EMPOWERING THE ARTS: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF THEATRICAL ACTIVITIES IN PEACE BUILDING FOR HIGH-RISK CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into theatre's role in peacebuilding efforts targeting high-risk children, with a special focus on two projects in Penang, Malaysia. These projects sought to address several key inquiries: firstly, what is the significance of peacebuilding projects for high-risk children, secondly, what theatre activities are suitable for creating peacebuilding projects for high-risk children and thirdly, how can children empower the arts through theatre activities. "High-risk children" here refers to Rohingya refugee children, who are casualties of ethnic unrest in Myanmar, and children from Penang Shan Home, who face challenges like family issues and neglect. These children bring with them layers of untold stories, and the two different research projects posit theatre as a suitable intervention platform towards peacebuilding and a space for children empower the arts through their voices. This is an action-based research that employed a variety of methodologies, including theatre-based processes, interviews, observational techniques, and the collection of children's reflections that culminated in two stage productions namely *Jungle Book The Musical* and *Sang Kancil Speaks: Strange Times in Alam Rimba*. The research yielded promising outcomes as the children in both projects put on a one hour production entirely in English, a medium of instruction many of them were uncomfortable with prior to the project. Reflections from the respective teachers and the children themselves revealed that there was positive change overall from the children's behaviour, communication skills, their interaction with one another and with their teachers.

Key words: peacebuilding, high-risk children, theatre activities, Rohingya refugee

INTRODUCTION

In a world where conflicts and crises have become regular media headlines, a fraction of the community that is most affected and often forgotten are children. Labelled as 'high-risk', in such situations, these children experience a range of adversities that can have a profound and sustained impact on their physical, emotional, and social well-being. Peace-building projects have proven to be successful in helping high-risk children develop stability, resilience, and promote their overall wellbeing (Bräuchler, 2022; Carter & Guerra,2022; Otieno, 2022; Vestal & Jones 2004). As such, understanding the unique challenges these children face is crucial in

order to design effective peace-building interventions that can assist these children in developing resilience, and supporting their overall mental and emotional development.

Given its broad application across a variety of disciplines, the term high risk with reference to children today represents a vast majority of children who have experienced some form of emotional, physical, or mental trauma (Otieno, 2022). In this paper, the definition of high risk is confined to two specific groups in Penang, Malaysia; namely, Rohingya refugee children who have experienced forced displacement and exposed to armed conflict and children from Penang Shan Children Home who have experienced abandonment, abuse, neglect and come from broken homes. While the term children also carries a rather broad definition, in this paper we refer to children as individuals aged between 5 to 14 years old. By examining the experiences of Rohingya refugee children and the children from Shan's Home, this paper aims to shed light on the specific challenges faced by high-risk children, but more importantly explore how children have the agency to Empower the Arts. In the world of Arts, children take the lead, using their voice as a powerful tool to share their stories and fortify their identity, thus championing artistic empowerment.

This paper will discuss two projects that were part of two separate research grants. The first project was part of a short term grand funded by Universiti Sains Malaysia. It was initiated with Peace Learning Centre, a refugee centre that accommodates approximately sixty children aged four to sixteen. The centre offers basic education in subjects like Mathematics, Science, Bahasa Malaysia (Malay language), English, and Islamic studies at the primary school level. The centre is a sanctuary for refugee children whose parents seek refuge in Malaysia while awaiting relocation to other countries. It was initiated by The School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia Funding for the school is derived from non-governmental organizations, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), and private benefactors.

Rohingya refugee children represent a vulnerable population displaced from their homes due to the prolonged conflict and persecution faced in Myanmar. Rohingya ethnic minority from the State of Rakhine, have braved the Andaman Sea in rickety wooden boats, with little water and food, in an attempt to flee persecution at the hands of the Myanmar government. Many neighbouring countries sought to provide refuge for this community and Malaysia was one of them. At the heart of this turmoil were children who grapple with the psychosocial consequences of their displacement, including post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, and disrupted education. Understanding the specific challenges faced by Rohingya refugee children is crucial for creating specific peace building activities that will address their unique needs.

