Creating a Safe Space During Classroom-Based Sandplay Workshops for Immigrant and Refugee Preschool Children

Caroline Beauregard[1,2], Cécile Rousseau[2,3], Maryse Benoit[2,4], and Garine Papazian-Zohrabian[2,5]

[1] Human and Social Development (art therapy programs), Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue (UQAT)

[2] Sherpa University Institute, Montréal (Canada)

[3] McGill University, Montréal (Canada)

[4] Université de Sherbrooke, Sherbrooke (Canada)

[5] Université de Montréal, Montréal (Canada)

Author Note

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Caroline Beauregard, Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue (UQAT), 625, President-Kennedy avenue, suite 1515, Montréal (Quebec) H3A 1K2. Email : caroline.beauregard@uqat.ca Telephone: 1-877-870-8728, ext. 5959. Fax: 1-819 797-4727.

Abstract

Schools must address immigrant and refugee children's specific needs to enhance their psychosocial development. While most existing programs focusing on children's emotional and developmental needs assume that they have a basic knowledge of the language of schooling, less verbal interventions, especially sandplay, provide other promising avenues. This article describes a classroom-based sandplay intervention with immigrant and refugee preschool children in Canada, involving teachers. Based on individual and class-level observations, we examine the creation of emotional safety during the workshops and teachers' role in its development, focusing on the process of two children from Syria. Analyses suggest that teachers provided a safe-enough space that allowed children to express, during the workshops, emotions related to their life experiences. While implementing sandplay in non-clinical settings with non-art-therapists involves challenges, offering sandplay workshops in classrooms should be considered as a valid avenue of intervention to support the social adjustment of immigrant and refugee children.

Keywords: sandplay, preschool, safe space, teachers, immigrant, refugee, children, creativity in counseling

Creating a Safe Space During Classroom-Based Sandplay Workshops for Immigrant and Refugee Preschool Children

Introduction

Parallel to the massive arrival of Syrian refugees in Canada between 2015 and 2017, the province of Quebec sustained an influx of asylum seekers entering irregularly from the United States (Immigration, Diversité et Inclusion Québec, 2018). This situation led to a major mobilization of the school sector not only to place these children in school, but also to properly address their specific emotional and developmental needs (Papazian-Zohrabian et al., 2018). While not all refugee children have endured traumatic experiences, we can say that most refugee children face adaptation challenges due to the changes provoked by immigration. This experience can disturb children's emotional well-being and normal development, which will in turn affect their psychosocial and school adjustment (Papazian-Zohrabian et al., 2018). Although there exist prevention and intervention programs to support the emotional well-being and development of vulnerable children (Duval & Bouchard, 2013), these programs often consider that children have a basic knowledge of the language of schooling. Less verbal interventions based on play and especially sandplay have not yet received sufficient attention despite the benefits they may have for newly arrived refugee children. Proposing an inclusive activity within the class may also diminish the stigma often associated to access to mental health service. However, non-verbal expressive means may often introduce teachers to a less familiar realm. While this is a source of learning, challenges and opportunities, it also raises the question of emotional safety within classrooms during such interventions.

Consequently, the aim of this article is to consider teachers' contribution to the creation of emotional safety during *Sand Play* classroom-based workshops, taking into account their

attitudes and reactions during the intervention. We illustrate our point focusing on the process of two five-year-old immigrant children from Syria. Analyses are based on workshop facilitators' individual and class-level clinical observations made during a pilot research-intervention with preschoolers (*Sand Play* program) as well as on information obtained during debriefing sessions.

It is important to note that we did not collect data regarding teachers' contributions as research data per say.

Theoretical Framework

Supporting Refugee Children's Emotional Expression at School

For children who have endured adversity and trauma following migration, school and especially teachers can be important sources of healthy developmental support, a concept known in the literature as resilience (Anaut, 2005). Schools can play an important role in fostering good mental health in immigrant and refugee children by offering a space, within the school, for emotional expression. While teachers do not replace mental health professionals, they can listen and be receptive to the lived experience of newly arrived children, even if the experience children share is painful and emotionally loaded (Papazian-Zohrabian, 2015). Actively listening and being genuinely interested in what the children have to share without actively intervening or formulating a judgment, as well as by asking clarifying and probing questions when needed, help children feel welcomed and safe at school. This can also take the form of allowing children to freely express their distress and suffering at school, through different channels of expression such as drawing, pretend play, letters, or diary, without analyzing what they express. Indeed, this could help children draw on the resources inside themselves for working on losses and trauma, reinforcing emotional self-regulation and foster resilience (Rousseau et al., 2017).

