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The Spaces In Between: Understanding Children's Creative Expression in Temporary Shelters for Asylum Seekers

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Abstract

On arrival in a host country, asylum-seeking children face uncertainty and stress that may compound past traumatic experiences of war and violence. This article is based on a participatory action research project, Welcome Haven, that aims to promote the wellbeing and mental health of asylum-seeking families in Montreal, Canada, through psychosocial workshops. Since 2023, our interdisciplinary team has conducted arts-based workshops to support asylum-seeking children lodged in hotels that function as temporary accommodations, funded by the federal government. This study examines the drawings and narratives of participating children (ages 5–17) to understand how children communicate and make sense of their experiences through artmaking. Following a participatory action research framework using arts-based approaches, we use narrative and thematic analysis to analyze our (a) ethnographic field notes, (b) notes from our intervention team meetings, which functioned as peer supervision for facilitators, and (c) photographs of children's artwork. Our findings suggest that children use drawings to share and externalize their personal stories and to express fears and hopes for the future. Importantly, children's expression happened not only on the page and through stories, but in the space between facilitators and children, and in their manner of sharing or protecting their art. The challenges of conducting research and creating therapeutic alliances in these spaces are explored. This research has important implications for understanding children affected by war and those in humanitarian crisis settings, including reception centers and shelters in high-income countries.

Keywords
art therapy; asylum seekers; children; expression; refugees; stories; temporary housing

1. Introduction

In response to unprecedented numbers of asylum claims in Canada after the reopening of borders closed by Covid-19, the federal government created new temporary accommodation sites (TAS) in hotels in the Spring of 2022. In Quebec alone there were 58,805 processed asylum claims in 2022 (Government of Canada, 2024). While the provincial government is responsible for social services for claimants, including providing temporary shelter, Quebec reported that the numbers of asylum seekers outstripped their capacity, and called on the federal government to send claimants to other provinces and provide increased funding ("Breaking point: Quebec premier," 2024). With this political debate ongoing, the federal government opened 17 TAS in the Greater Montreal area, with more opening in other provinces.

Unlike immigrants and refugees, asylum seekers (also known as refugee claimants) must wait approximately two years for the adjudication of their request for refugee status, during which time it is uncertain if they will be allowed to remain in Canada (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2021). Research suggests that living in limbo, with only temporary protection, increases the risk of mental health problems in both children and adults, and thus, despite having comparable rates of pre-migration trauma, refugees with secure status have far lower rates of morbidity than asylum seekers (Côté-Olijnyk et al., 2024; Ratnamohan et al., 2023). Children and their families often face extreme forms of adversity prior to migration, during their journey, and on arrival in the host country (Bauch, 2022; Kronick et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2024). The stress of the resettlement process includes being confronted with poverty, discrimination, and racism as well as barriers to employment, health care, and housing, all of which may be compounded by precarity (Ratnamohan et al., 2023). Little is known, however, about how initial experiences on arrival, such as being housed in temporary accommodations, may influence people's trajectories and experiences.

This study is part of the Welcome Haven, a multi-site community-based implementation study exploring how psychosocial support workshops for asylum-seeking families, may break social isolation and foster agency, and wellbeing. While Welcome Haven began in September 2021 in community centers in Montreal, Canada, in response to the opening of the TAS in 2022, we began implementing our workshops in TAS in the area Greater Montreal area. These workshops in TAS include art-based expression spaces for children. For this article we focus on the children's arts workshops and ask: What stories emerge from asylum-claimant children's artwork? How do the children communicate and make sense of their experiences? How are art spaces in the temporary hotel accommodations experienced and used by children and youth?

While little information is publicly available about the TAS, we have learned from key stakeholders and our workshop visits that typically TAS house several hundred refugee claimants each day with length of stays varying from 2 to 6 months. The majority of TAS are located far from downtown Montreal, leaving very few accessible services for asylum-seeking families. In Quebec, only a few community organizations enter the TAS, often on a once-per-month basis to provide information to families, usually with a focus on finding housing. While families can access social welfare in the hotel, they often wait for several weeks, during which time they do not have the resources to purchase public transit tickets, often leaving them confined to the hotel.

