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"I Don't Want War in My House": Young Children's Meaning-Making of War and Peace Through Their Drawings

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Abstract

War and conflict have always been an integral part of humankind, posing significant threats to humanity. This article investigates young children's conceptualisation of war and peace through their drawings. Taking a qualitative, interpretive research paradigm, eight five-year-old children who had never experienced war first-hand were invited to draw pictures depicting their understandings of war and peace accompanied by their narratives. The drawing and talk processes were video-recorded. Drawing on the theory of social semiotics, this study considers drawing as a multimodal visual artefact and metaphorical representation to analyse the content as illustrated by children. Employing a phenomenological approach, the analysis centres on the meanings, feelings, and constructs of war and peace that the participant children communicated through 25 drawings. The findings indicate that children used visual elements like lines, colours, symbols, and narratives to convey multilayered meaning-making, where five overarching themes were identified as the children's conceptualisations of war: concrete depictions and symbols of war and warfare such as weapons and soldiers; descriptions of identifiable actions of war to include fighting, shooting, and killing; the negative consequences of war including dead people and animals, sadness and homelessness; conceptualising peace as the end of war and as a happy, safe place with beautiful nature; and reflections on war and peace including the dichotomy between the two. The findings show that while children who do not have first-hand experience of war, struggle to fully comprehend its complexity, they still exhibit a basic understanding of the trauma of war. The findings also emphasise the importance of giving voice to children to communicate their understandings and emotions through drawing.

Keywords

children's conceptualisation; drawings; meaning-making; peace; social semiotics; war

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1. Introduction

Conflict is an enduring aspect of human history, causing significant harm to individuals and societies through the destruction of the environment, buildings, and infrastructure, and lasting physical injuries, trauma, and loss of life (Özgür, 2015; Oztabak, 2020). Recent historical events such as the civil war in Syria (2011–2020), and ongoing conflicts like the Russian-Ukrainian war (since 2022) and the Israel-Palestine war (since 2023)—happening as this article is being written—exemplify the tumultuous landscape of global conflicts. Children are pervasively exposed to war, either directly in conflict zones or indirectly through media exposure, prompting them to think about war from a young age (Ålvik, 1968).

Adopting a social semiotics perspective (Kress, 2010), this study explores how eight five-year-old children in Malta use drawing as a communication tool to develop their understanding of war and peace, where drawing is considered a semiotic activity and a visual language children use to process, construct, and communicate their meanings and perspectives (Van Oers, 1997).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Children's Understanding of War

Children's conceptualisation of war and peace has been a major focus in research (see, e.g., Hall, 1993; Ilifiandra & Saripudin, 2023; Jabbar & Betawi, 2019; Rosell, 1968). Several researchers used drawing as a data collection method, frequently asking children to depict war and peace on separate sheets, accompanied by descriptions of their drawings (Ålvik, 1968; Fargas-Malet & Dillenburger, 2014; Walker et al., 2003). Studies (Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1998; Jabbar & Betawi, 2019; McLernon & Cairns, 2001; Walker et al., 2003) show that children aged three to eight demonstrate a basic understanding of war and peace irrespective of their exposure to conflict, often illustrating tangible elements such as weapons and violence, including fighting and killing. Older children (six to ten years old) incorporate more detailed and abstract concepts, including symbolism and the consequences of war, such as injuries and fatalities.

Buldu's (2009) study with Emirati children, which combined free drawing and structured interviews, found that younger children (five- to six-year-olds) struggled to depict war, while older children (seven to eight) drew weapons (e.g., guns, bombs, grenades, planes, tanks), actions of armed conflict (e.g., fighting, killing, destroying) between opposing teams or nations, and its negative consequences (e.g., dead bodies, injured people, destroyed buildings). They also depicted peace represented through illustrations of nature and fun activities with family and friends. These findings are consistent with those of Jabbar and Betawi's (2019), who likewise asked children to draw their understandings of war and peace, and held conversations with them where they claimed that children's war drawings often included war activities, conflict, war equipment, and adverse effects, whereas peace was depicted as a state of serenity.

2.2. Children's Understanding of Peace

Children's conceptualisation of peace varies, with some viewing it as the "absence of war" (McLernon & Cairns, 2001, p.50), represented by war memorials or military soldiers retreating from battle, and equating peace with "not fighting" (Gülec, 2021, p. 403) or as a state of "normality" (McLernon & Cairns, 2001,

p. 50)—a finding supported by other researchers (Covell et al., 1994; Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1993, 1998; Walker et al., 2003). This "negative peace" perspective (Gülec, 2021, p. 391) regards peace as "a state of stillness" (Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1993, p. 70) and the elimination of direct violence (Gülec, 2021). Conversely, children also depict "positive peace" (Gülec, 2021, p. 402), often illustrated through nature scenes of "tranquillity or quietness" (McLernon & Cairns, 2001, p. 54), or "contentment and serenity" (Jabbar & Betawi, 2019, p. 1).

Children's conceptualisation of peace includes interpersonal interactions (Covell et al., 1994; Özer et al., 2018) such as depictions of "people with different skin colour being side by side and hand in hand, hands shaking, the coexistence of various flags" (Gülec, 2021, p. 403), reflecting friendship, cooperation, concern for others, and unity (Covell et al., 1994; Gülec, 2021; Walker et al., 2003). Some children associate peace with religious images and spirituality, often depicting religious symbols like churches and the crucifixion (Jabbar & Betawi, 2019; McLernon & Cairns, 2001).

2.3. Conceptualisations of War-Exposed and Non-Exposed Children

War-exposed children often focus on concrete aspects of warfare and destruction, including depictions of casualties, bombings, and bloodshed, influenced by their sociocultural conditions and traumatic experiences (Özer et al., 2018). Conversely, children without direct war experience understand conflict through media and family exposure (Walker et al., 2003), processing and interpreting the images they see and information they receive. War-exposed children conceptualise peace as a return to normal life devoid of destruction, while non-exposed children perceive peace in more abstract terms such as harmony and friendships (McLernon & Cairns, 2001; Özer et al., 2018; Oztabak, 2020; Raviv et al., 1999).

2.4. Theoretical Framework

This study integrates social semiotics (Kress, 1997, 2003, 2010; Kress & Jewitt, 2003) and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) to interpret children's drawings as meaningful signs conveying their knowledge, ideas, emotions, and experiences to and with others.