The second project funded by the Malaysian Cultural Development Economy (CENDANA), was carried out with children from Penang Shan Children Home. The children at this centre were aged between seven to fourteen years old. The core aim of this research project was to foster children's self-expression and to boost their confidence by harnessing the English language within the realm of theatre, particularly, through dance, acting and storytelling. These children who come from broken families are often exposed to familial instability caused by factors such as divorce, parental separation, substance abuse such as alcohol and drugs, and domestic violence. Growing up with such turmoil in the family unit can cause a lot of distress in a child. The children confront a myriad of challenges, encompassing social, academic, and emotional dimensions, largely stemming from factors such as displacement and multiple placements prior to finding a suitable home. This transitional process can span up to a year, contingent on the prevailing system. The constant instability in their lives

have left these children vulnerable and at high risk as they often face separation from siblings, bullied by other children, defenceless and are unable to trust anyone.

The primary objective of both projects was to provide a platform for the children from the two centres to use their voice to empower the arts and articulate their experiences, aspirations, and hopes in a world that has continued to judge and oppress them. We employed theatrical activities like theatre games, storytelling, music making and creative movements as peacebuilding tools to enable these children to become advocates for themselves, their families and their homeland, offering them newfound means of expression. The work with both groups of children culminated in a one-hour stage production where they showcased what they had learned and took control of their narratives. The Rohingya children performed *Jungle Book The Musical*, while the children from Shan's Home presented *Sang Kancil Speaks: Strange Times in Alam Rimba*. The childrens performances underscored their significant role in amplifying their stories and empowering the arts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section of the paper will review relevant literatures to examine existing peacebuilding strategies that have been adopted in other countries with high-risk communities, particularly among children. The different literatures will provide a better understanding on the different types of peacebuilding initiatives and help inform how such works can be carried out for children from two diverse groups of high-risk communities in Malaysia.

The Merriam Webster dictionary (since 1826) gives a wide definition for peace. The definitions include; i) peace as a state of tranquillity, ii) peace as freedom from civil disturbance, iii) peace as restored order, iv) peace as a state of security and order by law, v) peace as freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions, vi) peace as harmony in personal relations, vii) peace as a state or period of mutual concord between governments and viii) peace as a pact or agreement to end hostilities between those who have been at war or in a state of enmity. The above definitions allude to peace or peacebuilding has always had a very formal approach to it. Given that peace initiatives have often been governed and overseen by organisations like the United Nations (UN), peacebuilding activities have often been rather structured. The United Nations has played a crucial role in various peacebuilding activities, including peace negotiations, institution building and the protection of civilians and justice sector reforms. It's worth noting that these initiatives often hold limited appeal for children. Nevertheless, alongside the more conventional initiatives led by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government agencies, there is a body of literature addressing peacebuilding efforts among children. These initiatives involving artists, art practitioners, art therapists and academics in the creative arts field, underscore the role of arts in fostering peace.

Arts as a medium for peacebuilding

To date, there are numerous works that have dealt with the general idea of arts as a medium for addressing peacebuilding and conflict resolution. In many parts of the world the arts have been known to bring together divided communities and help raise awareness of the dangers of impending conflict and speak out in favour of peace. The role of arts as an effective mode of fostering peace building has been researched in many communities in as far back as 1996. In this paper, we look at three pertinent works to demonstrate how the arts has always been used as an effective tool to address issues of conflict resolution and work on peacebuilding with children.

