

Creative forms of expression in times of crisis: A critical analysis of selected children's drawings in Maiduguri Metropolis, Borno State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: Creativity is a part of every individual regardless of age. It begins at a very early age in children where they use both conscious and unconscious effort in dealing with feelings and ideas; this comes into realization when producing desired forms of expression. To a child, creation is personalized; it is personal in the sense that one's experience is qualitative, meaning that a vital confrontation has occurred between the child and his/her perception and the understanding of what the child's senses are communicating. The problem in today's world children face many crises, it could be crises from broken homes, abuse or neglect or crises in general like floods, fire which are natural, or man-made crises like terrorism, which seems to be very common today. It is not surprising to find a large number of children who have experienced at least one of such crisis at one point or another. Often children respond to crises by acting out, becoming angry and frustrated as they feel out of control because of the circumstances they find themselves. The objective of this paper is to highlight the need to nurture children's creativity and to be aware of the best ways to help them learn and develop their creative abilities during times of crisis. Children express their feelings by drawing a picture, writing a poem or story or even singing about how they feel. Participants for this study were children in Maiduguri Metropolis Borno State who have and continue to experience varied forms of crises. These are children who have witnessed war, destruction of their homes and death, abductions and abuse of loved ones. The paper provided an understanding that exposing the child to a creative atmosphere and letting the 'child' out of the 'child' within a 'safe space' may enhance the child's all-round development. The philosophy of this research highlighted the need to harness children's drawings and create awareness of the best ways to help them learn and develop their creative abilities in times of crisis.

Keywords: Children, creativity, crisis, drawing, expression.

INTRODUCTION

In today's world children face many crises, it could be crisis from broken homes, abuse or neglect crisis in general like floods, fire which are natural, or man-made crisis like terrorism, which seems to be very common today. It is not surprising to find a large number of children who have experienced at least one of these crises at one point or another.

For many years the Northeastern part of Nigeria has suffered a lot under the influence of the terrorists. So many villages have been destroyed entirely and people scattered all over large swaths of land. Many have died,

many have been lost, many have been injured and many have lost their innocence. Gradually the people tried to return to their homes hoping they would see it as it was but instead met a lot of work to be done to rebuild their homes and their communities.

In situations like this, women and children are more at risk and probably the victims as well, and in such cases we see the children reacting in strange ways that a lot of people will not understand, they become withdrawn, unable to talk about what they saw or what they experienced. They become reserved, quiet, traumatized

and unable to express themselves. Ring (2001) explains that children's narratives from an attempt to order and explain the world from all aspects of their experience is often part of the silent language that embodies thinking. He further states that children's narratives are not confined to spoken or written words, but they include stories and experiences. Naturally, children have different ways of expressing themselves; research has shown that art, music, play and so many other activities have a very significant role in children's development. They learn more effectively through the involvement of these activities, these activities expose children in creative ways that help them have contact with their environment. They tap into their inner creativity which helps them discover different ways of doing things. Since art helps children learn to develop their skills, visual memory, and their emotions, they become more prepared to learn and connect with others.

In Maiduguri Metropolis, children who have experienced crises and witnessed war and the destruction of their homes and loved ones are allowed to express themselves through drawings. The paper gave an in-depth understanding with evidence that exposing the child to a creative atmosphere and letting 'children be children' with controlled restrictions would enhance the child's all-round development. Therefore, the philosophy of this study highlights the need to harness children's drawings and to be aware of the best ways to help them learn and develop their creative abilities in times of crisis.

The crisis in Maiduguri Metropolis started in 2009 when hundreds and thousands of people were killed, displaced or abducted from their homes. Though the situation has been controlled, the crisis has continued to devastate the lives of the people. Those affected have experienced violence, loss of family members, friends, their homes, education, health privileges, and their communities; everything has been torn apart with little or no access to a normal life. Many can or have not been able to return to the place they once called their homes. Though everyone is affected, the children seem to have suffered it more, children at a very tender age who have no idea of what crisis is and have never experienced it may not understand what has happened or what is happening, one can wonder what goes on in their mind.

