

## **Interpolating Peace in the Curriculum: How Peace Education is Feasible Through Art among Malaysian Pre-Schoolers**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Children should not be left behind in discussing about peace. In this qualitative study, it discovers the potential use of visual aids for teaching peace values among young children. It aims to explore the use of visual representations, such as pictures and video clips in a study of peace education to develop their understanding of the principles and values of peace. This study employed a qualitative multiple case study approach to investigate twenty children's artworks (between the age of 5 to 6 years old). They have been selected using purposive sampling method. In-depth semi-structured interviews and field notes were also used to triangulate data extracted from the drawing and successfully portrayed peace elements in their artworks. Later the codes were extracted and organized to find the emerging themes. The focus was to analyze the KEMAS preschoolers' drawings and their reactions to the drawings and selected video clippings provided in the research framework. Using Feldman's model of art criticism, each drawing was analyzed using the thematic analysis and interpreted using a network of coding. Some of the themes extracted from their artworks are unity and safety symbols, love and happiness, togetherness and survival, peace, conflict, and tranquility. The findings suggested that pictures and video clippings could be a suitable method for conveying powerful messages, including abstract concepts, such as peace and war to young children. Young children have a dissimilar capability to make sense of their surrounding world and putting it into words unlike adults. The use of pictures and clippings would give a practical advantage in helping researchers gather valuable information about how peace education can be taught to children of young age. The need for further research is deemed essential to extend the link between how children learn about peace values and the use of multiple means to teach peace education effectively to students of various ages.*

**KEYWORDS:** Qualitative research, Early childhood education, Art analysis, Peace education, Malaysia, Pre-schoolers.

Humans learn best by looking at pictures compared to words because the human brain is trained to store pictures more efficiently than words (Grady et al., 1998). Just imagine when a person says, an elephant, what will come to mind? Is it the word or a picture of an elephant? Likewise, children will think the same way. They learn best when showed pictures compared to mere words and complex terminologies. Famous theorists, such as Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky pioneered the field of cognitive development among children and have highlighted how children learn in their early stage of life. Piaget, according to (Ormrod, 2009), regarded children as an individual constructivist. The former stated that through interacting and reflecting on their physical and social worlds, children are able to construct complex understandings themselves and develop reasoning abilities with age. In this era of technological advancement, pictures and videos can be accessed by anyone at any time. Apart from being a tool to convey messages, they can also become a powerful tool in education. In fact, powerful messages, such as emotions, sufferings, and happiness can be shown with visual representation. This study aimed to investigate how pictures and videos can be used in promoting peace education in the curriculum for preschools as this

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concept can be understood as early as six years old (Ahmad, 2018; Myers-Walls & Lewsader, 2015). Therefore, this study selected KEMAS preschools as the participants. KEMAS is the acronym for *Jabatan Kemajuan Masyarakat* or can be translated as the Community Development Department, which is under the provision of the Ministry of Rural Development in Malaysia.

For many years, peace educators have debated on ways to inculcate peace in the curriculum. The debate usually revolves around curricula and policies. However, it is often neglect on the potential of arts in instructional strategies that is useful to inculcate peace in the classroom. Becker (1982) stated that art is a powerful tool that can bring deeper understanding of one's values, cultures and contexts. Art deals with aesthetic but it also teaches about living in the world and problem solving. If the world deems peace and justice, it should be transcended in the forms of arts and its element of promoting it since the foundation of one's education. Nonetheless, literature that is available are limited to only within the definition of peace studies itself rather than focusing on the pedagogical aspect that educators can use it to teach peace.

