Play in a refugee camp: dis-order from chaos

What image comes to mind when you think of a refugee child?

TV adverts from large humanitarian aid NGOs usually depict refugee children migrating, crying, malnourished, possibly dirty or in damaged clothing. These adverts are designed to trigger intense emotional responses and encourage people to turn from passive bystanders into active life-changers by donating what they can afford, with the promise of improving those children's lives. Such imagery can have a considerable impact on the public's perception of refugee children and the assumptions they make about them. Undeniably refugee children's struggles are real. But I would argue that the image that is conjured up when thinking about child refugees should not simply be defined by sorrow, trauma, war experiences, famine, and perilous journeys across seas and deserts. They are first and foremost children, which means they have a lust to play, possess an incredible ability to adapt to new conditions, and the capacity to find beauty and playfulness in everyday life, regardless of what that might look like from the outside. Secondly, they have a voice, and will not hold back from expressing it, particularly when shaped by discontent with their situation or environment – and if this happens to be a refugee camp, there will certainly be some discontent. But … is anyone listening?

In the summer of 2019, I undertook a research project in a Greek refugee camp, examining how a Child-Friendly Space meets children's play needs and how the context of a refugee camp impacts play. Child Friendly Spaces (CFSs) is the main internationally recognised humanitarian aid initiative for children and, commonly, the only places children can access safe play opportunities in refugee camps (Save the Children, 2008). However, play in a CFS is typically more focused on structured, adult-led activities and psychosocial support, and less concerned with free, child-directed play (World Vision, 2015). Despite the wide global spread of the initiative, research is lacking on the effectiveness of CFSs, particularly around children's play provision (Ager, Metzler, Vojta, & Savage, 2013); and this primarily motivated my study.

For a wide variety of reasons, it is difficult to put into words almost one month of working with children in such an environment, particularly as a qualified playworker and a strong advocate for children's right and freedom to play.

First worth noting is how I realised that my personal feelings about what I noticed around me, no matter how strong, needed to be put to one side and replaced with a big smile, followed by the commitment to providing a sense of normality placed at the forefront of my daily interactions with the children. In some ways, being positive was not entirely a mammoth task, especially when seeing sparkling eyes and happy faces in children who just wanted to play. They did so, both as part of the organised CFS sessions I helped deliver and outside of those, wherever the camp allowed for play through its politics, topography and daily disposition. I also saw anxiety, lack of emotion regulation and aggressivity – children throwing real hard painful punches and kicks at each other, with an intensity which was both disturbing and captivating at the same time. The atmosphere between some of the children felt as volatile as the conflicts they were fleeing from. I spent hours separating children's fights, which occasionally descended into lashing out at staff. In those intense

moments, children's tendency was to destroy everything they encountered; it all seemed too difficult to handle for those who could not find their own personal refuge in an impersonal refugee camp.

Disorder and destruction were not tolerated during the CFS sessions and one can think of many reasons why. But what if we had allowed those children the freedom to destroy things and created a space that supported such actions? Permission in this area was something I thought might in fact help some children cope with and release some of their feelings. During my time at the camp, I often thought of sneaking into the play space, outside of programming hours, and attaching a punching bag to a tree branch, so that the little ones could reach it. Or bringing in giant Jenga blocks to be stacked up and then kicked in, for them to experience whatever might be triggered by the toppling blocks, perhaps in an attempt to assure them that everything else can topple in a moment – not just their lives. But sadly, my days there were numbered and my authority to make such decisions, highly limited. I also concluded that the theoretical basis of this approach needed to be strengthened before applying it in practice.

Most refugee children are assumed to be vulnerable, traumatised in some way, and therefore, in need of psychosocial and other therapy-based interventions (Atkinson, 2007; Williams & Drury, 2011). Although that may be true for some (Hyder, 2005), there are dangers in drawing synonymous links between the two. Research carried out in refugee camps is increasingly uncovering that, despite having either witnessed or been themselves subjected to violence, child refugees are in fact highly resilient, eager to integrate and to take back control of their lives (Atkinson, 2007; Veronese, Castiglioni, Tombolani, & Said, 2011). The latter is mostly what I saw and experienced as well. Therefore, instead of automatically thinking of refugee children as traumatised and in need of psychological support, what if we considered many might just be angry human beings, with little control over their lives, who want to be heard, challenge the status quo and need an outlet to do so?

During my time at the camp, I noted the absence of a holistic understanding of play and its many shapes and forms, which was mainly stemming from a lack of training. One play concept in particular that I would have liked to see better understood. Henricks (2015) discusses play as rebellion, as disorderly, defying rules and social niceties; 'Disorderly players rage against the world. They take liberties; they go to extremes. They challenge the best-laid plans of everyone, including, sometimes, their own' (p. 35). This is not without reason, and Henricks identifies both individual and social functions for why play would look and feel this way. There is no better way of describing the essence of the play I observed at the camp. And of course, it makes sense, when thinking about it – why wouldn't children 'rage against the world' in such circumstances? But, a more important question arises – why shouldn't we allow children to feel this way, angry and destructive? After spending time with children in that context, I truly believe creating a space in which children can safely express those feelings should be part and parcel of a refugee camp's play provision.

