Perceptions, Reflections, and Conceptualizations of War and Peace in Children's Drawings

Edited by Lisa Blasch, Phil C. Langer, and Nadja Thoma

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Introduction: Perceptions, Reflections, and Conceptualisations of War and Peace in Children's Drawings

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Abstract

In this editorial, we introduce the focus of this thematic issue and its contributions. Addressing the themes of "war" and "peace" and their impacts on children requires contextualization within socio-historical, socio-cultural, socio-psychological, and educational frameworks. Equally, it is essential to tackle the methodological challenges inherent in this field of empirical research. The rise of child-centred and participatory approaches over recent decades—emphasizing children as active agents—has enriched the research landscape, offering a counterbalance to the quantitative and developmental psychological traditions. Yet, as the contributions demonstrate, there is no methodological "gold standard" for this field. Rather, the topic's complexity calls for a diverse array of approaches and perspectives, including those that push beyond conventional academic frameworks and methods.

1. Introduction

We live in perilous times. In 2024, 92 countries worldwide were involved in 56 acute crises, as documented by the 18th edition of the Global Peace Index (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024). This is the highest number since the end of World War II. The overlapping dynamics of excessive violence in the Middle East and Russia's

brutal war against Ukraine are among the most visible and defining conflicts that have critically repositioned issues of war and peace at the centre of global politics, media discourse, humanitarian aid, and individual life circumstances. Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Darfur, Mali, Haiti, and Myanmar are additional examples of the violent conflicts that have plagued the world for years. Under such circumstances, what does the concept of peace still mean amidst a violent global polycrisis?

Children are among the groups most severely affected by the pervasive consequences of nearly all conflicts and wars. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2024) estimates that approximately 400 million children are currently living in or fleeing from conflict and war zones. The impact of war on children is profound and poses several risks to their physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development (Buheji & Buheji, 2023, p. 11). Many are displaced for extended periods, with no possibility of returning home. Families are torn apart, loved ones are lost, and many children become orphans. These children are highly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, and their prospects for a successful life are severely limited when opportunities for education, employment, and social participation are scarce. Bürgin et al. (2022) summarize that the multiple implications faced by children in conflict zones include immediate stress responses, an increased risk for specific mental disorders, distress from forced separation from parents, and fear for their own and their families' safety. Thus, the experiences that children endure during and as a consequence of war are in stark contrast to their developmental needs and their right to grow up in a physically and emotionally safe and predictable environment (Bürgin et al., 2022, p. 845).

The mental health and psychosocial burdens experienced by children are often transmitted transgenerationally, creating a state of violent hopelessness characterized by social trauma (Kizilhan et al., 2021; Veronese et al., 2023).

While it is crucial to emphasize the harm inflicted upon children in conflict areas, it is equally important to recognise that they are not merely passive victims of violence, displacement, hunger, and existential hardship. They remain (albeit to varying degrees) conscious actors in a collective process of meaning-making: they perceive, reflect, interpret, and conceptualise their experiences.

2. Challenges and Perspectives

In this context, it is essential to include children's perspectives to understand their life-worlds and support them in shaping these according to their needs, wishes, and hopes. Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children hold the internationally recognized right to be heard on matters affecting them—a right that arguably becomes even more critical in wartime, though it is undoubtedly harder to implement. The UN's Children and Armed Conflict program emphasizes the importance of amplifying children's voices to ensure that their stories of hope and resilience are recognized globally.

In recent years, the development of child-centred, participatory approaches has increasingly enabled the inclusion of children's perspectives in transdisciplinary projects (Coyne & Carter, 2018). Children's drawings serve as a powerful medium for expressing their reflections on war and peace, created in contexts ranging from spontaneous play at home to formal and informal educational settings, through pedagogical guidance, in therapeutic contexts, and for research. Notable examples of children's drawings from conflict zones include: *Witness to Genocide*, which documents the Rwandan genocide (Salem, 2000); an online project by

the Human Rights Watch (2005) focused on Darfur; and a virtual exhibition of Ukrainian students' work (Körber Foundation, 2024).

Despite their potential in research, systematic methodological frameworks and the recognized use of drawings in empirical projects remain limited across many disciplines, especially in studies involving children. Children's drawings do not reveal direct access to their thoughts, nor is the objective to uncover hidden truths. The risk of overinterpretation is significant in this context.

We have launched this thematic issue to provide a platform for innovative researchers who work with children's drawings to explore their ideas of war and peace, report on their work, reflect on their methodological approaches, and engage in dialogue with others in the field. This issue brings together diverse contributions that focus on children's perceptions, reflections, and conceptualizations of war and peace from a wide range of (inter-/trans-)disciplinary fields, theoretical foundations, methodological perspectives, and geographic regions. The authors grapple with methodological and ethical challenges and present context-specific strategies for navigating them.

3. Overview of the Contributions

Myriam Denov employs arts-based methods to examine wartime and post-conflict experiences of children born of conflict-related sexual violence in northern Uganda. Her article illustrates how mask-making, drawing, and life maps allow young people to share—or withhold—their experiences, while also addressing the strengths, limitations, and ethical considerations of arts-based methods.

Glynis Clacherty uses a visual narrative approach in which refugee children's drawings from eastern, central, and southern Africa are placed within a literal or metaphorical "container," offering some protection for the children's expressions. Her article explores possibilities for displaced youth to describe their experiences and to cope with the complexity of their displacement and loss.

Lisa Blasch and Nadja Thoma use a transdisciplinary framework grounded in ethnography and metapragmatics to explore how children of a primary school in Northern Italy conceptualize peace in image-text worksheets. Their analysis reveals how children use their multimodal repertoire and show themselves as literate and often humorous-creative practitioners of visual communication.

Aisha-Nusrat Ahmad and Phil Langer interpret drawings from former child soldiers of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria as part of a collaborative storytelling project. Their work offers insights into these children's struggles for agency and interpretative ownership amid powerful social narratives and contributes to discussions on visual methodologies in conflict zones.

Josephine Deguara draws on social semiotics to analyse video-recorded drawing and talk processes in which children who had no first-hand war experiences create images of war and peace. Her findings reveal that while the children may not fully grasp the complexities of war, they exhibit a basic understanding of the trauma of war.

Zihan Zhou's study examines artworks by Ukrainian children shared on an internet platform as part of a support project. The analysis reveals complex combinations of personal emotions in these paintings, offering inspiration for future research on the intricate relationships between artwork and specific sociopolitical and cultural contexts.

Judith Klemenc's article is an unconventional aesthetic exploration of how children creatively investigate war and peace in their drawings. Her writing centres on the "echoes" of children's unspoken thoughts, manifested in the polyphony of their images, potentially opening pathways toward a nonviolent, fearless world.

Finally, Laila Hamouda, Manuela Ochoa-Ronderos, Sewar A. Elejla, Keven Lee, and Rachel Kronick utilize arts-based workshops to support children of asylum-seeking families in Montreal, Canada. Within a participatory action research framework, they examine how children express themselves in the shared space between facilitators and participants, addressing the complexities of conducting research and building therapeutic alliances in these spaces.

4. Conclusion

These contributions underscore the value of moving beyond mainstream empirical research by embracing narrative and arts-based approaches, especially in contexts as complex and sensitive as children's experiences with war and peace. They call for research that is theoretically grounded, methodologically rigorous, and ethically responsive. This thematic issue demonstrates how arts-based methods can illuminate children's perspectives while respecting their agency and interpretive autonomy. Each contribution serves as an invitation for continued, and potentially provocative, debate within critical social research. We hope that these insights inspire future work to further develop child-centred methodologies and to advocate for practices that honour children's rights to draw, narrate, and shape their own life stories in spaces of safety and respect.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

Exploring the Lives of Children Born of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence Through Art

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Abstract

Although the realities of children born of conflict-related sexual violence have gained increased attention, limited research has explored the issue from the perspectives of the children themselves. Drawing upon a sample of 79 children born of sexual violence in Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) captivity, and using arts-based methods, this study explored the wartime and post-conflict experiences directly from children born of conflict-related sexual violence in northern Uganda. The study illustrates how the arts-based methods of mask-making, drawing, and life maps—developed in consultation with local researchers and youth born in LRA captivity—helped to capture the complex wartime and post-war realities of this unique population of children and youth, as well as enabled young people to choose what to share and what to withhold during the research process. More easily distributed, accessed, and consumed than traditional academic publications, the medium of art can have a widespread, immediate, and powerful impact. The article concludes with the strengths, limitations, and ethical implications of arts-based methods, as well as the importance of considering culture and context for future research.

Keywords

arts-based research; children; conflict-related sexual violence; Lord's Resistance Army; wartime sexual violence; northern Uganda; youth; war

1. The War on Children: Children Born in Lord's Resistance Army Captivity

War and armed conflict continue to devastate the lives of children and families worldwide. During war, children are killed, injured, orphaned, and separated from family. Vast numbers of children are also recruited

into armed groups and forces. Exposed to brutal forms of violence as witnesses, victims, and participants—most often simultaneously—children associated with armed forces and groups take on a multiplicity of roles as fighters, porters, messengers, spies, medics, caregivers to younger children, domestic workers, and are frequently sexually exploited. According to the Paris Principles (UNICEF, 2007, p. 7), children associated with armed forces and groups refer to:

> Any person below 18 years of age who is or has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including, but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities.

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) provides a powerful example of an armed group that strategically targeted and recruited children. Joseph Kony—the leader of the LRA—formed the armed group to counter the exclusion and oppression that the Acholi people of the north experienced at the hands of the Ugandan government. However, while seeking to overthrow the Ugandan government, the LRA became well-known for committing atrocities against the very civilians it was claiming to liberate (Dolan, 2009). A war that spanned over two decades in northern Uganda (1986–2007), it left families torn apart, communities demolished, education disrupted, and traditional family and cultural practices weakened. The war killed tens of thousands and forcibly displaced millions (Annan et al., 2003). As a critical part of his military operations, Kony strategically targeted both boys and girls to swell LRA ranks, abducting an estimated 60,000–80,000 children over the course of the long war (Shanahan & Veale, 2016). Kony sought to create what he conceptualized as a "new nation" through abduction, forced marriage, and procreation. Kony organized and implemented a forced wife system, whereby girls were abducted and later "given" to LRA commander "husbands." The majority of these abducted girls became mothers, and their pregnancies were the result of repeated sexual violence. From Kony's perspective, forced marriage became a way of literally giving birth to a "new nation," and these children were to be raised as Kony's next generation of fighters (Denov & Lakor, 2017, 2018). Thousands of children were born of sexual violence in the LRA, although the precise numbers of children remain unknown. While not all children born in LRA captivity survived the war, thousands are currently living in post-war northern Uganda (Watye Ki Gen, 2014). In the aftermath of the war, these children are referred to locally (and refer to themselves) as "children born in captivity" or using the shorter acronym CBC.

The experiences and realities of children born in LRA captivity have been receiving increased research and policy attention (Denov, 2022; Oliveira & Baines, 2022; UK Government, 2023). Born into the harrowing conditions of war and deprivation, these young people spent their early and formative years under constant threat of government ambush, violence, injury, displacement, starvation, and illness. "Growing up" in the LRA meant that they were witnesses to and victims of severe forms of violence. Most of these children eventually left the LRA with their mothers by means of escape and/or rescue. Alongside their mothers, children typically transitioned between physical spaces, moving from the "bush" to rehabilitation centres, where they may have stayed for several months, eventually moving to civilian communities. While young people's wartime experiences were steeped in unimaginable violence and upheaval, their post-conflict experiences have also been challenging. Research has uncovered that in the post-war period, because of their former LRA affiliation, family and community members have rejected, stigmatized, and brutalized these young people and their mothers (Akello, 2024). Given the marginality of this group of children and youth and

the importance of eliciting their unique voices and perspectives, this study sought to explore their conflict and post-conflict realities and experiences.

2. Exploring Young People's Wartime and Post-War Realities Using Art

While children actively resist war and live with the daily consequences, war-affected children and youth are typically de-historicized, universalized, and overwritten as powerless victims, often regarded as passive "objects" of research (Berents, 2020; Clacherty, 2021; Denov & Fennig, 2024). Garnering the unique perspectives of war-affected children and youth is thus vital. However, doing so can be fraught with "ethical minefields" (Denov, 2010), requiring constant ethical reflection, mitigation, and care. Given the sensitive nature of research on and with war-affected young people, researchers have long underscored the importance of questioning *how* we are engaging with children and youth in research, calling for greater attention to ethics (Bilotta & Denov, 2023). How do researchers and practitioners effectively and sensitively explore and examine young people's wartime and post-war realities? Research has begun to uncover that words and narrative alone are often unable to adequately capture the complexities and horrors of war, particularly for children (Denov & Shevell, 2021). As such, researchers have increasingly advocated for, and drawn attention to, the benefits of using arts-based research (ABR) that uses multiple mediums, such as visual and digital arts (photography, drawing, video) and performance arts (theatre, music) "to explore, understand and represent human action and experience" (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2014, p. 1). ABR enables research participants, particularly children, to convey experiences of war in contexts of reduced stress, providing a means for communicating with the nonverbal mind and safely accessing traumatic memory (Clacherty, 2021; Gantt & Tinnin, 2009). ABR can be used in developmentally and culturally appropriate manners, promoting expression beyond words (McNiff, 1998). Mand (2012) notes that visual and arts-based methods enable children to represent experiences unconfined by language and literacy. Elden (2012) suggests that visual methods, particularly drawing, offer a democratic way of involving children as producers of knowledge. The use of art has also been found to ease children's ability to communicate their realities, in a less threatening and pressurized context (Clacherty & Shahrokh, 2023; D'Amico et al., 2016; Linds et al., 2023). In addition, ABR can help to build critical skills by fostering opportunities for "youth [to] express their voices, connect with communities and increase their civic engagement" (Friesem, 2014, p. 45). Ultimately, the arts have increasingly been used as an instrument for research, practice, and social change. Drawing on the potential benefits of using arts-based methods, this research employed mask-making, drawing, and life maps as methodological tools to trace the wartime and post-war realities of children and youth born in LRA captivity.

3. Methodological and Ethical Realities: Mask-Making, Drawing, and Life Maps

Funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation, and the Canada Council for the Arts, this study received ethical approval from two research ethics boards: the first from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology/Office of the President of Uganda and the second from McGill University. The research team consisted of northern Uganda researchers, as well as youth researchers who themselves were born in LRA captivity. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as every human being below 18 years; it defines youth as those between the ages of 15 and 24 years. Both terms are used in this article to reflect the varied ages of participants.

The sensitive nature of this research meant that ethical implications were paramount, requiring ongoing consideration and mitigation. Child and youth participants had, for the most part, never shared their personal histories and experiences, and doing so could evoke varying levels of distress. Informed consent and confidentiality were assured. For those under 18, assent forms were signed by child participants and the consent of a parent/guardian was acquired. Consent was also acquired to potentially disseminate and exhibit participants' artwork. Given the profound ethical implications of the research, as a selection criterion, child and youth participants were required to have known about their birth origins and conception. All participants were aware that they had been born in LRA captivity prior to participating in the research, although the depth of information they had about their origins and histories varied. Support in the form of referrals to local organizations was instituted. Moreover, in the years that followed data collection, members of the local research team traveled to remote villages to assess participants' ongoing well-being, offering psycho-social support, visiting child and youth participants in schools, advocating on their behalf, and hosting workshops based on topics and issues of their choosing.

Recognizing young people's rights and their capacity to act in competent and thoughtful ways, researchers are increasingly including young people as co-researchers alongside adults (Denov et al., 2022). To ensure that young people's knowledge and expertise were infused into the research design and data collection, three youths born in LRA captivity—two males and one female between ages 18 and 22—were engaged as co-researchers. Researchers have suggested that using such participatory approaches may not only help to temper power differentials, ethical concerns, and engage children and youth as active citizens, but may also increase the reliability and validity of research (Alderson, 2000). The youth researchers in this project received in-depth research training and were then involved in participant outreach, the development of interview guides, and data collection in the form of leading focus groups with a peer group of youth born in LRA captivity. The youth researchers also helped to facilitate mask-making workshops and participated in preliminary data analysis as a part of the research team. Drawing upon young people's knowledge, experience, and leadership, the goal was to enhance the quality of the research and provide youth with purposeful and skill-building activities.

Data collection was carried out in four waves. However, only the first and second waves are addressed in this article, as these waves focused on data collection through mask-making, drawing, and life maps. The first wave—involving one-to-one interviews and mask-making—occurred between June and October 2015 with 60 children and youth born in captivity. All participants were recruited through a local partner organization that had ongoing contact with women and children formerly in the LRA as a result of their ongoing work and advocacy for women and children born in LRA captivity. Child and youth participants (33 boys and young men and 27 girls and young women) were between the ages of 12 and 19 at the time of the data collection and were living in Gulu, Pader, and Agago.

The second wave of data collection—involving interviews, life maps, and drawings—occurred between January and August 2017 with a cohort of 19 children and youth born in captivity (11 boys and young men and 8 girls and young women) between the ages of 17 and 22. The districts of Gulu, Nwoya, Pader, and Agago were represented in this second wave. The interviews, drawings, and life maps explored children and youth's perceptions of their fathers, and issues related to lineage and heritage.

Participants in both waves had spent their early years in captivity, ranging from a few months after being born to seven years. Arts-based workshops (involving the mask-making, drawing, and life maps), and

interviews were conducted in Acholi, audio-recorded with permission, and then translated and transcribed into English. Interviews conducted by non-Acholi speakers included Acholi-English translation. While the content of interviews is addressed elsewhere (see Denov & Lakor, 2017, 2018), this article focuses on the themes that emerged from the mask-making, drawings, and life maps.

Developed through extensive discussion and planning with the youth researchers and local Ugandan researchers, mask-making, drawing, and life maps were chosen as methods as they represented locally accepted ways of eliciting participants' wartime and post-war lives, family relations and structures, as well as children and youth's hopes for the future. Children and youth were invited to participate in arts-based workshops, specifically mask-making, drawing, and life maps, which were then used to explore the project themes of identity, citizenship, rights, and belonging.

3.1. Mask-Making

Prior to beginning the mask-making workshop, the group discussed the purpose of mask-making, outlining the goals and objectives of the process and encouraging young people to depict elements of their wartime pasts, present, and futures onto their masks. While the topic was inevitably a difficult one, the actual artistic process of mask-making was meant to be fun and interactive, with children and youth working in small groups to create and build each other's masks (see Figure 1). Messy and tactile, the process elicited a great deal of laughter and camaraderie while the masks were being created. Once the masks were dried, children and youth painted their masks and glued on found objects. Upon completion of their masks (see Figure 2), participants were asked to share the meaning of their masks with a member of the research team. Importantly, attempting to garner a complex understanding of children's experiences, alongside the mask-making process, we conducted in-depth interviews with the 60 children/youth.

Figure 1. Collectively creating the masks.

Figure 2. Completed masks.

3.2. Drawing and Life Maps

Drawing has been shown to be a tool that allows for the inclusion of children's points of view, regardless of their stage of development or linguistic abilities. Drawing may be used as a springboard for children to express themselves freely, enabling them to communicate what they have experienced and, in turn, giving those working with them additional insights into their psychosocial status (Farokhi & Hashemi, 2011).

Paper and markers were provided to participants, and they were invited to draw and/or illustrate scenarios of their choosing. Many participants drew scenes from the bush, as well as their post-conflict lives. In addition to free drawing, Ugandan members of the research team, who had much experience working with war-affected women and children, suggested using the "river of life" technique. In this auto-biographical mapping tool, using a simple pen and paper, participants were invited to draw or map out their histories and life courses, showing the ebbs and flows of their lives (Denov & Shevell, 2021). Using the metaphor of a river, participants identified key moments and/or events, prominent individuals in their lives, and positive moments in their life histories as well as challenges. The benefit of this technique is that children decided what they would draw/map out what they wanted to share and what they wanted to withhold. Once participants created their "life map," they were invited to explain it privately to a member of the research team.

The process of art-making—whether through mask-making, drawing, or life maps—involved a "draw and talk approach" (Mand, 2012), inviting a dialogue with participants about their artwork. Importantly, young people's artwork was never interpreted by the research team, but instead by the young people themselves. Participants' verbal explanations of their artwork were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed, and included in the overall qualitative data analysis (Leavy, 2009). Transcripts of their explanations were read and annotated according to themes that emerged in the data. Clusters of verbatim text were then taken from their original explanations and regrouped thematically. The themes of wartime violence, and post-conflict stigma, rejection, and socio-economic challenges, alongside hope for the future, remained prevalent in participants' narratives. Young people's explanations of their artwork are highlighted below, in their own words.

4. Uncovering Wartime and Post-War Experiences Through Masks

Explanations of young people's masks revealed the profound violence, struggle, and physical injuries that they witnessed and endured during captivity. Young people also depicted their physical environments, describing the grasses and mountains that surrounded them. Testimonies also highlighted their post-war challenges regarding poverty, hunger, the inability to pay for school fees, and the multiple forms of stigma and rejection that they endured within their families and communities. Participants also projected their futures onto the masks, outlining their hopes and dreams. The history of one participant, "Alice," is addressed below, followed by her explanation of her mask.

4.1. Alice

Alice's mother had been abducted into the LRA at the age of 12 and was held captive for eight years. During that time, Alice's mother gave birth to three children, all of whom had been born of sexual violence. Alice spent the first part of her life in LRA captivity and eventually escaped the LRA with her mother. Alice was 15 years old at the time of the interview and in the post-war period was able to attend school. However, she faced major challenges in her family and community because of her former LRA affiliation. Alice shared the meaning of her mask and the significance of the colours she chose:

> The green colour shows the bush that our mother was living in...[the place] where my mother was taken [abducted]...and where I was born....The problems and difficulties that my mother went through and that I went through also. That is why I remember this green colour.

> The black colour represents the difficulties that I started experiencing [when I was in] the bush with my mother, and up to now, the problems and difficulties I'm [going] through. The problem of getting food and having no place to stay. That is the reason why I have shaded my mouth black, [it] is because of the lack of food to eat. And also other difficulties that I experience when I talk. They [the community] stigmatize me [because] I was from the bush. [They say] that I have demons in my eyes. People in the community want us to keep silent. I'm experiencing a lot of insults. Some of these black [colours] are showing the kind of problems I'm still experiencing up to now. I have used these black colours because I think I will continue to encounter problems in the future. This will continue until someone helps [offers support] me from these problems. I cannot get out of these problems alone.

> The yellow colour shows the situation...when I leave the problems I'm experiencing. It represents the kind of happiness that I may get [in the future]—not in darkness. It shows that I am going to have a very good living situation—better than that of the past.

> The white colours show my dreams, as I think that my future may be as good and bright as the white colour, if I set a goal. If I work on my own life, I respect people, at least people will help me. If we put our hands together, then my future can become bright. That is why I have put the white colour to represent it.

> The red colour is showing the blood that was shedding from people [during the war]. Killings and injuries that were done on people from the bush. For example, my brother was shot badly and his leg got paralyzed. Right now, he is [disabled]. So those are the things the red colours are showing.

This flower shows that, even if people were getting injuries and dying, there were other people who were also saved by God. They are now out of those problems. Others came back home without getting any injuries—that is why I have put these flowers.

This blue colour shows happiness from my side, even though other people do reject me, stigmatize me, because I am from the bush and demons are in my eyes. I am just happy with my life. That is why I have put this flower in the blue colour. I love every person. Even if no one likes me, I love them.

The stars show that even if people see me like someone who is not useful, I need to do something in the future that can show people that they should stop despising people from the bush because they are able to live normally like other people. They can even do things better than other people.

I feel that if my future becomes bright, I should support people in the community…so that they can know that even if you are born in captivity, you can also do things better than other people.

Alice's testimony highlights the painful memories of her wartime past and the violence and deprivation that surrounded her during her time in the LRA. It also underscores the stigma and discrimination that she lives with in the post-war period and the ongoing socio-economic challenges she and her family continue to grapple with. At the same time, however, Alice's testimony underscores her capacity, her resistance, alongside her hopes for the future, which include acceptance, support, belonging, and opportunity.

5. Life in the LRA: Understanding War Through Children's Drawings

Participants survived extreme adversity in the bush. Through their drawings and interviews, they reported being witnesses and victims of severe and unimaginable forms of violence, including the violent death of a parent or sibling. Participants also expressed how they endured starvation, illness, injuries, sleeping under the rain without shelter, walking long distances without rest, and being under the constant threat of violent ambushes led by the Ugandan government forces. These young people explained:

The hardest thing I cannot forget is when I saw how my father was shot badly dead and we ran and left him there.

My mother had already been shot while carrying me on her shoulders….My mother was shot and fell down, while I also fell lying next to her, so one of the people who were running alongside her carried me away and continued running with me.

Drawings (like Figure 3), and their accompanying explanations, helped to elucidate children's daily lives during the war. This boy explained his drawing:

What I remember is, by this time I was old enough and still in the bush. My father…loved me so much. This picture here shows where they were cooking from under a tree at the foot of a hill, which I did not know the name of. These are the people cooking, and this other person was instructed to climb and keep watch from the tree. Here is a picture of people carrying guns, and one who was escorted came and sat down where he always sat. This person is always guarded. As you see, some people are holding

Figure 3. Depiction of life in the bush.

guns and standing outside here. This is the hill which I don't know the name of and the people cooking are here.

6. Mapping Tools: The River of Life

Similar to masks and drawings, life maps provided vivid illustrations of young people's lives both during and following the armed conflict. This young person used his life map to describe his seemingly contradictory life while in LRA captivity. On the one hand, he remembers his life as a child playing in the bush. On the other hand, he describes the fear, deception, and violence that surrounded him:

> I drew the picture of children playing indicating the time when we were still in the bush. Life was easy while we were in the bush; we would play all the time. I was also in the company of both my parents. The arrow pointing up shows the period around 2004, when we were captured while in the bush. On that day we were captured, I thought our captors were part of my father's group. But they deceived us that they were part of my father's group. But instead, we were taken to the army barracks. I was not feeling comfortable because I was no longer in the presence of my mother. I did not know the people who captured us, but they kept promising us that they were taking us to where our mother was.

As seen in Figure 4, using her life map, this girl described the challenges of poverty, death, and hunger in the bush. She also described how losing her father and living with a single mother affected her life after the war. She eloquently describes the realities of discrimination and finger-pointing, particularly by her stepfather:

> First and foremost, I was born from the bush and never knew anyone, not even my relatives. I saw no hope for the future except life in the bush only. However, as I grew up knowing that my father was there, I saw greater hope for the future since my father was mindful of us and took care of us [while in the bush]. Life went on as normal and I never expected anything bad to happen in my life. However, when battles started and my father had to respond by going to battle, we were left alone with our mother. At this point, life became very hard with poverty, death, and hunger as a major hurdle among other challenges faced by people in the bush. I continued experiencing a lot of hills and steep slope in

my life until my mother escaped with us, and we came back home. After our return, I saw little hope, since our father was not there. We experienced a hard life being raised by a single mother. When my mother married another man, life became marred by discrimination and finger-pointing. Our stepfather discriminated against us, and our mother took us to live [without her] with her relatives who never welcomed us wholeheartedly. Then she picked [us up from there] and brought us back to live with her…though our stepfather still discriminates against us. There is a big difference between how our stepfather treats us and how our biological father treated us.
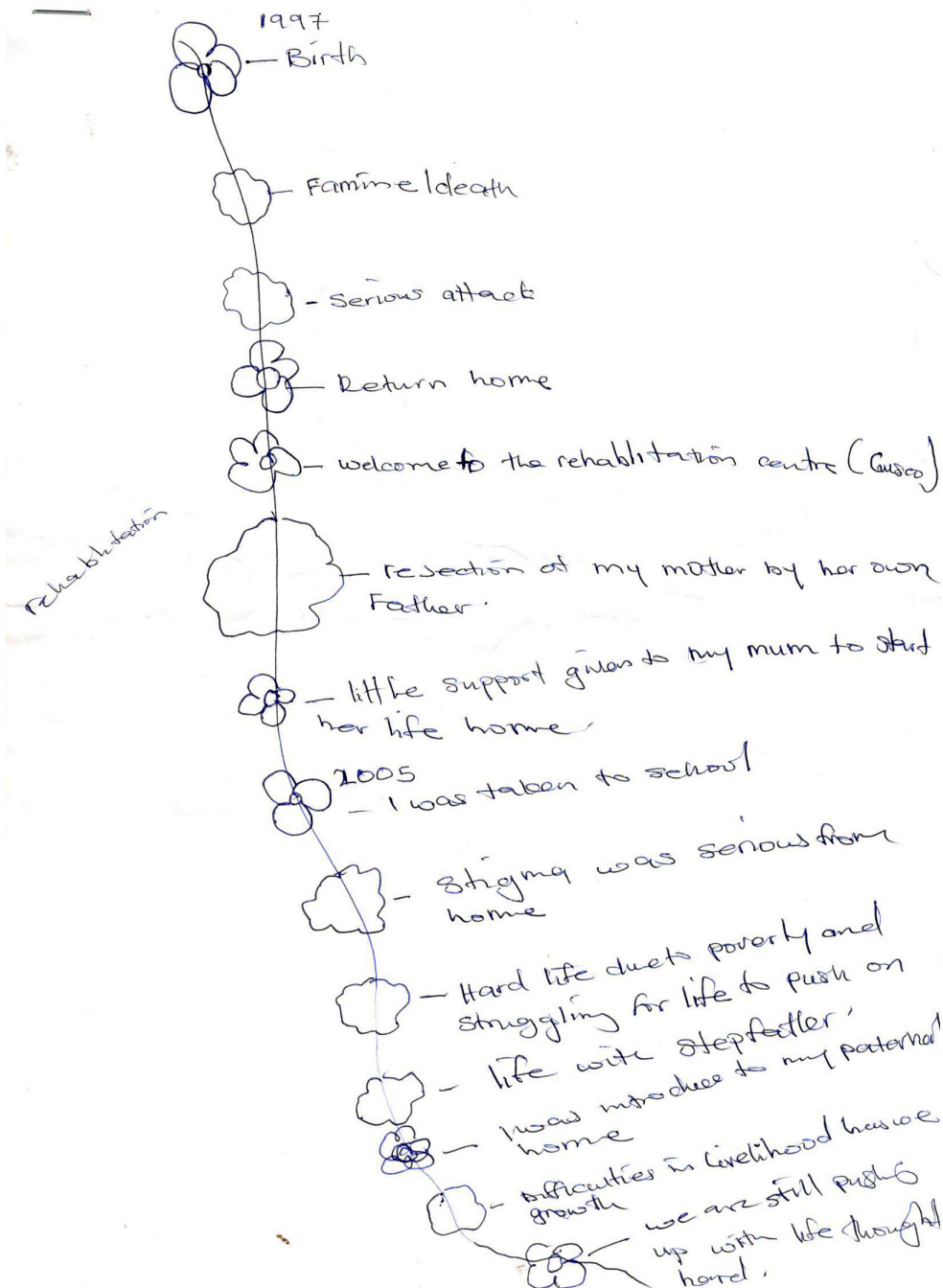

Figure 4. A young woman's life map outlining the major events and circumstances of her life.

