

## EVALUATION OF DRAWINGS MADE BY PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN WHO WITNESSED GRIEF, MIGRATION AND WAR

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### Abstract

This article aims to explore, through document analysis, how the interrelated traumatic experiences of grief, migration, and war—though rarely examined together in the literature are reflected in the drawings of primary school children, and the nature of these reflections. By examining the symbolic expressions and emotional displays in children's drawings within the context of grief, migration, and war, the study provides a broader understanding of their emotional responses to these challenging times. The findings aim to provide insights for those working with children and to develop an understanding of children's traumatic experiences. Consequently, it is observed that children express their emotions through their drawings and express their situations through lines and colors. Furthermore, we see that every difficult situation children face, such as grief, migration, and war, finds its outlet in their own realities. Considering that all children experiencing difficult situations are likely to attend other educational levels but are definitively enrolled in primary school, we can suggest that classroom teachers should be more aware of this issue.

**Keywords:** Evaluation of Drawings, Bereaved Children, Migrant Children, Children Affected by War, Disadvantaged Children.

## Introduction

Children's drawings are an important tool to understand their inner world and to analyze their emotional and psychological state (Malchiodi, 1998). Especially in cases of traumatic experiences such as grief, migration, and war, it is very important to understand how children process and express these experiences in order to support their mental health (Cohen & Mannarino, 2011). Children often find it difficult to express traumatic experiences with words. In such situations, creative activities like drawing help them reflect on their emotions. Research shows that the themes in children's drawings give important clues about their lived experiences (Malchiodi, 1998; Rubin, 2005). Experiences with heavy emotional impact, such as grief, migration, and war, often appear as clear themes in their drawings. Therefore, analyzing children's drawings is an important method to understand how they cope with traumatic events and what kind of emotional responses they develop. However, these drawings should not be evaluated alone but within the perspective of the child's psycho-social situation.

Analyzing children's drawings is important in order to understand and support their emotional and psychological states (Howard & Hodes, 2000). Children who go through challenging experiences such as migration and war may suffer from serious trauma. Understanding how they cope with these traumas and how they express their emotional reactions can help provide more effective support (Öztürk & Soysal, 2019; Yavuzer, 2017). This study explores whether and how children's negative experiences are reflected in their drawings.

This research is unique because it examines grief, migration, and war together, focusing on how these three different but connected traumatic experiences are reflected in children's drawings. In the literature, there are many studies examining the effects of grief, migration, or war separately on children (Cohen & Mannarino, 2011; Huss & Vostanis, 2012). However, studies that investigate all three experiences together through children's drawings are limited. This study allows us to gain a wider perspective by looking at children's emotional reactions through their own drawings. At the same time, the findings provide valuable insights for educators, psychologists, and child development specialists. In this way, the study aims to develop a deeper and more detailed understanding of children's traumatic experiences. Based on academic studies in the literature about grief, war, and migration, the main findings of this research are presented as follows:

## Grief

Grief is a difficult and multidimensional experience that affects every part of life after a loss. However, it is not an illness; it is a natural reaction to loss. Some argue that children do not experience grief since their ego is not sufficiently developed. It is also thought that children can more easily "replace" lost objects or people. Yet today, even children between 0–3 years show certain grief reactions that can be diagnosed. In childhood, the loss of a loved one -especially a parent- can be deeply destructive (Lowenstein, 2022). For this reason, children often experience the grieving process more intensely than adults. When children face grief, two main problems arise: first, their limited understanding of what death means, and second, the stronger sense of trust and attachment they have toward their parents compared to adults (Kıvılcım & Doğan, 2014; Stikkelbroek, 2015).

From birth, children develop a close bond with parental figures. Thanks to these bonds, they turn to their parents to share their happiness or sadness, to seek comfort, and to find solutions. When these people are lost, the feelings of love and trust are replaced by strong anxiety and sadness, which appear as grief reactions (Ergün, 2005; Moore & Herlihy, 1993). At first, grief shows itself through numbness, known as denial. Denial is often followed by anger. In the stage of anger, the person rejects the loss and behaves as if it did not happen. While showing this reaction, they are already confronted with the reality of death, which creates the wish for the lost person to return. This situation is called bargaining, where the person waits for the deceased.

