

Understanding trauma and trauma intervention in new ways through an examination of the Suitcase Project, a project for unaccompanied refugee children in Hillbrow, Johannesburg

Glynis Clacherty

Abstract

This thesis provides a detailed description of a support project that originated in 2001 in Johannesburg, South Africa. The project, which became known as the Suitcase Project, worked with unaccompanied refugee children from Rwanda, Burundi, DRC, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe and Angola. The thesis contains detailed narratives of the children's experiences in their countries of origin and in South Africa as refugees. The narratives were collected through a participatory, art-based process over a period of five years.

A reflection on alternative ways of understanding and responding to the trauma experienced by war-affected children emerges from the description of the project. The project's use of art-making as a key process tool allows for an examination of the role that art can play in helping children make meaning of specific traumatic events as well as the general loss and grief of migration. The artwork and narratives the children produced are used to explore children's understandings and representations of trauma giving a unique understanding of the way children use their own agency to overcome their situation.

The reflection on the project allows for the emergence of a meaning-making approach to helping children deal with trauma. The approach includes the explicit use of metaphor through art, allowing for fragmentary narratives to be built up into coherence over time, accepting silence in place of talk, creating internal and external spaces for children to express their agency and a focus on everyday rituals and objects. The project is an example of the creation of a community of grief that allows the children to support each other but through the public work of the project to also make a political statement as marginalised children. The approach explicated in the thesis can be incorporated into a wide range of intervention projects for children made vulnerable by war.

Key words: Unaccompanied refugee children, art-making, trauma, narrative, child agency, making meaning, everyday, metaphor, war-affected children