One of the most significant works utilising the arts for peacebuilding is Arts Approaches to Conflict (1996) edited by Marian Liebmann. It is a compilation of essays by researchers who predominantly relate their personal account on using the different medium of arts like music, drama, visual art, creative movement, theatre, storytelling, and photography as platforms to mediate peace building efforts with children. Each chapter in the book is an informative narration that describes the various ways in which arts can be used to understand the actual process of conflict and through that develop new ways of resolving and overcoming it. In the same book Dorothy Cameron's chapter on conflict resolution looks at incorporating visual arts as a therapeutic measure to help homeless youths. A similar body of scholarly works by Crawford and Bodine (1996) also discusses different types of conflict resolution education programmes for school children and youths. This book centres on the premise that children need to learn to deal constructively with conflict, as these are essential skills needed to build successful relationships in the future. These body of works present a preliminary understanding of the importance of peace building initiatives and it has been in practice for almost 30 years. They provide the present research with a basis to start from and understand the fundamental importance in the need for peace building initiatives for children who come from destructive and dysfunctional backgrounds.

In the years to follow, there has been a significant increase in the literature about peace-building initiatives using the arts. This growing body of academic work demonstrates a rising interest in understanding and implementing strategies to promote peace and resolve conflicts particularly among youths and young children. In the book titled, Youth Peacebuilding: Music, Gender, and Change by Pruitt (2013) highlighted that music has the power to unite voices and build a common identity for youths who have been displaced and struggle with identity issues, a dilemma that many displaced children and youths face. Tatsushi Arai's Creativity and Conflict Resolution: Alternative Pathways to Peace (2009), examines several ways in which creative thinking has played a role in advancing the conflict resolution process. He posits that "unconventional viability lies at the heart of creativity for transcending seemingly intractable inter-communal conflicts" (p. 34). Many other scholars are of the same view as they believe that peace building is most effective when there is creativity and the arts involved in it (Cohen & Urbain, 2007; Zeliger, 2003)

Theatre, dance and music have long been favoured as tools for educating and bringing people together to work towards collective action or to facilitate community problem solving (Mada, 1993, Zeliger 2003, Shank, Schirch, 2008,). In an article that discussed the role of arts in peacebuilding within Bosnia-Herzegovina, Zeliger (2003) noted that in countries like Northern Ireland, Africa, and the Middle East, community theatre productions and mural projects have been used to bring communities together. He further noted that music in the form of peace concerts had a positive impact among communities in Cyprus and Angola, while in the Middle East, bi-communal orchestras and poetry played an instrumental role in restoring a sense of belonging among the people of that community (2003). Many scholars have vouched in favour of incorporating theatre activities, mainly theatre games, creative movements, music and storytelling in peace building and conflict resolution particularly among refugee communities (O'Connell, Castelo-Bronco, 2010; Shank, Schirch, 2008). Dance and music have also been used by artists to address psychosocial and psychological issues among refugee communities (Dieterich-Hartwell, Koch, 2017; Doyle & Wood, 2017).

Form the various articles discussed above, it can be concluded that arts in its various forms is a favoured medium to work with high-risk children. The arts have a critical role to play in post conflict reconstruction as it brings people together through a common language that

requires little verbal communication, an element that most children from high-risk situations often try to refrain from.

METHODOLOGY

During our discussion sessions with the teachers from both groups of children respectively, we were informed that most of the children showed eagerness towards learning, were expressive with their thoughts and aspired for a better future. A small fraction of these children, especially the older ones were quieter, unable to reveal and share their stories and experiences. In the case of the Rohingya refugee children, their scars are a result of the harrowing experiences that they endured in Myanmar. Conversely, the children from Shan's Home have been victims of domestic violence and abuse. With this in mind, we designed theatre activities to create a safe and inclusive environment where these vulnerable children could explore their potentials without fear or discrimination and eventually develop the courage to tell their story on stage, which was the ultimate aim of the project.

However, as researchers we were prompted to contemplate post- production peace processes and the long-term sustainability of arts-based projects in the context of peacebuilding. Both research projects were centred on peacebuilding exercises and activities encompassing theatre games, creative movements, dance, music, and storytelling. We divided the activates according to the following sub categories as it provided us with a good framework to work from, namely:

a) Building Trust
b) Conflict Resolution
c) Positive Interaction
d) Fostering Creativity and Teamwork
e) Children Empowering the Arts

These five categories will be expounded on in the discussion section of this paper. The activities and exercises were designed carefully according to the five categories to suit the children according to their ages, experiences, and social situation. Activities were prepared based on the identified issues, knowledge, or skills to be focused. The aforementioned issues were thoughtfully and comprehensively addressed, both individually and collaboratively, which yielded promising outcomes. Every session with the children was conducted as a workshop to ensure knowledge acquisition, skills development, personal growth, increased confidence, networking opportunities and teamwork among the children.