Patra and Mete (2015) believed that the process of inculcating values and knowledge, and instilling good attitudes, skills, and behaviors to build a tranquil community and environment can be conducted through peace education. Peace education is also a process of preventing conflict and violence, particularly among young children (Patra & Mete, 2015). However, young children tend to normalize violence as a means of solving problems (Duckworth et al., 2012). Thus, young children need to be taught about the aspects of peace to avoid such decisions. They also stated that peace education is significantly essential to create and maintain peace among students and the school's community. Peace should not be rigidly stated in lessons, it requires practices and experience from the learners and the school's community. In addition, several educational institutions have initiated steps for addressing problematic youth, such as violence and bullying, by promoting conflict resolution and peace education programs (Duckworth et al., 2012). On the other hand, peace education is also necessary to maintain the calm of social communities and the environment in relation to school stakeholders and to address the problem of youth violence and offer a better solution (Samuel, 2018).

### **Literature Review: The Significance of Art in Communicating Feelings Among Children**

The meaning of peace is subjective; hence, many interpretations are available. (Hakvoort, 1996) stated that the concept of peace indicates aspects of friendships, less dispute, and zero war. Peace is commonly viewed as the sense of harmony and tranquility within a social community. Thus, peace education is to teach about peace and to enable students to appreciate peace. The knowledge of peace is assumed to be evolving through time, which has crossed the underlying concept where it should be inculcated at an early age. Peace education can be informally taught through art. The following section will discuss and review past literature on the importance of peace education, the significance of arts, and the relationship between children and arts to show the link between peace education and art.

According to Nathan (2006), art is defined as the product of coming to understand a work, which provides awareness of the various types of artworks. There are different interpretations and understanding of art because it is never restricted to one's opinion. Art exists in various forms that share the same foundation, which is to express emotion in an implicit way. Art works closely with imagination and the freedom create. For example, in the stage of being young adults, creative art helps them dive into their emotion (Mills, 2014). Art allows them sink under and emerge with fresh ideas on what they feel. Art is also significant because it can improve learning chances for children who have minimal opportunity to pursue education due to financial problems (Hanna et al., 2011). Similarly, art carries good values, and it is one of the solutions to clarify emotional and mental states. The emotional and mental health of a person can prove the essentiality of art towards someone's life. Furthermore, considering the aftermath of several natural disasters that affect children's psyche, researchers have noticed there are some patterns that provide similar themes in their findings (Dyregrov et al., 2018; Rahman, 2018). Dyregrov et al., (2018) found that children are 88% prone to get various infectious disease due to climate change and natural disaster. Apart from that, they estimated around 5-43% of affected children will highly likely experience mental health disturbances such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It is also found that during pandemic Covid-19, children's mental health was affected as much as adults and they portrayed psychological distress in their drawing during online art therapy (Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., 2021). Thus, by enabling art therapy such as drawings would help the children to

express more on their feelings, alleviate their burden and it has been beneficial to improve mental health among children during these difficult circumstances (Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., 2021). These findings were found consistent among the researchers that study the benefits of using art to communicate feelings (Waller, 2006).

### **Children and Art**

Children are easy learners, relying on clarity to process the information they receive. They are also more likely to understand images or images more easily than just words and complex terminology based on the appropriateness of their cognitive readiness and development. Famous theorists such as Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky pioneered the field of cognitive development in children and have emphasized how children learn early in life. Piaget viewed children as individual constructivists. He explained that by interacting and reflecting on their physical and social world, children are able to self-construct complex understandings and develop logical skills as they grow older (Ormrod, 2009).