Through mask-making, drawings, and life maps, children's experiences and perceptions of life within the LRA, the challenges they faced, their strength, courage, and capacity, as well as their profound vulnerability were uncovered. Their artwork and accompanying explanations also revealed the new and complex challenges in the aftermath of the war. Participants were forced to navigate entry into civilian life and contend with community and family stigma, rejection, poverty, and new family structures, with little accompanying psycho-social and economic support. The masks, drawings, life maps, and accompanying verbal explanations helped to provide an understanding of the realities of armed conflict and its aftermath from the children's own perspectives.

7. Public Dissemination of Children's Perspectives Through Art: (Inter)national Exhibitions

While the data for this study has been published using traditional academic publications, to reach broader audiences, the experiences of children born in LRA captivity were disseminated to the general public via art exhibitions. In 2017, at a national level, a conference was held in Gulu, Uganda, to disseminate the findings of the research and to reach the local population. As part of the conference, masks and drawings were exhibited, and children who were part of the research project were invited, if they desired, to share their experiences with the audience.

At the international level, in 2022, at the invitation of the UK Government, the masks, drawings, and life maps were displayed at a curated art exhibition for the Interministerial Conference on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative in London. The Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative is a UK Government-led initiative that aims to raise awareness of the extent of sexual violence in situations of armed conflict and to encourage and rally global action to end it. The two-day international conference was attended by over 800 delegates, government officials, and survivors. As a result of the conference, more than 50 countries signed a UK-led declaration to end the scourge of sexual violence in conflict. Moreover, 40 countries, made national commitments outlining the steps they will take to tackle sexual violence in conflict. Given their young age and the sensitive content of the conference, children were not in attendance. The art exhibition thus sought to share the perspectives of children born of conflict-related sexual violence through their artwork to a broad public and policy audience.

8. Discussion: The Strengths and Limitations of Arts-Based Methods

This study has demonstrated how mask-making, drawing, and life maps can help to elicit the perspectives and experiences of children and youth affected by war, particularly those born of conflict-related sexual violence, who have until very recently been overlooked in research and international policy. The multiple methods of data collection, using mask-making, drawings, and life maps, alongside interviews, helped to offer breadth and depth of children's lives both during and following war. More easily distributed, accessed, and consumed than traditional academic publications, the medium of art can have a widespread, immediate, and powerful impact (Evans & Foster, 2009). Also, methods that put production in the hands of children and youth can project a credibility and authenticity that more polished works of art cannot achieve, provoking social action and potential social transformation (McNiff, 2008). The arts-based approaches enabled participants to choose what to draw, reveal, share, and discuss with the research team, as well as decide what to withhold, facilitating great control over the research process. Finally, the art-based products and completed masks, drawings, and life maps were shared with key audiences, including war-affected

populations, families, communities, policymakers, and government officials, highlighting the need for appropriate support, research, intervention, and action.

There are inherent limitations that deserve consideration for future research. The methods chosen for this study were developed with local research partners and youth researchers, and, through discussion and consultation, these methods were deemed culturally acceptable and meaningful activities to engage with children born of conflict-related sexual violence in northern Uganda. However, given the unique historical, geo-political, economic, and cultural realities of war and its aftermath, what is appropriate in one context and culture, may not be in another. This underscores the vital importance of community consultation, trust, and relationship-building during data collection and for researchers to not employ universal forms of arts-based methods. Moreover, intersectional factors such as participants' age, race, gender, ethnicity, mobility, sexuality, cultural/spiritual beliefs, historical realities and local customs, etc., must be considered, and researchers must be prepared to adapt research tools to each unique context.

Arts-based activities can allow participants to create distance from discussions of trauma and create safety with a self-directed locus of control. However, researchers must not assume that all participants will be comfortable with the method. For a group activity, such as mask-making, where each child lies down and others helped apply their plaster masks, a certain level of comfort and safety must first be established and discussed particularly for individuals who may have experienced forms of trauma and adversity.

9. Conclusion

Through the arts-based methods of mask-making, drawing, and life maps, this article has explored the wartime and post-war realities of a unique and important group of war-affected children. Through these arts-based methods, the violence, loss, marginalization, and deprivation that these children endured and continue to endure, were captured. These children were denied socio-economic stability and growth, familial and community affection, and education upon returning to their families and communities after being forced to live within an armed group amidst mass violence and upheaval. Despite these profound challenges, they navigated their post-conflict lives with courage, tenacity, and hope for the future.

A key lesson in the development and implementation of arts-based methods in this study was ensuring that they were relevant, useful, and appropriate to the unique context of children's lives and realities in post-war northern Uganda. Jones (2008) notes that political, social, and cultural literacy is essential and that to help any child in crisis, one needs to understand the child's world and their perspectives upon it—which would include culture and context. "Culture" describes a shared social system of knowledge, beliefs, values, and assumptions, continuously guiding and shaping our behavior and our interrelations (Geertz, 1973). Culture is dynamic and gives meaning, acting as a prism through which we not only perceive but also make sense of the world around us. As such, culture plays a prominent role in how individuals conceptualize and experience illness, trauma, healing, and coping. Arts-based methods, interventions, and services during war and its aftermath must be grounded in the local cultural and social contexts; exploring what children's expressions of distress, coping, and wellness mean within their particular context. As such, the arts-based methods used in this study should not be automatically and unilaterally replicated. Instead, arts-based methods must be tailored to each unique cultural context to galvanize individual and collective resilience, strengths, and capacities.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Drawings in a "Container": A Visual Narrative Approach to Research With Refugee Children

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Abstract

Drawings can be a useful research tool as they allow children and young people to reflect on their lived experience in a form that is not dependent on words. They can, however, evoke strong memories and cause distress, particularly among children affected by war. This article describes a visual narrative approach where drawings do not exist on their own as a research tool but are embedded in an actual container, like a suitcase, or another artistic form such as a sculpture, a book, or a layered collage. The challenge this seeks to address is how to work with difficult topics in a way that allows us to apprehend the depth and complexity of the lived experience of children affected by war while protecting them from distressing memories evoked by the visual images they create. In an attempt to answer this question, the article describes a number of research encounters that have taken place over the last 15 years in eastern, central, and southern Africa in both refugee settlement and urban contexts. It explores examples of how multiple drawings are placed in a metaphorical "container" that resonates with the research purpose and the participants. The approach contains emotion, but using a multiplicity of drawings also allows children to reflect on the complexity of lives affected by war, a complexity that includes both strength and vulnerability.

Keywords

art-based research; children; drawings; ethics; refugee

1. Looking Beyond Drawing

This article describes a particular approach to using drawings in research that has developed over years spent working with refugee children and youth in eastern, central, and southern Africa. It explores research

encounters where drawings do not exist on their own as a research tool but are embedded in an actual container, like a suitcase, or another artistic form, such as a sculpture, a book, or a layered collage.

The motivation to look beyond a simple drawing began with a research project undertaken in 2003. As part of a southern Africa-wide research study for a large INGO, I was asked to work with children and young people in refugee settlements to find out about their perceptions of "being a refugee." The INGO, like many international agencies, had a particular protocol for describing the refugee experience, and therefore requested that I ask for information on three migration stages: "pre-migration," "the journey of migration," and "post-migration." I framed the research interaction around an activity where the participants did three drawings illustrating their experience of the three stages.

It soon became clear that this activity unsettled and disturbed the children; their drawings depicted graphic scenes of soldiers, of fires and flames, and of people running away. A girl of 10 said to me: "I don't want to draw that because it will make me dream." I, therefore, suggested she draw something that made her happy instead. It also became clear as the children and I discussed what they had drawn that the descriptions of the drawings were flat, chronological narratives that fitted with what the INGO asked for but not necessarily what the children wanted to tell. I felt I could not probe the children's responses or ask too many questions because of the traumatic experiences that they represented. I subsequently changed the research activity to an open-ended one where the children and young people could choose what they represented in their exploration of "being a refugee." This allowed them the choice to avoid drawing experiences that had been traumatic.

Sometimes, though, we do need to understand narratives of escape, journey, and arrival, for example, if our work is to be used to inform the nature of transit support programmes or the types of psychosocial recovery activities needed in a cross-border arrival centre. The question is, how do we work with these difficult topics in a way that allows us as researchers to apprehend the depth and complexity of the lived experience of children affected by war and, at the same time, protects them from distressing memories evoked by the visual images they create?

This article seeks to answer this question by describing an approach where drawings become part of a larger artwork, or what I call a "container." The section on art-based research below outlines some of the theory that guides the approach. This is followed by a definition of the term "drawings in a container," and, to show what that means, two examples are described. Finally, the article explores three themes that have emerged as I have worked with containers. Throughout I refer to a range of research projects I have undertaken over the last 15 years with children and youth who are refugees. Their contexts range from refugee settlements to urban environments in South Africa, Zambia, Angola, Botswana, Malawi, and Uganda. The age range of the participants was mostly from 7 to 18 (divided into different age groups for the research) and included girls and boys, young women, and young men. Their countries of origin included Burundi, Rwanda, Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Somalia, and Zimbabwe.

2. Visual Methodologies

My own journey with visual approaches began early in my career as an independent researcher working with international and local NGOs. Practitioner-theorists such as Boyden and Ennew (1997) were a particular influence. They emphasised the need to:

> Find ways in which children's ideas and perceptions can be expressed in their own terms without being blocked or misrepresented by the ways adults think and talk. [This means] using techniques that are less dependent on words. (Boyden & Ennew, 1997, p. 37)

As a way of using techniques less dependent on words, my initial work used drawings, as they often allowed children to share their lives in their own unique ways. I began, though, to look for ways that allowed children to share the complexity and texture of their lives beyond a simple description of what they had drawn. Secondly, I needed to find approaches that did not break down the essential psychological defence mechanisms that children affected by war employ (Perrotta, 2020).

Though visual methodologies have been used for many years as a research tool (e.g., Collier & Collier, 1986), there is a growing body of work that reflects on the power of the approach in creating rich, textured and often surprising understandings that go beyond surface description. Bradbury (2017) describes how visual methodologies allow research participants to move beyond the idea that a "'good' narrative…entails logical flow, integration and coherence" (p. 14). She suggests too that they create the possibility to reflect context and interconnection, the kind of detail we seek if we are to understand more about children's inner and outer worlds.

There is also work exploring how visual methodologies that employ a variety of materials and allow young people to choose the form of their artwork can empower them (Driessnack & Furukawa, 2012; A. White et al., 2010). Children affected by war often live with a sense of powerlessness as "the bonds that tether [them] to the everyday world become stretched, distorted, and even torn" by the experience of war (Lester, 2013, p. 753). Using visual methods where young people create a three-dimensional artwork with different media confirms their control over materials and a concrete product. Their choice about what to represent and how to represent it builds a sense of agency. Additionally, choice allows children and young people to decide what they will or will not reveal as they employ the defence strategies they have put into place to protect their emotional well-being (Perrotta, 2020). Mitchell (2008) suggests that it is not only multiple materials such as paint, crayon, charcoal, and ink that build depth. She discusses the benefit of using multiple visual genres such as photographs, video, collage, drawings, and found objects, for example. Using only "one practice or one set of tools" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 366) in visual research methods restricts what we as researchers come to know. She suggests that bringing the full complexity of visual modalities into our research practice will "deepen" the narratives that emerge.

Some of the work on visual methodologies explores how the approach is particularly useful when working with children affected by war. Green and Denov (2019) used mask-making and drawing as a participatory visual method in work with children born as captives of the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda. They describe how the use of visual methods facilitated their ability to work ethically with this particularly marginalised and vulnerable group of young people. Using the visual arts made their work less intrusive because it was focussed on "making" rather than "talking." Working together to create something built community amongst the young people and built trust between researchers and the young people because it reduced the power imbalance between them. It allowed the young people to be "active agents" creating something, rather than "passive" objects answering questions or describing experiences and perceptions. All of this "greatly enrich[ed] the quality of the research" (Green & Denov, 2019, p. 1).

Another reason why visual methods can be effective when working with children affected by war is that images can allow children to articulate what M. White (2005, p. 20) calls the "unmentionable," or what Emmerson and Frosh (2004) call experiences that are "beyond words," i.e., traumatic experiences that are often hidden deeply in the psyche as a form of psychological protection. An artwork can allow children to depict an experience and then talk about it with emotional distance. Johnson (1987) helps us understand this process:

> Instead of the discussion of a feeling, one has a discussion of a picture of a feeling, a less threatening situation for the [participant] because the picture is concrete and external to the self. (p. 11)

The thinking described above has informed my exploration of drawings in a container.

3. A Container

The approach described in the rest of this article focusses on placing children and young people's drawings into a "container." The container could be an actual object, such as a box or suitcase, or another artistic form, such as a book, a sculpture, or a collage. The idea of using a container is not new. Art therapy literature describes a long history of using containers. For example, Frings Keyes (1983) describes using a self-box in therapy as "a visible graphic record of your perception of you" (p. 14). Farrell-Kirk (2001) suggests that boxes are commonly used in art therapy as they can "enclose and conceal contents, create a new realm of space...and encompass past, present and future" (pp. 88, 92).

There are examples too in the research literature of placing drawings in another art form. One example is Walker and Oliveira's (2020) work in Johannesburg with refugee women. They began with drawings of "a story you choose to tell." At the women's suggestion, they then transferred these narrative drawings onto cloth which was sewn and glued onto a large three-dimensional quilt. De Jager et al. (2016), in a systematic review, describe a number of research projects where drawings are contained in body maps. Kollontai (2010) describes innovative work where children displaced by war place artwork in "homes" they have made from found objects in the environment around them.

The following two examples illustrate the idea of drawings in a container. Before exploring these, the reader will notice that another mechanism that I have found to be useful—for me as a researcher (to keep my focus) and for the participants—is to link the container chosen to the purpose of the work. When looking at layers of violence one uses layers of paper; when researching a journey, one uses a suitcase; when researching the impact of living conditions on refugee children in urban contexts one can build a house.

3.1. Example 1: A Small Parcel Tied Up With String

To explain the idea of placing drawings into a container that will protect research participants, deepen our research, and reflect the research purpose in the container, we can begin with the simplest example: a parcel tied up with string. Research in 2018 looked at the psychosocial impact on refugee young adults in South Africa of the difficult process of accessing documentation to legalise their stay. We used a small zig-zag book made from a long strip of folded paper. Working from left to right, participants drew their stories of attempting to access documentation. The long rectangular paper and drawing from left to right encouraged a chronological representation of the process and the passage of time, the focus of the research. The narratives that grew from

the drawings described an ongoing struggle that often took years in a system that did not want them, treated them as "not human" (a quote from one of the young people), and blocked them from moving ahead into their adult lives. Their stories about their interactions with officials and attempts to live life without documentation were traumatic and full of frustration and anger.

While the drawings enabled an understanding of the young people's lives that achieved the aims of the research, I did not want them to take these feelings away with them after the research interaction. Therefore, after asking the young people's permission to use their drawings for the advocacy work that the research would feed into, we folded the small zig-zag books and tied them up into small parcels with coloured ribbons and string. The young people chose the material they wanted to use to tie up their story. The tying up was done in silence and in an intentional, almost ritualistic way. We symbolically closed the drawings and (hopefully) contained the feelings. The container (the long piece of paper) had focussed the research question for the young people (a chronological story and the passage of time) and tying it up allowed an ethical containment of emotion. This containment did not mean ignoring their emotions but acknowledged that talking about difficult emotions can break down their natural psychological defences.

3.2. Example 2: A Suitcase Full of Stories

Another example is the use of an actual container, a suitcase, as a repository for drawings. In this example, the container was chosen intentionally to resonate with the children and young people's experience:

> I remember when I left my country, there were many people waiting at the bus and there was a pile of suitcases. My suitcase reminds me of that time when we were all pushing to get on the bus, and we were afraid, and we wanted to get away because of the war. (young man from Angola, 15 years old, 2002)

The young man quoted above was a participant in a research project conducted between 2001 and 2005 involving refugees newly arrived in Johannesburg, South Africa, from the DRC, Angola, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Burundi (Clacherty, 2019). The research sought to understand their experience of their original homes, why and how they left, and what their new lives were like. At the beginning of the research process, each child chose an old suitcase and, using a large array of art materials, placed drawings about "my life now" and "my life in the past" in and on the suitcase. The suitcase was a container that allowed the children to choose what they wanted to share because it had an exterior that everyone could see and a hidden space inside that they could choose to expose or not. It was also a concrete metaphor for them for the aim of the research and the narrative of their journey from their home country to Johannesburg. Using the fact that some of the suitcases had old labels attached, no handles, and battered edges, I introduced the suitcases as an object that itself had been on a journey:

> A suitcase is something we take on a journey. You have all been on a long journey from the place where you were born to Johannesburg, so your life is a bit like a suitcase—it has been on a journey. So, this suitcase you have chosen can tell the story of your life. (researcher introducing the research task, 2001)

Over several meetings, the young people created visual narratives that described happy childhood memories such as climbing trees, mothers who placed them in the shade of a tree on bright cloth as they worked in

the fields, and the gardens of beloved grandfathers. They told stories of friends they had made in their new homes, the park where they played basketball and chatting with friends at home. They also told stories that covered traumatic war experiences, dangerous journeys, and their present lives in a violent city that did not welcome them, these were often placed inside the suitcase. If they chose to (and some did not), they talked about what the drawings represented, often in detail, and most chose to have the story recorded for use in the research. What they presented were rich narratives where dark and light, past and present, despair and hope were interwoven. This built an intensely textured understanding of some aspects of the young people's lived experience.

Having explored the meaning of the word "container" the remainder of this article explores three themes that have emerged over time as I have worked with the idea: the power of being able to place "layers" within a container, the role that the metaphor of the container holds, and why working on a container-like artwork allows for the use of fragments, which are an important reflection of the lives of children affected by war. These themes begin to explain why the idea of a container holds the possibility of reflecting on and understanding the complexity of the refugee experience while protecting young people and children from being retraumatised.

4. Emergent Themes

4.1. Theme 1: Layers

Containers allow for layers of drawings and layers are one of the important elements for allowing the emergence of "complex human experience [that goes beyond the] surface level" (Siegel, 2006, p. xiv).

The concept of layering drawings emerged from the suitcase research. The children who worked on the suitcases often placed one drawing over another, either completely hiding the first drawing or allowing part of it to be seen. When we discussed what they had made they often referred to these layers. In the quote below a 10-year-old girl describes how she had layered two drawings:

> This is a drawing of me on a swing in Congo when I was little. I tore [a piece of] it and made a drawing of the flats [apartments] where we live now here on it. (a child from the DRC, 10 years old, 2002)

What the layers allowed the young girl to do was to represent both her past and her present; a garden with a tree and a swing replaced with the decaying inner city apartment block in which she now lived. Through a simple layered image, she helps us capture an essential part of the experience of being a refugee. Her two images echo Summerfield (1998), who describes how those forced into exile experience "a rupture in the narrative threads running through their lives" (p. 16). She allows us to see how she mourns for what is now inaccessible (Kohli & Mather, 2003).

Building on what I had learned from the "suitcase children" I began to use the idea of layers intentionally. One example of this is a process used in research on violence against children living in refugee settlements in southern Africa conducted in 2004. The research was submitted to the UN study on violence against children (Pinheiro, 2006) to include the experience of refugee children in the global study.

The container in the UN study was a large collage made of layers and layers of drawings where pages were pasted one over another in such a way that each drawing could be seen, like many small books pasted on the collage. The process began with the children drawing a map in pastel crayon of "all the places I go in a week" on a large piece of canvas. They were asked to identify the places on their map where violence against children took place, then draw a picture of the violence and paste it on the map. The drawings showed physical bullying, often related to ethnic difference, corporal punishment by teachers and parents, verbal and physical harassment of girls by adolescent boys and older men, the impact of alcohol abuse on violence (many of the drawings of violence were placed outside taverns). Rape and intimate violence in the home were also included, and in some of the settlements, young women drew forced early marriage as violence.

The young people then drew anything else they wanted to say about the violence on other small pieces of paper that were pasted "over" the drawings of the violence they had already made in such a way that the drawing underneath could be seen. The result was a number of small books placed all over the map. The drawings the children chose to layer over their first drawing showed what children do about the violence, how it makes children feel, what power children have over the violence, what parents should do, what other adults such as camp management and security should do, how other children help each other or perpetrate violence and how gender is related to violence. The drawings allowed for a rich discussion where many themes emerged. One dominant theme was the fact that, in every settlement, violence was a pervasive part of young people's lives. There is not enough space here to explore all the different forms of violence so I will focus on one of the richest seams of discussion (which emerged from the use of layers) amongst the girls and young women, namely violence related to gender. In one of the groups in Botswana, a young woman placed a blank piece of paper in amongst her layers. This led to the following discussion:

> Participant 1: This paper is blank because girls can do nothing [to keep safe].

> Participant 2: Nothing.

> Participant 3: Nothing.

> Participant 4: There is nothing they can do.

> Participant 1: Maybe you're going to school or you're coming from school, then you meet some boys; they can beat you or fight you if they have asked you for love and you refuse. They catch you on the way, waiting if you pass.

> Participant 6: Or they call, "will you marry me?"

> Participant 1: Usually, it is ok because there are people around, but sometimes when I go to school, nobody can be there. Those boys might be there.

> Participant 4: There is nothing you can do. (young women aged 14–18, 2004)

A single piece of blank paper placed amongst a layer of drawings allowed for an understanding of the powerlessness these young women feel and a picture of how boys understood their masculinity and

relationship with young women. Further discussion with the group led to exploring why these patterns of belief and behaviour emerge. We also spent time discussing the responsibility of adults, particularly officials in the refugee settlement to protect young women. The discussion on the powerlessness of young women raised the issue of being powerless as a refugee and the young women's belief that no one was going to do anything to make their lives safer:

> Here we do not belong. We are not allowed to move out of the camp, I cannot get work in the city, I cannot go where I want. I cannot go back to my country; I am nowhere, and they [officials] know that. They are nationals [local Batswana], they do not understand or care. (young woman aged 14, 2004)

Another strong emergent theme, again from all the groups in every country, were layers of drawings showing the patterns of structural violence that pervade the lives of young women in the settlements. In the following discussion, which took place in a refugee settlement in Malawi, two young women have drawn an image of a *chigayo*. This is the name in the local language for a machine used for milling maize. A *chigayo* is a valuable resource as the owner can earn money from local farmers who pay for their maize to be ground. Notice how the use of layers of drawings facilitates a deepening story:

> Participant 1: That picture that she has shown [referring to one of the layered drawings of a girl and an old man made by another young woman]. Sometimes, there are some parents who like money. If they see their daughter is growing, they tell her to stop going to school so that she may decorate herself and she may be married, and they may get money. It is old men that they marry [she points to one of her layered drawings showing an old man]. These old men give the family *chigayo*. The girl for a milling machine [she points to the next image she has drawn—a milling machine].

> Participant 2: Also, here in the camp most of the girls themselves are called *ibigayo* which means [that, since] she is born, she is seen as someone who will bring money [because she can be sold for a milling machine]. This here [she points to a drawing in her layers that shows parents giving their child to an old man] and this here [she points to her next layered drawing of a young woman standing firm] shows that girls can refuse. It tells the story of a girl who ran away to her uncle when her mother told her to marry. (young women aged 14–18, 2004)

What the layering has allowed this group of young women to do is explore the details around early forced marriage, how women and girls are seen in their social context, and that there are young women who resist the social mores. What we see here is literally a form of "thick" (Geertz, 1973d) data; each layer tells us more. Additionally, as they describe each layer, we see how the young women are making meaning of the structural violence against them.

Finnström (2008) when describing his work in war-affected Northern Uganda, describes how those in a situation of armed conflict and displacement wrestle with how to "orient and seek meaning as they engage the world and live their humanity" (p. 28). He suggests that meaning is often found when "people who live together articulate and mediate experiences and stories among one another in a patterning and systematic manner" (p. 7). Zarowsky (2004) describes a similar process as "engag[ing] the logic and structure of violence" (p. 204). As a researcher, I was able to listen in to this process of making meaning as the young women described the drawn layers on the map that contained them.

4.2. Theme 2: Metaphor

As the use of the suitcases described above illustrates, using a metaphor can allow children to engage with the research topic. A research process with young women migrants living in an inner-city shelter in Johannesburg (Walker & Clacherty, 2015) helps us understand how metaphor and the idea of a container can work together to give insight into the complexity of making meaning out of displacement and marginalisation.

The shelter where the young women lived was housed in an old office block with a sign outside proclaiming that it was a "shelter for abused women." It was run by a religious organisation. The women's lives were dominated by spoken and unspoken rules that they felt they had to obey or risk eviction. The unspoken rules were built around religious observance, particularly asking for forgiveness of sin. The young women had to attest to being saved and adopt a "clean and holy" life, and they had to often testify to this process in religious services attended by the Christians who donated money to keep the shelter running. Within this controlling space, a colleague and I embarked on an action research project built around an art group that met regularly in an empty room in the old office block. All but one of the women in the art group were migrants, some from rural areas in South Africa, others from Swaziland, Zimbabwe, and the DRC. Some were in their teens, others in their twenties, and a few had young children or babies.

Making the room comfortable with mats on the floor, a heater in winter, and tea and muffins, we created a homely, safe place very different from the institutional space with its rules and expectations. This room was essentially also a container. Slowly over time, the young women began to feel comfortable making art and talking about their lives, though we never made them feel any obligation to do this. We wanted this to be a safe space where they had the power to choose what they wanted to do and say. Though we were committed to allowing them to lead the process and create their own agenda for the work we were to do together, we did have an idea of how an art project might be supportive of the women. We hoped to provide an opportunity for the exploration of narratives the women might want to tell (or not tell) in different ways.

What emerged from the process crystalised our understanding of the power of the metaphor one chooses as a container for drawings. Working from our experience with the suitcases as containers we brought in a selection of clothing that we thought might evoke stories that the women might have wanted to tell, an old school shirt, a grandfather's jacket, a young girl's dress, a pair of trousers. We suggested they choose an item and use the art materials we had brought along to tell a story about themselves on the piece of clothing. After choosing an item of clothing they began making and pasting drawings and magazine cut-outs onto them. One young woman made a cut-out drawing of a coat a beloved grandmother wore and pasted it on an old coat, another drew the journey she had made from Zimbabwe on a young girl's dress. One of the young women, who had come to Johannesburg from Swaziland as a child, drew a story about her estranged father on many small pieces of paper and pasted them in a long line down a pair of trouser legs. She then turned the trousers over and decorated the other side with magazine cut-outs of wedding dresses and brides. Talking about the wedding dresses prompted us to begin thinking about the container we had chosen. Did the metaphor of the old clothes resonate for the young women as the suitcases had for the children?

Though they enjoyed being in the space we had created, and chatter and laughter accompanied the art-making, they placed few drawings on to the item they had chosen, and we sensed a lack of enthusiasm about the clothing item they had chosen. They did not treat it as a "special" item that carried weight and their narratives about their drawings were thin and reluctant.

We asked them, therefore, what they would like to make, and they said: "ballgowns!" We realised that young women who had been labelled as "worthless," "bad," and "marginalised" because of the place where they lived, a shelter for abused women, would not relate to second-hand clothing. In fact, the metaphor we had chosen reinforced all the negative stereotypes that built barriers around their ability to create their own personal identities.

We brought in rolls of coloured paper, thinking that paper ballgowns would overcome a lack of sewing skills. We also gave each young woman a dressmaker's mannequin which we had found in second-hand shops. They then set out to use a ballgown as a container for their drawings. Each week we were asked to bring other materials as they became more and more engaged with how the dress could work as a metaphor for their lives, a thick rope, a roll of wire mesh, silver paper, beads. One young woman made a ball gown with stiff corrugated card which represented roofing for a house. The back of the dress, which fishtailed down to the floor, was painted black and represented the "sad house." The front of the dress was decorated with silver stars—"the happy house." While working she told us the story of how the two houses were part of her reason for leaving home and migrating to Johannesburg. Another created a huge purple skirt with a small bodice, a drawing of a broken heart stitched together on the bodice.

Perhaps the best example of drawings in another piece of artwork or container was the dress encircled with a wire mesh frame. Inside the wireframe was a beautiful bright tissue paper skirt decorated with drawings. The drawings represented images from the young woman's life, the first Christmas tree that she had seen as she arrived at the station in Johannesburg, drawings of her baby, the abusive man she had lived with before coming to the shelter, her grandmother's coat, the bus she had travelled in to get to Johannesburg, the street violence she had experienced, and the shelter. The wire mesh perhaps representing how her life was fenced in.

Ricoeur (1978) suggests that metaphor "has the capacity…to provide untranslatable information and…yield some true insight about reality" (p. 143). This is what the young women were doing, using the metaphor of the dresses to narrate their reality, a reality that few people outside saw or acknowledged.

As they worked, each in their corner, often over a few hours, they commented on what they were making. One young woman informed us that she had made the hips wide as the woman had an African body, another named her mannequin Basetsana Khumalo, a powerful local businesswoman. These young women were reframing their identities from "abused, marginalised woman" to "strong, beautiful, successful African woman." The drawings integrated into the dresses and the forms of the gowns themselves all included the women's past, present, and futures, the complexity of their lives. Using a metaphor that resonated had allowed us to witness how they were making meaning of their displacement and marginalisation and their longing to make meaning of the disorder of their lives. Jackson (1995) suggests how metaphor can play a role in this process. He writes that "metaphor mov[es] us…as we seek connections between experiences" (p. 157), as we try to make meaning of the "given and the chosen, then and now, here and there" (Mallett, 2004, p. 80).

What the gowns as container, as metaphor, allowed us as researchers to see was the process of the young women making connections between past, present, and future, the given and the chosen. Through the power of the metaphor, the young women were able to share narratives in drawings of the happy house, the sad house, the first Christmas tree, the grandmother who wore a warm coat, the abusive partner, the broken

heart, the wish for a wedding gown, the feeling of being fenced in and the ability to be a strong businesswoman alongside the difficulty of their lives.

4.3. Theme 3: Fragments

In all the processes I have described in this article, we were working with fragments. The small drawings tied up with string and ribbon, the pieces of drawing pasted, torn, and layered into and onto the suitcases, the small drawings layered on the maps, the drawings hung on and behind the wire mesh of the paper gown are all fragments. Placing drawings into another piece of artwork that works as a container can allow fragments to emerge. Listening to these fragments can give us as researchers a deeply privileged view into the meanings children and young people are making around their lives.

One of the most powerful examples I have experienced was working with young adult unaccompanied refugees in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2023. The container we worked with in this research was a "zine." Zines (Knobel & Lankshear, 2001) are small handmade and photocopied books, often associated with counterculture, where drawings, prints, photography, and text are used to tell unconventional stories. We used them as a container for drawings where the young people were asked to explore the idea of "belonging." A zine is in itself a metaphor and as such could be used in the discussion of the previous theme, but here I use it to illustrate the importance of fragments as an aspect of drawings in a container.

We made myriad art materials available, including different kinds of paper, paint, crayons, charcoal, magazines, newspapers, string, and tape. After making the zines we used them as a point of discussion and participants told us, if they chose, about what they had made.

