Title: Making Sense of Collective Identity and Trauma through Drawing: The Case Study of a Palestinian Refugee Student

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Abstract

Identity construction can be very complex for refugee children, especially for Palestinian refugee children. For refugee children, organized violence and immigration are important parts of their life experience that can lead to trauma, which in turn influences how they construct their collective identity. Schools have to consider this specific experience as the development of a meaningful identity is an important factor in refugee students' well-being and school adjustment. School-based activities centred on creative expression can help refugee students in expressing trauma and in making sense of their identity and migration experience. This paper presents the case study of a 9 year-old Palestinian refugee boy in Canada and explores how he expressed and made sense of his multiple identities in his drawings. Many features of the boy's drawings evoked a wounded identity, especially spatial disorganization and enmeshment. Data analysis revealed that the boy might have been experiencing collective identity trauma and that he used drawing and a peer as props to heal his wounded identity. Both drawing and the space offered by his teacher to safely explore and experiment with different identities contributed to the integration of his multiple identities into a meaningful whole, which participated in his school adjustment.

Keywords: Refugee student; drawing; collective identity; trauma; school-based activities.

Introduction

Identity construction can be very complex for refugee children who are forced to flee their place of origin to seek asylum elsewhere, leading to feelings of loyalty and grief toward their country. Changes brought by resettlement can also be challenging for identity development (Bash & Zezlina-Phillips, 2006). Cultural changes transform refugee students' identity who then need to readjust to the disruption caused by immigration by making sense of these changes in their life (Kanouté, 2002). In the case of Palestinians, it is necessary to add the fact that with the creation of the Israeli state in 1948, large numbers of civilians found themselves with no land of their own (Brock, 2011). Many flew to neighboring countries, such as Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, where they have been living for decades. Despite being born in the country, Palestinian refugee children were never granted civil rights and Lebanese citizenship (Chatty, 2009). On the other hand, while being refused citizenship by the host country, some Palestinians also resisted naturalization because they defend their right of return to their homeland (Arari, 2001). Indeed, for many Palestinians, emotional attachment to Palestine is very strong. Palestinian parents can transmit this feeling of deep connection to the place to their children who have never been in direct contact with Palestine (Akesson, 2015).

This paper presents a case study of a 9 year-old Palestinian refugee in Canada, raised and born in Lebanon. Special attention will be given to how the boy expresses and makes sense of multiple identities in his drawings and to how he adjusts to his new country.

Collective Identity and Organised Violence

Identity refers as much to what makes individuals unique as to what makes them similar to other people in a group they belong or to which they identify (Vinsonneau, 2012). When a group of people have, or think they have some traits, characteristics, symbols or history in common, they share a collective identity without necessarily being in direct contact with one another (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004). Even before interacting with other peers and adults in school, young children's identity is greatly determined and influenced by their parents (Phinney & Ong, 2007). By being a powerful source of resilience, the development of a meaningful identity is an important factor in

students' well-being and school adjustment (Sinai et al., 2012), especially when talking about minority groups' collective identity. Minority children who exhibit strong ties to their ethnic, religious and/or family group are usually more satisfied with life, this feeling of well-being being stronger when they can also identify to mainstream society (Dimitrova, Chasiotis, Bender, & Vijver, 2013). On the contrary, children's psychological well-being and adaptation can be undermined when they are confused about belonging to and being involved with different identity groups (Berry et al., 2006).

Research has shown that the context of organized violence also plays an important role in how children develop their collective identity (Rousseau, Drapeau, & Rahimi, 2003), even if they do not experience this violence directly. On one hand, organized violence may fuel the creation of a reactive identity in which emphasis is put on pride and ethnic identity affiliation. On the other hand, violence may lead people to deny an identity when its exposition can be dangerous, as was the case during the Holocaust (Prot, 2008). The authors of this paper argue that violence may also lead to another shift in identity, in which multiple identities are hybridized in order to allow the tolerance of an unbearable identity. These identity shifts following exposure to organized violence are also found in the drawings of children (Ahuja, Dhillon, Akalamkam, & Papneja, 2016; Elbedour, Bastien, & Center, 1997).

