



# Fostering the Human Rights of Migrant Children Through Art and Educational Practices at the United States-Mexico Border

JORGE FRANCISCO SÁNCHEZ-JOFRAS  
CETYS Universidad, Mexico

PABLO TREVIÑO-RODRÍGUEZ  
CETYS Universidad, Mexico

MAYA POLANCO  
CETYS Universidad, Mexico

**ABSTRACT** *This paper explores the impact of art and educational practices on fostering the psychosocial well-being and human rights awareness of migrant children residing in shelters at the U.S.-Mexico border. This population often faces acute vulnerabilities due to migratory status and exposure to trauma during transit, including violence, displacement, and family separation. The study emphasizes the collaborative efforts of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and early childhood educators within these shelters. Data collection entailed conducting interviews with early childhood educators, art instructors, and literacy mediators who work directly with migrant children. Observations were carried out in reading rooms and multilevel classroom settings, focusing on the structure and flow of activities to ensure they addressed the emotional and psychological needs of the children involved. This research is situated against the backdrop of migrant families and children entrapped at the U.S.-Mexico border due to the Remain in Mexico and Title 42 policies implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. These policies have resulted in prolonged stays in shelters for asylum-seeking families, creating environments characterized by immigration uncertainty, limited resources, and emotional strain. The findings illuminate the effectiveness of art and educational practices and the crucial role of early childhood educators in helping children process trauma, express their emotions, and develop a sense of identity and agency amidst challenging circumstances.*

**KEYWORDS** childhood education; international cooperation; nongovernmental organizations; migration; psychosocial well-being; social work

*Correspondence Address:* Jorge Francisco Sánchez-Jofras, College of Social Science & Humanities, CETYS Universidad, Mexico; email: jofras@cetys.mx

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## **Introduction**

This study explores art and educational practices focused on advancing the human rights of migrant children at the U.S.-Mexico border. By analyzing initiatives carried out by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and art educators in migrant shelters, the research shows how these practices contribute to the psychosocial well-being of children and empower them to exercise their agency and rights under challenging circumstances.

The main question guiding this study is: How do psychosocial approaches implemented through art and educational practices affect the well-being of migrant children living with their families in shelters at the U.S.-Mexico border? The study is guided by the theoretical framework of child development and human rights, mainly drawing from the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989). This framework stresses the fundamental rights of children to participation, protection, and development, which are especially relevant within the context of migration.

This investigation links migration studies and psychology to examine the effects of art and educational interventions on the psychosocial well-being of migrant children. By adopting this perspective, the research underscores how these practices not only cater to the emotional and psychological needs of the children but also empower them to assert their agency, enabling them to reclaim their rights amid adversity.

The article is structured in four sections. It begins with an academic analysis of the migratory context that exposes children to precarious scenarios. It also examines relevant theories related to child development and concludes with examples of how art workshops have helped refugees integrate into new communities. The methodology section describes the qualitative research, including interviews with educators and direct observations of the programs implemented at shelters. The results section highlights key findings about the positive effects of art and educational practices on the emotional well-being of migrant children, emphasizing their binding role in advocating for children's human rights. The conclusion reflects on the implications for future policies and interventions to promote and protect children's rights within migration contexts.

### *Migrant Children and Families Entrapped at the Border*

Over the last decade, the United States-Mexico border region has witnessed a significant influx of migrants, including children, who are forced to leave their home countries due to various socio-economic and political factors (Silva, 2019). Thousands of undocumented migrants use Mexico as a transit territory, taking into account that such journeys do not offer safe passage and expose individuals to a series of risks, which, according to Villafuerte (2016), they paradoxically assume as a necessary cost for a better life. In destination

countries, they tend to live in marginality or secrecy under the shadow of State benefits.

Among other nationalities, Central American people have been confronted with insecurity and violence when migrating to Mexican territory in search of reaching the United States (París, 2016). Most of the Central American population lives in marked economic inequality, where over half are in poverty, and in rural areas, poverty affects more than three-quarters of the inhabitants (FAO, 2018a). The increase in undocumented migration from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador is also a consequence of *push-pull factors* such as food insecurity, climate shocks, erosion of the social fabric, and lack of economic opportunities in rural villages (FAO, 2018b).

According to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (2013), undocumented immigrants in Mexico face heightened vulnerability as a result of violence and discrimination. The situation has worsened due to the implementation of the Remain in Mexico policy placed during Donald Trump's first administration (2018-2021), which requires migrants to wait in Mexico until their asylum hearings in the United States.

At the end of 2018, the Mexican Federal Government agreed to cooperate with the immigration policy called the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP). This policy diverted asylum seekers to Mexico while they waited for their U.S. court hearings. As a result, many people were entrapped for several months until their cases were resolved. It is estimated that, in 2019, around 59,000 asylum seekers were sent back to cities along the U.S.-Mexico border (Paris & Díaz, 2019, p. 101).

The majority of individuals seeking asylum in the United States arrived at Mexican border cities in a state of financial instability, with limited local connections, and in a fragile emotional and mental state, especially if they have been displaced from their communities and have lost their patrimony due to migration (Silva, 2024). This challenging situation exposed them to further hardships and intensified their vulnerabilities, limiting their employment opportunities and hindering the education of minors, among other effects. These difficulties underscore the pressing need to establish more robust support systems for asylum seekers at the U.S.-Mexico border.

The Remain in Mexico policy resulted in migrants being entrapped in increasingly precarious conditions, which hampered their human rights. However, this led to an increase in agencies offering services to migrants and refugees in Mexico's border cities. Additionally, during the Joseph Biden administration (2021-2025), significant international funding, mainly from U.S. foundations, supported humanitarian efforts in collaboration with organizations like the United Nations, providing critical aid to the region (López & París, 2023, p. 6).

Children are particularly vulnerable in the context of migration. According to Silva (2024, p. 110), in Tijuana, approximately 30% to 40% of the individuals who stayed in migrant shelters during the MPP. were children and teenagers accompanied by their parents or guardians. Silva (2024), identified

a restructuring of family dynamics, with mothers often assuming a central role, especially in situations involving displacement due to family violence. In many cases, children and teenagers assume caregiving responsibilities for their mothers and younger siblings, further adding to their emotional burden during the already traumatic experience of migration. Migrant families prioritize crossing into the United States rather than establishing a long-term residence in Mexico, making formal enrollment in Mexican schools impractical and unfeasible. This sense of impermanence, combined with the uncertainty of their stay, dissuades families from seeking regular educational opportunities for their children, particularly when unsure how long they will remain in Mexico. Furthermore, while migrant children theoretically have the human and constitutional right to enroll in Mexican schools, structural and concrete barriers prevent this from being a practical reality. Enrollment in regular schools in Mexico requires a series of bureaucratic steps, including submitting documentation such as birth certificates, school records, and other formal identification. For migrant families, many of whom are fleeing their home countries without the necessary documentation, these requirements pose insurmountable challenges (Silva, 2023). Additionally, even when families can provide the required documentation, the enrollment process can be slow, further compounding the children's educational marginalization. Moreover, structural inequalities exacerbate these difficulties, as migrant families often lack the financial resources to cover the costs of uniforms, books, materials, and other educational expenses (Silva, 2024).