Emotional Safety in the Classroom

A number of authors argue that creating a safe space through a positive therapeutic relationship is a cornerstone of therapeutic work (see for example Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015). Although the concept of a safe space is mostly related to the clinical world, it can also be adapted to educational contexts where it is used to describe the school environment:

> An emotionally safe school is one where there are systems and structures that provide boundaries and self-worth in students; which results in the students feeling connected, respected, and valued; and through those feelings they are able to fully engage in relationships and learning, and express their true self. (Shean & Mander, 2020, p. 229)

For instance, teachers can provide boundaries by being consistent in their expectations from time to time or from one child to another as well as by not letting their own emotions influence their attitudes towards students. This also assists in making children feel they are important individuals, with their own interests and culture. An emotionally safe school, but also an emotionally safe classroom, allows students to be themselves and to feel good no matter how different they might be from others. Indeed, "a safe classroom space is one in which students are able to openly express their individuality, even if it differs dramatically from the norms set by the instructor, the profession, or other students" (Holley & Steiner, 2005, p. 50). In other words, when a child feels safe enough to express his or her identity and emotions in the classroom, what they like or dislike, but also when he or she feels safe enough to take risks without fear of retribution from the part of peers or the teacher (e.g., sharing an emotionally loaded experience), the latter was probably successful in creating an emotionally safe space in the classroom.

Teachers encouraging children to participate and contribute to the group, while respecting the degree to which they want to do it, can also play a role in the creation of a safe classroom

space, especially when the non-verbal is in congruence with the words (Holley & Steiner, 2005; Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015). Besides, this can strengthen the relationship between the teacher and his or her pupils, since the teacher gets to know students better and differently (Rousseau et al., 2009). In Holley and Steiner's study (2005), an open and non-judgmental attitude on the part of the teacher was essential to the creation of a safe space in the classroom according to students. For instance, students believed that a teacher who does not consider others' perspectives, who has a strong opinion on what students say or do and who does not encourage students to develop their ideas, contributes to the creation of an unsafe classroom environment. While teachers' positive attitude toward all children is important, it is especially so for immigrant and refugee children who may have endured predicament in the home and host countries, especially regarding discrimination. When working with this population, providing a safe space for expression is thus key for fostering positive transformation in children. One way to achieve this, is through the use of sandplay.

Sandplay with Young Children

Among the different ways that exist to promote children's safe emotional expression, creating pretend play spaces within the classroom, and especially sandplay spaces, allows a unique mode of expression for young children. Sandplay is a form of pretend play that gives young children the opportunity to express a wide variety of emotions and experiences through figurines and the different uses of sand (hide, dig, pour, bury, etc.) (Mitchell & Friedman, 1994). This approach helps in preventing children from being frustrated by their inability to represent their inner world through more traditional creative modalities (e.g., drawing). As a mode of expression, sandplay can support children cope with emotionally destabilizing experiences by providing a safe environment for the emergence of the imaginary and the expression of emotions

(Homeyer & Sweeney, 2016). In the case of immigrant and refugee children, offering sandplay workshops at school fosters the expression and the working through of migratory and potentially traumatic experiences, while protecting them from other possible traumas (Lacroix et al., 2007). In particular, the impact would be more important for children whose family experienced adversity back in the home country (Rousseau et al., 2009).

Sand Play Creative Expression Program

To respond to immigrant and refugee children's emotional and developmental needs, Sherpa University Institute developed the *Sand Play* creative expression program in the 1990's. The program consists of a series of 10 one-hour weekly workshops that take place in the classroom, mostly at the preschool level and in integration classes where they exist (Sherpa Research Center & Transcultural Research and Intervention Team, 2010). The preschool-level groups in Quebec are generally made up of a maximum of 16 to 18 children with one teacher. With the teacher's collaboration, two of our team members facilitate the workshops. Our team is made up of creative arts therapists, psychologists and artists who all have experience working with children and with immigrants. Before facilitating their first workshops, they receive training about the clinical principles underpinning the *Sand Play* program, the relevance of the intervention with immigrant and refugee preschoolers and the necessary know-hows for running the workshops.

In order to reflect schools' material and spatial conditions, sandplay as normally used in clinical settings, was adapted in two major ways. First, figurines are placed in different trays according to the realms they represent (i.e., figures, animals, transportation, household, or natural), instead of being arranged on shelves. Groups of four to six children share a set of figurine trays. Second, while sand trays possess the dimensions of regular sandplay trays (51 x

71 x 13 cm), a removable divider separates the play space in two. This allows two children to share a sand tray, either having their own space or sharing the space when removing the divider.

While we do not intend to offer therapy when conducting the *Sand Play* workshops in a classroom setting, there are nonetheless clinical principles that underlie the program, that we refer to “golden rules”, which are similar somehow to the fundamentals of filial therapy developed by Bernard and Louise Guerney (B. Guerney, 1964; L. Guerney, 2000). Unlike most school-based therapies that take children out of the classroom to receive specialized services, the *Sand Play* program adopts a universal approach in which every child in the class participates in the activity. This prevents stigmatization and allows prevention for a greater number of children. In class, this can also take the form of not excluding children from participating in the workshop for disciplinary reasons. This non-punitive approach rather focuses on setting firm limits within which children can play safely, just like it is the case in filial therapy (Gilmartin & McElvaney, 2020). In addition, *Sand Play* encourages non-performance as a means of opening up spaces for play and freedom to promote children’s expression. This means that there are no good or bad sandplay (e.g., pour a large quantity of figurines jumbled into the sandtray) and that teachers must refrain from telling children that what they created is “nice” or “beautiful”. As in filial therapy, teachers are encouraged to be non-directive and to follow children’s lead in their play (Cornett & Bratton, 2015; Gilmartin & McElvaney, 2020; McCarley, 2015). Any form of expression is thus supported and valued, even if it manifests through opposition to the proposed activity or through initial avoidance of it, provided that it occurs within safe limits. We also expect teachers not to put emphasis on children’s learning the words for the figurines they use, in order to separate the “learning space” from the “play space”. Respecting children’s own rhythm, by not pushing for disclosure and by paying attention to children’s choice not to share with

