

The Suitcase Project

A psychosocial support project for refugee children

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“This suitcase is a good memory. I want to keep it for my children so they will know what I have done and where I have been with this suitcase, my life.”

Acknowledgements

The Suitcase Project was initiated by Glynis Clacherty in 2001. During 2002 Annurita Bains co-facilitated the group with Glynis.

During 2002 Diane Welvering joined the project as an art teacher and together with Glynis formalised the approach that is described here.

In 2003 Jessie Kgomongoe joined the group as an assistant facilitator. Thandi Mashinini and Gloria Ndwandwe, counsellors from Ekupholeni Mental Health and Trauma Centre have given time as counsellors on the two retreats.

In 2003 Joan Allison from the UNHCR became interested in the project and has continued to give support and encouragement.

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Introduction

The UNHCR Guidelines on Protection and Care of Refugee Children (1994) include a section on the need to provide for the psychosocial well-being of refugee children. The section begins by quoting Article 39 of the Convention of the Rights of The Child,

Every child who is a victim of 'any form' of abuse or neglect has the right to 'physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration'.

In a section on helping children directly the guidelines encourage the creation of support groups where children have an opportunity to talk about problems and ways of addressing them. The suggested activities contained in the guidelines include "games, dance, music, drawing, painting, storytelling and singing with small groups of children." The guidelines also mention that some children may need specialised services and provision needs to be made for referral of these children to qualified mental health professionals.

The guidelines are clear about the importance of psychosocial services for refugee children yet there are few examples of ongoing psychosocial support programmes for refugee children,¹ particularly in the context of children living in city environments in South Africa . In South Africa organisations working with refugee children have a policy of referring children to local mental health services for counselling if they feel they need it. Firstly, few counselling centres exist partly because of the dearth of qualified professionals and when they are accessible to refugee communities they are not always equipped to deal with the particular needs of refugee families.

There is a pressing need, therefore, for models of psychosocial support that involve minimal resources and which can be facilitated by lay counsellors but that provide the 'deep healing' that many refugee children need.

This report documents a psychosocial support project that evolved among refugee children in Hillbrow in Johannesburg, South Africa.

¹ Hinton, R. (2000) and Felsman, K 1993. "*Seen but Not Heard: Refugee Children and Models for Intervention.*" In Panter-Brick, C. and M. Smith, eds. *Abandoned Children*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 199-212. and Felsman, K. (1993). Review paper on *The Psychological Well being of Refugee Children: Research, Practice and Policy Issues*. M. McCallin (ed), International Catholic Child Bureau. Geneva 1992



Hillbrow is a densely populated area full of high-rise apartments, many of which are run down and have no services. It is an area characterised by crime and poverty. Many migrants, including refugees, live here as it is easy to rent cheap rooms in the apartments, often with as many as 15 people living in a three-roomed apartment.

The children who were part of this project were living in two large neighbouring apartments used as an informal 'shelter' for unaccompanied minors by the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS). The children from the two apartments met the author of this report when they participated in a research project on xenophobia for *Soul Buddyz* (a children's television series). The research highlighted the many difficulties the children lived with on a daily basis and their need for psychosocial support. The researcher (and author of this report) decided to stay in contact with the group through informal meetings once every two months.

Initially the meetings were purely recreational but through this informal contact it soon became clear that many of the children had been psychologically affected by their past experiences of war and displacement. A few were withdrawn and interacted little with others. Others demanded attention by dominating discussions, often behaving inappropriately. Many of them could not work together in a group; they were unable to share art materials or food in the group.

It also became clear that most of the children's lives at that time were stressful. Many did not have proper papers and spent their lives dodging the ever-present police who sought out illegal immigrants in the streets of Hillbrow. Three of the boys had been arrested for not having papers. At least half of the children at this stage did not speak English well and struggled to communicate with the others. In addition, food at home was limited and often not enough for teenagers who were growing. Most of them also experienced some kind of xenophobia either at school or on the streets in their everyday lives.

The children were also ambivalent about their identity as refugees. When the children introduced themselves to strangers, none of them said they were refugees; none claimed their home countries. They all said "I am from Hillbrow" or "I am South African". In their attempt to integrate into South African society the children had begun to deny their own identities; only those who were trusted and known could

know they were refugees and where they came from, otherwise they were 'from Hillbrow'.

It soon became clear that outings and games were not enough; the children needed some form of psychosocial support.

But the children were very sceptical about anything that looked like 'healing'. When the group discussed what kinds of activities they could do together they were quick to say that they did not want to tell stories about past difficult experiences. They resisted any sort of 'feeling expression' game and told stories of negative counselling experiences in the past. One girl summed up her experience of previous counselling,

It didn't help me. She (the psychologist) just wanted me to cry about it. I got bored so I did and then she (the psychologist) felt better.

An approach that helped children deal with the psychological effects of their past and everyday difficulties had to be found, but clearly it had to be something different from the conventional counselling model.

It was clear that whatever work was done needed to allow for some emotional distance for the children. The children needed to tell their stories, but they needed an approach that would allow them gently and over a period of time to reclaim and integrate their memories and restore their identities.

At this stage Diane Welvering, an art teacher joined the project. She used a creative mixed media approach where the children were given many different kinds of techniques and materials but were allowed to decide how they would use them. This seemed to be the ideal approach.

This was when the idea of using suitcases arose. A suitcase is about a journey; all the children had taken journeys. A suitcase also has a face that is open to everyone to see and a hidden space inside that we can choose to expose or not. Would suitcases help some of the children to reclaim the memories, both difficult and happy, that they were now choosing to hide? A number of old suitcases were sourced in second hand shops around Johannesburg. All the suitcases had been on journeys too, so perhaps the children would relate to them.