One young woman made a small book of drawings that contained a deeply poignant fragment. On the first page of her zine, she pasted a map of North America that she had cut out of an old atlas. She wrote a single word on this page: "mum." The next page had a cut-out of Europe and the single word "dad." On the third page, she drew a small picture in pencil of a girl and wrote "me" on the page. Other pages followed but through the first three pages she had threaded a piece of wool that linked the words, mum, dad, and me. In a single fragment within the container of the zine, she had reflected her story of loss and abandonment. The single drawing of herself in pencil, alone on the page spoke deeply of being alone, of not belonging. This small fragment represents, for me, how a piece can hold a deeply personal narrative. Fragments can evoke a deeper narrative because lived experience is fragmentary, particularly for refugees. Summerfield (1998) suggests that refugees escaping conflict have experienced a "a rupture in the narrative threads running through their lives" (p. 16). Zarowsky (2004) in her work with Somalian refugees describes the narratives shared with her as "scraps of inchoate memory…characterised by dream fragments, elision or innuendo" (p. 204). This resonates with the idea of fragments. By placing the drawings in other pieces of artwork or containers rather than leaving them as flat pieces of art we were accepting fragments, we were accepting the "rupture of narrative" and "memory as inchoate."

Some researchers may be hesitant about using an approach such as that described in this article because of the practical implications of time, space, and familiarity with art processes. There are strategies for responding to these. Some of the processes described here have taken place in as little as five hours. I have made strange places work for this kind of research—a room in a clinic, a hair salon, a church, mats under a tree. A lack of

experience and the confidence to use art materials can be solved by bringing in an artist to work alongside the researcher, someone to introduce materials and quietly guide the art processes.

5. Conclusion

The idea of placing drawings into a literal or metaphorical container made up of another artwork builds on the power of the simple use of paper and drawing materials. What's important is to find a container that both resonates with research participants and holds within it the purpose of the research endeavour. The three emergent themes—layers, metaphor, and fragments—described in this article illustrate a process for using drawings that provides psychological protection to children and young people. The approach also allows participants to choose how to describe their lived experience, past, present, and sometimes the imagined future, with all the complexity with which they live as refugees. In this way, narratives about "home" (which can be conceptualised in different ways), their journeys, their present experience, and, in fact, any other research topic that we wish to explore, can emerge from the individual metaphors, layers, and fragments of their personal memory and meaning.

I suggest that working with containers can help to make displacement "comprehensible" (Finnström, 2008, p. 7). Creating a narrative that involves deciding which part of a drawing needs to go into the container, where it should be placed, if it needs a layer over it, or if an object like string, tape, or cloth needs to be added to it, can be a process of meaning-making. This means that, though our research has the depth that helps those who use our research understand the lives of children and young people, it also makes a small contribution to their ability to cope with the complexity of loss and displacement of war.

Conflict of Interests
The author declares no conflict of interest.

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ARTICLE

Students' Conceptualisations of "Peace" and "War" in Drawing–Text Combinations: A Metapragmatic Multimodal Analysis

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Abstract

In this article, we investigate (partly guided) conceptualisations of "peace" (and "war") in children's school drawings and their accompanying textual framings. We draw on a transdisciplinary framework grounded in ethnography and metapragmatics, combining tools from socio-pragmatic (critical) approaches to multimodal discourse. Our data consists of authentically generated, photographed image-text worksheets that were publicly displayed on the fence of a primary school in a small town in Northern Italy in April 2022. Combining qualitative and quantitative analytical procedures, the (textual and multimodal) conceptualisations range from peace as a very concrete mode of secure-relaxed experience of basic relationships, of home and togetherness, and of self, to peace as care and unity on a more (global-)political scale. Contrary to ideologies on children's drawings as naïve-unmediated "windows" to inner states, our analysis shows how the trans-/locally re-/produced repertoire(s) of multimodal frozen mediated actions (including emblematic patterns such as emojis, peace-flags, comics-speech bubbles, etc.) are deployed ranging from realistic scenes to abstract and complex visual designs. Thereby, children show themselves as literate and often humorous-creative practitioners of visual communication.

Keywords

children's drawings; critical multimodal discourse analysis; metapragmatics; multimodality; peace; peacebuilding; school; visual communication; war; well-being

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1. Introduction

In this article, we investigate how children of an elementary school in Northern Italy conceptualise peace (and war) on image-text sheets they made in the context of a school-wide intercultural project.

Building on research in childhood studies, we understand children not as "becomings," i.e., as unfinished, not-yet adults, whose expressions are to be interpreted primarily with a view to their future adulthood, but as "beings," and thus as competent social actors in the reality of their lives (e.g., Bollig, 2020, p. 22). In line with such a conceptualisation, children are "active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live" (James & Prout, 2015, p. 7). Such a perspective also implies reconstructing the children's cultural and artistic forms of expression in their own right. Therefore, we regard children's drawings neither as a preliminary stage and training ground for an "adult" art/media production nor as assemblages of naïve-subconscious, "symptomatic" expressions of inner states: On the contrary, we conceive them as (media) cultural practices of children as actors, as specific social actors' deployments of specific semiotic resources and mediational means, as communicative and artistic contributions in their own right; cultural (media) products in which aspects of the social order of the school and their broader lifeworld also become visible (Papandreou, 2014).

Against the backdrop of mediatised (familial, institutional, etc.) settings and practices which shape socialisation in today's digital childhoods (Wiesemann et al., 2020), a genre label such as "drawing" must not mirror unreflected traditional media ideologies (e.g., "drawings are analog"; Blasch, 2021, p. 42) nor echo classic fine-art taxonomies (drawing vs. painting, etc.). Therefore, we conceive of "drawings" as a (working) label referring to a diverse range of space-based visual (media) practices usually using two-dimensional surfaces (a sheet of paper, a wall, a digital surface, etc.) and production tools of any kind (pencils, sticks, digital brushes, etc.) to arrange and show (static) visual elements (colour, lines, figurative elements, etc.). Considering the main characteristics of multimodal discourse in the digital age including the constant ongoings of remediation (e.g., Ravelli & van Leeuwen, 2018), researchers need to be open to children's drawings as somehow "echoing" the transmedial flows of signs and practices, and the heavily multimodal digital surrounds of contemporary lifeworlds.

Concerning the notions of "war" and "peace," we draw on both a technical and a discourse-theoretically grounded understanding: Regarding our data, it seems obvious that the Putin-Russian war against Ukraine served as a reason for realising this project in the primary school. "War" in this context technically refers to armed conflict between two or more (militant, sub-/supra-/national) parties, whereby a characteristic of these conflicts lies in the fact that they always harm uninvolved actors and surroundings. As the discursive regime of Putin exemplifies, it is an essential dimension of warfare's "strategic communication"—and of politics as such—to control the declarative practices referring to these violent events: The specific trans-/local conceptualisations and declarative regimes regarding the highly significant labels of "peace" and "war," on large scale, also re-/produce geopolitical assemblages of "non-/grievable lives" (Butler, 2009). As several works from peace studies point out, reconstructing and envisioning concrete social actors' manifold conceptualisations of peace is itself an essential aspect of peacebuilding efforts (e.g., the seminal concepts of "positive peace," Galtung, 1969; "bottom-up peacebuilding," Lederach, 1997; "the many peaces," Dietrich & Sützl, 1997; see also de Coning et al., 2023; for the context of childhood research and peace education see Ilfiandra & Saripudin, 2023, p. 364).

2. Conceptual Framework

Drawing on ethnographically oriented childhood studies (Anzures Tapia, 2020; Huf & Kluge, 2021; Kelle & Breidenstein, 1996; Lytra et al., 2016; Seele, 2012), we adopt the differentiation of childhood as social status, life phase, way of life, and discourse (Kelle, 2004, pp. 89–90). This also allows for integrating multiple perspectives (e.g., deconstructing specific "childhood discourses" while acknowledging crucial developmental aspects; reconstructing peer-group practices while acknowledging the interwovenness of children's and adults' lifeworlds). Furthermore, we underscore that understanding children as social actors in their own right must be met with methodological consequences (Kelle & Breidenstein, 1996, p. 56): We agree that ethnography—with its ethnomethodological underpinnings, its focus on social actors' lifeworlds and cultural practices, on situatedness and data-drivenness; and with its openness to theoretical and methodical triangulation—well satisfies those needs as a methodological meta-framework (Kelle & Breidenstein, 1996, p. 56). Additionally, the focus on reconstructing children's cultural meanings urges researchers to position themselves into a self-reflective and power-sensitive "learning from kids" perspective, which helps to avoid "studying them down" (Thorne, 1993, as cited in Kelle & Breidenstein, 1996, p. 52; Kubota, 2017) and thereby re-/producing children's precarious social status.

Investigating practices of children's drawings means going beyond the usual ethnographic focus on verbality (Dicks et al., 2006; Mohn, 2013). Simultaneously, deploying ethnomethodological principles (Bergmann & Meyer, 2021) also helps to avoid the pitfalls of widespread communicative ideologies (Spitzmüller, 2013, pp. 285–286) on this research object, such as children's drawings understood as a genuinely narrative-representational practice, exclusively focusing on the depiction of concrete (maybe imagined) event-like scenes, and thereby following a concrete figurative realism as its implicit norm or "developmental goal" (e.g., Capurso et al., 2022). On the contrary, we conceive of children's drawings as frozen mediated actions (Norris, 2019, pp. 45–47), with the child actors choosing from available semiotic resources (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; for differences in semiotic modes see J. Bateman et al., 2017) to make their communicative intentions interactively accountable, thereby reflectively pointing to and simultaneously constructing the contexts for their interpretations.

Therefore, children's drawings are far more than indicators of predefined cognitive or developmental stages (Matthews, 2003), or "windows" into unmediated inner (cognitive, emotional) states of children (cf., e.g., Capurso et al., 2022, p. 1). Rather, drawings have to be understood as a crucial "meaning-making activity" (Papandreou, 2014, p. 85) and reflect the socio-political discourse spaces of children. In addition, children actively interpret and adapt semiotic elements from popular culture, also engaging in shared meaning-making during collective drawing activities (Kukkonen & Chang-Kredl, 2018). It is therefore not surprising that drawing is understood and used as a meaningful pedagogical resource (A. Bateman & Mitchell, 2023).

In line with this conceptual background, we draw on a metapragmatics-based approach to multimodal analysis (Blasch, 2021, pp. 40–42; Spitzmüller, 2013), which enriches the above-mentioned concepts with its focus on socio-semiotic variation and social indexicality (e.g., Blasch, 2021; Spitzmüller, 2013): Semiotic variants might have an identical denotative meaning but they differ socio-culturally in their connotative meanings and social evaluations (e.g., a "professional-balanced" vs. a "dilettantish" visual composition; Blasch, 2021). These socio-indexical evaluations—which are re-/produced via usage and explicit metapragmatic discourse, respectively, which may be more or less dominant, and may differ within different socio-cultural contexts—

serve, in turn, as implicit-habitual or explicit-stylised resources for inter-/actively position selves and others in social interaction (e.g., Blasch, 2021; Spitzmüller, 2013). Following Agha (2005), we use the term "emblem/ -atic" to refer to semiotic elements meta-/pragmatically enregistered with specific socio-cultural meanings in a given context (Agha, 2005; e.g., rainbow colours as a "readable" symbol for peace).

3. Research Design: Data and Methods

Our data consists of 433 worksheets of children from an elementary school (aged 6 to 11) in a small town in Northern Italy. This data was not generated and collected for ethnographic purposes and research strategies, but "by chance" (photographed in April 2022): The worksheets were hung on the fence of the school and were recognisable as part of the school project "Peace, Solidarity, Friendship. Project Interculture." All drawings were generated on standardised worksheet templates on white DIN A4 sheets with the project logo and explicit instructions: The header with the task "I build peace when…" at the top, then a blank space box for a drawing, and six lines for a text below (see Section 4.1 for detailed analysis). The drawings were hung one next to the other (grouped by class and/or motif). The materiality of the displayed drawings indicates that they were intended for a longer exhibition at the interface between the school and the public: The sheets were foiled to make them weatherproof, and they were attached to the fence with cable ties. We observed that the drawings were looked at by people walking by and that they also gave rise to conversations. Some also took photos. In this way, the children's messages were publicly received and discussed.

Our data is characterised by both the advantages and disadvantages of ethnographic data generated beyond research strategies: We have documented a specific authentic moment of this schoolwide project, i.e., the exhibited drawings; simultaneously, our data lacks specific background information and metadata usually collected to contextualise, order and associate the data along potential dimensions.

As Table 1 shows, 38.80% of the students' worksheets mention the school-level group. Within this article, we focus on this subset of 168 worksheets (98.80% of these include the students' names, in the format of "Cristina 2A" or "Luigi Marcona 4B") which allows us to contextualise and associate findings along school level. Simultaneously, we are confronted with the fact that the data subset of each school level is composed quite differently: While we have a larger group of level-1 students ($n = 64$), composed in quite similar parts by three different classes, we have relatively small subsets for levels 2, 4 and 5; additionally, in three school level subsets one specific class is quantitatively dominating (subsets of level 2: $n = 23$, 22 students from class 2A; and level 4: $n = 20$, 18 students from class 4A). These facts must be met with adequate and conclusive methodical, analytical, and interpretative procedures.

According to the multi-perspectival outreach of our approach (Blasch, 2021), we combine quantitative and qualitative procedures. The basis for the quantitative analytic account is, in large parts, qualitative coding with the codebook developed in a data-driven ethos (see Norris, 2019) and an abductive-cyclical procedure: According to our research interests and conceptual framework, the underlying analytical tools and conceptual groundings for the codes were drawn from socio-pragmatic (critical) approaches to discourse, visual communication and multimodality (Blasch, 2021). Against the backdrop of communication ideologies framing children's drawings as genuinely narrative practices with concrete figurative realism as an implicit (modality) goal, we have put a data-driven analytical focus on the usage of emblematic and non-representational visual design aspects.

Table 1. Overview: data and frequencies of selected dimensions.

Dimension	No. Total (%)	School level 1 (%)	School level 2 (%)	School level 3 (%)	School level 4 (%)	School level 5 (%)	School level unknown (%)
Worksheets (photos)	433 (100)	64 (14.78)	23 (5.31)	39 (9.01)	20 (4.62)	22 (5.08)	265 (61.20)
School-level group mentioned	168 (38.80)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Classes	—	1A: 22 1B: 22 1D: 20	2A: 22 2B: 1	3A: 1 3B: 1 3C: 2 3D: 16 3E: 19	4A: 18 4B: 2	5A: 2 5B: 4 5C: 1 5D: 2 5E: 13	—
Student name mentioned	324 (74.83)	64 (100)	23 (100)	39 (100)	20 (100)	20 (90.10)	158 (59.62)
Accompanying text (on lines)	419 (96.77)	60 (93.75)	22 (95.65)	39 (100)	20 (100)	22 (100)	256 (96.60)
Drawing includes text	249 (57.51)	17 (26.56)	8 (34.78)	24 (61.54)	16 (80.00)	18 (81.82)	166 (62.64)
Length of accompanying texts (letters; rounded)*	—	0 to 121; average: 25; median: 22	0 to 57; average: 30; median: 30	27 to 254; average 125; median: 109	35 to 227; average: 100; median: 101	53 to 249; average: 129; median: 135	**
Worksheet heading coloured in	—	32 (50.00)	20 (86.96)	25 (64.10)	20 (100)	19 (86.36)	***

Notes: * A few texts were partly hard to read and the number of letters reconstructed; ** no conclusive analysis possible due to unreadable texts; *** this data group is not included in this article; all names were anonymised.

The codebooks for the analysis are provided as supplementary material for this article.

4. Findings

4.1. The Worksheet's Framing of Students' Multimodal Interactions with Peace(-Building and War)

While we don't have data to contextualise the production of the students' drawings, we can analyse how the worksheet multimodally frames the children's interactions (see Figure 1): It uses a multimodal design pattern very common in online and print media contexts with the top-down triad of heading—visual element—text (with a blank space box and text lines to be filled out), including a logo-like element positioned in one of the common logo corner spots. With its composition, the worksheet invites one to multimodally complete the subjectively formulated task (i.e., the header "I build peace when…") by producing a picture with accompanying text. Nonetheless, considering the salience and "visual weight" of the blank space box (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, pp. 201–203), the main focus is on completing the task via drawing. This task assemblage, while deploying widespread patterns of professional multimodal (media) communication, also meets the inclusive needs for addressing children aged 6 to 11 years with their different capabilities.

Considering "visual weight," the logo-like element with its snail-house-like assemblage must be considered "heavy." Using the keywords "peace, solidarity, friendship" connected with the rainbow colours, this element simultaneously deploys and projects both: the discursive conception of the task and topics as associated with "colourfulness," and the fact that the (elicited) practice of "standing in for peace" is crucially connected with an inventory of multimodal emblems and symbols that are (globally) circulated via media texts as in the case of the rainbow colours: "Standing in for peace" is—at least also—a (political-activist, at least public) practice of positioning oneself deploying the adequate, "readable" symbols.

Considering the textual framings, the term "intercultural" implicitly conceptualises conflicts as "intercultural" conflicts, which in turn are linked to discourses of "culture" as "national culture." Second, the focus is on "peace," "solidarity," and "friendship," which refer to the idea of peace as a product of (more) political as well as interpersonal relations. Third, the subjectively formulated task "I build peace when..." refers to the agency of concrete individual social actors and encourages them to reflect on their own possibilities and conditions of peacebuilding.

The students took up the main worksheet activity projections by focusing on the drawing (accompanied by some sort of text by 96.77% of the children; see Table 1). Partly, they also responded to the more implicit projections, e.g., by visually "rhyming" the logo element and painting the heading letters in alternating colours (69.05% of the drawings; see Figure 2).

4.2. Quantitative Analysis

4.2.1. Rising Complexity of Drawing–Text Combinations and the "Readable" Competence of Multimodality

Unsurprisingly, the range of complexity (understood as modal density, that is, the given modal intensity and/or complexity of mediated actions; see Norris, 2019, pp. 242–243) of the accompanying texts increases with age (see Table 1 for ranges of length): constructions range from one-word texts (e.g., "Pace" in level 1) to complex text-pragmatic constructions (e.g., poems, three level-5 students). Considering the accompanying texts of level 4, 18 of 20 children (17 of 18 students of class 4A) used complex, explicitly argumentative constructions echoing the task formulation (e.g., "I build peace when I help or console a comrade because I take away the feeling he is hurting for"). In this case, the recorded frequencies most probably show the local and collective relevance of the construction due to the teacher's instructions.

Concerning the modal density of the drawings, the dimension of whether the drawings themselves include texts appears to be very interesting: The frequency distribution of this nominal categorical dimension for levels 1 to 5 (see Table 1) is highly significant ($p < 0.001$; Fisher's exact test for count data with simulated p-value based on 10000 replicates, performed with R). Given that displaying "readable" competence is a crucial goal of students' inter-/actions in accomplishing school tasks, we interpret these results not only as due to increasing capabilities but as pointing to the current highly valorised emblematic status of image-text designs, not only within this specific school context (e.g., Kress, 2003).

4.2.2. Textual Conceptualisations of Peace

Considering the textual conceptualisations by school level (see Table 2 for frequencies), we witness a development from conceiving peace in very concrete terms, grounded on the most basic aspects of

Table 2. Textual conceptualisations: Frequency distributions of qualitative coding.

	Level 1 (n = 60) (%)	Level 2 (n = 22) (%)	Level 3 (n = 39) (%)	Level 4 (n = 20) (%)	Level 5 (n = 22) (%)	Total (N = 163) (%)
Conceptualisation of peace (exclusive*):						
Secure and relaxed-joyful experience of primary and basic relationships	25 (37.50)	11 (50.00)	3 (7.69)	1 (5.00)	1 (4.55)	34 (20.85)
Secure and relaxed-joyful experience of self	13 (23.33)	4 (18.18)	1 (2.56)	0	0	19 (11.65)
Fostering peace through specific social practices	7 (11.67)	7 (31.82)	35 (87.18)	19 (95.00)	20 (90.91)	103 (63.19)
Other (paratactical lists; slogans)	15 (25.00)	0	0	0	1 (4.55)	7 (4.29)
Sub-dimensions (overlapping**):						
Reference to Russian War on Ukraine	1 (1.67)	0	1 (2.56)	0	0	2 (1.23)
Reference on war	1 (1.67)	0	6 (15.38)	0	3 (13.64)	10 (6.13)
Reference on children as social actors	2 (3.33)	0	8 (20.51)	0	1 (4.55)	11 (6.74)

Notes: * Codes deployed exclusively; ** additional transverse sub-dimensions; see Supplementary File 1 for a codebook with descriptions and examples.

children's lifeworlds (primary relationships; home), to more abstract terms of reflecting social practices to foster peace: Whereas the first two school levels focus on peace as—(implicitly) secure, joyful and relaxed—constellations and activities with family and friends, and on peace as—(implicitly) secure, joyful and relaxed—experiences of self (aggregated: level 1: 63.33%; level 2: 68.18%), the reflection of—more or less concrete—social practices to foster peace are clearly at focus with the higher-level students (level 3: 87.18%; level 4: 95.00%; level 5: 90.91%). Thereby, this development from very concrete conceptualisations, centred on intrapersonal and primary relational aspects, to more abstract understandings, centred on social practices, is coarsely in tune with findings from research connecting children's development of role-taking ability to their understanding of peace and war (e.g., Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1998, pp. 362–363; Ilfiandra & Saripudin, 2023, pp. 365, 367–368).

Regarding the accompanying texts, explicit textual references to the Russian War on Ukraine (1.23%)—most probably an initial for this school project—and references to war as such (6.13%) are very rare. The noticeable number of explicit references to children as a concerned social group in level 3 (20.51%) could be interpreted as echoing related (instructional) classroom discourse as well as a (locally relevant) collaborative pattern of accomplishing the task.

4.2.3. Multimodal Conceptualisations of Peace

Concerning the overarching visual communication patterns, our data show (see Table 3) that using (complex) visual design patterns beyond concrete scenes are available at all levels: While level-1 students mainly used

realistic-scenic representations (78.12%) with anthropomorphic figures (87.50%), level-5-students mainly produced quite complex and more abstract image-text designs (visual design: 81.82%, anthropomorphic participants: 40.91%, image-text-design: 81.82%). Similarly, students of all levels partly used emblematic-stylised patterns of (recent) visual communication (e.g., emojis/icons, speech bubbles, Anime/manga-like eyes). Older students especially show their literacy by producing the current standard of visual media communication, i.e., image-text designs. Similar to this aspect, efforts to produce images satisfying norms of a "balanced composition" (Blasch, 2021, pp. 45–47; i.e., a "neat," often symmetrical style of arranging the elements in the image space, avoiding randomness and slant, using templates like the sun put in a top corner, etc.) are clearly observable in all levels and dominating in levels 2 to 5 (level 2: 86.96%, level 3: 92.31%, level 4: 100%, level 5: 95.45%).

Regarding the conceptualisations of peace, we witness how the children exploit the potentials of multimodal communication to integratively display their accounts of peace topoi as well as showing the settings of peace and using (common) peace symbols (e.g., rainbow colours, peace signs, hearts, "pace" as emblematic lettering) to "stand in for peace." In tune with the analysis of textual framings, the integrative multimodal analysis underscores the range of conceptualising peace: The younger students mainly conceive peace as the settings of secure-relaxed, active and harmonious basic relationships at home and with family and/or friends, as well as a secured-joyful experience of self. The older students mainly reflect on social practices to foster peace, especially on the topoi of care (helping, consoling, etc.), actively establishing or securing social constellations of harmonious togetherness (by avoiding or reconciliating quarrels, focusing on a mode of

Table 3. Multimodal analysis: Frequency distributions of qualitative coding.

	Level 1 (n = 64) (%)	Level 2 (n = 23) (%)	Level 3 (n = 39) (%)	Level 4 (n = 20) (%)	Level 5 (n = 22) (%)	Total (N = 168) (%)
Overarching pattern of visual communication:						
Concrete scene (Figures 2 to 6)	50 (78.12)	11 (47.38)	23 (58.97)	15 (75.00)	4 (18.18)	103 (61.31)
Visual design (Figures 1, 7, 8)	14 (21.88)	12 (52.17)	16 (41.03)	5 (25.00)	18 (81.82)	65 (38.69)
Anthropomorphic figure/s as participant (Figures 2 to 7)	56 (87.50)	22 (95.65)	31 (79.49)	20 (100)	9 (40.91)	138 (82.14)
Image includes text	17 (26.56)	8 (34.78)	24 (61.54)	16 (80.00)	18 (81.82)	83 (49.40)
Emblematic-stylistic visual dimensions:						
Balanced composition (Figures 1 to 8)	23 (35.94)	20 (86.96)	36 (92.31)	20 (100)	21 (95.45)	120 (71.43)
Stylised eyes (anime/manga-like) (Figures 5, 7)	12 (18.75 total/ 21.43 of figures)	8 (34.78 total/ 36.36 of figures)	8 (20.51 total/ 25.81 of figures)	3 (15.00 total/ of figures)	0	31 (18.45 total/ 22.46 of figures)
Stick figure style (Figures 1, 4)	12 (18.75)	1 (4.34)	6 (15.38)	1 (5.00)	2 (9.09)	22 (13.10)
Speech bubbles (Figure 5)	2 (3.13)	5 (21.74)	13 (33.33)	13 (65.00)	4 (18.18)	37 (22.02)
Emojis/icons (Figures 1, 7)	6 (9.38)	3 (13.04)	11 (28.21)	2 (10.00)	6 (27.27)	28 (16.67)
Complex patterns of mise-en-scene* (Figure 5)	0	3 (13.04)	8 (20.51)	6 (30.00)	4 (18.18)	21 (12.50)

Table 3. (Cont.) Multimodal analysis: Frequency distributions of qualitative coding.

	Level 1 (n = 64) (%)	Level 2 (n = 23) (%)	Level 3 (n = 39) (%)	Level 4 (n = 20) (%)	Level 5 (n = 22) (%)	Total (N = 168) (%)
Conceptualisations: settings of peace						
Family & home	27 (42.19)	4 (17.39)	11 (28.21)	12 (60.00)	1 (4.55)	55 (32.74)
Experience of self	17 (26.56)	8 (34.78)	2 (5.13)	0	1 (4.55)	28 (16.67)
Friends (and family)	11 (17.19)	11 (47.83)	11 (28.21)	0	3 (13.46)	36 (21.43)
Children as a concerned social group	2 (3.13)	0	8 (20.51)	0	0	10 (5.95)
Nature	7 (10.94)	9 (39.13)	6 (15.38)	1 (5.00)	1 (4.55)	24 (14.29)
Global-national politics	1 (1.56)	0	2 (5.13)	0	13 (59.09)	16 (9.52)
School	0	1 (4.35)	4 (10.26)	0	0	5 (2.98)
Playground	1 (1.56)	0	2 (5.13)	1 (5.00)	0	4 (2.38)
Soccer	1 (1.56)	0	0	1 (5.00)	1 (4.55)	3 (1.79)
Other sports	0	0	1 (2.56)	0	1 (4.55)	2 (1.19)
Animals as main anthropomorphic participants	0	0	1 (2.56)	0	1 (4.55)	2 (1.19)
Religion	0	0	1 (2.56)	0	0	1 (0.60)
City	1 (1.56)	0	0	0	0	1 (0.60)
Conceptualisations: visual emblems of peace						
Flags (Figures 7, 8)	5 (7.81)	0	6 (15.38)	1 (5.00)	11 (50.00)	23 (13.69)
Hearts (Figure 1)	16 (25.00)	5 (21.74)	13 (33.33)	2 (10.00)	4 (18.18)	40 (23.81)
Pace/Peace (emblematic lettering) (Figures 1, 7, 8)	7 (10.94)	1 (4.35)	6 (15.38)	1 (5.00)	13 (59.09)	28 (16.67)
Peace sign	1 (1.56)	2 (8.70)	8 (20.51)	0	4 (18.18)	15 (8.93)
Rainbow (colours) (Figures 2, 7, 8)	8 (12.50)	6 (26.09)	8 (20.51)	1 (5.00)	10 (45.45)	33 (19.64)
Bodily symbols of togetherness (Figure 3)	16 (25.00)	7 (30.43)	6 (15.38)	2 (10.00)	4 (18.18)	35 (20.83)
Peace dove	2 (3.13)	0	2 (5.13)	0	1 (4.55)	5 (2.98)
Globe (Figure 8)	1 (1.56)	0	0	0	5 (22.73)	6 (3.57)
Conceptualisations: topoi of peace						
Care	6 (9.38)	3 (13.04)	23 (58.97)	14 (70.00)	11 (50.00)	57 (33.93)
Togetherness & harmony	11 (17.19)	2 (8.70)	26 (66.67)	9 (45.00)	16 (72.73)	64 (38.10)
Understanding & respect	0	3 (13.04)	6 (15.38)	1 (5.00)	7 (31.82)	17 (10.12)
Russian-Ukrainian war	2 (3.13)	0	6 (15.38)	1 (5.00)	2 (9.09)	11 (6.55)
War	1 (1.56)	0	6 (15.38)	0	3 (13.64)	10 (5.95)
Colourfulness	2 (3.13)	0	1 (2.56)	0	1 (4.55)	4 (2.38)
Joy	1 (1.56)	1 (4.35)	0	0	0	2 (1.19)
Freedom of movement	1 (1.56)	0	0	0	0	1 (0.60)
Political peace activism	1 (1.56)	0	0	0	1 (4.55)	2 (1.19)

Notes: See the codebook in Supplementary File 2 for this article; * in this sample: split image space, speaking from/to the off, close-up, cinematic framing, bird's/satellite's eye view.

friendship and love, etc.) as well as of understanding and respect. Additionally, older students (especially level 5: 59.09%) use visual communication to multimodally construct a global-national political dimension using emblems like the globe or national flags, or by just "doing" political peace activism with their image-text designs (see Figure 7).

The multimodal analysis also shows the collaborative approach of many children to accomplish the worksheet task: Potentially due to specific (instructional) classroom discourse, and throughout all school levels, we find quite specific motifs and design patterns similarly produced by a group of students (e.g., a decontextualised pair of figures holding each other's hands in level 1, see Figure 3; 25.00%). In some cases, we presume that the children also used specific professional media texts as models (e.g., the motif of three or four girls lying in a lane, using centre-margin composition and bird's/drone's eye view).

4.3. In-Depth Qualitative Analysis of Selected Examples

4.3.1. Peace Symbols: Emblematic Lettering

Several images include the words *pace* or "peace." This kind of "emblematic lettering" shows the children's ability to deploy emblematic resources and position themselves within the task's framework (see Table 3). In Figure 1, *pace* is the central image element, with red heart-shaped icon-like balloons rising up between the letters. The worksheet is also interesting due to the—very rare—usage of the lines for further drawings (emoji hearts, a hot air balloon, houses, human figures). This child, thus, is "drawing out of the box" and thereby creatively transcends the projections of the pedagogical setting.