### **Conceptual Framework**

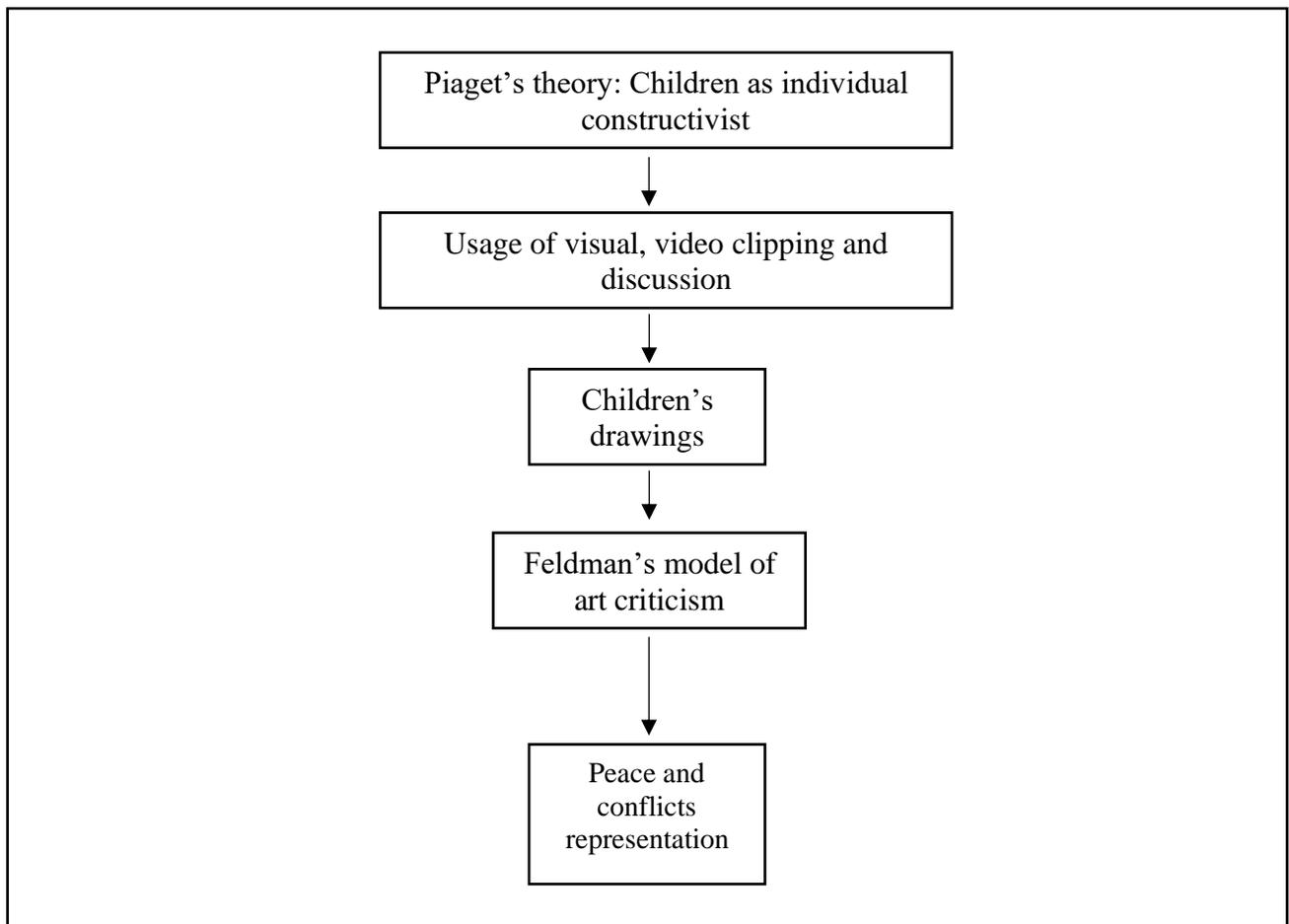
Nowadays, pictures and videos can be accessed by anyone at any time. Apart from being a tool to convey messages, they can also become a powerful tool in education. In fact, powerful messages, such as emotions, sufferings, and happiness can be shown with visual representation. According to (Ahmad, 2018), art is very sentimental to children. It is a way to understand a child's feeling because children draw what they feel and know. He stated that children draw what their five senses can catch, which are things that they can observe. Maagerø and Sunde (2016) reported that drawings give children the opportunity to communicate. Drawing basically prepares them for with good communication skills, not only in school, but in later life as well. Because children's ideas are represented in the form of drawings, drawings can be used to assess children's motor skills to create visual shapes.

