



## Article

# Towards a Model for Integrating Informal and Formal Learning for Children in Refugee Camps: The Example of the Lesbos School for Peace

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to describe a unique, bottom-up model for building a school based on humanistic intercultural values in a post-disaster/refugee area. We think that this model will be of use in similar contexts. This single-case study can teach us about the needs of refugee children, as well as provide strategies to reach these needs with limited resources in additional similar contexts. Additionally, this paper will outline a qualitative arts-based methodology to understand and to evaluate refugee children's lived experience of in-detention camp schools. Our field site is an afternoon school for refugee children operated and maintained by volunteers and refugee teachers. The methodology is a participatory case study using arts-based research, interviews, and observation of a school built for refugee camp children in Lesbos. Participants in this study included the whole school, from children to teachers, to volunteers and managers. The research design was used to inform the school itself, and to outline the key components found to be meaningful in making the school a positive experience. These components could be emulated by similar educational projects and used to evaluate them on an ongoing basis.

**Keywords:** refugee children; refugee education; arts-based research; psycho-social education



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## 1. Literature Survey

In general, there is little research on schools for refugee children within detention camps, rather than in non-refugee populations of the host countries, although children may spend a number of years in the camps. This may be due to the difficulty in undertaking research in a context that is so volatile, improvised, and changing (Clark and Statham 2005; Greene and Hogan 2005). It is clear that these children suffer extreme impoverishment in terms of educational services. The rights and abilities of children to consult and express their worldview, as well as to influence their lives and the services provided for them, are, by definition, even more limited than those of marginalized adults. Thus, finding ways to understand the lived experience for extremely disadvantaged children, such as those living in refugee camps, is imperative (Amthor 2017; Aydin and Kaya 2019; Ben Asher et al. 2020; Brun and Lund 2010; Daniel 2019; Oikonomidoy et al. 2018). These children have often endured potentially traumatic situations of conflict, loss, and difficult transitions, and so may face resulting health and stress problems, as well as the challenge of managing in the present with a lack of funding and, under current policy, reduced hope of reaching their wished-for final destination in Europe (Hobfoll et al. 2007). The refugees in Lesbos, where this research took place, number between 20,000 and 30,000 people, and they are gathered in two central refugee camps. The School of Peace is a unique refugee school for children from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Kurdistan, and North Africa and located on the island of Lesbos, near the capital, Mitilini. The camps on the island are characterized by

escalating inter-ethnic violence and the struggle to meet day to day needs. Many of the children, called “the lost generation,” have missed out on schooling, with a few who were or are in sporadic school situations. The island of Lesbos has a school within the camp of Karatape. Some refugee children attend this school in the morning and go to the School of Peace in the afternoon (Ben Asher et al. 2020; Eleftherakos et al. 2018; Krikigianni 2016).

Schools in refugee detention camps are often impoverished frameworks that can provide only low standards of education. However, they also have major strengths such as the motivation, commitment, and social organization of the entire refugee community. Knowledge and skills are perceived of as hope for the future and as assets that cannot be taken away, thus the children and families are often highly motivated to study (Jones and Rutter 1998). Refugee pupils study extra hard under difficult circumstances because they realize that it is their only hope, and they internalize the intense value their parents attribute to education as key for their future (Mares et al. 2002; Measham et al. 2014). This can lead to better educational performance than in local schools in poor neighborhoods, as shown in the examples of Uganda and Nepal (Aydin and Kaya 2019; Jones and Rutter 1998).

Most schools use a pyramidal framework with the refugee community at the base, the pupils and teachers in the middle, and the program managers at the apex. Refugee teachers are often willing to give their services for little or no pay. Challenges of refugee camp schools are a lack of trained teachers and a lack of physical resources, low salaries for teachers, and hence reduced motivation (Hos and Çinarbaş 2018). Another challenge can be cultural differences in educational methods. This includes tensions between the more child-centered, informal teaching methods presented by NGOs as compared to the more hierarchical and formalistic methods of teaching found in traditional schools such as those in the countries of origin of the refugees. However, in spite of these cultural differences, there is very little literature about the value of multicultural education in the refugee context. Peacebuilding curricula that aim to psychosocially address inter-ethnic conflicts are more common in Africa than in Europe, although the children are mainly in the camps because of such conflicts (Bird 2003). It is important to state that the school in this study focuses on both multicultural and conflict negotiation issues.