A social semiotics theoretical perspective views children's drawings as "semiotic resources" and "textual artefacts" (Jewitt et al., 2016, p. 65); interrelating with multimodality, it can also inform how children use semiotic modes such as lines, colours, and symbols to organise their understanding of the world and communicate that meaning to others (Danielsson & Selander, 2021). Thus, drawing serves as an intentional semiotic mode of meaning-making (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001), a channel of "direct metaphorical communication" (Wright, 2010a, p. 166) that children use to link internal concepts with external representations in a "tangible and permanent form" (Thompson, 1995, p. 11), and convey their multilayered meanings to others. The interplay of elements within a drawing facilitates new meanings for both the drawer and the reader (Bateman, 2008). By combining images with narrative, children use drawing as a cognitive tool where thoughts and emotions interact (Wright, 2010a). Social semiotics acknowledges that children's drawings are impregnated with layers of meaning, allowing for a dual level of interpretation (see also Deguara, 2019):

1. The content, or "signifier" (Barthes, 1964, p. 10), of a drawing, which involves an objective analysis at the surface level of the "what or who" (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 37), is represented in a drawing (concretely depicted images of people, places, objects, and events).
2. The deeper attributed meaning, or "signified" (Barthes, 1964, p. 1), of a drawing, which involves "higher levels of signification" (Penn, 2000, p. 230), involves the interpretation of implied meanings to include abstract concepts, emotions, thoughts, and values (see also Van Leeuwen, 2005).

Sociocultural theory recognises that children's drawings are influenced by their cultural and social contexts, and shaped by interactions with family, friends, the home and school environments, media exposure, and the community. Both social semiotics and sociocultural theory highlight the active role of individuals in creating and exploring meanings within specific societal, cultural, and temporal contexts (Jewitt, 2009a, 2009b; Kress, 2000, 2004, 2010; Kress & Jewitt, 2003). Drawing, therefore, serves as a tool for meaning construction, enabling children to actively engage with their surroundings while negotiating their identities through visual representation.

2.5. Research Question

Given the findings on children's ideas of war and peace in drawings as explored in various disciplines of visual communication research (see, e.g., Fargas-Malet & Dillenburger, 2014; Ilfiandra & Sarpudin, 2023; Jabbar & Betawi, 2019; Özer et al., 2018), we know that "children feel, children know...war" (Malaguzzi, 1991/2021, p. 16) directly through first-hand experiences and indirectly through the media and as influenced by their geo-cultural, economic, political, and sociocultural contexts. Young children might find it difficult to articulate their complex thoughts and emotions about war solely through verbal means. Using drawing as a vehicle of communication can facilitate and support verbal expression and meaning-making (Alerby, 2015). Moreover, around the age of five, children transition from the preoperational phase to more advanced cognitive processes, where they begin to use symbolic thinking more effectively (Piaget, 1951), making it important to understand how they represent complex and abstract concepts in their drawings (Veraska & Veraska, 2016). Besides, five-year-olds begin to show an understanding of fairness, justice, and conflict (Turiel, 2022), making their perspectives on war and peace particularly insightful.

This article examines how young children's drawings can serve as a window into their thought processes and emotional world, particularly relating to complex and distressing topics, and unwrap how they use symbolic representation to communicate their unfiltered insights into their conceptualisations of war and peace. Furthermore, research is lacking about five-year-old children's drawings and their conceptualisations of war and peace from a multimodal semiotic perspective. This study aims to fill this gap by examining five-year-old children's drawings as multimodal visual artefacts that are inherently contrastive, where children use multiple semiotic modes—such as page layout, size, or colour—to make meaning (Danielsson & Selander, 2021), arrange the visual elements of a drawing, and convey discourse relations of "temporal relations" (e.g., the First War happened, then people were dead or homeless, then peace happened; see Danielsson & Selander, 2016, p. 18) or "contrast" (e.g., war and peace, life and death; see Papazoglou, 2010, p. 6) in and between drawings—such studies are lacking.

Thus, in the following, I propose to address this research question:

How do five-year-old children, without prior exposure to war conceptualise war and peace through their drawings?

3. Methods and Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive phenomenological research paradigm, recognising that individuals are shaped by their lived experiences (Peat et al., 2019). Interpretive phenomenology, grounded in a hermeneutic approach, seeks to understand phenomena within historical, cultural, and social contexts, with both researchers and participants co-constructing the subjective experiences and meanings of individuals while acknowledging the influence of social norms and values (Heidegger, 1962; Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2009). Through engaging with children about their drawings, interpretive phenomenology helps to uncover the personal and emotional significance behind their representations, revealing how each child conceptualises war and peace based on their unique narratives, perspectives, and concerns (Smith et al., 2009). While interpretative phenomenology delves into the deeper meanings within children's drawings, social semiotics deconstructs the symbolic and cultural significance, as well as the ascribed meanings of these visual representations (Kress, 1997, 2010); thus, interpretative phenomenology and social semiotics overlap in their aim to understand the in-depth attributed meanings. Combined, interpretative phenomenology and social semiotics offer a comprehensive analysis of children's abstract and emotionally charged depictions, blending an examination of cultural symbols with an understanding of individual experiences. This integrated framework deepens our understanding of how children, even without direct exposure to war, conceptualise complex ideas like war and peace by synthesising social and personal perspectives through narrative interpretation and researcher reflexivity (Heidegger, 2005; Tuffour, 2017).

3.2. Drawing and Narratives as Child-Appropriate Modes for Data Collection

Drawing is a spontaneous and effective child-friendly communication tool, allowing children to express themselves comfortably in visual and symbolic forms, in ways that verbal language does not (Alerby, 2015; Deguara, 2019; Mitchell, 2006). Embedded with other modes, such as gestures, mark-making, speaking, and writing, children make deliberate decisions about what to represent and how to do so (Deguara, 2019). Thus, drawing enables children to communicate their thoughts and emotions and create meaning (Deguara & Nutbrown, 2018). Its familiarity and ease of use (Prosser & Burke, 2008) make drawing a valuable elicitation tool enabling children to convey, review, and refine their understandings tangibly (Marion & Crowder, 2013). It provides insights into children's experiences, perceptions, and cognitive processes, thereby enhancing contextual accuracy, relevance, and validity of data (Coates & Coates, 2011; Liebenberg, 2009).

Although a drawing can serve as an effective mode of communication, on its own, it may be "the limit of meaning" (Barthes, 1977, p. 152), potentially conveying a different or less nuanced connotation than intended (Kress, 1997). Thus, children often supplement drawings with other modes such as talk, vocalisations, and gestures, creating a dynamic mediation platform, that informs the mode of drawing and aids in understanding and expressing children's thoughts while exploring moral and ethical concepts (Nielsen,

2009). The "draw-and-talk method" (Tay-Lim & Lim, 2013, p. 66) offers insights into children's thought processes, showing the "co-emergence" (Wright, 2008, para. 6) of form, content, and meaning. Listening to children's talk as they draw helps adults to get a deeper understanding and interpretation of the meanings they create (Deguara & Nutbrown, 2018; Podobnik et al., 2024). For this article, drawing and talk are considered inseparable and interdependent, forming a "single multimodal act" (Wright, 2010b, p. 160), and providing a comprehensive account of children's meaning-making (Coates & Coates, 2006).