Furthermore, drawing gives meaning to children as they are allowed to show their ideas, express their thoughts and emotions, and to identify things that have happened around them. This observation is supported by Dhanapal, Kanapathy and Mastan (2014), who reported that students learn better with the inculcation of hands-on activities and any element of visual art. Based on evidence in the literature, children and art are inseparable because it becomes a platform for them to express ideas and thoughts in a creative manner. Adults can observe children's motor skills and use the resulting artworks to prove the effectiveness of inculcating art in formal educational settings.

The awareness and knowledge of peace among young children has been continuously introduced throughout time. Hakvoort (1996) stated that the concept of peace and war has been developed at a young age, which supports the significance of this knowledge. Through art, peace is drawn as an imaginary image because the visuality of peace is only in the children's mind (Yilmaz, 2018). Therefore, art can be utilized to show the development of children's mind (Hanna et al., 2011). Hence, to talk about peace with children one cannot depend on everything they thought within the classroom per se i.e., to solve conflicts and to make decisions rather they must experience, discuss and demonstrate it on why peace education is important (Duckworth et al., 2012).

In this study, the researchers used Feldman's model of art criticism to analyze the children's drawings. Feldman's model of art criticism is a well-established method to study about art criticism and evaluation in the field of art education (Feldman, 1982). The Feldman's philosophical underpinning of criticism is through an inductive process for gathering conclusions (generalities) from the available evidence (particulars). His model of criticism has served as a model in four stages for making statements about a work of art (Carney & Carney, 2009; Prater, 2010; Subramaniam, Hanafi, & Putih, 2016). In short, it utilizes simple method of categorizing information about the art object by using cues and four areas of categories namely description, analysis, interpretation, and judgement.

**Figure 1**  
*Conceptual Framework*



*Note.* The conceptual framework on peace and conflict representation from the children drawing developed by the researchers (2022)

### Statement of the Problem

In this era of technological advancement, educators can use visual images, artwork, and video clips to instill peace values in young children. Although peace is a complex and abstract concept, peace education is no longer a difficult subject in today's world. However, what is often neglected is the potential of the arts in instructional strategies, useful for inculcating peace in the classroom. The lack of literature arguing about the importance of art has enabled this study to fill a major gap in the promotion of peace using art and visual means through images and drawings (Congdon, 1994). Therefore, this study proposes a new method to teach and teach young children the values and principles of peace using pictures and drawings. Selected preschoolers were instructed to draw and make artworks with the help of their teachers, and later were taught certain concepts of peace, such as love, happiness, unity, and survival. Children as young as 6 were able to demonstrate their understanding of this concept, and this process was charted and analysed using Feldman's model of art criticism.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To explore the use of visual representation, such as pictures and video clips in peace education.
2. To uncover children's understanding of peace through art and drawings.
3. To explore effective pedagogical tool to introduce peace education among preschoolers

### Delimitations

This study was limited to preschoolers under the provision of KEMAS preschools located in a sub-urban community. Therefore, other socio-economic classes might have learnt a different concept in understanding peace. The number of children who participated in this study was approximately 150. Due to the nature of this preliminary study, the researchers decided to select

only twenty drawings for having the best representation, in terms of art and clarity of the drawings. The inclusion criteria are mentioned as below:

1. Proposition of the study
2. Clarity of the drawings
3. Saturation of the drawing
4. Representation of the real objects
5. Feldman's theory of art critics

Comparison between selected and non-selected drawings is included in the analysis section. It should be noted that this number was not meant to generalize the findings, but rather as a mean to explore the potential use of drawings among these twenty children.

## Methodology

In qualitative case study research, it aims to facilitate investigation of a phenomenon within its context using multiple data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Yin (2009) asserts that case study allows researchers to better understand a phenomenon by exploring the case within its context. In order to decide when is the suitable to use a case study approach? Ones must consider the following: (a) focus of the study is to answer how and why questions; (b) no manipulation of the behavior of those informants (c) discovery of contextual conditions because it is relevant to the phenomenon under study (d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context (yin).

