Abstract

Combined with the stress associated with migration, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a growing sense of helplessness in many newcomer children in Canada. Considering the impact this health crisis could have on the well-being and mental health of newcomer children, it is urgent to intervene to foster hope and agency. Schools can provide art making spaces to support the development of their creative capacities. Based on qualitative data from an intervention research study that took place during the pandemic, this article presents the case study of Venus, an eight-year-old newcomer girl from Burundi who participated in the *Art & Storytelling* school-based creative expression program. Analysis of the workshop facilitators' observation notes, drawings made during the intervention, and semistructured interview with her teacher suggests that the child used creativity sometimes to protect herself and regain a sense of agency, while at other times, her use of creativity seemed to be insufficient to make her feel agentic. These findings highlight the importance of providing newcomer children with art therapy opportunities at school to develop their creativity and support their sense of agency to prevent mental health problems. They also emphasize the importance of paying close attention to children's process to ensure their emotional safety.

Keywords: Immigrant children; Creativity; Agency; Hope; School; Pandemic; Case Study

Promoting Creativity and Agency in Immigrant and Refugee Children at School: A Case Study from the *Art & Storytelling* Creative Expression Program

Introduction

Although numerous studies have reported that newcomers in Canada generally experience better mental health than their native counterparts (McDonald & Kennedy, 2004; Newbold, 2005; Whitley et al., 2016), the literature also highlighted that migration and postmigration challenges can act as risk factors for the development of mental health problems (Guruge & Butt, 2015; Kouider et al., 2015). Despite diverse migratory journeys, most newcomer children experience a feeling of loss because of loved ones who remained in the country of origin. This grief and loss may also relate to losing their culture, their language, their values, and so on (Brezicha & Miranda, 2022; Watson et al., 2021).

Refugee children may be exposed to greater difficulties. For certain groups of refugees, the prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety is seven to eight times higher than the general population (Aysazci-Cakar et al., 2022). This exposure to trauma can cause significant stress that affects refugee children's cognitive functions and performance at school (Guo et al., 2019; Kaplan et al., 2016). These difficulties can be exacerbated if refugee children experience exclusion, discrimination, or intimidation at school (Brezicha & Miranda, 2022; Guo et al., 2019; Papazian-Zohrabian et al., 2018).

Newly arrived children may have also suffered the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic more than their native-born peers. During the health crisis, levels of anxiety, depression, or uncertainty raised in many homes and family dynamics were disrupted (Brooks et al., 2020; Graber et al., 2021; Rousseau & Miconi, 2020). Experts fear that these critical

circumstances are likely to hinder children's social and emotional development in the near future and have significant effects throughout their lives (Gadermann et al., 2021; Graber et al., 2021).

Moreover, children from immigrant and refugee families could have sustained more mental health challenges (Cleveland et al., 2020). The COVID-19 crisis exacerbated already existing health and social inequities for these families who were at the intersection of multiple risk factors (Cleveland et al., 2020; Cross & Gonzalez Benson, 2021; Kollender & Nimer, 2020; Luijten et al., 2021; Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2021; Valenzuela et al., 2020). To help newcomer children cope with the after-effects of the pandemic, interventions aiming to increase creativity in children could be provided (Lopez-Persem et al., 2022; Orkibi, 2021; Tang et al., 2020).

Schools can create art spaces in a structured environment to support children's adaptive and creative capacities (O'Keeffe & McNally, 2021; Papazian-Zohrabian & Mamprin, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Creative activities are known to foster resilience and closely align with children's natural interests (Kapoor & Kaufman, 2020). This article is based on intervention research and aims to answer the following research question: how did the *Art & Storytelling* school-based creative expression program foster creative capacities and a sense of agency among immigrant children who experienced adversity during the pandemic? Through a case study based on workshop facilitators' observation notes, drawings collected during the program and semi-structured interviews with teachers, we present the experience of Venus (pseudonym), an eight-year-old girl from Burundi, who developed her creativity and agency throughout the program in a nonlinear way. We identify potential moments that led to an increase in the girl's sense of agency and creativity and other moments that instead led to their decrease.

Literature Review

Creativity, Hope and Sense of Agency in Times of Crises

When experiencing periods of heightened stress and uncertainty, children may feel as if they do not have control over their lives and that they cannot achieve their goals (Beghetto, 2021). In other words, they can feel hopeless. Hope is the perceived ability to find ways to achieve goals and to use agentic thinking to motivate oneself to translate those means into action (Snyder, 2002). In extreme situations, uncertainty can also be a source of hope. One can imagine a better life and escape from a hurtful reality using imagination, which can foster hope and agency (Levi, 2021). Agency consists of the feeling of being able to initiate and control one's own thoughts, emotions, and actions to have an impact on one's environment (De Luca Picione et al., 2019; Haggard, 2017). For immigrant children who may experience a stressful migration process coupled with the stress of the pandemic, thinking and acting creatively may help them work through uncertainty and regain a sense of hope.