Due to the varied age groups, we were unable to work with all the children altogether. Taking the advice from the teachers, we divided the children according to their ages and created workshop schedules for each group. We conducted separate workshops with distinct age groups, group 1 (ages 5-7), group 2 (ages 8-10) and group 3 (ages 11-14), spanning a period of approximately 4 months. Initially we met the children once a week, however two months before the production date, we increased the contact hours and met the children 3 times a week. Each session was between 2 to 3 hours long. Subsequently, we brought all these age groups together to perform their respective productions, which served as one of the key outcomes of each respective research projects.

After each workshop session we would conduct reflection sessions with the children. This was vital as it provided us with the information needed to understand the children's predicament better and inform the way we structured the workshop sessions. While we had a

framework of how we wanted to run the sessions, we were very mindful not to force the children to conform to a structure that we thought might suite them. Given that the overriding aim of both projects was to have the children Empower the Arts, we kept the framework rather flexible so we were able to accommodate and amend the activities accordingly. Feedback was also gathered from the teachers from both centres, as they were constantly present throughout all the sessions. The feedback from the teachers along with the children were gathered through focus group discussions post workshop which provided valuable resource for improvement. The feedback also aided us in developing future lessons with the children.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Peace building efforts hinge significantly on effective interactions and communication, particularly between children and adults in various spheres of their lives, including families, teachers, and other authoritative figures. However, marginalised children who have endured neglect and abuse often exhibit problematic behaviours, especially in their interactions with adults such as foster parents, social workers, and teachers. This unfortunate circumstance leads to strained and negative relationships with these more senior figures. Sadly, both Rohingya refugee children and children from Penang Shan Home frequently find themselves in such challenging relationships within their shelter homes, centres, and schools. These difficult relationships often result in a decline in their academic progress, exacerbating their existing difficulties.

Our experience working with children unveiled critical insights through a process of trial and error. We determined that the composition of the groups played a crucial role. An ideal group size comprised approximately 5 to 6 children led by 1 or 2 adult actors. This approach ensured that each child actively participated, responded, interacted, and had their voices heard. It underscored the significance of their presence in shaping the group dynamics and the development of the play. Group discussions proved indispensable, fostering collaborative teamwork, and nurturing a profound sense of belonging among the children. This highlighted the critical importance of effective group dynamics in our work.

The following section of this paper will discuss how the 5 different components mentioned in the methodology section was carried out and the outcomes of those sessions.

a) *Building Trust*

Prior to initiating any activities with the children, it was first crucial for us researchers to establish and build trust with the children. The initial 2 workshop sessions were primarily dedicated to activities designed to building trust among the children and ourselves. The activities curated for this purpose played a pivotal role in enhancing trust, promoting mutual understanding, and facilitating group interaction- an essential aspect of any project involving refugees and high-risk children (Broome, 1993, Kelmen, 1997, Rothman, 1997, Sandole, 1998). To instil trust within these projects, we introduced two widely recognized and effective theatre games, "the name game" and "push and hold game".

The name game

One commonly used icebreaker in various artistic and theatre activities is the "name game". In this game, the instructor or facilitator initiates the activity by introducing their own name, followed by each participant in turn. Participants may choose to share their names formally or opt for shorter or more popular versions to infuse an element of fun and engagement.

Maintaining a brisk pace is crucial in this game to prevent boredom. Prior to playing the game, we, as the researchers, explained its purpose to the children. We began by stating our own names and each child in sequence would then announce their name while simultaneously recalling and calling out the names of those who had preceded them. The game proceeded until everyone within the circle had successfully memorized and called out the names of all the other participants.