Overall, the research on refugee children and schools tends to focus on the integration of refugee students into host country schools, rather than on the schools in or next to detention camps (for children without migrant status), possibly because these frameworks are perceived of as temporary. However, children can spend years in these schools (Aydin and Kaya 2019; Oikonomidoy et al. 2018). Another reason for a lack of literature on such schools may be that it is often hard to evaluate the impact of such educational settings as the context is so volatile, improvised, and changing (Brun and Lund 2010).

Due to the above difficulties in theorizing and evaluating these schools that occur in such extreme and impoverished geo-social contexts such as refugee camps, arts-based participatory research methods may be especially relevant in helping to evaluate, theorize, and understand the children’s lived experiences of these contexts. Phenomenological arts-based methods such as using drawings as triggers for discussion are recommended as a natural developmentally appropriate form for children to express themselves. The mind is programmed to translate composition into content meaning and to connect this information to perceptual and emotional arousal. Images thus trigger emotional reactions within us that encourage verbalization and further interpretation (Eisner 1997; Huss 2017). Drawings that are metonymic and metaphorical reveal cultural values, ways of seeing and understanding the world, and so, are an ethnographic tool.

Arts shift our focus away from dominant adult conceptualizations enabling children to have an equal voice. These advantages are important for children who may not have learnt to read and write, who come from different cultures, and live within uncontrolled and shifting environments such as refugee camps. The arts help to excavate, socially contextualize, and amplify the children’s voices (Eisner 1997; Huss 2012; Huss et al. 2015; Mason 2002). A participatory arts-based methodology was chosen so as to integrate and include the multiple voices of the different stakeholders, the children, youth workers, and

youth teachers, and the external actors, each with different mother tongues, into an overall evaluation of the school. This can become a tool to understand what is happening in the school, and as an evaluative tool to improve itself, in the context of very limited supervision, enrichment, funds, and guidance, circumstances which are typical of the refugee context (Holmes and Mathews 2010; Huss et al. 2015; Huss 2017).

## 2. Field of Research

The School of Peace is a unique refugee school for children from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Kurdistan, and North Africa that is a part of the community center, One Happy Family, founded to serve the refugees on the island of Lesbos, near the capital, Mitilini. The school is democratically run and teachers are refugees from within the camp, who each teach children from their own culture and ethnicity in the school. The school is coordinated by a group of Jewish and Arab volunteers from Israel who are members of a socialist youth movement in Israel, “Ha’Shomer Ha’Tzair,” and its Arab sister movement, “Ajal.” The Jewish and Arab volunteers’ role is to logistically and pedagogically manage the school. There is no single headmaster but in weekly meetings between the teachers and volunteers, they run the school together. The proclaimed aim of the school is to create a democratic process of dialogue and compromise between the different cultures in the school, thus providing an alternative for the violence of the refugee camps where the children live, as well as a model for a better life while also providing formal schooling. The curriculum includes formalized studies, such as mathematics, English, science, and art, and also life skills and the children’s culture of origin in their mother tongue. English is the language of communication in the public areas and in overall school activities, and English language and mathematics are the central subjects taught in all classes. The school is an afternoon school, situated outside of the refugee camp in a community center, and it also provides a hot afternoon meal for the children. The physical building of the school in the community center was a set of shacks built by, and kept up by volunteers, teachers, children, and parents in the context of extremely limited funding. The school is democratically run and taught by refugees from the camp in the children’s respective languages and culture. Maintained by Arab and Jewish volunteers from Israel (See Huss et al. 2020 for more details on this case study), the school serves about a hundred children. The children are from the refugee camps of Moria and Karatape, who arrived with their families on the island of Lesbos. Lesbos received, as of 2015, up to 5000 refugees a day who arrived via Turkey. The afternoon “School for Peace,” within the “One Happy Family” community center on the island, is located about three miles from each of the camps. The community center was set up in 2017 by Swiss volunteers, while the School of Peace was set up by the Israeli youth movements as mentioned above.