When they are creative, children use their imagination to develop new perspectives about their lives, which helps them feel more agentic (Berberian, 2019; Carafoli, 2016; Glăveanu, 2014; Hoffmann et al., 2020). Creative children are better equipped in anxiety-provoking situations as they usually display cognitive flexibility, can generate multiple solutions to a problem and make decisions based on incomplete information (Corazza, 2016; Hoffmann & Russ, 2012). To be creative, children must also be able to distance themselves from the *here and now* (Berberian, 2019; Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013). The immediate psychological distress resulting from immigration and the pandemic may have occupied children's mind and have impaired their creativity (Beghetto, 2021; Rousseau & Miconi, 2020). Accordingly, an intervention aiming to

reestablish children's creative capacities could be beneficial in a postcrisis context and may help restore their sense of agency (Glăveanu, 2014).

Creativity, Art Therapy and Storytelling in School Settings

A group intervention may foster creativity in children and ultimately promote their sense of agency (Fleming et al., 2016; Sawyer, 2012). A group that functions well and evolves in a reassuring environment may encourage children to take risks and make mistakes because they feel safe to do so (Oztop et al., 2018). Other group members may also model creative ideas by doing so, support the development of creativity in their peers (Glăveanu, 2014; Hoffmann & Russ, 2016). Providing art therapy in a group context, such as the classroom, thus appears to be an interesting avenue to foster creativity.

Creative arts interventions have been offered to newcomer children and youth in school settings, taking on different forms such as open studio, after-school program, individual art therapy sessions, parent-child dyads, closed group art therapy or classroom universal interventions (Beauregard, 2014; Beauregard, Tremblay, et al., 2020; Beauregard et al., 2024; Berberian, 2019; Kim et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2018; Regev & Tamir, 2021; Rousseau et al., 2005). School-based creative arts interventions were found to reduce emotional and relational problems, depression, and anxiety symptoms as well as trauma-related symptoms (Kevers et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2022; Quinlan et al., 2016). Studies have also shown that art therapy in school settings have the potential to improve self-esteem and social connectedness in the classroom as well as supporting immigrant and refugee students' identity expression and meaning-making processes (Beauregard, Caron, et al., 2020; Beauregard et al., 2017a, 2017b; Kevers et al., 2022; Rousseau et al., 2005; Tyrer & Fazel, 2014).

Integrating arts with storytelling can also benefit newcomer children. Through stories heard and told, children can identify with a character and then translate their own problems and solutions into it, before transferring solutions to their real life (Rajabi et al., 2018). This is even more important for children who experienced displacement since they can make their voice heard and reclaim their experience (Akthar & Lovell, 2019; Czamanski-Cohen, 2010; Rousseau et al., 2003). Therefore, offering the *Art & Storytelling* school-based creative expression program in a postpandemic context seemed like a meaningful option to help newcomer children recover their sense of agency.

Methods

This article presents the case study of Venus (pseudonym), an eight-year-old newcomer girl from Burundi, attending a grade two class in Quebec, Canada. The case study integrates qualitative data collected during a mixed methods intervention research. The aim of the larger mixed methods study was to explore how school-based creative expression programs, contribute to the development and consolidation of vulnerable children's creative capacities.

Between November 2022 and March 2023, a research team consisting of art therapists, psychologists, an educator, and a psychiatrist implemented the programs in 21 elementary school classes in three cities across the province of Quebec. Overall, we obtained consent from the parents of 242 children to participate in the research. Venus and her class participated in the *Art & Storytelling* program. The study was approved by the research ethics committee from Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue (UQAT) under approval number 2022-05.

The Art & Storytelling *Creative Expression Program*

Art & Storytelling is a universal intervention program that has been manualized by the Sherpa University Institute (2010). The program has been adapted to meet the needs of immigrant and refugee children through previous research (Beauregard, Caron, et al., 2020; Beauregard et al., 2017a, 2017b; Rousseau et al., 2003, 2005; Rousseau & Heusch, 2000). The program consists of a series of 10 to 12 workshops, lasting one hour each and that are offered on a weekly basis to entire classrooms. The workshops are structured as follows:

(1) An opening ritual brought the group together in a playful atmosphere and took different forms, such as greetings in different languages or a simple game (e.g., the orchestra's chief conductor game).

