

# Using Music in the Classroom to Help Syrian Refugees Deal with Post-War Trauma

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**Abstract**—Millions of Syrian families have been displaced since the beginning of the Syrian war, and the negative effects of post-war trauma have shown detrimental effects on the mental health of refugee children. While educational strategies have focused on vocational training and academic achievement, little has been done to include music in the school curriculum to help these children improve their mental health. The literature of music education and psychology, on the other hand, shows the positive effects of music on traumatized children, especially when it comes to dealing with stress. This paper presents a brief literature review of trauma, music therapy, and music in the classroom, after having introduced the Syrian war and refugee situation. Furthermore, the paper highlights the benefits of using music with traumatized children from the literature and offers strategies for teachers (such as singing, playing an instrument, songwriting, and others) to include music in their classrooms to help Syrian refugee children deal with post-war trauma.

**Keywords**—Children, music, refugees, Syria, war.

## I. INTRODUCTION

**B**ARNEY, the friendly dinosaur, has a famous song that says, "if you're happy and you know it, clap your hands." What if you're *not* happy and you know it? What do you do? What *can* you do? The death of a loved one, loss of one's home, displacement, and disease are just a few examples of the many adverse outcomes of the Syrian war that have made the Syrian children unhappy... and they know it! So, this little song sung by children in schools is, by and by, rendering itself more ineffective and redundant... unless something is done about it!

This paper discusses the effectiveness of music in helping children of the Syrian refugees deal with the trauma they have experienced during and after the war. A review of the literature on music therapy, music in the classroom, war trauma and post-traumatic stress is screened and, as a result, methods and techniques – such as singing, playing an instrument, songwriting, and others – are presented as pertaining to the effective use of music in the classroom to help children deal with, and eventually get over, post-war trauma.

## II. WAR TRAUMA

Children experiencing war – directly (exposed to shelling and bombing) or indirectly (through the news and stories on the playground) – are subject to the tremendous effect that war

has on their psychosocial development as to the way they perceive society, other people, and life in general. The mental health problems of these children, such as depression, stress disorders, and aggression start to appear as a consequence of their experiences during war [1]. Hence, the term "war trauma", which refers to an experience that fits the way trauma is defined in the DSM IV under Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that results from exposure to war conditions [2]. These children suffer from the loss of parents, displacement, and immigration and are deprived of their most basic needs such as food and shelter [3]. Although they are physically away from the war zone, war trauma is far from over. The negative events children have experienced during the war lend themselves to post-trauma where children re-experience trauma by displaying a decreased responsiveness and involvement in the environment and an increased state of alertness [1]. Therefore, as war trauma farewells war-stricken children, post-trauma salutes them with worse, such as extreme clinging, bed-wetting, dumbness, problems in expression, extreme aggression, problems in sleep, somatic complaints, anxiety, withdrawal and isolation [2].

## III. POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS

Ironically, parents, caregivers and teachers push themselves so hard to resume normal life after war that neglecting the post-traumatic stress of children is inevitable. Since war is over, adults assume that children are back to normal, and therefore, any behavior out of the ordinary is considered somewhere between childish and abnormal. The whole issue, however, is that war-stricken children will have to show some symptoms such as disturbed sleep and nightmares, low concentration and memory at school and a disinterest in whatever was once an enjoyable activity [1], because war was not a breeze that blew and faded; rather, it was a thunderstorm – or a tornado – that destroyed the psychological world of these children. Even when children are around each other, the happiness that could normally be shared is lost because of the personal losses weighing on them. There appears to be a large amount of psychological disorders in children who are emotionally scarred by their memories and experiences of war [4]. If not dealt with properly, post-traumatic stress could lead to chronic post-traumatic stress disorder, where children display aggressive behavior, changes in attitudes and beliefs and changes in personality [1].

