

## Strengthening Resilience in Refugee Children Through Art and Attention to their Voices

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### Abstract

The study focuses on refugee children living in a temporary transit camp in Lesbos, Greece, which endeavors to provide the children with safety, security, and an adaptive learning experience under transit camp conditions. The research question was: Can children develop a high level of hope during prolonged hardship and distress? The study adopted the salutogenic approach developed by Antonovsky, according to which resilience can develop under severe stress. We also used an arts-based research method to focus on how a sense of coherence can enhance an overall sense of hope. Findings confirm that hope is a component of inner resilience, and not necessarily dependent on external circumstances, even when those circumstances are harsh and threatening. Additionally, it appears that art can enhance children's ability to communicate their social context, as well as the capacity of adults to pay attention to the children's voices. The findings support the argument that hope is a personality trait, and not necessarily dependent on external circumstances. The findings obtained from the children's drawings and class discussions enhance our understanding that a positive experience of support can be achieved in a protected environment, where clear boundaries are set, and attention is given to forming positive relationships.

**Keywords:** refugee children, hope, resilience, salutogenic approach, arts-based research.

### 1. Introduction

Refugee children are especially vulnerable. They are exposed to war atrocities, displacement, compromised physical safety, strenuous walking across hundreds of kilometers, and risky sea travel. In recent years, more than one million refugee children were born in exile, and about the same number have left their homes with their parents, wandering from one country to another, or temporarily settled in crowded refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Cyprus, Iraqi Kurdistan, and Greece. For these children, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (2019) is no more than a piece of paper. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF's response to the Syria Crisis, 2018), during the civil war in Syria and the Kurdish revolt in Iraq, more than two million children in the Middle East did not attend school.

While these children obviously experience extremely difficult contexts and childhoods, it is also important to understand how they cope within these contexts. Since they have so few external resources, we assume that resilience is a very important component; we understand this resilience as strongly connected to hope for the future, in view of the dire present. It is important to understand whether they experience hope for the future and the components that enhance hope.

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An earlier study, part of a large study on the well-being of child refugees (Ben Asher et al., 2020), found a high level of hope among refugee children, which was explained as an inner self-experience that is independent of events in the outside world, despite the harsh reality in which these children find themselves. The researchers concluded that hope is an element of resilience that is more sensitive to inner experience than to difficult life events. Another part of the same study employed an arts-based grounded research method to understand how the children experience their school (Huss et al., 2021b).

In the present study, a mixed methods approach was employed, using quantitative methods to measure hope and a qualitative arts-based method to explain the children's surprisingly high levels of hope that our quantitative data indicated.

The literature on refugee schools suggests that schooling is a source of hope for refugee families, and thus for their children. Including children in regular classes as early as possible seems to provide the best chances for school success (Crul et al., 2019). Refugee children shape images of the future for themselves by building a narrative of a new home, and an important element within this future image is integration into the new environment through the local language (Arvanitis & Yelland, 2021).

Refugee detention camps often have meager educational frameworks that can only provide a low standard of education. However, they also have major strengths, such as the motivation, commitment, and social organization of the entire refugee community. Knowledge and skills are perceived as hope for the future, as assets that cannot be taken away, and thus the children and their families are often highly motivated towards studying (Rutter & Jones, 1998). Refugee students study extra hard under difficult circumstances because they realize that it is their only hope, and they internalize the immense value their parents attribute to education as the key to their future. This can lead to better educational performance compared to local schools in poor neighborhoods, as shown, for example, in Uganda and Nepal (Rutter & Jones, 1998).

In addition to schooling that includes learning languages, mathematics, and basic subjects, several attempts have also been made to examine the impact of unique curricula on the ability of refugees to integrate into modern society in the future. For example, a study conducted among young refugee women in Greece who learned digital skills found that the women's ability to develop digital skills influenced their hope of integrating into civic life in modern countries in the future (Greene, 2020).

The present study seeks to explore what in the refugee children's present circumstances provides this hope. We assume that experiences such as a school in the present are a source of hope for children. We employed qualitative methods to explore the children's experience of their school, through which we gained an understanding of their needs and how the school fulfills these needs.