adults or with their peers, is also essential for the intervention. For this purpose, teachers must adopt a listening stance and be attuned to their students' needs, which is a different posture than they are used to. This stance is in a way similar to the Wait, Watch and Wonder programs (Muir et al., 1999), but also to the empathic listening and understanding adopted by parents within the filial therapy approach (Cornett & Bratton, 2015; McCarley, 2015). Although, in general, teachers do not directly facilitate the intervention, we invite them to actively take part in workshops. For this purpose, they can lead parts of the workshop with which they are comfortable such as the opening and closing rituals or the sharing circle. Being attentive of what is going on in the classroom, teachers can make sure children understand the activities, by rephrasing instructions for instance. They can also go around the classroom and ask open-ended questions to children about their sandplay, in an authentically curious and non-judgemental way. They may also witness an event or behavior that requires more clinical skills and, in this case, refer to the art therapists. Regardless of their level of involvement, we ask teachers to respect the golden rules to which we sensitize them before the start of the program, along with the program's intervention rational and structure. By inviting teachers to participate while supporting them, workshop facilitators acknowledge their key role without asking them to perform, which on the contrary fosters conditions that can help shift their perception of children. Even though we believe teachers can act as transformative agents for their students, they do not receive the same formal training parents may receive in formal therapy (VanFleet, 2014), as this is not the focus of the intervention.

Workshop facilitators establish a ritualized framework to foster a sense of safety, in particular by ensuring that workshops follow the same structure every week. Every workshop begins with a ritual in which children sing the opening song. Preschool teachers are often

comfortable to lead this activity, and this allows for a smoother transition from regular classroom activities. Then, we invite children to a sharing circle during which the workshop facilitators ask a very simple question (e.g., with whom do you come to school?). The question is often chosen in collaboration with the teacher and is adapted to children's needs and language development from week to week. The intention is to bring children together on something they share (e.g., being accompanied to school) while leaving room for differences (e.g., who accompanies them). Teachers often participate in this part by making sure the children understand the question being asked and rephrasing it if necessary. The workshop then continues with free play time in which we invite children to spontaneously choose figurines and place them in the sand tray to create a scene or short story. We strongly encourage teachers to be genuinely interested in whatever children want to share with them by asking open-ended questions and setting aside any learning goals they might have. At last, the workshop ends with the opening song that has been edited for closing purposes, conducted either by the teacher or the workshop facilitators (Lacroix et al., 2007). Apart from the sharing circle's question that changes from week to week, children know what to expect from the workshop, which participates in the creation of a sense of safety. Throughout the workshops, teachers remain in charge of classroom management. However, we ask them to respect the golden rules of the workshops as much as possible, by not taking a misbehaving child out of the class, for instance.

Immediately after the end of each workshop, facilitators take notes related to the evolution of children's sandplay, such as the figurines they used and left behind, the stories and scenes they created, the space they used, their verbal and non-verbal interactions with adults and their peers, and their involvement in their play. Workshop facilitators also take photographs of the final stage of each child's sand tray. The images illustrating the vignettes presented below

represent the final state of the sand trays, as left by the children at the end of workshops, while their actual play may have changed several times during play time.

Due to *Sand Play* inherent characteristics and principles, we believe that the program could be a powerful intervention tool to promote the good mental health and well-being of immigrant and refugee children, as previous research shows (Lacroix et al., 2007; Rousseau et al., 2009). However, how well children respond to these workshops might depend on how emotionally safe they feel in the classroom. This article therefore examines the creation of an emotionally safe space during classroom-based sandplay workshops, taking into consideration the attitudes and reactions of teachers. We base our reflection on facilitators' individual and class-level clinical observations collected during a pilot research-intervention with immigrant and refugee preschoolers.

Implementation Context of the Sand Play Intervention

We implemented the *Sand Play* program in seven preschool classes as part of a pilot research-intervention whose objective was to document the effects of the *Sand Play* program on the emotional well-being and the cognitive development of immigrant and refugee children in two Canadian cities, Montréal and Sherbrooke. However, as the research is not the focus of this article, in this practice paper, we focus on workshop facilitators' clinical observations and on the context in which we implemented the intervention rather than on research results.