According to the National Child Welfare Policy of 1989, a child is someone who is 12 years and below, though a child can also be considered to be from the age of 18 years and below. It is expected that all children are to be protected by all means, but because of the crisis that happened in Maiduguri Metropolis the rate of kidnappings and abduction of children seems to be a growing industry. The rate of kidnapping by the insurgents is one of the largest organized crimes. It is also a very lucrative business not only in Borno State but also in Nigeria as a whole.

The crisis has a very negative effect on individuals especially. It affects children more because of their

innocence, and could lead to depression, anxiety, and fear. This situation could last a very long time if not a lifetime.

CHILDREN'S ART

Children are very sensitive and tend to act on what they know. Many of them have been exposed to violence, and because of that, they engage in activities which include shootings and killings because of what they have experienced. When children are given drawing materials, they express themselves in their drawings. They tend to draw guns, large cars, fire, blood and other forms of violent activities.

Art is one of the areas in the school curriculum that provides children with the opportunity to create something meaningful and satisfying for them. Self-expression in art activities is very vital to the development of the individual. Dyson (1989) observed that self-expression in art enables children to express their ideas and feelings in their own way. Art activities, which have been well developed as a result of research and innovation by many Art Educators, provide a source of content for enhancing visual perception and a part of the foundation. For children to become sensitively aware of art, to become more creative, and to achieve more self-awareness, it is assumed that there is much to learn in art and about art. Art can provide the opportunity and help children develop a high degree of awareness of this visual legacy. Children should be given purposeful activities through which they learn to see and understand the structural design, and qualities in nature, and to interpret the visual symbols used by artists.

Art expression

Previous researchers like Rueschhoff and Swartz (1969) explain that children's art expressions are the result of inherent differences in children, and the result of the kind of experience they have. These experiences determine what they perceive; they also said that the self-expression of children with art media and symbols developed from this expression is visual evidence of their feelings, emotions, reactions, experiences, and attitudes.

A more recent research by Yusuf (1992), defined visual art expression as the communication of thoughts or opinions, an indication of some feelings, conditions or quality. Expression is a kind of conventional sign used to indicate something symbolic and is both mental and emotional. Also, Umar (2003) referred to art expression as the making/producing of artworks in visual form while visual arts are works produced by the children that could be seen with the eyes like drawing and painting.

It is worth noting that children are inherently different and that such difference affects the way they perceive things. This, in turn, affects the way they express things and it

ultimately affects their art expression. The Child's ability to manipulate art has also been portrayed to constitute a significant factor towards the effectiveness of his/her art expression. Therefore, the degree of the child's skills in control and manipulation could directly affect his art expression. Art expression in children includes drawing and music.

Drawing

Art is a means of communication and children communicate through art, so art is a universal language to a child. Drawing is one of the many languages which children use to talk about their world. Drawing is a reflection of children's inner schematic representation. It is through art that a child can boldly and freely express his/her feelings from his/her immediate environment especially how people relate with each other. Ring (2001) affirms that when children begin to express themselves in art at an early age, they do not differentiate between visual arts and performing arts or literacy arts, poetry and prose, to them all activities are the same. Children draw pictures and tell a story at the same time, they produce something instantly focusing on their emotions and what they feel at that moment. It is not surprising that even in times of crisis, children express themselves based on what they see and experience.

Music

Music is a language of emotion that represents different feelings in individuals, music makes humans(s) nostalgic, songs stimulate in different ways, and it makes one associate with memories or other images. Music is an arrangement of sounds having melody and rhythm; it is the art of producing pleasing or expressive combinations of tones, especially with melody, rhythm and harmony. Music is basically an arrangement of sounds having melody and rhythm; it is the art of producing pleasing or expressive combinations of tones, especially with melody, rhythm and harmony. Music is a language of emotion which represents different feelings in individuals, music makes humans nostalgic, songs stimulate in different ways, and it makes one associate with memories or other images.

We all yearn for music at one point or another, music transforms us into a state of elation where nothing exists to us, only the sounds of rhythms. Music is a form of art that affects our everyday lives, at any time in our lives; there is a time to go along with our feelings. Music seems to have capacities and many have turned it to cope with the chaos in terms of crisis.

In times of crisis, art can be evidence of a positive role. Listening to music has a way of heightening positive emotions in the brain, and it is believed to heighten a sense of human connection. In art, it has a way of teaching children to be independent and think for themselves.