The study adopted the salutogenic approach developed by Antonovsky, according to which resilience can develop under severe stress (Antonovsky, 1996; Mittelmark & Bauer, 2017). One of the significant understandings to emerge is that a sense of hope is an important component for understanding how people cope in crisis situations. We posit that hope is an important component of resilience. In the present study, we sought to examine hope as a salutogenic resilience resource in the reality of refugee children on Lesbos. We also used an arts-based research method to focus on how a sense of coherence can enhance an overall sense of hope.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Stress and resilience

The literature offers extensive examinations of the behavioural and psychological effects of exposure to high-stress situations, including political violence. The concept of 'resilience' was developed in the 1980s. Antonovsky (1987, 1996) maintained that most people possess mental resilience that helps them to recover quickly from stressful situations and carry on with their lives while sustaining their mental and physical health. The salutogenic orientation focuses on identifying the resources that help us remain healthy in stressful situations. Antonovsky sought to shift the orientation of research on stress to a focus on health and salutogenesis rather than illness and pathology, with the aim of identifying the resources that contribute to effective coping with stress (Mittelmark & Bauer, 2017).

Resilience is a person's continued effort to resume normative and effective life functioning and cope with new challenges after a disrupting event (Norris et al., 2009; Wiles et al., 2012). Bonanno (2004, 2005) defined personal resilience as the individual's capacity to sustain an adequate level of functioning during and after a crisis by focusing on optimism, control, and self-competence. Resilience reflects high psychological functioning when coping with negative events. According to Lepore and Revenson (2006), when contending with life's crises, there are three main resilience trajectories: Resistance, recovery, and reconfiguration. The process of reconfiguration is closely connected with the term 'post-traumatic growth', coined by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996).

Walsh (2003) defined resilience as the individual's ability to emerge from a crisis stronger and functioning better. When a person faces a physical or mental threat, hope becomes a valuable cognitive resource that affects their self-perception and ability to lead themselves toward a better future (Cheavens et al., 2019; Snyder, 1994; Snyder et al., 1991).

The research on resilience can be divided into three stages (Holmes & Wilson, 2017; Wright et al., 2013). The first studies focused on the individual's resilience and looked for a personality profile. This type of research examined children who survived tragic life circumstances and potentially traumatic events without developing psychopathology. The findings indicated several contributing factors, including a capacity for emotional regulation, positive self-image, and an inclination for active coping, as well as an ability to enlist the support of a trusted adult (Holmes & Wilson, 2017).

The second wave of research focused on developmental processes that promote resilience, and the characteristics of close family and social circles that enable the individual to exhibit optimal coping. These studies highlighted the interaction between internal and external elements, and its impact on the individual's capacity to manage and regulate both their intrapersonal and interpersonal space (Rutter, 2012; Ungar, 2008).

The third wave of research can be defined as translational research. Its purpose was to 'translate' the findings of past research into tools for developing personal and social resilience in the face of risk factors (Holmes & Wilson, 2017).

Today, resilience is considered a multidimensional construct, and its underlying mechanisms are being studied (van Der Kolk et al., 2019). It is now viewed as a combination of dynamic, evolving processes that occur within the individual in response to their interactions with the world, and integrate interpersonal and intrapersonal regulation.

In the study, refugee children from two angles were observed. A quantitative phenomenological study was conducted in which children's level of hope was measured. A qualitative study was also performed to explore an arts-based intervention, through which the children communicated their difficulties as well as their ways of coping with the challenge of schooling in the camp. First the theoretical background of the concept of 'hope' will be reviewed and then the theoretical background of art as self-expression. Taken together, the two research perspectives present a picture of the children's struggles, while also demonstrating how a supportive environment, in which their voices are heard, enhances their coping capabilities.

## 2.2 Hope

'Hope' is a frequently used term in everyday language, yet it can be elusive and ambiguous. Essentially, hope is an expression of an abstract and complex construct, which takes place in social spheres, while also being very personal. Hope occurs in the present, carries past knowledge and experiences, and looks toward the future. It is not defined as a personality trait, yet it evolves and grows within the individual, and is based on their self-image, level of confidence, and trust in others. Hope is a core concept in positive psychology, a school of thought that calls for examination not only of human pathology and weakness, but also of people's strengths, positive functioning, and healthy development (Kaye-Tzadok et al., 2019; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). In a study conducted by scholars from around the world following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, hope was identified as one of the five components that promote resilience against mass disasters along with safety, calmness, efficacy, and connectedness (Hobfoll et al., 2007).