4.3.2. Peace as a Secure and Relaxed-Joyful Experience of Self

A conceptualisation of peace common among lower-level students is what we labelled a "secure and relaxed-joyful experience of self." In Figure 2, the child itself and a rainbow are salient participants, contextualised in a setting of nature. Here, peace is conceived of as a relaxed-joyful inner state, in this case,
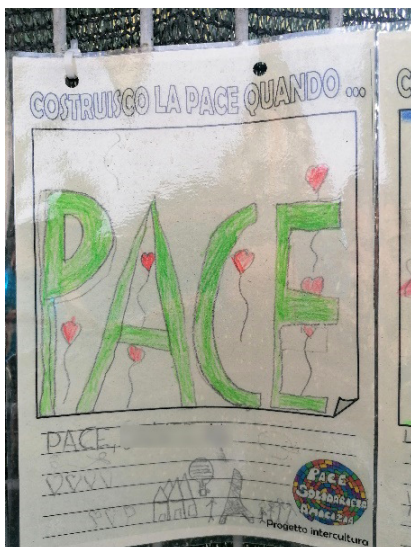

Figure 1. PACE (level 1).

Figure 2. "I am looking at the rainbow" (level 1).

a contemplative experience of nature. Contrary to other research on children's conceptualisations of peace (cf., e.g., Ilfiandra & Saripudin, 2023, p. 377; Walker et al., 2003, p. 194), we understand this mode of physical and mental relaxation and well-being as going far beyond the idea of peace as the mere absence of violence (see the notion of "negative peace," Galtung, 1969). The right—and claim—of physical and emotional integrity and intactness, which is enshrined in human rights and children's rights, and a claim to feel relaxed and to enjoy are displayed here in a multimodal way. The above-mentioned motifs, i.e., joy as such and enjoying nature, also occur in other research on drawings of peace in early childhood (e.g., Ilfiandra & Saripudin, 2023, p. 377). In contrast to quite superficial categorisations deriving from content analysis and sticking to thematic labels such as "happiness" or "natural beauty" (cf. Ilfiandra & Saripudin, 2023, p. 377; Walker et al., 2003, pp. 194–195), we want to stress that the common denominator of these conceptualisations is a relaxed and joyful experience of self—be it in the context of enjoying nature, candies, or playing one's favourite game. The analytical step of interpreting such aspects as mere absence of violence or as "inactivity" (Walker et al., 2003, p. 194), and therefore as instantiations of negative peace concepts (Walker et al., 2003, p. 194), to us, is a crucial devaluation of children's relevances and their valuation of exactly those experiences (e.g., calm, relaxation, contemplation, mere joy). Regarding the visual dimension, this worksheet in Figure 2 from level 1 also exemplifies the children's efforts and patterns of creating a "balanced composition." We see an emblematic arrangement of sky, sun, and clouds, as well as the compositional pattern to position elements at the corners while simultaneously "using" the whole image space.

4.3.3. Peace as a Socially Co-Constructed State

Other accounts focus on peace as a co-constructed state that demands certain attitudes or activities from those involved. Peace, thus, is conceptualised as a secure and relaxed-joyful experience of primary and basic relationships, and peace can be fostered through specific social practices:

Several worksheets display peacebuilding as avoiding disputes within the children's intimate social environment, such as "making peace" by saying sorry, as in Figure 3. This drawing is also an example of a collaborative pattern in level 1: Two anthropomorphic figures as main, mostly decontextualised participants, shown in a bodily gesture or interaction that symbolises states of harmonious togetherness (e.g., shaking/holding each other's hands, hugging). As regarding Figure 2 and in contrast to other research, we neither interpret such drawings and conceptualisations as "negative peace" nor as "static" or "inactive" (cf. Walker et al., 2003, p. 194), but as displaying aspects which are set relevant by the child actors: in this case bodily touch, intercorporeal and interaffective arrangements of togetherness and joint attention. Aspects which are also considered to be crucial for psycho-cognitive development in early childhood (e.g., for phenomenological-ecological conceptions of psycho-cognitive and inter-/personal development see Fuchs, 2016).

Figure 4, using the concrete setting of soccer, is another example of peace as a relaxed-joyful and active experience of primary relationships, and it also exemplifies the interwovenness of this conceptualisation with the reflection on social practices to foster peace, e.g., by avoiding arguments. This aspect of interwovenness is in line with other findings challenging and contradicting the theoretical development-psychological assumption that children's conceptualisations of peace (and war) would neatly correlate with the socio-cognitive development stages of role-taking ability and interpersonal understanding as based on Selman's seminal work (Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1998, pp. 362–363; Ilfiandra & Saripudin,

Figure 3. Sorry (level 1).

Figure 4. "I play soccer with my brother without arguing." (level 1).

2023, pp. 368–369). Visually, this drawing shows that stylised resources are available also at a young age, in this case, a certain style—or competence—to draw humans as stick figures.

A specific variant of this view of peace is represented by drawings in which caretaking in the immediate family environment is central.

The text under the drawing in Figure 5 says: "I build peace when I take care of the rabbits instead of mom so I don't bring quarrels, but I bring peace to mom." This child constructs peacebuilding as a form of caretaking towards her mother. This worksheet exemplifies locally re-/established emblematic multimodal patterns and discourses to (collaboratively) accomplish the task: Concerning the motif, household help (feeding pets,

Figure 5. Feeding the pets (level 4).

vacuuming, etc.) and relieving their mothers is commonly used in level 4 (25.00%). Besides doing gender-specific "borderwork" (Thorne, 1993, p. 64, as cited in Kelle & Breidenstein, 1996, p. 64), this series of drawings presumably materialises a specific classroom discourse. As well, Figure 5 shows a complex visual pattern commonly—and exclusively—used in this group (25.00%): A comic-like arrangement with speech bubbles including the narrativising mise-en-scène of "speaking from/to the off," common in professional comics and graphic novels. Additionally, some of the drawings contain "readable" style elements, such as big stylised eyes as an element from the visual language of manga (e.g., Cohn & Ehly, 2016). Drawings using this motif of "caretaking in the family" were all hung next to each other. This shows the efforts of curating this exhibition on the school fence.

4.3.4. Peacebuilding as Equalising Socio-Economic Inequalities

In Figure 6, peacebuilding is interpreted as a practice aimed at equalising socio-economic inequalities. The two "readable," stylised female figures throw different items of clothing into two bags. Like others, this drawing refers to the self-evident nature of belonging to an (economically, socially) privileged group, and at the same time, to the self-evident nature of taking action to equalise inequalities. As in several other worksheets (e.g., "I give food to the poor"), "the poor [children]" are imagined as a group outside the children's main social environment.

4.3.5. Peacebuilding as political peace activism

Figure 7 is an account of peacebuilding by simultaneously showing and itself "doing" political, or at least public, peace activism.

The caption says: "This is me and my mom and my sister demonstrating for PEACE. PEACE Peace Peace. LOVE in Japanese あい." Here, the child used letters from the Japanese writing system Hiragana and thus drew on her multilingual and multiscriptal resources (Lytra et al., 2016). The visual design intensely exploits several

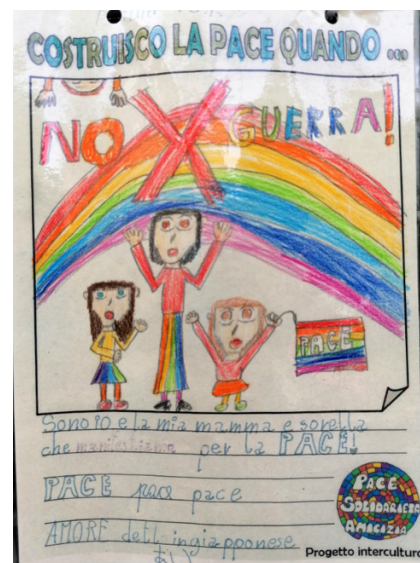**Figure 6.** "I give my clothes to poor children" (level 1).

Figure 7. Peacebuilding as political peace activism (level unknown).

Figure 8. Globe (level 5).

peace activism emblems (rainbow/colours, peace flag, emblematic lettering, "NO WAR!" slogan integrating the common red x-icon/emoji for "no") and also integrates a concrete (nonetheless symbolic) scene showing three demonstrators in great detail (raised arms, wide-open eyes and mouths). As in several other drawings, this child shows itself as a humorous-creative practitioner of visual communication—have you recognised the fourth demonstrator hanging into the picture at the top left corner?

Figure 8 is another example of older students contextualising peace on the global political scale by using emblematic elements (rainbow colours, flag, emblematic lettering, globe), and collaboratively establishing and using visual patterns: Several level-5 students (22.73%) used a round-element-at-centre vs. margin design putting a globe at the centre.

The worksheet also includes a poem and was hung within a thematic group of similar poem-drawing worksheets using the same visual pattern. Together, Figure 3 and Figure 8 demonstrate the range of complexity and designs of the exhibited worksheets, reaching from decontextualised and simple concrete scenes with 1-word texts to complex text-image arrangements with artistic appeal and literately echoing patterns of current visual media communication.

5. Conclusion

Combining qualitative and quantitative steps within an ethnographically and metapragmatically grounded approach, we have shown the range of textual and multimodal conceptualisations of peace and peacebuilding in this sample of exhibited school worksheets of children aged 6 to 11: Peace as a very lifewordly grounded and concrete mode of secure-relaxed experience of basic relationships, of home and togetherness, and of self, to peace as care, unity and activism on a more (global-)political scale. Contrary to ideologies on children's drawings as narrative practices and unmediated "windows" to inner ongoings, our analysis shows how the trans-/locally re-/produced repertoire(s) of multimodal mediated frozen actions (including emblematic patterns of mediatised popular culture such as emojis, peace-flags, comics-speech bubbles, visual design patterns such as "round-element-at-centre vs. margin") are deployed ranging from

realistic-narrative scenes to complex and abstract visual designs. Thereby, children show themselves as literate, competent, and quite often humorous-creative practitioners of (current) visual communication. Against the backdrop of nowadays mediatised lifeworlds of children, crucially established via visual (screen) design (e.g., Kress, 2003; Wiesemann et al., 2020), we observed how children, even at a young age, use these available (emblematic) semiotic resources circulated via multimodal (digital screen) media. Our research also showed how the students choose enregistered (visual style) variants to show and position themselves (as competent visual designers, as peace activists, or as belonging to specific—privileged—social groups and to specific social identities set relevant via visual—especially gender-related—borderwork).

Confronting approaches of using drawings to get insights into children's *individual* cognitive, developmental, and/or emotional states, the authentic data of this specific school context underscores the many (local, situated) ways in which (classroom or peer-group) discourse as well as visual communication patterns are collectively and *collaboratively* re-/established to accountably communicate intentions and accomplish given institutional tasks. Reflecting our methodical procedures, our data is clearly limited concerning any inferential statistical approach to formal coding (due to a lack of appropriate and sufficient metadata and small subsets). Nonetheless, our research shows the importance of appropriately contextualising frequencies of qualitative dimensions: Rather than indicating individual but systematic ongoings driven by "external" variables, these frequencies are often pointing to the locally established or reproduced social significance of (collaborative) semiotic-communicative patterns (see Stivers, 2015, for methodological reflections on (formally) coding social interaction).

Bearing this in mind, it is also very important to re-/consider the very rare or even excluded phenomena: Considering the city's and school's socio-demographic context, with a considerable number of children at risk of poverty and a presumable proportion of students concerned with (familial) experiences of war and migration, it is astounding that such discourses do not—accountably—appear in our sample. It is the (privileged) middle-class perspective that sets the norm.

Nonetheless, the image-text arrangements of this school project should be taken as a sincere reminder of some crucial aspects of peace: With the security of a relaxed-joyful experience of self at its core, it is the very concrete mode of actively and caringly sharing a world with concrete others, a concrete mode of friendship and an Arendt-like "amor mundi." These aspects correspond to adaptive, multi-track, and context-sensitive approaches to peacebuilding and conflict transformation which stress the need for bottom-up, context-specific, and concrete local actions on intrapersonal, interpersonal, structural, and cultural dimensions (e.g., Carter & Dhungana, 2024; de Coning et al., 2023; Lederach, 2003). Last but not least, and considering peace education (e.g., Carter & Dhungana, 2024), these children's multimodal arrangements should be taken seriously, particularly in their strong focus on positive notions of peace (corresponding to the formulation of the project task), even among the youngest students: Rather than devaluating topoi of calm, contemplation, the intercorporeal and interaffective reality of togetherness, bodily touch, and other relaxed and joyful (self-)experiences as expressions of "negative peace" and mere absence of violence, responsible stakeholders in ECEC institutions and schools should deliberate on how structures and cultures enabling and fostering those crucial aspects for peace could be implemented.

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Cogitatio

Through Their Eyes: Contextualized Analysis of Drawings by Former ISIS Child Soldiers in Iraq

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Abstract

This article presents a contextualized interpretation of drawings created by former child soldiers of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The drawings were generated as part of a collaborative storytelling project in Northern Iraq in 2019 that aimed at identifying the psychosocial needs of these militarized children. The analysis focuses on two distinct groups: Arab-Sunni and Yezidi boys, each representing different pathways into and experiences within ISIS, leading to varied forms of social stigmatization. The findings reveal significant differences in how violence, agency, and social attributions are represented in the narratives and drawings of the two groups. The study underscores the importance of collaborative meaning-making in representing marginalized groups and highlights the potential to combine drawings with other qualitative methods to minimize the risk of over-interpretation. This approach provides nuanced insights into the children's struggle for agency and interpretative ownership in the face of powerful social narratives. This article contributes to the broader discourse on child soldiers and the use of visual methodologies in conflict-affected areas.

Keywords

child soldiers; collaborative stories; collective violence; drawings; ISIS; participatory research; trauma

1. Introduction

While children's drawings have been studied in the social sciences for over a century (Walker, 2007), their use as a systematic data collection method in qualitative social research has gained significant traction only

in the past two decades (Kekeritz & Kubandt, 2022; Leavy, 2018). This trend can be attributed to the development and academic institutionalization of participatory research approaches, which seek to employ innovative methods tailored to the needs of groups often marginalized by conventional research designs (Brown et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2017).

In research involving children and youth in (post-)conflict and war zones, drawings have been assigned various functions. As age-sensitive and playful methods, drawings enable children and young people to express their unique worldviews, providing them with a voice that does not rely on sophisticated narratives (Martikainen & Hakokönäs, 2023). Drawings also offer insights into emotional states and open aspects of experience that may defy verbalization, such as traumatic events; in this sense, drawings are also used in clinical art-based therapy as a window into experienced violence (Goldner et al., 2021; Malchiodi, 1998). Furthermore, they serve as media of agency and witnessing in the face of injustice and violence (Bober, 2011). Tolia-Kelly (2007) emphasized the importance of visual methods like drawings, noting that they create "a space for embodied, multilingual, marginalized experiences to be expressed in visual form."

To mitigate the risk of over-interpretation, drawings are often combined with other methods. Literat (2013) advocated for combining participatory drawing with other research techniques, suggesting strategies like reflective discussions, in which children explain their visual choices. Jabbar and Betawi (2019), for example, used such a "draw-and-tell" approach with refugee children in Jordan, combining drawings with interviews. Authors of other studies, such as Veronese et al. (2018), have used a "write-and-draw" technique, and Green and Denov (2019) explored combining drawings with other artistic methods like mask-making.

In line with this tradition, we have integrated drawings into research designs primarily based on interviews or projective essays in previous qualitative projects. For example, in the Afghan Youth Project, which looked at the experiences of over 220 young people in Afghanistan between 2016 and 2018 and how they dealt with violence, we combined interviews and projective essays with drawings using both "draw-and-tell" and "write-and-draw" techniques (Langer et al., 2021). These combined approaches have proven effective in data collection but highlighted the need to contextualize drawings with accompanying interviews and essays to avoid misinterpretation. We view this as essential to account for the complex, often ambivalent experiences of the children involved.

This article aims to contribute to the growing body of nonclinical social research involving children that utilizes drawings within combined methodological approaches. In the research project we discuss, the psychosocial needs of children abused as soldiers by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Northern Iraq between 2018 and 2019 are examined (Langer & Ahmad, 2019). For this project, we developed a collaborative storytelling approach that combined a group-based generation of fictional child soldier stories with drawings, offering the children an opportunity to enrich and expand the narratively developed stories. The children received only general instructions on how to use the drawings: They were to supplement the story wherever and however they wished. This approach raises intriguing questions about the points in the story where a drawing is created, how it relates to the narrative, what the drawings depict (or omit), and what is expressed visually that might be missing from the text. Consequently, our analysis of the drawings is systematically contextualized within the framework of the collaborative stories that surround them.

The starting point for the analyses presented in this article is tentative and preliminary findings from our previous analysis of the narratively developed stories, which we have briefly outlined elsewhere (Langer & Ahmad, 2024). These findings suggest a clear distinction between the two groups of Arab-Sunni and Yezidi children in their depiction of violence and the attribution of agency to the protagonists and dealing with social attributions toward them. Analyzing the drawings leads us to the guiding question: How are violence, agency, and social attributions (specifically in groups) represented and negotiated in the drawings?

In the following sections, we outline the research project (Section 2), discuss the methodology (Section 3), and present our contextualized analysis of the drawings (Section 4). We conclude by discussing the insights gained from this research and the value of incorporating drawings into multimethod projects with children in (post-)conflict areas and war zones (Section 5).

2. The Research Project

In 2014, ISIS gained global prominence by conquering and controlling a territory in Iraq and Syria roughly the size of Portugal or the state of Maine, stretching from the Mediterranean coast to the south of Baghdad, and proclaiming itself a caliphate (Gerges, 2016). The genocide of the Yezidi community in Sinjar and the reign of terror in Mosul marked tragic climaxes of ISIS's grave human rights violations (Cheterian, 2019). Less well known, however, is the group's extensive abuse of thousands of children in combat and combat-related support roles, commonly referred to as child soldiers. Among the various definitions of "child soldier" proposed and institutionalized in internationally binding conventions, the one formulated in the Paris Principles is the most widely recognized. It defines a child soldier as:

> Any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies, or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities. (UNICEF, 2007, p. 7)

This definition underscores important distinctions: the diverse pathways into armed groups (ranging from voluntary recruitment to forceful abduction); the various types of armed groups (from governmental military institutions to paramilitary or terror organizations); the diversity of the children involved (with differences in age and gender, for example); and the broad range of roles and functions within the armed group, which may include combat roles but also extend to other military-related purposes, such as explicitly mentioned sexualized violence.

In the context of ISIS, we differentiate between three groups of child soldiers, each defined by distinct pathways into ISIS, socialization processes, tasks, and experiences: Arab-Sunni children, Yezidi children, and children of foreign fighters. In our research project, we focused specifically on male children from the first two groups. This focus aligned with the mandate of our funding agency, an international NGO, intending the research to contribute to sustainable improvements in the psychosocial care of children living in Northern Iraq. In contrast, the children of foreign fighters were supposed to be promptly returned to their home countries by other international organizations (Nyamutata, 2020).

The two groups we studied were subject to different political, societal, and judicial responses as well as varying levels of support. Although former ISIS child soldiers were generally highly stigmatized, this stigma was particularly pronounced for boys of Arab-Sunni background. While Yezidi boys were kidnapped, forcibly converted, and indoctrinated, the involvement of Arab-Sunni children is more complex. Some appeared to join ISIS voluntarily—though the concept of voluntariness is fraught under such circumstances—while others were recruited under false pretenses and exploited as child soldiers. Consequently, Yezidi boys were more often perceived as traumatized victims, while Arab-Sunni boys were more likely to be seen as perpetrators. Yezidi boys were given opportunities to reintegrate into their communities in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, though discussing their experiences with ISIS remained taboo. In contrast, Arab-Sunni boys faced significant social stigma and discrimination, often resulting in their detention in juvenile centers and later in remote IDP camps with minimal facilities.

For example, in a quantitative study, Kizilhan and Noll-Hussong (2018) highlighted the high prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among former ISIS child soldiers, with a focus on Yazidi children. Horgan et al. (2017) presented a theoretical model of radicalization that effectively depicted the situation in Syria and, to some extent, possible pathways for Arab-Sunni boys in Iraq. Anaie (2018) explored the ambivalent concept of the child soldier, oscillating between the roles of victim and perpetrator, from a legal perspective. However, qualitative studies that included both groups as well as participatory studies that engaged directly with the children rather than merely studying them were not available. Our qualitative project (Langer & Ahmad, 2019) therefore aimed at identifying the psychosocial needs of former Yezidi and Arab-Sunni ISIS child soldiers in Northern Iraq. To achieve this, it was essential to examine the lived experiences of these militarized children during their time with ISIS as well as the impact of the stigmatizing social perceptions that shaped their lives—an endeavor that necessitated a participatory approach to ensure that the children themselves had a voice, countering the powerful attribution processes that often dominated their narratives.

3. The Collaborative Storytelling Approach

To identify the psychosocial needs of former ISIS child soldiers and address their lived experiences, we employed a multimethodological approach comprising several key elements: a systematic review of existing literature, explorative fieldwork in the region (including formal and informal interviews with experts), actor and service mapping of relevant organizations, and a participatory method to engage directly with the children. Additionally, we initiated "round table" discussions for organizations working with former child soldiers, serving both as capacity-building efforts and reflective spaces for critical discussion.

We have detailed the development of our participatory approach elsewhere (Langer & Ahmad, 2024). A central challenge was adhering to the "do no harm" principle, given the likely traumatic experiences of the children—ranging from violent recruitment to military training and possibly combat. Our methodology had to be trauma-sensitive and minimize the risk of retraumatization, stigmatization, and danger to life and limb, especially given the insecure environments of juvenile prisons and IDP camps where the children resided.

Building on the tradition of participatory research using storytelling (e.g., Caxaj, 2015; Hydén, 2017; Mahoney, 2007), we developed the collaborative storytelling approach. This method involved small groups of former ISIS-affiliated boys collaboratively creating a *fictional* life story of an ISIS child soldier. The process, facilitated by local field researchers, unfolded over several weeks in early 2019. Structured into six chronological chapters,

the storytelling was guided by questions designed to explore changes in personal, social, and political contexts, and the children's experiences of agency, loss, and trauma. The children were invited to supplement their stories with drawings at any point, using pencils and crayons provided. We refrained from giving specific instructions for the drawings, allowing us to observe which story elements the children chose to depict visually and how these influenced the narrative.

This approach addresses ethical challenges by creating a collective fictional space in which children can indirectly express personal experiences, thereby avoiding the potential dangers of individual attribution of narrated actions and further stigmatization. Engaging playfully in the creation of a fictional story employs an "as if" mode, a technique also used in psychotherapeutic approaches to reduce the risk of retraumatization (Krüger, 2024). Simultaneously, from the perspective of the psychosocial approach of sequential traumatization (Keilson & Sarphatie, 1992), it is crucial to open a space for the articulation, negotiation, and recognition of potentially traumatic experiences. This process helps the children distance themselves from their own traumatic memories, making these experiences accessible and integrating them in a meaningful way.

In terms of theory, the study is grounded in the concept of collaborative meaning-making, which emphasizes the co-construction of understanding and interpretation through interactive and shared processes (Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998). This approach highlights the importance of dialogue and mutual engagement in creating meaningful narratives, particularly within contexts of trauma and conflict. By facilitating collaborative storytelling and drawing activities, this approach enables former ISIS child soldiers to collaboratively construct and articulate their experiences, fostering a deeper and shared comprehension of their psychosocial realities.

The data collection process was integrated into the ongoing work of NGOs, where our local field researchers were already providing psychosocial services to children, including former child soldiers. This prior involvement gave the researchers access to the relevant locations and established a certain level of trust with the children. Participation in the collaborative storytelling project was voluntary and open to all interested children. From the outset, the activity was clearly presented as a participatory research project; the process and objectives were explained, and it was emphasized that participants could withdraw at any time. Between February and April 2019, we collected five stories from small groups of former ISIS child soldiers in Northern Iraq. These stories, gathered in juvenile detention centers and IDP camps, reflect the diverse backgrounds and current situations of the children. The stories are available online in their original Arabic form and in English translation (Ahmad et al., 2019). For this article, we focus on two stories representing Sunni-Arab and Yezidi boys, the main groups of ISIS child soldiers in Iraq.

While we have previously conducted tentative analyses of the narrative stories (Langer & Ahmad, 2024), in this article, we present the first in-depth analysis of the accompanying drawings. It is crucial to understand that neither the written stories nor the drawings should be viewed as expressions of individual subjective experiences. Instead, they are collectively generated, fictional stories that incorporate and process individual lived experiences within a shared group context. The drawings, created alongside narrative storytelling, must be analyzed within this framework. They serve as interpretations of the narrative, highlighting specific elements, adding new dimensions, or at times, deviating from the text. Our analysis explores how the drawings relate to the narrative, what they emphasize or omit, and how this relationship shapes our overall understanding of the collaborative stories.

The methodological approach was inspired by studies in which researchers analyzed drawings in conjunction with storytelling in qualitative research projects (Aerila et al., 2023; Colás Álvarez, 2017; Hills et al., 2008; Pirtle & Maker, 2012). We reconstruct the story conveyed by the drawings through content analysis and systematically compare these findings with the narrative developed in the text.

4. Struggling for Interpretative Ownership

In the following, we analyze two selected stories representing the groups of Arab-Sunni and Yazidi boys. The stories are analyzed in turn (Sections 4.1 and 4.2), by first outlining the narrative story, then analyzing the story told with the drawings, and contextualizing it in relation to the narrative story to work out the specific pictorial interpretation elements of the story through emphasis, omissions, and deviations. The individual analyses are brought together in a comparative discussion (Section 4.3).

The following analyses are based on observations that emerged as preliminary secondary findings when analyzing the children's psychosocial needs. A tentative analysis of the storytelling texts indicated that the stories of the two groups differed in terms of the representation of violence, agency, and social attributions. We explore these aspects in the drawings and look at how the findings relate to the texts and what meaning is produced in the interplay of text and drawings.

4.1. The Odd Times

The story *The Odd Times* facilitated by Nazdar Saleh was developed by a group of four Arab-Sunni boys who were either from Mosul or areas close to Mosul aged between 14 and 18 years old in a rather remote IDP camp in the Dohuk governorate in Northern Iraq. The story consists of a total of six chapters and is the only story to have a two-line prologue dedicating the story to all children who have lost their innocence to war.

4.1.1. The Storytelling Text

The story covers a period of 7 years. The narrative begins with a broad view of the city of Mosul, highlighting its socioeconomic and security challenges. The focus narrows to a specific neighborhood and eventually to Khadr's conservative family, describing Khadr as a playful but troubled child fascinated by violence. Chapter 2 covers the period when ISIS takes over Mosul. It describes how Khadr is drawn to ISIS through propaganda and the lure of power and material gain, eventually leading him to join the group despite his family's shock. Chapter 3 focuses on Khadr's life within ISIS, vaguely describing his growing involvement in fighting and religious activities. However, as the Iraqi army advances, Khadr begins to doubt his choices, especially after witnessing the brutal actions of ISIS. Chapter 4 covers the period as the Iraqi army closes in and Khadr, terrified and desperate, injures himself to escape ISIS. His family hides him, but during their escape, his brother is killed, leaving the family devastated. Chapter 5 tells how Khadr is turned over to the Peshmerga by his father to avoid harsher punishment. He is tried, imprisoned, and later released but struggles with remorse and the loss of his brother and has difficulty reintegrating into society. The final chapter focuses on Khadr's future. He tries to find a trade to support himself, but his past with ISIS haunts him, and he fears being pursued by the Iraqi army. Despite his challenges, he hopes for a better future for himself and his family.

4.1.2. The Drawings

What story are the drawings telling? In total, the group produced six drawings. Khadr's life is portrayed at five distinct points: twice before joining ISIS, once during his involvement, once during his imprisonment, and finally, in the present day, with no depiction of his future.

The first drawing (Figure 1) shows Khadr as a young boy from a side perspective. He is holding a rucksack with both hands. He is wearing a short-sleeved shirt tucked into his trousers. In the drawing, he looks at the viewer, and a smile is implied. We would like to note here that the form and stylistic design strongly suggest that this drawing was drawn by the facilitator on behalf of the children.

Figure 1. Drawing of Khadr as a schoolboy (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 12).

The second drawing (Figure 2) is a detailed color location map of the Mosul neighborhood where Khadr grew up. The labeled facilities represent central areas of an orderly and normal social life in the clear depiction based on a checkered pattern: private houses, the public space of the market, mosques as religious areas, sports facilities as leisure arenas, a waterworks as an administrative symbol.

In "Khadr before ISIS, when he was 11 years old," as it says in the Arabic caption of the third drawing (Figure 3), the story's protagonist is depicted as a young boy wearing blue jeans and a red T-shirt, alone and largely frontally, with his posture and line of vision slightly to the left. The body appears to be slightly off balance and tilted backwards. In contrast with the first drawing, his gaze is more serious. The hands hang down the sides of the body, slightly away from the body, the palms are open, pointing downwards at an angle.

In the fourth drawing (Figure 4), Khadr is again presented from the front. Compared with the previous drawings, Khadr's clothing has changed significantly. The hair is fuller and longer than in the previous drawings, hanging down at the sides over the ears. His body is covered by a full-body dress with a long shirt ending below his knees and wider pants. The body and clothing are drawn in pencil and dominantly dashed in gray again. He has a gun belt over his shoulder and the rifle is only partly visible, as it is covered mostly by his back. His shoes and the back of the gun are painted the same color, light orange. The arms hang down at the sides of the body with open palms pointing slightly away from the body. The expression on his face appears serious as he looks directly at the viewer.

Figure 2. Drawing of Khadr's neighborhood in Mosul (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 13).

Figure 3. Drawing of Khadr aged 11 (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 14).

Figure 4. Drawing of Khadr aged 16 (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 17).

In the fifth drawing (Figure 5), Khadr is again drawn from the front. For the first and only time, he is not drawn alone. He is wearing an orange jumpsuit that obviously represents prison clothing, with handcuffs that fix his hands in front of his body and shorter, yet not styled hair, and a slightly larger man with a red cap, which could be a uniformed soldier or policeman, appears to his left side, holding him by the upper left arm. Khadr's eyes are fixed on the ground. The caption identifies Khadr as a 17-year-old who was taken by the army.

Figure 5. Drawing of Khadr aged 19 in an arrest-related situation (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 19).

The sixth and final drawing (Figure 6) shows Khadr standing alone again. He is again wearing a T-shirt and pants—a green T-shirt and black pants. Khadr is again drawn alone, with both hands on his hips, looking directly at the viewer. The inscription on the drawing reads: "Khadr when he got out of prison, he was 18 years old."

Figure 6. Drawing of Khadr aged 18 after release from prison (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 21).

The series of drawings chronologically documents Khadr's life and personal development over 7 years. It begins with the depiction of his hometown of Mosul, him as a schoolboy, then at the age of 11, progresses to depict him as a 16-year-old child soldier within ISIS, continues through his imprisonment at 17, and concludes with his time in an IDP camp at the age of 18. The narrative conveyed by the drawings does not feature any actions by the protagonist, almost like becoming without doing anything.