When bargaining brings no result, the truth of loss is fully recognized, and feelings of helplessness appear, leading to depression. After some time, the stage of acceptance begins. The loss is acknowledged, and normal life gradually starts to retake its place (Ekici & Tuncel, 2015).

Children's grief reactions vary according to their developmental stage. Although they usually follow the same stages, some may skip or rearrange them. The intensity of children's grief is affected by how they understand death, their desire to protect loved ones, their worries about family members' well-being, changes at home, adjustments to new roles, and their fears about the future (Arslan, 2023). The idea that death means the ending of life or the loss of body functions develops in children over time. Around age seven, children begin to realize that death is unavoidable and can happen to anyone. After the age of ten, they can also understand the idea of their own death. At this stage, children tend to connect death to concrete reasons such as old age or accidents. Younger children, however, may associate death with abstract ideas such as spirits, ghosts, or angels. They may think that the deceased person can still be seen or heard. They try to cope with feelings of justice and injustice. As their verbal skills develop, they are able to express their emotions more easily. Children's questions about death should always be answered in ways they can understand. Children between the ages of 5 and 7 may have fears about falling asleep, while older children are reported to experience nightmares. After age 8, physical symptoms such as headaches become more common. Other possible reactions include regression, behavior problems, separation anxiety, difficulty concentrating, lower academic success, or imitating the deceased person's behavior. Some children fear being taken away by creatures, and words like "soul," "ghost," or "corpse" may cause strong anxiety (Zara, 2011).

The circumstances of death give rise to two different types of grief. The first is pathological grief (Balk, 2014). This occurs when, even after at least six months, the child's daily life is increasingly disrupted because they remain stuck in one stage and cannot progress. The second is traumatic grief. This refers to the reactions that appear when a loved one dies suddenly and violently. Whether pathological or traumatic, it is essential to provide children with accurate information about their loss so they can experience the grieving process healthily and naturally. At the same time, the child's developmental level should be taken into account when giving such information. For instance, children with a low level of grief should not be given abstract explanations, and the news of the loss should not be delivered directly. This may cause them to go into shock. Instead, the situation should be explained gradually, step by step, allowing the child to ask questions during or after the explanation. To help them grasp the reality of the loss, they should attend the funeral ceremony. Emotions should not be hidden, and belongings that remind the child of the deceased should not be removed. Rather than trying to prevent sadness, adults should share in the child's feelings. After the loss, the child's daily routines should be kept as normal as possible. Despite these recommendations, some children may still need psychological support, and in such cases, consulting a professional is the healthiest solution (Ürer, 2017).

In the literature, there are not many studies focusing specifically on grief in children. In Turkey, most has focused on death anxiety. The first and only scale developed in Turkey to measure death anxiety is the Turkish Death Anxiety Scale (TDAS) (Sarıkaya & Baloğlu, 2016), which consists of 20 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The scoring is as follows: 'never = 0', 'rarely = 1', 'sometimes = 2', 'often = 3', and 'always = 4'. The TDAS produces scores ranging from 0 to 80, with higher scores indicating greater levels of death anxiety. The scale has three sub-dimensions: uncertainty regarding death, experiencing pain, and being exposed to death. In a study involving 290 participants, including psychologists, pilots, firefighters, accountants, police officers, and primary school teachers, significant differences were found in death anxiety levels between those in high-risk professions (pilots, police officers, and firefighters) and those in low-risk professions (psychologists, accountants, and teachers). Interestingly, individuals in low-risk professions showed higher levels of death anxiety than those in high-risk professions (Eke, 2003).

Another study, which examined the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and death anxiety among 209 university students, found that most early maladaptive schemas significantly predicted death anxiety (Geçit, 2018).