It was at this point that the model described here began to emerge. It should be noted that though the model emerged through practice it is rooted in theory. This theory is described later in the report.

Description of the project

The table below describes the children who attended the group at its inception.

Age	Gender	Country of origin
16	Boy	DRC
15	Boy	Rwanda
18	Boy	Ethiopia
16	Boy	South Africa
13	Boy	DRC

17	Boy	Ethiopia
11	Boy	DRC
15	Boy	Angola
11	Boy	Burundi
14	Boy	Burundi
16	Boy	Rwanda
13	Girl	Ethiopia
12	Girl	Burundi
12	Girl	DRC
16	Girl + baby	Burundi
10	Girl	DRC
9	Girl	DRC
11	Girl	DRC
6	Girl	DRC
8	Girl	DRC

The work with the children took place at a weekly meeting held on a Saturday morning at a local school that is accessible to all the children. The art materials were set up in a large open space and once instructions for the day's activity had been given the children worked uninterrupted for two and sometimes even three hours with support from the art teacher and an assistant. While they worked some children, alone or in pairs or small groups, went and sat under a tree and talked about the stories they had told in their artwork. About once every two months counsellors from a local mental health centre attend the group. Particular children are referred by the facilitator to spend time with the counsellors.

The group then ate a simple meal together, sharing with each other and the facilitators what had happened during the week.

The project consists of a number of aspects:

- Artwork
- Storytelling
- Sharing the work and advocacy
- Encouragement of specific social interactions

Each of these aspects is discussed in turn below.

The artwork

The artwork activities which form the core of the project are described in summary in the table below.

Theme	Description of art activity	Purpose	Time frame (approximate as each child worked at their own pace)
<i>The story of my life now</i>	The children used mixed media such as drawing, printing, wax resist and painting to make images that told the story of their present lives. These images were then pasted on to the outside of the suitcase and then	The media chosen allowed children to tell a story in a picture they then told the facilitator about their picture. The telling of the story was therapeutic. The work began with their present lives as this	4 weeks

	three dimensional materials such as beads, card, sand, shells and found-objects were added to the 'story'. Children were encouraged to layer their stories.	was less threatening than telling stories about their pasts.	
<i>The story of my life in the past</i>	Using the same materials the children then made images to tell about the place where they had first lived and their memories of the past – both good and bad.	Telling about these images was again therapeutic. Because they were inside the suitcase there was also a measure of emotional distance as each week the bad memories could be left inside the suitcase until next week. If children chose to they told the stories of their memories.	8 weeks
At this point a weekend retreat was held with experienced counsellors and a psychologist. The suitcases formed the core of work done at the retreat. The retreat focused on traumatic memories.			
<i>The story of my journey to Johannesburg</i>	Firstly the children made large pieces of hand made paper and then worked on these in collage with drawn images and images from magazines to show the journeys they had made to get to Johannesburg.	The tactile nature of the paper making and collage work allowed children to spend time thinking and reflecting on what for many was the most traumatic part of their stories.	6 weeks
<i>Where am I going to take my suitcase? Looking to the future.</i>	Tracing around each other's bodies children made large drawings of their bodies with their suitcases in their hands and answered the question of where they were taking their suitcases through layering images on to the body maps.	This activity allowed children to move from the past to the future. Many began to make concrete plans for the next year.	6 weeks

As the table shows the artwork began with suitcases. Initially each child chose a suitcase. They were told that there was a suitcase just for them and they would know exactly which one it was. Without any of the usual battles over resources each child in the group chose a suitcase.

The box below outlines the first workshop that was held with the suitcases. The project began by working with the outsides of the suitcases and the children's lives 'now', as this was less emotionally threatening for the children than telling stories about their past.

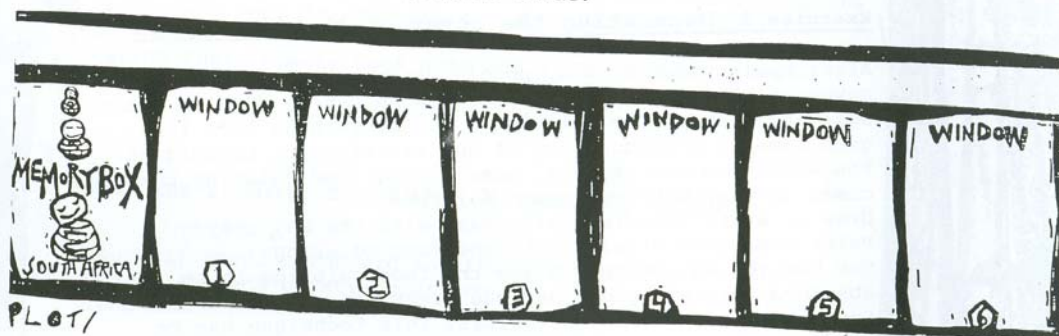
Introductory suitcase workshop

Facilitator: A suitcase is something we take on a journey. You have all been on a big journey from the place where you were born to Johannesburg, so your life is a bit like a suitcase – it has been on a journey. So this suitcase is going to tell the story of your life.

On the outside of the suitcase we will tell the story of our lives **now**. On the inside of the case we will tell story of **the past** – what happened to us long ago – because we carry our past inside us.

Today we will start with the outside – ‘My life now’.

Your life now is big. What do you do in your life? You go to school, play with friends, do housework at home etc. That’s a lot of things and your case is small so you need to choose things to show your life now. These windows² may help.



