

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.

Keywords

children's discursive conceptualisations; children's drawings; children's multimodal meaning-making; children's perspectives; education; methodological challenges; multimodality; peace; visual communication; war

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.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Nadja Thoma is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Education, University of Innsbruck. Her research experience and interests include biographical and ethnographic approaches to education and multilingualism in neoliberal migration societies, as well as language as a site of the reproduction of social inequality. Currently, she is leading a research project on pedagogical professionalisation for multilingualism in early childhood education and one on educational transitions in the context of linguistic minoritisation.