The school started as an informal education framework, but in alignment with the wishes of the volunteers, formal studies were undertaken. The school is populated by Syrian, African (mostly Congolese), Persian/Yazidi, Afghani, and Kurdish children that are taught in separate groups in their own language and divided into two classes each of younger and older students. The teachers, who are volunteers from within these respective groups, are paid a small salary, similar to the pocket money the Israeli youth leaders receive from their youth movements funded by Israel. The school operates five days a week, but the teachers add a sixth day for meetings.

The children arrive by bus in the afternoon and receive a snack (a sandwich and fruit), as well as a hot supper after their classes. The community volunteers, teachers, and youth leaders physically built the buildings of the school. The youth leaders maintain two full-time workers and groups of volunteers (up to ten) who come for three-week periods during the year. The school day starts at 3 p.m. when the children arrive. They then learn their mother language and culture, math, and English until 5 p.m., when they have a snack. From 5 to 6:30 p.m., they learn arts, games, sports, and then have a shared hot supper provided by the school and get on busses to return to their homes in the camps.

**Study Sample:** This study included ten teachers, respectively, from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Kurdistan, and North Africa. There were between seven and ten children from each of these countries, with one class of older children (ages 10–14) and one class of younger children (ages 5–10) such that all together there were between 80 and 100 children and 5 volunteers, from Lesbos, and from Israel. In terms of gender, the teachers and students were roughly divided into half female and half male.

### 3. Arts-Based Research Protocol

The entire school, children of all ages, teachers, and volunteers, drew two images on a single page, while in the classroom or staff meeting. On one side of the page they drew what they liked about the school, and on the other what was challenging in the school. The art materials were simple crayons. The drawings were then displayed in each classroom, and each class talked about their images, providing additional focus group data ([Huss 2012](#); [Huss et al. 2015](#); [Mason 2002](#)).

**The arts-based data sources** were 100 pictures with recorded explanations and classroom or staff meeting discussions around the pictures. Also included were six hours of recorded discussions triggered by the images.

**Analytical methods:** The images were not analyzed through projective methods, but were treated as a trigger for further elaboration and interpretation of that experience. While the images were different in terms of styles, cultures, and developmental stages, the overall analyses focused on the content level of how the school was experienced by the children in terms of recourses and challenges.

All of the data, both visual and verbal, were analyzed thematically and phenomenologically, that is, the images were analyzed not as projective data, but as phenomenological data. This means that the students' verbalization of the images were the central analyses, rather than looking for unconscious signs of stress in the compositional elements. The images were analyzed in terms of symbols, content, and most importantly, as a trigger for a narrative that provided an explanation and elaboration of the person who drew the picture as an expert on his or her experience of the school ([Betinsky 2003](#); [Gauntlett and Holzwarth 2006](#); [Huss 2012, 2017](#)). In group discussions around the exhibits, the images were used as a trigger for further elaboration. Utilizing drawings, explanations, and group discussion of the exhibits of the drawings provided the opportunity to triangulate the data. The authors of this paper are a multidisciplinary team who added multiple perspectives to the thematic analyses. ([Miles and Hubberman 2002](#)).

**Ethical considerations** were that the focus of the research was not the personal lives or past traumas of the participants, but rather their understanding and experience of the school. All parents of the children and participants signed their consent for their participation in the research component of the program. All identifying features of the children were removed. We received the Kaye Academic College of Education ethics committee certification to undertake this research. Because the research method is participatory and was used as a self-evaluating reflective tool for the school itself, the data were not "taken away" from the school, but rather served as an enriching evaluative and transformative activity within the school, that helped to run it more effectively. Drawing, as an expression that both adults and children could understand, enabled them to share perspectives and to communicate their different experiences of the school ([Clark 2011](#); [Huss 2012](#); [Huss et al. 2018](#)).