## IV. THE SYRIAN WAR

Since the beginning of the war in Syria in March 2011, an estimated 11 million Syrians have fled their homes, whereas a

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striking 13.5 million who are still in Syria are in need of humanitarian assistance. The majority of those who have escaped the war have sought refuge in neighboring countries or within more peaceful areas in Syria itself. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 4.8 million have fled to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq, and 6.6 million are internally displaced within Syria. About one million have sought asylum in Europe, with Germany and Sweden being the countries with the highest intake [5].

Lebanon, for instance, with a population of barely 6 million, has become a refuge for more than 1.2 million Syrians who have fled their country. Tuyoor al-Amal (Birds of Hope) is an elementary, junior, and high school for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Mustafa al-Haj [4], the director of this school, asserts that the effect on adults that are grieving, suffering and in constant need is very clear in the traumatized behavior of the Syrian refugee children. Other kinds of traumatic experiences are affecting refugee children and their parents and interrupting all aspects of their lives.

Some non-governmental organizations (NGO) are providing the Syrian refugees with accommodation (tents or apartments), food, and medication in collaboration with the United Nations. Other NGOs are developing educational programs for the children in special schools for the refugees or integrating them into the local schools. The educational strategies and policies focus mainly on preparing Syrian refugee children for exit exams, equipping them with vocational skills, teaching them the English language (or the local language of the host country), and integrating them with the local educational system [6].

Unfortunately, the educational programs have little or no focus on the creative arts, such as music, or organized mental health programs for the psychological well-being of the children. More than 6.5% of Syrian refugee children in Lebanon go to work (10% in Jordan), a percentage which the UN is trying to decrease by providing free schooling, as the classroom is a safe environment in which these children can grow and learn [6].

Most of the children have witnessed traumatizing events, such as the death of one or both parents, as well as separation from and worry about family members who have stayed in Syria. Fifty percent of them have experienced six or more traumatic events since the outbreak of the war, 74% have experienced death, and most of them have been clinically diagnosed with psychosomatic symptoms (65%), depression (60%), PTSD (45%), and aggression (22%) [6].

On the bright side, summer workshops are being planned to include activities such as music, photography, theatre, and sports, in Lebanon and Jordan, which can help Syrian refugee children [7].

#### V. BENEFITS OF THERAPEUTIC WORK

Therapy minimizes short- and long-term difficulties, promotes resilience and enhances children's coping skills by providing these children with safety, recognition and reconnection with themselves and others [8]. It is very crucial

to provide children with the artillery to help them protect themselves against what is to come. As children develop coping strategies, future experiences will be met with greater resilience because coping strategies will have served as prevention [3].

The Home of Expressive Arts in Learning (HEAL) program is a school-based mental health program that uses creative arts therapies to help refugee children deal with their social, behavioral and emotional issues. Activities include the use of arts psychotherapy and music therapy as part of the school program for refugee children [9]. A survey of young refugees found that 79% chose to seek therapeutic support at school rather than at a community clinic (11%) or at home (4%). The researchers report the benefits of art therapy and its importance in offering a non-verbally-oriented approach, allowing expression of feelings beyond the usual limits of verbal therapy. HEAL creative arts therapy has positively influenced the emotional symptoms and behavioral difficulties of young refugees, such as behavioral difficulties, emotional symptoms, hyperactivity and peer problems [9].

Ugurlu et al. [10] investigated the prevalence and the severity of psychological symptoms among 63 Syrian refugee children in Turkey and examined the benefits of the art therapy on psychological well-being. The symptoms of trauma, depression and anxiety were assessed, and the results showed that psychological symptoms, specifically depression and anxiety, among children were lower. The researchers noticed that the majority of children who participated in the study could not name or explain their emotions. Following the art therapy sessions, the parents of the children reported that they began to talk more and also became more self-aware and self-confident. As they exposed Syrian refugee children to music and art therapy, they found out that "children shared their traumatic experiences with expressive art therapy techniques like drawing, movement and making music, and those techniques helped them to reduce arousal and intrusion symptoms." Furthermore, they observed that children did not know how to express their emotions before art therapy. It was only because of the art therapy intervention that they started learning how to express their feelings and gain insight into their inner world [10].