Each window is a part of the story about you and your life now. Choose windows that will tell anyone who is looking at the suitcase about your life now. Go and sit alone around the garden for a little while with your suitcase. Decide what you will show in each window and draw a small picture of it. Friends, house, school – one for each window.

Once children had thought about a number of images they chose one of the different art media that had been set up for them and made visual images of each window.

In the second workshop children began working on their suitcases. They began by pasting the images on to the suitcase and then decorated the cases. The children were encouraged to treat the outside of the suitcases in a very tactile way using a wide variety of found materials. Each child was encouraged to undertake this re-invention in their own way, reinforcing the idea that the child has the power. At no stage was anyone told what to do. The art teacher and facilitator merely encouraged and led the children to a variety of media.

² The windows activity is one developed and used by the Memory Box Project, University of Cape Town.

A suitcase with no handle

A 15 year old boy from Angola who was very depressed when he joined the group spent most of the first half of the first workshop wandering around annoying the other children.

“What are you going to put on your suitcase A?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe you should look at your suitcase and think about why you chose that one, maybe that will give you some ideas.”

With this A spent the rest of the workshop printing many copies of the same sign for his suitcase.



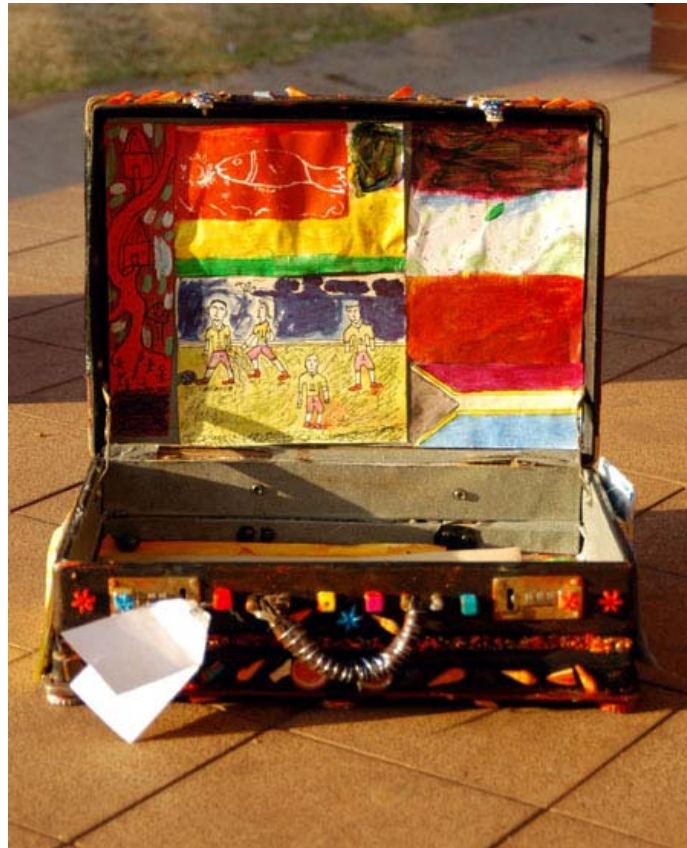
The next week he painted a picture of a boy’s face with tears. And at the end of this workshop he told his story about why he felt his life was like his suitcase.

“Let’s get free’ it says on my suitcase. We are refugees in a foreign country and the thing is we want to be treated the same as South African people are. It makes no difference if we are not born here because we are all African and we are all people. It is saying that refugees should be treated the same.

There are a lot of things going on around the person in my picture. There is blood and dark colours and yellow. There are good things and bad things going on around him – most of it is bad, like discrimination at school. The children we are schooling with, who are in the same class they always gossip about you - ‘you should go back to your country!’ – things like that and they don’t know we never chose to be here, it is because of certain reasons we are here like war in our country.

This sign here on my suitcase that says my life is like a suitcase with no handle tells more about the guy in the picture. The person on the suitcase, his life is not balanced, it is not straight. He is always falling and then needing to get up again. Like me.”

Once the children felt their suitcases were finished outside they began work on the insides. The insides of the suitcases were about memories of their pasts. This section of the work was introduced in a similar way in that children were encouraged to think of windows into their pasts. They then represented these different windows in different media and pasted the pictures inside their suitcases. Again the multi-dimensional layering of their stories was encouraged.



Once they felt the insides and outsides were finished (and this took over 10 weeks) they began work on a set of small journals that would go into the suitcases. Children were encouraged to work on these journals in a tactile way with many different media. This journal work was ongoing and by this stage the facilitators knew the children well and were able to direct the work, encouraging children gently to draw particular issues that they knew troubled them. But at all stages the children decided what they wanted to represent.

To keep up interest, personalised, constructed objects were also made from found fragments of clay (baked and polished with boot polish), papier-mâché and wire. The choices of modes of representation and materials to be used were always the children's own. Every week the suitcases were brought to the group so children could keep thinking about their own lives, past and present. Children became very fond of their suitcases and the packing away each week in the facilitator's car was done with great care. Children began to learn through this about caring for other people's work too, a theme that mirrored the work being done around encouraging the children to care about each other.

It is important to note that even though the group had a therapeutic aim, the children valued the skills they had learned through doing the artwork.

I have learned skills for school such as printing.

Sometimes people say that you get born with talent but you can also learn. Attending these art classes can make you be an artist.

I would sleep at home, read or study if I didn't come here. Maybe my work of art is improving. I am learning things in art better.

Before I came here I never used to take art serious. I did not like drawing. Now I like drawing and people say I am good at it.