This economic burden makes it nearly impossible for migrant children to participate in formal schooling, even if the juridical framework ostensibly supports their inclusion. The combination of bureaucratic barriers, financial constraints, and the transitory nature of their situation places migrant children at a significant educational disadvantage, contributing to their academic and social exclusion. In light of these barriers, alternative educational initiatives, such as those examined in this study, play a crucial role in mitigating the educational backlog migrant children face. These initiatives provide informal yet structured learning environments that allow children to engage in educational activities without the formal requirements of the regular school system.

The MPP ended in January 2021, but new programs were launched to help asylum-seeking children and families continue their processes while in Mexico. According to López and París (2023, p. 6), Mexican federal agencies worked with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to provide shelter, basic care and supplies. They also introduced mental health and psychosocial support initiatives, recognizing the importance of art and creativity in improving the mental health of migrant children and families (UNICEF, 2020; IOM, 2023). In light of these circumstances, our study focuses on the art and educational practices dedicated to supporting migrant children.

*Psychosocial Well-Being of Migrant Children*

Children and adolescents in mobility conditions face a dual vulnerability due to the combination of factors such as age and migratory status (Palummo & Vaccotti, 2016, p. 7). Firstly, minors are in a developmental stage, both physically and cognitively, which makes them dependent on others (whether family members or authorities) as they are unable to meet their needs independently in the same way that adults can (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2014, p. 121). Consequently, the role of the adults they depend on becomes crucial for maintaining their well-being. Additionally, there is a high incidence of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) associated with the migration process, such as exposure to emotional, physical, or sexual abuse; serious accidents or injuries; neglect; theft; and discrimination. Prolonged exposure to such events, without adequate protective measures, is detrimental to the psychological and psychosocial well-being of children (Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, 2018, p. 8). In this regard, ACEs lead to alterations in neurological physiology, resulting in functional, neuroendocrine, psychological, structural, and neuroplastic consequences of the effects of stress during neurodevelopment (Charry-Lozano et al., 2022).

These consequences include observed links between ACEs and the atypical development of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, which regulates cortisol release, commonly known as the stress hormone (Heim et al., 2008). Structural changes induced by stress in the brain regions involved in this axis contribute to the development of psychiatric disorders, such as major depressive disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder (Oates et al., 2012). In other words, once exposure to adverse experiences occurs, various neurobiological and psychological consequences can manifest. However, the impact of ACEs depends on children's coping resources, their environmental conditions, and the level of exposure, frequency, and severity of the vulnerable situations they face.

Soriano (2022) emphasizes that ACEs can significantly affect psychosocial well-being during childhood and adolescence. Behaviorally, they may lead to self-harming tendencies, attention deficits, and externalizing problems such as aggression and hyperactivity, while also hindering the development of executive functions. On an emotional level, ACEs can disrupt attachment, fostering feelings of insecurity and distrust towards others, and contribute to internalizing issues such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress symptoms. They are associated with lower literacy levels, poor academic performance, and various learning difficulties. Socially, ACEs can lead to isolation, challenges in adaptation, interpersonal issues, and heightened social anxiety.

These effects are evident among migrant children, whose psychosocial well-being is compromised across physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions (Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and

Migrants from Venezuela, 2020, p. 16).<sup>1</sup> This underscores the need for interventions and external assistance to restore the individual and collective psychosocial well-being of migrant children. To address this, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2014) describes psychosocial support as a process that fosters resilience among individuals, families, and communities by adapting their opinions, independence, and coping mechanisms. Among various psychosocial support activities for children and adolescents, art-making, games, sports, and educational support stand out. In the face of adversity, these activities help children resume their daily tasks and strengthen their coping abilities, thereby reducing and redefining the impact of the aforementioned consequences.

### *Research in Arts and Refugees*

According to Adnams (2018), art-making can be a powerful resource in the process of personal healing and social transformation, particularly when practiced in a community setting. Art practices can be implemented to support individuals and communities that have endured trauma resulting from poverty, war, natural disasters, or cultural genocide. In this regard, when individuals create art together, they share their trauma narratives, facilitating healing in multiple ways. Thus, the act of creating art allows individuals to process their experiences, build a sense of identity, and foster resilience. Adnams (2018) emphasizes that groups, such as women, children, and refugees often experience *de-voicing*, where their ability to speak up is suppressed by repressive cultures. He stresses the importance of creating inclusive spaces in art education that embrace and respect differences in race, class, and gender, particularly considering the presence of social hierarchies and power structures in the lives of immigrants. In other words, art-making can help these individuals reclaim their voices, facilitating communication and advocacy, which are essential for transforming dehumanizing situations. Therefore, group art practices are fundamental in the transition from personal expression to collective activism, bringing peripheral voices to the center, as seen in community art-making with migrant children and refugees.

In addition, Lewis et al. (2020) conducted a study on an arts-based program for refugee language learners in a Canadian high school. This program provided a social and creative outlet for participants, helping to alleviate the isolation and disconnection often experienced by newcomers and addressing instances of racism by offering a safe and supportive space for cultural expression. Hence, art sessions within a community setting can also have a therapeutic effect, promoting resilience and a sense of belonging among

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<sup>1</sup> The term *psychosocial* refers to the dynamic relationship between psychological aspects, including thoughts, emotions, and behavior, and the broader social experience composed of interpersonal relationships, social values, and cultural practices (Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, 2016, pp. 9-10).

participants. However, resilience is not accessible to everyone, as it depends on individual temperament and positive support networks (Wolff, 2010). Thus, the development of agency for migrant children and refugees hinges on social recognition and collective support, including the acknowledgment of their voices, whether expressed visually or otherwise. On this note, McAdam et al. (2020) studied the use of children's literature as a cultural tool for post-crisis interventions in the context of migration displacement in Egypt and Mexico. They highlighted the importance of mediators in selecting literature that connects with children's experiences, offering themes of hope and resilience.