Most TAS do not allow families to bring their own food to their rooms though meals are provided at set times. At the time of this research, children were not permitted to register for schools without a permanent address and, therefore, were without schooling for many months. Children do not have access to playgrounds or play spaces, nor were any toys or books provided in the hotels we visited. Asylum-seeking children in the TAS, along with their families, were thus excluded from receiving typical social services that asylum seekers housed in the community could readily access. Our team sought to provide increased support through our workshops, and also to understand what the experiences of being in TAS were like for families.

2. Methodology

2.1. Art Therapy

Art therapy is a modality that uses art for communication and self-discovery with a view that artmaking itself can be therapeutic (Ulman, 2001). With newcomers, art therapy can transcend verbal communication, making it well-suited for those with different linguistic backgrounds (Akthar & Lovell, 2019; Feen-Calligan et al., 2020). Because art, like play, is a natural means of communication for children, it can be a mechanism to express emotions and make meaning of their outer and inner worlds (Maagerø & Sunde, 2016). It can also be an apt method to amplify children's voices that are otherwise unrecognized (Akthar & Lovell, 2019). Drawings allow children an accessible means of communication that can disrupt the traditional power dynamics in research (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2018). Arts-based research emphasizes the importance of children's drawings, allowing children choice in what and how they share or depict (Linds et al., 2023). Arts-based approaches are viewed as more culturally safe and developmentally appropriate to use with war-affected children (Linds et al., 2023) given for many individuals and communities, direct verbal questioning of children about difficult experiences could be seen as unacceptable. Further, art can be used to support healing for those who have experienced trauma, as it allows a modulated and indirect means to address challenging affect and memories (Linds et al., 2023). In research, generating understanding of children's experiences and inner worlds through art can provide insights regarding their social positions and views (Akesson et al., 2014; Kronick et al., 2018).

2.2. Participatory Action Research

In alignment with participatory action research (PAR), we proposed an arts-based and collaborative framework for working with children and adolescents. PAR seeks to do research *with* people rather than *on* people. In this way, youth are active co-researchers rather than passive objects of research with limited voice and agency (Clark, 2005). However, important challenges arise in conducting PAR with children, particularly vis-à-vis power inequity between children and researcher/facilitator (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2018). As a team, we acknowledge that achieving epistemic equity was impossible, especially considering that our encounters with children were sometimes brief, as the workshops happened on a drop-in basis. Although the children did not become full co-researchers, our intervention and research were animated by a PAR framework that seeks to empower participants giving them choice and voice in the workshops and following their lead in our research (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019; Kemmis et al., 2014).

2.3. Positionality

As researchers and interveners, we occupy intersecting personal and professional identities. Two authors have lived experience of migration, as first-generation immigrants to Canada. One author is refugeed. Four authors are clinicians from the disciplines of medicine, psychiatry, art therapy, and occupational therapy. All authors except one are visible minorities. Together, the authors speak four languages: English, French, Arabic, and Spanish. While our positionality afforded us some lived experience that reflected those of the children, we also recognize our privilege as clinician-researchers, and people that are housed, and the inevitable blind spots of our gaze.

2.4. Context of the Intervention

Since December 2022, our interdisciplinary team has conducted weekly arts and information-based workshops to support asylum-claimant families lodged in TAS. The workshops were designed based on an ecosocial model (Krieger, 2021) that views refugee claimant families' recovery from persecution and violence as contingent on the re-establishment of their social bonds, existential meaning, security and safety, sense of identity, and access to justice (Silove, 2007; Silove et al., 2017). Our workshops last two hours and begin with a group icebreaker before the parents and children are divided into two groups that often share the same room. The parents attend informational or art-based sessions, while the children participate in art-based workshops.

We began at six hotels in Greater Montreal, rotating hotels weekly. While the nature of temporary accommodations means there was a high turnover of participants and varying age groups at each workshop, we sought to maintain consistency by holding the workshops on the same days at the same hours with a core interdisciplinary team of facilitators. Our team is mostly made up of immigrants to Canada. Most asylum claimants speak Spanish and also French, English, Kurdish, Portuguese, Créole, and Arabic. At least two people facilitate the session: an art therapist and a graduate student or volunteer.