Studies have shown that people with high levels of hope are better able to set and pursue ambitious goals than people with low levels of hope (Cheavens et al., 2019). Hope is a cognitive-emotional resource, which emerges when the individual expects a concrete positive outcome (Snyder et al., 2003). Snyder (2000) defined hope as a target-oriented process, which is linked to the individual's perception of their own ability to work towards desired goals and to cognitively motivate themselves. According to theories on hope, our goals guide our behavior: A person adopts a systematic behavior to achieve a purpose, excel in an activity, or avoid a course of action perceived as ineffective or counter-effective. People with hope believe they can achieve their goals if they chart an appropriate course of action and remain determined to follow it (Cheavens et al., 2019). High levels of hope result from the activation of certain nerve areas, which are associated with goal-oriented behaviors, motivation building, and problem-solving (Wiles et al., 2012). Hope leads to expectation, and thus directs people's actions since it connects with their inner sense of fulfilling a mission and confidence in their ability to get their life on track. Hope promotes an optimistic outlook, e.g., when a person challenges catastrophic thinking and adopts realistic aspirations and fact-based reasoning instead; not ignoring problems but expecting them to be solved (Levi et al., 2012).

Theories on hope seek to understand its place within the knowledge of child development (Jacoby, 1993). Most scholars agree that hope is developed by the nuclear self, from the moment the child is born, and enables them to advance successfully throughout their life from one developmental stage to the next (Erikson et al., 1968). On the basis of hope, we find positive emotions, resulting from a healthy childhood, and empathic relationships that lead to a sense of trust in the world, especially in people in one's close environment. Children with a sense of hope have better problem-solving skills and are more optimistic about the future (Pedrotti et al., 2008).

Sleijpen et al. (2017) reviewed 26 qualitative studies on how young refugees cope with stress and trouble. They found that one of their coping tools was hope. Hope was demonstrated in clear future goals and served as a powerful source of positive attitude, which alleviated the pain caused by trauma and loss. The narratives in the reviewed studies reflected a shift from desperation to hope. It seems that through hope, refugees were able to imagine a brighter future. The opportunity for education, for instance, provided a sense of hope for future success. Numerous scholars (Sagy & Adwan, 2006) have shown that social-environmental as well as cultural variables may have a substantial effect on hope. It was further found that hope is affected not only by internal, and mental factors but also by external and objective life circumstances (Sagy & Adwan, 2006).

O'Leary et al. (2015) investigated the effect of a community intervention on the level of hope among refugee children in refugee camps in Lebanon. They found that hope increased when the community intervened and supported the children's coping. On the other hand, a study on Iraqi refugee children who did not benefit from community intervention found that the children's harsh experiences – ethnic-political conflict, violence, destruction, escape from home, and lack of essential resources like food and water – eroded their sense of resilience, which includes hope (Trentacosta et al., 2016). Another study examined the sense of hope among Palestinian and Israeli children and concluded that the level of hope and expectation for a better future diminish among children who spend years under conditions of war and danger (Sagy & Adwan, 2006).

### **2.3 Salutogenic theory**

The conceptualization of resilience began in the 1980s. Antonovsky (1987), who developed the salutogenic approach, posited that most people possess personal resilience qualities that enable them to recover quickly after a stressful event, to continue living their life, and to maintain good physical and mental health. He proposed changing the research orientation from illness to health, from pathogenesis to salutogenesis, and identifying the contributing factors to effective coping with stressful situations. The salutogenic orientation focuses on searching for sources and assets for health and coping with stressful situations (Mittelmark & Bauer, 2017).

Antonovsky (1979) described health, stress, and coping as helping to shape the individual's sense of coherence. A strong sense of coherence helps the individual to mobilize resources to cope with stressors and successfully manage tension. Sense of coherence, defined as a global orientation that expresses the extent to which the individual has a pervasive, enduring, though dynamic feeling of confidence that their internal and external environments are predictable, and that there is a high probability that things will work out as well as can reasonably be expected (Mittelmark & Bauer, 2017).

The salutogenic conceptualization of art therapy differs from the dynamic understanding of art as a projective expression of the unconscious. It also differs from fine art, which focuses on the product rather than the process (Huss and Samson, 2018). Art, as described above, comprising process, product, and interpretation, becomes an embodied aesthetic experience, but also a broad phenomenological space for embodying and concretizing a person's meaning, manageability, and comprehensibility in a single 'coherent' artwork (Harel-Shalev et al., 2017).