Through literature, readers can explore different ways of making the unfamiliar familiar and acquire awareness of sources of hope such as friendships, people, places and artifacts in their surroundings. As a result, children's literature serves as a powerful medium for instilling hope by engaging young readers in imaginative and future-oriented reflections about their identities and spaces of interaction. It is important to note, however, that the benefits of art and educational interventions are not limited solely to their end results, but also encompass significant contributions during their development. Throughout this process, facilitators establish a relationship of *holding* or *emotional support* with children, which proves to be meaningful for this population.

The concept of *holding*, introduced by the English psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott (1965), defines the physical and psychological maternal care provided to children, particularly in the immediate period after birth. But nowadays, according to Medeiros and Aiello-Vaisberg (2014), this concept is increasingly recognized as a method of accompaniment not only within psychology but also among educators and other healthcare providers (p. 50). Winnicott (1965) refers to holding as the caregiver's ability to provide an emotionally safe and containing environment for children. Within psychosocial accompaniment, this involves providing the necessary support and presence to offer genuine holding, including readiness to be alongside others, attentiveness to their emerging needs, and being fully present in the moment (Abello & Liberman, 2011). In this context, the facilitator's holding role translates primarily into comprehension and empathy through identifying the child's needs, akin to a primary maternal concern. This role often involves verbal communication at the right moment, where the facilitator demonstrates understanding and awareness of the child's deepest anxieties, enabling these experiences to be articulated, contained, and thereby more comprehensible and tolerable for the child (Mendoza, 2010, p. 52). Overall, holding plays a crucial role in the relationship established between educators and children during art or educational activities, as it provides children with a sense of security and emotional stability, fundamental for their psychosocial well-being. The consistent and empathetic presence of facilitators helps children develop structure in their daily lives, feel heard and understood, and enhances their ability to face future challenges.

## **Methodological Approach**

The analysis of art and educational practices in migrant shelters is informed by a best practices approach, drawing on the Management of Social Transformations (MOST) Program by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2023) and international expertise. According to the Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sport (2023), best practice is defined as an innovative approach that offers new and creative solutions to address specific problems. The adoption of best practices facilitates the identification of effective methods, concrete examples, and practical tools that contribute to the provision of social services. This approach aims to ensure the creation of the right conditions to achieve respect for the physical and psychosocial integrity of human subjects. Additionally, it requires professionals trained in specialized areas of education or social work. Best practices refer to programs or activities that are effective and highly valued by participants (Zabalza, 2012). These practices yield positive outcomes, such as participant inclusion, community integration, and the recognition of human rights. This research delves into the best practices related to the care of migrant children and families sheltered in Tijuana, Mexico. People from Central America and the Caribbean have entered Mexico to seek asylum in the United States. Some have been detained or returned by immigration authorities, while others have stayed in Mexico due to the Remain in Mexico policy and Title 42 during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

### *Children and Families Undergoing Immigration Challenges*

To develop the pathway shown in Figure 1, reports on current Central American migration were analyzed based on the research of Gandini et al. (2020), Serrano and Pérez (2022), Silva (2024), and Silva and Alfaro (2022). The pathway displayed in Figure 1 illustrates a series of interconnected situations that highlight disturbances to migrant well-being and the resources that can provide support along the way. It is worth noting that this pathway should not be viewed as a strict sequence with clearly defined boundaries; instead, it comprises events that do not preclude the continuation of impairments. Nonetheless, educational practices at migrant shelters can play a vital role in restoring agency for children amidst challenging circumstances. Firstly, individuals and families face the *push-pull factors* that compel them to leave their home countries, embarking on a journey into unknown territories while encountering social rejection in foreign societies. Secondly, they navigate migration systems, undergoing immigration procedures and

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<sup>2</sup> Title 42 regulations resulted in the screening of asylum seekers at land borders under the pretext of addressing COVID-19 health risks. According to Del Monte (2023), this selective application disproportionately impacted impoverished individuals from the Global South, highlighting the disparities within the United States asylum process.

confronting official discrimination, governmental negligence and temporary, usually indefinite, placement in migrant shelters. Thirdly, the journey involves reaching out to NGOs and educators, who play a pivotal role in providing *holding* and psychosocial support, advocating for fair treatment of migrants, and facilitating their integration into host societies. Their work is crucial in empowering children to recognize their human rights and adapt to their new circumstances. Lastly, the process involves challenging societal perceptions, sharing experiences with fellow migrants, and embracing a new sense of identity.

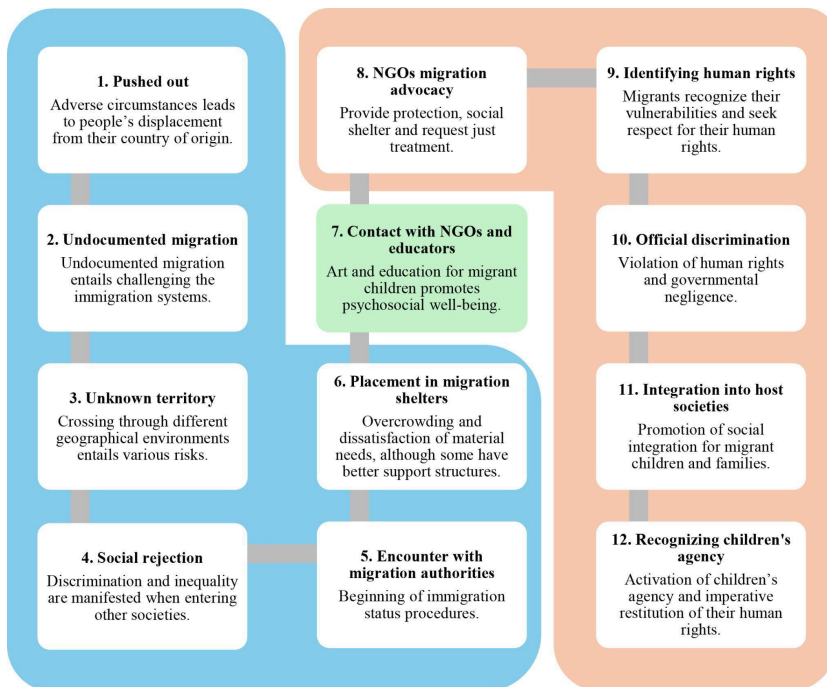


Figure 1. Pathway for reconstructing identity after immigration.

(Note: The enumerated situations that comprise the pathway are divided into three main stages: 1) the *ex ante* situations of the encounter with the educators (blue); 2) the encounter with the educators (green); and, 3) the *ex post* situations of the encounter with the educators (orange).)

Undocumented migration poses risks for children, even when they are accompanied by an adult or caregiver. They endure a lack of basic needs, scarcity of food and inadequate access to safe shelter and healthcare, while being exposed to violence and physical harm during the journey. Additionally, separation from home and facing discrimination further disrupts their sense of belonging and obstacles to education and employment as well as mistreatment by authorities hinder their parents' opportunities in a new country.