Similar to art therapy, music therapy achieves anxiety-reduction and emotional-expression, as it offers a safe environment in which feelings are expressed and communicated easily. Traumatized refugees find it easier to sing about their misery rather than talk about it [11], and the tenderness found in music, such as lullabies, helps children achieve relaxation [12].

Art and music-based activities are ideal for children experiencing trauma or living with post-traumatic stress, because children enjoy them, are able to express their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, and improve their self-esteem and self-awareness [13]. Through therapy, traumatized children learned how to decrease their stress and gain a sense of control over their symptoms [10].

## VI. BENEFITS OF MUSIC

Music is a natural mode of expression for children [14]. Most children babble and hum long before they start to speak, and even after they do, a simple piece of music or a song serves as a gateway for children to express their excitement, joy and happiness on the one hand, and their sadness, grief, and sorrow on the other. So many other emotions are expressed in songs as well, such as wonder (“twinkle, twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are”), worry (“if all the sea were ink... what should we have to drink?”), fear (“doe, doe open the door, the hunter’s rifle is pointed at me”), joy (“have you got the sunshine? Smile!”), to name a few.

Besides the themes embedded in music and songs, and besides the capacity of music and music therapy to create a safe environment, music fulfills the aforementioned benefits of therapeutic work when it comes to reduction of anxiety. Not only does music reduce anxiety, it also helps channel or redirect emotions in a healthy and relaxing way [11].

Post-war children shut-down their emotions to dissociate; they become uncooperative or highly conforming, they become highly controlling or defensive, and they withdraw. “Music can be used to help develop such children’s continuity of self, capacity for sensory and symbolic play, and communication with others” [15].

Lefevre [8], a social worker, outlines how she has used music-based activities to explore therapeutic relationships with children and their communication methods. She argues that music-based activities allow for increased and improved communication that extends beyond verbal means. For instance, children’s traumatic or pre-verbal experiences may be expressed through singing, playing an instrument, or writing a song [11], [14].

## VII. BRINGING MUSIC TO THE CLASSROOM

With the adverse effects of war trauma in mind, the benefits of therapeutic work on one hand and the effectiveness of music in fulfilling these benefits on the other, it is only relevant to bring music into the classroom of Syrian refugee children.

First of all, music is a universal communication tool that can affect feelings, attitudes, and behaviors [13]. It is music that helps children express their emotions, hidden thoughts, and attitudes, especially at a young age. Secondly, music usually requires the child to perform (sing alone or in a group, play an instrument) or show creativity (writing new words to an existing song, creating harmony and rhythm). As the teacher listens to their performances or composition and supports them, children will feel that they are accepted, met, and understood [8]. During the post-war stage, children need to feel a sense of accomplishment. Therefore, any encouragement by the teacher to their musical creation or performance will boost self-confidence and reduce anxiety. Finally, learning music and words together, usually accompanied by hand and body movements, helps wire brain connections for children’s learning in a wonderful and pleasurable way [12]. Having in mind that the brain is growing

daily and acquiring new information during school-age, and adding the fact that most children enjoy music classes more than any other class and wait for it impatiently, it would be unconscionable not to make use of music to reach the goals of helping children deal with, and eventually get over, post-war traumatic stress.

Liechtel [17] interviewed teachers and observed how they deal with traumatized students. She found that teachers have information about how to deal with children with PTSD, but they are unsure of what to do with it. The teachers participating in her research correctly identified the ways trauma might manifest itself in their classrooms and did research about trauma and how to deal with traumatized children; however, they did not know how to implement strategies for reducing the stress of these children. Liechtel concluded that teachers need strategies. She remarked that teachers had a lot of information but were missing some practical pieces to make it meaningful. Hence the need for strategies to modify and differentiate the curriculum.