3.3. The Participants

Eight children with an average age of five-and-a-half years, residing in Malta and with no prior exposure to war, were invited to draw pictures depicting their understandings of war and peace accompanied by verbal narratives. The group included five boys (Andre, Brian, Ethan, Paul, and Seth) and three girls (Eva, Martha, and Natalie) attending the same classroom. Three children had at least one parent of Maltese origin, speaking Maltese and/or English at home. The others had parents from various non-Maltese backgrounds, with all but one being bilingual, speaking English and another language at home. Ethan and Andre had a friend who was a war refugee. The study occurred a year after the onset of the Ukrainian-Russian war, during which Malta received Ukrainian refugees, including children. Children from families fleeing war-affected regions such as Ukraine, Syria, and African countries, also attended the same school.

3.4. Data Collection

The data collection spanned over two months. Children were randomly paired based on their availability in class, taken to a different room, provided ample drawing materials, and encouraged to draw freely at least two illustrations at one-month intervals. Before each drawing session, I briefly discussed their understanding of war and peace. Language barriers existed as some children had English or Maltese as a second or third language, making it difficult to comprehend the words "war" and "peace." To aid understanding, I showed them eight pictures depicting war and peace scenes, which we described and discussed. Once these pictures were shown to the children, it was evident that they had an understanding of war and peace. Subsequently, children were invited to draw their conceptualisations of war, peace, or, as suggested by them, a combination of both. I took the role of a participant observer, engaging with the children during and after the drawing process while video-recording the sessions. There were no time constraints, allowing children to take as long as needed. Informal conversations during and after each session involved open-ended questions to elicit elaboration on their drawings and articulate their thoughts (Houen et al., 2022). Children were encouraged to label their drawings. In total, 25 drawings were created, accompanied by approximately three hours of video recordings, used solely for transcription. The drawings were scanned, saved, and returned to the children.

3.5. Ethical Issues

This study adhered to the Ethical Guidelines for Education Research by the British Educational Research Association (2018), the Research Code of Practice (University of Malta, 2019a), and the Research Ethics Review Procedures (University of Malta, 2019b). Ethical clearance was obtained and informed consent was secured from both the teacher and the parents. Children's informed assent was negotiated using a child-friendly, image-based booklet explaining the research process. Each child confirmed their assent by drawing a smiley face and a self-portrait in the booklet. Recognising assent as conditional and negotiable,

"provisional consent" (Flewitt, 2005, p. 556) was sought before and during each session. The children's ongoing interest was verified through verbal and non-verbal cues, ensuring voluntary participation. In rare instances of momentary dissent, such as preferring to finish a class activity first, the children's preferences were respected and they participated later. To safeguard the children's identities, pseudonyms were used.

To date, there is no specific ethical protocol that relates to research on children in conflict (Bennouna & Stark, 2020). To address ethical challenges involving sensitive topics like war, I remained vigilant to signs of distress in children, while psychological support from the school's professional team was available, though never needed. Each drawing was also shared with the classroom teacher to prepare her for any related conversations taken up in the classroom.

3.6. Using Systematic Visual Analysis

To analyse the children's drawings as visual artefacts, I adapted Penn's (2000, pp. 235–240) model of visual and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2011). Following Penn's steps, I began by configuring the data—sorting, indexing, organising, and saving the children's drawings. I then moved to Penn's second step of visual analysis, where I explored the form and content of the drawings (signifier) to try to get an initial understanding of what the children drew. This was done with the creation of a data log that included the names of all the drawings, the children's pseudonyms, and accompanying transcripts, which simultaneously enabled familiarisation with the data and preliminary thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2011).

Moving to the third step of Penn's model, I visited and re-visited the children's drawings, coding the form (modes: mark-making, size, layout, colours) and the content (themes; see Braun & Clarke, 2011) represented in the children's drawings, like war-related objects and actions identified at the surface level. This process enabled the compilation of an "inventory of content" (Table 1) across the data set.

The fourth step of Penn's visual analysis involved the examination of the deeper attributed "structures of meaning" (signified; Nicolopoulou et al., 1994, p. 106): the underlying knowledge, thinking processes, emotions, and conceptualisations of war and peace. This was done by reading the transcriptions of the children's narratives and coding them to identify common patterns and the generation of themes. Coding ranged from *simple* (single-drawn war objects) to *complex* (multiple objects or actions of war in one drawing), supported by the children's verbal commentary. The interpretive reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2011; Chapman et al., 2017) generated five themes in the children's drawings: (a) concrete objects of war and warfare, (b) war activities, (c) negative consequences of war, (d) conceptualisations of peace and the emotions of happiness, and (e) reflections on the dichotomy of war and peace.

4. Findings

4.1. Concrete Objects: Warfare and Military Equipment

I began by analysing the content of the children's drawings at the surface level. Of the 25 drawings, 14 depicted war, six depicted peace, and five combined elements of both war and peace, indicating the children's understanding of both concepts. Table 1 presents an "inventory of content" illustrating the variety of war and peace-related objects depicted by the children.

Table 1. The inventory of content of children's drawings.

Concrete objects drawn	Number of objects
War	
Military equipment	
Soldiers	10
Guns	10
Bombs	7
Bullets	3
Smoke	3
Helmets	2
Aeroplane	1
War tank	1
Actions of war	
Shooting/firing	7
Killing	4
Fighting	4
Soldiers helping war victims	4
Consequences of war	
Dead people	6
Injured people	1
Destroyed homes/homelessness	4
Destroyed trees	4
Destroyed cars	2
Broken hearts	2
Sad people	6
Peace	
Happy people/children	9
Flags	3
Safe place with beautiful nature	4

Nineteen drawings featured war-related elements, with soldiers and guns being the most common (Table 1). In his drawing, titled *Camouflage Soldiers* (Figure 1a), Paul drew the skyline and grassline with two small armed soldiers confronting each other, each with a gun in hand on either side of the paper. Interpreting the form of the drawing, the small size of the soldiers compared to the size of the paper aligns with Skattebol's (2006) suggestion that drawing small objects can give children a sense of control and power. In this case, the small camouflaged soldiers allowed Paul to manage and hide them easily. The small size might also represent the soldiers' insignificance compared to the enormity of the war, as Paul described war as "very big...never-ending...many people fight in the war." Paul drew a bullet as a small black circle in the space between the soldiers, saying that "the bullet [is] already out of the gun," demonstrating an understanding of warfare and combat. His detailed description of a soldier in camouflage attire confirms his knowledge:

> Black dots and green dots to disguise them [the soldiers]....They are wearing camouflage clothes...the soldiers hide in the grass...they have to stay still when they wear camouflage....They dress up like that because they have to shoot.