Art therapy?

Throughout the project the artwork consisted to a large extent of three-dimensional work with most of it consisting of children layering their suitcases and maps with multiple materials. Because the children were not working with conventional art tools that they knew, such as crayons, they were able to respond intuitively. Essentially what the children did was 'play' with the materials and explore their potential. Working in three dimensions with many different materials allowed them to play more freely as they did not feel scrutinised in any way, as if they had to 'draw well'

In addition, the children were always in control of the process. One of the central principles was that the facilitators did not interfere with their art making. It was a private process. While they worked the facilitators did not ask questions or give advice. Sometimes the art teacher would hand a child a new piece of material or quietly strengthen a construction without interfering.

Many traditional art therapy approaches work with drawings and ask children to talk about these drawings. The approach used in this project was different, but it was deeply therapeutic. The layering of the suitcases was a concrete expression of the idea of finding many layers to our life stories, which is central to narrative therapy (see theory section below).

Sometimes it was clear that individual children were doing deep emotional work while they 'played' with the materials (see D's story below). They did not always need to talk about what they had drawn for it to be therapeutic.

It was noticed that the more difficult children's past experiences had been, the less confident they were about 'playing' with the art materials (see P's story below). It was interesting to note that their 'healing' could be measured by the extent of their engagement with the materials. As they dealt with emotional issues over time the more confident they became with the materials.

Another key aspect of this free and playful art making approach is that it soon became clear that no piece of work was made lightly; every piece had a story for the child. For example, a boy who had survived the Rwandan genocide carefully cut out pictures of shoes and sandals for an entire workshop and then pasted them on to his map. When he told the story of his map he said:

These shoes remind me of walking and walking and that I survived that walking, I was only 10 years old but I survived the walking.

From a narrative therapy perspective (see theory section below) the shoes had given him an extra layer to his story that showed he was a survivor and not only a victim.

Storytelling about the artwork

The artwork was used as a focus for informal storytelling. Sometimes in small groups, sometimes alone, children would bring a piece of artwork and tell the story behind it. Children were always given the choice to do this. Children were never asked to tell more than the story they had volunteered, details were not probed and if a child chose to stop the story this was accepted. The artwork was always the focus of the storytelling and this created some measure of emotional distance.



Once the facilitator became a trusted person, almost like a family member, then many more stories were told. In particular, Rwandan and Burundian children only began to tell the stories of their pasts and presents after about six months. Some took over a year before they felt able to tell their stories.

The children acknowledged the value of the storytelling as a healing thing.

It is a must to tell because when a problem is in your heart there is no solution and it makes you angry. But when you talk it makes you better.

For me it is like interesting doing all these things. I used to enjoy doing things like this. Memories of life, the workshop is about life stories. It is sometimes hard. Our expression when we draw. When we draw you don't just draw. We draw how we feel at the time. We express our feelings in the pictures. In the situation we are in here in SA as foreigners it is not like our country but this reminds of us of our country and helps us think back to the good things.

They saw that talking does help but that it must come later, when they know the person and when they can choose the time.

When we talk about our mothers had passed away it makes us sad. We need the time to be right to talk about those things. There are certain stories to be told and some not to be told.

You work fine because the secret you do is call us one by one and that makes it easier. Some problems that some of us have we don't want anyone to know. Also you let us decide and choose to talk.

It is good to give a person time and sometimes when you remember things bad it is good to give a person chance before talking.

They valued the fact that they were never coerced into telling their stories. The group attended a retreat weekend with counsellors trained in a more traditional way for working with trauma. This is what they had to say about this experience.

When we told them something they forced their way to ask about things we didn't want to say.

This one time I felt sad and this woman was pressurising me to talk talk talk and I felt pressurised.

In her own time

The first few workshops that D attended she did no work at all. She wandered around talking to other children, washed paintbrushes, poured juice but resisted making any art. She had a suitcase but it remained bare. Her history was particularly traumatic. She seemed to be depressed and preoccupied with the fact that she could not get a job. She spent her days at home in the apartment alone while the other children went to school. She talked about helping her foster mother who was a hawker.

One Saturday at the end of the workshop she drew the facilitator aside and said, "Next week can you bring a big piece of paper for me, I have a very big story to do next week." The next Saturday she was waiting, and as soon as the room was opened she withdrew from the group with a pile of collage materials and set up a table in a corner of the room. She began to construct a collage, working with great intensity. No one interrupted her, but a facilitator sat at the other end of the table and quietly did her own artwork. This told the young girl that the facilitators were there to support her but she could choose when and whether she wanted to ask for more support than that. She worked for the entire workshop and then together she and the facilitator put the collage into her suitcase locking it away until the next week. She indicated that she did not want to talk about it and this was respected. Monitoring was seen as necessary because of her deep trauma, so the facilitator contacted her caregiver and, without breaking confidentiality, asked that she keep an eye on her during the week.

For four weeks she worked on the collage. At the end of the fourth workshop she asked the facilitator if she could tell the story of the collage. After she had told the story she and the facilitator then worked on another layer of the collage together, working with tissue paper. This layer looked at what she had then to help her survive and what she had now to help her with the bad memories.

Clearly the process was deeply healing as from this point she began to make plans for her future, discussing setting up a small business to sell clothes on the street alongside her foster mother. She no longer attends the group but keeps in regular contact with the facilitator.

Exhibiting the work

During the project the children's artwork was exhibited twice. Initially this was done to raise awareness of the lives of refugee children, but ultimately it also served a therapeutic purpose. The exhibitions became a way to integrate the children with outsiders and encourage them to be proud of their histories and home countries. Over time the group became very proud of their ability to do art. At the second exhibition they freely opened up their suitcases and shared the contents with academics at the University of the Witwatersrand who attended the exhibition.