Serrano and Pérez (2022) reported preliminary data from 17 migrant children and adolescents aged six to 14 from Honduras, El Salvador, Colombia, and Guatemala participating in CAENA. The document highlights central concerns among migrant children related to immigration. Firstly, children express profound uncertainty stemming from a lack of information about their lives and future. Family reunification is another significant concern, expressed as sadness or fear of being unable to reconnect with loved ones, and they are worried about the well-being of family members left behind. The current housing conditions also raise concerns, as many children have to adjust to new circumstances. Children staying at shelters become worn due to the enforcement of strict schedules and locations for daily activities. Children and youth grow tired of the repetitive routines, limited food options, and restricted mobility conducted as a safety measure due to their young age and immigration status. Additionally, the decisions made by their parents, such as whether to continue the journey, attempt to cross again, return to their place of origin, or stay in Tijuana, create anxiety among the minors.

### *Immigrant Shelters*

Silva and Alfaro (2022) highlight the role of shelters in offering accommodation and creating a secure environment for immigrants. Often run by religious organizations, these shelters offer essential services such as lodging and meals, as well as comprehensive support including healthcare, legal assistance, and advocacy for human rights. Given the limited government involvement in providing aid to immigrants, NGOs encompassing local organizations, religious congregations, and international cooperation agencies, play a crucial role in providing diverse resources to these populations. In this regard, organized civic society networks are vital for the comprehensive protection of migrants (Silva, 2024).

The study explores the work of childhood educators and art instructors engaging with children at migrant shelters. Given the transient nature of this demographic, two methods were employed to deliver their services: conducting one-time sessions for temporarily sheltered children, and establishing school routines for children who have been residing in shelters for an extended period. The researchers followed the activities of *Juguemos a Leer*, a mobile reading room that provided assistance at different locations in the city. Due to the varying lengths of stay for families and children at the shelters, the literacy mediators had limited prospects of interacting with the same children again. Nonetheless, the expertise of these professionals in understanding the needs of children in mobility was valuable for this investigation.

The study primarily examined the operations of a multilevel classroom for migrant children functioning during regular daytime hours. This program adapted the educational practices of *Círculos de Aprendizaje Escuela Nueva*

Activa (CAENA), established by Fundación Escuela Nueva, an organization with expertise in displaced populations in the context of Colombia.<sup>3</sup> The program was implemented in Tijuana and supported by a collaborative effort of Fundación Internacional de la Comunidad A.C. (FIC) and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). Throughout the 2022-2023 academic year, CAENA provided services designed to improve learning skills, promote social integration, and support emotional development for students potentially relocating to the United States. However, immigration hearings disrupted the program, leading some participants to leave prematurely, highlighting the challenging educational conditions faced by professionals supporting this population. The program accommodated children aged six to 14 and divided the class into early childhood and adolescence groups to better meet their needs.



*Figure 2. Spatial aspects at CAENA, a multilevel classroom, where participants were seated at different table settings according to their age and developmental stage, with children and adolescents having distinct seating arrangements. (photo: authors)*

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<sup>3</sup> According to Fundación Escuela Nueva (2023), CAENA, or the Active New School Learning Circles, is a program that enhances education quality, relevance, and efficiency in rural and urban communities in Colombia and other countries. It focuses on active, cooperative, and personalized learning.

### *Data Collection Methods*

The application of semi-structured interviews enabled the construction of narratives that illuminate the experiences and meanings of participants (Álvarez-Gayou, 2003). In this particular context, the researchers sought to comprehensively understand participants' actions as they unfolded in their natural environment. When examining the phenomenon of undocumented migration, this methodological approach enables researchers to understand how educators perceive the circumstances of children and their families and how local organizations provide psychosocial support and contribute to achieving their essential life goals.

In-depth interviews were conducted with an early childhood educator, an art instructor, and a literacy mediator who directly interacted with migrant children and their families. Through these educators, insights were collected about the classroom context, program design, pedagogy, selection of relevant activities and materials, social integration initiatives, and promotion of human rights. Additionally, reports from NGOs and academic research were reviewed to comprehend the situation of migrant children and families during the pandemic hiatus, which coincided with the implementation of the Title 42 health policy.

When researching educational practices in migrant shelters, careful attention was given to ethical considerations to ensure the rights and well-being of the participants. Informed consent was obtained from all educators involved, outlining the purpose and procedures of the study. The research team visited the shelters where educators interacted with the children in reading rooms and a multilevel classroom. It is important to clarify that the researchers did not directly implement the described interventions, instead they assisted as educational observers. All the photographs taken for this article were carefully composed to protect the minors' identities. They avoided any facial features and instead focused on the details of the activities, as shown in Figure 2. It is important to note that anonymity and confidentiality were not necessary as the interviews were conducted solely with educators rather than with underage children or migrant families. Nonetheless, strict protocols were in place to handle and protect any sensitive information shared during the interviews.

For this study, an expert sampling strategy was implemented, taking into account the professional qualifications and workplaces of the participants, as detailed in Table 1 below. The sampling method was designed to reflect the professional characteristics of the instructors, such as a background in psycho-pedagogy and children's rights, specialized training in working with migrant children and families, and involvement in educational programs within migrant shelters. The study also ensured the inclusion of programs that promote human rights and the well-being of migrants, underscoring its ethical approach.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Profession</b>	<b>Studies</b>	<b>Professional Experience</b>	<b>Workplace development</b>
Ms. Beltrán	Early childhood educator.	- Special Education Teaching Degree (SPED) at Manuel Escamilla University, San Salvador. - Knowledge about language stimulation and human rights promotion. - Training at Active New School Learning Circles (CAENA).	- Migrates to Mexico due to security threats in home country, temporary undocumented status. - Obtained permanent residency and volunteered with a civil association. - Gets back into a career path with the aid of a defense attorney.	- Multilevel Classroom Coordinator at CAENA pilot program with UNICEF & FIC, from 2021-2022 - Works at the Círculo Monarca School with migrant children and families at the San Juan Bosco Salesian Oratory in Tijuana, from 2022-2024.
Ms. Solano	Art instructor and educational assistant.	- Arts degree at Tijuana. - Certificate of studies in the pedagogy of the arts and play resources librarian.	- Facilitator at <i>Vivamos la Calle</i> initiative with USAID and the Ministry of Gov.t Affairs. - More than five years' experience working with migrant children and adolescents using art activities to promote social transformation.	- Coordinator of the Migration Area at <i>Fundación Internacional de la Comunidad</i> . - Teaches workshops on urban art, collage, engraving, and handicrafts.
Ms. Cantú	Literacy mediator and educational assistant.	- Certificate of Studies in Children Rights, at Valencia, Spain. - Attended <i>Programa Nacional de Salas de Lectura</i> , CONACULTA, Mexico.	- In 2012, worked with migrant children from the Mediterranean Sea in Spain. - Sociocultural animation at underserved communities as part of public safety programs. - Tijuana City Libraries Coordinator, from 2018-2020.	- Creator and mediator of the mobile reading room: <i>Juguemos a Leer</i> and <i>La Cipoteca</i> . - Facilitator of reading and art activities in migrant shelters.