A qualitative multiple case study approach was used in this study to examine artworks from preschools in several states in Malaysia, namely Kedah, Kelantan, Johor, Melaka, and Wilayah Persekutuan. The main focus was on the analysis of the KEMAS preschool children's drawings and their reactions to the drawings and selected video excerpts provided in the research framework. Using Feldman's model of art criticism, each drawing was analyzed using the thematic analysis and interpreted using a network of coding. The codes were extracted and organized to find the emerging themes. In-depth semi-structured interviews and field notes were also used to triangulate data extracted from the drawings. The interviews took place with five head teachers representing each KEMAS preschools. Each session was recorded using a smartphone recording application and a backup of each recording was made. All conversations were transcribed verbatim and were later analyzed using Atlas.ti. These processes were conducted in a systematic manner to permit subsequent audit trails to address the trustworthiness of this study. Below is the research question used to achieve the objective of this study:

1. How can art and drawing become an effective pedagogical tool to introduce peace education among preschoolers?
2. How do preschoolers understand peace-related concepts through art and drawings?
3. What is the suitable approach to teach peace to Malaysian preschoolers?

## Participants

KEMAS is the acronym for the Community Development Department, which is under the provision of the Ministry of Rural Development in Malaysia. This study has obtained an official permission from the Ministry and the children were selected through respective KEMAS preschools. Parents gave their consent via forms to allow their children to participate in this study. All principals gave their permission to conduct the study and their identities will be kept anonymous. This study selected 20 out of 150 children aged 5 to 6 years old based on the purposeful sampling method. These children were instructed to draw peace-related concepts after watching a series of video clippings and images about conflict and war. These children were able to complete their drawings using pencil colors and crayons on A3 plain white-colored sketch paper. Later, their expressions and reactions were recorded in the researchers' field notes. The inclusion criteria that were set are as follows:

- Children who are 5–6 years old.
- Male and female children; and
- The selection should have included Malay, Chinese, and Indian preschoolers. However,

due to accessibility of the preschools' demographic, Chinese pupils were non-existent in all five selected preschools.