Setting and Participants. As part of the research, we approached three schools located in neighbourhoods with high numbers of immigrant and refugee children in two Canadian cities: Montréal and Sherbrooke. The city of Montréal is a metropolis where 62,7% of children were of immigrant origin in 2017 (Grenier, 2018). Due to the regular influx of immigrant children, most of them are accommodated in closed integration classes, even if preschool integration classes do

not always exist (the case for half the classes in the pilot research-intervention). In comparison, Sherbrooke is a medium-sized city, relatively homogeneous in terms of ethnocultural origins. However, due to immigration regionalization policies, refugees represented 38,5% of Sherbrooke's immigrant population compared to 15,9% in Montréal in 2016 (Statistics Canada, 2017). Although the city of Sherbrooke has been a refugee reception area for over twenty years, the dynamics of reception and integration of refugee students in this region are very different from those of the metropolitan area (Mc Andrew & l'Équipe du GRIES, 2015). There are closed integration classes only in some schools and rarely at the preschool level, as the educational program does not officially include a reception class component in preschool. Most of the time, schools integrate immigrant children into regular classes (as it was the case in the pilot research).

In the three participating schools, we invited preschool teachers to participate in the *Sand Play* program. For research purposes, we obtained parental consent to participate in the pilot research-intervention for 63 children from seven preschool classes (two non-official integration classes and five regular classes). Every child who attended one of these classes was invited to take part in the research, whether born in Quebec or not, of immigrant parents or not (as immigrant children are generally integrated into regular classes in Sherbrooke, we did not want to discriminate against certain children, based on their place of birth or that of their parents). In the event that we did not obtain parental consent for the research, children could still benefit from the *Sand Play* program without information being collected about them, as *Sand Play* was considered part of the regular activities of the class.

Teachers Training. Before the beginning of the program, we met every teacher for a short training session. To accommodate the busy and tight schedule of teachers, we offered the short training session during lunch hour or immediately after school. During this session, we not

only explained the unfolding of workshops, but the teachers also experienced them. This allowed teachers to intimately discover the full potential of sandplay and to better understand what the children who participate in the workshops may feel. As the teachers experimented with sandplay, we also made them aware of the clinical principles (golden rules) behind the intervention. In order to ease their comfort during the workshops, we also took the time to clarify their role during the intervention, particularly in terms of disciplinary intervention. While we are aware that this short training may not be enough for teachers to lead the workshops themselves, we believe that when we model the intervention directly in their classroom, it promotes teacher ownership of the workshops (Machouf et al., 2009), not enough to be therapists or therapeutic agents as understood in filial therapy (Cornett & Bratton, 2015), but probably enough to create a safe space.

This article presents workshop facilitators' individual and class-level clinical observations on children's sandplay process, considering teachers' contributions to the creation of an emotionally safe space in the classroom. Observations were made during the pilot research but were not collected as research data per say. We also consider information from debriefing sessions with workshop facilitators in the analysis. To illustrate our point, we will present two vignettes.

Vignettes

Art therapists noticed positive change in several children during the intervention. As part of the workshop facilitators' debriefing sessions with the research team, they also pointed out that participating teachers reacted differently to the *Sand Play* program (and its associated research) as well as to children. The research team organized the debriefing sessions as a way for workshop facilitators and researchers to examine the qualitative data and clinical observations

from different perspectives. During these sessions, team members were invited to share on important topics related to the effects of the *Sand Play* program on children. Workshop facilitators in Montreal addressed the subject of the teacher's role in creating a safe space during the workshops, to which workshop facilitators in Sherbrooke added. In this regard, two teachers from different schools and cities stood out because they had very different teaching styles, one being very caring and attuned to children's emotional needs, and the other being rather focused on the cognitive development of her students. In addition, each teacher had a child in her class, Yana and Lozan, whose clinical process was interesting in terms of their use of sandplay, the evolution of their play during the workshops, but also because of the theme of safety that seemed to be at the core of their play. From these observations, we started to consider in more depth, the possible relationship between children's evolution in sandplay and the reactions of their teachers, by connecting our observations to relevant literature. For this purpose, we focused on teachers' facilitative and non-facilitative behaviours and attitudes (see Table 1) for the creation of an emotionally safe space in the classroom as well as on the processes of two children (their reactions, elements in their sandplay evoking danger or safety). As a way to illustrate how reflection, the following vignettes will be examined from the perspective of creating emotional safety in the classroom.

Table 1

Examples of teachers' facilitative and non-facilitative behaviours

Type of behaviours	Facilitative behaviours	Non-facilitative behaviours
Attitude	Understanding and caring Open and non-judgemental Genuinely interested in getting to know children better	Authoritarian Focused on getting "correct" answer Unconcerned

Behaviours	Respect children's rhythm and needs	Less receptive to children's needs
	Encourage participation and contribution	Encourage disclosure
	Make sure children understand	Focused on learning vocabulary
	Consistent in limit setting	Inconsistent in rule application or no intervention when inappropriate behaviours

Yana and her teacher Melissa. Yana's teacher, Melissa (pseudonyms), was very enthusiastic to participate in the *Sand Play* program, but also in the associated research. When Melissa is not directly involved in leading the workshops, she records her observations by taking notes, as she says this helps her understand the children better. Her attitude towards children is understanding and she follows the rhythm of children. For instance, Melissa respected the decision of a child who did not want to share the stories he had made in his sand tray before the eighth workshop, illustrating how a teacher can establish emotional safety in a classroom by being receptive to students' needs (Papazian-Zohrabian, 2015). The teacher kindly welcomes what children create in their sand tray, as long as they have fun and respect each other. Melissa's open and non-judgmental attitude may have contributed to Yana's sandplay process, as this is crucial on the part of teachers according to Holley and Steiner (2005).