(2) The opening ritual was followed by a storytelling period which could take different forms: the facilitators could tell a story and interrupt their narrative at a critical moment (e.g., when a character faced a challenge). Classes could also invent a story using a dice to indicate what element of the story they needed to add (e.g., character, place, action, problem, free choice, end). Another source of inspiration for children could be the use of a Dixit card, from the board game of the same name (Roubira, 2008), which presented metaphorical images from which they could project themselves and invent a story.

(3) Independent of how the story was told, children were invited to draw the story (their own or a continuation of the story told by the facilitators) with oil pastels on a sheet of paper (12 × 18 inches). In cases where children drew something that did not seem to be related to the story or the Dixit card, the facilitators did not insist and welcomed the children's creations with equal interest.

(4) A closing ritual marked the end of every workshop, during which children could present their drawing, their story, or its title to their peers, if they wanted to.

With the help of the teacher, two members of our team led the workshops in Venus's class. One facilitator was a professional female art therapist from a White Canadian background. She had experience facilitating the *Art & Storytelling* program in reception classes in different elementary schools. She worked in collaboration with a female educator, also from a White Canadian background, who had experience working in childcare settings. Adopting a lens of cultural humility (Jackson, 2020), the two facilitators were sensitive to the fact that they were not newcomers themselves and that this could influence their relationships with the newcomer children in the class.

The *Art & Storytelling* program aimed to offer children a space where they could express their interests, worries, daily life, memories, or any other topic. During the drawing period, the workshop facilitators and teacher walked around the classroom asking open-ended questions to support the children's creative process and showed interest in what they were drawing or saying, without insisting for disclosure.

Data Collection and Analysis

In this case study article, we focus on the qualitative data we obtained during the *Art & Storytelling* classroom-based intervention. We also collected quantitative data on children's creativity and sense of agency before and after the intervention that are not the focus of the present article. After each workshop, the two workshop facilitators recorded their observations in a grid, paying particular attention to the drawings (elements, use of space) and the stories created by the children, their interactions with adults and their peers (both verbal and nonverbal), and

their involvement in the creative activities. Facilitators photographed children's drawings at the end of every workshop.

We also conducted hour-long semistructured interviews with teachers at the end of the program to collect their perceptions of the effects of the intervention on their students' creativity and sense of agency. Combining different types of data from three different sources allowed us to triangulate perspectives and to strengthen the credibility of our findings (Nowell et al., 2017; Yin, 2017). Moreover, workshop facilitators' prolonged contact with the children may have also fostered a more accurate understanding of their experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

We used an overall strategy of immersion, emergence, and intuition to analyze the data and allow the development of themes throughout the process (Crabtree & Miller, 2022; Denzin et al., 2023). The first phase of the analysis involved a research assistant, a female art therapy graduate student from mixed Canadian and Latin American heritage. She went through the children's drawings and facilitators' fieldnotes to perform a preliminary analysis focusing on symbols and metaphors relating to:

1. Creativity, such as fantastic content, emotional expression, novelty, and plot twists (Hoffmann & Russ, 2012, 2016) and;

2. A sense of agency such as control, power, projection into the future, and strategies to attain goals.

While paying attention to the previous content, we also identified the emerging themes following a thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012; Nowell et al., 2017). The first author of the article, a White Canadian female art therapist and educational psychology researcher who conducted previous research on the *Art & Storytelling* program, also carried out an independent

thematic analysis. She followed the same previous steps before comparing it with the research assistant and refining the themes.

In the second phase, the two workshop facilitators cross-checked the storyline created by the research assistant and first author to strengthen the credibility of the analysis. The themes and codes are illustrated in Table 1. By combining the interpretations of the drawings made by different research team members with Venus's narratives, we strived to construct meaningful and contextualized interpretations (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

<<<Add Table 1 here>>>

Case Study of Venus

Venus (pseudonym) was an eight-year-old girl who had recently arrived to Quebec (Canada) from Burundi. The school had no information about her migration status. At the time of the study, there were many violent crimes and political violence in Burundi, which could suggest that her family was claiming refugee status. Venus, who spoke Swahili and French, was integrated into a regular grade two class. Her group comprised of 19 children, seven of whom did not speak French as their first language. Venus' teacher, Ashley (pseudonym), felt that the group dynamic was better after the intervention. The workshop facilitators considered that there was good participation from the group, with the children mostly enthusiastic and motivated, helping each other by considering each other's strengths and weaknesses.

In class, Venus demonstrated ease in social relationships and was respectful toward her peers and adults. She was readily willing to help her classmates when they were having difficulties. Her teacher thought that Venus was less creative and less enthusiastic about the

workshops. On the contrary, workshop facilitators perceived that she participated well and that she had creative ideas.