**Procedure**

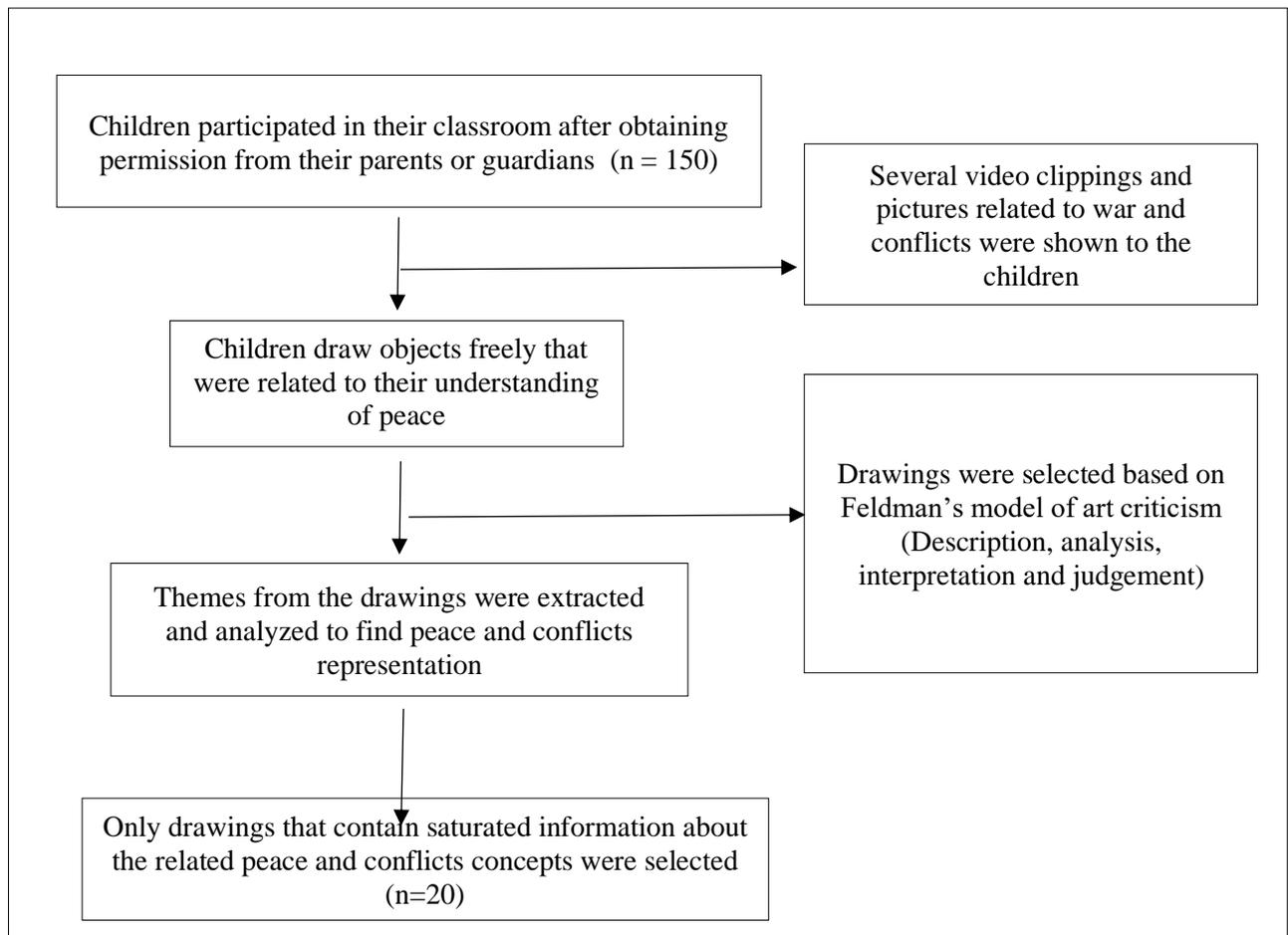
Initial permissions were obtained from the Ministry of Rural Development. Each head of preschool was called via telephone by the researchers to decide for the study session to be conducted at their respective schools. Each head of preschool gave their consent to conduct the study with the selected children in their own classrooms. This arrangement was crucial to ensure the participants feel comfortable to do activities in a familiar place (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 1995). Prior to that, all parents of the children have given their consent to participate in this study. A written consent letter was signed by each parent and caregiver of each child indicating their permission to participate in this study.

First, these children were provided with various color pencils and crayons, and a blank A3 white-colored sketch paper by the researcher. They were instructed to draw by their own creativity to materialize their understanding towards the picture and video clippings. All participants were evaluated in their classroom setting by their teachers, while the researchers observed and recorded their reactions and verbal responses. The researchers did not have access to individual participants' demographic. However, their places of stay and gender differences were recorded. The planned activities were conducted in five different KEMAS preschools located in varied socio-economic areas, and in the children's native languages.

Next, face to face interview session was conducted with their head teacher for approximately 45 minutes with each KEMAS preschools. This includes their comments and remarks about the drawings provided by the children.

**Figure 1**

*Flowchart*



*Note.* Flowchart of analysis to extract peace and conflicts concepts

The steps prior to conducting these sessions are as follows:

1. Children were shown random pictures and video clippings of symbolic to conflict interaction. These clips were chosen randomly, and personal laptop was used to show to the children.
2. Researchers recorded their reactions when seeing the pictures and clippings.
3. Later, they were given a sheet of paper and were asked to draw objects or any symbols that tells a story. They may draw any picture they like; and
4. Researchers used probe questions to get feedback about their drawing