International studies usually focus on death anxiety and the fear of death across age groups. For example, the study *Death Anxiety and Attitudes Toward the Elderly among Older Adults: The Role of Gender and Ethnicity* was conducted in the U.S. with 198 participants (average age 69.4). The sample included 75.8% White Americans and 24.2% African Americans. Results showed no significant gender difference in anxiety about aging, but women had higher death anxiety than men. While ethnicity did not predict aging-related anxiety, White Americans reported higher levels of death anxiety compared to African Americans (Depaola, Griffin, Young & Neimeyer, 2003; Raabe & Beelmann, 2011). Another study, *Perspectives on Death: A Developmental Study*, examined 874 participants aged 18–87. Researchers divided participants into groups: young adults (18–23, n=336), adults (24–29, n=159), early middle-aged (30–37, n=146), middle-aged (38–44, n=82), late middle-aged (45–59), and elderly (60–87, n=66). Results showed that death anxiety was significantly related to gender, with younger groups reporting higher levels. Middle-aged and older adults reported lower death anxiety compared to younger participants, and the elderly group had the lowest. The study found that although individuals over the age of 60 experienced lower levels of death anxiety regarding their own mortality, they expressed greater concern about the death of others. Compared to all other age groups -except for the middle-aged group- they reported lower levels of personal death anxiety (Keller, Sherry & Piotrowski, 1984).

### **War and Migration**

People tend to value what belongs to them and attribute meaning to it. They also develop bonds with the places they inhabit. Migration, however, disrupts this bond. Communities or individuals leave their homes for various reasons and move to different locations. This act of relocation is often defined as migration, either by individuals themselves or by society (Barglowski, 2019; Ekici & Tuncel, 2015).

Throughout history, people have been forced to leave their homes for different reasons. One of the main historical causes of migration has been natural disasters. However, since the Industrial Revolution, economic, political, and social factors have become more prominent. With the advancement of transportation and communication, the number of people seeking a better life has significantly increased. During this process, large migration movements, particularly from south to north and from east to west, have occurred. The causes of migration significantly affect both the migration process and the outcomes. For instance, economically motivated migrations may follow different patterns and result in different consequences compared to politically driven ones. While economic migration usually reflects a voluntary pursuit of a more comfortable life, politically driven migrations are often the result of war, forcing individuals or communities to leave their homes involuntarily (Şemşit, 2018).

Migration can be a voluntary or forced process experienced by individuals or communities. It may occur on an individual level or as a mass movement. Understanding how migration takes place is important in order to understand its consequences. Migration, therefore, refers to the voluntary or compulsory displacement of people or communities, which may occur either individually or collectively. Comprehending how migration occurs is essential for understanding the implications of this process (Aydn, 2017).

Voluntary migration, often motivated by economic, political, and social factors, differs from forced migration, which is driven by natural disasters, war, terrorism, or exile. In voluntary migration, economic opportunities are more decisive, while in forced migration, security concerns and political factors dominate. Those who are forced to migrate are generally referred to as refugees. Beyond the voluntary–forced distinction, the scale of migration is also significant. Small-scale, long-term migrations differ in impact from large-scale, sudden mass migrations.

Mass migrations, especially in situations where political authorities struggle to manage them, often give rise to spatial, social, and political challenges. Another classification is permanent versus temporary migration. Migration with no return intention is considered permanent, while relocation with the possibility of return within a certain period is referred to as temporary migration (Kaypak, 2016).

Although migration may bring positive aspects such as new opportunities and social connections, it also comes with challenges. The struggle to survive and to maintain what has been gained represents its negative side (Andersan & Thorbjorn, 2019). At the same time, migration pushes individuals toward a more dynamic lifestyle, as they must work harder to adapt and succeed in their new environment. Often, this adjustment is achieved through solidarity with others who have gone through similar experiences, thereby fostering collective resilience. On the other hand, the emotional difficulties, stress, and even the tendency to give up represent the negative psychological impacts of migration (Eroğlu, 2020). Children constitute the most vulnerable risk group in migration and war contexts. They face numerous challenges and are deeply affected by these processes (Balat et al., 2022). When families fail to provide sufficient attention and when socioeconomic deficiencies exist, children's basic needs -nutrition, healthy living, growth, and development- may go unmet. This increases their vulnerability to diseases, accidents, neglect, abuse, and violence. Migrant children often experience psychological and behavioral problems such as criminal tendencies, violent behaviors, depression, anxiety, developmental delays, sleep and eating disorders, low self-esteem, academic failure, substance use, suicidal thoughts, and hyperactivity (Borch, 2022). Moreover, children in migration processes often lack access to housing, education, and healthcare (Gencer, 2017). Since children are still developing, dependent, and in need of protection, they are the group most affected in terms of acute or chronic, physical, psychological, and social aspects. The greatest impact of migration on children is observed in areas such as adaptation, family violence, poverty, education, and overall health. Migration can impact children's health in several aspects, including social rights and psychological well-being (Bütün & Mercan, 2015; Karanfiloğlu, 2019).