*Table 1: Profile of educators and competency development for migrant engagement.*

The children catered to in the art and educational activities examined came from Central and South American countries, including Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Colombia. Some are from the United States. These children are part of families that have migrated due to violence, displacement, or economic hardship in their home countries, facing unique challenges that require targeted support. Family structures vary, with some children being raised by single parents while others live in extended families or families formed during migration. Many children have a strong attachment to their mothers, who are often the primary caregivers. They express feelings of loss due to separation from other family members, such as grandparents or fathers, who may have stayed behind or are no longer present (Serrano & Pérez, 2022). Children aged six to 14 participated in art and educational practices at shelters, expressing their emotions, concerns, and daily life conditions. Their adaptability to new family dynamics due to migration is a testament to their resilience. Several factors, including insufficient spots in local schools and problems with documentation verification, often hinder access to formal education in Mexico. As Silva (2023) explains, migrant children often find themselves in extremely vulnerable conditions, exacerbated by institutional negligence and structural inequality. This is particularly evident in the realm of education, where migrant children are often overlooked due to their transient status and the perception that they will not complete the school year. In this context, the initiatives studied are not just beneficial but critical for the development of migrant children. They not only provide academic support but also help them cope with situations of human mobility. Thus, the initiatives examined recognize the particular vulnerabilities faced by migrant children and offer psychological support through art and educational practices in response to the challenging environment they face. Accordingly, this study examined the programs and activities of childhood educators and art instructors working at migrant shelters with children of varying ages.

## **Data Analysis**

### *Educational Practices and Art Activities*

Participating in educational and art activities can improve the social and mental well-being of migrant children (IOM, 2023). These activities meet the children's needs by creating safe spaces and establishing supportive relationships with educators, which can include *holding*. The psychosocial benefits of these interventions are presented based on interviews with the participants referenced in Table 1. Below, Tables 2a and 2b catalog the educational practices and art activities used in interventions with migrant children. These practices include mobile reading rooms, educational games, and psychoeducation sessions, all of which promote self-expression, active engagement, and emotional awareness.

Educational practices		
Activities	Description	Examples
Mobile reading rooms	Employing picture books at reading rooms, children and adolescents identify and self-reflect on the narratives recounted, fostering a platform for self-expression through storytelling.	-Reading: <i>Dos conejos blancos</i> (Buitrago, 2015). This book describes the journey of a migrant child and her father as they travel north toward the U.S. border. - <i>El Monstruo de colores</i> (Llenas, 2012). A picture book that helps identify and organize emotion using colors for joy, sadness, anger, fear, and calm. - <i>Palabras en mi maleta</i> (Castaño, 2018). A picture book about the forced displacement of children in Colombia. It explores themes of growth, exploration and loss, aiming to instill values such as empathy, strength, courage, respect, and tolerance.
Games for learning purposes	Games are a valuable platform for learning and education, as they effectively promote active engagement within a safe environment, enabling individuals to experiment, explore, make mistakes, and learn from them.	- <i>Word hunter</i> activity (Ms. Solano, 2023). During this activity, children transcribe a compilation of words discovered within the confines of the classroom. Subsequently, they are taught the meaning of each copied word.
Psycho-education	Through the presentation of psychoeducation dynamics, children can express themselves among peers and cultivate self-awareness about their emotions and psychological processes. In addition, they serve as valuable tools for preventing violations of their human rights.	- <i>Emotions traffic light</i> (Ms. Beltrán, 2023) (see Figure 3). - <i>Agreements for interaction in the classroom</i> , - <i>Friendship Mailbox, Children's Rights Poster</i> (Ms. Beltrán, 2023).

Table 2a. Educational practices and art activities provided by educators.

Art activities		
Activities	Description	Examples
Worry dolls, or <i>Quitapesares</i> in Spanish	Worry dolls serve the purpose of assisting children and adolescents in expressing their anxiety, sadness, or worries, allowing them to externalize and address previously unmanaged emotions.	- <i>Quitapesares</i> are initially from Guatemala. If children find themselves unable to sleep due to their sorrows, they can confide in the doll, sharing their problems and placing it beneath their pillow (Ms. Cantú, 2023) (see Figure 5).
Modeling compound crafts and drawings	Through these activities, children and adolescents discover a form of non-verbal communication of their thoughts and emotions while developing their artistic skills.	<i>The backpack that migrates</i> (Ms. Cantú, 2023). In this activity, children portray the items they wish to carry in their backpacks during their journey, reflecting both cherished possessions and aspirations for the future.

Table 2b. Educational practices and art activities provided by educators.

The implementation of art activities in multilevel classrooms serves as a mechanism for facilitating emotional expression, self-reflection, and social cohesion among migrant children. For instance, drawing and writing activities (Figures 4 & 6), offer channels for children to articulate complex emotions and aspirations, exemplifying the transformative power of artistic expression. The creation of *quitapesares* or worry dolls (Figure 5) provides children with a tangible means to externalize anxieties, reinforcing emotional resilience through symbolic interactions. Similarly, reading rooms with picture books enable children and adolescents to engage with narratives that mirror their experiences, facilitating self-reflection and identity construction. As a whole, these practices are designed to cultivate a sense of agency and promote psychological well-being of migrant children.

### Psychosocial Support Findings

Migrant children frequently encounter emotional and social challenges due to their mobility circumstances. In response, educators in shelters at the U.S.-Mexico border engage in art and educational activities aimed at promoting psychosocial well-being. The following sections explore the multifaceted dimensions of this support, highlighting key findings across several thematic categories.

*Providing Safe Spaces for Migrant Children.* As explained by Ms. Solano (2024), educators prioritize ensuring that participating children are not re-victimized during social interactions or through the activities they facilitate.

Their goal is to create safe spaces that promote containment and empathy for migrant children, where “art and educational activities serve as an outlet for children to express themselves and share their experiences” (Ms. Cantú, 2024). Educators play a fundamental role in supporting migrant children articulate their emotions and concerns, a topic that will be explored in depth in the next section.