## VIII. STRATEGIES FOR TEACHERS

### A. Singing

Singing is something wonderful for children. For a start, it is a lot of fun! “B-I-N-G-O and Bingo was its name-o” is appreciated by children even after repeating it for the fifth time. But fun is not the only merit of singing. Physiologically, singing facilitates deep breathing, which slows the heart rate and calms the nervous system; mind and body are stilled and relaxation is the result. Therefore, without even paying attention to the words of the songs, we are already halfway towards achieving our goal: dealing with trauma and stress. Through singing, the internally frozen blocks of energy are released. These frozen blocks are the numbed off areas in the body that hold traumatic experiences [11]. It is not odd to see a child crying at one moment and at the next moment the same child has burst into singing a beautiful song. As children sing their favorite songs, lots of the coagulated stress is broken up in the music, the words, the action, the laughter, and all else that is to it. Songs can also help children think about the traumatic experiences, reconcile with their feelings, and develop problem solving skills. “The North wind doth blow and we shall have snow, and what will the robin do then? Poor thing” sets forth the tragic, almost traumatic situation that the robin is in. However, “he’ll sit in a barn, and keep himself warm, and hide his head under his wings” is the problem-solving strategy that the robin has decided to follow. The music teacher can use the robin as a starting point and go on into discussing problem-solving strategies. Songs can also be reassuring. “So, smile when you’re in trouble, it will vanish like a bubble, if you’d only take the trouble just to S-M-I-L-E” is fun, rhythmic, lends itself to express the emotions of happiness, joy and smiling, and reassures the children that if they decide to look at things in a positive way, their problems will vanish like a bubble.

Since some war-stricken children might have lost hope and peace, using songs like “Climb Every Mountain”, “The

Impossible Dream”, and “Finlandia” (theme by Sibelius” also known as “Song of Peace”) can be used to remind them that peace is found within them and they can accomplish whatever they dream of [18].

#### *B. Playing an Instrument*

Many music classes require students to play an instrument. Instruments such as pianos, keyboards and recorders (all used in classrooms) assist in creating a certain mood, since they are melodic in nature, and can thus produce different tunes (sad versus happy) in different intensities (very soft versus very loud). For instance, the keyboard, having a very large range can provide the child with an arena of sounds ranging from very thick and low, all the way to very thin and high. Sound effects that could be created on a keyboard allow the child to engage in storytelling and reenacting certain episodes from the past. A full-range orchestra, the seashore, and many other authentic sounds could be created on the keyboard, allowing the child to tell a story that describes the sound of bombs, while using the sound effects on the keyboard to supplement the story. This way, the child lets out the story, breaks loose the emotional energy blockades, and allows the music teacher to use this as a platform to discuss more about the story that still seems to be engrained in the mind of the child, causing distress [8], [18].

Percussion instruments such as drums, tambourines, cymbals, maracas, and bells are also very useful. Easy to play, but not easily broken, these instruments create sound even with little or no musical skill allowing the child to improvise without having to worry about the melody and the harmony [8]. This serves as an emotional outlet since almost anything done with a percussion instrument produces sound, and the child feels a sense of achievement, something that most children lose after being exposed to war. As achievement is attained (easily in this case), performance anxiety is gone. Step by step, playing percussion instruments can be used to alleviate anxiety in general. Children experience recreational drumming as a way of improved self-expression, enhanced wellbeing, and an increased sense of connectedness and empowerment [13]. On the other hand, playing a musical instrument demands concentration and therefore temporarily blocks the children from over-thinking about their traumatic experiences. Also, playing music is usually done in a group format, and hence socially isolated children get a chance to make music along with others as a group, to communicate with them, and to experience contact with other group members [11].

#### *C. Song-Writing*

Expressing feelings and telling war-related stories to let out repressed emotions and the blocked-up anxiety are even more relevant when it comes to song-writing. Song-writing provides a chance for children to meet with their own self. It is a call for self-awareness, and it helps in future planning. Song-writing is such a versatile activity that it can be used in almost any setting: individual counseling, group activity, and classroom guidance. Kelly and Doherty [13] tested the effect

of song-writing as a means to reduce post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms for children. They reported that song-writing increased a sense of personal safety and showed to be effective in helping victims fight against self-blame and attain a sense of security.