Previous research by the second author shows that arts-based interventions can be a way to enhance manageability, comprehension, and meaning, just as creating an image enables us to define, reflect, and elaborate on a phenomenon, and thus gain a sense of control and coherence towards it (Huss & Samson, 2018).

Rehabilitating communities after trauma, including displacement and immigration, requires organized and structured education systems (Bromley & Andina, 2010; Nofal, 2017). Consequently, education is one of the building blocks for humanitarian aid, and a means for long-term social development (MacKinnon, 2014). Schools can offer refugee children a protected environment that contrasts with the violent reality of their home country or the brutalities of their escape, which have made them homeless (Culbertson & Constant, 2015). Moreover, learning in a school not only contributes to the child's personal and intellectual growth, but it is also a prerequisite for future academic studies, which may in turn provide an essential starting point for productive social integration (Dippo et al., 2013; Sullivan & Simonson, 2016).

## **2.4 The International School of Peace**

The International School of Peace (ISOP) was established in 2017 in Lesbos, Greece, at the initiative of Jewish and Arab youth movement graduates from Israel. The school is situated outside the Moria refugee camp, and the children are transported to the school and back every day. The curriculum consists of 35 weekly hours and is adapted to the children's level and their native language: Arabic, Persian, Kurdish, and French. The classes are divided into three age groups: Young (6-8), intermediate (9-11), and adolescent (12-16). All the teachers at the school are members of the refugee community. Youth movement graduates from Israel coordinate the school's operation and services in professional and organizational support roles to facilitate the local teachers' work.

ISOP endeavors to provide a safe and protected space for children that is not affected by the surrounding turmoil. The school setting provides the children with a certain sense of order and organization in their chaotic world, enabling them to resume, at least temporarily, their 'role' as children. Care for the children is not limited to pedagogical aspects, and the school addresses other needs, such as serving a light breakfast and a hot midday meal every day, maintaining a safe, violence-free environment, and at times helping with clothing or responding to the children's physical feelings and emotions.

The school operates in the spirit of democratic and informal education. It focuses on developing the children's inner strength so that they are better able to cope with the complex situation they face while promoting learning and knowledge. Considerable emphasis is placed on strengthening each child's sense of belonging – to their homeland, culture, language, and family – in order to mitigate the experience of displacement as much as possible. The educational staff is guided by democratic principles, emphasizing equality, intolerance of violence, acceptance of others, gender equality, and social leadership. While these values reflect a Western liberal worldview, the heritage and identity of each refugee's country of origin and community are respected.

Given the harsh reality faced by these children, the following questions arise: Having experienced war and violence, displacement, exhausting travels, and the stressful reality of refugee camps, can these children develop a high level of hope? Can hope for a better world emerge in conditions of suffering and distress? Does hope depend on external events and circumstances, or does it reflect a type of personality that may develop hope even without supportive conditions? Are these children capable of developing the same level of hope as children whose lives are safe and stable? And finally, can non-verbal intervention such as art therapy help the children to communicate their emotional and cognitive world, and strengthen their resilience?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Methods

The present study combines quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell & Zhang, 2009) in order to gain a wider understanding of the research questions. In the quantitative part of the study, we administered a questionnaire and employed statistical analysis methods. In the qualitative part, we employed participatory research methods, in which the community itself defines its needs, conflicts, and possible solutions. Participatory research involving art might be particularly relevant for understanding children's experiences. An arts-based methodology (Bergold & Thomas, 2012) puts all the stakeholders on one stage and gives them a voice, including children who have not yet acquired reading and writing skills, children from different cultures, or children who live in unstable surroundings, such as refugee camps (Huss et al., 2021b; Huss & Sela-Amit, 2019). The quantitative research questions were: Do the children in the present study demonstrate lower levels of hope compared to children living in safe and stable conditions, as examined in other studies (Cheavens et al., 2019; Haroz et al., 2017; Savahl et al., 2016; Shadlow et al., 2015).

1. Does the children's age affect their level of hope?
2. Does the children's country of origin affect their level of hope?
3. How do the children's drawings reflect their thoughts and feelings?

The qualitative research questions were: How do the children experience the school? What components of the school contribute to their resilience, coping, and hope?