### 4. Results

Three central themes were identified in the art work from all of the classrooms and in the teachers' art work and verbal explanations:

**The first theme** was the physical reality of the school, including the difficulty of working with severe lack of resources together with a sense of love and ownership of the building. The first theme was the experience of 'lack', yet also of attachment and pride in the physical elements of the school. Through active investment in the school as outside of the camp, within a 'normal' community center environment, and with much personal

investment of the volunteers, staff, and parents, the school transformed into a special space, into a 'home'. This attachment to the place element can be understood as especially relevant for displaced refugees.

**The second theme** reflects the intense relationships in the school that emerged as a theme that included many conflicts, but also a place to resolve conflicts and to make friends. The images described intense conflicts between the different ethnicities in the school, including both teachers and students. This included intense efforts to negotiate conflicts in the school on all levels. This theme connects to the first theme, the creation of a safe setting, invested in a 'home' that enables the staff and children to put an active focus on relationships, and on problem solving through dialogue, rather than the violence characterizing the refugee camps. Thus, possibly the most central informal gain for the children was a chance to experience a home that constantly confronted the violence and conflict, rather than accepting or succumbing to these. This is a counter message to the very basic reality of being a refugee escaping from ethnic violence.

**The third theme** was the ability of the first and second themes to create a physical and relational setting that enabled the children to engage in formal learning with pride. The formal studies were described as including both difficulty in teaching for the staff due to lack of training and resources, and the pleasure and pride of the children in going to school and learning. Indeed, the children's drawings and explanations showed how proud they were of their formal studies. How happy it made their parents that they were learning mathematics and English, which symbolized hope for the parents. Formal learning also worked to provide structure and a holding framework for the chaotic context of the refugee camp. It pointed to the importance of a much-needed experience of normality for the children, providing structure that the children lacked in their chaotic experience of refugee lives with their multiple traumas and transitions, even if it was a huge challenge for the teachers. When this theme of the students' satisfaction with the studies was discussed with the teachers, they were surprised, because they found it so hard to teach the children. This finding motivated them to continue to teach. The teachers understood the formal studies as a space to provide structure for the children, and they decided to enhance this further by preparing report cards, and stressing homework with clear school rules.

While all classes taught basic English and math, each teacher described efforts to create a different environment in his/her class based on his/her personality but also on the cultural norms of the ethnic group that s/he and the students belonged to. Thus, for example, the African classroom described more singing, and the Afghani classroom created a more formalized setting. This may have been due to lack of textbooks which forced the teachers to improvise, but it enabled them to create an arena for culturally contextualized interaction with the students that enhanced a sense of normality and familiarity. In light of this theme, when the teachers received some funding, they paid a Greek teacher who was an expert in didactic methods to help them understand how and what to teach the children, so that they could catch up on reading and writing and learn English and Greek.

The following (Table 1) describes the three central themes or contexts of the findings (physical context, relational context, and academic context) in the three columns. Each theme was divided into challenges and resources that it raised. These can be seen in rows 1 and 2. As stated in the methods, the directive was to draw the challenges and also recourse that participants felt that the school provided, using two opposite sides of the page, so that this table included all of the art work of all of the participants.



**Table 1.** The participants three central themes, (physical contexts, relational context, and academic context).

	Physical Context	Relational Context	Academic Context
<b>Challenges</b>	Lack of most basic resources from buildings to school materials.	Constant conflict and violence between ethnic groups in school	Lack of training of teachers. Children's' lack of basic knowledge
<b>Resources</b>	Time spent in decorating and building resources	Constant verbal addressing of these conflicts. Non-violent communication Relationship building through fun together	High motivation for learning as hope for future Teaching according to cultural norms of each group

## 5. Discussion

Overall, and most importantly, the findings reveal the interactive nature of the three themes described above. Firstly, the physical energy put into the school constructed a base. The lack of resources—buildings and materials—was a difficulty that when overcome by painting and working on the school, provided a sense of satisfaction. Although the building was so inadequate and supplies so few, by decorating it and looking after it, it became their special building. The second theme of relationships was also central. This included intense fights between ethnic groups, but by talking about these struggles, the teachers enabled spaces for dialogue, even if the conflicts were not fully solved. The subjects studied were hard to teach because the level of the children constantly changed and there were no text books, yet the situation of formal learning provided so much pride. Thus, those trying to set up such a school can learn that the effort to create a safe decorated space is more important than having supplies. The effort to resolve ethnic conflicts is more important than the ability to resolve conflicts, and the lack of text books and training is less important than an effort to teach according to cultural norms and to create structure within which to learn. We see that there is a need to include intercultural dialogue and conflict negotiation not only in African countries but also in European refugee camps such as Lesbos (Bird 2003; Jones and Rutter 1998).