Music unites people in times of celebration and crisis, and naturally, it also helps people cope with stressful situations. When children respond to music, they develop better motor skills while singing. Music also supports their development process to learn the sound of tones and words. The study of early childhood has been researched many years ago as far back as the 1950s. Children do not express music the same way as adults; this is because the early years of children is the most important period of the child's development. Even toddlers receive the tones of music at an early age. Researchers believe that the early years are critical. At this early stage, they learn the tones of music and build up a mental organization system to memorize music and because of that the children develop their musical skills through imitating and memorizing rhythms and tones of songs by clapping of hands.

CHALLENGES CHILDREN FACE DURING AND AFTER CRISIS

Children in war crises face numerous challenges that can have long-lasting impacts on their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. In recent times, displacement of people from their natural environment has become rampant due to natural or man-made disasters. Mohammed *et al.* (2022) claim that it is no longer a short time or temporal but a permanent time because some of the victims hardly return to their permanent settlements. As earlier mentioned in the paper, the Northeast of Nigeria experienced displacement as a result of insurgence resulting in massive loss of lives and properties, loved ones and relatives gone missing without any trace of their whereabouts, while others are in captivity. This has brought about displacement and altered their way of life as it distance them from their environment which gives them a sense of place. Children are the worst affected since they are very young and vulnerable.

In Mohammed *et al.* (2022) study, they encountered victims of war who have gone through crises of the insurgence in the Northeast of Nigeria and also recorded similar circumstances which children faced after the crises, in their study, they focused on women and children. In this study, some of the challenges are:

Safety and security: Children living in war zones often face constant threats to their safety, including violence, bombings and displacement. A lot of the children witness or experience direct harm which can lead to physical injuries or loss of lives.

Loss and separation: Children in war crises experience the loss of family members and loved ones. They may be separated from their parents or caregivers which results in feelings of abandonment and fear.

Displacement and migration: Conflict often forces families to flee their homes leading to displacement and

migration. Displaced children face challenges such as lack of access to basic necessities like food, clean water, healthcare and education.

Education disruption: War disrupts the education system, making it very difficult for children to attend school regularly or access quality education. Lack of education can have long-term consequences on their future opportunities and development.

Emotional and psychological trauma: experiencing violence, loss and displacement can lead to severe emotional and psychological trauma in children.

Child exploration and recruitment: Children are often targets for various forms of exploitation, including child labour, trafficking and recruitment by armed groups. The children are vulnerable to being forced into dangerous situations or becoming child soldiers.

Lack of healthcare: Access to healthcare becomes limited or even non-existent during a war crisis. Children may not receive proper medical attention leading to a higher risk of illness, malnutrition and preventable diseases.

It is important to provide support and assistance to children in war crises, ensuring their safety, education, healthcare, and emotional well-being.

HOW CHILDREN RESPOND TO CRISIS

Children respond to crises in different ways as their reactions are influenced by their age, personality, as well as their previous experiences. Several signs are seen in the ways children respond to crises, typical ways that are seen are:

Emotional responses: it is very common that not only do children show emotions during crises; adults also do like fear, sadness, anger confusion as well as anxiety. Children exhibit certain changes in their behaviour such as withdrawal, and regressive behaviour which are not normal at certain ages.

Physical response: children show some symptoms like lack of sleep and stomachaches; these are manifestations of emotional distress.

Behavioural response: this is a very common behavioural change in children where they become very clingy, have trouble concentrating or experience changes in appetite.

There are several responses which are seen in different children, children are a product of the environment and the

environment determines their learning abilities. Mshelbila (2006) went further to say that children contribute to their development and learning as they strive to make meaning out of their experiences in their environment through their interaction and how they respond to it. Emotionally, physically and behavioral. Mshelbila's study agreed with that of Yusuf (1992) that environment is an immediate factor influencing children's art expression by exploring their environment and subsequently expressing their experience artistically to communicate their intention. Their emotions and physical and behavioural responses tell so much of what they are going through. Children draw to project their feelings in their drawings.

DISCUSSION

Children expressed different creative forms in times of crises they encountered during the insurgency. A lot of them went through difficult times but were able to tell their stories in the form of drawings. A few of the children were given art materials to communicate their experiences through art and these are a few of what they expressed.