#### 3.2. Participants

The study participants were 132 refugee children (70 boys and 62 girls) who attend ISOP in Lesbos, Greece. They were divided into three age-based classes: young (6-8), intermediate (9-11), and adolescents (12-16).

#### 3.3. Procedure

The children's parents signed consent forms for their participation. The form was translated into the parent's language and included explanations about the research and its goals. The questionnaires were translated into three languages: Arabic, Dari, and French (in addition, verbal assistance was provided in the Congolese Lingala dialect). Seventy participants (53%) were Dari speakers from Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan; nine (6.8%) were French or Lingala speakers from Congo; and 53 (40.2%) were Arabic speakers from Syria and Iraq. The questionnaires were administered in separate classrooms according to age, country of origin, and language.

In the first section of the quantitative questionnaire-based part of the study, the children provided information on their age, country of origin, parents' occupation and education prior to displacement, and length of stay in the refugee camp. This part of the questionnaire only received partial responses, especially regarding questions about the parents' occupation and length of stay in Greece. The second part of the questionnaire was dedicated to hope and employed one of the most commonly used measuring tools for self-reported future motivation (Snyder et al., 1997). This part included six statements, which were rated from 1-6 on a Likert scale (1=hopeless, 6=hopeful). Higher scores reflect higher levels of hope.

The questionnaires were administered in the presence of a teacher from the children's home country, who explained difficult words and helped with the technical aspects of filling out the forms. In the Congolese class, the teacher helped translate the text from French into Lingala, and in the Kurdish class, the teacher helped several children translate some of the questions from Arabic into Kurdish. While observing the class of the 6-8-year-old Congolese children, we had doubts concerning their understanding of the questionnaire. Young Congolese children speak local dialects, only learning French when they begin their formal schooling. The researchers, therefore, decided to exclude from the study the questionnaires filled in this particular class.

The qualitative part of the study included an arts-based research component. Arts-based participatory research uses visual and non-verbal symbols (Wood et al., 2011). Non-verbal interaction forms a means of communication that bypasses speech and helps track the participants' emotional processes (Chambala, 2008). The language of art exists in a symbolic space, which mediates between internal and external worlds. The picture or images that are created provide a metaphoric way for reorganizing, and thus coping, with a chaotic experience through its compositional organization (Thompson, 2011).

Arts within a relational context, enable access to an often-fragmented experience on a sensory level and then help find the words to explain it to the observer, thus gaining cognitive control over it and creating a more enabling narrative. Sometimes, on a more concrete level, therapists and patients speak different languages, making art the only medium for informal and personal expression that can serve as a basis for communication. Children's thinking is less abstract, so using art, which situates their experience within specific events or stories, helps them as a trigger to explain their phenomenological experience (Huss et al., 2021b).

### **3.3.1. Arts-based research protocol**

All the children in the school had 90-minute sessions in each class during the school day. They were given colored pencils and blank sheets of paper and asked to draw what they liked about the school on one side of the page, and what they did not like about it on the other. The instructions were given in plain language and were open and free. A refugee teacher who spoke the children's mother tongue and translated the instructions was present in each class and also encouraged them to overcome any insecurity and draw. The drawings were then displayed in the classroom as an exhibit. Each student in turn presented their drawing and received empathic feedback from the class, and the presenting student had an opportunity to further explain the meaning of their drawing (Mason, 2002). The discussion following the presentation of the drawing, which included explanations and responses, provided another platform for cognitive and emotional processing and added multiple perspectives to the students' reports (Hubberman & Miles, 2002). The group discussion also encouraged brainstorming for solutions to the problems reflected in the drawings. The students spoke in their mother tongue, with the refugee teacher translating their statements for the researchers. A research assistant documented the discussions, creating a comprehensive transcript.

In the next stage, we ran the questionnaires through statistical analyses. Then the drawings and accompanying transcripts were qualitatively analyzed (Hubberman & Miles, 2002; Lincoln & Denzin, 2003), focusing on the cognitive aspect of the content, and the children's emotional response to the school.



The children themselves explained the content of their drawing, its visual symbols, and the captions. We treated the children as experts of their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006; Huss et al., 2021b). The researchers did not search the drawings for implicit or subconscious meanings.