Yana is a five-year-old girl, born in Aleppo (Syria) and resettled in Sherbrooke (Quebec) for less than a year, where she attends a regular preschool classroom along with two other immigrant children (there are other 2nd generation immigrant children in the classroom). Although we do not know whether she was a child of immigrants, asylum seekers or refugees at the time of intervention (this information is not required to be enrolled in school), the sociopolitical situation in Syria was such that one can assume that regardless of her immigration status, Yana could have been exposed to organized violence directly or indirectly. In her sandplay, she essentially creates

domestic scenes. In the stories associated with these scenes, there is often a danger underlying the apparent calm. From the first workshop, she represents the interior of her house, her "beautiful house" (Figure 1). However, despite the apparent absence of dangerous characters, the art therapists found a machine gun hidden under a bed at the end of the workshop. As the child did not mention firearms, we do not know the reason behind the concealment of the weapon. Possible explanations could be because the weapon represented a danger to the family or because it had a protective role in the event of danger and was positioned to be easily accessible. In both cases, it revealed that despite the seemingly peaceful atmosphere of the scene, there was a latent threat.

During workshop 3, Yana tells the story of a woman (represented by the Indian female figure) attacked by a monster (a frog) while taking her bath (Figure 2). There follows a period of intense activity in which another person cleans everything up and undoes everything before starting all over again. Here again, the child makes a connection between a harmless activity normally related to well-being and danger. When assaulted, a moment of chaos follows in the house, and probably in her inner world.

Several times during the intervention, Yana plays with a peer born in Sherbrooke but of Nepalese origin. In these moments, the two girls have fun together and their play reveals a positive connotation (princess, beach, garden, etc.). However, in the penultimate workshop (#9), Yana rubs a male figure with a woman, saying that these two are not married. At one point, the man approaches the woman who runs away crying for help. When asked why the woman is behaving this way, Yana tells the art therapist that the woman does not want kisses from this man. Interestingly, she then puts the two figurines away, outside of the sand tray, and replaces them with married figures (Figure 3). While anyone who witnesses this scene may perceive the scene as

representing a sexual assault, it is also important to consider that the story Yana told may also represent a cultural transgression and its resolution, by “marrying” the two.

During the last workshop (#10) in which she plays with the same girl, Yana shares that they learned to feed the baby and that her friend gives the little baby hot chocolate (Figure 4). This contrasts with workshop 4, in which Yana creates a scene in which a baby cries and is inconsolable. In the sandplay, Yana seems to have found a comfort that nourishes her. The help of her friend who supported her in expressing danger, but who also supported her by containing her experience, perhaps contributed to this feeling of well-being. However, even though sandplay itself and her friend’s behaviours may have contributed to Yana’s process, we consider that without the positive and warm attitude of Yana’s teacher, the child might not have felt safe enough to take risks and express her experience in this way (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Lozan’s case is slightly different in this respect.

Lozan and his teacher Ana. Lozan (pseudonym) is also from Aleppo (Syria). Officially, there is no integration educational program for newcomers at the preschool level, so the boy attends preschool in Montreal (Quebec) with other children of his age, mostly from immigrant or refugee background. Lozan is a boy who speaks little and has minimal eye contact with other children and adults. Even when a workshop facilitator speaks Arabic with him, the child does not want to share either. During the first workshops, Lozan creates very loaded sand trays, filled with figurines, in which there is very little space to breathe (Figure 5). In several of the scenes he creates, insects fight whales. At first, insects outnumber whales (Figure 6), while later, the number of marine mammals exceeds that of insects (Figure 7). This is also when we notice a change in Lozan’s play, which becomes airier and tidier. Along with this, we also notice a change in the boy’s attitude, as he is more in contact with others (peers and adults). For Lozan, sandplay seems to have helped

him, on the one hand, to put order in the turmoil or the overflow in his internal world, while improving, on the other hand, his relational capacities, maybe because the world was generally less confusing and threatening.