### Analysis

The qualitative data analysis in this study was divided into two major processes. In the first part of the process, researchers have introduced several probing techniques in order to initiate the discussion among the children. The use of video clippings and pictures depicting both peace and conflict related materials were shown to the children. These clippings and pictures were used just to provide some stimulants to the children so that they are prepared to engage with the researchers in the later part of the study. Next, researchers have instructed the children to draw freely on what they have understand from the visuals that they have seen. While doing the activities, researchers have sat beside the children and actively taking field notes on the verbal reactions that came from the children. On the second part of this process is where drawings were screened based on several criteria and proposition of the study. Those criteria are clarity, saturation, and representation. By using Feldman's model of art criticism (Carney & Carney, 2009; Prater, 2010; Subramaniam et al., 2016), researchers have derived twenty drawings that showed related peace and conflicts concepts in line with the proposition of this study. Finally, themes were extracted using thematic analysis and all these data were triangulate to establish credibility of the study.

### Figure 2

*Expression of love and unity by a 6-year-old preschooler: house, family, love, and flowers*



### Figure 3

*Expression of love, safety, and happiness by a 6-year-old preschooler: house, rainbow, teddy bear, and girl*



***Peace-related Drawings***

The first theme that was identified by the researchers was peace-related drawings of unity, safety, love, tranquility, and happiness. A particular piece of drawing drawn by a 6-year-old child portrayed a full-grown girl with a teddy bear near a house and a colorful rainbow (Figure 4). Another drawing by another 6-year-old preschooler included a big house at the center of the drawing (Figure 5). These findings suggested that pictures can be a suitable method for conveying powerful messages. Abstract concepts, such as peace and war, are comprehensible even to young children (Ahmad, 2018; Jabbar & Betawi, 2019; Walker et al., 2003; Yilmaz, 2018; Zakai, 2019).

**Figure 4**

*Safety and happiness expressed by a 6-year-old preschooler: big house, sun, clouds, trees, and a lady*



***Non-peace Related Drawings***

The second identified theme was of non-peace-related drawings. This theme was categorized by several concepts, such as emotional state (i.e., smiling, crying, happy, and sad faces) and elements of conflict (i.e., monsters, tanks, arrows, and crying). Drawings by two 6-year-old preschoolers portrayed multiple elements of several concepts, such as elements of conflict (monsters and tanks) in Figure 6, and people quarrelling and two unhappy faces in Figure 7.

**Figure 5**

*Monsters, tanks, and several unpleasant characters by a 6-year-old preschooler*



**Figure 6**

*Unhappy faces and two people quarrelling by a 6-year-old preschooler*



**Findings**

Several steps were taken to interpret each of these children’s drawings. First, the researchers used descriptions to represent the details of the drawings, such as the types of media used and images drawn. Second, the analysis part consisted of the elements of the drawings being examined, which included lines, shapes, colors, or any geometric shapes drawn. During the interpretation phase, the researchers interpreted the objects drawn based on the children’s understanding and the researchers’ insights. Next, judgement was used to decide the elements of peace and themes that were present. When using this method, emotionalism and expressive qualities were analyzed. In other words, this method is concerned with the emotional content of the artworks. The researchers must have a strong sense of feelings, moods, and ideas derived from the drawings in order for the message to be unearthed from their point of view. This study combined the following sub-themes that were derived from the main themes:

1. Positive peace elements, such as house, flowers, sun, trees, rainbow, and clouds.
2. Emotional states, such as smiling, crying, happy, and sad faces; and
3. Conflicting elements, such as monsters, tanks, arrows, and crying.

**Table 1**

*Content of children’s drawings*

Codes	Frequencies	Themes
People	45	Unity & safety
House	9	Peace
Color	Red, blue black, yellow green, purple teal	Love & happiness
Monsters	5	Conflict
Tank	1	Conflict
Hands	2	Unity & Safety
Crying	15	Conflict
Smiling	2	Tranquility
Trees	9	Peace
Flower	10	Love & happiness
Girls	8	Togetherness
Boys	3	Togetherness
Doll	1	Love & happiness
Rainbow	1	Peace
Cloud	4	Peace
Father	1	Togetherness
Mother	1	Togetherness love & happiness
Arrows	1	Conflict
Happy Face	3	Tranquility
Sad Face	3	Conflict
Child	2	Love & happiness

*Note. The above table displays concept summary of children's drawing*

In this study, drawings by the KEMAS preschoolers signified different themes, namely, positive peace, elements of conflict, and emotional elements (Table 1). In their drawings, these children associated positive peace with several themes: unity and safety, peace, love, and happiness (e.g., house, flowers, sun, trees, rainbow, clouds); emotional elements with themes of tranquility and togetherness (e.g., smiling, girls, boys, crying, and happy faces); and elements of conflict with themes of conflict and disputes (e.g., monsters, tanks, arrows).