The arts-based data sources were 100 drawings and recorded and transcribed explanations and classroom or staff-meeting discussions about them. Also included were six hours of recorded and transcribed discussions triggered by the images.

### 3.3.2. Analytical methods

All the data, both visual and verbal, were thematically and phenomenologically analyzed, that is, the images were analyzed not as projective data, but as phenomenological data. This means that the students' verbalizations of the images constituted the main analyses, rather than looking for subconscious signs of stress in the compositional elements (Gauntlett and Holzwarth, 2006; Huss, 2012; Huss et al., 2015; Sarid et al., 2017).

#### Reliability

Utilizing drawings, explanations, and group discussion of the displayed drawings provided an opportunity to triangulate the data. The authors of the present paper are a multidisciplinary team who added multiple perspectives to the thematic analyses (Hubberman and Miles, 2002).

#### Ethics

The focus of the research was not the participants' personal lives or past traumas, but rather their understanding and experience of the school. All the children's parents and other participants signed consent forms for their participation in the programme's research component. All identifying features of the children have been removed. We received approval for this research from the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev ethics committee (Huss, 2012).

## 3.4. Results and analysis

### 3.4.1. Quantitative findings: Level of hope

Analysis of the questionnaires revealed high internal consistency,  $\alpha=0.72$  Chronbach's Alpha. To identify differences between the age groups and country-of-origin groups, we ran an ANOVA analysis. The results indicated considerable differences in levels of hope between the age groups. In general, the average level of hope among the participants was higher than that obtained in other studies (Snyder et al., 2003). Most of the students reported having hope 'most of the time or 'many times'.

Further analyses of standardized averages indicated significant differences between the age groups. The children in the intermediate age group (9-11) reported higher levels of hope than their counterparts in both the young (6-8) and adolescent (12-16) age groups [ $F(4,143)=7.94, p<0.01$ ]. In the main effect of the country-of-origin groups, the level of hope was found to be high among all the children, regardless of country of origin [ $MF(2)=9.21, p<0.01, \eta^2=.13$ ].

### 3.4.2. Hope as target-directed and process-directed thinking

To compare the Arab-speaking children with the Dari-speaking children (from Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan), a t-test for each questionnaire item was run. The Congolese group was excluded from this analysis due to its small sample size. The limitations of this study – its scope, the conditions for administering the questionnaire, and reliance on mediators who speak the children's languages – compelled us to analyze the results with considerable caution and modesty.

Of the six items that measured hope, Statements 1, 3, and 5 addressed the variable of target-directed hope, i.e., the respondents' look towards a desirable goal (e.g., completing an academic education). In contrast, Statements 2, 4, and 6 relate to process-directed hope, i.e., examining the process rather than the goal (e.g., perceiving academic studies as interesting and meaningful). A separate analysis of each of these factors revealed a significant difference between the groups in Statement 3 (target-directed hope) and Statement 4 (process-directed hope). In both analyses, the Arab-speaking group scored higher than the Dari-speaking group. This finding supports the results obtained in previous studies indicating that the level of hope does not depend on the participants' experiences. It might even indicate a reverse association: People who have experienced the atrocities of war (Syrian Arabs in this study) have higher expectations for better, happier lives than people whose negative experiences 'only' amounted to a threat.

When examining the association between the children's age, country of origin, and level of hope, we found that the level of hope was highest in the intermediate age group (9-11), lowest among the oldest participants (12-16), and moderate in the youngest group (6-8).

In previous studies that examined resilience (which includes hope) in refugee children, no association was found between resilience and age (Trentacosta et al., 2016). Thus, the present findings may warrant further research. We suggest that the older children were more aware than their younger counterparts of the danger, loss, disruption of schooling, and reduced chances of acquiring an education. In the intermediate age group, the main developmental challenge facing children of this age is adjusting to the social demands of the surrounding society (Sarnoff, 1987). They tend to disregard their emotions, sometimes even hiding disappointment and anger (Erikson, 1968). Younger children, by contrast, are more needy and dependent on their caregivers. The sustained presence of a caregiver provides these children with a supportive, safe, and empathic environment (Freedman, 1996). Therefore, when their environment – in this case, the school – provides daily personal contact in protected and warm surroundings, these young children's inner anguish may be alleviated.

Given that hope is an expectation of the future, how can we explain the children's high levels of hope, obtained in the Snyder test, when their present conditions are so difficult?