#### *D. Writing New Words*

An easy introduction to song-writing is by asking children to write new words to the tunes of the songs that they already know. Words could be chosen to provide comfort and reassurance (e.g. about being safe or valued), and an appropriate and calming musical mood could be selected to enhance this goal. Fill-in-the-blanks activities serve as a jump start, since it is the teacher provides the basic sentence and students can fill in the words they choose. This helps in structuring traumatic experiences, especially when children write about what happened to them. It is also a chance to write positive plans for the future which fills them with hope and gives them a vision. Some children might decide to write funny words just because they need a laugh to let out the stress. Others might decide to include self-encouraging words, such as “I can do it!” The idea behind it is that the children are creating something on their own which contradicts the idea of destruction they have experienced during war. This way, children feel they have achieved something. Since these songs are sung in the classroom setting where a safe environment is created, children will develop a sense of security with the song; hence, at times of distress and stress outside school, singing their own song will make them feel safe and secure [8], [11], [14].

#### *E. Composing New Music*

Some children will have the ability not only to invent new words but original melodies and rhythms of their own, creating a completely new and personal external expression of their inner world [8]. An important thing that most refugee children forget to do is to reflect back on the times when they actually had good days and pleasant memories. They tend to see their past as clouded and black. Music evokes pleasant memories, especially when children can remember songs they used to sing while playing games with their friends before the war. Some made-up songs during the pre-war times would serve well to bring back the “good old days” and draw a smile upon the child’s face. Composing music also allows children to express their feelings and lay them out in the open. A minor (rather sad) key would reflect a certain feeling versus a major (rather happy) key [11].

#### *F. Familiar Songs and Music*

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, an important part of de-stressing oneself is by retrieving pleasant memories, something that traumatized children often fail to do. Both familiar songs and familiar music are targeted towards that goal [11]. Children remember how they used to sing “there were 10 in the bed and the little one said ‘roll over’” with their siblings and would roll over one by one. They might want to reenact that scene in the classroom. It will serve as a laugh for a couple of minutes and leave an impact for much longer.

These songs become familiar to the children to the extent that they are associated with security and are returned to when difficulties are faced or trauma is relived. This music can enhance independence and self-confidence and allow children to achieve so much more, being filled with a sense of accomplishment. Whether classical or popular, a certain piece of music, when familiar to the children, becomes the shelter to which they resort when things get cloudy and gray. Listening to, humming to, or singing the piece of familiar music or song creates a new world where children are the owners of their feelings, and where security rules [8].

#### *G. Lullabies*

School children may have outgrown lullabies, but due to its intense benefits it would be advisable to include a lullaby or two in the curriculum or play a lullaby as the children rest, pack their bags, or relax after a physically exhausting activity. Lullabies are generally composed within the range of an octave, in major keys, with easy, sing-able melodies. As a matter of fact, Honig [12] suggests that teachers use lullabies every day with children. Lullabies provide comfort and soothe the troubled and exhausted mind and body; they help young children relax. The bodies sink into a safe and well-cared-for environment that alleviates the tensions experienced by children during and after the war. Children are frustrated when rushed, but so many refugee children are rushed to go to school, do homework, and sometimes even cook, clean, and care for their younger siblings, especially if one (or both) parents were killed during the war. This exhausting routine adds to the post-war trauma and stresses that children live and experience. Lullabies, by their relaxing and soothing music, provide time-out from this stress [8], [12].