*Expression of Emotions and Concerns.* Migrant children often face fear, anxiety, and confusion stemming from a lack of information about their circumstances (Serrano & Pérez, 2022, p. 20). Educators like Ms. Solano (2024) have pointed out that “children do not choose to migrate; their parents suddenly inform them we are leaving.” Similarly, Ms. Cantú (2024) has noted that many children “do not know where they are going or with whom,” as caregivers frequently fail to communicate their plans and the reasons for their departure, resulting in a range of unresolved emotions. In addition to uncertainty, children often encounter abuse or aggression during their journeys and while staying in shelters. Ms. Beltrán (2024) recounted the experiences of two newly arrived girls who exhibited visible fear and were reluctant to participate in school activities due to distrust stemming from past trauma:

They were ashamed and showed distrust of people. This likely comes from their past experiences with aggression, whether they have faced it themselves or seen it happen to others. Because of this, it is hard for them to open up.

To address these situations, educators make concerted efforts to foster safe spaces where children can express their feelings through art and expressive activities.

Initially, children do not know how to express what they feel verbally. One activity that facilitates this process is the Emotions Traffic Light, which Ms. Beltrán (2024) uses to help children identify the emotions they experience each day upon arriving in the classroom. Another activity utilized to encourage children to share personal experiences is the Surprise Egg. Inside, educators place questions like: How do you feel? What difficult story have you experienced? Who feels closest to you here? As Ms. Beltrán (2024) noted, this activity helps children open up to their peers through verbal responses.

Educators designed activities to help children release their internal tensions through imaginative play. This approach helps them face traumatic experiences, as Esquivel et al. (2007, p. 12) noted. One example is the Quitapesares rag dolls children made during sessions with Ms. Cantú and Ms. Solano. They encouraged children to share their sorrows, sadness, or fears with the dolls, especially during restless nights. The dolls are intended to comfort and help children manage their unresolved emotions, becoming comforting companions.



Figure 3. Emotions traffic light at the multilevel classroom. (photo: authors)  
(Note. This educational activity facilitates the identification and effective management of emotions among children through visual methods. Rather than requiring children to verbalize their feelings, they can point to the specific emotion depicted.)



Figure 4. Art activity drawn by one of the children at the multilevel classroom (photo: authors).  
(Note. The use of drawing as a medium allows children to articulate complex emotions and experiences that they may not yet be able to express verbally; for instance, this drawing specifically denotes happiness for being in that specific space (classroom), as inferred from the happy-faced sun, the rainbow, and the colors used.)

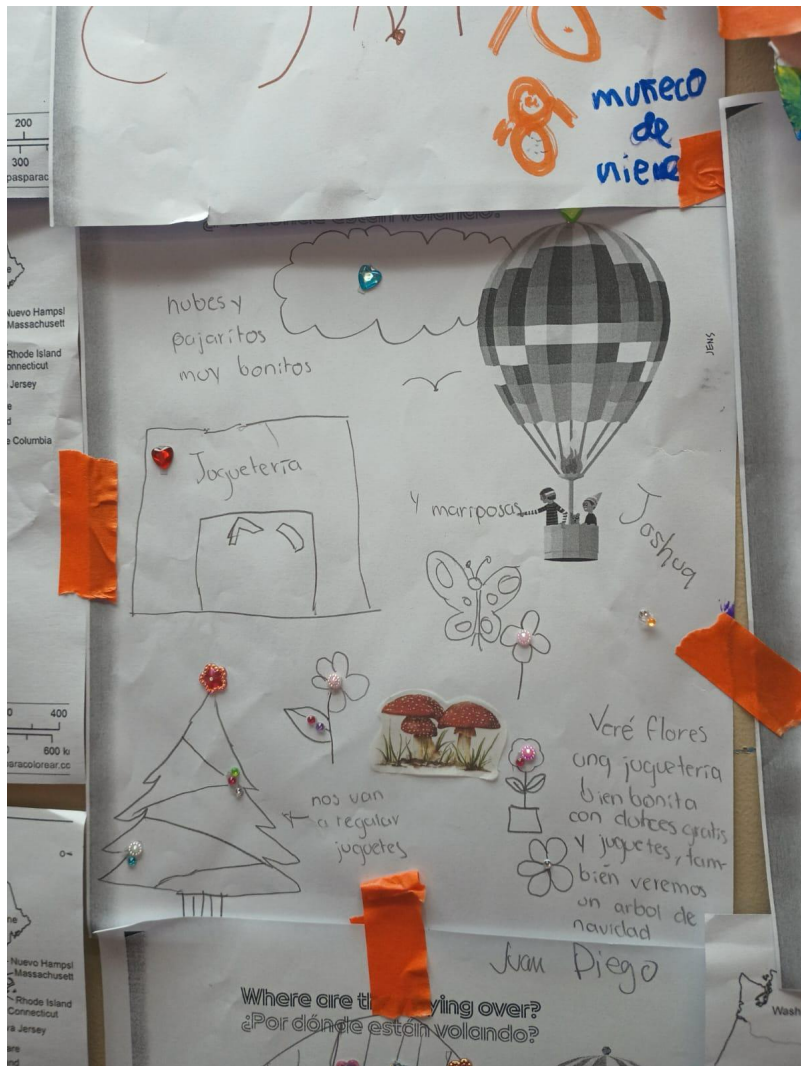


*Figure 5.* One of the children in the making-process of a Quitapesares during a session led by Ms. Solano and Ms. Cantú (photo: authors).  
(*Note.* This creative process helps children externalize their worries and find comfort in their handmade dolls.)

*Expression of Desires and Aspirations.* Ms. Cantú (2024) emphasizes that “it is important to listen to and observe children, allowing them to express and recognize themselves in activities,” as through the latter, children are able to convey their lived experiences and their desires and things that hold symbolic value in their lives. Among the activities conducted, Ms. Cantú (2024) lists creative writing and comic drawing. Within the aspirations expressed by children in these activities are various desires:

They would like to be in the United States, either in a house, with their mom, with their dad, or at their school. In their future drawings, they place their entire family together, regardless of whether half of them are there [in their place of origin] and others are here [in Tijuana]. They have been told that at some point, everyone will be together. It is something they see as a longing, however, it can also have a very strong impact on them if it does not come true. (Ms. Solano, 2024)

These desires for family unity have also been identified by Serrano and Pérez (2022), who highlight that children's yearning revolves around physical spaces where the whole family can live together (p. 17).



*Figure 6.* Drawings made by diverse children at the multilevel classroom during a mapping session conducted by Güiza & Beltrán-Duran (2025) (photo: authors). (Note. This drawing illustrates elements such as a toy store, butterflies, and a hot air balloon, representing the child's imaginative expression and longing for a joyful and united future, denoting how children use creative activities to convey their dreams and the symbolic value these dreams hold in their lives.)