In the second part of the study, the researchers sought to understand the children's sources of power in the present by examining how they see the reality within the 'isolated' context of school life, which creates a sort of barrier between 'normal' life and life in a refugee camp.

To examine this issue, we conducted a qualitative study that focuses on the visual expression that children give to their life at school, both the 'good' and 'bad' parts they experience in it.

### 3.4.3. Qualitative findings

Three main themes were identified in the artwork from all the classes and in the teachers' artwork and verbal explanations. The first theme was the physical reality of the school, which included despair over the difficulty of working with a severe lack of resources, no food, no school materials, very small classrooms, and no space for the teachers: "I hate the food"; "I don't like the taste of this food".

At the same time, there was also a strong sense of place attachment, of love for the school, and an experience of the school as a 'home', a place that is aesthetically pleasing and looked after. The school occupied a series of old shacks built by the volunteers running the school together with the parents and children. "I love my school, we look after it, we planted a garden"; "My parents helped build this school, it's pretty, I look forward to coming to school every day".

For refugees who have been displaced from their homes, this sense of place attachment can be understood as a corrective psychological experience. Thus, the lack of a physical 'home' was counteracted by the emotional investment in turning the school, which was just as physically deficient as the refugee camp, into a place that feels like 'home' by taking care of it.

Similarly, the second theme focused on the stress of multiple conflicts between the different ethnicities at the school, but also on the staff's intensive efforts to negotiate conflicts through dialogue rather than violence. Thus, the main refugee experience of constant political conflict and violence was experienced here, but it was also counteracted by the efforts to negotiate them non-violently. The possibility of negotiating conflicts in a way that does not displace you from your home, or your body, can be seen as an element of basic trust that allows hope to occur. The children described the friendships they formed as one of the school's main resources. Here, too, we see the synergistic relationship between the main problem of intercultural conflict and violence, and the school's efforts to address this problem as a source of resilience and hope. The children trusted their teachers to negotiate these problems: "I don't like it when the kids fight all the time"; "I'm always fighting with someone"; "The boys fight with the girls"; "The other groups fight with our group"; "I love the teachers"; "My teacher knows good games to do when we start fighting".

The third and final theme repeated this synergy, and addressed the huge difficulty faced by the teachers, teaching in a school with no trained teachers, no books, and constantly changing children. However, the learning was unanimously experienced as a source of great pleasure and pride for the children. On the one hand, the lack of resources made studying difficult: "There are no textbooks, no notebooks, no pencils. How can we study like this?" And on the other, it gave meaning and hope to the school as a whole: "Going to school is so nice"; "I'm learning English"; "I love coming to school every day, it makes my parents so happy that I'm studying numbers".

Thus, formal learning provided hope for the children's parents, and for them, as it is based on a vision of the future in which they will have an education and be able to integrate into Europe. The formal studies also provided structure and a framework for the chaotic context of the refugee camp. It highlighted the importance of a much-needed experience of normalcy for the children.

### 3.5. Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The principal findings of the present study relate to the refugee children's surprisingly high levels of hope. Their hope was evident in clear goals and an ability to look to the future. Their sense of hope provided a powerful source of positivity and enabled them to cope with the harsh circumstances of their life in the present. As in other studies on populations in distress, caused by natural or man-made disasters (Sleijpen et al., 2017), it seems that the refugee children in this study translated hope into 'possibilities' of a more promising future, rather than into 'expectations'. They were concerned with creating a safe life for themselves and viewed the opportunity to acquire an education as part of their hope for future success. The premise of the present study is based on the salutogenic approach (Mittelmark & Bauer, 2017), whereby difficult life situations can also be viewed in terms of health, not only in terms of illness. Two additional schools of thought resonated the premises of this study regarding hope as aiding in stressful situations: positive psychology and the studies conducted by Snyder (2000) and Snyder et al. (2002).