The themes found in lullabies help alleviate stress and fear. As school children sing them over and over again, they own the words of these lullabies. Lullabies talk about a promising future (“the sun is going to shine tomorrow”) – something war-stricken children desperately need – how special children are (“Priceless child, more precious than ermine”), how God cares for them (“guardian angels God will send thee all through the night”) – especially that most post-war children cannot sleep at night – how precious mommy and daddy are (“your daddy’s rich and your momma’s good looking”), how they love the child, and how everything is going to be alright (“if that mockingbird won’t sing, Papa’s going to buy you a diamond ring, and if that diamond ring turns brass, Papa’s going to buy you a looking glass”) [12].

#### *H. Themes and Discussions for the Future*

It is interesting to see that music used in the regular classroom does not solely target post-war stress and how to deal with it. During singing, listening to classical music, or discussing the lives of great composers, many themes and discussion topics also come to stage, such as academic success, family values, accepting differences, making good choices, helping others, establishing quality relationships, and making career choices [16]. Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> symphony, for example, sets forth the idea of a “new universe”. Using a full-

fledged orchestra and chorus, this symphony proclaims that we are one: no blacks, no whites, no man, no woman, no master, no slave. These topics that emerge from music and songs provide refugee children with guidelines for the future. Through music, students can strive to create a better world, or make a difference in the world that they live. For instance, a peace-making campaign may start with the music classes. “We can make a difference, we can make a change, we can make the world a better place” is an energetic and rhythmic song that is a first step into building a better future. Peace and tolerance need a sense of belonging, respecting each other, and working together. What would serve this purpose better than music? After all, music is seldom performed or enjoyed in isolation, and two people cannot make music unless they are at peace with each other. Furthermore, music is a group activity that encourages cooperation and collaboration [11]. As we create this model in the miniature of society (i.e. school) the wish would be that peace and tolerance prevailed instead of war and hatred.

d’Ardenne and Kiyendeye [19] explored the benefits of music therapy on 14 genocide orphans in Rwanda. The aims of the study were to see whether or not these young people saw music as changing them, and if so, were there any emerging themes of perceived change. Thematic analysis of the interviews showed that music serves not only as a source of enjoyment or escape, but also as an agent of safe grounding in the present, visiting traumatic memory with less emotional pain, and improving mood. Participants mentioned that music helps them be less confused about the past and see events in historical contexts. For them music is not just another language, it is the tool which helps understand the incomprehensible and the unspeakable. The results also showed the importance of music in grounding the person in the present. “The value of this is to prevent the survivor from re-experiencing the past as though it were still in the present – a process known as ‘dissociation’”. These participants referred to making music as a “safe place”. After all, most of children of refugees have found that schools are a shelter to escape from their residences, which are dreary houses or basements that become like a grave for them [4].

#### IX. CONCLUSION

As inevitable as war is, and as inescapable as its adverse effects are on children, as negative as war trauma is, and as fearful as post-traumatic stress seems to be, there is more to the situation than this gloomy, hopeless side. Throughout history, dealing with post-traumatic stress to the extent of possibly alleviating it from war-stricken children has been a bright light at the end of a dark tunnel. Music therapy in a clinical setting has been one of the many methods to reach this light. What this paper tackled was the notion of transferring the ideas and basics of music therapy, and along with them their benefits, from the exclusive clinical setting to the regular classroom. Many methods and techniques were discussed such as singing, playing an instrument, vocal training, song-writing and others and their effectiveness in reducing anxiety on one hand and expressing emotions on the other were highlighted

and presented. A future-oriented peace creating model through music classes was also proposed.

Many armed fights, kidnappings and turbulences have taken place in Syria and the region throughout the time of writing this paper. On the other hand, so many children, from those who have lost their home in the war all the way, to those who have to overhear their parents watching the news of the horrible events going on in Syria, got a chance to sing together, play music together, express their emotions and take a break from the negative hassle of the everyday "trauma" and enjoy the 50-minute class by letting out some of the anxiety blocks in them. Even the language barrier ceases to pose problems when children make music, and hence, volunteer summer workshops and activities which focus on music, arts, and sports, should be sought after more and more [6].

"If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands!" Well... we may not be happy, and we know it, but still... we can clap our hands!

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