The project was profiled in the Sunday Times *Read Right*, an educational supplement. This again allowed the children to be seen, not as refugees only, but as artists; young people who had something important to say. This built their sense of self worth.

In all cases the children were in control of the exhibition and newspaper articles, they could choose to do them or not. They used this power too, informing a photographer from the Sunday Times that he could not photograph their faces. They were also involved in setting up the exhibitions. This reinforced the sense of power they had over their lives.

This public face of the project was very important for the children.

I think the exhibition was a cool thing to do because it will make people know about what real foreigners are doing – most people just stay in their offices saying they are helping foreigners without seeing the real lives of people.

We were celebs. It made me feel like a VIP because the time we wanted to go into the art exhibition this man chased us away he thought we are the street kids. Diane came and said we were the ARTISTS! I liked that “we were the ARTISTS!”

I felt good that people were interested in our artwork and we were not wasting our time.

Meeting new people was the best. I met a young lady and her husband and she is an artist too. We met people outside Hillbrow world.

I have never told my story to anyone ...

P was everyone's favourite in the group – he had a huge grin and a gentle way. When the suitcase work began he did very little artwork. He drew one or two flat and very grey pictures. He painted his suitcase in one colour and drew a large black heart on it. He often took his suitcase and hid it away so that the facilitators could not see that he had not done any work. Sometimes the other children drew pictures and said they were his; they realised he was not doing any work and tried to help him out. The facilitators allowed him to work in his own time and never commented on his lack of artwork.

One day he began drawing ducks. They were simple ducks, like a small child would draw, in pencil. When the facilitators asked him about the ducks he said:

The ducks were at my first house in Rwanda. I remember my first house. My father was in that house in Rwanda. He was teaching me to look after the animals. I had six chickens, four pigeons, five goats and five ducks. I always wanted a rabbit and I was always asking my father, ‘Can I have a rabbit? I have never tasted a rabbit, can I keep rabbits?’ My father he said he was going to get me a rabbit next time he goes to town. But he never went. We had to run away. Now I cannot find him. I cannot get hold of him. I do not know where he is.

He did not say any more and he carried on for many weeks drawing ducks and sometimes the house where he lived with his father.

Then one Saturday morning he called me and said he wanted to tell his story. In an expressionless voice with no emotion he told the story of how he had seen his whole family killed over a period of time in Rwanda. When he had finished telling the story he said, "I have never told anyone that story. Lots of people have asked but I have never told anyone."

With support from a clinical psychologist over the next few weeks he was monitored. From that point on he began to use the art materials. He drew trees and houses, roads and more ducks all in startling colour. He pasted most of these drawings inside his suitcase.



When the work was exhibited recently P was observed eagerly opening his suitcase and telling his school principal the story of the artwork he had pasted there.

Encouragement of specific social interactions

Two levels of interaction were overtly encouraged in the project. Firstly the group was encouraged to build trust relationships with the facilitators. Many of the children had lost adult caregivers and had experienced deep grief and were very wary of building relationships with adults in case they were let down again.

In addition many had also been let down repeatedly by adult service providers who had promised them things and never kept their promises. Many also had stories to tell of how media professionals had exploited them. At least five of the children had

stories of filmmakers or journalists who promised them help if they told their stories (one journalist even promised to take an Ethiopian child home to look for her parents). None of these people had kept their promises.

Understandably, the children were wary and did not trust adults to do what they said they would do. Because of this it was very important that the adult facilitators were consistent and attended the meetings regularly. The meetings were now held weekly so they could be a regular part of the children's lives. The facilitators were very careful not to make any promises about practical help that they could not deliver.

But they did begin to build real relationships with the children in the group. Every week they asked about school and kept track of particular events in the children's lives. Facilitators also spent a lot of time in workshops encouraging them and telling them how good their work was. Every week each facilitator was the same and nobody was treated differently from anyone else. Every week questions were asked about any child who was missing and children who knew the missing child were told to pass on a message to say they had been missed. If a child did not attend for more than two weeks home visits were made to find out why they were not attending.

Over time the children began to reciprocate. They were very protective, making sure that the facilitators did not go into dangerous parts of Hillbrow, helping voluntarily to clean up art equipment and making cups of coffee when they thought the facilitators looked tired. This was part of the healing for the children; it allowed them to create caring relationships with adults, who as far as possible tried to be consistent in their attendance and give what care they could.

At the same time as encouraging relationships this behaviour also modelled a set of consistent values that included, for example, respect for others and commitment to the group.

When asked why they kept coming to the group children identified these relationships as an important factor in their continued attendance on a Saturday morning.

You and Diane are here and you worry about us. We know you will help us with things. You are like a mother.

They also talked about how the facilitators' responses to their artwork built their sense of self worth and taught them valuable life lessons

- I have never heard Diane telling us our images are ugly. It is always "beautiful!" (laughs). It makes you feel good.

- Ja, There is no insultment here.

You guys do like our art honestly – you are not just saying it. It is worthwhile. Here in Hillbrow there are not many people who will tell you "Hey this is beautiful" when you do something.

I have noticed in Hillbrow people are all about making money. Everyone for themselves. If you come with your art drawing and show someone and say

“How is this?” they will look at it for two seconds and say “Ya whatever,” and get on with what they want to do but you really look and ask about it.

You teach us in the art to make something of our mistakes. We learn from the art that we make can mistakes and we can fix them, we can turn them into something good.