One of the most difficult aspects of being at the camp and working as part of the CFS team was the nature of a CFS space itself. The focus was on maintaining clear routines, which indeed worked well for some children. However, many craved novelty and change and following a strict schedule often led to frustration and the conflict that staff were

desperately trying to avoid on a regular basis. During the sessions, it became obvious that many children were just bored and some of their aggressive behaviour stemmed from that apathy. After all, 11 research studies revealed that when left unstimulated, humans would rather experience pain than boredom and are ready to self-inflict it (Wilson et al., 2014).

And then, there was the wider context of the refugee camp. Perhaps an extract from my final observation at the camp can summarise the most harrowing aspect of children living and growing up in a refugee camp (all names have been changed, to maintain children's anonymity):

On one of the swings in the only camp playground [right next to the volunteer toilets], there was Jamal, a little boy about 4-5y, being pushed by his dad. Him and his brother Ahmed (7-8y) have been at the CFS every day this week. They are smiley, friendly, calm and more relaxed and responsive than the majority of other children. There is a spark in their eyes, that as painful as it is to admit it, other children do not possess. Jamal said hi and I said hi back, as I went to sit on the other swing, next to his. We started smiling at each other and hiding behind swing bars and emerging as we were swinging, unsynchronised. […] Ahmed was also there, talking to the other volunteer. We smiled at each other and waved. I mentioned to the volunteer my perception of the brothers and how different they seem from the rest. She nodded in agreement and said they had only arrived at the camp last week. I had no clue, as I don't know if children I haven't seen before are new to the space or not, since for many, CFS attendance patterns are irregular. The volunteer carried on saying she has seen many children arriving and being just as calm and relaxed, but then turning extremely aggressive in a very short amount of time. She corrected me after I initially said months – '*Weeks! It's this place, the environment; and if they have younger siblings they learn they have to protect them; they start fighting … then the little ones copy them*'. She talked about Wajiha and Miriah, sisters and constant CFS presence, and how when they arrived they were just the same as the brothers and now they're not just more aggressive, but they'll start fights as well. It broke my heart in little pieces, like the hard gravel we were walking on, which covers the whole camp ground and now my soul. I suddenly succumb to a general sense of uselessness.
Another lingering thought was that some of the toddlers had been born at the camp; it was the only home they had ever known and in which they may find themselves for years to come, meaning they may be spending most, if not all of their childhood in the hostile environment of a refugee camp. If play, which is a biological and social need, a right and one of the most beneficial processes for a child's overall health (Lester & Russell, 2008) is not catered for appropriately, many refugee children will grow up experiencing play deprivation, with whole generations impacted by its negative effects (Hyder, 2005). However, without relevant knowledge of and guidance around play and evaluation of play provision in refugee camps, the chances are that provision will remain inappropriate. An overwhelming need exists in refugee camps for child workforce training and bridging the gap between knowledge and practice when it comes to children's play.

My study found it is extremely difficult to separate children's play from the wider refugee camp context; access to play becomes dependent on local political decisions around how aid money is distributed, as well as the camp residents' levels of stress resulting from their lack of mobility, autonomy and access to basic resources and recreational services. Everything

was connected and everything was chaotic, and children's play was, at times, only a reflection of that.

At this point in time, it feels unrealistic to expect refugee camps can change the way they operate and magically become more child-friendly environments. But what can be proposed is that appropriate play provision is put in place to meet ALL children's different needs. It goes without saying that this should be reflective of children's voices, choices and desires. There is plenty of room for improvement in this department and of course, this can only come from more international collaboration and more research into understanding refugee children's play needs and how they can be supported by services, especially in different local and cultural contexts. Research must then inform the development of play policy, to include minimum international standards for play provision in refugee camps, which accounts for specific contextual factors and challenges.

There is so much more about children's lives and play in a refugee camp that is worthy of discussion, but I will just settle on one last fundamental point: while the negative effects of forced displacement on children can spread across generations, play has the potential to counteract those (Feldman, 2019; Hyder, 2005). Therefore, I see it as crucial to call on more humanitarian aid funding to be made available for:

(a). basic resources and appropriate facilities for play

(b). enabling better quality of play in CFSs alongside developing different play-based initiatives

(c). more appropriate training for staff and volunteers working with children at play

(d). more cross-organisational work to create local support networks, all within the refugee camp context.

I also urge all those who are interested in children's wellbeing to become involved in researching and debating refugee children's play and how changes in Child Friendly Spaces guidance and wider humanitarian aid policy can ensure that the right to free play is catered for in situations of crisis, when children need it the most. Is anyone listening?...

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