Findings

A Lens of Cultural Humility

As advocated by proponents of cultural humility, the art therapist, educator, and researchers approached Venus's expression with openness (Jackson, 2020; Watkins et al., 2019). However, intervening with a large group did not allow us to delve deeper into the truth of Venus beyond the stories and descriptions she shared about her drawings. The following presentation and interpretation result from choices we made as researchers that were inevitably tinged with our biases and assumptions, regardless of how hard we tried to acknowledge and contextualize them (Kapitan, 2023).

Although we have been working with immigrant and refugee populations for several years, as White native-born adult researchers, we probably understood Venus's drawings and stories with our own cultural lens (Jackson, 2020). However, we took care in our interpretations to include as much culturally and personally specific information we had and to offer different possible interpretations. We also multiplied the perspectives to construct the most credible narrative possible (Kapitan, 2023; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Potash et al., 2017).

The following section introduces the creative and therapeutic process of Venus as we have understood it. We chose to organize the presentation of the sessions chronologically to show the fluctuations in the girl's process. Therefore, we grouped the sessions together and gave each grouping a title.

Sessions

Expressing Danger Through Fiction in Sessions One and Two

After hearing a story of a lion caught in a hunter's net and who asks a mouse for help, Venus chose to represent the mouse that did not want to help the lion (see Figure 1). In the second session, she chose to finish the story of the *Stone Soup* (Muth, 2003) by drawing herself as the cook, along with a classmate who poured poison into the soup and caused the death of all the students in the class. Venus laughed when she told the story to the facilitators and was laughing in the drawing she made (Figure 2). While laughing may have conferred her a certain sense of control over an uncontrollable situation, the workshop may have led her to touch upon negative experiences (intergenerational, past, or related to the confinement during COVID and the shadow of death) and may have provoked a need to retreat away from danger in the following workshops.

<<Add Figure 1 and 2 here>>>

Stepping Back in an Inoffensive Environment in Sessions Three and Four

Although Venus participated in inventing the rest of the story with her classmates in the third workshop, the drawings she made did not seem related to the story heard (about sharing and relationships). Her two drawings depicted snow-capped mountains and black birds and were mostly monochrome. A general atmosphere of emptiness was evident in the first drawing.

The second, on the other hand, exuded more life, with the addition of a house and what appeared to be two Christmas trees (Figure 3). However, the absence of figures gave a barren feeling to the image, despite the grandiose nature of the landscape. While we do not know the specific meaning that Venus gave to these birds, we observed that she may have made a

transition toward a more symbolic representation of her experience (possibly of dangers) in a nonhuman world.

<<<Add Figure 3 here>>>

Venus continued to depict landscapes in the fourth workshop. After the group invented two stories from rolling a dice indicating which elements they had to include in the story, she drew black birds again and represented the sun and the sea with the desire to fill the entire paper with blue (Figure 4). A workshop facilitator offered to show her a technique to spread pastel across a paper to fill the space, but she chose not to use this technique and found her own.

Although the image was well distributed in the space of the paper, her drawing gave the feeling of being empty. Interestingly, Burundi is a small African country bordered by the large Tanganyika Lake, to which the capital Bujumbura has access. This drawing was perhaps an attempt to remember her country of origin, which she might have been longing for.

<<Add Figure 4 here>>>

Entrance of Danger Repelled by Fiction in Sessions Six to Eight

After having made a lead pencil drawing representing her with a classmate for the fifth workshop, Venus seemed to express more vulnerability in workshops six to eight. The sixth session was dedicated to a story featuring a family of bears who ask for food and shelter faced with an incoming storm. Venus drew a house in the storm and told the facilitators that they could not come inside for shelter (Figure 5). Venus merged her drawing with that of her teammate by placing both images side by side. Venus had this idea on her own, as nobody had done it before or suggested doing it.

<<Add Figure 5 here>>>

During the seventh workshop, Venus and her teammate created a story based on a Dixit card illustrating the shadow of a wolf behind two children. The girls drew pictures which, according to Venus, represented a bear hiding in a house and two lost children who, when they approached the house, saw blood on the walls and footprints on the floor (Figure 6). Venus had a new idea this time too, cutting and rounding the corners of the drawings to make them look like the Dixit cards. She also initiated the writing of the story underneath, like in a storybook.

<<Add Figure 6 here>>

For this eighth session, the facilitators showed a Dixit card depicting a little bear in tears and turning his back on a boy with a slingshot-like object. Venus imagined the story of two boys who disagreed about the activity they wanted to do. One of them broke the window out of frustration, and the glass hurt the other who started to cry (Figure 7). She wrote the story in bubbles at the bottom of her drawing, like in a comic strip. The story ended there, without problem resolution and Venus showed no sign that this ending disturbed her.