4.1.3. Comparative Analysis

Upon examining both the narrative and the accompanying drawings, it becomes evident that, while the written account provides details and context, the drawings are notably devoid of contextual elements, with the sole exception being the depiction of his neighborhood in Mosul. A local and temporal context is set with the map at the beginning, which depicts an orderly normality of life before ISIS as a still image. The drawings then consistently portray Khadr in isolated, static, and passive poses, devoid of any action. Except for a single drawing in which he is shown during his imprisonment, Khadr is always depicted alone, without any surrounding figures or dynamic elements. Explicit social or communal contexts are markedly absent in the illustrations; Khadr is not shown interacting with or accompanied by his family, former friends, or any individuals associated with ISIS, the prison, or the camp. Context is, however, implied by the backpack (school), the gun (military), and the handcuffs with uniformed people (prison). A transition between the areas thus designated cannot be reconstructed as a story based on the images. It simply happens as if Khadr himself has no agency.

Although the text offers some insights into his life before joining ISIS, particularly his familial and social connections, these aspects remain absent in the visual representations. Similarly, while the narrative provides detailed descriptions of his childhood environment in Mosul, it lacks specific details about Khadr's experiences and the various locations he inhabited after joining ISIS, focusing instead solely on his physical, outward appearance at different stages over the 7-year period without providing any contextual information.

Khadr's affinity for violence narrated in the text is minimally depicted in the drawings, as it is only suggested in one illustration, which portrays Khadr as an ISIS child soldier (Figure 4), where a rifle is partially visible. Beyond this, the narrative offers also only a vague reference to Khadr's affinity to violence and toy weapons and, after joining ISIS, an increasing interest in fighting during his time with ISIS, without providing any concrete details about what fighting entailed in that context. The drawings themselves are devoid of any depiction of Khadr engaging in or being involved in acts of violence. The narrative's sole reference to loss and death pertains to the immediate personal tragedy of his brother's death during the family's flight, a memory that continues to haunt Khadr. However, this significant event is not represented in the accompanying drawings. What is also missing is a future vision of Khadr's life. The last drawing is the one of Khadr after his release from prison. Any drawings regarding the future are not part of the collaboratively generated story.

4.2. The Boy Nuri

The story "The Boy Nuri," facilitated by Musaab Arezi, was developed by a group of four Yezidi boys aged 12 to 14 years old, originally from Kocho, at the Qadia IDP camp near Dohuk in Northern Iraq. This story, slightly shorter than *The Odd Times*, includes one additional chapter titled "The Boy Nuri," placed before the chapter that, according to the manual, should address the time before ISIS.

4.2.1. The Storytelling Text

The protagonist Nuri is introduced in the first chapter as a 17-year-old Yezidi boy—small, thin, but energetic and sociable. The narrative quickly shifts back to Nuri's hometown Kocho, a village near Sinjar, where he lived a peaceful life with his family before the ISIS invasion. His family included his parents, an older sister, and two younger brothers. This tranquility is shattered when ISIS invades the village in the third chapter, forcing Nuri and his family to surrender their possessions under a false promise of protection. Nuri is then separated from his family and taken to Mosul, where he is sold to ISIS leader Abu Mujahid.

Initially, Abu Mujahid is harsh on Nuri, who struggles with Arabic and Islam, which he is forced to adopt. Despite his fear and sadness, Nuri undergoes Islamic indoctrination and weapons training, gradually becoming proficient in using firearms. Over time, Nuri becomes stronger and more skilled, even accompanying Abu Mujahid on missions, including executions. After Abu Mujahid's death, Nuri is sold to other ISIS members and eventually handed over to the People's Defense Units (YPG), who return him to his uncle and cousin after a ransom is paid.

In the Qadia'a camp, where Nuri now lives with his uncle and younger brother, he struggles with the aftermath of his experiences. He has forgotten his native Kurdish language, is haunted by memories of ISIS, and suffers from nightmares and a fear of the dark. Despite these challenges, Nuri attends school and tries to rebuild his life, though the absence of his parents and sister remains a painful burden. Nuri's greatest wish, as revealed in the final chapter, is to reunite with his family and return to his home village of Kocho. He dreams of becoming a military pilot and starting a family, but these aspirations are overshadowed by the uncertainty surrounding his parents' fate and the lasting scars of his past.

4.2.2. The Drawings

The story includes five drawings: one illustrating life before ISIS, two showing scenes during Nuri's time with ISIS, and two related to his departure from ISIS and his future aspirations. The chapters covering Nuri's entry into ISIS and his current life at the camp are not illustrated.

The first drawing (Figure 7) depicts Nuri's family home with mountains and clouds in the background. His family is shown close together in a garden, with Nuri's father approaching with his vehicle. The figures are drawn as simple stick figures, with gender distinctions made through dress styles. The idyllic scene reflects the narrative's portrayal of peaceful pre-ISIS life but omits personal aspects of Nuri's character.

The second drawing (Figure 8) sharply contrasts with the first, showing Nuri shooting a dog under the supervision of two tall, bearded men. The scene is detailed, with the ground in the front painted in red, a house on fire in the background, and a vehicle carrying the ISIS flag moving away from the house on a reddish hill. This depiction aligns with the narrative's emphasis on Nuri's forced participation in violence but lacks the emotional complexity of the text, which details Nuri's fear and initial reluctance.
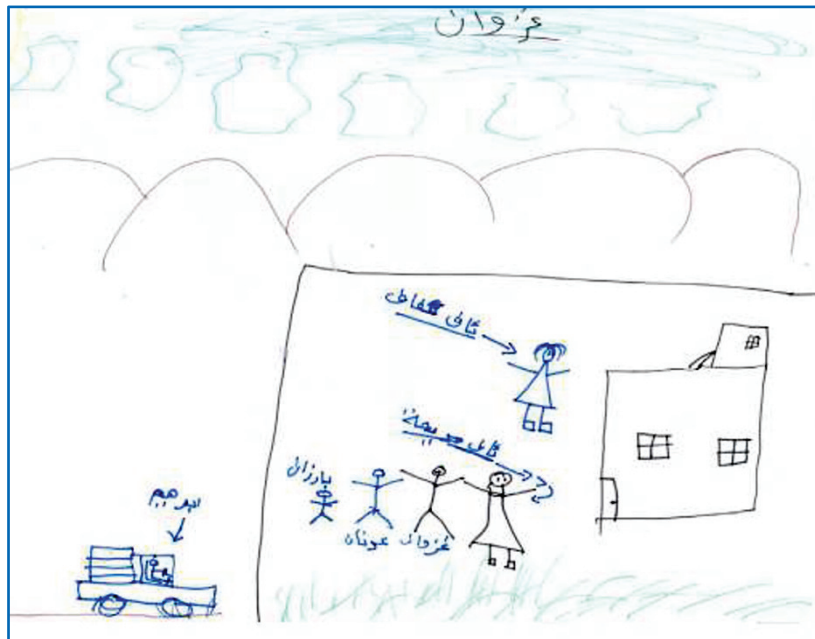
Figure 7. Drawing of Nuri with his family at home (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 25).

Figure 8. Drawing of Nuri shooting an animal (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 27).

The third drawing (Figure 9) continues the theme of violence, showing Nuri actively engaged in military operations. The scene includes a tank, an off-road vehicle, and various weapons, all meticulously detailed. This portrayal contrasts with the text, where Nuri's growing expertise is mentioned but with less emphasis on pride or agency, highlighting a tension between the text's nuanced depiction and the drawing's more straightforward portrayal.
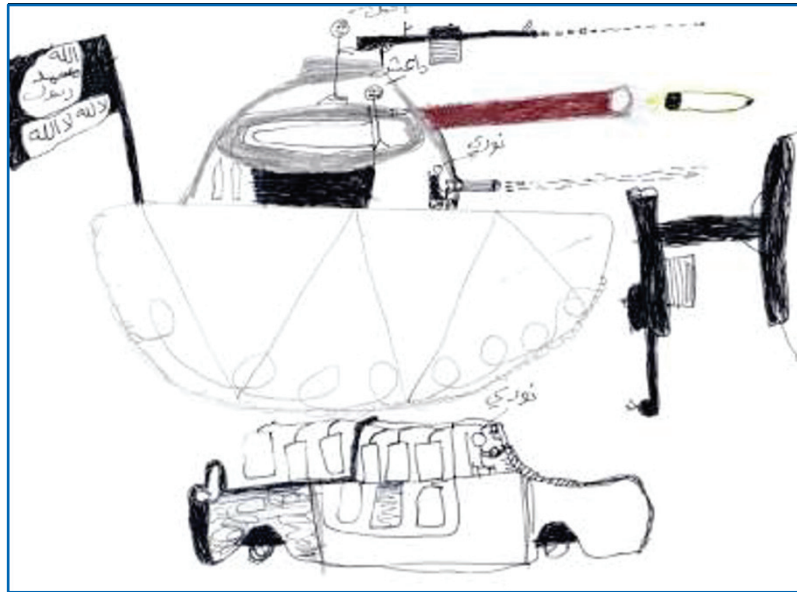
Figure 9. Drawing of Nuri riding ISIS combat vehicles and firing weapons (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 28).

The fourth drawing (Figure 10, left) illustrates Nuri's return to his family, showing a handover by YPG members. The scene is framed by mountains and a sky like earlier drawings, indicating an ambivalent scene of transition in the crossover of family- and war-related motifs. The context of Nuri's struggles in the camp, however, is absent from the visuals. The final drawing (Figure 10, right) depicts a wedding, representing Nuri's future hopes. The scene is more static than previous drawings, with abstract stick figures and bright decorations, contrasting with the dynamic action depicted earlier.

Figure 10. Drawings of Nuri getting back to his family and at his wedding (Ahmad et al., 2019, pp. 29, 31).

4.2.3. Contextualized Analysis

The interplay between the narrative and the drawings in "The Boy Nuri" highlights key aspects of the story while downplaying others, creating a complex and meaningful message. The first and last drawings frame Nuri's life before and after ISIS, standing in sharp contrast with the explicit scenes of violence in the context of ISIS and emphasizing peaceful family scenes that subtly underscore the loss of Nuri's family—a theme that gains prominence through the text.

As the story shifts to Nuri's traumatic experiences, a notable divergence between the text and drawings emerges. The drawings skip significant events, such as the ISIS invasion and Nuri's emotional devastation, creating a dissonance with the narrative. Familiar motifs, like the father's truck and the family home, are transformed in the drawings to represent violent destruction, yet the emotional and psychological struggles found in the text are missing.

The drawings portray Nuri as an increasingly powerful figure within ISIS, emphasizing his military skills and agency. This contrasts with the text, which presents a more nuanced view of Nuri's experiences, acknowledging his skills while also highlighting his fear, regret, and disillusionment. The visuals offer a more heroic depiction, downplaying the narrative's exploration of Nuri's inner conflict.

A significant omission in the drawings is the depiction of life in the IDP camp and Nuri's struggles to adjust. The text delves into his emotional turmoil and difficulties with reintegration, but these aspects are not reflected in the visuals. Instead, the drawings culminate in an idealized wedding scene—a future hope briefly mentioned in the text but presented in a static and almost romanticized manner.

In conclusion, while the text and drawings of "The Boy Nuri" are largely consistent in their portrayal of Nuri's journey, the drawings emphasize themes of agency, violence, and empowerment to a degree that the text does not. The narrative's more nuanced exploration of Nuri's fears, regrets, and trauma is downplayed in the visuals, which favor a more straightforward, almost heroic interpretation. This divergence creates tension between the story's depiction of a difficult reality and the drawings' more palatable conclusion.

4.3. Discussion

It is interesting to note that the drawings of both groups show very few similarities, suggesting little shared experience among ISIS child soldiers. Both groups depict a chronological development closely aligned with the narratives of their respective stories, consistent with the method that envisioned the drawings as a complementary element. One commonality is that both groups depict the environment where the protagonists grew up, but there are notable differences: In *The Odd Times*, the Arab-Sunni group presents an abstract map of Mosul, Khadr's childhood area, while in "The Boy Nuri," the focus is on the family house and Nuri's nuclear family. Additionally, the Yezidi group's drawings include contextual details, such as the landscape and socioeconomic circumstances, as seen in the depiction of Nuri's father's off-road vehicle, offering a rather intimate portrayal.

Without delving into aesthetic details, significant differences in the drawings between the two groups are evident. First, while both narratives illustrate the characters' lives chronologically, they differ significantly in the stages depicted. Khadr's life is portrayed at five distinct points: twice before joining ISIS, once during his

involvement, once during his imprisonment, and finally in the present day, with no depiction of his future. In contrast, Nuri's life is shown in four stages: before joining ISIS, during his time with the group, in a military context with the Peshmerga, and finally, an image reflecting his aspirations for the future, omitting his current situation. The Arab-Sunni boys' group emphasizes Khadr's phases beyond ISIS, while the Yezidi boys focus more on their time within the group.

Secondly, a striking difference lies in the depiction of violence. Nuri's story explicitly shows violence, with Nuri himself involved in violent acts, such as shooting a dog as part of ISIS's socialization strategy and operating a tank. In contrast, the drawings of Khadr almost entirely omit violence; he is depicted passively, with a gun on his back that he never uses and handcuffs as symbols of violence inflicted on him by others. This passivity is consistent throughout Khadr's story, with no mention of his involvement in violent acts, whereas Nuri's story details his gradual involvement in and eventual enjoyment of violence, with the individuals who introduced him to violence being explicitly named and depicted.

Thirdly, the social contexts differ significantly. Khadr is depicted almost entirely alone, moving from childhood to ISIS soldier, to his present situation post-imprisonment, with only one other figure, a uniformed officer, appearing when he is arrested. The absence of a future vision for Khadr is notable. His final image shows him standing alone post-release, devoid of contextual information. This lack of context and Khadr's passivity can be interpreted as a strategy to downplay or obscure the shameful guilt associated with his ISIS affiliation, with the death of his brother as a subsequent event. This solitude contrasts sharply with Nuri, who is never depicted alone; he is shown with his nuclear family, ISIS comrades, and later with his family and wedding guests. The characters in Nuri's story, though simply drawn, exhibit continuity, with collective groups appearing interchangeable in the drawings. This contrasts with the narrative, which describes Nuri's painful socialization as a child soldier following his violent abduction and indoctrination into ISIS. The final, almost utopian, wedding image, where guests sit orderly and the bridal couple remains inactive, seems unrealistic, further emphasized by the story's portrayal of the wedding as an unattainable dream given the destruction of Nuri's home and the loss of family members.

How do we interpret these significant differences? Considering that Khadr's story was created by former ISIS child soldiers from an Arab-Sunni background, while Nuri's was developed by Yezidi youth, the differences can be linked to public discourses surrounding former ISIS child soldiers in the region during the time the stories were created. Arab-Sunni boys were perceived and treated as having voluntarily joined ISIS, aligning them with perpetrators, while Yezidi boys were seen as victims of trauma whose violent actions were often overlooked (Omarkhali, 2016). The drawings present opposing pictures: The group perceived as perpetrators omits violence and active complicity, while the Yezidi boys explicitly depict violence and exhibit a sense of pride in their involvement in combat. Interpreting the drawings alongside the collaborative stories reveals stark differences in articulating the experiences of being an ISIS child soldier, shaped by powerful social perceptions. The message in Khadr's story seems to reject the attribution of violence and perpetration, framing his narrative as the tragic deviation of an innocent boy, as indicated by the initial dedication: "To every child who has lived through the tragedy of war and had his innocence taken away" (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 12). This can be seen as a denial of collective action and guilt.

In contrast, the message in the Yezidi youth's story is more complex. It rejects the public narrative of pure victimhood and challenges the taboo within the Yezidi community about discussing the crimes committed during ISIS's rule. The portrayal of violence can be seen as an attempt to break this taboo and reclaim narrative

control within their community, with the emphasis on collective belonging depicted in the drawings. However, the interpretation of the wedding at the end remains contradictory: It could symbolize a celebration of life and continuity in response to the Yazidi genocide by ISIS, or it could be viewed as a romanticized, unrealistic portrayal of a future that cannot exist as imagined, considering the prior violence. This complex portrayal reflects the intertwined realities of victimhood and perpetration within the Yazidi community and highlights the difficulty for Arab-Sunni children in envisioning a future, given their precarious political situation and fear of authority.

5. Conclusion

What can we learn from these drawings about collective interpretations of the experience of being an ISIS child soldier? What did we learn methodologically about how drawings can be used in qualitative research in war-related contexts? Our analysis has highlighted group-specific differences in the representation of violence, the roles in the exercise and experience of violence among former ISIS child soldiers, and their responses to powerful social ascriptions. The groups are acutely aware of the public perceptions that society holds about them and have constructed narratives that counter these perceptions. The stories reflect a struggle for interpretative sovereignty over their own experiences, articulating moments that challenge the dominant public discourse.

For Arab-Sunni boys, this involves rejecting the highly stigmatizing and legally consequential labeling as perpetrators by portraying their protagonist as a nonagentic, passive victim of the violent conditions of war—a condition that is simultaneously rendered invisible. On the other hand, the Yazidi boys highlight perpetrator elements (sometimes with a sense of pride) that are particularly taboo in their communities, thus complicating their social perception as purely traumatized victims. This is illustrated in the final wedding scene, which problematizes the notion of their reintegration into the community as free from ambivalence. Despite employing different strategies, both groups aim to assert sovereignty over the interpretation of their lived experiences. The drawings emphasize the dominant narrative that unfolds in the text and, through their omissions when compared with the text, reveal the challenges in conveying this narrative convincingly.

Methodologically, the analysis of the drawings allows for a more nuanced understanding of the collaborative stories and sheds light on the groups' struggle to present their narratives against powerful social ascriptions. We consider the integration of drawings with other qualitative methods, such as collaborative storytelling, to be particularly valuable, as it reduces the risk of over-interpretation and adds depth to complex analyses, especially when contradictions and breaks in the narratives become apparent. The drawings guide the analytical process, helping to elucidate the ambivalences inherent in the researched phenomenon and providing insights into the children's struggle for testimony and interpretative ownership within the context of powerful social (and academic) discourses about them.

Collaborative stories can also be used beyond research in educational settings when working with children who have had similar experiences. They create a space for the legitimate representation of difficult experiences in a child-friendly manner. Given that (not only) children experience and process violence in war and conflict contexts as members of specific social groups, it is essential to focus on the negotiation and transmission of the collective meaning of this experience of violence. We see collaborative storytelling as a promising methodological approach for investigating this.

However, to achieve more precise analyses of the drawings, it would have been necessary to document the process of creating the stories in more detail. For example, recording the weekly sessions could have provided additional insights, although we deliberately refrained from doing so due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter in insecure settings. The potential of collaborative drawings for art-based psychotherapy with children and young people could also be explored. Further contextualization of our findings with other collaborative stories is still pending. Additionally, comparing our data with findings from other research projects on ISIS-affiliated children (e.g., Abdussalam, 2024; Güleç, 2021) could extend the scope of our analyses and provide valuable insights for future research.

A follow-up project could address a significant gap in our study by including not only boys but also girls, thereby developing a gender perspective that is central to understanding crisis and conflict contexts beyond the group-specific focus of this study.

Ultimately, we hope that, by introducing the method of collaborative storytelling, we have contributed an innovative approach to qualitative research with children, one that will continue to be tested and refined in future contexts. Moreover, we aimed to shed light on the experiences of former child soldiers and their struggle for agency, portraying them as reflective actors and providing professionals with critical insights into how to improve their psychosocial situation and social participation.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests. In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Ulf R. Hedetoft (University of Copenhagen, Denmark).

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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

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."
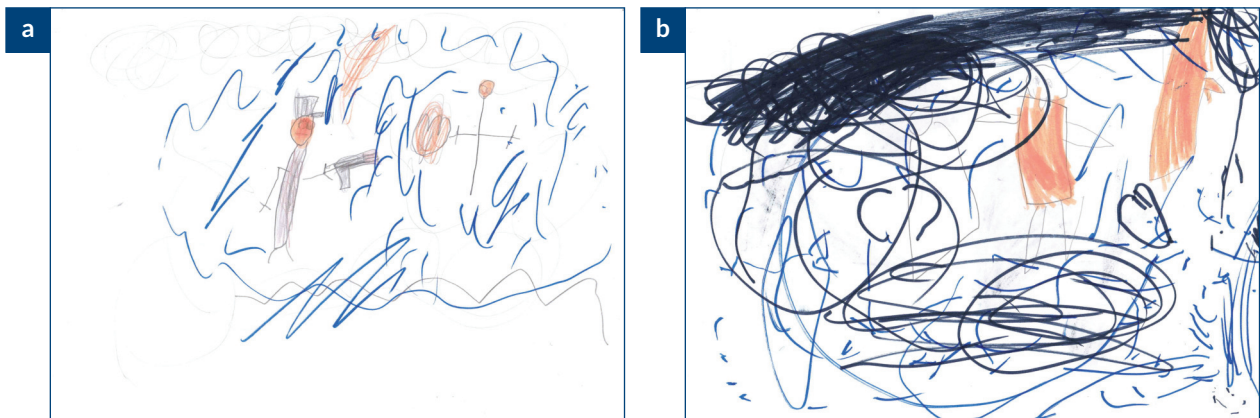
Figure 2. Bombing representations: *War in the Forest—The Good Guy Kills the Bad Guy* by Seth (a) and *A Broken Heart From War by Eva* (b).

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.
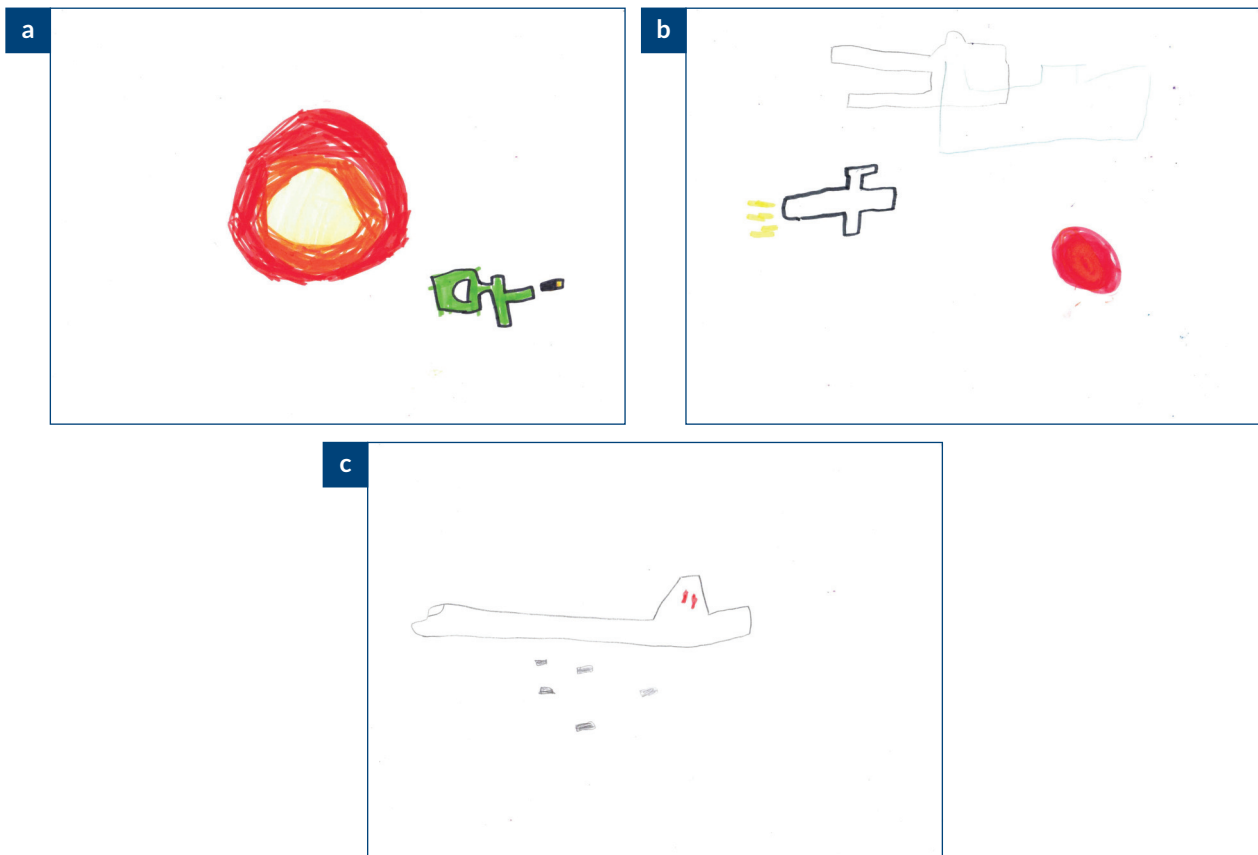
Figure 3. Ethan's three drawings of military equipment: *The Gun and the Ball of Fire* (a), *The Gun, the Tank, and the Fireball* (b), and *An Aeroplane at War* (c).

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
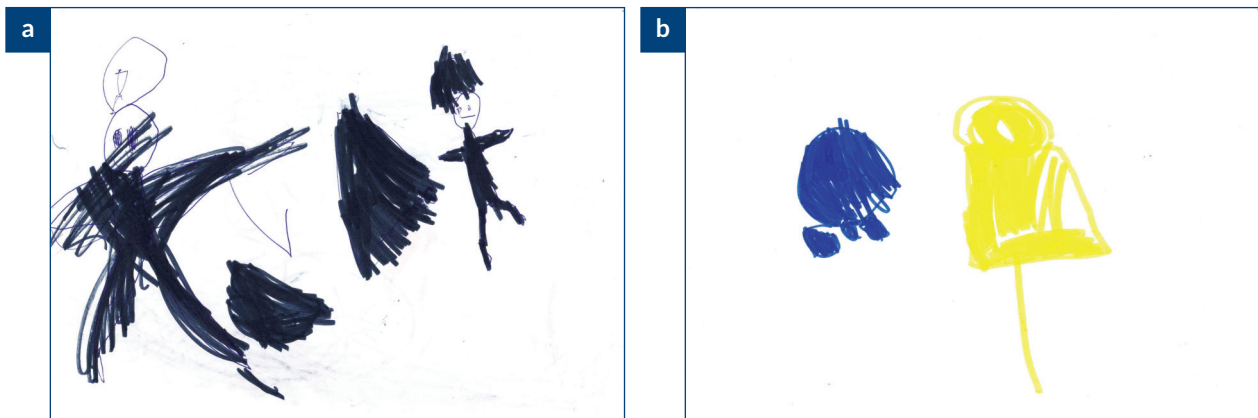
Figure 4. Eva's drawings of killing or dead people: *The Good Soldier Shooting the Bad People* (a) and *The Dead Man in the Car* (b).

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.
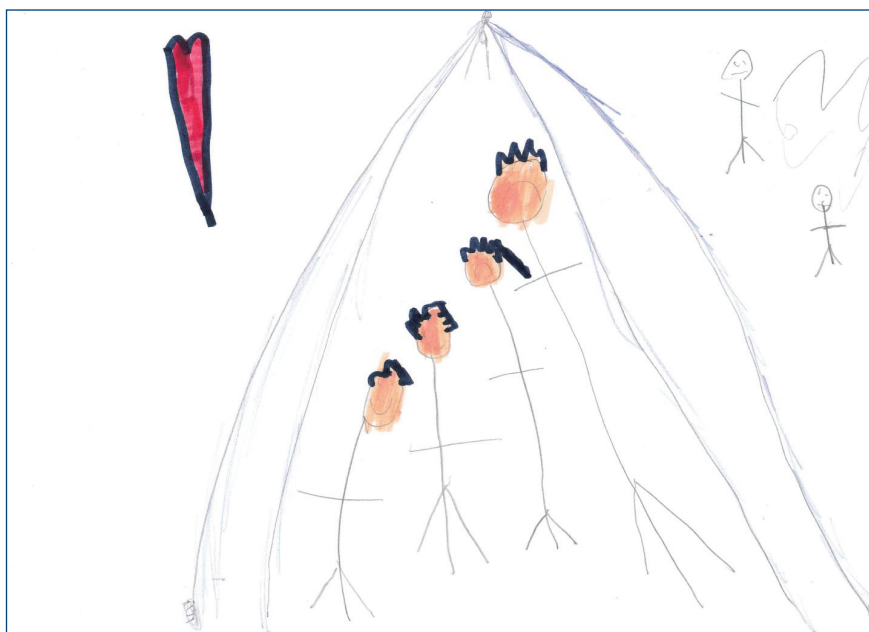

Figure 6. Seth's drawing of *A Sad Family in the Tent*.

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).
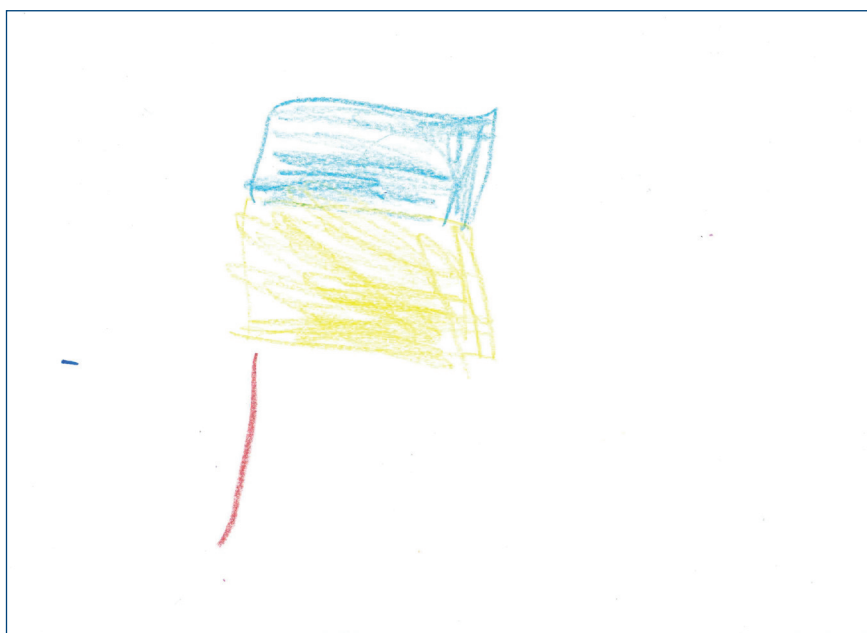

Figure 8. *The Flag of Peace* by Andre.

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.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data available on request from the author.

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Beyond Semiotic Representation: A Study of Emotion in Ukrainian Children's Paintings

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Abstract

As part of the Ukrainian children support project, the platform Mom, I See War presents, on its official website and social media, more than 4,000 drawings by children from war-affected areas (mainly Ukraine). Based on the artworks on this platform, this article delves deeper than mere symbolic interpretations and explores the various categories of emotional expression in these children's drawings. Through a close reading of different elements (symbols, colours, structures) within the drawings, the study is carried out within the theoretical framework of emotion and political and cultural study. While each painting contains a complex combination of various personal emotions, the article makes a general outline of all the paintings as a whole and analyses the various possibilities of emotional expression among the group. In response to war conditions, four categories of emotional expression are presented: fear, pain, anger, and hope.