The drawing in Figure 1 shows a picture of a plane flying; the child may not necessarily think of it as a sign of danger but a normal plane flying over. The colours depict a bright disposition and hope towards a better future; seen in the representation of the clouds and sun. Progress is suggested or longed for and is depicted by the two objects representing movement, birds, and planes.

This painting, titled Maara, the Kanuri word for "aeroplane," symbolizes the resilience and hope of the young artist. Through the depiction of an aeroplane and clouds, the work expresses his dreams and aspirations for a brighter future beyond his current circumstances. The aeroplane represents his vision of travelling freely and overcoming present challenges, while the clouds evoke a realm of peace and safety. Together, they reflect the artist's inner strength and unwavering hope amidst the hardships brought by the insurgency.

Children have a very wide imagination and fantasy, this child must have seen planes flying on a daily basis and hoped that one day he would be in it. So much innocence that he did not represent the plane with bombs or bullets. This shows hope of peace.

This drawing (Figure 2) shows a normal situation that a child is used to, a normal village situation where there are houses, trees, and figures moving around. This shows that the child at one point lived a secure life where there was love and calmness around.

The need for community and family is very strong here, the absence of family and the need for strong ties with dependents and accessibility to them can be assumed from the road network. This dream of having fun and family in safety could have been denied by looking at the shattered hearts.

Still focusing on innocence, every child who grew up in



Figure 1. Title: Maara
Medium: pencil and crayons on paper.
Year: 2023.
Size: half imperial cardboard.



Figure 3. Bara (Grain Storage).
Medium: pencil and crayons on paper.
Year: 2023.
Size: half imperial cardboard.

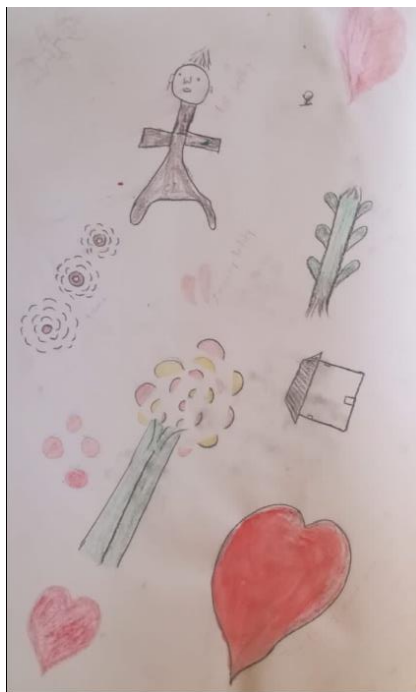


Figure 2. Title: Safety.
Medium: pencil and crayons on paper.
Year: 2023.
Size: half imperial cardboard.

a normal family setting believes there is peace and that peace will be there forever.

In this piece, the artist presents a vivid portrayal of life in northeast Nigeria, focusing on traditional agricultural practices and the environmental conditions of the region (Figure 3).

The central motif is a traditional grain storage structure, signifying the importance of agriculture and food security within the community. A man is depicted approaching the

storage, which may symbolize the daily labour and routine involved in maintaining and accessing food resources. To the left, the artist includes three growing plants or food crops, representing fertility, growth, and the sustenance provided by the land. These elements underscore the community's reliance on agriculture and the cycles of planting and harvest that are central to their way of life. The orange hue at the top part of the work captures the intense heat and harsh weather conditions typical of the region. This choice of colour not only reflects the environmental challenges faced by the community but also enhances the overall atmosphere of the piece, adding a sense of immediacy. Through this composition, the artist effectively conveys a narrative of resilience and continuity. The traditional grain storage and growing crops symbolize the enduring practices and cultural heritage of the community, while the depiction of the harsh weather conditions highlights the external challenges they face.

Most children who grew up in rural areas know that at all times there is available food in store for them, signifying that there is always going to be food to eat, but despite the crises, the child still represents the food storage because the child believes the food is still available. With such a pure heart, the child also represents probably his Dad going to get them what to eat as he has always seen growing up.