Another important finding was how these three themes created a circular, reciprocal relationship between the physical and relational tending of the school in spite of huge insufficiencies, as a backdrop that enabled the experience of ‘school’ and formal learning. In other words, the focus on creating a safe physical and relational context in an unsafe situation enabled a level of normalcy. The focus on learning also enabled the children to experience some normal aspects of childhood and to gain important skills. Thus, for example, overcoming the first theme, that of experiences of physical insufficiencies, was achieved through focus on relationship building with the school.

Another element central to this model is the interplay of ethnic spaces in classrooms and “universal” spaces in the school as a whole. This enabled the teachers to be culturally relevant and represent positive role models, to manage the class in a way that was familiar to the children, and to some extent re-create ‘home’. For example, the Senegalese teachers employed more music, while the Iranian teachers utilized more formalistic learning methods such as learning by heart. At the same time, the universal activities, such as singing together during breaks, and the use of multiple language signage, have enabled the children to experience open space and respect for all groups: they could experience being part of the multicultural ‘world’ that they now inhabit in a positive way. This is important in relation to the cultural clashes between western NGO’s and refugee cultures described in the literature above. This model echoes Greenfield (1994) focus on the tension between ethnicity and globality that is so central to refugees’ lives (Dominelli 2005).

While there is not much literature about inter-culturalism and anti-racist education in refugee schools as compared to research on integration of refugees in European schools,

this paper points to the need to address this basis of refugee identity already in camp schools before they reach regular schools, thus mirroring the developmentally appropriate model of a healthy childhood. The refugee-teachers became role models for the children. This positive role and the meaning created by being a teacher was described by the teachers as helping them deal with being refugees, and thus was also a way for them to rehabilitate themselves from the traumas and transitions that they had experienced (Amthor 2017; García-Moya et al. 2013; Hos and Çınarbaş 2018; Nilsson and Bunar 2016).

The arts-based methods enabled the school to show these challenges and ways of overcoming them as interactive parts of a whole. They also allowed for the expression of the holistic interactive nature between the above three elements of the physical, relational, and content levels of the school (Knowles and Cole 2008).

The “showing” element of art as a metonym enabled multiple moments of repeated and unresolvable conflicts, but also attempted to solve them in non-violent ways. The images mapping out experiences within the school space showed the interplay of ethnic spaces in classrooms and “universal” spaces in the school as a whole that contained both similarity and difference. The spatial element enabled the capture of the interaction of physical and relational efforts as dialectical processes. The symbolic, metaphorical, but also concrete, mapping out of the nature of art enabled participants to experience the importance of building and maintaining the school despite having no resources, as a correctional experience of ‘home’, which is often what is taken away when people become refugees (Derr 2002). This embodiment of the school space may have been lost in verbal interviews based on abstract concepts, and formal measures of learning. Formal data-gathering methods that focus on a specific encapsulated issue may also have lost the interactive nature of a complex system of interdependent themes that when taken together, created a transitional space in which learning could occur even without the needed supplies and knowledge. Overall, we can say that the arts-based methods helped to create complex spectrums, rather than endpoints, and helped to capture both physical and relational efforts to address lack of resources. The data were returned immediately to the school in exhibits, and helped adjust school strategies and policy, showing what was working and what was not. The overall intention of the school volunteers and teachers to deal with the severe lack of physical and educational resources, social and cultural conflicts, and lack of formal academic content simultaneously, rather than focusing only on content or saying that schooling cannot occur in this context, is what has enabled them to move beyond the limitations and experience a sense of efficacy.