Keywords

anger; child psychology; emotion; fear; hope; pain; war painting

1. Introduction

Since February 24, 2022, the world has witnessed the severe consequences brought about by the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. This ongoing battle has created significant economic, cultural, physical, and mental challenges for the people living in Ukraine. Among those dwelling within the war-affected zones, children, as one of the most vulnerable groups, suffer both physically and psychologically. Yet, instead of being regarded simply as victims, they are also actively making meanings with responses towards their surroundings. These responses can be seen in various creative activities, such as story-telling, visual-presenting, music-making,

etc., among which painting is the most common method used for self-expression. As part of the Ukrainian children support project, the platform Mom, I See War (https://www.misw.org) presents, on its official website and social media, more than 4,000 drawings by children from war-affected areas (mainly Ukraine). Grouped on the symbolic resemblance within the drawings, the website has given a clear message that children living out the war are using specific communal symbols or colours in their artworks, including umbrellas (protection), pigeons (peace), and the noticeable colours of the Ukrainian national flag (blue and yellow). Based on children's artworks on this platform, the study delves deeper than mere symbolic interpretations and discusses the different groups of emotional expression as presented within these drawings.

2. Theoretical Basis

Emotion, in its early stage, is seen as a complete outburst of one's interiority and is linked specifically to individual morality. People who reveal their emotions are presumed as immoral individuals who cannot properly control themselves. In his work, *De Ira* (*On Anger*), Seneca proposes a negative interpretation of anger. Connecting it with a "temporary madness" (Seneca, 1928, pp. 106–107), he considers anger as addictive and as a "baneful thing" that "is not to be counted as a helpful agent" (p. 131). For him, anger, as well as other similar emotions, is based on personal self-expression and is related to individual morality. Drawing on this early philosophy on emotion, later scholars have developed an appraisal theory that argues that fundamentally, cognition precedes emotion. In 1960, Canadian psychologist Magda Arnold introduced the concept of an appraisal interpretation of emotion, as a "direct, immediate evaluation" of individual experience (Arnold, 1960, p. 175). For appraisal theorists, personal emotions are responses premised upon assessments of the "stimuli and events for their significance for the individual" (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003, p. 576). The formation of this emotion is, therefore, a linear process that starts with the evaluation of events and is a subjective reaction towards the exteriority.

Another line of thought, however, challenges appraisal theory by emphasising the importance of certain non-conscious factors, suggesting that emotions can also be triggered entirely by external elements without having a prior evaluation. In *The History of Emotions* (2017), Rob Boddice stresses how personal emotions are pre-determined by the construction of the spaces they enter, and that "the *atmosphere* of a space is determined by the logic of its own construction" (Boddice, 2017, p. 178). The exterior factors, for example, the damp air, the highly-saturated painted walls, the intricate decorations, and the extremely bright lighting in a room may lead to anxiety for whoever is in that place even though they were in a pleasant mood before entering. Explaining this relationship between human emotion, architecture, and physical surroundings, Polish-American architect Daniel Libeskind, similarly, in one of his interviews, asserts that buildings are never neutral and possess emotion because each one "tells a story" (Out of Sync - Art in Focus, 2016). This narrative power of a spatial entity penetrates individuals and evokes certain emotions through its decorations, its specific fabrics of construction, and even the smell that lingers in the air.

3. Literature Review

Previous studies have discussed the relations between emotion and various artistic expressions, including literary works, film production, paintings, etc. In *What Literature Teaches Us About Emotion*, Patrick Colm Hogan analyses the presence of various types of emotion (love, grief, guilt, shames, etc.) in several famous literary works (Colm Hogan, 2011). His focus involves both "interpreting the text itself" and "determining

individual readers' responses to the text" (p. 3). The emotion of a literary work, in his study corpus, is, therefore, approached both from within the work and from its exterior effects on readers' psychology. This discussion of emotion within an artistic creation is also prominent in cinematic production. By combining film study and psycho-neuro cognition, Greg M. Smith presents the evoking mechanism of films on audiences' emotions (Smith, 2003). Researchers have also discussed the inter-relations between paintings and emotion. One of the key focuses is viewers' emotional responses towards traditional paintings. Pamela Fletcher, in "'To Wipe a Manly Tear': The Aesthetics of Emotion in Victorian Narrative Painting" (Fletcher, 2009), evaluates Victorian paintings in terms of their emotional impacts and aesthetic success. The emotion discussed here is a reaction towards accomplished works, a following procedure after the artistic creation. Another line of research, however, emphasises the exact *process* of art-making. When examining the results art-making has "on the anxiety level of children undergoing cancer treatment in hospital," Altay et al. (2017, p. 5) have strengthened the therapeutic effects of "drawing and writing and mutual storytelling."

Besides emotions led by medical illness, scholars have also explored the physical and mental condition of children in war-affected zones. In *Children and War: A Historical Anthology*, editor James Marten compiles several articles addressing various aspects of children on battlefields, including their memory and imagination of past and present war conditions, the portrayal of their experiences in literature, and the psychology of child victims (Marten, 2002). This area of study is then extended to the exploration of children's artistic expressions (mainly paintings) in war-affected areas. Analysed within the context of World War I, Pignot and Pickering (2019) give a detailed analysis of children's paintings in France, Russia, and Germany. Focusing on the specific representation of "enemy" and "combat" within the drawings, they use a historical perspective, seeing children's paintings as "one of the best places to observe childhood experience in World War I" (Pignot & Pickering, 2019, p. 172). Similarly, in "Understanding War, Visualising Peace: Children Draw What They Know" (Walker et al., 2003), 56 child participants were advised to draw their understanding of peace and war respectively. Unlike other studies that are based on the analysis of the already-finished paintings, this study is more specifically performed and presents the contrasts between children's presentations of peace and war by quantitatively calculating the "colours," "figures," "objects," and "space" (Walker et al., 2003, p. 197) used within the two groups of drawings.

4. Methodological Basis

Initiated in 2022, the platform Mom, I See War has presented more than 4,000 drawings by children in Ukraine and other war-affected areas on its official website and social media accounts. By inviting "all parents in Ukraine and worldwide to take a picture of their child's drawing" and sending it to the official website, the project intends to create "the world's most significant and most valuable collage of children's drawings about the war in Ukraine, which will remain forever on the Internet using NFT technology." Besides preserving the paintings, the project is also raising money for "the humanitarian aid fund for children affected by the war." The website offers young artists (anyone below the age of 18) the freedom to submit their work, whether they are from Ukraine or other countries, and to decide what to include in their paintings. This results in a more complex but universal database that encompasses a wide variety of drawings. Even though certain information (author's name, age, city) is collected with the submission, it is generally impossible to determine the exact status of the authors: the context of the drawing (individual or in school context), their living conditions (directly or indirectly affected by the war), and their drawing purposes (whether intended for the project or not). Lacking precise information on particular drawings, the

current study deviates from the author's biographical study of the relationship between artworks and their creators; instead, it takes the whole database as a collection of children's reactions towards the current war and approaches these visual data as texts which exist under the current cultural and political context.

The study of paintings can be performed with two different approaches: the content-focused approach and the projective approach. While the former "focuses on content and not on interpretation," the latter "treats drawings as data which must be interpreted by the researcher" (Merriman & Guerin, 2006, p. 49). A content analysis of paintings treats individual elements (symbols, colours, characters) as specific data and approaches them with quantitative digitisation. The projective approach, however, pays little attention to specific numbers and focuses more on the interpretation of individual paintings within the relevant theoretical contexts. Combining both approaches, this study organises and summarises different elements within the paintings into groups of emotional expression. Yet, instead of giving an exact digitisation of their number or percentage, it delves more deeply into the interpretation of such elements under the context of children in war-affected areas.

Treating the whole database of children's drawings as a collection of texts, the main method utilised is a combination of close reading of the paintings with cultural and political theory. Having its contemporary origin in New Criticism, close reading was initially a strict method of analysing texts, mainly poetry. Derived from I. A. Richards's *Practical Criticism*, close reading treats text as an independent entity, free from the influence of the author's biographical or socio-political circumstances (Richards, 1929). Instead of focusing on the exterior intention, it advised attention to formal aspects within the texts, including the vocabulary, symbols, ironies, etc. In contemporary settings of literary criticism, however, this method is extended and not restricted to the mere analysis of interior elements. It is, instead, a mode of approaching texts that emphasises, but is not limited to, textual details. While stressing the importance of interior elements as starting points of arguments, it also invites certain social and cultural contexts into the discussion. This method is not limited to literary study but can apply to the discussion of other artistic expressions, including paintings. When treating the children's paintings as the carrier of information (explicit or implicit), specific elements are approached. The first group of elements under examination are symbols and scripts which have a rather explicit connotation with certain emotions. Attention will also be paid to the colours used in the drawings, where tonal effects are analysed as implicit ways of emotional expression. Thirdly, there will be a focus on the structure of the drawing, specifically on the various combinations and organisation of certain symbols and colours. Through a close reading of these different elements inside the drawings, the study is performed within the theoretical framework of emotion study and political and cultural theories.

Grounded on these theoretical and methodological bases, this article takes children's drawings presented in the Mom, I See War platform as the study corpus, and discusses the different emotions expressed within them. While each painting contains a complex combination of various emotions, the article does not intend to categorise individual drawings into specific emotional groups. Instead, it discusses elements of the paintings and makes a general outlining of these elements as a whole, thereby analysing the various possibilities of emotional expression among the group. In other words, rather than treating each drawing as an individual case, this study uses the paintings as representations to illustrate how elements within them can be interpreted as different categories of emotions for children in war-affected areas. In response to war conditions, four categories of emotional expression are presented: fear, pain, anger, and hope.

5. Four Emotions in Children's Paintings in War-Affected Areas

5.1. Fear

The first group of emotion expressed in children's paintings is that of fear. Traditionally, when discussing the psychological status within or instantly after a catastrophic historical incident, the most immediate reaction is mere passivity. In his book *The Drowned and the Saved* (1988), Primo Levi introduces life in the Nazi concentration camp from the perspective of an intellectual and discusses the unique experience which he refers to as being impossible to remain humane (Levi, 1988, p. 57). In this abandoned world where traditional norms and meanings no longer exist, individuals are treated as animals that are deprived of their social values and can be disposed of as wished without moral judgment. For Levi, under such circumstances, most people tend to not feel anything because they are not able to think. This lack of thinking is due to, on the one hand, the tedious work and violence that restrict them to that exact moment, and on the other hand, an inability to understand what is happening. The instant change of surroundings both on a physical and metaphysical level is always too much for individuals to grasp, and much more so for those who have yet to develop a mature psychology. In the period after their first experience of war, children are overwhelmed by the tragedy and are shocked by the events that are instantly happening around them. When confronted with the deaths and suffering of close friends or family members, children in war-affected zones may struggle to comprehend their situation. Instead, they tend to passively endure the overwhelming pressures placed upon them.

This overwhelming pressure results in the first category, the emotional status of fear, which includes a combination of "affecting" and "feeling." When discussing the different vocabularies in emotion study, the exact meanings of these terminologies, such as feeling, affect, and emotion, are different. While emotion in general, defined in this essay, is a combination of all procedures taking place during an emotional process, the other two have more specific definitions. "Affecting" is the bodily reaction towards certain triggers; "feeling," on the other hand, is the individual interpretation of that reaction either through words or other medium. For example, most people would tremble and sweat at the sight of a wild bear, and this is the "affecting" they experience. Yet, it is only through summarising it as fear that "feeling" comes into being. The fear of the bear, as indicated through the bodily reaction of trembling, will take place uncontrollably as fierce animals like bears are sources of collective fear. When discussing collective behaviours and thinking patterns, Carl Jung introduces the term "collective unconscious," which he describes as a "system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature that is identical in all individuals" (Jung, 1968, p. 43). This collective unconsciousness of fear is inherited and revealed as the instant reactions of trembling or yelling in the face of danger, be it fierce animals or violence and death. In the case of children in war-affected areas, they must experience, on the one hand, the sudden sounds of gunfire and bomb explosions, and on the other hand, the bloody and violent scenes all around their neighbourhoods. The presence of weapons and death as collective sources of fear will have immediate effects on children's bodies, manifesting as either physical wounds or as crying and trembling, both on the battlefields and during the later process of war migration.

In the children's paintings collected in the database, two types of fear can be seen in this first reaction against the war. One type of fear is related to "affecting," presented more in its primitive appearance as the reflection of the instant traces of war on children's bodies. Paintings of this type, normally abstract and impressionistic in nature, are not linked directly to the war, or any of the cultural and political background. Instead, they are more

connected with the primitive individual self-expression at that exact moment. In this painting by 12-year-old Kseniia (Figure 1), this primitive horror is portrayed both with symbols and the use of colours. The black canvas in the background, with a yellow circle (representing the moon) in the top-left corner, explicitly indicates a deep night. For children, nights are related to danger, where ghosts might appear suddenly from nowhere. In the context of war, this harsh yellow circle can implicitly be interpreted as military headlights from above, signifying the unavoidable exposure under enemy searchlights. This feeling of being exposed is validated by the portrayal of eyes that are scattered on the canvas. These dozens of eyes are similar in shape but with the iris (painted as black points) looking in all directions. For Kseniia, the horror is everywhere, as if millions of evil eyes, along with the beaming searchlights, are looking at her all the time. These symbols of eyes and headlight, despite being the sources of her fear, are figurative and not specific in terms of the exact origin of that fearful emotion. This illustration captures the instance of human suffering and horror, focusing on an inner outbreak of fearful emotion without making connotations to specific external causes, thereby presenting the most direct traces of war on children's bodies.

The other type of fear, portrayed as the later interpretation of the previous primitive fear, appears when children draw connection between that fear with specific sources in war. After the initial shock, when children are unable to process events happening around them, they begin to interpret that emotion, identifying the specific causes that have led to their suffering. This process of trying to understand the "affecting" and defining it into a certain "feeling" is not limited to naming or explaining using words, but can also be demonstrated through artistic expressions. In the children's drawings, this naming activity is

Figure 1. Eyes scattering over a black canvas (Kseniia).

performed by outlining the specific sources of their fear, including missiles, bombs, fire, blood, etc. One obvious example of this fear can be found in 14-year-old Zlata's drawing (Figure 2). In the foreground of the work, she presents a child crying and trying to cover his/her ears, capturing the exact moment when a bomb is exploding. Painted with a curling position, the child takes up only around 1/8 the space of the entire canvas, signifying their passivity and vulnerability. This is presented in huge contrast with the overwhelmingly large silhouette in the background, which has presumably brought about all the suffering. This huge figure in the shape of a man with a weapon does not have any specific facial characteristics. Yet, within this figure, the artist portrays a fighter jet passing by, with overwhelming dust and fire blowing, as if this man is bringing these fearful artefacts to and all around the child. With the portrayal of a background that explains the fearful condition of the foreground, the painter is indicating the direct causes (background) for the child's fear (foreground), being itself an artistic interpretation of the "affecting" as "feeling." By including these elements in their paintings, the children in war-affected areas experience this second type of fear when they realise the direct sources of their suffering.

Figure 2. A child horrified by bombs (Zlata).

5.2. Individual Pain—Collective Grief

The second category of emotion expressed is that of individual pain which is then added up to collective grief. While the initial shock and fear still exist, children will then start to feel the consequences of the war and begin to struggle to get used to this new society where gunshots and death are frequently taking place. This emotion of individual pain can be traced in almost all paintings in the database, through the portrayal of tears, blood, ruins, etc. While individual pain accumulates, a collective grief emerges within the community and among age groups who have experienced similar tragedies, whether within their own families or through the suffering

of others around them. In her book *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (2006), historian Barbara H. Rosenwein proposes the "emotional community" as "groups in which people adhere to the same norms of emotional expression and value—or devalue—the same or related emotions" (Rosenwein, 2006, p. 2).

Even though individuals differ in how they express their emotions, there is a tendency for certain collective emotions to arise due to political and cultural similarities. This is especially true for children living in war-affected areas, where individual differences are marginalised under the extreme circumstances of the ongoing collective suffering. While this collective emotion of grief is a build-up of individual pain, it is also based on a certain level of emotional transmission within the community. Challenging the "emotional contagion" theory, which regards emotion as a property that someone owns, Sara Ahmed, in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, proposes that the formation of emotion relies on interactions and contacts with the exterior surroundings (Ahmed, 2004, p. 10). The pain in these children's paintings, similarly, is not an existing property that is unchanged and can be simply passed on to one another, but one that is constantly being formed through interactions among them. Through either hearing or witnessing other's painful stories or situations and sometimes mixing that pain within themselves, these children are also presenting a collective grief of the whole nation.

Among the children's drawings in the database, individual pain is presented through either physical wounds on children's bodies or figurative sadness. In the database, many paintings include elements of blood, wounds, scars, etc., marking the cruelty of war which leaves unbearable physical pain on individuals. In this drawing by 13-year-old Vladyslava (Figure 3a), for example, the protagonist has dozens of fresh wounds on their face and neck, with the left eye covered by a blood-soaked bandage, symbolising the ongoing physical pain inflicted by war on individuals' bodies. The series of red numbers ("24. 02.2024") carved below the right eye represents the specific date that marks the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In paintings like this, the children use their eyes like cameras which capture the continuity of physical pain from their own perspectives. Besides the portrayal of bodily suffering, this pain is also largely expressed through tears.

When outlining the different types of tears, Juan Murube proposes a "psycho-emotional tear" which "is used to express the need for help or offer of help/support" (Murube, 2009, p. 63). Caused by physical and emotional pain, tears become a form of communication, expressing sadness on a collective level. This element can be traced in most of the children's paintings. In Figure 3b, 12-year-old Nadiia presents a similar emotional pain through the running tears. With her eyes closed, the painter is projecting her emotional pain through a simple portrayal of tears running down the girl's face. By depicting tears in their paintings, these children are, on the one hand, using crying as a form of cathartic release, and on the other, expressing a plea for help to everyone who views their work.

Besides the portrayal of personal pain, a large portion of the paintings also bears a memory of the cultural level of grief. After witnessing the events around them, their initial, personal pain gradually transforms into mourning for the entire nation. This type of collective grief for communal suffering is achieved in the drawings through two different artistic techniques. One method of expression is using unique painting structures to present external surroundings. While the previously mentioned paintings focus more on individual emotional outbursts, or the pain within one person, this group of drawings describes the exterior ruins caused by the war. One subgroup uses the shape of an eye as their canvas, portraying themselves as the witnesses of all terrible events taking place.

Figure 3. Vladyslava's *Scars and pain caused by war* (a) and Nadiia's *War as presented in children's tears* (b).

In Roman (13) and Veronika's (14) drawing (Figure 4a), the weeping eye captures the horrifying scenario where a house is being attacked by a tank, bombs, and a warplane from underground. While capturing this horrible scene in the eye, the children are both memorising and weeping for the collective pain unfolding around them. Another subgroup divides the canvas into two parts, portraying the sharp contrasts before and after the invasion. In this drawing by 6-year-old Anna (Figure 4b), the left side illustrates a lively scene of warm colours where birds are flying gently over a house, with greenery covering the lower background. The right side, however, challenges this serenity with everything burning in flashes caused by the aeroplane flying by. Either through eye-witnessing or contrast of "before" and "after," the first method of expression captures the exterior and portrays grief for the collective misery.

Another method combines representational cultural symbols with pain, outlining the collective grief of the whole nation. While the interaction between individuals and their surroundings produces and adds up to a collective emotion, it is through specific interpretations that the feeling of grief takes shape. When painting

Figure 4. Roman and Veronika's *The eye that captures war scenarios* (a) and Anna's *Ukraine divided into "before" and "after"* (b).

certain elements of collective grief, the children are projecting their own feelings into a nation, "as if it were a mourning subject" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 13). By outlining a collective nation as having an emotion, this nation is presented as "the subject of feeling" (p. 13). This subjectivity is based upon individuals' own mourning "on behalf of the nation," upon the premise that the nation is "the object of 'our feeling'" (p. 13). In the drawing by 18-year-old Asia (Figure 5), a girl, with her face covered in the colour of the national flag of Ukraine, is weeping blood. While the tears indicate an individual expression of pain, this combination of tears and representational national elements marks a collective mourning: The whole nation, represented by this girl, is bleeding and weeping. By projecting their pain on a collective level, the children introduce characters as representatives of the whole nation. The individual pain is, therefore, added and metaphorically changed into a nation that is weeping.

Figure 5. Bleeding of a woman coloured in blue and yellow (Asia).

5.3. Anger

Among the children's paintings in the Mom I See War database, the third emotional category is that of anger. Although anger is traditionally believed to be a morally ambiguous emotion that is destructive in nature, contemporary scholars see it the other way around. In her article "The Uses of Anger" (1997), American writer and activist Audre Lorde discusses, for the first time, how anger can be viewed positively as a power of revolution against the dominant systematic power. According to Lorde, the anger of minorities, whether among Black individuals or females, is often feared and dismissed as mere hostility and typically met with silence (Lorde, 1997, p. 7), effectively ending a conversation. In redefining the positivity of anger, she openly advocates for others to not fear their anger as the fear of that anger teaches nothing. Instead, the power to "envision and reconstruct" is fuelled by anger, which will help "define and fashion a world" (p. 10). Anger, for her and many other activists influenced by her, is a response to injustice, an energetic tool of rebellion. While the emotions of fear and pain are directed inward toward individuals themselves, anger is more of a

subjective reaction to the external world. Similar to Lorde's positive view on anger, Sue J. Kim, in her monograph *On Anger: Race, Cognition, Narrative* (2013), introduces three aspects of the appraisal patterns of anger: as "a reaction to violations of norms and rules" (Kim, 2013, p. 18), as blame upon the real or imagined other who (might intend to) "act upon us" (p. 19), and as an implication of hope where one "is not reduced to mere passivity" (p. 20). For children in war-affected areas, the anger is toward the enemy who has or will act upon them. In comparison to adult activists, their anger is less destructive due to their age and the conditions of war. However, through their intentional expression, these paintings serve as a subjective reaction to the enemy, envisioning an affirmative future where peace might prevail.

In these paintings of Ukrainian children, traces of this affirmative anger can be seen in not only the pictorial drawings but also the words that sometimes accompany the drawings. These scripts, either in English or in Ukrainian, together with the picture itself, work as a public parade where slogans are chanted. In an article dedicated to anger, Marilyn Frye regards anger itself as "somewhat a speech act" (Frye, 1983, p. 88). When expressing individual anger, the first party is both presenting information through emotion and also demanding responses from the second party. In the paintings, the symbols and scripts are speech acts per se, as they carry information about the collective. This act of speech serves its function the moment it is performed even though no immediate responses are given. By directing their anger through different mediums and forms of expression in their artworks, the children in Ukraine are directly reacting to the wartime conditions and are using their rage as an act of speech, a performative yet powerful tool against the inhumane activities performed by the other side. By expressing anger, whether consciously or unconsciously, in their drawings, a powerful reaction to the wartime conditions is articulated and a positive future, where these children have a safe and peaceful life, is envisioned.

Among all the paintings in the database, anger is less explicitly expressed than other emotions. Yet, it can be seen through the inclusion of particular symbols and also from scripts written on the drawings. One typical symbol of anger is the image of the blood-soaked handprint. The handprint, in its original appearance, is found in the earliest man-lived caves. The fact of having a handprint on a wall or canvas symbolises life and validity, as it is a unique biometric characteristic of all individuals who have ever lived, and therefore, a proof of existence. Throughout history, handprints have been used to represent humanity and rebellion against inhumane activities. While handprints are common to almost everyone living in different continents, the combination of which presents a unity of all human beings as a group, against any enemy that intends to interrupt this unity. In the drawing by 13-year-old Katia (Figure 6), dozens of red handprints are scattered on the canvas in a messy but unifying way, signifying the whole group of Ukrainian people binding together. This unity is strengthened by the colour of the handprints and the script in the background. With the hands covered in red, Katya is explicitly expressing her affirmative anger, signifying both suffering and rebellion. While being harmed by the invaders, the people of Ukraine, symbolised as blood-coloured handprints sticking together on the canvas, will unite and act collectively against the other side. The anger of the collective resulting from the blood is transformed into a communal fight against the same target. The background writing *Я хочу, щоб ти відчував, що відчуваю я* ("I want you to feel what I feel") validify this anger when the painter intentionally asks viewers to feel the anger that she feels. By demonstrating both explicitly with the blood-soaked handprints, and implicitly with the scripts, Katya is voicing her anger and at the same time affirmatively envisioning the unity of the whole country despite its suffering.

Figure 6. Blood-soaked fingerprints (Katia).

5.4. Hope

Besides the various emotional expressions of fear, pain, and anger, the last category observed in the children's paintings is the emotion of hope. Hope, in its original essence, is a positive emotion as opposed to its negative counterpart, depression. In his article "Hope: An Emotion and a Vital Coping Resource Against Despair" (1999), Richard S. Lazarus defines the act of hoping as "believe(ing) that something positive, which does not presently apply to one's life, could still materialise" (Lazarus, 1999, p. 653). The hope, for Lazarus, is premised upon an unsatisfactory condition of the current situation, which is then projected into a future positivity. While the emotion of hope, for Lazarus and many other scholars alike, is affirmative, a recent study has negated that premise by proposing a toxic positivity where the things individuals hope to achieve are manipulated by institutional power. Contemporary Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han, in his monograph *Psychpolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* (2017), introduces a "smart power" as opposed to the "greater power." While the latter uses "violence and repression" (Han, 2017, p. 13) to control, the former "operates seductively" (p. 14) and "call(s) forth positive emotions and exploit(s) them" (p. 14). In Han's philosophy of positive emotion represented by hope, individual pursuit is controlled and exploited by the "smart power," utilised as a way for more efficient institutional control in contemporary society. Despite the complex possibilities of different interpretations of the emotion of hope, the children's paintings demonstrate an affirmative direction. The hope they hold is aiming towards the power that tries to dominate and is, to a large extent, beneficial to them. By demonstrating their hope, negative emotions of fear and pain will be gradually cured. This vision of a peaceful time, whether in the past or the future, offers a positive outlook for everyone in desperate conditions to regain their strength.

Among the paintings, the emotion of hope can be divided into two different categories of expression: the portrayal of peace and love as well as the various images of protectors. The first category, featuring various representative elements of peace and love, evokes an explicit envisioning of a scenario filled with beauty and tranquillity. Many children use the image of a giant umbrella in their paintings to protect people and the cities underneath. In 7-year-old Artem's drawing, for example, a significantly large umbrella, covered in the colours of the Ukrainian national flag (blue and yellow), crosses the canvas diagonally. Painted in faded colours, the warplanes and tank on the left side of the canvas stand in stark contrast to the right side, where buildings are depicted in various vibrant colours, bringing more life to that corner. This lively and colourful corner is

Figure 7. An umbrella that protects the city underneath (Artem).

surrounded by the umbrella and a rainbow that covers from above, outlining a place where all things related to battlefields are excluded, where only peace remains. While this portrayal can be interpreted as either a vision of the future or a memory of the past, the writing *Поверни наше щастя Дитинство!* ("Bring back our happy childhood!") in the top right corner reinforces its nostalgic quality. In handwritten form, the phrase describes Artem's calling to bring back their "happy childhood." This childhood, for the 7-year-old painter, is not a physical age span; instead, it is a peaceful past before the invasion. In *Retrotopia* (2017), Zygmunt Bauman argues for a contemporary "U-term" of directing public hopes from the "uncertain and ever-too-obviously un-trustworthy future" to "the vaguely remembered past, valued for its assumed stability and so trustworthiness" (Bauman, 2017, p. 6). While the future cannot be imagined in the miserable present, a nostalgia for tranquillity became the way out for Artem in directing his hope.

The second category that demonstrates hope among the paintings in the database focuses on depictions of various protectors: the adults and the children themselves. Images of adults include the portrayal of mothers, fathers, and sometimes soldiers in uniforms. In Yeva's (13) painting (Figure 8), two children are sleeping in bed while two adult characters, forming a bubble with their bodies, are constructing a clear sky around the children. Painted with the colours of the Ukrainian national flag, the bubble prevents missiles and fires from getting inside. The man on the left does not show any facial expression; instead, there is a focus on his identity as a soldier wearing a uniform. The woman on the other side, similarly, is painted with long hair and a dress, without showing any personal characteristics. Yet, it is this anonymity of the protectors that unites them as a collective. By projecting their hope onto adults, regardless of their identity, children envision a reliable and unified protection that allows them to feel safe. Besides adults, the group of protectors is also sometimes identified as the children themselves. While hoping for protectors to help them, the children also envisioned themselves as protectors for other people living in war-affected areas. In this painting (Figure 9) by Nadiia (no age specified), while the left panel represents the enemy in a cartoon-like skeleton hand, the right part is characterised by a boy sheltering the other kids, and even an adult, from danger. Portrayed as an angel, with a pair of wings and a halo, the child is given the power to face the enemy. By drawing this angel-like character that stands between danger and their people, the painter and other children like her are hoping that they will have the strength to protect others in the same situation.

Figure 8. Adults protecting children with their bodies (Yeva).

Figure 9. Children as protectors (Nadiia).

6. Conclusion

Among the paintings presented in the Mom, I See War database, four categories of emotional expression of children under war conditions are analysed. Firstly, the emotion of fear appears when the cruelty of war presses its traces directly upon children's bodies. Two types of fear exist among the paintings: The first type marks a primitive and instant bodily reaction and calls for an entire self-expression without drawing any external connection; the second, through naming and outlining the specific sources of that fear, goes further as an interpretation of the previous primitive fear. Secondly, when children begin to recognise the deaths of

their close friends or family members, the emotion of pain emerges. Individual pains, as analysed within the database, are presented as both physical wounds (blood, scars) and figurative sadness (tears). This individual pain, experienced both physically and mentally, contributes to a collective grief in which the entire nation mourns. In the children's paintings, this collective grief is expressed either through depictions of their miserable external surroundings, marking them as witnesses of unfolding events, or through the personification of the nation, signifying a shared sense of grief. The third emotion of anger, however, appears less frequently in the paintings. Seen positively as a vehicle for activism and an envisioning of a positive future, this anger is presented through the symbol of blood-soaked handprints binding and resisting together on the canvas. The scripts within the drawings also indicate a parade-like utterance for a peaceful world. Finally, a positive emotion of hope is expressed in two different ways. Elements of peace, together with the application of warm colours are used as powerful depictions of a positive future. Similarly, images of various protectors, including parents, soldiers and the children themselves, are presented as a wish for safety and the strength to protect others.

Summarising the different possibilities of children's emotional reactions in war conditions, the article does not intend to categorise paintings or their creators into these different categories. With the ongoing suffering caused by the invasion, Ukrainian children are experiencing a fluid and unstable emotional landscape that is too complex to fit into one particular category. In most cases, each painting contains a complex combination of various personal emotions, taking different proportions within one particular artwork. This study considers these paintings as a corpus rich in various elements of emotional expression and offers approaches for analysing children's war paintings with a focus on emotion. It is worthwhile for follow-up research to consider individual paintings as cases and conduct a more detailed, painter-related study on the drawings, relating the personal experience of the young painters to the artworks as well as discussing the relationship between paintings and their specific social and cultural contexts.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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About the Author

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ARTICLE

In the Echo of the Unspoken

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Abstract

In a series of four art classes, children around the age of 10 creatively explored the themes of war and peace. They perceived and interpreted sensory experiences alongside their imaginative reflections. This approach opens up art education to unpredictability, creating heterotopic spaces that challenge and reshape worldviews as well as self-perceptions. During these classes, the goal is to listen attentively for the echoes of unspoken thoughts, which may prompt expansions, transformations, or even reversals of perception. Descriptions, analyses, and interpretations remain fluid and airborne, emphasizing not only the visible and familiar, but also the semi-visible, invisible, and aesthetically perceptible aspects. My aesthetic writing about these classes offers sensitive inquiries and responses that render a sensual perception of the world, others, and oneself palpable. Central to this exploration are the questions of how war and peace are perceived, experienced, and enacted. The answers reside in the unspoken echoes between what is sensed and what is imagined, aiming to make tangible the images created by the children participating in the process.