Paul expressed excitement about being a sniper, stating: "Imagine if I had a camouflage shirt and shorts like that and I would lie on the grass. I would hide in the grass and I would be, like, I have a floating head." He demonstrated a deep knowledge of guns, describing them as "long guns, wide guns, big guns...there are different guns," noting distinct features like "guns with five holes." He also mentioned playing at war with toy guns at home, "shooting at my wardrobe," clarifying that his guns were "made out of plastic" and harmless—and thus distinguishing between fantasy and reality.

Figure 1. Children's drawings of warfare: *Camouflage Soldiers* by Paul (a), *Soldier With a Gun—I Don't Like Guns* by Eva (b), *A Soldier With a Gun* by Seth (c), and *Girl Soldier Shooting Trees* by Madeline (d).

Eva's drawing, *Soldier With a Gun—I Don't Like Guns* (Figure 1b), depicts a soldier shooting another person, representing her complex perception of warfare. She views the conflict as between "a good soldier" defending peace (drawn at the top, symbolising power) and "bad people" (at the bottom, symbolising weakness) who indiscriminately "shoot everyone," including innocent bystanders. Eva justifies the "good" soldier's actions, believing he eliminates threats: "The good soldier...is happy because he killed the bad people." The mono-colour brown likely represents camouflage clothing. Drawing a soldier without legs might indicate uncertainty in depicting war (Eddy, 2010). In *A Broken Heart From War* (Figure 2b), Eva again portrays "good soldiers" fighting "bad people," stating: "War is when the good soldiers shoot all the bad people...the good people are happy because they kill the bad people." Yet, she expresses disapproval of guns, highlighting moral ambiguity: "I do not like guns because they kill people."

Seth's *A Soldier With a Gun* (Figure 1c) shows a soldier loading a big, black gun and shooting a bullet/red ball of fire. The gun's big size and colour likely reflect the child's perception of its power, while the grey marks at the top indicate a blast. This drawing is probably influenced by television, linking media exposure to his understanding of war. Like Eva, Seth sees armed conflict as a moral action, where "some people die because they are naughty," aligning with simplified media narratives of good versus evil, where violence becomes a means to rectify perceived injustices. Conversely, Madeline's *A Girl Soldier Shooting Trees* (Figure 1d), is colourful, without depicting destruction or killing, but only a girl soldier shooting trees, presumably representing herself. The heart on the right of the drawing symbolises love for the good soldier and people overcoming war.

In a collaborative drawing session, Seth and Eva influenced each other's depictions of war—both used circular blue and black lines to represent bombing blasts, signifying destruction. Seth's *War in the Forest—The Good Guy Kills the Bad Guy* (Figure 2a) is described as follows: "This is the storm...the fire that killed him." Conversely, Eva's *A Broken Heart From War* (Figure 2b) adopted Seth's blast imagery, describing it as "smoke...the smoke is black." While Seth focused on bombing destruction, Eva focused on the consequences of war, referring to sadness and "a broken heart."
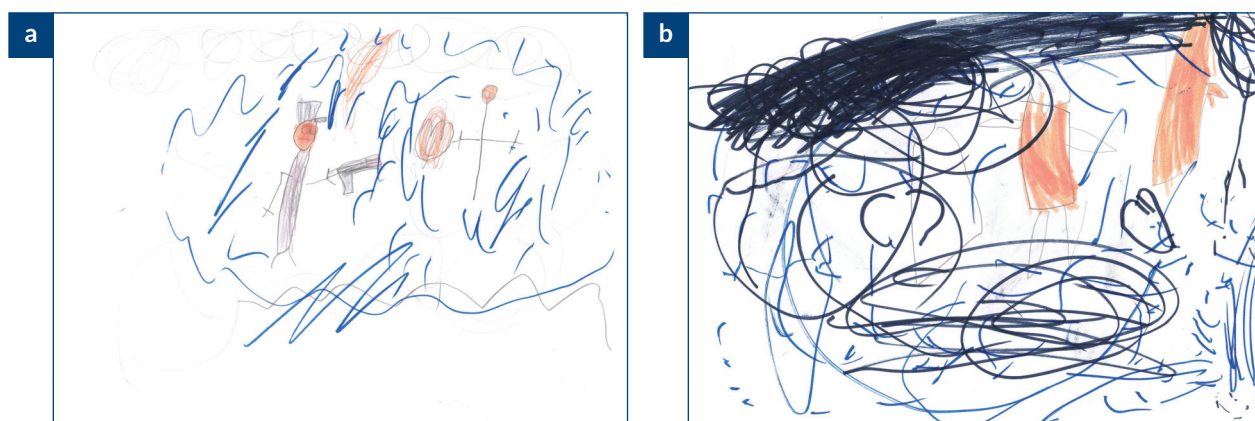
Figure 2. Bombing representations: *War in the Forest—The Good Guy Kills the Bad Guy* by Seth (a) and *A Broken Heart From War by Eva* (b).