Identity Expression, Trauma Elaboration and Well-Being Through Drawing

Though the pivotal role of schools in the well-being and adaptation of refugee students have been highlighted by researchers, refugee students' specific educational needs are rarely taken into account by the school system (S. Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). When working with refugee students, school activities based on nonverbal expression could be an approach to explore. Indeed, the arts support the safe expression of trauma without words (Avrahami, 2005). Through drawing, children make sense of their identity and migration experience by building bridges between possible life contradictions and identities (Rousseau, Lacroix, et al., 2003). Being able to redefine, reconstruct and

reorganize conflicting experiences in a meaningful way, children develop an identity which is much more imbued with sense (Ferrara, 2004).

Three principles underlie identity transformation through drawing: projection, identification and symbolization. Through projection, students disclose in their drawing important personal information that they are not necessarily conscious of or for which they do not possess the sufficient linguistic abilities to share (Anzieu et al., 2012). In other words, students transfer part of their inner world in their drawing which shows the identifications they are experiencing. Multiple identifications to various people play an important role in identity development. Children assimilate others' characteristics completely or partially in order to integrate these characteristics to who they are (Pontalis & Laplanche, 2004). For instance, human figures, animals, plants and other elements drawn by children and their reaction to these elements give an illustration of identity processes (Greig, 2001).

Identifications found in students' drawings are rarely expressed in a straight forward manner. Symbolization is the use of symbols to give shape to an experience or emotion that has not been expressed otherwise, such as trauma or identity, in order to share it with someone else (Stepakoff, 2007). Artworks include multiple symbols that need to be interpreted in order to understand the content of a drawing. Knowing that the interaction between immigration and the effect of trauma on collective identity could be challenging for refugee students' identity, drawing could therefore be a very efficient tool for teachers to help them make sense of multiple identities and to adjust to their new place.

For this paper, the authors explore how a young 9 year-old Palestinian refugee boy, born and raised in Lebanon, expressed his multiple identities in his drawings in the context of school-based creative expression workshops in order to examine how being a Palestinian refugee may emerge as a dimension of identity in his drawings and how artistic expression may support him to make sense of who he is.

Methods

Art & Storytelling Program

The case study is based on data derived from free drawings created as part of the Art & Storytelling program. This classroom-based prevention program was elaborated in collaboration with schools and community organizations by the Transcultural Research and Intervention Team (Erit) to which the authors belong. Art & Storytelling builds on the power of the arts and stories as verbal and nonverbal means of expression to foster the well-being of immigrant and refugee students. It is comprised of 12 weekly workshops of a 60-minute duration following the same structure every week: an opening ritual, a story time, a free drawing period and a closing ritual (Équipe de recherche et d'intervention transculturelles (Erit), 2010). The workshops take place in the classroom and are offered to the whole group. This allows prevention for a greater number of children while avoiding stigmatization. The workshops do not target learning nor school performance. Workshop facilitators (including teachers) embrace a listening, open and non-judgmental stance to support the exploration of daily life, worries, memories without pushing children to disclose personal information.

In the 20 years that the program has been running, the researcher, who is an art therapist, has led the program numerous times and has participated to several evaluations. Evaluations have confirmed that participation to the Art and Storytelling program decreases levels of externalized and internalized symptoms as well as increases self-esteem and tolerance towards the others (Rousseau, Drapeau, et al., 2005). They have also shown that the use of metaphors and stories is beneficial in making sense of adverse experience and in creating connections between different worlds, while encouraging adaptive strategies (Rousseau, Lacroix, et al., 2003).

Case Selection

As part of a larger study, the Art & Storytelling program was offered to two classrooms in a Canadian multiethnic elementary school. The 2 groups selected for the study were integration classrooms where immigrant and refugee children receive intensive

host society language lessons in a relaxed atmosphere to ease social and school adjustment. In the classroom to which this case study pertains, children were aged from 8 to 10 and came from 12 different countries. This age group was selected because at this age, children get increasing control over drawing tools, materials and techniques. Children this age are not yet appealed with realism and their drawings are usually much less inhibited while graphical development in terms of completeness of characters and the use of various colors is at its best (Greig, 2001).