In the next phase of the game, we introduced the element of incorporating geometric shapes or movements alongside our names. For instance, one of the children mimicked the iconic "Wakanda forever" gesture from the Black Panter movie by crossing his fisted hands across his chest while announcing his name. Subsequently, the remaining children followed suit, each creating their unique movements or shapes while simultaneously uttering their names. The game proceeded with the children not only expressing their names but also creating their identities and corresponding to the names and identities of their friends. This extended interaction further heightened the impression of acceptance, acknowledgement, and mutual respect, thereby accentuating the significance of trust-building within the broader framework of peacebuilding endeavours.

The push and hold game

The game aptly named "Push and Hold", incorporates two fundamental actions, pushing and holding. Children were organised into groups of three participants. Two participants faced each other, while the third child stood inside a small, marked box at the centre, facing either of the two participants. The game commenced as one child gently pushed the child in the centre toward the other child with an emphasis on ensuring safety and building trust. The recipient of the push was responsible for securely holding and maintaining their balance as they received the child pushed towards them. This process continued as the child who was pushed, in turn pushed back towards the other child. The game continued until participants changed partners, facilitating the development of trust among all participants.

To enhance the game's effectiveness, it was crucial to maintain a safe distance between the three children, achieving the right balance between closeness and separation. The child who was being pushed was confined within the confines of the marked box, necessitating their body to sway towards the participant responsible for holding them. The game's emphasis on executing a "gentle" push while maintaining a "strong or firm" hold or grip underscored the paramount importance of cultivating trust and fostering safety awareness among the children, thereby aligning with the broader objective of peacebuilding.

b) Conflict Resolution

Once trust was established, our focus shifted toward addressing issues related to the children's perceptions and comprehension of safety and security, as well as their responses to conflict and resolution. According to (Collin-Vézina, D., De La Sablonnière-Griffin, M., Palmer, A. M., & Milne, L., 2015), children who have experienced neglect often struggle to recognize that they are being harmed or exploited, which in turn hampers their ability to trust and believe that others are capable of respecting and or protecting them. Throughout all phases of the projects, it remained of utmost importance to prioritize the safety and security of the children. This involved creating an environment that allowed the children to develop both independent and dependent security through nurturing relationships with the individuals around them. Activities under conflict resolution were carried out throughout the three months as it was important to constantly remind the children on the importance of expressing their feelings the right way. Given the seriousness of the topic, we decided to have fun and engaging activities that would

indirectly address the issue of conflict resolution without them having to confront the topic directly.

Emotional Charades
The objective of this game was to allow the children to identify, understand and eventually express a range of emotions. In this activity, the children were divided into two groups. We mixed the ages in the groups so the older kids would be able to guide and help the younger kids, thus teaching them to develop empathy as they guided their younger teammates. The children then took turns to come to the front and pick a piece of paper from a jar that had one word. The words were all different forms of emotion like, happy, angry and loving. The child was then required to act out the emotion while the rest of the children in their groups guessed. Each child was given 30 seconds to express the word, and they were allowed to use facial expressions and body language to express and act out the different emotions. They were however not allowed to use their voice. This was an indirect demonstration that emotions can be expressed without words. The game proved to be successful as, although children were often apprehensive to speak about their feelings, it was a first step towards a positive direction, given that they were able to recognise the different emotions in a fun and safe environment.

Throughout the 3 months of workshop, the children in both projects demonstrated a keen interest in expressing themselves artistically. However, while they were positively engaged in all the workshop sessions, we saw lesser engagement in the post activity group discussions, as they were not immediately forthcoming when asked to give their feedback on an activity they just participated in. To overcome this challenge, we turned the discussion sessions into fun games. For example, after the Emotional Charades activity, we conducted a small reflection session with all the children. We asked them questions like which emotion was the easiest to guess? How did you feel when you had to express an emotion without using words? Instead of asking the students to verbally answer the questions, we created stations for each question, with a large sheet of paper labelled with the question. We equipped each station with drawing and colouring materials, like emoji stickers, stamps, or cut-out emotion faces. So for the question "Which emotions were easy to guess?" and "Which emotions were challenging?", the children were asked to place a sticker or stamp on the paper to represent an emotion they found easy or challenging. They were also encouraged to draw the emotions if they preferred. For example, some children used bright colours like red and orange to write emotions like happy and excited. This feedback received was crucial as it provided us with deeper insights into how the children felt about certain emotions and how we could incorporate them into the peace building activities.