During the intervention, Lozan's teacher, Ana (pseudonym), is present and wants to be involved in the workshops. At the start of the program, Ana assigns the children to sand trays. Yet, she does not intervene when at some point another child takes Lozan's usual place, forcing him to choose a different sand tray. According to Shean and Mander (2020), setting boundaries fosters emotional safety at school. However, inconsistency in their application could compromise this sense of safety. Indeed, the boy's sand tray, which was starting to be airier, again becomes loaded with figurines following this incident. As a teacher, Ana is also particularly involved in the sharing circle during which she makes sure that the children understand the question asked. She strongly encourages children to participate and contribute to the group, which promotes emotional safety (Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015). According to the art therapists' observations, it is not uncommon for her to encourage all the children to speak, including Lozan, for whom this seems to be a challenge. Doing so, Lozan may have felt compelled to participate, which could have undermined his sense of safety, because his teacher was not receptive to his needs (Papazian-Zohrabian, 2015). Interestingly, the first time Lozan speaks during the sharing circle is when there is a substitute teacher, who did not push him to participate but did not ignore him either. In addition, his teacher Ana seems to be worried about getting a "correct" or "original" answer to the question. For instance, during workshop 8, workshop facilitators ask the children about their favourite animal. Since some children give the same answer as others, Ana tells them that "they do not think much", which could have prevented some children from taking risks perceiving a judgmental attitude from their teacher, which generally impedes the creation of emotional safety (Holley & Steiner, 2005).

In Lozan’s case, creating a safe space seems to have been central to his change and the occasions when he may have felt unsafe seem to have caused regression in the child. For all children, but especially for newly arrived children who do not master the language of the host society and its cultural norms, and who may not know what is expected from them, the attitude of their teacher towards them becomes even more important.

Discussion

Implementing sandplay workshops in a non-clinical classroom setting involves challenges, especially in a context in which non-art therapists are also involved in facilitating the workshops. Initial teacher training assumes that teachers are trained for classroom management and thus to take a more directive role, which is different from the posture they are required to adopt during the workshops, namely one of listening, being available and non-judgmental (Machouf et al., 2009). In the context of our research-intervention, the way children responded to sandplay may have been influenced by the degree of emotional safety they felt during the workshops and by the attitude and behaviours of their teacher during *Sand Play*. Indeed, as is widely found in the literature, emotional safety is required to build the positive therapeutic relationship needed for clinical evolution, this being also true in educational environment (Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015; Shean & Mander, 2020). However, because the *Sand Play* program emphasizes children’s non-performance and respect of their rhythm, and because of the qualities inherent in sandplay, we believe the workshops provided a safe-enough space to children, albeit differently for Yana and Lozan. During the workshops, children can address in a personal way the content that matters most to them by creating scenes in the sand tray and telling stories about them. Thus, spaces to freely express one's identity and emotions are created in the classroom, as long as children respect themselves and others, which are important conditions for creating an

emotional safety that we find in the literature (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Therefore, all content is accepted on condition that children do not hurt themselves or others, even if the topic is generally unacceptable in most educational settings (e.g., expressing violence by portraying firearms or blood, which could be extremely relevant for children who have fled organized violence in their country of origin). Indeed, symbolizing violence is different from experiencing real violence since symbolization allows a more appropriate integration of the experience (Gil, 2017). The fact that Yana's teacher allowed her to use guns and did not judge her as being violent or disturbed, perhaps gave implicit permission to Yana to share some of her experience with the others. This may have fostered her symbolization process, which is often affected when people have endured trauma (Berberian, 2019). Nonetheless, the fact that she hid the weapon may also be an indication that she was testing the reactions of her teacher and the workshop facilitators, because the safety framework may not yet have been fully established at this stage. For Lozan, the safety framework may have been compromised by his teacher who strongly encouraged him to verbally participate during the workshops, which may have resulted in loaded and chaotic sandtrays at first. Indeed, the teacher may not have been very attuned to Lozan's needs at the time, a condition for establishing emotional safety (Papazian-Zohrabian, 2015).

One of the strengths of the *Sand Play* program is that it takes place directly in the classroom. The teacher not only attends the workshops but is also strongly encouraged to participate by intervening in the activities (e.g., by asking the children questions about what they are creating). However, this can be a double-edged sword, depending on teachers’ reactions to children and their play. Although sandplay and the sand tray itself generally provide a sense of safety for children and although the workshop facilitators demonstrate such a quality of presence that should lead to the creation of a safe space, this might not be sufficient in a classroom

context. How teachers react to children's participation and how they interpret their role during, and outside workshops can influence children's sense of safety during *Sand Play*. During the pilot research-intervention, some teachers were warm and understanding if a child was unwilling to answer questions posed by facilitators while other teachers strongly encouraged children to respond. For instance, both Melissa and Ana were eager that their students participate in the workshops, which is normally contributing to a sense of emotional safety in the classroom (Holley & Steiner, 2005; Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015). Yet, Melissa did it by adopting a receptive posture, by listening to Yana's needs and respecting the girl's rhythm, while Ana may have been less attuned to Lozan's needs when she wanted him to speak in the sharing circle. Although these teachers intervened gently, they might have placed children in a stressful situation that they might not have been ready to go through, not interpreting their non-verbal language correctly and not showing unconditional acceptance of their rhythm. Nonetheless, in the case of Yana and Lozan, sandplay seemed to have helped create a safe enough space in the classroom that made them feel safe enough to express emotions related to their experience, albeit through the use of metaphors.