Within both classrooms, 29 children and their parents accepted to take part in the study. A total of 478 commented free drawings were collected as part of the Art & Storytelling program while 116 thematic self-portraits "Me from within and from without" were collected right before and after the program. On the 29 students, 4 were met, with one or both parents, for a semi-structured interview. Both classroom teachers also participated in an interview. This paper presents the case study of one of these 4 children, a 9 year-old Palestinian refugee boy, Ali (pseudonym). During the 14 weeks of the study, the boy created two self-portraits and 13 free drawings. With the child, the interview covered the stories related to the drawings made during the program, the drawings he preferred the most and the least, as well as themes related to school, friends and families. The family story as well as themes such as language, religious beliefs and the changes noticed in the child since arrival in Canada were addressed with the mother. Notes were taken during the interview with the boy and his mother as she refused recording. A semi-structured interview (audio-recorded) was also conducted with his teacher mostly covering students' interpersonal relationships and identity in class, and the teacher's teaching philosophy. These data were complemented with the researcher's field notes based on participant observation.

Ali was chosen among the 29 students because the graphical quality level of his drawings was below what one would expect from a boy his age. From the first drawings he made, the spatial organization of his images was overwhelming and chaotic, evoking trauma. The space in many of his drawings was saturated with lines, colors and human figures, which made the different elements hard to distinguish. Besides, Ali's drawings stood out because of the orientation he chose to draw from. Contrary to his peers who chose to make most of their drawings in a landscape orientation, the boy made 14 drawings out

of 17 in portrait orientation (which is also unusual when noting that the sheet of paper measured 30,5 x 45,7 cm). Human figures were also the main topic in most of his drawings (9 out of 17), while sceneries were common among his peers. It soon became obvious that the boundary of these human figures were ambiguous and shifting and that boundary between the self and the 'other' was a recurring theme as the boy visually explored fusion and separation with a Lebanese peer.

Case Presentation

Ali

Ali is a young boy of 9 years old, who was born and raised in Lebanon by two Palestinian refugee parents born outside of Palestine. The couple has 3 children, Ali being the middle one. The children go to Saturday school where they learn Arabic and the basics of Islam, the transmission of which is very important for the parents. The mother takes care of the children at home and take language lessons while the father is often gone for long work trips. While in Lebanon, the family was living in a house constructed by a family member, located next to a Palestinian refugee camp. During the interview, the mother talks a great deal about how difficult it is to be Palestinian in Lebanon, as it is not possible or at least very difficult to have Lebanese citizenship, buy a house, have access to governmental jobs, travel outside the country, etc. These conditions led the family to immigrate for better life conditions and to guarantee education and citizenship for the children. Immigration was also related to security. Although generally happy of being in Canada after 8 months, one of the mother's strongest desires is to go back to Palestine one day as she would have loved to live in her country.

Even in Lebanon, the father was working outside the country to earn an income and save money for immigration which was planned long before coming to Canada. He arrived 2 months before his spouse and children in order to prepare their arrival and the family was granted refugee status shortly after. When the Art & Storytelling workshops started in Ali's class, the boy had been in Canada for about 6 weeks, having arrived a few weeks after the start of the school year, which contributed to Ali being a bit isolated from the others and made his adaptation more difficult according to his teacher. For several weeks, the boy was

returning from school in tears. The boy was clumsy, tripping over things and falling off his chair every 10 minutes or so. According to his teacher, Ali was unable to do things children his age usually know such as tying up his shoes, sharpening a pencil or putting on a jacket. Even though Ali attended school for five years before coming to Canada, the level of his hand-writing and drawings was also below what one would expect from a boy his age which could have contributed to how he organized the content of his drawings. The situation gradually changed as he was socialized to host society and its language. According to his mother, Ali had one friend at the time of the interview, a boy from his classroom who is from an ethnic minority in Afghanistan.