c)   Positive Interaction.
Positive interactions between children with their friends, peers, teachers and adults in their lives constitute a pivotal foundation for both academic and social learning within and outside the classroom. These interactions play a significant role in shaping teacher-child behaviours, parents-child interactions and child-friends/peer communications and the overall quality of their relationships. Previous research has highlighted that activities like creative movements, singing, acting and music making are all effective ways to encourage communication that can encourage peace-building initiatives (Bräuchler, 2022; Carter and Guerra, 2022; Cohen and Urbain, 2007; Fancourt and Steptoe, 2018; Sutherland, et. al, 2010).

Music Making

In both projects, the music making activities were carried out on alternative weeks. However, closer to the production dates, we had more regular contact with the children as they were required to sing and perform on stage. the children were proficient in conversing and singing in their native language and Malay language. To kickstart the music making process, we commenced with singing well-known and uncomplicated local Malay songs which the children were already familiar with. They included "Rasa Sayang", "Geylang si paku geylang" and "Bangau oh Bangau". From there we moved into nursery rhymes and English songs. While singing, we encouraged the children to express themselves through rhythmic and creative body movements and clapping. With consistent practice, the children began to pay close attention to vocal instructions, actively seeking clarification when needed or expressing curiosity.

d) Fostering Creativity and Teamwork

During creative movement sessions, children were encouraged to imagine themselves as animals, elements of nature or objects, expressing these ideas through movements and sounds. They began with subtle and gentle actions, often displaying awkwardness in their action and movements. Many of the Rohingya children were more reserved than the children from Shan's Home. However, over time, their movements progressively transitioned to more self-assured and confident gestures. This could be attributed to them being at ease with their peers, surroundings, space and facilitators. Notably, the children received periodic praise for their efforts, which, in turn, boosted their self-confidence and enthusiasm to further seek recognition and validation.

As the children's training in singing and creative movements progressed, they were divided into groups representing animals and nature. Given the theme of both productions, the children were introduced to different animal characters very early on in the workshop sessions, so they would be familiar and comfortable with the roles they would eventually play on stage. These groups were guided by adult actors and movers, mainly consisting of students from the School of the Arts at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM).

Figure 1. The Rohingya children in rehearsal with the USM students

Both productions provided valuable outlets for the children to express themselves and contribute to peace-building efforts through creative arts. "Jungle Book the Musical" centered on the theme of peace between animals and humans, highlighting the unity of animals in

protecting Mowgli from the formidable tiger, Sheer Khan. "Strange Times in Alam Rimba" emphasised the importance of maintaining harmony in the jungle. Both groups of children received guidance from project directors, acting coaches, movement coaches, and vocal coaches to immerse themselves in the roles of the animals in the stories. Adult actors and movers, serving as group leaders and mentors, led and assisted the children throughout this process.

Initially, the children encountered challenges in articulating their lines, responding to fellow actors, and hesitated to explore animal movements and vocalizations with their bodies. These exercises were unfamiliar, leading to shyness and fear of making mistakes. However, through continuous encouragement, guidance, and the freedom to make mistakes, the children made significant progress. They began to engage positively with other actors, adult mentors, and coaches. They began to let loose and let go of their inhibitions and we eventually saw the children having fun and enjoying themselves. Overall, it could be underlined that these projects offered a platform for the children to address their daily struggles, stand up for themselves, assert their identities, and seek peace amidst the ongoing challenges they faced.