The findings reveal that all the refugee children have a high level of hope, which is congruent with the level of hope found among children living in safe, normative conditions. This can be explained along the lines proposed by Nofal (2017), whereby coping with the troubles of war, deciding to leave home, and embarking on a challenging journey, make refugees more determined to succeed wherever they end up. With regard to between-group variations found in levels of hope, how can we explain the higher scores of the Arab-speaking children in both target-directed and process-directed hope, compared with the children in the other groups? Possibly, the Arabic-speaking Syrian refugees assume that they will not be able to return to their homeland anytime soon, and consequently, they are determined to build a new life. Moreover, harsh conditions in transit countries may have strengthened their motivation to reach their destination countries and build the life they aspire to. An alternative explanation draws on the cultural codes of the different ethnic groups. Following this line of thought, perhaps the Arab-speaking children's hope stems not only from an expectation of a positive event but also from a set of social values. Hope, in addition to being sensitive to the individual's worldview, may also indicate social and cultural change. In Arab society, there is a sense of mutual responsibility and commitment that increases in times of trouble (Fromherz, 2010). Perhaps the Arab immigrant communities already established in some of the Arab refugees' destination countries (European countries, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States) contribute to the refugees' high expectations of receiving assistance from the local immigrant community to integrate into their new home.

Regarding the second research question, on the association between the children's age, home country, and level of hope, we found that the children in the intermediate age group (9-11) had the highest levels of hope. Moreover, we found that the adolescents (12-16) demonstrated the lowest levels of hope, while the levels of hope among the youngest participants (6-8) were moderate. Since previous research that examined resilience (which includes the component of hope) among refugee children did not identify any correlation between resilience and age (Trentacosta et al., 2016), this finding is a new contribution.

The link between hope and age has not been examined until recently (Cedeno et al., 2010; Kaye-Tzadok et al., 2019). According to Snyder (2002), a sense of hope is acquired in early childhood and is expected to remain stable throughout the individual's life. With one exception, other studies have not indicated significant differences between levels of hope at different ages (Atik and Kemer, 2009). A study conducted in Turkey, however, found that the levels of hope among sixth graders were higher than those of seventh and eighth graders. This finding corresponds with the findings of the present study.

In sum, with all these variations, we see unexpectedly high levels of hope in the children who attended ISOP. How can this be explained? It seems that our qualitative findings reveal the three experiences of place attachment, nonviolent conflict negotiation, and formal studies, as considerably enhancing resilience and hope. The contents of the qualitative themes indicate the corrective experience that these elements provided, and the experience of hope. On the one hand, it was experienced as similar to their

general refugee experience of extreme lack of physical and educational resources, and constant potentially violent conflict, but on the other, as transcending this situation by fostering place attachment, modeling nonviolent conflict negotiation, and providing structure and hope for academic studies. The physical and relational setting enabled the children to experience 'school'. Thus, there was an experience of home, nonviolent relationships, and of schooling, which may underly the heightened level of hope described in the quantitative findings.

What do the qualitative findings teach us about hope? They provide an important insight into generating hope: Hope occurs, not when everything is perfect, but when the experience of potential despair (lack of resources) is challenged and negated by attachment-promoting behaviors (attachment to school, to other children), and by creating structures of coherence and safety within the chaos, rather than waiting for the chaos to disappear.

This is a very important psychoeducational message for anyone engaging in education in refugee schools, namely that even if it does not enable high standards of schooling, the effort to actively counteract (rather than negate) the lack of resources and violence enables hope to be fostered.

In other words, the findings of the present study shed light on a possible connection between a relationally supportive environment and an experience of hope. A safe space, such as that offered by ISOP in Lesbos, enables the children to form social relationships that are based on respect, equality, and safety. Mutual help, opportunities for older children to help the younger ones, practicing peaceful conflict resolution through dialogue, and creating a social group of peers with shared activities – these experiences convey a spirit of tolerance and reciprocity. This allows the children to experience, in small moments, and thus to internalize and imagine a future of a supportive world, even if the current grim reality still stands between them and that desired future. If they focus on place attachment, positive relationships, and set structures, rather than on formal learning, even schools with extremely limited resources can provide refugee children with a sheltered environment that contrasts with the violence in their home country or the journey that rendered them homeless and displaced (Culberston and Constant, 2015). Schools can paint a brighter picture of the world, one without violence and destruction, providing children with a sense of safety and normalcy. Parents and children alike view these schools as an opportunity to rectify the destruction caused by the political reality that has befallen them (Shakya et al., 2010). Education can thus constitute a catalyst for hope, with the potential to meet the psychological needs of refugee children (MacKinnon, 2014). The psychosocial aspects of education that actively address the absence of home, positive conflict resolution, and structure, offer opportunities to adapt to the new community and new interpersonal interactions (Walsh et al., 2011).

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