Limitations

Regardless of how the *Sand Play* program and the safe enough space created in the classroom may have contributed to children's process, the reflections reported here should be taken with caution for several reasons. First, the interventions were embedded in a research project whose main objective was to document the effects of the program on the emotional well-being and cognitive development of immigrant and refugee children. Therefore, we collected research data and clinical observations that did not specifically and systematically focus on teachers' reactions during the workshops. However, the facilitators attended each workshop for

one hour for 10 weeks and in this sense, were able to have a good understanding of the dynamics of the group and how it works.

Another area of concern is the difficulty, within the framework of this project, of isolating the factors that may have influenced the children's sandplay process and their behaviour during the workshops. Events in children's personal and family life, peer relationships at school and outside of school, but also possible changes in their teacher, all could have played a role in children's sense of safety in their class, which in turn could have affected their sandplay. Likewise, it is also difficult to assess who, between workshop facilitators, teachers or both, had an impact on creating emotional safety in the classroom. Nevertheless, for a therapeutic change to occur in children, they must feel emotionally safe enough for the transformation to take place (Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015). This suggests that the positive and caring attitudes of the workshop facilitators as well as the good enough reactions from the teachers, coupled with the qualities inherent in the *Sand Play* program, provided sufficient emotional safety for these children.

In order to better understand the role of teachers in creating an emotionally safe enough space in the classroom in the context of sandplay workshops, it would be important to conduct research that collects observational data specifically on teacher-student relationships during the intervention and how they influence each other. It would also be interesting to provide more formal training for teachers and explore its impact on the way the *Sand Play* workshops are conducted. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we suggest collecting the children's own impressions and feelings towards the workshops through focus groups, but also by using sandplay itself, as it can be difficult for preschoolers to share their inner thoughts through verbal means.

Conclusion

Practice observations suggest that classroom-based sandplay workshops represent an interesting avenue for intervening with immigrant and refugee children. These observations also highlight that teachers may take measures to enhance the safe space in the classroom environment. First, it may be important to remind teachers of their mandate to socialize children. Even if Quebec teachers must fulfill the threefold mission of the school (i.e., educate, socialize, and qualify children), most of them attach more importance to the teaching aspect of their mandate and to educational activities. The promotion and appreciation of the mission of socialization must therefore be present both in the initial training of teachers and in their in-service training in order to bring about lasting structural changes. This may support teachers' investment in alternative interventions and help them pay attention to the development of children social network, which they can support. Second, in terms of in-service training, teachers need to be made aware of the specific predicament of immigrant and refugee families, especially teachers who work in reception classes and of the role they play in fostering students' resilience. Learning what their students may have gone through could foster the development of greater empathy and sensitivity towards the children in their class, and thus promote a safer emotional space by encouraging the unconditional position of teachers. At last, initial and in-service training should also demystify that without being a psychologist, teachers can listen to children's life experiences without being destroyed and without losing their role as teachers. While these recommendations require a supportive school administration and constitute a longer-term process, they would undoubtedly help create an ideal context for offering *Sand Play* workshops in a classroom setting, and thus maximize the impact sandplay can have on children's emotional well-being.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to warmly thank the workshop facilitators who did such a great job supporting children and teachers: Marie-Eve Caron, Catherine Isely, Priscilla Monette-Gagné and Maïté Simard. And also many thanks to the children who shared their stories with us.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

Funding Details

This work was supported by the Fondation de l’Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue (FUQAT) under Grant 2017-2018.

References

Anaut, M. (2005). Le concept de résilience et ses applications cliniques. *Recherche en soins infirmiers*, *82*(3), 4-11. https://doi.org/10.3917/rsi.082.0004

Berberian, M. (2019). Creative problem solving in art therapy: An overview of benefits to promote resilience. In M. Berberian & B. Davis (Eds.), *Art therapy practices for resilient youth: A strengths-based approach to at-promise children and adolescents* (pp. 13-32). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315229379-2

Cornett, N., & Bratton, S. C. (2015). A golden intervention: 50 years of research on filial therapy. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, *24*(3), 119–133. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0039088

Duval, S., & Bouchard, C. (2013). *Soutenir la préparation à l'école et à la vie des enfants issus de milieux défavorisés et des enfants en difficulté*. Ministère de la Famille.

Gil, E. (2017). *Posttraumatic play in children. What clinicians need to know*. The Guilford Press.

Gilmartin, D., & McElvaney, R. (2020). Filial therapy as a core intervention with children in foster care. *Child Abuse Review*, *29*(2), 159–166. https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2602

Guerney, B. (1964). Filial therapy: Description and rationale. *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, *28*(4), 304–310. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0041340

Guerney, L. (2000). Filial therapy into the 21st century. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, *9*(2), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0089433

Grenier, S. (2018). *Portrait socioculturel des élèves inscrits dans les écoles publiques de l'île de Montréal: Inscriptions au 3 novembre 2017*. Comité de gestion de la taxe scolaire de l'île de Montréal.