<<Add Figure 7 here>>

Cuteness as Protection in Sessions Nine to Eleven

For the last three workshops, Venus did not really use the sources of inspiration provided by facilitators (i.e., Dixit cards or story) as springboards to continue the story. She returned to a more harmless depiction, drawing *Kawaii* animals. *Kawaii* is a Japanese term that is often translated as ‘cute’ in English but that also encompasses a whole culture (Nittono, 2016).

During the ninth workshop, Venus and a classmate used an image they had of *Kawaii* animals to reproduce them at the foot of a long staircase, using lead pencils and crayons (Figure 8). The following week, Venus also drew a *Kawaii* bird on a tree branch that seemed to have water in his eyes. The image took up all the space on the paper, but the girl did not want to comment on her drawing (Figure 9). She then finished the *Art & Storytelling* program by drawing again several *Kawaii* animals with a lead pencil. She also did not share any stories about this drawing.

<<Add Figure 8 and 9 here>>

The workshop facilitators came back for a last session to facilitate a bookmaking activity with the stories invented by children. Venus chose not to draw from the story she heard and instead drew a friend from the class.

Discussion

Venus expressed her creativity and sense of agency differently throughout the *Art & Storytelling* program. The way in which the young girl developed both processes was not linear, this possibly being related to how she let others have access to her vulnerability or to how she felt threatened. In the following discussion section, we will discuss and contextualize the narrative and arts-based intervention's impact on Venus' experience of agency, limitations, and implications for art therapy in schools.

Creativity as a Protection to Regain a Sense of Agency

The drawings and stories Venus told about them alternated between expressions related to an explicit presence of danger and to a danger of a more implicit or even absent nature. It is difficult to infer what the expression of danger could have been related to as we do not have a lot

of information on Venus's personal life. Perhaps there was a stressful situation in her life that she might have wanted to gain control over (e.g., premigratory experience, migration and resettlement process, or the pandemic). In periods of great stress, people might feel as if they do not control their lives the way they would like to. Their quest for regaining a sense of agency could then stimulate the search for new creative solutions (Beghetto, 2021).

In her drawings, the child took on an agentic role by initiating actions that had an impact on her environment such as when she decided not to free the lion or when she did not let the facilitators get into her house (De Luca Picione et al., 2019; Haggard, 2017). Leaving strangers out might have been a way to protect herself by externalizing potential aggressors. In these images, the girl could have also shown a tendency to identify with the aggressor. The phenomenon can develop when a child experiences an "ongoing and overwhelming attack that the child cannot escape, avoid, or prevent" (Lahav et al., 2021, p. 9727). Although the story of Venus in Burundi is unknown, because the country was subjected to ongoing violence for decades and because the helplessness caused by the pandemic may have exacerbated previous traumatic experience, Venus might have felt the need to take on the perpetrator's experience to regain a sense of agency (Sultana Eliav & Lahav, 2023).

Several of Venus's drawings included symbols of entrance, such as doors, windows, or staircases, that were sometimes coupled with a threat. Entrances can be related to protection, as keeping the entrances closed can prevent danger from getting inside. In some instances, Venus controlled the entries (e.g., not letting the facilitators in her house), but in others she was exposed to the threat (e.g., a hidden bear inside the house, a broken window). She relied on art making to show indirectly that she was threatened without showing her vulnerability, which is a protective factor in the face of adversity (Corazza, 2016). Paradoxically, representing threats might have

also helped Venus to identify the zones in which she needed protection. This identification could have helped her preserve her psychological well-being and act in an agentic way to protect her *self* (Waters et al., 2022). Additionally, when Venus laughed after everyone was poisoned with the soup, she may have been pretending to control the situation using art making and storytelling. Perhaps it was also dissociative and an attempt to disconnect from her wounds.

Between the sixth and eighth workshops, Venus invented more complex stories, which is usually a sign of creativity (Hoffmann & Russ, 2012, 2016). Other signs of creativity were related to the integration of novel ideas and techniques of her own in her productions (writing the text, combining images, or rounding corners to make her drawings look like Dixit cards). Considering that the experience she depicted in her drawings was perhaps too close to reality, making her images resemble works of fiction could have added new layers of protection. Acting creatively might have only been possible because Venus had been able to distance herself from the hurtful reality of the *here and now* (Berberian, 2019; Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013). Repelling threats through fiction could have given her a sense of control over her life at a time when she may have felt powerless (e.g., the news of an upcoming move).