Keywords

children; lived body; peace; practice-based artistic research; war

1. Before Seeing, Interpreting, and Imagining

The other day, a colleague told me that he had been studying my work on my website and that he was attracted by the way I transform academic knowledge into aesthetic language. For a while, we discussed the need for practice-based (art) research to make theories critical of power relations accessible to all. In the echo of the unspoken, my colleague asked me if I also try, conversely, to introduce embodied experiences of power and inequalities into academic discourse.

Reflecting on our respective experiences with racism and classism, which have become embodied in us, we concluded that it is inevitable to think from our own affectedness. This is not only necessary to combat the epistemic, bodily, material, and physical violence driven by the management of humans and nature but also to foster knowledge production that aligns with the aesthetic processes of seeing, interpreting, and imagining.

In this light, the article advocates for approaches to writing that view practice-based research as a process requiring dual engagement—both scientific and sensory.

The thinking in this article is filled with grief and concern, and unfolds in despair, but also in hope. Neither grief nor concern, neither despair nor hope, are considered scientific methods or theoretical approaches. Perhaps this is one of the greatest deficits of scientific thinking and working. Grief, concern, despair, hope—these fill us as human beings. They are part of thinking, feeling, and acting. We cannot choose them as we would choose a method. Sensations arise on their own (Krasny, 2022, p. 12).

From a queer-feminist perspective, I disrupt scientific thinking through poetry, opening a space between us (Ahmed, 2023, p. 215). We lack the dreams that open up visions of solidarity in a clear representation of ourselves and others. Representations produce meaning and knowledge by presenting something in a specific way. They structure ways of perceiving and thus play a significant role in the construction of reality (Mörsch et al., 2018, p. 15). Dreams appear unrealistic, and the hope of living together in freedom, non-violence, equality, and justice no doubt seems naive, perhaps even impossible, to many:

> Nevertheless, some of us must rather wildly hold to it, refusing to believe that the structures that now exist will exist for ever. For this, we need our poets and our dreamers, the untamed fools, the kind who know how to organise. (Butler, 2023)

I understand queerness itself as thinking and acting in contradictions that disrupt normative worldviews of dichotomy. In this sense, I think and work with images that challenge the division in how we understand the world and open us up to what we perceive as "others" (Sternfeld, 2018, p. 472). Towards our neighbors, our superiors, our children, for whose future we bear responsibility: for their concerns, and especially for their dreams of and in a future world where we come into contact with images for a solidaristic peaceful coexistence, ultimately sensing and experiencing them. I dream of that.

In the children's film *Mary Poppins* (Stevenson, 1964), the nanny of two well-to-do children, images painted by her friend on the street opened up, into which they jumped to land in a world full of dreams. Perhaps this article can be understood as such: Drawings in the text invite you to jump into dreams about living together in freedom, non-violence, equality, and justice.

Discussions of war and peace are seldom explicit with children. Instead, the subject tends to hover in the background, generating atmospheres that are perceptible through the lived body. As an echo of the unspoken, atmospheres have a social impact because they affect sensations like grief, concern, despair, and hope which create images of a world, how we see, interpret, and imagine within oneself, with others, and with the world at large (Gugutzer & Barrick, 2022, p. 7).

The first part of the article explores the intention and method of aesthetically engaging with children on the topic of peace and war, aiming to dive in and swim without drowning in the bottomless whirlpool of subjectivity

(Wacquant, 2014, pp. 97–98). The second part describes an autoethnography from aesthetically engaging with the children, framed by a praxeological approach that understands the social as a field of embodied and materially intertwined practices. This approach shifts the focus from individual actors to the dynamics of situations in their enactment, emphasizing the materiality, collectivity, and processuality of social enactment realities (Pürgstaller et al., 2023, p. 265). The conclusion, though not in the obvious form, presents the results of the practice-based (artistic) research with children on war and peace: their drawings. However, instead of being translated into scientific thinking and working, the children's images provide a space, voicing the possibility of a nonviolent, fearless world.

I interpret the images from an aesthetic perspective that connects scientific thinking with personal experiential knowledge (Engel, 2019, p. 46). In the image descriptions, I condense into a triad what "we can see" and what "we can interpret" from an art historical perspective of description, analysis, and interpretation. When it comes to personal experiential knowledge, I speak from my own position: "I imagine…." My imaginings leave a trace for a new sense of experience, one that can also be interpreted hermeneutically. This potential meaning begins to take shape within the condensed image translations without necessarily requiring explicit hermeneutic or interpretative analysis (Engel, 2019, p. 46).

By using the phrase "We can read…," I create a distance from my imagining, grounded in what we can see and interpret.

What we can read, we can also see and interpret: the table, or the chair, for example, where I now sit in this blurring of night and day. The dreams are still alive, imagining different orientations at the boundary between the equivocal and the unequivocal, challenging traditional interpretations of the table, the chair "that secures the very 'place' of philosophy":

> The use of tables shows us the very orientation of philosophy in part by showing us what is proximate to the body of the philosopher, or "what" the philosopher comes into contact "with." How the table appears might be a matter of the different orientations that philosophy takes toward the objects that it comes into contact with. (Ahmed, 2006, p. 3)

What we can read in this article is orientated by an echo of the unspoken in the drawings of ten children, which relate to the topic of war and peace. We can read about co-existence, receptiveness, expansion, violence, formation, exclusion, sensitivity, confidence, interbeing, and sensation. The artworks were created as part of my teaching under the guidance of drawing letters for children in war. These were meant to be images that could be read in all languages: no equivocal table, no equivocal chair. Rather, they are images that evoke dreams of peace at the boundary between the equivocal and the unequivocal.

Ultimately, the article demonstrates that artistic writing, framed as practice-based research, underscores the importance and advantages of dismantling scientific thinking and working by embracing poetry, dreams, and untamed thinking as a practice of peace in an androcentric, heteronormative, racist-postcolonial, and capitalist world: within oneself, with others, and with the world at large (Ahmed, 2023, p. 193).

2. In the Echo of the Unspoken

2.1. Imagining and Remembering

In Figure 1 we can see blurred boundaries of one color swimming into another. We can interpret the essence of each color. I imagine peace between the echo of the named colors.

We can read about co-existence.

Figure 1. Color pigments and Gum Arabic on watercolor paper (Child, 2024).

I imagine children. This imagining is deeply intertwined with remembering: I taught art for 17 years. So I know quite a bit about the art of imparting knowledge and yet I know very little.

I remember and imagine: a ship as a part of the school. Sailing with the ship in deep waters. With the wind in the sails, we flew from one land to another, in the air, on paper...on the ground. The children were no longer children, just as I was no longer a teacher. Perhaps we were pirates, navigating towards an unknown island in between.

As pirates in the echo of the unspoken, we are thinking and practicing not in a traditional academic world that generates and objectifies (non) knowledge. Our knowledge is a blur as the boundaries between one land and another. We know about our equivocal that opens us to each other.

The unequivocal as a guiding discipline of knowledge.

Discipline creates a relationship, which makes the body more docile the more useful it is, and vice versa. This allows a policy of constraints to be formed; and it is these constraints that show an effect on the lived body by calculating and manipulating its elements, its gestures, and its behaviors. This is how the lived body becomes part of a power system that penetrates, dissects, and reassembles it (Foucault, 1976, p. 176).

A power system that articulates itself in images, words—in what's literal, in schools, countries—disciplinary demarcations between one and the other to secure policies.

2.2. Untamed Thinking

In Figure 2 we can see untamed lines swimming from one to the other. We can interpret movements from one to another. I imagine the yellow land can open for a blue land that gets green.

We can read about receptiveness.

Figure 2. Color pigments and Gum Arabic on watercolor paper (Child, 2024).

With colors in the air, on paper, and even on the ground, untamed thinking is needed to escape any form of categorization (Bayramoglu & Castro Varela, 2021, p. 25). It requires queer thinking, a wild form of thinking which is critical of normalization and anti-disciplinary; a way of thinking that cannot be systematized, aware of its contingency that it dissipates in due course (Hark, 2004, p. 74).

At the turn of the millennium, queer was understood not so much as an identity, but rather as a movement of thought and language that runs counter to its expected forms (Butler, 2018, p. 32).

Towards movement and being moved we open our bodies:

> Through touch, the separation of self and other is undermined in the very intimacy or proximity of the encounter. However, for feminist, queer, and post-colonial critics there remain the troubling questions: If one is always with other bodies in a fleshy sociality, then how are we "with" others differently? How does this inter-embodiment involve the social differentiation between bodily others? (Ahmed & Stacey, 2001, p. 6)

2.3. Lived Bodily Sensations

In Figure 3 we can see green islands. We can interpret the blue merging into the green. I imagine the deforming of the islands...becoming different from each other.
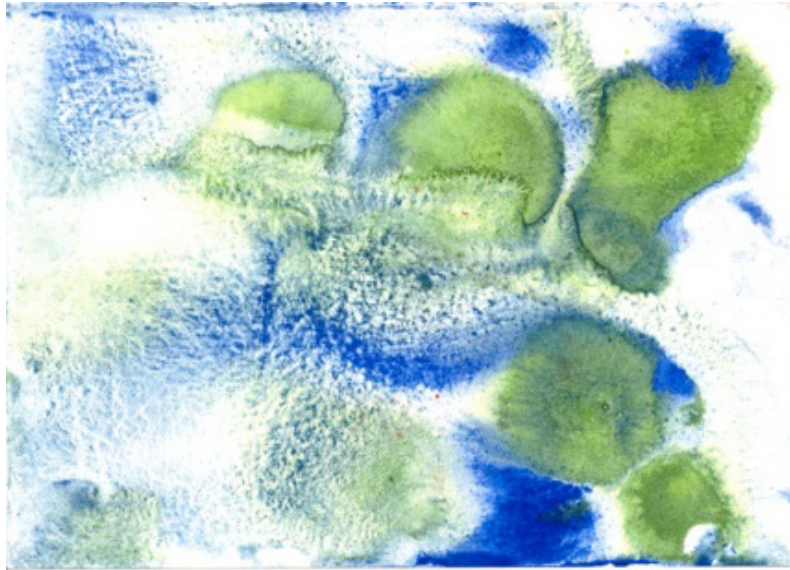
We can read about expansion.

Figure 3. Color pigments and Gum Arabic on watercolor paper (Child, 2024).

Everything we feel as belonging within the boundaries of our own bodies concerns the palpable lived body. This includes all sensations such as fear, pain, lust, disgust, or fatigue; it also means all spontaneous forms of being struck with emotions; and it includes palpable intervention and movement, to the extent it can be felt in one's own lived body. In terms of spatiality and dynamics, this is something of a completely different nature than the body itself (Schmitz, 2009).

We represent a symbolic body, and it could be the conception of a body of teachers on the frontline, children in the ranks. Thus, I speak of a body in the intertwining of a sensitive/sensing, experienced/experiencing lived body and a culturally-shaped body (Gugutzer, 2020, pp. 48–49), emphasizing the lived body materialization of societal (power) relations and (body) orders (Spahn, 2022, p. 11).

2.4. Cultural Body

In Figure 4 we can see a field of red on one side and a field of yellow on the other side. We can interpret the cuts of yellow into the red. I imagine the yellow penetrates the blue in between and continues into the red.

We can read about violence.

Figure 4. Color pigments and Gum Arabic on watercolor paper (Child, 2024).

When we speak of the body, we often have in mind the cultural body that we embody. We remember and imagine: teachers, students. Less or not at all in mind is the lived body, which is intertwined with the cultural body in a dialectical way (Gugutzer, 2002, p. 280).

This entails conflict, perhaps even war within one's own body; the dialectical relationship between lived body and cultural body mirrored in the one and the other. Cultural binaries such as racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and bodyism are based on the construction of hegemonic relations between the self and the other.

So, it is also about triumphing over sensation, within one's own lived body, amidst the ranks, on the frontline. It's about regulation, disciplining of a lived body, demanding a clear-cut identity, which constitutes a brutal social regulation that continues to traumatize the subject (Wuttig, 2016, p. 172).

2.5. Alphabet of Movements

In Figure 5 we can see straight lines. We can interpret the lines as an alphabet of movements dividing the land of paper. I imagine moving spaces in the middle of the land of paper and aesthetical movements dreaming of togetherness.

We can read about formation.

Figure 5. Color pigments and Gum Arabic on watercolor paper (Child, 2024).

I describe the school as the quintessential Alphabet of movements. Children, when they start school, are neither completely alike nor completely different. They are brought forth as equals and unequal in particular respects through acts of addressing and everyday school practices. I refer to school par excellence as social choreographies to regulate movement patterns that have become second nature for all participants. These reliable structures organize the movements of a group in space according to specific rules and are significant for the social order within the educational field (Dietrich & Riepe, 2019). This alphabetization of movements made me sensitive to gaps in the Alphabet of (de)subject-constituting movements, leading me, amid my art class, to imagine, for example, a ship amidst the school. With the wind in the sails, the children flow from one land to another, in the air, on paper, on the ground, opening up heterotopic spaces for reordering and reinterpreting worldviews and self-understanding (Spahn, 2022, p. 21; Wuttig, 2016, p. 406)—with images in the air, within the lived body…with vulnerability.

For Foucault, the ship is the heterotopia par excellence. Indeed, it is in civilizations without ships that dreams dry up, espionage replaces adventure, and the police replace freebooters (Foucault, 1990, p. 46).

I imagine transforming the art classroom into a flying ship painting images in the air, on paper, on the ground, dreaming of a nonviolent, fearless world; just coexistence through a culture/policy of sensitivity. "For this, we need our poets and our dreamers, the untamed fools, the kind who know how to organise" (Butler, 2023).

On this flying ship, movements are set in motion, flying in deep waters. With the wind in the sails, from one land to another, in the air, and on paper, aesthetical movements will queer an alphabet of movements, enabling conditions of worldviews and self-relations among different subjectivities (Spahn, 2022).

2.6. War in the Alphabet

In Figure 6 we can see brown boundaries dividing the blue spaces. We can interpret the isolation of the blue to the edge of the land of paper. I imagine war in the middle of the body of paper.

We can read about exclusion.

Figure 6. Color pigments and Gum Arabic on watercolor paper (Child, 2024).

I remember teachers talking about one or another child: the child disrupts, the child incites, the child is out of control. We have to set boundaries: Exclusion.

There is war in the alphabet.

I remember one or another child.

Even today, I imagine the work of one child. They radiated obstinacy. I remember the resistance in the unrealistic picture. One picture I will keep in mind: an oversized head in one hand on the ground and the other hand touching the air. The big body was painted with many colors and it seems unrealistic that the too-small feet could keep the body upright. But they did. Their steps gone, out of the land of paper, and finding a balance in another world.

In the echo of the unspoken, I hear Butler:

> But you know, people say to me that I'm very naïve, that I'm very unrealistic. I say yes, but It would be nice if this idea, this unrealistic idea became popular, right? Sometimes we get so realistic and strategic and hard-headed that we forget that there are ideals, right? We should wish for the unrealistic, we should hold onto the unrealistic in my mind. (Marimon, 2022)

2.7. Dancing

In Figure 7 we can see moving lines and spaces. We can interpret aesthetical movements on the dance floor of paper. I imagine an improvisation dance in the echo of the unspoken.

We can read about sensitivity.

Figure 7. Color pigments and Gum Arabic on watercolor paper (Child, 2024).

I haven't spoken yet about dancing as a political, sensual practice of making visible and shifting cultural and social codes (Klein, 2015, p. 314; Pürgstaller et al., 2023, p. 274). I'll talk a bit more or less about it, based on my experience in the dance workshop "Non-Discriminatory Learning, Choreography & Performance" with Deborah Hay.

I am still searching for words. I still cannot find a translation for the sensations and experiences made in Studio4 at Tanzfabrik Berlin in the summer of 2022. Hay's sentences still echoing within me: "You know what you don't know and you don't know what you know," "The body is your teacher," and "Turn around your fucking head." With the head in one hand and with the other hand touching the air, I turned in another direction. Meanwhile, the one hand on the ground, the echo of dance within me, letting me know bodily that, in Engel's words, perceptual sensibility precedes knowledge and recognition of something. An initial attentive perception of what is shown does not necessarily mean knowing what something is shown as. In fact, the process initially goes through attentiveness, wonder, or amazement. So, initially, there is a state of not-knowing before a "dawn of knowledge" emerges (Engel, 2019, p. 46).

2.8. Painting Dreams

In Figure 8 we can see islands transform from one form into another. We can interpret the blur of islands across the land of paper. I imagine bodies that trust in a land without borders.

We can read about confidence.

Figure 8. Color pigments and Gum Arabic on watercolor paper (Child, 2024).

Yesterday I looked at the clouds and painted images in the air. They flew with the ship where I was collecting images, words, and less literal things.

Today, at dawn, it dawned on me: With colors in the air, on paper...and not on the ground.

I will lead the children to send dreams. Like clouds that transform. For example, from a bomb into a cuddly cat. From a school into a ship. From a child into a pirate.

It would be necessary to think and to practice without lines. It would be required to use watercolors that transform immediately with the touch of the air, the paper...the ground, which is the sky. With the other hand, it would be possible to touch it, and with the one hand it would be feasible to hold the head that leads towards another world.

2.9. Being-With and Being-For

In Figure 9 we can see deep yellow as ground. We can interpret the deep blue touching the brown color by moving in the yellow. I imagine aesthetical movements of being-with and being-for.

We can read about interbeing.

Figure 9. Color pigments and Gum Arabic on watercolor paper (Child, 2024).

We will paint with watercolor swimming with the ship in deep waters. With the wind in our sails, we will fly from one land to another, in the air, on paper...on the ground.

We will paint letters sending them. We don't need designation, words...no clear-cut bodies with pencils, with red lines, with drawn lines marking the boundary to others.

We need the head in the hand, thinking with the hand (Derrida, 1988, p. 63).

We need the transition to the gift of that which gives, which gives itself as a capacity to give. This passage from the hand that gives something to the hand, to the hand that gives itself, is obviously decisive. It probably needs more of these silent gestures that become events and disturb alphabets in their citation, putting a stop to what has become completely ordinary and yet completely wrong (Butler, 2018, p. 81).

We are thinking with our lived bodies. I advocate with Ahmed and Stacey (2001) for a skin-tight politics, a politics that takes as its orientation not the body as such, but the fleshy interface between bodies and worlds. "Thinking through the skin is a thinking that reflects, not on the body as the lost object of thought, but on inter-embodiment, on the mode of being-with and being-for, where one touches and is touched by others" (Ahmed & Stacey, 2001, p. 1).

2.10. Touching/Being Touched

In Figure 10 we can see blurred islands of colors swimming into one another. We can interpret the hearts in the middle of the land of paper to the other. I imagine the echo of the unspoken in-between.

We can read about sensation.

Figure 10. Color pigments and Gum Arabic on watercolor paper (Child, 2024).

I imagine a ship as part of the school. Sailing with the ship in deep waters. With the wind in our sails, we will fly from one land to another, in the air, on paper…on the ground. The children will no longer be children, just as I will no longer be a teacher. Perhaps we will be pirates, navigating towards an unknown island in between.

We will touch and will be touched by the images in the air that we all breathe. We share the same air in the sky, on the earth, in the room, on the table. Among people and everywhere in between, we breathe together.

We need colors that move.

We need to sail with the ship in deep waters. With the wind in our sails, we are dancing in the sky, on earth, in the land of papers…in movements: against racism, classism, sexism…

We can be pirates for a nonviolent, fearless world, just coexisting through a culture/policy of sensitivity.

Now.

Now I will go on with an autoethnographic part drawing from practice-based artistic research with the children. This ethnography-practice research component introduces a teaching approach that presented less as an assignment given to the students and more as associative motivations to engage with the theme of war and peace, without concretely defining the topic. The focus of working with the children on war and peace was to open up to an echo of the unspoken, which would manifest in the polyphony of their images: as a response to living together in peace.

Now.

In the realm of the sky, on the earth, and within the land of paper, I will engage in practice-based artistic research through aesthetical movement with children on the topic of war. Together, we will explore today,

two hours later, six hours later, between yesterday and tomorrow, and maybe two, six hours later, embarking on an aesthetic inquiry aimed at fostering peace.

3. Today—March 22, 2024

In two hours, I will be with the children. First grade. They won't have colors, no paper. Neither will I.

For all children. We will make the colors ourselves. Pigments. Finely ground stones. Stones from around the globe. From one land and another. Ground to sand. The blue from Italy, the sienna red from the mountains around Innsbruck.

We will.

I will tell the story "Frederick, the Mouse" (Lionni, 2017). Of collecting colors by painting pictures in the air. Of collecting words with immediate associations in the air. Of the other mice, who keep asking Frederick why he's not working. I will tell of how all the mice were in a dark hole and they ran out of food. And how it was Frederick who nourished them with images and stories and made them forget about their suffering.

I will not speak unequivocally about it. The ambiguity with the ship in the air. Sailing with the ship in deep waters. With the wind in our sails from one land to another, in the air, on paper…on the ground.

3.1. Today—Two Hours Later

Sitting here. In this corridor. Which is now so close again. And all these teachers, professor Klemenc, colleague Klemenc…sitting there with me, waiting for the children.

It was yesterday or the day before when a colleague talked about the emotional work with colleagues. Today, I sit here and feel what connects me with the children: the sensation, not an emotional work.

I look forward to them. Without knowing who they are. I look forward to a sense of sensation and sensitivity. To their becoming sensitive. I hope so.

> First, your names. Please write them on this adhesive tape. And please on your sweater so I can read them. That way, I don't have to say, "You with the black sweater," and then you with the gray sweater ask, "Do you mean me?" And you with the black lettering on your sweater say a little louder, "Or me?" And then it's you, and you, and louder and louder, until it's just noise and no one knows who I actually mean. I might not even know who's wearing a black sweater anymore.

Their laughter. Their hands. My tearing of the tape. Into this hand, into this…the first chaos.

> I was at an exhibition in Berlin, where letters written by children in war were shown. I read about their fear, about their anger. It made me so sad, and I wondered what we could do to make the children less fearful. I thought for a long time. Very long. And then it occurred to me: If the children write these letters, maybe it's also about them receiving some. But not letters that tell about war, but about

peace. But what peace can we write about if there might be no hope for peace at all? It probably sounds strange too, if we write about peace and the children read these letters in the midst of war. So, I thought, it's about painting pictures of peace. Like painting pictures in the air. Like dreaming. Maybe like clouds. Which were a bomb at first and then turned into a cuddly cat. Yes, that's right, maybe a bear. Or….

Do you know the story of Frederick the mouse? A family of mice collect all the supplies for winter except one mouse, and that's Frederick….

Yes, first we collect the words and then the colors. 20 words about war in 2 minutes. Anything that comes to your mind. Shoe, cloud, cannon…it doesn't matter, if toenail comes to your mind, that's great too. Yes, sure, you can write in any language you want. Yes, with many spelling mistakes. It doesn't matter. As long as you can read it. Ok, 1, 2, 3 go. In 10 seconds, it will be over. Yes, if it only has 13 words, that's fine too.

Ok. Now the next word. 20 words about *child* in 2 minutes….

And now about *peace*.

So now it will be a bit difficult. Now let's try to find family names. As if war, child, and peace were the address. Like Amthorstraße 46, and there are different family names on the doorbells. Like, one of them is Klemenc. And in the Klemenc apartment, may I read your words? Thank you, so there are bombs, cellars…. OK, that's too complicated. Right. Let's just imagine that we now know what we associate with *war* and *child* and especially with *peace*. And we only write the words for *peace* on these slips of paper and put them on the table. No, we won't do that for *war* and *child*. Only words of *peace* on the table. So that we can find colors for them.

Who knows how colors are created? Yes, also from plants, but only for dyeing fabrics. I mean the colors we paint with. Yes, exactly. For example, lapis lazuli. Or when we go to Hungerburg above Innsbruck, there are rust-red stones, who has seen those? Yes, also from those. It looks like this. And this blue is from one of the most expensive stones. They are very rare, they come from the area around Ukraine. And this white from the area of the Gaza Strip. These stones are ground to sand. They are called pigments. Ok. What do we do now to be able to paint with them? Hm, no, it can't be water; when it evaporates, the loose pigments are back. What can bind them, think of the kitchen. Oil, yes, exactly, it could be oil; yes, exactly, egg. That's what we call egg tempera. With this paint, we can paint very precisely. But I thought we wanted colors that flow. Like clouds. Which change from one form to another, without us knowing beforehand what will come out of it. I brought us rubber dissolved in water. With this binder, the colors can continue to flow. And there's paper, it can carry a lot of water without crumbling. We call it watercolor paper.

So, in pairs, you'll make the colors, ok? Like this. Just cover the floor with water and add two spoonfuls of pigments. And handle it carefully. This is a gift from me so you can gift dreams. This is very valuable. Yes, the blue is much more expensive than the rust red. It was more expensive than gold. Who has ever been to the Sistine Chapel? Yes, there's a lot of blue in the paintings. And back

then, the more blue in a painting, the more valuable the painting was. No, not everyone can make the color blue. For dreaming, warm colors might be much more important.

I hold the paper only halfway under the tap. And look. When I dip the brush into the water, this is what happens. And when it's at the edge, that happens. Isn't that great? That's so great. Look what happens there. Yes, there's a dog. Ok, for you it's a flower. That's so great! For you it's a dog and for you a flower. And for you a bear, that's even greater. So much with a drop of color. So many dreams in a small spot.

We'll do it now so that there are two colors on each of the four tables. And each of you will go with the paper to the colors it needs to dream. And just see what happens there. That takes time.

Yes, great, look. Isn't that great? I think it's so great. Look how cool! How the color expands there! Yes exactly, the yellow into the blue. How great. A sun in the midst of the blue. Ok. A flower. That's right. Look, it even goes beyond the blue.

Professor, professor. Can you dream well there? Do you think the children can dream there?

3.2. Today—Six Hours Later

3.2.1. Between Yesterday and Tomorrow, and Maybe Two, or Six Hours Later

In the echo of the unspoken, we get to know what we seemingly don't know. What is known and can be perceived with senses with what comes to mind. "You know what you don't know and you don't know what you know" (Hay, 2022).

Towards the article's conclusion, I envision images heralding a nonviolent, fearless world, serving as a prelude to its opening. The artwork of the children evokes a path toward coexistence guided by a culture or policy of sensitivity.

We can embody the role of pirates in this context—explorers of imagining and remembering, champions of untamed thought, embracers of lived-body sensations, advocates for cultural and lived experiences, proponents of war within cultural and lived bodies, proponents of living with and through the body, enthusiasts for dancing and painting dreams, and advocates for being-with and being-for. This stance involves embracing the profound connections that arise from touching and being touched by each other, acknowledging the diverse ways in which we envision and remember the world's images.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

Due to research-ethical principles, data associated with this article is not available. Drawings of the children are available from the author.

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The Spaces In Between: Understanding Children's Creative Expression in Temporary Shelters for Asylum Seekers

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Abstract

On arrival in a host country, asylum-seeking children face uncertainty and stress that may compound past traumatic experiences of war and violence. This article is based on a participatory action research project, Welcome Haven, that aims to promote the wellbeing and mental health of asylum-seeking families in Montreal, Canada, through psychosocial workshops. Since 2023, our interdisciplinary team has conducted arts-based workshops to support asylum-seeking children lodged in hotels that function as temporary accommodations, funded by the federal government. This study examines the drawings and narratives of participating children (ages 5–17) to understand how children communicate and make sense of their experiences through artmaking. Following a participatory action research framework using arts-based approaches, we use narrative and thematic analysis to analyze our (a) ethnographic field notes, (b) notes from our intervention team meetings, which functioned as peer supervision for facilitators, and (c) photographs of children's artwork. Our findings suggest that children use drawings to share and externalize their personal stories and to express fears and hopes for the future. Importantly, children's expression happened not only on the page and through stories, but in the space between facilitators and children, and in their manner of sharing or protecting their art. The challenges of conducting research and creating therapeutic alliances in these spaces are explored. This research has important implications for understanding children affected by war and those in humanitarian crisis settings, including reception centers and shelters in high-income countries.

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1. Introduction

In response to unprecedented numbers of asylum claims in Canada after the reopening of borders closed by Covid-19, the federal government created new temporary accommodation sites (TAS) in hotels in the Spring of 2022. In Quebec alone there were 58,805 processed asylum claims in 2022 (Government of Canada, 2024). While the provincial government is responsible for social services for claimants, including providing temporary shelter, Quebec reported that the numbers of asylum seekers outstripped their capacity, and called on the federal government to send claimants to other provinces and provide increased funding ("Breaking point: Quebec premier," 2024). With this political debate ongoing, the federal government opened 17 TAS in the Greater Montreal area, with more opening in other provinces.

Unlike immigrants and refugees, asylum seekers (also known as refugee claimants) must wait approximately two years for the adjudication of their request for refugee status, during which time it is uncertain if they will be allowed to remain in Canada (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2021). Research suggests that living in limbo, with only temporary protection, increases the risk of mental health problems in both children and adults, and thus, despite having comparable rates of pre-migration trauma, refugees with secure status have far lower rates of morbidity than asylum seekers (Côté-Olijnyk et al., 2024; Ratnamohan et al., 2023). Children and their families often face extreme forms of adversity prior to migration, during their journey, and on arrival in the host country (Bauch, 2022; Kronick et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2024). The stress of the resettlement process includes being confronted with poverty, discrimination, and racism as well as barriers to employment, health care, and housing, all of which may be compounded by precarity (Ratnamohan et al., 2023). Little is known, however, about how initial experiences on arrival, such as being housed in temporary accommodations, may influence people's trajectories and experiences.

This study is part of the Welcome Haven, a multi-site community-based implementation study exploring how psychosocial support workshops for asylum-seeking families, may break social isolation and foster agency, and wellbeing. While Welcome Haven began in September 2021 in community centers in Montreal, Canada, in response to the opening of the TAS in 2022, we began implementing our workshops in TAS in the area Greater Montreal area. These workshops in TAS include art-based expression spaces for children. For this article we focus on the children's arts workshops and ask: What stories emerge from asylum-claimant children's artwork? How do the children communicate and make sense of their experiences? How are art spaces in the temporary hotel accommodations experienced and used by children and youth?

While little information is publicly available about the TAS, we have learned from key stakeholders and our workshop visits that typically TAS house several hundred refugee claimants each day with length of stays varying from 2 to 6 months. The majority of TAS are located far from downtown Montreal, leaving very few accessible services for asylum-seeking families. In Quebec, only a few community organizations enter the TAS, often on a once-per-month basis to provide information to families, usually with a focus on finding housing. While families can access social welfare in the hotel, they often wait for several weeks, during which time they do not have the resources to purchase public transit tickets, often leaving them confined to the hotel.