Our expression when we draw. When we draw we don't just draw. We draw how we feel at the time. We express our feelings in the pictures. We are learning about expressing feelings.

In addition, children could also articulate some of the values that were modelled.

Responsibility – to care for our own stuff. Because many people don't want to care for their stuff. Also you taught us not to throw away our images, our art whatever we do. Even if we think it is not beautiful you say “Keep it”.

The second kind of social interaction that was encouraged was the attempt to help the children support each other. It soon became clear that in their everyday lives they were the best potential support for each other.

This was done through repeatedly encouraging respect of each other in the group. Everyone had to respect each other's artwork, no one was allowed to laugh at it. Group conflicts (which were frequent in the early days of the group) were handled firmly using conflict resolution and problem-solving strategies.

The group was encouraged to choose a name (they chose “Survivors”) and a short goodbye ritual was used to give the group an identity. Children were also encouraged to check up on each other's well-being by asking a group member to follow up if a child was missing.

Over time the group became almost an alternative family for most of the children.

The art classes are not just for coming here and doing art. We are also coming here and getting to know each other. I never used to know J so much but now I know him and he is like a brother to me and I see him on the street and I feel good. We were next door neighbours once but we didn't know each other because the way Hillbrow is everyone minds there own business. Now we are like brothers.

How much this was true became clear only when the two apartments that the children lived in were sold and they had to move off to different areas of Hillbrow. Children showed fear at losing contact with each other at this stage. It was at this time, when their futures were uncertain, that the regular nature of the group and the consistency of relationship with the facilitators were particularly important to the children.

Linked to the idea of developing social interactions is the fact that the group took place in an informal space and that children were able to come and go as they wished within this space. The workshops were open in the sense that anyone could

attend and often children brought in friends, some who stayed for a few weeks and others who are still with the group. The art material was set up and children came in to work throughout the morning. The only rule was that the children were expected to participate and to follow the rules of respect. At lunch time they usually sat on the grass outside and talked and socialised in the sun. It was one place they could just relax in Hillbrow. The children identified this relaxed space and the safe venue as a significant factor in their continued attendance and commitment to the group. The children also talked about how having the art workshops gave them something constructive to do on a Saturday.

It is cool here. We can sit in the sun, we get lunch and we feel safe here. There is no place in Hillbrow to chill in the sun. The park is not safe but here we are safe.

I come because it is fun and you get to do different kinds of things. It is different from one's week with school and stuff. We come and talk about art. The art is fun. There is no pressure here like at school with deadlines and stuff.

Usually every Saturday I don't have anything to do so I come here. I would just stay at home or go somewhere not interesting. I also learn a lot about art and I know skills I can use at school.

Attending these art classes keeps me from doing drugs and going around with knives. I met this guy P and he told me to come here to do art. From then my behaviour started to improve. I decided that I could use the art classes to improve my art. It gives me something else to do on Saturday instead of doing bad things.

You don't get pressurised here to do something. It is fun.

In addition the children were also encouraged to build relationships within the community. For example, a group of the older boys became involved in a local church that ran holiday workshops with children in Hillbrow.

Where are you taking your suitcase?

Once the suitcases were finished the children began work on large maps to tell the story of their journey to Johannesburg. They began by making large pieces of hand-made paper. They then made collages using magazines and hand-drawn pictures.

The group then went on to work on large body drawings. They drew around their bodies representing themselves with their suitcases, many making almost perfect replicas of their suitcases. On the body drawings they drew and painted and printed images that answer the question that was posed to them, 'Where are you taking your suitcase?'

This work prompted the older members of the group to come up with concrete plans for their immediate futures. For example, two of the boys who are over 18 and at present in Grade 9 and Grade 10 at a local high school were concerned about the quality of education they were receiving. "I know I am not going to achieve my

dreams if I stay in that school. Even the principal said to me I should find somewhere else." They had collected information about a local technical college where they could do Matric in two years and gain entrance to a Technikon. Reducing a year of schooling is very significant given that they are both 18 already.

These were all children who were so paralysed by their past trauma when they joined the group that they could not even commit to coming to the next group meeting, never mind thinking about planning for their futures.

The older children in the initial group have begun to move on, though they all maintain some contact. A group of new children has recently been referred by the Jesuit Refugee Service and they have already begun work on their suitcases.

But before the initial group disperses they are writing a book that will include all the stories told over the last two years as well as photographs of their suitcases. The book will be published by Double Storey books in 2005. This book is a further step in the idea of making them visible to the world. They are all very excited by the idea.

The theory that informs the project

j) Children as actors not victims

The starting point of the project approach is that children are not merely victims but they have the power to make contributions to their own healing. This idea is best expressed in the following quote³,

While it is important to acknowledge the painful, humiliating and profoundly debilitating experiences that many children suffer during periods of political violence, it has to be recognized that the dominant discourse of vulnerability, sickness, crisis and loss has the potential for seriously undermining children's wellbeing (Burman 1994; White 1998). Notions of children's passivity and susceptibility disregard the important emotional, social, economic and political contributions children make to family and community during periods of political violence, as well as trivializing their coping efforts. The perception of the child as vulnerable victim may have powerful emotional appeal for adults, but can in many circumstances be quite detrimental to children since it renders them helpless and incompetent in the face of adult decisions and actions, many of which may not be in children's best interests. It also ignores the possibility that children may have insights and opinions about solutions to their problems that could be highly appropriate and valid... If children are to be helped to overcome highly stressful experiences, their views and perspectives need to be treated as a source of learning and strength, not weakness.