In *Lardanyi (My Homeland)*, the artist offers a poignant depiction of a community ravaged by insurgency (Figure 4). The composition masterfully contrasts scenes of domestic life with symbols of conflict and trauma. In the top left, the traditional hut and family scenes evoke a sense of normalcy and cultural continuity. The mother cooking outside and children engaged in play highlight the routine activities that define everyday life. However, the presence of a fallen child suggests the disruption caused by the insurgency, subtly referenced by the large bullets drawn on the right-hand side of the piece. Central to the work are three red hearts, each broken in two and increasing in size as they ascend. This motif symbolizes the escalating



Figure 4. Lardenyi (My Homeland).
Medium: pencil and crayons on paper.
Year: 2023.
Size: Half imperial cardboard.



Figure 5. Super Star.
Medium: pencil.
Year: 2023.
Size: half imperial cardboard.
Source: Harrison, 2023.

trauma and deepening emotional scars inflicted on the community. The progression of the broken hearts signifies the worsening situation and the compounded impact of the conflict over time. The lower portion of the artwork intensifies this narrative. Smaller huts depicted on the right suggest the fragmentation and displacement of the community, while the lower left corner illustrates the reality of the conflict with slain figures and a military tank. This juxtaposition of domestic tranquillity and violent disruption encapsulates the profound loss and resilience of the artist's homeland. Lardenyi stands as a visual testimony to the enduring hardships faced by the community, offering both a tribute to their resilience and a critique of the forces that have upended their lives.

Another typical example of a normal peaceful home setting, which was interrupted by heavy bullets and bombardment something probably seen for the first time in their lives. Sadness and fear came unexpectedly. Everything changed in a very short time, hearts broken and all their lives changed and things were never the same again.

Figure 5 shows a typical drawing by a boy who has seen war either on television or experienced war at one point. The child may also see this military man as an enemy or a friend who came to his rescue or harmed him. One thing for sure is that he knows that a soldier always carries a rifle and is there to protect him and his loved ones.

Way forward and how to foster children's art

Fostering children's art is a wonderful way to encourage their creativity and self-expression. It is very essential to provide, support, and create a nurturing environment for children during and after crises. The following methods could be applied by the parents and/or caregivers:

1. **Communication:** Encourage children to express their feelings and thoughts, be available to listen, and provide age-appropriate explanations by ensuring they understand what is happening in ways they can comprehend.
2. **Provide reassurance:** Showing love to children, showing them that they are safe, they are protected. Reassure them that their feelings are valid.
3. **Encourage self-expression:** Engage the children in various activities that allow them to express their emotions creatively, such as drawings, paintings and writing. Such activities can help process their experiences and provide a sense of control.
4. **Seek professional help:** If children are experiencing severe distress or their reactions persist for long, a professional children's therapist may be required.
5. **Create a supportive environment:** This can be done by setting up a designated art space in a conducive environment where children can freely explore their artistic ideas, by making sure it is well stocked as possible with various art supplies like crayons,

markers, paints, papers, clay, and if possible improvised materials that can be used when certain materials are not available.

6. **Encourage imagination:** Ask open-ended questions like “What do you think would happen if animals could talk?” this will encourage children to use their imagination and create art based on their ideas, and help them stimulate their creativity and critical thinking skills. Probably it will help them forget their past experiences.
7. **Support their interest:** Pay attention to what interests and inspires them. If it has to do with animals, encourage them to create art centered on animals, so they can connect with their passion.
8. **Engage in art activities together:** spend quality time together engaging in art activities. You can work side by side, by sharing ideas, and materials so it can strengthen your relationship and make them feel safe and see that art is an enjoyable activity.

The way forward for children during and after crises depends on the support and care they receive from the significant adults in their lives. Remember that the key to providing a nurturing and supportive environment where children can feel safe to explore their creativity is to let their imagination soar and try to forget what they went through during crises.

CONCLUSION

Children often use drawings as a means to express their thoughts and emotions, especially after going through crisis such as war or trauma. Drawing can be a powerful tool for communication when words may be insufficient or too difficult to express. Children are different in their various ways and they all show their differences in different ways, they can express themselves through their use of colour, music, symbols, and different activities, this could be seen in their drawings above. Some express themselves through storytelling depicting events they have witnessed either directly or through symbolic representation. This helps them establish a sense of self amid crisis and allows them to externalize their thoughts and emotions, gain a sense of control and process their experience in a non-verbal way. It is very important for parents, guardians, even educators and mental health professionals to pay close attention to their drawings and also to listen to what they are trying to say in their drawings. This will help them provide support and validation for their feelings and experiences.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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