

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

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., “Peace” 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 reconciling 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).

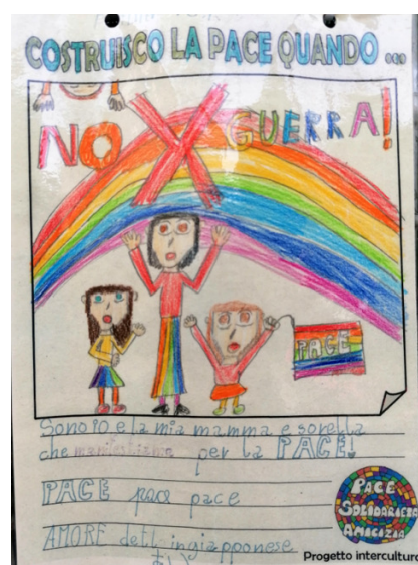


Figure 7. Peacebuilding as political peace activism (level unknown).



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 lifeworldly 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 mediated lifeworlds of children, crucially established via visual (screen) design (e.g., Kress, 2003; Wieseemann 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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Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Ulf Hedetoft (University of Copenhagen, Denmark).

Data Availability

Due to research-ethical principles, data associated with this article is not available.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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