In this sense, it is noted that while nurturing children's imagination in expressing their desires is encouraged, there is also a need for honesty regarding their expectations. As Ms. Solano (2024) mentions:

It is not that educators should cloud their aspirations; rather, it is necessary for parents to be able to talk to them honestly because, in the end, children do observe, understand, and pay attention to what is happening around them.

In other words, while children should have the opportunity to express their wishes and aspirations through their imagination, it is equally crucial for adults to address these expectations realistically, avoiding false hopes while not completely limiting their aspirations.

*The Holding Relationship Between Educators and Children.* As previously mentioned, holding, or emotional support, refers to the caregiver's ability to provide an emotionally safe and containing environment for children. In this context, Ms. Cantú (2024) notes:

Migrant mothers are busy, as they focus on the migration process, which involves communicating with relatives in the destination country, preparing paperwork, and addressing their families' basic needs, among other things. In this context, the emotional support for children is left a bit aside.

It is understood that mothers prioritize their efforts to resolve their migration status while ensuring food and shelter for their children. This is where the role of holding by educators comes into play, as they carry out educational and art activities while providing support and emotional sustenance for the children, filling the void left by their mothers. As Ms. Cantú (2024) comments, "sometimes, it might seem like we are taking on the role of a mother, but what we are doing is that part of emotional accompaniment that children need."

Consequently, the support provided by educators to children plays a crucial role in offering them a sense of security and emotional stability, which is often lacking or even absent in their relationship with their primary caregivers. Nevertheless, Ms. Solano (2024) states that "creating a bond of trust and emotional accompaniment with children and their mothers is crucial." Educators aim to raise mothers' awareness of their children's emotional needs through after-school meetings and homework activities. Often, even unintentionally, it is the children themselves who initiate conversations with their mothers about their emotions. Thus, emphasis is placed on the need to develop the holding function with the primary caregivers, as they bear the responsibility of ensuring their children's psychosocial well-being. Additionally, strengthening the relationship through holding will eventually foster security in children and a sense of belonging within their families.

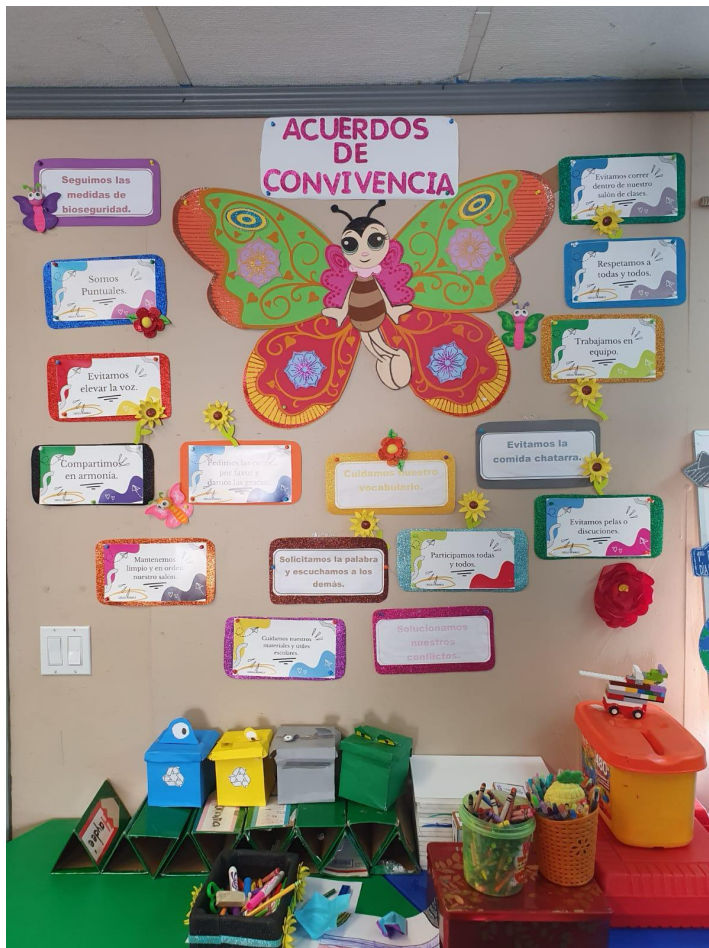
*Reading Stories.* Reading stories is another helpful activity for children. Ms. Cantú (2023) shared: “if children are worried or uncomfortable about something, the pretext of stories helps them express their situations.” Stories allowed children to see different characters and relate them to their experiences. This helped them see different perspectives and understand other scenarios (Schaefer, 2011, pp. 333-335). When children engage with stories, they may feel inspired to talk about their doubts, challenges, or personal experiences with adults. Ms. Cantú (2023) stated that stories are effective for discussing serious issues like violence and sexual abuse. For instance, she uses the story *¡Estela, grita muy fuerte!* (Olid, 2021) to start conversations between children and adults about these topics. Ms. Cantú (2023) considered such readings give children the tools they need to spot and prevent harmful experiences.

*Development of Knowledge and Skills.* Upon arriving at shelters, a significant educational lag is often evident. Ms. Cantú (2024) mentions that younger migrant children “often do not know how to read or write, which causes them fear when engaging in activities involving literacy.” This low level of literacy is also observed in programs like the multigrade classroom where Ms. Beltrán (2024) collaborates, stating that “the classroom includes children and adolescents aged six to 14. We have different levels based on the situations they bring, as many have significant educational gaps.”

In response, it is imperative to meet not only the behavioral and emotional needs, but also the academic needs of these children. In this regard, UNICEF Mexico (2022) emphasizes that access to education helps mitigate the loss of educational opportunities resulting from migrant displacement. It is precisely here that art and educational programs provide tools to develop and strengthen children’s cognitive and motor skills. Furthermore, art activities allow children to explore talents in crafts and activities they may not have previously experienced due to their mobility situation. Some examples mentioned by Ms. Solano (2023) include the *Word Hunter* game, where children often verbalize doubts about their ability to read or write beforehand, but afterward, they are amazed by their literacy skills (see Table 2a). Some children have also discovered artistic abilities, such as creating highly detailed clay figures, which has fostered aspirations for their educational and professional futures (see Table 2b).

Activities led by educators provide practical life skills to children, such as personal care and household organization. For example, in the multilevel classroom, Ms. Beltrán (2024) not only taught educational competencies but also instructed children on keeping their spaces clean, organizing materials belonging to the whole classroom, performing task-management roles, effective communication, and personal hygiene. All this is accomplished through practices like the *Classroom Interaction Agreements* and the *Friendship Mailbox* (see Figures 7 and 8).