When Creativity Is Insufficient to Regain Agency

Venus's use of creativity as a protection may not have been sufficient to regain agency in all cases. Although some of her actions in the *Art & Storytelling* program may have been expressions of agency, there were moments when Venus expressed danger in the stories without necessarily including problem solving. The absence of problem solving in the face of danger could be a sign of decreased creativity and agency (Corazza, 2016; De Luca Picione et al., 2019), but is also typical of posttraumatic play (Gil, 2017).

Throughout the program, Venus alternated between images that appeared empty and that were possibly associated with dissociation and more anxious depictions (Amir & Lev-Wiesel, 2007). Although the drawings of the lost children and of the broken window were complex and accompanied with the innovation of rounded corners, they might also have been too difficult to deal with. Feeling threatened, Venus was perhaps unable to problem solve, like creative children usually do when faced with anxiety-provoking situations (Corazza, 2016; Hoffmann & Russ, 2012). As is often the case in posttraumatic play, the child stepped back to more surface-level and repetitive images (e.g., the landscapes of the third and fourth workshops) (Gil, 2017).

Other drawings that appeared to be surface level were the *Kawaii* animals drawn in the last sequence of workshops. Drawing *Kawaii* animals may have illustrated Venus's attempt to dissociate from hurtful feelings and connect with childhood and innocence, concepts aligning with *Kawaii* culture (Nittono, 2016). The feeling of control over the reproduction of known images may have also been a way of reassuring herself at a time when she needed to protect her *self* after revealing parts of herself. For instance, the story of the broken window may have been loaded with personal meaning and emotions. Perhaps Venus felt that she lost control of the emotions expressed in her drawings, which could also explain why she subsequently closed up and was less creative in her productions.

Furthermore, Venus might have been too much in the *here and now* and thus not in a position to express her creativity, being too close to the dangerous emotions (Berberian, 2019; Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013). Nonetheless, even if she may have felt less agentic about the situation she was experiencing, Venus was still able to identify what was threatening her well-being and to initiate a shutdown to protect herself, which could be signs of agency (Waters et al., 2022). The simple fact of choosing to represent images that may not meet the adults' expectations is an

important sign of strength and agency, showing how Venus was creative in reappropriating her own experience despite her emotional vulnerability.

Implications for Art Therapy Practice in Schools

The case study of Venus reminds us of the importance to adopt a strengths-based approach when working with newcomer children to support their well-being at school (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2024). Given that immigrant and refugee children may have had stressful, even traumatic experiences before, during, or after arriving in the resettlement country, it might be easy to focus on what children are lacking rather than on their resources, a deficit perspective often adopted by schools (Bauer et al., 2021). Even if there were times when Venus seemed to express less creativity and agency in her images, we could also look at these moments as important resources in her process that may have helped her build positive capacities supporting her mental health (Waters et al., 2022).

Perhaps because there were no expectations in terms of art production results, the *Art & Storytelling* program seems to have offered Venus the space to freely explore her inner strengths but also to exercise her agency by not doing what the school was expecting of her (e.g., copying *Kawaii* pictures instead of creating her own images). Resistance expressed through minimal compliance with the instructions is a form of agency (Kuczynski et al., 2018). Schools must nonetheless be aware that encouraging creativity through divergent thinking can also be accompanied by what the school milieu considers a "bad" expression of creativity (Runco, 2022), such as the violence Venus expressed in some of her images and stories. School professionals should refrain from repressing expressions of violence when they are channeled into artistic productions and do not hurt other children or adults. It also implies that art therapists should not jump too easily to the conclusion that expressions of violence are directly related to

the child's experience. Violent images can also be acts of resistance and therefore agency (Kuczynski et al., 2018; Runco, 2022). Regardless, acts of resistance highlight the importance of being attuned to what children express when they create and underlines the crucial role that art therapists can play in sensitizing the school milieu about children's expression.

Strengths and Limitations

While a case study allows for a deeper understanding of a phenomenon (Yin, 2017), Venus's process may not be representative of all children in her class, or of all newcomer children. Because creativity is about using imagination to develop novel ideas (Carafoli, 2016; Glăveanu, 2014; Hoffmann et al., 2020), other children may have developed their creativity differently. Nonetheless, Venus's case study provides important information about how newcomer children may use the creative process of drawing and storytelling to develop their creativity, which could in turn have a positive impact on their sense of agency.

This case study illustrated how creativity, by fostering the development of complex stories and images, may generate intense emotions that could cause someone to feel vulnerable. Creativity may also allow newcomer students to find a personal and agentic way to distance themselves from overwhelming emotions. This has important clinical implications for practitioners who, even though creativity may play a protective role when children are faced with adversity (Corazza, 2016), should still pay close attention to their client's process to ensure their emotional safety.