Spatial Disorganization

For the first drawing, students were shown how to fold the paper like a double-sided door and were asked to draw a self-portrait from two perspectives: from without as they thought people saw them and from within, as they saw themselves. Ali did not completely understand the task (the task was very complex for children his age) and drew a random character. As shown by figure 13, the boy filled almost the entire space with different colors, leaving little white space. Ali framed the character with colors, as if on the one hand, the character could not contain all the colors. But on the other hand, the way he drew the colors is also very containing, having different layers of colors protecting the human figure. If we consider that Ali projected his internal world onto this drawing, we can suppose that Ali indeed drew a self-portrait of him overwhelmed with emotions, trying to find a way to express and contain them.

Figure 1.   Me from without, before the beginning of the program.

The idea of being overwhelmed is also present in the second drawing he made that day, "Me from within". Interestingly, he drew a "mountain where nothing is happening,

Figure 2.   An empty mountain evoking a volcano.

but where children live" (Figure 14). What Ali says is in contradiction with what one can see in his drawing. The colors of the mountain and its shape remind strongly of lava erupting from a volcano with smoke coming out on the upper left. It is as if Ali was telling the researcher that he was boiling on the inside and that he needed a space to get it out. Furthermore, the fact that he says that nothing is happening on the mountain suggests that Ali might wish to avoid an unpleasant experience. This contradiction suggests a splitting between emotions and rational ideas, between verbal and nonverbal discourses, which is usually the case with traumatic experiences (Papazian-Zohrabian, 2013).

The way Ali organized the content of the images was also chaotic. In some of his drawings, he drew elements from different baselines, turning his sheets of paper while drawing, such as in figure 15. In this image, he also expresses a feeling of emptiness as he drew "houses in Lebanon, where nobody lives". The resemblance with Lebanese urban landscape is indeed striking for someone who knows the cities of Lebanon: narrow streets

Figure 3.   Houses in Lebanon.

with houses very close to each other. When asked about the element on top of the house on the left, the boy said that it was the Palestinian flag. In this drawing, the houses might represent Ali's identity of a Palestinian refugee living in Lebanon. However, the Palestinian houses were empty which could be related to a lack of anchor and a void of identity. The world he knew had been turned over as is shown by the different baselines from which he drew. This emptiness within could also be related to the void of representations and symbols related to trauma. This could imply that both his Palestinian and Lebanese identities were shaken and that he was trying to grasp a reference point to identify with.

These first three drawings he made as part of the study are representative of how troubled Ali's identity was at the beginning of the intervention. However, he was able to use a Lebanese peer as a prop to heal his wounded identity and make sense of it, as is shown in the following section.

Enmeshment

After a few sessions, Ali became closer to a Lebanese boy, Issam (pseudonym). In many of his drawings, Ali represented himself and Issam, writing both names along both figures, Issam also doing the same in his drawings. It was hard to know which drawing belonged to which boy and which figure represented who and even when asked, the boys kept the confusion. During the fourth workshop, Ali chose to draw Issam, but later changed his mind and said it was just anybody (Figure 16). The human figure he created reminds of Frankeinstein: there is a line separating the face in two and the body is made from different geometrical forms, as if the figure was patched up or hybridized. The colors do not follow the outlines of the shapes which make the character disappear behind them, perhaps behind overwhelming experiences. The fact that he chose to draw Issam suggests a first attempt at using a Lebanese peer to make sense of who he was. The division made in the face might also be reminiscent of a splitting between his identities as Palestinian, Lebanese and/or Canadian, or if compared to stitches, of an attempt at joining his multiple identities. It is also interesting to note that during the interview, he chose this drawing as one he disliked, maybe because he was uncomfortable with this

Figure 4.   Using a Lebanese peer to
make sense of multiple identities.

situation at that time. However, he chose to go on with hybridity and went further into getting enmeshed with Issam.