Regarding classroom management, the *Classroom Interaction Agreements* (Figure 7) established a structured environment prioritizing teamwork, mutual respect, and well-being, ensuring a safe space for collective learning. Meanwhile, the *Friendship Mailbox* (Figure 8) fostered positive social interactions by encouraging children to write notes of appreciation to peers, reinforcing supportive relationships and enhancing their sense of belonging within the classroom community. These initiatives, combining art activities with structured social dynamics, contributed to the holistic development of migrant children, addressing their psychosocial needs and educational gaps.



*Figure 7. Classroom Interaction Agreements at the multilevel classroom, below recycling bins created with students from CETYS Universidad (photo: authors). (Note. These are the general rules of engagement and self-care in the classroom, where teamwork, respect, nutrition and sharing disposition stand out.)*

*Building Community Bonds and a Sense of Belonging.* The educational and art programs aim to help children connect through group activities. The goal is to reduce feelings of loneliness and build a supportive community, as advised by UNICEF Mexico (2022). One way they do this is through the Friendship Mailbox. In this activity, children write thank you letters to each other every day. Ms. Beltrán ensured each child received a letter by giving them the names of the person they would write. Art activities help children make friends and better understand each other. Many migrant kids in Tijuana often feel excluded or unfairly treated. Creating art allows teachers to express their feelings and helps them understand their experiences. Ms. Beltrán (2024) explains that these activities also help children develop their identity and feel like they belong. Students explore their identity in the classroom by selecting a name or figure, such as a superhero. They draw their chosen superhero and describe the special powers they would have, which helps them connect with that identity. As a group, they also embrace the program named *Círculo Monarca*, which appeals to them because the monarch butterfly has a migratory pattern.



Figure 8. Friendship Mailbox at the multilevel classroom (photo: authors).

*Fostering Connections among Migrant Families.* The aforementioned psychosocial benefits have a significant impact not only on the well-being of migrant children but also on that of their primary caregivers. According to Ms. Solano (2023), “children act as a link that involves their primary caregivers in activities, creating connections between them and adults, and promoting a sense of community among them.” On this note, Ms. Beltrán (2023) shares how certain mothers, concerned for the safety of their children, used to remain outside the school premises throughout the day. To address this situation, the educator decided to involve them in alternative activities within the school, specifically handicrafts with yarn. As a result, some mothers started making and selling items from these activities to generate additional income. Accordingly, the mothers began to form both commercial and friendship relationships outside the school, demonstrating that the educational and art activities in which their children participate extend beyond the school environment and integrate into the social fabric. This contributed to strengthening community bonds and cultivating a sense of belonging for both the children and their families.

*Equipping Migrant Children with Self-advocacy.* Educators have noted meaningful changes in children, who are increasingly voicing concerns about their living situations, for instance questioning why they can’t attend school like other children. These inquiries reflect a growing awareness of the injustices they face, empowering them to express their thoughts and feelings and advocate for their fundamental human rights. The impact of these interventions is profound, with children often wanting to stay in touch with educators after leaving. Ms. Beltrán (2024) recounts the story about a Salvadoran girl who recently left after her parents successfully migrated to the United States:

One day, I received a message from her and I asked how she was doing in school. She said: I am doing well, even though some kids at school were bullying me because I do not speak English. But you taught me something important. I do not have to be a part of that problem [meaning, get involved in aggressive behavior]. I told my teacher, and you know what? They took those kids to the principal’s office, and now no one bothers me.

The story shared by Ms. Beltrán reflects how deeply these interventions can influence children’s confidence and self-advocacy skills. In this case, the girl’s decision to seek help from school authorities instead of responding aggressively to bullying reflects her understanding that advocacy can be a productive response to injustice, a lesson nurtured through her experience in the shelter.

Gratitude towards educators at migrant shelters highlights the resilience of children, as these interventions assist them in navigating challenges and equip them with essential skills for their future. Ms. Solano (2024) emphasizes, “our goal is to provide tools that will support them, regardless of where they may

go.” Equipping migrant children with self-advocacy involves creating safe spaces where they can explore their stories and express themselves. By implementing holding and empathy practices, educators nurture the children’s psychological well-being and personal growth, while also preparing them to manage challenging circumstances.

## **Conclusions**

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of art and educational practices in supporting the well-being of migrant children awaiting asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border. The interventions analyzed are guided by human rights principles, addressing immediate psychosocial needs and establishing a foundation for fostering the children’s self-advocacy. By creating safe spaces where children can safely explore and express their emotions, these interventions provide a critical response to the challenges faced by migrant children and families who have endured difficult experiences on their migratory journeys.

The findings underscore the proactive involvement of art educators in promoting the psychosocial well-being of migrant children. Despite facing limited resources, social isolation, and emotional distress, the creative interventions led by these educators offer critical support. They empower children to process challenging emotions, advocate for themselves, and cultivate skills to navigate current and future obstacles. Such interventions are vital given the prevalence of ACEs among migrant children, which include displacement, exposure to violence, and family separation.

The research findings indicate that educators can play a crucial role in providing a supportive environment within shelters, delivering essential stability and a sense of safety. These factors are vital for migrant children, who face increased vulnerability due to their developmental needs and the challenges posed by adverse migratory conditions. By creating safe spaces, educators provide children with valuable coping mechanisms to deal with adversity and foster resilience, a critical factor in their development. For instance, storytelling and expressive arts provide an effective outlet for children to engage with their experiences. Group activities further enhance this by creating a collaborative atmosphere, nurturing supportive relationships and peer engagement, ultimately promoting a sense of community for children who otherwise navigate a transient lifestyle in migration shelters.

The support offered by these programs aligns with the principles outlined in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) (1989). This Convention emphasizes participation and non-discrimination, evident in the rights-based approach of these shelter programs that actively involve children in their learning and value their perspectives. Through educational activities, children understand the importance of their voices and how to express them effectively. This connection illustrates that children’s rights can be upheld even in difficult

circumstances, underscoring their right to learn, play, and interact with peers in safe spaces. Recognizing the agency of migrant children empowers them to advocate for their rights. However, this requires a supportive environment where children can exercise their human rights in accordance with the four key principles of the CRC (1989): non-discrimination; the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival, and development; and the right to participate.

The findings highlight the importance of collaboration between global aid agencies and local NGOs in creating comprehensive support systems for migrant children and their families. As governmental resources become increasingly constrained, NGOs and educators have assumed a vital role in providing essential services. To build upon these findings, future research should investigate the long-term effects of these interventions on the psychosocial well-being and overall development of migrant children. Such studies could offer valuable insights and inform potential interventions. Moreover, future research could explore the role of family engagement in enhancing the psychosocial benefits of art and educational practices, particularly by examining how collaborative programs with parents and other family members might help foster a more holistic support system for migrant children.

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