A range of materials from crayons, colored pencils, markers, white and colored paper, braiding strings, colored blocks, and plastic figurines are available. The materials are chosen for practical reasons (i.e., the absence of a sink for water-based materials) and their properties according to the expressive therapies continuum (ETC; Hinz, 2020). The ETC categorizes materials from resistive to fluid, with resistive media, such as markers or pencil colors, allowing a greater sense of control. Within the hotels, we opt for a resistive medium to allow the children to have that sense of agency in what they choose to express. Other materials, such as dough—considered more fluid media according to the ETC—are sometimes introduced to enhance children's emotional expression (Hinz, 2020; Sholt & Gavron, 2006).

Most workshops invite children to share something significant to them through their art by either choosing what they would like to draw or drawing something to introduce themselves. Other prompts include telling a story using the six-part story method (Dent-Brown, 1999), which guides children in creating a character, their home, task, obstacles, helpful forces, storyline, and ending; or drawing themselves as a superhero (Grosso, 2019). The prompts for their art are chosen to help children feel they have a container, but also be open enough for them to have a sense of imaginative space without limitation. Children can always choose not to follow the prompt. When the children finish their drawings, they can share something about their art with the

facilitators. Because of the challenges with space, time, and noise, the sharing occurs one-on-one between the facilitator and each child instead of with the entire group.

2.5. Data Collection

Data was generated from December 2022 to December 2023. There were three sources of data: (a) ethnographic field notes of facilitators; (b) notes from our intervention team meetings, which functioned as peer supervision for facilitators; and (c) photographs of children's artwork.

The field notes—which were written after each workshop by all facilitators—focused on the facilitators' observations of the children's art, their stories about the art, and the process of the workshops, including dynamics between children, the experiences of the facilitators, and the context of the hotel and larger workshops.

A consent process with parents occurred during the workshops after the opening exercise. Children also provided their assent to have photographs taken of their art. In collecting data, we maintained the children's anonymity.

The study received approval from the research ethics board for the CIUSSS Centre Ouest de l'Île de Montréal (2021–2461).

2.6. Data Analysis

The first two authors conducted a narrative and thematic analysis of the data, including photographs of drawings, ethnographic notes, and notes from team discussions. We entered all data into the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, which we used to code the data after carrying out multiple reading cycles (Bazeley & Richards, 2000, Chapter No. 4). Codes emerged from the data itself, though they were also informed by the theories of art therapy and our positionality as clinicians and therapists. The data analysis had three stages:

1. Pre-coding: The researchers reviewed the collected data and prepared lists of themes to identify patterns both in content and in process that occurred repeatedly during the workshops. The researchers then discussed and contrasted their lists and conceptualized the data with phrases and words to describe their interpretations.
2. Coding: The researchers assigned codes to represent a concept shown in the data, organized codes, and divided them into more prominent themes (e.g., symbols, moments of silence). We used NVivo to organize and understand relationships between themes and sub-themes. Subsequently, we identified three primary categories that formed the structure of this article.
3. Theorizing: The researchers continued data interpretation using our theoretical framework. We also analyzed data vertically according to case (or child) and contextualized art with verbal narratives.

3. Results

We organize the results of our analysis into three primary themes: (a) the frame of the intervention, (b) children's expression of distress and agency, and (c) their visual representations.

3.1. The Frame of the Intervention

The shifting conditions and nature of the hotels meant that the workshop frame was constantly adapted to accommodate changing circumstances. For example, the size of the groups varied significantly depending on influxes of arrivals or departures, and so did the space we were entitled to use. We noted how certain elements of the frame seemed to impact the children's workshop experiences.

3.1.1. Space

Each hotel had different spatial conditions, influencing each workshop's dynamics and functioning. The children's space often limited confidentiality as other workers and parents would either be present or could easily walk into the space. At one of the hotels, for example, we worked in a corridor at the entrance of the building, illuminated by large windows, with ample space for the children to move around and play. In another, we worked in a small section with artificial lighting in the dining area, sharing the space with the adult workshop. In this space, some children moved under the tables to work on their art, seemingly seeking to separate themselves physically from the large group. Noticing this, one of the facilitators crouched down to be at the same level as the children. She stayed outside the table, respecting their created boundaries, but could see the children across the legs of the chairs. Upon inquiry, the children themselves explained how the noisy and bright room left them needing to create shelter. This struck us as a significant expression of how unique these children's circumstances were in the hotels. We wondered if their reaction to the large group and room reflected the fact that most days were spent in the confines of their hotel room, while also noting that it might be an expression of hypervigilance related to past or even present trauma.