Figure 17 is a good example of how Ali and Issam were enmeshed in the boy's drawings. It also shows the space that the host country started to occupy in Ali's identity. The figure Ali drew has two overlapping torsos: the one on the left in which he wrote Issam's name and the one on the right with his teacher's name. He also wrote "Me" on top of his drawing, suggesting that he drew himself. In this drawing, one possible explanation is that his Lebanese identity, represented by Issam, is struggling for space with his new host country identity, symbolized by his teacher. There are no apparent indications or symbols that could be related to Palestine, but there is almost a third space created by the two torsos. It is as if Ali was trying to merge both identities by leaning on the identity of a representative of the country he was born and raised in, Lebanon. It is interesting to note that his teacher only noticed this enmeshment during the Art & Storytelling workshops, which might have been used as a special space to make sense of his multiple identities.

Figure 5.   Identities struggling for space.

Collective Identity and Trauma

When immersed in the boy's drawings, many features evoked a wounded identity, especially chaos, confusion and the lack of space, which also recall aspects of trauma. When faced with traumatic events, individuals have normal reactions of "survival" including but not limited to difficulty in controlling one's impulses and in focusing one's attention, psychological numbness and withdrawal, dissociation, separation anxiety and developmental regression (Papazian-Zohrabian, 2013). For refugee children, traumatic reactions can also result from intercultural challenges caused by resettlement to a new country (Young & Chan, 2014). During the interview, both Ali's mother and teacher told the researcher how difficult it was for the boy to adapt to school in the first few months, indicating possible intercultural challenges. The way the boy fell down his chair repeatedly or the bad quality of his writing could have been signs of difficulty in controlling one's impulses following traumatic experience. The overwhelming impression coming out from his drawings as shown in figures 13 and 14, but also the avoidance of unpleasant experience by expressing a feeling of emptiness (Figure 14) also suggest difficult impulse control and psychological numbness. Ali could also have manifested signs of dissociation when he created images reminiscent of splitting as in figures 14, 16 and 17, but also signs of trying to hybridize his multiple collective identities. This could also have been a sign of rehabilitation, as trauma implies rupture, thus suggesting a link between trauma and collective identity.

As mentioned earlier, strong emotional connection to a place of origin can be passed down to children from their parents, even if children have never set foot in the country (Akesson, 2015). From what she tells the researcher during the interview, Ali's mother seems to be very attached to Palestine. She self-identifies as Palestinian, despite being born outside of Palestine and being raised in Lebanon. She even expresses how she would have loved to live in Palestine and how she wishes to go back to her place of origin one day, expressing loyalty toward Palestine and a strong ethnic identity affiliation, which suggests a reactive collective identity. This reactive collective identity seems to have been passed down to Ali who represented the Palestinian flag in one of his first drawings (Figure 15). This tie to Palestine might have been preserved, even reinforced, by the fact of being a

Palestinian refugee (Akesson, 2015). However, for Ali, this tie might have been fragilized by his parents' migration project. Already in Palestine, the family had chosen to live in a house located just outside a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, suggesting that the parents were beginning to let go of their Palestinian refugee identity. The decision to immigrate to Canada was naturally taken by Ali's parents, but the boy could have perceived this relocation as a threat to his Palestinian identity. Being disconnected to most of his Palestinian identity markers, Ali could have experienced anxiety or fear of losing his Palestinian identity, which in turn could have led to the development of collective identity trauma (Kira, 2006). Fear of losing one's identity is also linked to a guilt feeling of accomplishing what the aggressor wanted, implying the necessity to find a way to connect all identities without losing the Palestinian identity. The difficulties Ali encountered at school could have added to this already adverse background (McBrien, 2005) and rendered the trauma "traumatic". In other words, the identity injury engendered by the fact of being a Palestinian refugee became distressing for Ali in the context of migration.

Perhaps because Ali was experiencing collective identity trauma, he used a Lebanese peer as a prop to heal his wounded identity. Boundary between the self and the 'other' was a recurring theme in his drawings as the boy visually explored different ways to merge his multiple identities through fusion and separation with a Lebanese peer. By exploring different identities and their boundaries, Ali could have started to create a connection between his multiple identities, even though the stability of his identity was shaken in the process (Bash & Zezlina-Phillips, 2006). The choice of a Lebanese peer as a prop was not trivial. Although one can think of language as a criterion, there were many other Arab-speaking children in the classroom with whom Ali played at recess but who were not chosen as subjects for fusion. He chose the one representative of the majority in the country he was raised in, Lebanon. According to Abrams and Hoggs (2004), it is "likely that under uncertainty, people seek to identify with groups that are more effective at reducing uncertainty" (p. 168). Since Ali's Palestinian identity was first wounded in Lebanon by the fact of being a refugee, he might have first identified with a group he was familiar with, Lebanese, and who received greater recognition back in Lebanon. Then, as time passed in Canada, the locus of this identification shifted to the majority group of the place he was now in, school and peers being much more present in his drawings in the last