During the *Art & Storytelling* program, the workshop facilitators recorded observation notes on the 19 children in Ashley's class and they could not provide full details on every child. Future research may consider adding individual interviews with children who would have been

targeted after a first phase of the project. Having had access to more detailed information about Venus's life could have informed our analysis differently and would have added credibility to our analysis (Drapeau, 2004). This would also have allowed us to honor the experience of Venus and would have demonstrated greater cultural humility (Jackson, 2020). This article is mainly based on our interpretations, but we relied on the images and stories she created to supplement the facilitators' field notes. Both facilitators were also in prolonged contact with Venus, spending an hour every week in Venus's class, which allows for a more accurate understanding of their experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

We chose to highlight the qualitative findings from our research with Venus's case study. While the inclusion of quantitative data from the larger case study could have added a layer of complexity to the analysis by corroborating it or refuting it, these results will be informing a subsequent publication. By focusing on a single case study, our objective was to illustrate the complexity of a child's process in developing their creativity and agency throughout the program. We highlighted moments when creativity and agency increased and other moments when they rather decreased. This complexity could not have been demonstrated by quantitative data (Kaimal et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Despite the limited scope of this case study, Venus' creative process during the school-based *Art & Storytelling* program illustrates how a newcomer child from Burundi expressed her creativity and sense of agency in a nonlinear way throughout the arts-based intervention. There were times when she used her creativity to protect her *self* but also to feel agentic. Although these moments of creativity were likely important in regaining her sense of agency, there were also other moments when creativity might have seemed insufficient to make her feel agentic.

While we might view these "uncreative" moments through a deficit lens, it is important to also consider them as potential expressions of agency.

These case study findings suggest that providing spaces for free expression in schools, through art making, could help newcomer children feel more agentic during potentially stressful periods (Papazian-Zohrabian & Mamprin, 2020). This arts-based intervention is especially important as many immigrant and refugee children may not have access to specialized art therapy services in clinical settings for several reasons ranging from financial access to a reluctance to access those services (Thomson et al., 2015). Providing school-based art interventions on a larger scale, such as *Art & Storytelling*, could reach a greater number of newcomer children and increase their sense of agency.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

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Table 1

Themes and Codes Resulting From the Thematic Analysis of the Drawings

Themes	Codes
Control of a situation	Choosing not to help
	Causing the death of people
	Laughing at a difficult situation
Inventing new techniques	Combining drawings
	Rounding corners
	Story told in bubbles
	Own technique (pastel)
Human world depiction	Venus
	Non-fictive characters (e.g., classmates)
	Fictive characters (e.g., from the story)
Nonhuman world depiction	Kawaii
	Animals
	Landscape
Danger	Weapons (e.g., knife, slingshot, poison)
	Enemies (e.g., hunter, alien, wolf)
	Injuries (e.g., blood, broken window)
	Natural disasters (e.g., storm)
Protection	Shelter, house
	Food
Emotional expression	Positive emotions (e.g., pride)
	Negative emotions (e.g., fear, sadness, anger, frustration)
Emptiness	Emptiness, sterility
	Absence of figures

List of Figures

Figure 1

The Mouse Who is Not Helping the Lion Created by Venus in Workshop One from Oil Pastels and Lead Pencil on Paper Indicating an Expression of Danger

Figure 2

The Poisoned Soup Created by Venus in Workshop Two from Oil Pastels and Lead Pencil on Paper Indicating an Expression of Danger

Figure 3

A House in a Mountainous Landscape Created by Venus in Workshop Three from Oil Pastels on Paper Indicating a Transition Toward a More Symbolic Representation of Danger

Figure 4

Black Birds Over the Sea Created by Venus in Workshop Four from Oil Pastels and Lead Pencil on Paper Indicating an Attempt to Remember her Country of Origin

Figure 5

Not Providing Shelter From a Storm Created by Venus in Workshop Six from Oil Pastels and Lead Pencil on Paper Indicating a Desire to Repel a Danger and Illustrating How Venus Merged her Drawing With That of a Teammate

Figure 6

The Bear Who is Hidden in a House Created by Venus in Workshop Seven from Oil Pastels and Lead Pencil on Paper Illustrating How Venus Rounded the Corners of Her Drawings and Wrote the Story Underneath