In general, there were no communal spaces for children to play at the hotel accommodations. None of the hotels had outdoor spaces for children to run around, though even if they had, many children lacked winter clothing, so children had difficulty going outside in the winter. None of the hotels had any play spaces, toys, or books for the children. In some hotels, children could be on couches in the reception area with their families, though people told us they were not allowed to gather in other hotels. In other words, for most children, the sole space they could occupy was their hotel room and the meal room, during meals only. The art workshops thus appeared to be a unique moment when children could be in an open group with others. It was their only opportunity, as we understood, for children to have a space that was somewhat their own. As children's non-verbal communications suggested (see Sections 3.1.2, 3.1.4, and 3.2 below), the art space represented a significant reprieve from the restrictive and under-stimulating environment of the hotel. To some children, the workshop became a place where they could see they were not alone and even made friendships. It was also experienced as an opportunity to move after weeks (or sometimes months) of highly limited play and physical activity. It was not uncommon for children to take small objects—foam balls or toys brought for babies—and try to play soccer during the workshops. Sometimes, children approached the space as if it was a strict classroom environment and would sit still, silently working on their drawings for much longer than would be expected of a primary school-aged child. We viewed this as linked with the

general conditions of developmental deprivation, and children's seriousness towards artmaking reflected the gravity of their need for stimulation. Parents and children frequently requested to take home the art materials, explaining that they had no toys or activities. In addition to giving away art materials from the workshops, this prompted us to develop a program in collaboration with a private foundation to provide art kits to children in the hotels regularly.

3.1.2. Hotel Staff

Some hotels had accommodating employees who were staff from a private agency contracted by the federal government, and who helped us find appropriate spaces and even rearranged tables and chairs to suit our needs better. These employees seemed to care for the children and knew them personally, explaining to us certain preferences or characteristics they noticed, like who is the most energetic. They would offer us recycled cardboard for the workshops and be available to sit with children playing with toys. The children welcomed them into their play space and seemed to have a relationship with them. However, at other hotels, the staff were more distant, and we noted stricter restrictions. A facilitator observing the children playing together describes an employee intervening in the activities:

> A woman who was wearing police officer uniform [likely a uniform of the private agency] was "supervising" the children, and when the boys were flying paper planes she came over to stop them, which made me feel bad because when they first were flying it I kind of gave them the green light with a thumbs up (their paper plane was flying really well!!), so then I thought I gave them permission [to do] something they shouldn't do, even though I feel like the risk of other kids getting hurt by the paper planes was quite slim? (Fieldnote)

With such presence, the TAS sometimes felt like a space of strict surveillance, with children being restricted and regulated, not allowed to engage in age-appropriate play.

3.1.3. Our Position

In their field notes, facilitators described the challenges of building trust with some of the children, given that children were often only present for one workshop. During some workshops, the children would ask the facilitators who had sent or invited them. In her field notes, a South American facilitator shared her experience with an 11-year-old boy from her country of origin. While she had expected him to be more forthcoming and open when he learned they were fellow nationals, the opposite was true. The boy became silent and guarded about his personal history, to the extent that he told her he couldn't recall the name of his hometown. The facilitator and the team understood that this was potentially linked to the socio-political tensions of prolonged internal armed conflict that fostered deep distrust and strategies of silence to stay safe, including in exile (Arsenault, 2010; Rousseau et al., 2001). Rather than pushing disclosure, the team viewed this child's reticence as an important coping strategy and means of control. Instead, we focused on his artistic process, occasionally discussing his drawing and hobbies. As others have acknowledged, while we sought to have our facilitation team somewhat representative of the population we were serving, there are many challenges of "ethnic matching" to increase cultural safety (Chenot et al., 2019). It seemed that both difference and congruence between the child and facilitator could provide a sense of safety or suspicion (Chenot et al., 2019).