Ethan's three illustrations are characterised by line drawings of military equipment, using specific (and limited) colours: red, yellow, green, and black. The first, *The Gun and the Ball of Fire* (Figure 3a), shows a gun firing a bullet and a large, red and yellow fireball, representing a bomb. The second, *The Gun, the Tank and the Fireball* (Figure 3b), includes a war tank, a gun with yellow sparks denoting shooting, and a red bomb symbolising the fire it creates. The third, *An Aeroplane at War* (Figure 3c) depicts a typical military aircraft dropping bombs, with two, small red windows, highlighting the pilot's role in throwing the six black bombs. Ethan described it as "an aeroplane shooting...[with] bombs that explode...things break....It is war." He may have used black for bombs and red for windows to denote darkness, fire, and destruction. Despite language barriers, Ethan's drawings and his limited words conveyed his clear comprehension of war and its destructive nature.
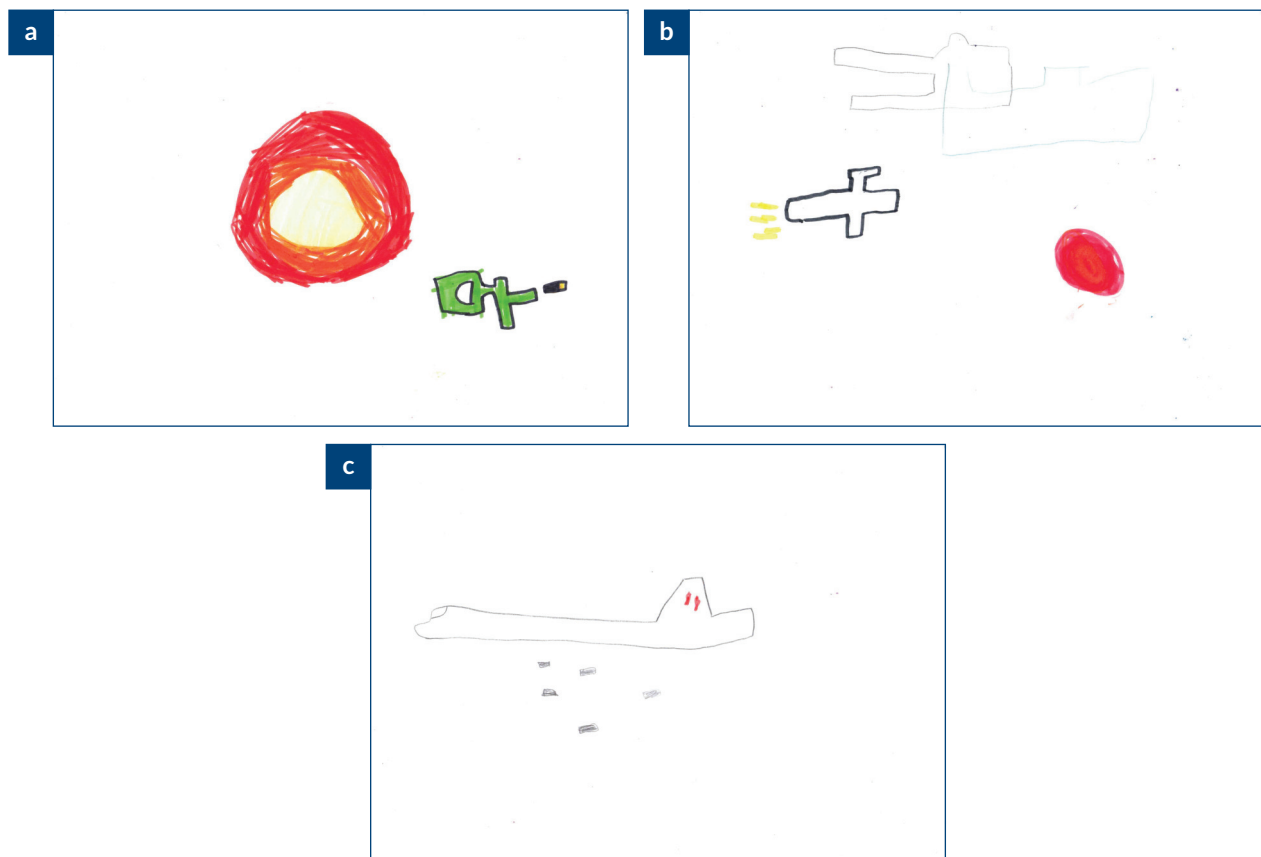
Figure 3. Ethan's three drawings of military equipment: *The Gun and the Ball of Fire* (a), *The Gun, the Tank, and the Fireball* (b), and *An Aeroplane at War* (c).

4.2. Descriptions of War Activity

In their depictions of war, the children highlighted the conflict between good and bad soldiers. They described soldiers shooting (7), firing (3), fighting (4), and killing (4) the enemy. Some emphasised the role of soldiers in aiding war victims. For instance, Seth's drawing *War in the Forest—The Good Guy Kills the Bad Guy* (Figure 2a) depicted a "soldier killing with a gun...the good soldier is killing the bad soldier," emphasising the good-versus-bad soldier dynamic. Eva's drawing *The Good Soldier Shooting the Bad People* (Figure 4a) shows a soldier and "bad people" all in black, which could be interpreted to symbolise the sadness and darkness of war. She also illustrated a *Dead Man in the Car* (Figure 4b), where a blue circle represents a dead man, "shot and killed by the good soldiers" (the yellow figure), signifying war casualties. The abstract soldier (without a face or body) may represent the anonymity of soldiers. Additionally, Paul's drawing *Camouflage Soldiers* (Figure 1a) highlighted the unintended consequences of war, such as accidentally hitting trees and houses during combat.

Paul described war as a prolonged conflict of "people fighting...just people fighting...soldiers always fight...the fight started a long time ago...it took like 109 days for it to stop" (*Camouflage Soldiers*, Figure 1a). In contrast, some children focused on the positive role of soldiers in aiding civilians during war. Andre claimed that "soldiers help people" and Ethan explained that "the good soldier gives the people medicine and food to eat." Madeline's drawing, *A Soldier* (Figure 5), visually divided the scene with a clear line in the middle into two contrasting illustrations of soldiers at war. On the left, she drew a soldier with a gun, representing the "bad" side of war
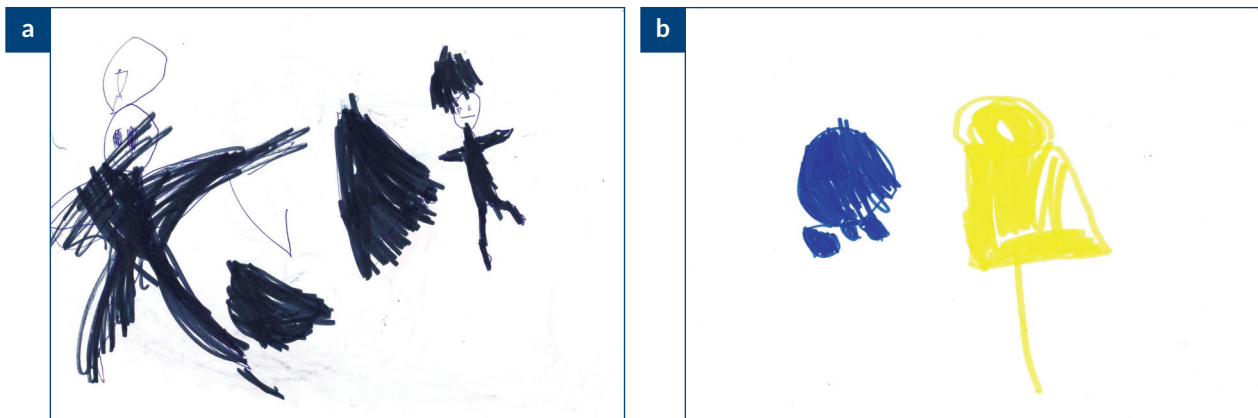
Figure 4. Eva's drawings of killing or dead people: *The Good Soldier Shooting the Bad People* (a) and *The Dead Man in the Car* (b).