e) Children Empowering the Arts

As a first step towards Empowering the Arts, and having the children take charge of their story and performance, we had 2 sessions that were focused on story telling. We narrated stories like Peter Pan, Snow White, Jungle Book and Jack and the Beanstalk. We also used local folktales from the "Mousedeer chronicles" such as "Mousedeer and the crocodile". There was a slight twist to this activity. Unlike other story telling sessions that are often one directional, these sessions were aimed to get the children to interact and insert their own ideas in the stories. As we told the different stories, we would often pause mid-way through and ask the children what they think possibly happened next. For example, when we were narrating the story of Snow White with the Rohingya children, we paused at the point where Snow White escapes into the forest after her evil step mother orders for her to be killed. It was interesting to see how the children were able to come up with their own unique versions of what happen in the forest. It was encouraging to see the enthusiasm with which they shared their ideas, some suggesting that Snow White met a group of friendly animals that took care of her, while others imagined her discovering a hidden cave with magical creatures. With the children at Shan's Home, we narrated the story on the Mousedeer and the Crocodile, and asked the children to discuss and come up with solutions or suggestions on how to help the mousedeer cross the river without being hurt by the ferocious and hungry crocodiles.

These exercises with the children in both projects were important as they demonstrated how the children were able to use their ideas and voice to alter and influence the direction of a story. In a way, this approach not only nurtured their creative thinking but also instilled a sense of ownership and agency in their narratives. It revealed that when given the opportunity, children are capable of thinking beyond the conventional storyline which also helps built their confidence in sharing and articulating their thoughts.

After the story telling sessions, the children in both projects were asked to begin writing their own stories that would form the storyline of their production. We introduced them to the idea of storyboards. With the Rohingya refugee children, they decided to go with the thematic idea of Jungle Book. In conversations with them regarding the different stories, most of the children revealed that they could relate to Mowgli's feeling of being lost in the vast jungle and wanted to develop and add their own twist to the storyline. Hence the birth of Jungle Book The Musical. Conversely, the children in the second project opted to adapt the story of the Mousedeer and the Crocodile as their performance.

Although Jungle Book has a well-established tale of a boy lost in the jungle, we asked the children to put their own twist to the storyboard that they were writing. The children were given the freedom to narrate their own stories and were encouraged to insert tales of home and their own personal experiences into the story line. This exercise was important as it was vital for the children to start the first step of putting their feeling to words. This was a gradual build up from the previous exercises like the Push and Hold game and Emotional Charades. From physically expressing their feelings and fears, this next step promoted a more cognitive engagement as putting to paper the different emotions and stories taught the children that they were free to express themselves in so many different ways. Research has revealed that using free writing, storytelling and drawing particularly amoung primary aged children is associated with a reduced relative risk of social and behavioural instability (Fancourt, D., & Steptoe, A., 2018).

Story boarding sessions focused on the understanding of the script/story and the communication of ideation by the children. We began the exercise by dividing the children into smaller groups with at least one older child in the group. To speed up the process of developing and moving the storyline along, each group was in charge of different sections of the story and they were first briefed on their section. Throughout this process, we moved around the different groups to see how their respective stories were progressing. Group discussions, "question and answer sessions" were held and led by the coaches and adult actors with the children. They were asked to re-narrate the story, write, or draw the steps and sequence of the story according to how they wanted their story to develop. White Mahjong papers were given to groups and children were encouraged to draw and write the sequences of the story.

At the end of the activity, each group had to present their interpretation of the script, or the scene given to them as a team. With the involvement of multiple groups in the development of the storyboard, the potential for different plot development became very evident. Therefore, once these ideas were gathered, the USM students sat with the children to weave the different plots and tie the narrative together. This task was artfully incorporated into the playwriting process, enriching the scripts with the children's creative insights. The final storyboards curated by the children were then put up on white boards in the studios as references for the children to follow or remember the sequence during rehearsals.