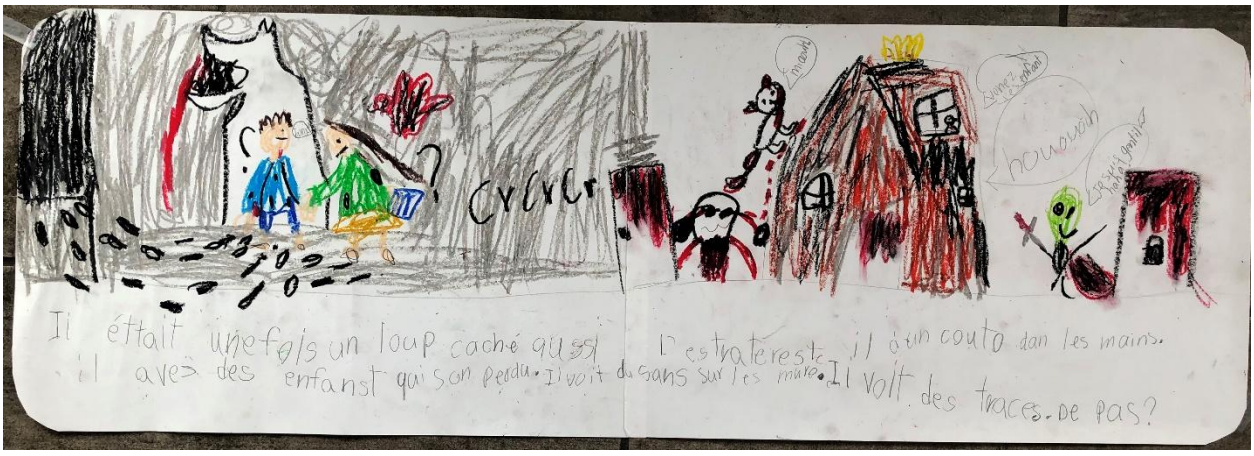

Figure 7

The Quarrel Created by Venus in Workshop Eight from Oil Pastels and Lead Pencil on Paper Indicating the Absence of Problem Resolution and Illustrating the Use of Bubbles Like in a Comic Strip

Figure 8

Kawaii Animals at the Foot of a Staircase Created by Venus in Workshop Nine from Markers, Oil Pastels and Lead Pencil on Paper Indicating the Use of Cuteness as a Protection

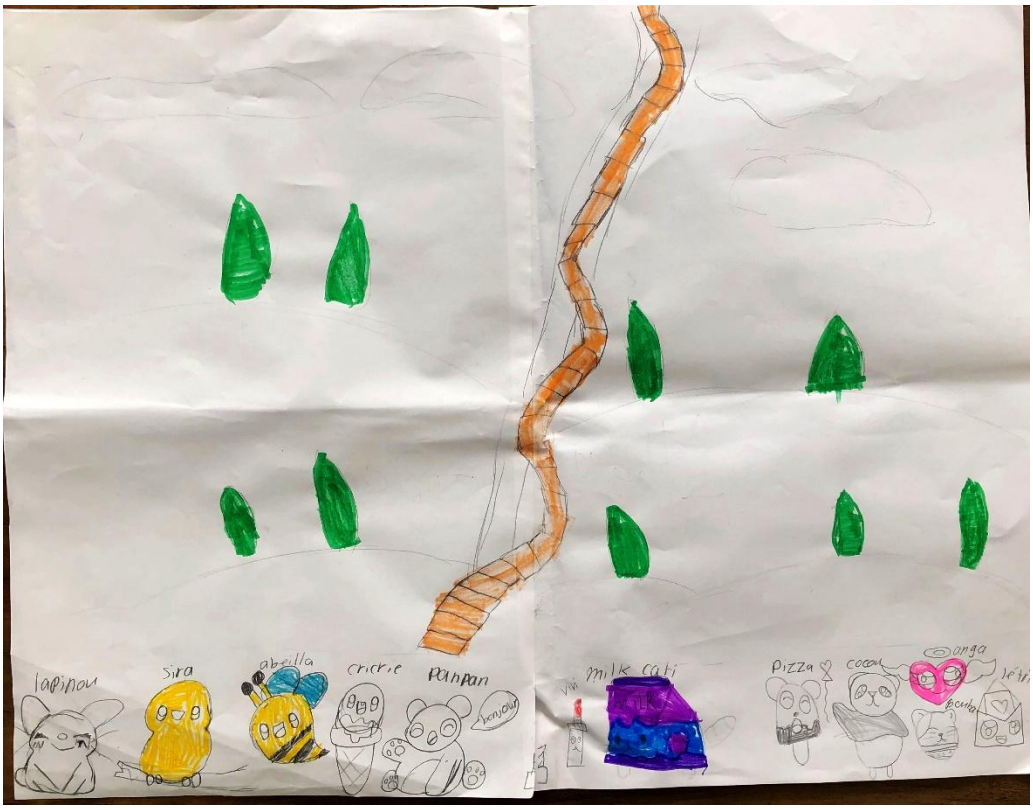

Figure 9

A Kawaii Bird with Eyes Full of Water Created by Venus in Workshop Ten from Oil Pastels on Black Paper Indicating the Use of Cuteness as a Protection