Figure 5. Madeline's drawing of a soldier with a gun in his hand (left) and a good soldier helping a mummy escape war (right).

(in blue, green, and yellow). On the right side, she depicted a female soldier helping a mother escape from war (with the girl soldier drawn larger and in bright colours), representing the "goodness" that happens in war, where "the good soldier is happy because she is helping the mummy and the mummy is happy because she is helping her." Madeline's composition decision strongly influenced how she interpreted the drawing, focusing on the contrasting elements of war as well as its temporal development: War passes by time and peace follows.

4.3. The Negative Consequences of War

Children's drawings expressed concerns about the negative consequences of war, highlighting human and animal loss (6), destruction of houses (4), and vehicles (2), injuries (1), and emotional stress (8). Eva's drawing

Dead Man in the Car (Figure 4b) emphasised devastation, as she stated: "The car is dead and the house is dead. Everything is dead." Seth mentioned deaths and injuries too (Figure 2a), while Ethan stated that "people die in war" (Figure 3a), acknowledging war casualties. Some children depicted the emotional impact of war. Madeline claimed that "war and shooting make people sad" (Figure 1d), while in his drawing *War and Peace* (Figure 9a) Andre drew "a sad face because the people's house is broken and they are sad." In contrast, Paul (Figure 1a) took a philosophical stance suggesting that during the conflict, emotions like love and compassion are non-existent: "When soldiers are fighting there are no hearts...no love."

Ethan's drawing *The Gun and the Ball of Fire* (Figure 3a) illustrates the destructive nature of war, as he stated, potentially influenced by his refugee friend's experiences: "War means the house is bombed with bombs...your house is broken and you go to the aeroplane and go to a different house." Similarly, Bob's drawing *Bomb Fire* depicted people fleeing their homes to escape war. Seth's drawing *A Sad Family in the Tent* (Figure 6) conveys sadness about war-induced displacement. He drew a family in a tent, saying "the war ruined their house...they are sad because they miss their house." Even if Seth described the family as sad because their house was destroyed, he drew them smiling, with the two soldiers far away at the top of the drawing. The smiling family appears to be safe and happy in the tent, indicating a sense of empowerment and hope for a brighter future.

Paul (Figure 1a) and Madeline (Figure 5) compared the devastation of war to earthquakes, with Madeline recalling a personal experience where "war is like an earthquake...like when I was a baby we had an earthquake and my house broke." Paul (Figure 1a) emphasised the contrast between war-torn regions and Malta's safety, noting: "Houses get broken with war and people are very sad because they have to leave their homes and then they have to move to Malta because there is no war and earthquakes in Malta." This comparison reflects his ability to connect different experiences, demonstrating higher-order thinking and reflection. This study occurred shortly after a significant earthquake in central Turkey and northern Syria in 2023, likely exposing the children to images of destruction on television.
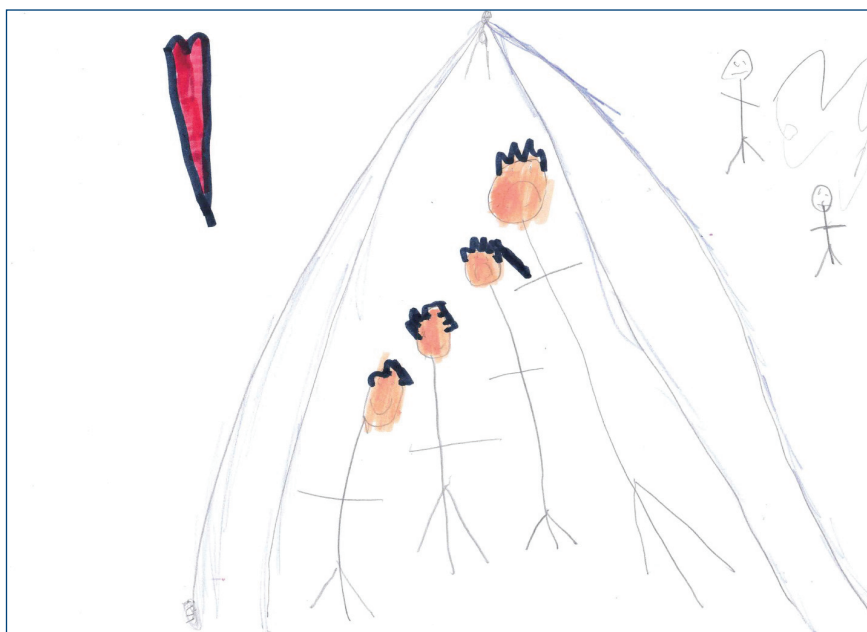
Figure 6. Seth's drawing of *A Sad Family in the Tent*.

4.4. Conceptualising Peace

When children drew images of peace (10), they often associated it with the end of war, showing smiling people and children celebrating in safe, beautiful natural environments. For instance, Paul's drawing *Children Jumping With Happiness During Peace Time* (Figure 7a) featured six smiling children "flipping" in nature; he emphasised:

> Peace is better for me. I am going to draw peace, peace, and peace....There is no war....Everyone is doing tricks like jumping and flipping because they are happy in peace....They are happy. There is no war....A lot of children flipping in peacetime....They are flipping because they are happy.

Similarly, Natalie's drawing *Children Excited in Peace* (Figure 7b) featured "happy children playing together during peacetime....They are happy and excited because it is peace....There is the sky and the grass." Andre's *War and Peace* (Figure 9a) included a "smiley face because people are happy in peacetime, because there is no war anymore....The happy face because now it is peace," highlighting the relief of living without war. On the other hand, Seth's drawing of *A Sad Family in the Tent* (Figure 6) showed a happy family, demonstrating contentment and safety despite losing their home; he explained: "I drew a heart and people with happy faces because they are happy in the tent....There is no war." Somewhat differently, Andre's *My Friend Anna and I During Peacetime* (Figure 7c) illustrated peace as he and his friend holding hands: "My friend Anna and me. We are at peace...because I hate war. Peace. Peace. My friend Anna is holding my

Figure 7. Seth's *Children Jumping With Happiness During Peace Time* (a), Natalie's *Children Excited in Peace* (b), and Andre's *My Friend Anna and I During Peacetime* (c) represent the children's understanding of peace.

hand," he said, expressing his dislike for war and his happiness in times of peace. Analysing the three drawings from a multimodal perspective, it is evident that children drew smiling children at the centre of the drawing and used bright colours to bring out the joy that peace brings.