Most TAS do not allow families to bring their own food to their rooms though meals are provided at set times. At the time of this research, children were not permitted to register for schools without a permanent address and, therefore, were without schooling for many months. Children do not have access to playgrounds or play spaces, nor were any toys or books provided in the hotels we visited. Asylum-seeking children in the TAS, along with their families, were thus excluded from receiving typical social services that asylum seekers housed in the community could readily access. Our team sought to provide increased support through our workshops, and also to understand what the experiences of being in TAS were like for families.

2. Methodology

2.1. Art Therapy

Art therapy is a modality that uses art for communication and self-discovery with a view that artmaking itself can be therapeutic (Ulman, 2001). With newcomers, art therapy can transcend verbal communication, making it well-suited for those with different linguistic backgrounds (Akthar & Lovell, 2019; Feen-Calligan et al., 2020). Because art, like play, is a natural means of communication for children, it can be a mechanism to express emotions and make meaning of their outer and inner worlds (Maagerø & Sunde, 2016). It can also be an apt method to amplify children's voices that are otherwise unrecognized (Akthar & Lovell, 2019). Drawings allow children an accessible means of communication that can disrupt the traditional power dynamics in research (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2018). Arts-based research emphasizes the importance of children's drawings, allowing children choice in what and how they share or depict (Linds et al., 2023). Arts-based approaches are viewed as more culturally safe and developmentally appropriate to use with war-affected children (Linds et al., 2023) given for many individuals and communities, direct verbal questioning of children about difficult experiences could be seen as unacceptable. Further, art can be used to support healing for those who have experienced trauma, as it allows a modulated and indirect means to address challenging affect and memories (Linds et al., 2023). In research, generating understanding of children's experiences and inner worlds through art can provide insights regarding their social positions and views (Akesson et al., 2014; Kronick et al., 2018).

2.2. Participatory Action Research

In alignment with participatory action research (PAR), we proposed an arts-based and collaborative framework for working with children and adolescents. PAR seeks to do research *with* people rather than *on* people. In this way, youth are active co-researchers rather than passive objects of research with limited voice and agency (Clark, 2005). However, important challenges arise in conducting PAR with children, particularly vis-à-vis power inequity between children and researcher/facilitator (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2018). As a team, we acknowledge that achieving epistemic equity was impossible, especially considering that our encounters with children were sometimes brief, as the workshops happened on a drop-in basis. Although the children did not become full co-researchers, our intervention and research were animated by a PAR framework that seeks to empower participants giving them choice and voice in the workshops and following their lead in our research (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019; Kemmis et al., 2014).

2.3. Positionality

As researchers and interveners, we occupy intersecting personal and professional identities. Two authors have lived experience of migration, as first-generation immigrants to Canada. One author is refugeed. Four authors are clinicians from the disciplines of medicine, psychiatry, art therapy, and occupational therapy. All authors except one are visible minorities. Together, the authors speak four languages: English, French, Arabic, and Spanish. While our positionality afforded us some lived experience that reflected those of the children, we also recognize our privilege as clinician-researchers, and people that are housed, and the inevitable blind spots of our gaze.

2.4. Context of the Intervention

Since December 2022, our interdisciplinary team has conducted weekly arts and information-based workshops to support asylum-claimant families lodged in TAS. The workshops were designed based on an ecosocial model (Krieger, 2021) that views refugee claimant families' recovery from persecution and violence as contingent on the re-establishment of their social bonds, existential meaning, security and safety, sense of identity, and access to justice (Silove, 2007; Silove et al., 2017). Our workshops last two hours and begin with a group icebreaker before the parents and children are divided into two groups that often share the same room. The parents attend informational or art-based sessions, while the children participate in art-based workshops.

We began at six hotels in Greater Montreal, rotating hotels weekly. While the nature of temporary accommodations means there was a high turnover of participants and varying age groups at each workshop, we sought to maintain consistency by holding the workshops on the same days at the same hours with a core interdisciplinary team of facilitators. Our team is mostly made up of immigrants to Canada. Most asylum claimants speak Spanish and also French, English, Kurdish, Portuguese, Créole, and Arabic. At least two people facilitate the session: an art therapist and a graduate student or volunteer.

A range of materials from crayons, colored pencils, markers, white and colored paper, braiding strings, colored blocks, and plastic figurines are available. The materials are chosen for practical reasons (i.e., the absence of a sink for water-based materials) and their properties according to the expressive therapies continuum (ETC; Hinz, 2020). The ETC categorizes materials from resistive to fluid, with resistive media, such as markers or pencil colors, allowing a greater sense of control. Within the hotels, we opt for a resistive medium to allow the children to have that sense of agency in what they choose to express. Other materials, such as dough—considered more fluid media according to the ETC—are sometimes introduced to enhance children's emotional expression (Hinz, 2020; Sholt & Gavron, 2006).

Most workshops invite children to share something significant to them through their art by either choosing what they would like to draw or drawing something to introduce themselves. Other prompts include telling a story using the six-part story method (Dent-Brown, 1999), which guides children in creating a character, their home, task, obstacles, helpful forces, storyline, and ending; or drawing themselves as a superhero (Grosso, 2019). The prompts for their art are chosen to help children feel they have a container, but also be open enough for them to have a sense of imaginative space without limitation. Children can always choose not to follow the prompt. When the children finish their drawings, they can share something about their art with the

facilitators. Because of the challenges with space, time, and noise, the sharing occurs one-on-one between the facilitator and each child instead of with the entire group.

2.5. Data Collection

Data was generated from December 2022 to December 2023. There were three sources of data: (a) ethnographic field notes of facilitators; (b) notes from our intervention team meetings, which functioned as peer supervision for facilitators; and (c) photographs of children's artwork.

The field notes—which were written after each workshop by all facilitators—focused on the facilitators' observations of the children's art, their stories about the art, and the process of the workshops, including dynamics between children, the experiences of the facilitators, and the context of the hotel and larger workshops.

A consent process with parents occurred during the workshops after the opening exercise. Children also provided their assent to have photographs taken of their art. In collecting data, we maintained the children's anonymity.

The study received approval from the research ethics board for the CIUSSS Centre Ouest de l'Île de Montréal (2021–2461).

2.6. Data Analysis

The first two authors conducted a narrative and thematic analysis of the data, including photographs of drawings, ethnographic notes, and notes from team discussions. We entered all data into the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, which we used to code the data after carrying out multiple reading cycles (Bazeley & Richards, 2000, Chapter No. 4). Codes emerged from the data itself, though they were also informed by the theories of art therapy and our positionality as clinicians and therapists. The data analysis had three stages:

1. Pre-coding: The researchers reviewed the collected data and prepared lists of themes to identify patterns both in content and in process that occurred repeatedly during the workshops. The researchers then discussed and contrasted their lists and conceptualized the data with phrases and words to describe their interpretations.
2. Coding: The researchers assigned codes to represent a concept shown in the data, organized codes, and divided them into more prominent themes (e.g., symbols, moments of silence). We used NVivo to organize and understand relationships between themes and sub-themes. Subsequently, we identified three primary categories that formed the structure of this article.
3. Theorizing: The researchers continued data interpretation using our theoretical framework. We also analyzed data vertically according to case (or child) and contextualized art with verbal narratives.

3. Results

We organize the results of our analysis into three primary themes: (a) the frame of the intervention, (b) children's expression of distress and agency, and (c) their visual representations.

3.1. The Frame of the Intervention

The shifting conditions and nature of the hotels meant that the workshop frame was constantly adapted to accommodate changing circumstances. For example, the size of the groups varied significantly depending on influxes of arrivals or departures, and so did the space we were entitled to use. We noted how certain elements of the frame seemed to impact the children's workshop experiences.

3.1.1. Space

Each hotel had different spatial conditions, influencing each workshop's dynamics and functioning. The children's space often limited confidentiality as other workers and parents would either be present or could easily walk into the space. At one of the hotels, for example, we worked in a corridor at the entrance of the building, illuminated by large windows, with ample space for the children to move around and play. In another, we worked in a small section with artificial lighting in the dining area, sharing the space with the adult workshop. In this space, some children moved under the tables to work on their art, seemingly seeking to separate themselves physically from the large group. Noticing this, one of the facilitators crouched down to be at the same level as the children. She stayed outside the table, respecting their created boundaries, but could see the children across the legs of the chairs. Upon inquiry, the children themselves explained how the noisy and bright room left them needing to create shelter. This struck us as a significant expression of how unique these children's circumstances were in the hotels. We wondered if their reaction to the large group and room reflected the fact that most days were spent in the confines of their hotel room, while also noting that it might be an expression of hypervigilance related to past or even present trauma.

In general, there were no communal spaces for children to play at the hotel accommodations. None of the hotels had outdoor spaces for children to run around, though even if they had, many children lacked winter clothing, so children had difficulty going outside in the winter. None of the hotels had any play spaces, toys, or books for the children. In some hotels, children could be on couches in the reception area with their families, though people told us they were not allowed to gather in other hotels. In other words, for most children, the sole space they could occupy was their hotel room and the meal room, during meals only. The art workshops thus appeared to be a unique moment when children could be in an open group with others. It was their only opportunity, as we understood, for children to have a space that was somewhat their own. As children's non-verbal communications suggested (see Sections 3.1.2, 3.1.4, and 3.2 below), the art space represented a significant reprieve from the restrictive and under-stimulating environment of the hotel. To some children, the workshop became a place where they could see they were not alone and even made friendships. It was also experienced as an opportunity to move after weeks (or sometimes months) of highly limited play and physical activity. It was not uncommon for children to take small objects—foam balls or toys brought for babies—and try to play soccer during the workshops. Sometimes, children approached the space as if it was a strict classroom environment and would sit still, silently working on their drawings for much longer than would be expected of a primary school-aged child. We viewed this as linked with the

general conditions of developmental deprivation, and children's seriousness towards artmaking reflected the gravity of their need for stimulation. Parents and children frequently requested to take home the art materials, explaining that they had no toys or activities. In addition to giving away art materials from the workshops, this prompted us to develop a program in collaboration with a private foundation to provide art kits to children in the hotels regularly.

3.1.2. Hotel Staff

Some hotels had accommodating employees who were staff from a private agency contracted by the federal government, and who helped us find appropriate spaces and even rearranged tables and chairs to suit our needs better. These employees seemed to care for the children and knew them personally, explaining to us certain preferences or characteristics they noticed, like who is the most energetic. They would offer us recycled cardboard for the workshops and be available to sit with children playing with toys. The children welcomed them into their play space and seemed to have a relationship with them. However, at other hotels, the staff were more distant, and we noted stricter restrictions. A facilitator observing the children playing together describes an employee intervening in the activities:

> A woman who was wearing police officer uniform [likely a uniform of the private agency] was "supervising" the children, and when the boys were flying paper planes she came over to stop them, which made me feel bad because when they first were flying it I kind of gave them the green light with a thumbs up (their paper plane was flying really well!!), so then I thought I gave them permission [to do] something they shouldn't do, even though I feel like the risk of other kids getting hurt by the paper planes was quite slim? (Fieldnote)

With such presence, the TAS sometimes felt like a space of strict surveillance, with children being restricted and regulated, not allowed to engage in age-appropriate play.

3.1.3. Our Position

In their field notes, facilitators described the challenges of building trust with some of the children, given that children were often only present for one workshop. During some workshops, the children would ask the facilitators who had sent or invited them. In her field notes, a South American facilitator shared her experience with an 11-year-old boy from her country of origin. While she had expected him to be more forthcoming and open when he learned they were fellow nationals, the opposite was true. The boy became silent and guarded about his personal history, to the extent that he told her he couldn't recall the name of his hometown. The facilitator and the team understood that this was potentially linked to the socio-political tensions of prolonged internal armed conflict that fostered deep distrust and strategies of silence to stay safe, including in exile (Arsenault, 2010; Rousseau et al., 2001). Rather than pushing disclosure, the team viewed this child's reticence as an important coping strategy and means of control. Instead, we focused on his artistic process, occasionally discussing his drawing and hobbies. As others have acknowledged, while we sought to have our facilitation team somewhat representative of the population we were serving, there are many challenges of "ethnic matching" to increase cultural safety (Chenot et al., 2019). It seemed that both difference and congruence between the child and facilitator could provide a sense of safety or suspicion (Chenot et al., 2019).

Regardless of our ethnonational or linguistic backgrounds, we also acknowledge that children viewed us, in some cases, as representatives of the host society, Canada, or Quebec. At one workshop, a young child, approximately 5 or 6, approached one of the facilitators with their arms wide open as if to embrace the facilitator. While welcoming the child warmly, the facilitator, who was also a mental health clinician, immediately and incorrectly assumed the child had attachment difficulties, given their unusually warm and comfortable response to a stranger. However, later in the workshop, that same child approached the facilitator and asked: "Can I have my visa?" After some confusion and time spent clarifying the child's request, the facilitator realized that the child assumed that we, Canadians, were either representatives of the immigration system or that we could bestow these families with secure immigration status. While initially the clinicians' gaze was pathologizing and individualizing, the child's interactions with the facilitator reflected the structural precarity the family was living. We also reflected as a team that despite our hopes that the workshops would offer a space that was a respite from the stressors of the asylum process, so present were those stressors, even for young children, that they viewed us as potentially powerful enough to change their circumstances. Further, despite our benevolent intentions, we had to acknowledge that children saw us as representatives of a system that both welcomed children and also left them vulnerable.

3.1.4. Diversity of Needs

Ten to thirty children between the ages of 5 and 17 attended our workshops, though because of the open set-up, sometimes toddlers and babies joined in the artmaking and playing. The wide age range within the workshop was challenging. While not wanting to exclude any age group of children, we struggled to attend to their varied developmental needs. Adolescents often resisted drawing, preferring to stay on their cell phones, for example, spurring us to offer collage materials despite the supervision challenges for preschool-aged children of having sharp scissors available.

During one workshop where the conference room was crowded with nearly 100 adults, we relocated the children to the hotel lobby with different stations: two drawing stations, a Play-Doh station, and a building station. One of the facilitators described being with a 4 or 5-year-old girl who, as the only English-speaking child, sat alone at a table with drawing materials. The facilitator sat with her, reflecting on her artmaking process. When the facilitator was called upon by another child and got up to see them, the girl became upset, made a grunting noise, and grabbed the facilitator's shirt, trying to hold her back. The facilitator named the girl's desire for her to stay by reflecting to the child that it was important to her that they create this image together. She told the girl she would help the other child and be back soon. The girl waited alone at the table for the facilitator to return. When the facilitator returned, the girl showed no interest or reaction. The facilitator was aware of the girl being alone as she was trying to help the other children with varying needs. This moment reflected the sentiment that some facilitators described of being unable to give enough to the children, and thus feeling helpless. While certainly highlighting the limitation of a frame that aims to include all children and the logistical challenges this inevitably creates, it also points to how the frame could not hold the larger structural and contextual challenges the children were facing. Children experienced, as we learned, a day-to-day lack of developmentally appropriate stimulation. Indeed, there was little stimulation other than cell phones. This included a lack of meaningful contact with adults other than their parents, such as teachers, extended family, or community members. As a result, children arrived at our workshops desperate, it seemed to us, for connection with adults and others. Thus, it was clear that the needs we were met with went beyond the capacity of what we could provide in a two-hour workshop.

In the face of linguistic diversity, children's non-verbal interactions seemed fueled by their desire to connect and were present between children, in the spaces between facilitator and child, and in their engagement with the art materials themselves. In one of our workshops, children speaking Spanish, English, Arabic, and Kurdish were sitting together across a large table. The art materials were spread on the table and the children had to share them to create artwork. The sharing of the materials encouraged interactions among children. For instance, one child who wanted a specific marker pointed to it as another child picked up different markers until they got the right color and handed it to them across the table. In other workshops, we also noticed children interacting through games. This excerpt is from a facilitator who was sitting on the floor using the building toys with the children:

> I stayed with the boy with whom we built some figures with the colored blocks. Although he does not speak English, he interacted with an English-speaking girl through the game. She told him colors in English and we said colors in Spanish. It was a short but powerful moment: the game allowed these children to get closer and exchange elements of their languages. (Fieldnote)

These interactions supported the children in trying to overcome their language barriers and try to connect. The presence of this third element, be it the art materials or building toys, allowed the children to have a reason to communicate to one another.

3.2. Children's Expression of Distress and Agency

While children did not always communicate their feelings through words, they often seemed to tell us much through their movements, actions, and silences. We found children running to the art table before the group gathered and drawing without prompts, as if they were craving the art materials and activities. Further, we noticed that silence was common and striking. While we observed—as expected—children talking, running, making art, and being rambunctious, there were often still and silent children. While some of these quiet children drew, others did not and sat completely still. Facilitators' bids at conversation were sometimes met with silence. In our discussions, we wondered what children were telling or showing us with their silence. It was possible that they did not trust us, had been advised by their parents, or feared the consequences of talking to us, especially if they viewed us as host country representatives. It could also be a means of protection and control in a context where they lacked much control. The children's silence and self-containment sometimes appeared to express agency (Kusmallah & Ghorashi, 2024), for example, when children would choose not to talk to us about their drawings. However, at other times it left us worried for the child's wellbeing. Especially when we were met with children who were sitting in complete stillness during the workshop, we wondered whether their behavior was a response to their exposure to trauma.

Transitions into and out of the workshop were also significant. Some children seemed to experience difficulty in leaving their parents and joining us, though because parents were close by, children could run back and forth between their parents and the artmaking. Multiple facilitators mentioned a boy whom we had seen multiple times had difficulty separating from his parents:

> Like the last time, he didn't want to be separated from his parents, his iPad and a blanket. His father tried several times to bring him, but it was impossible for him to stay with us. This family has been in the hotel for a long time and I wonder why this child has so much difficulty separating himself a few meters from his parents. (Fieldnote)

At times, the children's difficulty was leaving the workshop and returning to their parents. During these moments, we would observe children crying or screaming, holding onto the toys or materials and unwilling to let go:

> I noticed one girl being very reluctant to end the workshop, and was screaming, holding onto the toys. Her mother tried talking to her, and a lot of the children did as well. At some point she was on the chair, laying on the toys she wanted to keep. The children were around her in a half circle so I asked them to give her some space since I worried she would feel alienated. One of the facilitators then intervened by making an exchange with her and she let go of her toys. (Fieldnote)

de Freitas Girardi et al. (2020) noted similar patterns in their study with asylum-seeking children in temporary federal shelters in Canada. They hypothesized that the transitions within their workshops reactivated separation anxieties—knowing they potentially had been exposed to violence and/or traumatic separations from family members—that were present in the children (de Freitas Girardi et al., 2020). We also wondered, given children had so few possessions of their own, and often no toys, how much they were attached to the actual material objects.

Sometimes children's use of the material appeared to express their emotional states. Artmaking seemed to allow the expression of frustration. We would observe children making large scribbles that went off the paper and onto the table or repetitive dabs on a piece. The materials seemed a safe outlet for children's emotions, without fear of consequences (Rubin, 2005, pp. 19–33). Significantly, children regularly focused on folding their drawings into little packages or cutting them into smaller pieces. Beauregard et al. (2024) noted in their work with refugee children in schools that the folding of the paper allowed the children to choose what to reveal and conceal to the facilitators, thus enhancing their sense of control over their inner world. Also, art was sometimes left behind. It appeared that in the context of TAS the art allowed externalization and expression of emotion and acted as a container of sorts (Akthar & Lovell, 2019), and thus children did not want to keep it. However, knowing these children were forcibly displaced, we also wondered if they had become habituated to leaving things behind. The artistic media provided children with a different and perhaps safer means of expression and a sense of agency.

3.3. Visual Representation

Children in the workshops found ways to use art materials to depict their fears and hopes. While sometimes the content of their art appeared to represent their real lived experiences, other times it illuminated their imaginary worlds. In one of the workshops, a Kurdish boy, aged 10, created a structure that he described as a satellite. He explained how he would use the satellite to talk to other people. The facilitator asked which people he would be talking to, and he explained that he would be talking to aliens speaking different languages, such as French and Spanish. The imaginary world of satellites and aliens allowed the distance for this child to express some of his experience of being "alien" but finding the technology to reach others.

In another session, a child of 6 or 7 asked the facilitator to draw a story for her, instructing the facilitator on each frame of a graphic novel-like narrative. The child, who was Black, explained to the White facilitator that this was about a White family who had had their house burned down. While the content depicted violence, as the child engaged in the co-constructed story, she seemed delighted and pleased to tell the imaginary story

and be in such close conversation with the facilitator. This child also took pleasure in drawing scribbles on the face and arms of the facilitator, appearing to seek closeness or even, perhaps to express frustration and aggression. In this case, we speculated the child was using the art and the facilitator to share her own trauma story and to work through her experiences using a distancing strategy. It may also have been a relief to have control and agency over the story whether or not it was a reflection of her past. Many families in the hotels were in the process of writing the basis of their refugee claim—a written narrative of past events to be used by the tribunal to grant or deny their protection in Canada—an experience that can often be re-traumatizing (Rousseau & Foxen, 2010). The interaction and child-directed storytelling were like a foil for that process.

Children often explicitly conveyed their current worries and realities with regularly recurring images and themes in their artwork. Houses—the ones children dreamed of having, or homes they had left behind—often filled their pages. Depictions of family members in Canada or back home often accompanied those houses. Along with houses, drawings of the hotel were sometimes present, with the children describing their experiences in the hotel. One child drew the hotel's location and surroundings, including a bridge she had to take to reach services. Another girl drew the hotel and used the image to explain her enjoyment of the place since she made friends at workshops and has a TV in her room. Images of transportation were also recurrent: children often drew boats, planes, and cars. Similarly, flags of their countries of origin or Canada appeared frequently in drawings. One boy from Colombia, aged 5, described his drawing as a "map of going back home." He used oil pastels to create his image and presented the sea in the foreground, with multiple large "X" marks in red that seemed to create a path above it. He was quiet during the workshop and kept to himself even though there were other Spanish-speaking children. He told us he was lonely as an only child. Through his artwork, he expressed his sadness at being away from home and chose to share this with the facilitators and not with the other participants.

3.3.1. Absent Themes and Symbols

As we hypothesized that children's drawings seemed to represent their realities, we also felt the absence of certain themes or symbols was equally important to understanding that reality. While children discussed their preoccupation with schools, drawings of schools themselves or teachers were nonexistent. This did not seem to be the case with other studies conducted with asylum-seeking children and refugees using artmaking in a school-based program in Quebec (Beauregard et al., 2024). This finding seems to highlight how isolated the children were from education, and adult relationships that emerge from the school setting. Moreover, children seemed to have difficulty drawing on their strengths. In some workshops, we introduced the prompt of drawing themselves as a superhero (Grosso, 2019). However, children either bypassed the directive or drew popular superhero figures. Kronick et al. (2018) noted a similar pattern in their study on children's sand trays in immigration detention centers in Canada, reflecting that in that context, the absence of the themes in the sand trays seemed to indicate the absence of the themes in children's lives, especially the isolation within detention centers. This same pattern was observed in the TAS, where the lack of such themes in drawings seemed to reflect their absence in children's lives. In contrast, in similar research in Canada with newcomer families living in the community, children included a wider diversity of symbols (friends, school) and used religious and superhero figures to express protective forces and means of escape (Lacroix et al., 2007). We wonder if children in the hotels felt an absence of protective adults and a lack of means of escape, which was reflected in a more limited range of themes and symbol choices in their art.

4. Discussion

In a space marked by isolation, lack of stimulation, and uncertainty, the workshops in TAS provided the children with a place of connection, creativity, and witnessing. Through artmaking and storytelling, children could express their experiences of loss, home, migration, and resettlement, and sometimes recount these experiences to others. Verbalizing their ideas and memories with facilitators opened possibilities for connection and anchored their identities in places they could choose and direct. Children used the space of the workshops flexibly, sometimes sharing, and other times withholding their art. In the context of their migration journeys and predicament in the hotels, this was an important expression of agency and control.

Our results align with other studies exploring arts-based approaches with a similar population. Like Feen-Calligan et al. (2020) we found that art activities enhanced children's sense of safety and calm, which allowed them to express their stories. As van der Kolk (2003) described, the use of the symbolic and the imaginary, and the expression of negative emotions through an artistic medium can create a distance from the self, generating a sense of safety in artmaking, and allowing alternative outcomes to be imagined. In our workshops, art-making's kinesthetic and sensory, non-verbal, and relational elements seemed to allow the children the liberty of emotional expression, as many studies have found (Akthar & Lovell, 2019; de Freitas Girardi et al., 2020; Rousseau et al., 2003). Through the workshops, we also found that art enhanced children's sense of agency. This echoes the findings of Beauregard et al. (2024) that artmaking in school-based research allowed immigrant and refugee youth to create meaning and regain control over their lives. In choosing what they would share or keep to themselves during the workshops, children were able to have some autonomy amid uncertainty.

One thing that struck us, particularly those of us who have done art workshops in other settings or who work as therapists or clinicians, was that which was absent from children's art. Children often drew family members but rarely depicted adults who were not in their family, such as teachers, firefighters, etc. Significantly, children rarely drew schools or scenes of play. We suspect that this was due to their lack of access to school or play settings in the TAS. Also, while previous research (and clinical experience) has documented how children often include rescue figures and magic in their art and symbolic representations (Lacroix et al., 2007), children in the hotels did not. Unlike the representations of coping strategies (superheroes, magic, religious figures, human rescuers) that other children have represented in times of adversity (Lacroix et al., 2007), for example in school-based workshops with children exposed to news of natural disasters, children in the hotels did not depict such images nor tell such stories. It seems that the uncertainty and isolation in the TAS, or perhaps their family's focus on accessing basic safety (such as permanent housing) might leave children without their typical coping strategies or ability to imagine or hope for "rescue" from characters. We also wonder if children who have experienced stress related to human violence or bureaucratic violence, rather than natural disasters, might have a limited sense of the possibility of there being adult sources of protection and aid, and that this perhaps contributed to the absences in children's art.

Another important finding was children's ambivalence towards facilitators. At times we were sought out for connection and felt that our presence and witnessing was important. At other times, children seemed to regard us with distrust. It appeared that the children's projections were both positive and negative, reflecting perhaps the hopes they had in the benevolent host society, but also their disappointment in Canada in light of the challenges they were facing on arrival. Given the constraints and reality of our drop-in workshops, and

children's mixed feelings about us, we were careful in choosing what prompts to suggest to the children to avoid activating traumatic memories. Thus, though our results suggest the workshops created a safer means of communication, we ask ourselves how to offer and measure a sense of safety in a precarious and vulnerable setting such as TAS.

Finally, silence remained a revealing element of this research. Not all stories get told. As French (2019) has reflected, it is essential to pay special attention to silences, evasions, and refusals to speak about any subject of significance. We can learn a lot from what children and adolescents cannot or prefer not to speak about because there are, in fact, stories in their silences. As others have emphasized, leaving space for the unsaid—*le non dit*—is not only a therapeutic stance, but an ethical orientation in research with refugee children (Rousseau, 1994).

5. Conclusion

Although our workshops provide an expressive and creative space for children to connect, it is important to note that brief interventions in temporary accommodations cannot replace the social systems found in schools, daycares, parks, libraries, and community centers. Without access to education as well as social and cultural activities, children may experience a lack of physical, emotional, and intellectual stimulation, which can be detrimental to their mental health and development. Coupled with the stress and uncertainty their parents may experience regarding job search, housing, and legal status, this situation can pose significant risks to children and adolescents' well-being (Côté-Olijnyk et al., 2024; Ratnamohan et al., 2023). In other words, while we tried to foster a modicum of emotional safety and social connection, it is no replacement for structural changes that ensure social inclusion and welcoming integration of refugee claimants.

Nonetheless, our results point to the benefits of artmaking in the federal TAS, and potentially in other sites of humanitarian need or crisis. Artmaking promoted self-expression, regulation, and encouraged children's ability to hope and dream, and fostered a sense of connectedness among the children in a context marked by isolation. Finally, the art and dialogue with facilitators opened a window to children's lived experiences and their strategies for surviving the stressors of migration and early arrival in Canada.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

Because our data are qualitative and participants require anonymity, raw data may be requested and can be provided in a redacted format.

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Laila Hamouda is an art therapist and graduate of Concordia University's Creative Arts Therapies Department. Her fields of interest include using art to support minorities in processing displacement and improving family communication during resettlement. Laila's work centers on empowering clients to express themselves, take agency, and own their narratives through creative expression. Her current clinical work focuses on supporting migrant and indigenous communities in Quebec.

Manuela Ochoa-Ronderos is an artist and a humanities PhD student at Concordia University, Canada. She is the co-founder of the digital projects Oropéndola, Arte y Conflict, and Mirlo Podcast, and worked as co-curator for the exhibit Feliza Bursztyn, Elogio de la Chatarra, at the National Museum of Colombia (2009), as a producer for BBC Radio's Apichatpong Weerasethakul (In the Studio), and as an art curator and researcher at the Museum of Memory of Colombia (2016–2019).

Sewar A. Elejla is a doctor from Gaza and a master's student at McGill University, where she works on a project related to expressive therapies. Her work focuses on providing emotional and psychological support to children affected by the trauma of war in the Gaza Strip. Sewar is passionate about using creative, culturally adapted methods to help children express their emotions, heal from their experiences, and rebuild their sense of safety and hope.

Keven Lee is an interdisciplinary artist (dance and ceramic) and researcher (health and anthropology). He is currently a postdoctoral fellow at Université de Montréal in Public Health as well as a faculty lecturer at the School of Physical and Occupational Therapy (McGill University). He has conducted various ethnographic fieldwork with (neuro)diverse communities (e.g., autistic youth and persons living with dementia) and, most recently, with newcomer youth. Using critical and narrative phenomenological approaches, he is particularly interested in understanding the ethical implications of how people move together in known or unpredictable ways.

Rachel Kronick is a researcher and child psychiatrist. She is an assistant professor in the Division of Social and Transcultural Psychiatry at McGill University. Her primary research is on the social determinants of mental health for refugee, asylum-seeking, and precarious migrant children and families, with a specific focus on migration policies and practices in Canada. Her research uses qualitative and mixed-methods methodologies including critical ethnography and Participatory Action Research.
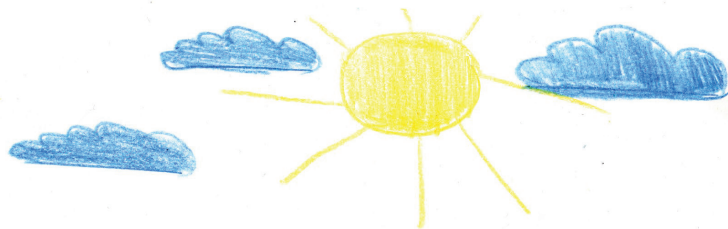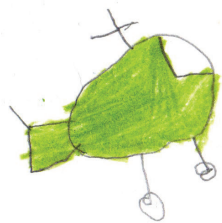
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