Regardless of our ethnonational or linguistic backgrounds, we also acknowledge that children viewed us, in some cases, as representatives of the host society, Canada, or Quebec. At one workshop, a young child, approximately 5 or 6, approached one of the facilitators with their arms wide open as if to embrace the facilitator. While welcoming the child warmly, the facilitator, who was also a mental health clinician, immediately and incorrectly assumed the child had attachment difficulties, given their unusually warm and comfortable response to a stranger. However, later in the workshop, that same child approached the facilitator and asked: "Can I have my visa?" After some confusion and time spent clarifying the child's request, the facilitator realized that the child assumed that we, Canadians, were either representatives of the immigration system or that we could bestow these families with secure immigration status. While initially the clinicians' gaze was pathologizing and individualizing, the child's interactions with the facilitator reflected the structural precarity the family was living. We also reflected as a team that despite our hopes that the workshops would offer a space that was a respite from the stressors of the asylum process, so present were those stressors, even for young children, that they viewed us as potentially powerful enough to change their circumstances. Further, despite our benevolent intentions, we had to acknowledge that children saw us as representatives of a system that both welcomed children and also left them vulnerable.

3.1.4. Diversity of Needs

Ten to thirty children between the ages of 5 and 17 attended our workshops, though because of the open set-up, sometimes toddlers and babies joined in the artmaking and playing. The wide age range within the workshop was challenging. While not wanting to exclude any age group of children, we struggled to attend to their varied developmental needs. Adolescents often resisted drawing, preferring to stay on their cell phones, for example, spurring us to offer collage materials despite the supervision challenges for preschool-aged children of having sharp scissors available.

During one workshop where the conference room was crowded with nearly 100 adults, we relocated the children to the hotel lobby with different stations: two drawing stations, a Play-Doh station, and a building station. One of the facilitators described being with a 4 or 5-year-old girl who, as the only English-speaking child, sat alone at a table with drawing materials. The facilitator sat with her, reflecting on her artmaking process. When the facilitator was called upon by another child and got up to see them, the girl became upset, made a grunting noise, and grabbed the facilitator's shirt, trying to hold her back. The facilitator named the girl's desire for her to stay by reflecting to the child that it was important to her that they create this image together. She told the girl she would help the other child and be back soon. The girl waited alone at the table for the facilitator to return. When the facilitator returned, the girl showed no interest or reaction. The facilitator was aware of the girl being alone as she was trying to help the other children with varying needs. This moment reflected the sentiment that some facilitators described of being unable to give enough to the children, and thus feeling helpless. While certainly highlighting the limitation of a frame that aims to include all children and the logistical challenges this inevitably creates, it also points to how the frame could not hold the larger structural and contextual challenges the children were facing. Children experienced, as we learned, a day-to-day lack of developmentally appropriate stimulation. Indeed, there was little stimulation other than cell phones. This included a lack of meaningful contact with adults other than their parents, such as teachers, extended family, or community members. As a result, children arrived at our workshops desperate, it seemed to us, for connection with adults and others. Thus, it was clear that the needs we were met with went beyond the capacity of what we could provide in a two-hour workshop.

In the face of linguistic diversity, children's non-verbal interactions seemed fueled by their desire to connect and were present between children, in the spaces between facilitator and child, and in their engagement with the art materials themselves. In one of our workshops, children speaking Spanish, English, Arabic, and Kurdish were sitting together across a large table. The art materials were spread on the table and the children had to share them to create artwork. The sharing of the materials encouraged interactions among children. For instance, one child who wanted a specific marker pointed to it as another child picked up different markers until they got the right color and handed it to them across the table. In other workshops, we also noticed children interacting through games. This excerpt is from a facilitator who was sitting on the floor using the building toys with the children:

> I stayed with the boy with whom we built some figures with the colored blocks. Although he does not speak English, he interacted with an English-speaking girl through the game. She told him colors in English and we said colors in Spanish. It was a short but powerful moment: the game allowed these children to get closer and exchange elements of their languages. (Fieldnote)

These interactions supported the children in trying to overcome their language barriers and try to connect. The presence of this third element, be it the art materials or building toys, allowed the children to have a reason to communicate to one another.