Children also expressed their understanding of peace through drawings of flags (3), such as the Ukrainian flag, labelled by Andre as *The Flag of Peace* (Figure 8):

> A flag...peace...because I don't want war in my house....You don't want your house to be broken and go to a new house. My friend Manuel had his house broken. Manuel did not die...and then Manuel went to a new house. It was so big with new floors. Manuel lives there now.

Andre's reflection reveals the harsh reality of refugees, illustrating the profound impact of war not only on those directly affected but also on others around them. His drawing of the Ukrainian flag, at the centre of the page and as the sole object depicted, suggests the children's awareness that war is a conflict between countries and indicates the media's influence on their understanding of war and peace.

Andre recognised the cyclical nature of war, noting the temporal nature of peace: "There is only peace now, no more war...but soon there will be war. Again soon war will come. Still peace, then war, then peace, war, peace." When drawing *Dead Man in the Car* (Figure 4b), Eva viewed the flag as a symbol of stopping war and representing peace: "This is a flag...so to stop them....The flag of peace stops war."

Andre's *War and Peace* (Figure 9a) depicts the Maltese flag, highlighting its significance in celebrating peace after war: "This is the Maltese flag because when the war is over and there is peace, people celebrate using their flags. This is our flag." This reflects not only his patriotism but also his sense of belonging (Oztabak, 2020).
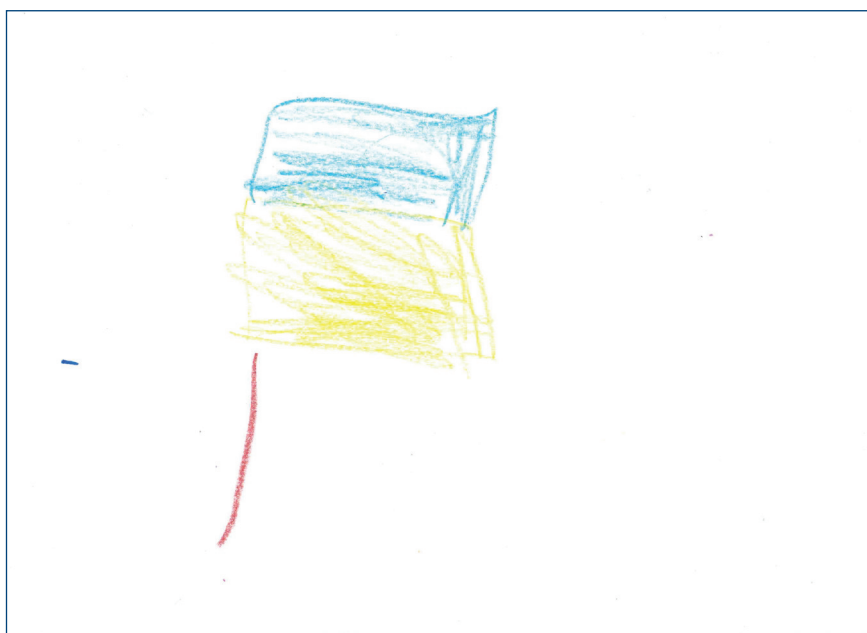
Figure 8. *The Flag of Peace* by Andre.

4.5. Reflections on War and Peace: The Dichotomy Between the Two

Children often highlight the contrast between war and peace in their drawings. Five children (Andre, Paul, Madeline, Natalie, and Bob) used a dividing line to separate war and peace scenes within the same illustration. Bateman (2008), argues that layout and, in this case, the dividing line along with the similar use of colours in each drawing, highlights the dichotomy between war and peace, indicating the interrelation and transition from war to peace.

Andre explained that in *War and Peace* (Figure 9a) he "drew a line...because on this side there are the sad people in war, and on this side there are happy people in peace....A part for war and another for peace." He drew smiley faces to denote happiness in peacetime and sad faces to symbolise the emotional toll of conflict. Similarly, in *A Soldier and Peace* (Figure 9b), Paul divided his paper with a line, explaining:

> I am going to draw a line so that they [war and peace] are not together...so peace is going to be right here [pointing to the right side] and war is going to be here [pointing at the left side].

He drew a soldier with a gun on the left, representing war, and joyful scenes of, "a happy girl and boy jumping high with excitement...they are jumping with joy," symbolising the happiness and freedom associated with peace on the right.

Figure 9. Children's drawings of war and peace are separated by a line: Andre's *War and Peace* (a), Paul's *A Soldier and Peace* (b), Natalie's *Peace* (c), and Bob's *War and Peace* (d).

Madeline's drawing *A Soldier* (Figure 5) also featured a line dividing war (represented by a soldier with a gun) and peace (represented by a soldier helping a mother escape war), explaining, "I drew the line because I don't want them [war and peace] to stick together." Natalie's drawing *Peace* (Figure 9c) illustrated "sad people...because they are leaving their homes in war" on the right and "happy kids in peace" on the left. In *War and Peace* (Figure 9d), Bob depicted happy and sad people:

> On this side the people are happy because their houses are good and their cars are good—they don't have war; on this side, the people are not happy because their cars are broken...and their houses are broken....Then they go to a new house....Then they are happy.

These drawings powerfully reflect the impact of war on children, their observations and hopes for a peaceful future.

5. Discussion

5.1. Children's Use of Multimodal Elements

In line with Kress (1997, 2010) and Jewitt (2008), children's use of multimodality integrates various modes such as mark-making (the use of the dividing line) size (of soldiers and guns), colour (bright and monochrome), layout (drawing in the centre or by the side). These elements, combined with the accompanying narrative, create meaning. This confirms that a meaning communicated through a mode intertwines with meaning made from other modes, forming a cohesive construction of meaning (Jewitt, 2009a; Kress & Jewitt, 2003). The dividing line and contrasting war and peace illustrations, along with children's explanations illustrate how multimodal elements enhance fluency and efficiency in the use and combination of different modes to derive unique meanings (Bezemer & Kress, 2008). Likewise, the small size of the soldiers made them manageable, less scary, and easy to hide. The use of bright colours and happy children in the centre of the drawing convey the joy of peace and worry-free living. Thus, the multimodal composition and layout influence the reader's understanding of the drawing and its related form, content, and meaning (Bateman, 2008).