## Discussion

The results of this study appeared to be similar with several studies, such as (Jabbar & Betawi, 2019; Walker et al., 2003), in terms of peace elements, which were categorized and associated with multiple elements of human emotions and symbols. Jabbar and Betawi (2019) asserted that children are able to differentiate at an early age the abstract concepts of war and peace. Their study on children in Iraqi refugee camps confirmed that regardless of culture, religion, and origin, humans can recognize violence and conflict. The present findings are also consistent with another study by Yilmaz (2018) whereby the introduction of the concepts of peace to students at a young age can help to prevent violent cultures from gaining roots in the social and individual levels.

Interestingly, it was not evident in other studies that the importance of religion and Malay culture play a huge role in shaping children's understanding of peace and war. Since this study involved only one race, which is Muslim Malay, these children were more prone towards religious-related concepts, such as *Ihsan* or empathy towards others more than other races. This is in-line with the findings by Jaafar, Kolodinsky, McCarthy and Schroder (2004), where they verified that sociological aspects, such as norms and values within the Malay society, have their own direct interactions with Islam as their main religion. Furthermore, Mastor, Jin and Cooper (2000) has identified that the culture within the Malay community is rich with politeness, self-efficacy, and conflict avoidance wherever possible.

They often speak carefully so much so that they will refuse any opposing views and care enough not to hurt others' feelings. This is embedded in the Malay society and is recognized as their trait. The Malays' opinion on what is good or bad in a person is also another factor in their moderate judgment of others. There is no extreme in judging of people among Malays i.e., to label one person as an extremely kind and another is extremely bad, without careful thinking, is considered improper judgment (Mastor et al., 2000). In terms of spirituality, the Malays are more connected to the concept of good conduct, as stipulated by the Islamic principles (Ismail et al., 2012). Thus, the concept of pardoning others for misconducts and conflicts is guided by the belief from Islamic teachings.

## Implication and limitation of research

The use of pictures offers a practical advantage that can help researchers gather valuable information, especially for informants who are not familiar with the use of formal conversation, such as interviews. It is important to note the potential of mass media having an influence on children at an early age. In relation to the findings, this research will help in shedding light on ways for KEMAS to include peace discussion in their curriculum especially in incorporating pictures to teach peace among young children. When teachers are able to understand peace through children's eyes, they are more likely to be able to communicate and share the lessons of peace with them, i.e., discuss about love and happiness in a family and help them relate to peace concepts. Future research is needed to investigate more on how peace education can be inculcated to young children by using the media as a pedagogical approach or an instructional strategy.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, children at the age of 6 years old are able to appreciate peace concepts and values through the use of pictures and art, even if the drawings are incomplete and show only one or two images. Exposing children to visual images and drawings are considered as part of the peace pedagogy that teachers can use to promote peace in the classroom. Children's background and their exposure to their own culture, such as Malays in particular, allow them to understand the concept of peace more easily within their values and norms. Piaget's assimilation stage clearly explains how children tend to understand, appreciate, and define peace according to their own culture and

experiences. Children will learn and grow with the ability to recognize peace and later, become the agents of peace, so that it can be preserved and embedded in the society. Any learning institutions, regardless of nationalities, can learn from this technique to bring changes towards understanding the concept of peace, which is varied across cultural backgrounds and religions. This study concurs that children's construction of thinking will change based on the environment they are placed in, and by experiencing the differences between what they already know and their new environment.

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