3.2. Children's Expression of Distress and Agency

While children did not always communicate their feelings through words, they often seemed to tell us much through their movements, actions, and silences. We found children running to the art table before the group gathered and drawing without prompts, as if they were craving the art materials and activities. Further, we noticed that silence was common and striking. While we observed—as expected—children talking, running, making art, and being rambunctious, there were often still and silent children. While some of these quiet children drew, others did not and sat completely still. Facilitators' bids at conversation were sometimes met with silence. In our discussions, we wondered what children were telling or showing us with their silence. It was possible that they did not trust us, had been advised by their parents, or feared the consequences of talking to us, especially if they viewed us as host country representatives. It could also be a means of protection and control in a context where they lacked much control. The children's silence and self-containment sometimes appeared to express agency (Kusmallah & Ghorashi, 2024), for example, when children would choose not to talk to us about their drawings. However, at other times it left us worried for the child's wellbeing. Especially when we were met with children who were sitting in complete stillness during the workshop, we wondered whether their behavior was a response to their exposure to trauma.

Transitions into and out of the workshop were also significant. Some children seemed to experience difficulty in leaving their parents and joining us, though because parents were close by, children could run back and forth between their parents and the artmaking. Multiple facilitators mentioned a boy whom we had seen multiple times had difficulty separating from his parents:

> Like the last time, he didn't want to be separated from his parents, his iPad and a blanket. His father tried several times to bring him, but it was impossible for him to stay with us. This family has been in the hotel for a long time and I wonder why this child has so much difficulty separating himself a few meters from his parents. (Fieldnote)

At times, the children's difficulty was leaving the workshop and returning to their parents. During these moments, we would observe children crying or screaming, holding onto the toys or materials and unwilling to let go:

> I noticed one girl being very reluctant to end the workshop, and was screaming, holding onto the toys. Her mother tried talking to her, and a lot of the children did as well. At some point she was on the chair, laying on the toys she wanted to keep. The children were around her in a half circle so I asked them to give her some space since I worried she would feel alienated. One of the facilitators then intervened by making an exchange with her and she let go of her toys. (Fieldnote)

de Freitas Girardi et al. (2020) noted similar patterns in their study with asylum-seeking children in temporary federal shelters in Canada. They hypothesized that the transitions within their workshops reactivated separation anxieties—knowing they potentially had been exposed to violence and/or traumatic separations from family members—that were present in the children (de Freitas Girardi et al., 2020). We also wondered, given children had so few possessions of their own, and often no toys, how much they were attached to the actual material objects.

Sometimes children's use of the material appeared to express their emotional states. Artmaking seemed to allow the expression of frustration. We would observe children making large scribbles that went off the paper and onto the table or repetitive dabs on a piece. The materials seemed a safe outlet for children's emotions, without fear of consequences (Rubin, 2005, pp. 19–33). Significantly, children regularly focused on folding their drawings into little packages or cutting them into smaller pieces. Beauregard et al. (2024) noted in their work with refugee children in schools that the folding of the paper allowed the children to choose what to reveal and conceal to the facilitators, thus enhancing their sense of control over their inner world. Also, art was sometimes left behind. It appeared that in the context of TAS the art allowed externalization and expression of emotion and acted as a container of sorts (Akthar & Lovell, 2019), and thus children did not want to keep it. However, knowing these children were forcibly displaced, we also wondered if they had become habituated to leaving things behind. The artistic media provided children with a different and perhaps safer means of expression and a sense of agency.

3.3. Visual Representation

Children in the workshops found ways to use art materials to depict their fears and hopes. While sometimes the content of their art appeared to represent their real lived experiences, other times it illuminated their imaginary worlds. In one of the workshops, a Kurdish boy, aged 10, created a structure that he described as a satellite. He explained how he would use the satellite to talk to other people. The facilitator asked which people he would be talking to, and he explained that he would be talking to aliens speaking different languages, such as French and Spanish. The imaginary world of satellites and aliens allowed the distance for this child to express some of his experience of being "alien" but finding the technology to reach others.