5.2. Children's Understanding of War

Research (Buldu, 2009; Ilifiandra & Saripudin, 2023; Jabbar & Betawi, 2019) indicates that children often depict military weapons, soldiers, fighting, and killing, even without direct exposure to war. In this study, children like Ethan, Andre, Seth, and Eva prominently drew guns, bombs, war tanks, and military aeroplanes. Although some of these objects were illustrated in the images of "war" and "peace" shown to them before starting the drawings to help them understand what they were invited to draw as children experienced language barriers, they drew unique representations of warfare, using different colours and original narratives. They also included elements that were not illustrated in the images, such as injured and dead people, soldiers shooting, and broken hearts, even comparing war to an earthquake. While the influence of the images cannot be entirely dismissed, it is clear that the children primarily drew their interpretations of war based on their sociocultural contexts and experiences rather than on the images displayed. Their detailed descriptions of military equipment suggest a nuanced understanding likely influenced by media (TV, videos, digital games, toys). For instance, Seth mentioned he "saw one of the shooters loading a gun on

TV" and recounted interactions with war refugee friends. The children's definition of war aligns with Jabbar and Betawi's (2019) findings, highlighting children's interpretation of war through symbols of weaponry.

Some children depicted war as destructive, causing sadness, death and destruction, and emotional distress (e.g., *War and Peace* by Andrew; *A Broken Heart From War* by Eva; *A Sad Family in the Tent* by Seth). This is consistent with findings from other studies (Hakvoort & Hägglund, 2001; Ilifiandra & Saripudin, 2023; McLernon & Cairns, 2001; Walker et al., 2003), showing that even children not directly exposed to war, like the children in this study, report negative reactions to violent conflicts.

Children like Eva (*The Good Soldier Shooting the Bad People*) and Seth (*War in the Forest—The Good Guy Kills the Bad Guy*) depicted war as a binary conflict between good and bad soldiers, reflecting a simplistic dichotomy often perpetuated by media. This binary view of conflict was also observed in Jabbar and Betawi's (2019) study, where children described war as the struggle between good and bad people. This enabled Eva to perceive war as positive, while Seth justified violence as a means to eradicate evil, stating: "I like war because I want to kill someone naughty." This contrasts with Buldu's (2009) conclusion that children define war as inherently bad.

While representing war through concrete actions like fighting, killing, and destroying might be considered a narrow and simplified definition of war, which may reduce it to its most visible and immediate effects, children went beyond to communicate their meanings of war to recognise economic (e.g., people losing their homes and displacement) and psychological dimensions (e.g., emotional distress, loss, fear, and sadness) that also characterise conflict. Thus, children's drawings were interpreted in a multifaceted, complex way to include their notions of war as a necessary evil, the endemic conflict between "good" and "bad," the killing of innocent people, and the symbols children used, e.g., black marks symbolise the sadness caused by war.

5.3. Children's Understanding of Peace

Children's drawings of peace often highlighted the end of the war and a return to safety, happiness, and normalcy, consistent with other studies (Ilifiandra & Saripudin, 2023; Myers-Bowman et al., 2005; Özer et al., 2018). In this study, children associated peace with smiling children jumping in natural settings, reflecting positive emotions and a utopian state of happiness and harmony (see, e.g., Ilifiandra & Saripudin, 2023; McLernon & Cairns, 2001; Myers-Bowman et al., 2005; Özgür, 2015; Walker et al., 2003).

Some children in this study drew flags to symbolise peace, associating them with the cessation of war and the restoration of stability. Flags also represented a triumph over evil and a tangible expression of their desires for peace and security (Gülec, 2021; Özgür, 2015). Andre's depiction of peace as two friends holding hands reflects findings from other studies, where children depicted images of peace as friendship (Hakvoort & Hägglund, 2001; Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1998; Özer et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2003).

5.4. Children's Engagement With Moral and Ethical Concerns

Some children's drawings and accompanying narratives revealed their understanding of moral and ethical dilemmas. While they depicted war as destructive and bad, they also considered it as a necessary evil, justifying the violence of "good soldiers" protecting the weak from the "bad soldiers." This archetypal

depiction of good versus evil prompted children to consider complex ethical issues from both sides, using their agency to take ethical positions (Edmiston, 2008). They navigated ethical dilemmas that challenge even adults and acted "ethically in that moment" (Edmiston, 2008. p. 16) recognising that what might be considered ethical in one context and time (e.g., soldiers killing people in a war zone) may not be so in another. Through their drawings, discussions, and evaluations of what is right and wrong during the war, children developed a deeper understanding of empathy and justice, learning to make ethical choices (Veldhuizen, 2019) and establishing the "ethics of war" (Nabulsi, 1999, p. 70). This process led children to author and co-author their "moral" (Edmiston, 2010, p. 205) and "ethical identities" (Edmiston, 2010, p. 209).

5.5. Sociocultural Influences on Children's Drawings

From a Vygotskian perspective, and consistent with prior research (Fargas-Malet & Dillenburger, 2014, Ilfiandra & Sarupudin, 2023; McLernon & Cairns, 2001; Özer et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2003), children's conceptualisations of war and peace are intricately shaped by their sociocultural contexts, including social norms, values and experiences prevalent in their communities. While there might be basic resemblances in children's drawings, their understandings are influenced by their level of exposure to direct conflict and their geo-cultural, political, economic, and sociocultural factors (Gülec, 2021; Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1998; Jabbar & Betawi, 2019; Raviv et al., 1999). Even if the children in this study were not directly exposed to war, akin to the non-exposed children in Walker et al.'s (2003) study, their conceptualisation of war was likely influenced by indirect exposure to war-related imagery through various media sources, which often normalise violence and armed conflict (Buldu, 2009). For instance, Paul's detailed knowledge of guns in his drawing *Camouflage Soldiers* (Figure 1a) and Seth's mention of a gun-loading scene on television support this influence. Indirect exposure through refugee friends' experiences, comparisons between war destruction and earthquakes, and collaborative drawing sessions further contributed to the children's evolving understandings, aligning with Brooks' (2009, p. 5) concept of "intrapersonal dialogue with drawing."

Acknowledging the diverse sociocultural factors influencing children's depictions of war and peace provides insights into how these factors shape children's meaning-making processes and representations of these complex concepts (Ivashkevich, 2009).

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the value of drawing as a child-friendly mode for meaning-making, facilitating dialogue and thought. It also brings out the multimodal elements children use in their drawings to communicate meaning. This study contradicts claims that young children are unable to draw war-related content (Buldu, 2009) and arguments that younger children (three-to-five-year-olds) cannot include abstract war concepts or consequences like symbolism, injuries, and fatalities (Ålvik, 1968; Fargas-Malet & Dillenburger, 2014; Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1998; McLernon & Cairns, 2001; Walker et al., 2003). Acknowledging diverse sociocultural factors influencing children's depictions of war and peace provides insights into how these factors shape children's meaning-making processes. It underscores the importance of listening to children's voices and incorporating their perspectives when interpreting their drawings. The children's conceptualisations of war and peace, shed light on their thought processes which can support professionals working with young children to promote a culture of peace and children's rights and well-being.

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