This project is a practical example of how therapeutic programmes can facilitate a process where children are able to reflect in a safe place on their experiences and

³ Boyden, Jo. "Children under Fire: Challenging Assumptions about Children's Resilience." *Children, Youth and Environments* 13(1), Spring 2003. Retrieved [21 December 2004] from <http://cye.colorado.edu>.

use these as a way of reinforcing their strengths. The group themselves reinforced the power of this approach when they called themselves “The Survivors”. This idea is seen in the way the children can lead the healing process. They decide what to represent on their suitcases and maps and they choose the materials to represent it. They decide if they want to talk about it and they decide if they want to transform or represent their experiences in a different way. They also decide whether they want other people to hear their stories.

What became clear in this project is that by putting the power in the children’s hands the project allowed them to choose the pace at which they told their stories and this made them feel safe and then able to open up bad memories that they had suppressed for a long time. By allowing the children to lead their own healing the project built their sense of self-esteem and their sense of control over their own lives. Evidence of this growing capacity is the way the children made clear practical plans for their futures as the project drew to a close.

ii) An alternative to the ‘trauma approach’

The project is in line with much of the thinking put forward by David Tolfree⁴.

Tolfree describes how in the past most projects that gave psychosocial support to refugees were rooted in a Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)⁵ paradigm. This approach uses a diagnostic tool based largely on Western research in developed countries. The resulting counselling approach emphasises the need for victims of trauma to talk about their past experiences and express their feelings about it.

Tolfree outlines the criticisms of this approach. It is individualistic, does not take into account people’s present belief systems and cultures, and it looks at traumatic events in isolation from the broader context. It also tends to see the person suffering from PTSD as a victim rather than as a person with resources who, with support, can solve their own problems.

In his book of case studies he describes a project⁶ that uses an alternative model for giving psychosocial support to refugees.

The model avoids the terminology of healing and therapy: rather the approach is firmly based on a developmental perspective which views human beings as having capacities and personal resources to identify issues they need to work on, and to deal with these themselves. By avoiding the typical stereotype of the refugee as helpless and passive ... by avoiding terms which label people as traumatised or pathological, the [project] works with [the children’s] strengths rather than their weaknesses.⁷

⁴ Tolfree, D (1996) Restoring Playfulness, Different Approaches to Assisting Children who are Psychologically Affected by war or Displacement. Swedish Save the Children: Stockholm

⁵ American Psychiatric Association “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 111 (DSM 111) 1980.

⁶ Hi Neighbour in Yugoslavia (p109) in Tolfree, D (1996)

⁷ p119 Tolfree, D (1996)

This is exactly what informs the Suitcase Project's approach. Tolfree's description of how the project works could be a description of the Suitcase Project.

*The whole approach is based on the belief that all refugees are deeply affected by their experiences, but by avoiding labelling people as "traumatised" or as "having problems", the [project] is able to work in a way that **builds on people's strengths** rather than weakness. No attempt is made to "solve" problems or to suggest action which they can take. Rather the aim is to provide a **special form of interaction** and the "tools" with which people themselves can discover and build on their own and each other's personal resources.⁸*

In the Suitcase Project the 'special forms of interaction' are those between the facilitators and the group and those that are encouraged within the group. The 'tools' used are the artwork, the storytelling and the exhibiting of the work.

ii) Resilience

With its emphasis on facilitating social interaction, of encouraging emotional competence, of engaging in everyday problem-solving and the growth of self-esteem, the Suitcase Project is rooted in the theory of resilience.

Grotberg⁹ describes resilience as a

... universal capacity which allows a person, group or community to prevent, minimize or overcome the damaging effects of adversity.

And Werner¹⁰ talks about children who were

... exposed to poverty, biological risks, and family instability, and reared by parents with little education or serious mental health problems – [and yet] remained invincible and developed into competent and autonomous young adults who 'worked well, played well, loved well and expected well.'

It is important to keep in mind the cross-cultural nature of the concept of resilience. From research in the International Resilience Project¹¹ it is possible to see that certain factors are universal in promoting resilience in children.

Resilience is determined mainly by the balance between the stresses and risks children are exposed to on one hand, and the protective factors that may be operating for them on the other. Donald, Lazarus and Lolwane¹² identify three categories of protective factors:

- Personal or individual characteristics of a child

⁸ p113 Tolfree, D (1996)

⁹ p7 Grotberg E. (1995), *A Guide to Promoting Resilience in Children: Strengthening the Human Spirit*, Early Childhood Development: Practice and Reflections, Number 8, Bernard van Leer Foundation: The Netherlands.

¹⁰ p3 Werner, E. and Smith, R. (1989), *Vulnerable but invincible*. Adams, Bannister, Cox.: New York.

¹¹ Grotberg (1995)

¹² Donald, D Lazarus, S and Lolwana, P, (1997), *Educational Psychology in Social Context*, Oxford University Press: Cape Town

- Characteristics of a child’s family
- Characteristics of formal and informal social support networks into which a child may be connected.

The following section shows how these protective factors were promoted in the Suitcase Project.