In another session, a child of 6 or 7 asked the facilitator to draw a story for her, instructing the facilitator on each frame of a graphic novel-like narrative. The child, who was Black, explained to the White facilitator that this was about a White family who had had their house burned down. While the content depicted violence, as the child engaged in the co-constructed story, she seemed delighted and pleased to tell the imaginary story

and be in such close conversation with the facilitator. This child also took pleasure in drawing scribbles on the face and arms of the facilitator, appearing to seek closeness or even, perhaps to express frustration and aggression. In this case, we speculated the child was using the art and the facilitator to share her own trauma story and to work through her experiences using a distancing strategy. It may also have been a relief to have control and agency over the story whether or not it was a reflection of her past. Many families in the hotels were in the process of writing the basis of their refugee claim—a written narrative of past events to be used by the tribunal to grant or deny their protection in Canada—an experience that can often be re-traumatizing (Rousseau & Foxen, 2010). The interaction and child-directed storytelling were like a foil for that process.

Children often explicitly conveyed their current worries and realities with regularly recurring images and themes in their artwork. Houses—the ones children dreamed of having, or homes they had left behind—often filled their pages. Depictions of family members in Canada or back home often accompanied those houses. Along with houses, drawings of the hotel were sometimes present, with the children describing their experiences in the hotel. One child drew the hotel's location and surroundings, including a bridge she had to take to reach services. Another girl drew the hotel and used the image to explain her enjoyment of the place since she made friends at workshops and has a TV in her room. Images of transportation were also recurrent: children often drew boats, planes, and cars. Similarly, flags of their countries of origin or Canada appeared frequently in drawings. One boy from Colombia, aged 5, described his drawing as a "map of going back home." He used oil pastels to create his image and presented the sea in the foreground, with multiple large "X" marks in red that seemed to create a path above it. He was quiet during the workshop and kept to himself even though there were other Spanish-speaking children. He told us he was lonely as an only child. Through his artwork, he expressed his sadness at being away from home and chose to share this with the facilitators and not with the other participants.

3.3.1. Absent Themes and Symbols

As we hypothesized that children's drawings seemed to represent their realities, we also felt the absence of certain themes or symbols was equally important to understanding that reality. While children discussed their preoccupation with schools, drawings of schools themselves or teachers were nonexistent. This did not seem to be the case with other studies conducted with asylum-seeking children and refugees using artmaking in a school-based program in Quebec (Beauregard et al., 2024). This finding seems to highlight how isolated the children were from education, and adult relationships that emerge from the school setting. Moreover, children seemed to have difficulty drawing on their strengths. In some workshops, we introduced the prompt of drawing themselves as a superhero (Grosso, 2019). However, children either bypassed the directive or drew popular superhero figures. Kronick et al. (2018) noted a similar pattern in their study on children's sand trays in immigration detention centers in Canada, reflecting that in that context, the absence of the themes in the sand trays seemed to indicate the absence of the themes in children's lives, especially the isolation within detention centers. This same pattern was observed in the TAS, where the lack of such themes in drawings seemed to reflect their absence in children's lives. In contrast, in similar research in Canada with newcomer families living in the community, children included a wider diversity of symbols (friends, school) and used religious and superhero figures to express protective forces and means of escape (Lacroix et al., 2007). We wonder if children in the hotels felt an absence of protective adults and a lack of means of escape, which was reflected in a more limited range of themes and symbol choices in their art.

4. Discussion

In a space marked by isolation, lack of stimulation, and uncertainty, the workshops in TAS provided the children with a place of connection, creativity, and witnessing. Through artmaking and storytelling, children could express their experiences of loss, home, migration, and resettlement, and sometimes recount these experiences to others. Verbalizing their ideas and memories with facilitators opened possibilities for connection and anchored their identities in places they could choose and direct. Children used the space of the workshops flexibly, sometimes sharing, and other times withholding their art. In the context of their migration journeys and predicament in the hotels, this was an important expression of agency and control.