This approach allowed for a critical exploration of their creative potential, transforming them from passive participants into co-authors of their artistic endeavours which in turn saw them empowering the art. The children were not mere recipients of predefined roles; instead, they actively shaped the content through their ideas, suggestions, and performances, lending their own voices and words to the dialogue, dance, narration, and song. The aim here was for the children to take control of their stories together, which in turn gave them a sense of ownership over their journey in this project. This exercise was also an immensely valuable activity that facilitated effective team communication, fostering the use of "we" and "us" instead of "I,". Storyboarding sessions also enabled the children in both projects to construct and reconstruct characters, organize stories, and brainstorm ideas collaboratively. This activity proved immensely rewarding as it unleashed children's creativity and facilitated out-of-the-box thinking and effective communication.

Figure 2. Children from Shans Home getting into character with a USM student

Figure 3. Children from Shans Home waiting to perform the narrative from their storyboard.

Trust-building activities served as a fundamental aspect of peace building efforts for children. Establishing trust held dual significance in these projects. Firstly, it created a secure and positive environment that bolstered the children's confidence. Secondly, it provided a platform for children to freely express themselves, secure in the knowledge that their feelings, emotions, thoughts, fears, and choices would be acknowledged and respected. Activities such as the "name game" allowed children to express their identities and take their initial steps in self-expression. Creating their identity served as a foundation for individuality and self-worth, fostering authenticity and self-confidence. As children cultivated their identities, they gained the confidence to tackle challenges and make decisions autonomously. The "push and hold" game allowed children to address conflicts creatively, turning obstacles into opportunities. This exercise not only engaged them in conflict resolution but also prioritized safety and emotional engagement through imagination.

Theatre performances encourage problem solving through many activities which require its participants to think and respond spontaneously and creatively. One of the many aims of theatre with children is also to provide opportunities and platforms for children to ask questions, give suggestions and allow them to take charge of their to their environment, materials at their own level and readiness (Goffin, S. G., & Tull, C. Q, 1985). Many scholars and theatre activists agree that it is vital for children to learn the art of problem solving so that they can learn to be resourceful and use their intellectual tools to face problems and challenges in life (Athey, 1974., Wood and Grant., 1997, Maguire and Schuitema, 2012). This has been adapted into the present research and it yielded positive outcomes.

The Role of Adult Actors in Nurturing Creativity:
The presence of adult actors played a pivotal motivating role in both projects. These actors served as role models and mentors, enabling children to observe, mimic, and learn from them. Engaging discussions and explanations between the adult actors and children fostered strong interaction and positive adult-child relationships, with children viewing the actors as teachers, older siblings, or friends who provided guidance, motivation, and inspiration throughout the project's various phases.

Figure 4. The Rohingya children playing the role of the monkeys with the USM students on their show night.

CONCLUSION

Theatre, as a dynamic form of storytelling and dramatization, serves as a holistic, non-academic educational platform. It excels in enhancing children's imaginative and concentration skills, fostering a mindset that encourages self-belief and instils the understanding that there exist myriad possibilities to address any challenge. Our projects stand as a testament that theatre and the creative arts, including music and dance, do not impose limits on a child's creativity. Children thrive when they have the freedom to explore, create, and learn from their mistakes, with their efforts being deeply valued and appreciated. It is essential to recognize that children possess unique voices, boundless curiosity, and insightful perspectives. These qualities provide researchers and adults with valuable knowledge, shedding light on how to better understand and appreciate their worldviews. In turn, children are capable of empowering the arts with their voices and stories. As researchers overseeing these projects, our commitment to elevating positive interactions and communication with these children was rooted in a critical perspective. We comprehended that such enhancements would yield numerous advantages, including nurturing positive teacher-child relationships, creating pathways for academic and social learning enhancements, fostering self-confidence, nurturing the development of crucial interpersonal skills and enhances theatre's role in peacebuilding efforts.

Given the rather similar predicament of the children from both projects it was our hope that through engaging in theatre activities and sharing sessions, these marginalized children are provided with a platform where their unique personalities and voices can shine. In this free and non-judgemental space, their feelings and emotions are expressed intellectually, emotionally, and physically. Through these transformative experiences, theatre becomes a powerful vehicle for peacebuilding with high-risk children, offering them the opportunity to reclaim their identities in a world that has often forgotten, and in turn Empower the Arts with their stories and voices.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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