few workshops. These identifications with stronger groups seem to have been beneficial for Ali who appeared to feel better over the weeks, also supporting the results of Dimitrova and colleagues (2013).

Making Sense of Collective Identity and Trauma Through Drawing

The evolution of Ali's well-being during the workshops is noticeable in his behaviors, his attitudes and his drawings. Toward the end of the program, he seemed much more comfortable in class, talking with his peers, the teacher and the researcher and he participated in a more active way to the workshops (e.g. putting something in the treasure box during the closing ritual, a thing he would not do in the first 9 sessions). While he still needed to include his Lebanese peer in his drawings at this stage, enmeshment was much less important and it was possible to consider the separate individuals, suggesting that Ali was able to affirm his own meaningful collective identity.

The school milieu, especially Ali's teacher, might have been in part responsible for the boy's adaptation, as it gave him support to adapt to his new milieu and create a sense of school belonging, which in turn contributed in healing his identity of origin. Indeed, when showing intercultural competencies, teachers acknowledge and support the expression of refugee students' identity and influence refugees' adjustment (Matthews, 2008). Ali's teacher showed intercultural competencies as indicated during the interview by his reflexive attitude toward Ali and the other students in the group. His teacher's sensitivity and openness probably left space for Ali to explore his wounded identity, in order to reinforce his self-image and make sense of his experience. Ali's teacher was opened to offer opportunities to the boy to explore his identity in his drawings and thus participated in a more profound learning experience for Ali (Sinai et al., 2012).

The importance that school played for Ali is shown in figure 1 (p. 62). Toward the end of the program, he created an image clearly bridging his home and school worlds. Ali described this drawing as houses, the school buses, his school, his classroom number (with his teacher's name) and some of his peers' names (all Arab speaking). From what he told the researcher, Ali has clearly drawn a part of his daily life that was important to him: when

he goes to school. This drawing, when compared to drawings he made at the beginning of the intervention, is much more structured and aerated. There is space to breathe for every element of his life, including his Palestinian, Lebanese and Canadian identities. In this image, the school bus, where he sits, transports him from home to school. By drawing the school buses, he was able to create a bridge between his home and school universes, a bridge that allowed back and forth movement between his multiple identities. This connection suggests that Ali could put together his Palestinian, Lebanese and Canadian identities in order to create a new meaningful identity.