Personal or individual characteristics of a child

There are several temperamental, cognitive and personality characteristics that appear to help developmental resilience in individual children. The most important in this context are those that relate to children being better able to take on and actively cope with the risks and stresses to which they are exposed. This extract outlining the resilience factors is taken from Donald, Lazarus and Lolwane¹³

Protective factors	How these were integrated into Suitcase Project
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective communication and general problem-solving skills through which children can express their needs, thoughts and feelings. These skills help them to confront and not be overwhelmed and helpless in the face of difficult situations. • A positive self concept, feeling of self worth, and strong interpersonal skills. When children feel good about themselves they are able to engage positively with others and feel empowered as people in their own right. • A strong internal locus of control linked to a sense of hope and future-directed goals. If children feel they can be effective and have some control over their environment, they can hope, plan and set personal goals. Without a sense of locus of control children feel powerless and subject to whatever happens to them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These skills were encouraged through the informal interaction with facilitators who consciously modelled effective communication and problem-solving skills. Over time the children began to use these skills in their interaction with each other • Making artwork and being told how beautiful this work was and then exhibiting this artwork built a sense of self worth. • Allowing the children to control the process of art making and allowing them to direct the storytelling gave them a sense of control over an aspect of their lives. In addition, facilitators spent much of the informal time helping children to set personal goals and to build hope for their futures.

Family characteristics

Research shows that a caring, stable and supportive family is a key protective factor but there are other protective factors that are perhaps more realistic in the context of refugee children.

¹³ Donald, D Lazarus, S and Lolwana, P, (1997), *Educational Psychology in Social Context*, Oxford University Press: Cape Town

Protective factors	How these were integrated into the Suitcase Project
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A caring relationship with one stable caregiver is particularly important in infancy and early childhood. • Adults that encourage competence such as school performance and encourage links with other activities in the community. • Adults that share a strong, coherent and consistent set of values with children. These can be religious but need not necessarily be. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitators became a stable consistent caregiver in the children's lives. • School attendance and links within the community were actively encouraged by facilitators. • A strong set of values was shared through the way the facilitators worked in the art workshops, for example respect for each other's work was a value that was consistently encouraged.

Characteristics of social support networks

Social networks can also play an important protective role for children and youth.

Protective factors	How these were integrated into the Suitcase Project
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive peer networks can play an important protective role as they give a sense of social acceptance, identity and values. Peer networks are particularly important when other protective factors are not available. • Role models beyond the family can be another important protective factor. Research has pointed to teachers as having an especially important role here. • Family friends, extended family, neighbours and other local community contacts can also provide a supportive network. The more children can turn to trusted others in the community the more able they are to cope with difficult life situations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One of the aims of the project was to help the group become a peer support network. • Facilitators became important role models as did older members of the group for younger children. • Facilitators and older children became part of the children's support network.

iii) Narrative therapy

The Suitcase Project is also informed by the theory of Narrative Therapy. Michael White¹⁴ is one of the important theorists in this area. He describes some of the basic assumptions of narrative therapy:

¹⁴ Epston, D and White, M (1990) *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. W.W.Norton. New York

- people have very thin stories and very negative conclusions re their identities (in this context “I am a refugee”)
- stories tend to be problem-saturated with a negative view of the future. Stories tend to be lacklustre with a prevailing sense of being trapped and paralysed
- life is multi-storied, not single-storied. Also multi-knowledged and multi-skilled. Knowledges and skills are present only in very thin traces in our lives
- as therapists our task is to make these traces more fully known. Help people become familiar with knowledges through alternative life stories.
- Our task is to help people become primary authors of their lives
- We need to establish appropriate contexts for people to develop thick stories¹⁵

He says that therapists should help people to tell ‘thick’ stories and by creating an opportunity for them to tell and retell their stories, to see what knowledge and skills they possess. In the telling and retelling people begin to see that what looked at first like a passive account of a traumatic event in which they were the victim is in fact an account of how they used certain strategies for survival. Over time the story becomes multi-storied and is an account of survival as well as trauma.

The use of multiple layers in the artwork in the Suitcase Project is a concrete expression of this idea. Through the artwork children were creating ‘thick stories’ – stories in which they were more than just ‘a refugee’.

Through the storytelling about the artwork they also began to see that their stories were full of knowledge and skills and they were not trapped and paralysed.

Replicating the project

The interest the project has attracted has led to questions about whether it could be replicated in other areas. This is one of the reasons why this report was written. In thinking about replicating the project it is important to highlight those elements that are essential to the model.

These are:

- Facilitators who are willing to attend the group regularly over at least a year, if not more.
- Facilitators who are committed to building relationships with children over a period of at least a year or more
- Facilitators who understand and embody the principles behind creating resilience in children.
- Facilitators who understand the importance of not labelling children as victims but who see them as survivors, in fact, just people.

¹⁵ Taken from a handout at a training workshop given by Michael White on 11 August 2003 in South Africa.

- The creation of group identity through group rituals and the encouragement of peer support amongst the group.
- A venue where children feel safe and relaxed, where there is space to play and that is easily accessible to them.
- Tools such as artwork or drama or music or a mixture of these with which children can 'play' and create.
- Opportunities for children to 'layer' their stories in line with narrative therapy theory.
- Ongoing open workshops where children can create with the 'tools' they have been given.
- Workshops that take place at a time when the children are free and unhurried and not worried about household tasks or school work.
- Plenty of opportunities for children to have their sense of self worth built.
- Children must have a sense that they are in control of the therapeutic process at all times and they can decide to participate or not.
- Opportunities for children to share what they have created in an affirming public forum.
- Storytelling that takes place without coercion and in the children's own time.
- Access to mental health professionals if children need referrals.

This project grew out of the skills of particular people but if the aspects above are taken into account it should be possible to replicate it in other areas where refugee children can meet regularly. Before replicating the model, though, it would be important to put in place an evaluation of the project.

Because of the organic growth of this project it was not set up with baseline data, nor has it been evaluated against a set of specific indicators. In spite of this, this report forms a valuable record that contributes to theory building that will inform further work on psychosocial support for refugee children.