Our results align with other studies exploring arts-based approaches with a similar population. Like Feen-Calligan et al. (2020) we found that art activities enhanced children's sense of safety and calm, which allowed them to express their stories. As van der Kolk (2003) described, the use of the symbolic and the imaginary, and the expression of negative emotions through an artistic medium can create a distance from the self, generating a sense of safety in artmaking, and allowing alternative outcomes to be imagined. In our workshops, art-making's kinesthetic and sensory, non-verbal, and relational elements seemed to allow the children the liberty of emotional expression, as many studies have found (Akthar & Lovell, 2019; de Freitas Girardi et al., 2020; Rousseau et al., 2003). Through the workshops, we also found that art enhanced children's sense of agency. This echoes the findings of Beauregard et al. (2024) that artmaking in school-based research allowed immigrant and refugee youth to create meaning and regain control over their lives. In choosing what they would share or keep to themselves during the workshops, children were able to have some autonomy amid uncertainty.

One thing that struck us, particularly those of us who have done art workshops in other settings or who work as therapists or clinicians, was that which was absent from children's art. Children often drew family members but rarely depicted adults who were not in their family, such as teachers, firefighters, etc. Significantly, children rarely drew schools or scenes of play. We suspect that this was due to their lack of access to school or play settings in the TAS. Also, while previous research (and clinical experience) has documented how children often include rescue figures and magic in their art and symbolic representations (Lacroix et al., 2007), children in the hotels did not. Unlike the representations of coping strategies (superheroes, magic, religious figures, human rescuers) that other children have represented in times of adversity (Lacroix et al., 2007), for example in school-based workshops with children exposed to news of natural disasters, children in the hotels did not depict such images nor tell such stories. It seems that the uncertainty and isolation in the TAS, or perhaps their family's focus on accessing basic safety (such as permanent housing) might leave children without their typical coping strategies or ability to imagine or hope for "rescue" from characters. We also wonder if children who have experienced stress related to human violence or bureaucratic violence, rather than natural disasters, might have a limited sense of the possibility of there being adult sources of protection and aid, and that this perhaps contributed to the absences in children's art.

Another important finding was children's ambivalence towards facilitators. At times we were sought out for connection and felt that our presence and witnessing was important. At other times, children seemed to regard us with distrust. It appeared that the children's projections were both positive and negative, reflecting perhaps the hopes they had in the benevolent host society, but also their disappointment in Canada in light of the challenges they were facing on arrival. Given the constraints and reality of our drop-in workshops, and

children's mixed feelings about us, we were careful in choosing what prompts to suggest to the children to avoid activating traumatic memories. Thus, though our results suggest the workshops created a safer means of communication, we ask ourselves how to offer and measure a sense of safety in a precarious and vulnerable setting such as TAS.

Finally, silence remained a revealing element of this research. Not all stories get told. As French (2019) has reflected, it is essential to pay special attention to silences, evasions, and refusals to speak about any subject of significance. We can learn a lot from what children and adolescents cannot or prefer not to speak about because there are, in fact, stories in their silences. As others have emphasized, leaving space for the unsaid—*le non dit*—is not only a therapeutic stance, but an ethical orientation in research with refugee children (Rousseau, 1994).

5. Conclusion

Although our workshops provide an expressive and creative space for children to connect, it is important to note that brief interventions in temporary accommodations cannot replace the social systems found in schools, daycares, parks, libraries, and community centers. Without access to education as well as social and cultural activities, children may experience a lack of physical, emotional, and intellectual stimulation, which can be detrimental to their mental health and development. Coupled with the stress and uncertainty their parents may experience regarding job search, housing, and legal status, this situation can pose significant risks to children and adolescents' well-being (Côté-Olijnyk et al., 2024; Ratnamohan et al., 2023). In other words, while we tried to foster a modicum of emotional safety and social connection, it is no replacement for structural changes that ensure social inclusion and welcoming integration of refugee claimants.

Nonetheless, our results point to the benefits of artmaking in the federal TAS, and potentially in other sites of humanitarian need or crisis. Artmaking promoted self-expression, regulation, and encouraged children's ability to hope and dream, and fostered a sense of connectedness among the children in a context marked by isolation. Finally, the art and dialogue with facilitators opened a window to children's lived experiences and their strategies for surviving the stressors of migration and early arrival in Canada.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

Because our data are qualitative and participants require anonymity, raw data may be requested and can be provided in a redacted format.

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