The self-portrait he made at the end of the intervention is also significant to illustrate the evolution of his well-being, especially "Me from within" (Figure 18). Ali liked this drawing very much and this is one of the drawings he talked about the most during the interview. Ali described this drawing as a representation of a family having fun in water slides at the swimming pool. The different figures he drew in this image are smiling and the overall impression is one of well-being. Compared to his first drawing of himself "from within" which reminds of an erupting volcano (Figure 14), this image is
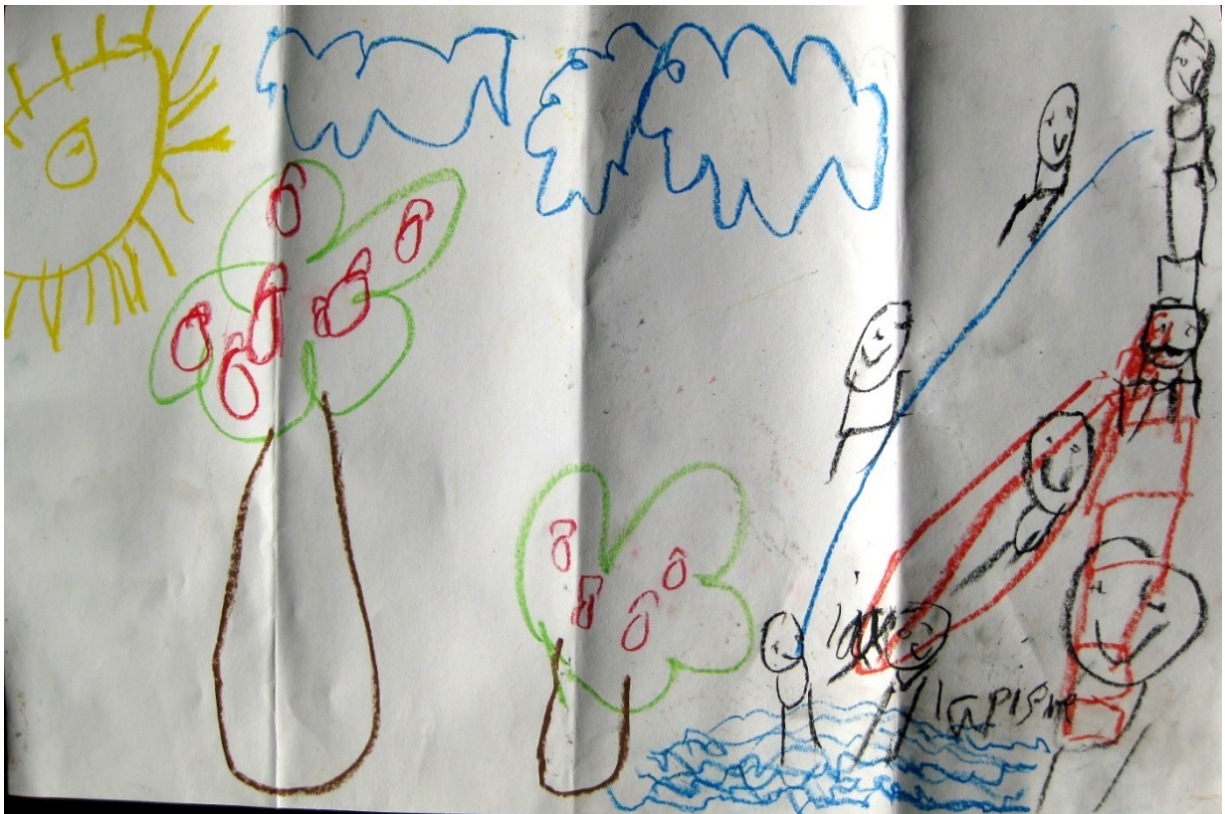

Figure 6.   An happy family at the water slides.

joyful and serene. There is also an apple tree, tree of life, which represents the past (the roots, the trunk) and the present (with the fruits) associated with the children beside playing and having fun. This drawing also goes against the rupture of time, particular in traumas showing how Ali evolved and reconstructed himself throughout the sessions.

Conclusion

When there is an interaction between collective identity and trauma, both transmitted trans-generationally and resulting from cultural changes, the construction of a comfortable identity is much more arduous. As illustrated by the evolution of a refugee student's artworks, drawing and the space his teacher offered to safely explore and experiment with different identities contributed to the integration of multiple identities into a meaningful whole, which participated in school adjustment (Bash & Zezlina-Phillips, 2006; Flum & Kaplan, 2012). As was observed in Ali's drawings and how they evolved, he could gradually explore aspects of his wounded identity, going back and forth between his wish to affirm his Palestinian identity and his wish to avoid it. It is interesting to compare the case of Ali to the case of a Chinese boy in his class, for whom his cultural identity of origin played a protective role (Beauregard, 2015), this also supporting other studies about the importance of maintaining links with the culture of origin while creating bonds with host society (Berry et al., 2006). But for refugee students who have been uprooted, and especially in the case of Palestinian refugees from Lebanon who are not allowed a national identity, relying on one's cultural identity of origin might not play only a protective role. This highlights the specific needs of refugee students and how teachers and school staff must support these children in building an identity that gives them the experience of wholeness that trauma had taken away.

Acknowledgements:

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