Holley, L. C., & Steiner, S. (2005). Safe space: Student perspectives on classroom environment. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *41*(1), 49-64. https://doi.org/10.5175/JSWE.2005.200300343

Homeyer, L. E., & Sweeney, D. S. (2016). *Sandtray therapy: A practical manual*. Taylor and Francis.

Immigration, Diversité et Inclusion Québec. (2018). *État de situation: Demandeurs d'asile au Québec*. http://www.immigration-quebec.gouv.qc.ca/fr/informations/situation-demandeurs-asile/index.html

Kisfalvi, V., & Oliver, D. (2015). Creating and maintaining a safe space in experiential learning. *Journal of Management Education*, *39*(6), 713-740. https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562915574724

Lacroix, L., Rousseau, C., Gauthier, M.-F., Singh, A., Giguère, N., & Lemzoudi, Y. (2007). Immigrant and refugee preschoolers' sandplay representations of the tsunami. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, *34*(2), 99-113. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2006.09.006

Machouf, A., Gauthier, M.-F., Rousseau, C., & Benoit, M. (2009). Dissémination des projets d'expression créatrice pour les enfants immigrants et réfugiés : Le défi du transfert des connaissances et des pratiques. *Revue Québécoise de Psychologie*, *30*, 121-139.

Mc Andrew, M. & l'Équipe du GRIES. (2015). *La réussite éducative des élèves issus de l'immigration: Dix ans de recherches et d'intervention*. Presses de l'Université de Montréal.

McCarley, L. L. (2015). Filial art therapy: A Rogerian approach. In C. Kerr, J. Hoshino, J. Sutherland, S. T. Parashak, & L. L. McCarley (Eds.), *Family art therapy: Foundations of theory and practice* (pp. 181–192). Routledge.

Mitchell, R. R., & Friedman. (1994). *Sandplay: Past, present and future*. Routledge.

Muir, E., Lojkasek, M., & Cohen, N. (1999). *Watch, Wait and Wonder: A manual describing a dyadic infant-led approach to problems in infancy and early childhood*. Hincks-Dellcrest Institute.

Papazian-Zohrabian, G. (2015). Les enfants traumatisés et endeuillés par la guerre. In C. F. Caputo & M. Julier-Costes (Eds.), *La mort à l'école: Annoncer, accueillir, accompagner* (pp. 249-270). De Boeck Superieur.

Papazian-Zohrabian, G., Mamprin, C., Lemire, V., & Turpin-Samson, A. (2018). Prendre en compte l'expérience pré-, péri-et post migratoire des élèves réfugiés afin de favoriser leur accueil et leur expérience socioscolaire. *Alterstice-Revue Internationale de la Recherche Interculturelle*, *8*(2), 103-117. https://doi.org/10.7202/1066956ar

Rousseau, C., Beauregard, C., & Michalon-Brodeur, V. (2017). Penser la prévention pour les enfants réfugiés et immigrants: Quand altérité et souffrance sociale se conjuguent. In M. Dorais (Ed.), *Prévenir* (pp. 105-167). Presses de l'Université Laval.

Rousseau, C., Benoit, M., Lacroix, L., & Gauthier, M.-F. (2009). Evaluation of a sandplay program for preschoolers in a multiethnic neighborhood. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *50*(6), 743-750. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2008.02003.x

Shean, M., & Mander, D. (2020). Building emotional safety for students in school environments: Challenges and opportunities. In R. Midford, G. Nutton, B. Hyndman, & S. Silburn (Eds.), *Health and education interdependence: Thriving from birth to adulthood* (pp. 225-248). Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-3959-6_12

Sherpa Research Center, & Transcultural Research and Intervention Team. (2010). *Sand Play. Training manual. Creative expression workshops*. Sherpa Research Center and

Transcultural Research and Intervention Team. https://sherpa-recherche.com/wp-content/uploads/Expression-créatrice-_-Jeu-dans-le-sable.pdf

Statistics Canada. (2017). *Focus on geography series, 2016 ensus*. Statistics Canada. https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/fogs-spg/Facts-cma-eng.cfm?LANG=Eng&GK=CMA&GC=433&TOPIC=7

VanFleet, R. (2014). *Filial therapy: Strengthening parent-child relationships through play*. Professional Resource Press.

Table 1

Examples of teachers' facilitative and non-facilitative behaviours

Type of behaviours	Facilitative behaviours	Non-facilitative behaviours
Attitude	Understanding and caring	Authoritarian
	Open and non-judgemental	Focused on getting "correct" answer
	Genuinely interested in getting to know children better	Unconcerned
Behaviours	Respect children's rhythm and needs	Less receptive to children's needs
	Encourage participation and contribution	Encourage disclosure
	Make sure children understand	Focused on learning vocabulary
	Consistent in limit setting	Inconsistent in rule application or no intervention when inappropriate behaviours

Figure 1

Yana's beautiful home

Figure 2

After the frog attack

Figure 3

The unwed man and woman

Figure 4

Feed the baby

Figure 5

A filled sand tray

Figure 6

Insects versus whales

Figure 7

A structured sand tray