The above insights can be translated into a set of bottom-up specific attitudes and actions that embody this model.

The theoretical orientation of this model highlights the need to activate relationships, place making, and conflict negotiation so as to create a space in which a school can work, even when working in refugee camps. Based on the above findings, this study presents a theoretical framework for enhancing education in refugee camps by integrating formal and informal educational aims that encompass physical, relational, and learning challenges as part of an ecological holistic approach.

This study makes a methodological contribution by providing a bottom-up knowledge base for setting up educational frameworks in extreme contexts such as refugee children in a transit camp. The data revealed how, within each of the themes, the interacting stressors and efforts to cope with the stressors were also reciprocal.

We have tried to create a set of bottom-up recommendations to use in practice for those trying to create educational models. The following practices can be applied to other refugee school contexts:

***Theme 1: The physical element of the school: Practices to strengthen place attachment:***

- *Finding a place for the school outside of the refugee camp, if possible.*
- *Asking parents, students, and teachers to participate in making the school special and to build and decorate the school together on a regular basis so that it is experienced as their place: by working on it, they develop an ownership.*

- *Enhancing embodied aesthetic experiences in the school: creating visual culture of the values of the school and “making it special.” This includes aesthetic visual presentation of food and decoration of the school.*

**Theme 2: Practices to enhance non-violent conflict negotiation and positive relationship building:**

- *Classrooms based on ethnicity with a teacher from the same ethnicity, teaching cultural values and games. In addition, also having times of mixing groups and ethnicities through messages of universal values through songs and other joint activities.*
- *Managed transitions between these spaces.*
- *Older children helping teachers so as to enhance identification with positive role models.*
- *Expecting and encouraging limit testing, as a healthy part of growing up not enabled in the violent atmosphere of the camp: Constant modeling of verbal conflict negotiation, as a central focus of the school curriculum.*
- *A focus on values of equality with the right to be different, constructed together, through discussion and negotiation (i.e., the teachers demand to earn money similar to how the volunteers receive pocket money, older children can make tea in the teachers’ room if they help with the younger children).*
- *A focus on positive good times together, investing time in relationship building on all ecological levels, with the community center, with parents, between teachers and volunteers.*

**Theme 3: Practices to enhance and enable formal learning:**

- *Utilizing the sense of pride and hope that learning English has for the refugees as motivation.*
- *Didactic methods such as prizes, reports, punishments, rewards, involving parents, as used as in regular schools.*
- *Integrating culturally specific and universal elements in the classroom such as culturally relevant songs and games with universal content such as English and mathematics instruction.*
- *Consistent didactic supervision through multiple staff meetings, in order to help the untrained teachers more effectively become a priority in the context of the refugee children’s school.*

A limitation of this study and its emerging model is the single-case study design. This does not allow perception of how it works in other circumstances and contexts of refugee schools. Another limitation is that it did not follow the school over time. Further research could compare additional schools to this one, and create a multiple case study design. However, deep encompassing research into single-case studies, as in this one, is recommended for preliminary and bottom-up studies, so as to help create a preliminary picture of the issues, that can then be further researched ([Miles and Hubberman 2002](#)).

As stated above, in terms of the contribution of this paper to the existing literature on the topic, there is very little literature on schools within refugee camps. Thus, this detailed case study helps to fill that gap. Additionally, it attempts to find a method that can include, as recommended in the above literature survey, the voices and experiences of the refugee children themselves. We see that the findings challenge existing positions concerning knowledge about children’s psychoeducational needs. The findings show that it is possible to create a fully educational context even if there are very limited recourses, many conflicts, and difficulty in formal learning. This adds new methods and potential hope to the literature describing the general difficulty and impoverishment within refugee camp schools ([Coulby and Jones 2018](#); [Hos and Çinarbaş 2018](#)).

We hope that this detailed description of the theoretical underpinnings of this model together with more concrete examples will inform theories of educational frameworks in post-disaster and refugee contexts, as well as theories of conflict negotiation. Most importantly, we hope that it will provide tools and inspiration to help people set up ad hoc schools in similar post-disaster, transient, and refugee contexts.

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