The situation of children affected by war is equally concerning. Children who have experienced or are currently experiencing war face serious threats to their health due to direct injuries during conflicts, poor living conditions, and limited access to healthcare. Restricted food supplies in war zones lead to malnutrition, which in turn causes growth and developmental problems. Children who lose their homes are forced into temporary shelters, further harming their health. Witnessing violence, losing family members, and living under constant danger and uncertainty lead to trauma and chronic stress. War-exposed children often suffer from depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems. They may develop aggressive behaviors, criminal tendencies, sleep and eating disorders, and other behavioral challenges. Moreover, war forces many children to flee their homes, becoming refugees, which complicates their social integration and adaptation (Karanfiloğlu, 2019). Children in our country are likewise affected by wars occurring in other nations, as well as by migration, whether forced by conflict or undertaken voluntarily. Through media or by hearing adults discuss these events, children may empathize and show emotional reactions. Graphic images or violent narratives can be particularly impactful. Such exposure may generate concerns about safety and security in the world around them. Traumatic events like war and migration may even surface in children's play and social interactions, providing them a way to process and express their emotional experiences (Balta, 2016).

In Turkey, the literature shows that various disciplines -including nursing, medicine, and educational sciences- have examined the effects of war and migration (Gün, 2007). Researchers aim to identify the challenges children face and to propose solutions. Additionally, organizations such as UNICEF and UNHCR carry out projects to support children. Globally, education programs are organized for children whose schooling has been disrupted by war or migration. Since trauma is a risk factor, psychosocial support services are provided (Over, 2016).



Furthermore, cultural and social activities are arranged to facilitate children's reintegration into normal life. In situations of war and migration, children's access to healthcare may be limited. Therefore, it is essential to provide health services and to meet their basic health needs (Kahriman & Çolak, 2018)

This article aims to investigate how primary school children's traumatic experiences -such as grief, migration, and war, which are interconnected yet rarely studied together in the literature- are reflected in their drawings, and to analyze the nature of these reflections through document analysis. By examining symbolic expressions and emotional indicators in children's drawings under specific themes, the study provides a broader perspective on their emotional responses to such difficult experiences. The findings seek to contribute to professionals working with children by offering insights into their traumatic experiences and helping develop a deeper understanding.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study was conducted using a multiple case study, which is one of the qualitative research methods. Multiple case studies allow for an in-depth examination of different situations. This approach enables researchers to explore a specific phenomenon within different contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In this study, a multiple case study was adopted by focusing on three situations: grief, migration, and war.

### **Study Group**

The study group was determined using purposive sampling and consisted of fourth-grade students attending a primary school in Istanbul. Purposive sampling was chosen in order to access cases that could provide detailed and insightful information by selecting individuals with relevant knowledge and experience regarding the topics under investigation. According to Merriam & Tisdell (2013), purposive sampling involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups with experience and knowledge about the subject in order to use limited resources effectively and obtain information by focusing on informative cases. In this study, a class that included students who had experienced the situations under investigation was selected to form the sample group.

**Table 1:** Information on Images, Age, and Gender of The Study Group.

<b>Images</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>
Image1	F	10
Image2	F	9
Image3	F	9
Image4	M	10
Image5	F	9
Image6	F	9
Image7	M	10
Image8	F	10
Image9	F	9
Image10	M	9
Image11	F	10
Image12	F	10
Image13	F	9
Image14	F	10
Image15	M	9
Image16	M	10
Image17	M	9

**Note:** A total of seventeen images were included in the study.

As shown in Table 1, the study group consists of seventeen primary school students aged between 9 and 10. The age and gender of each student are written on the back of their drawings. The group includes eleven girls and six boys. Six of the girls are 9 years old and five are 10 years old. Among the boys, three are 9 years old and three are 10 years old. These students are children of families who had to leave their country because of war. At their age, they have witnessed many wars through the media and now live together with people who have recently been affected by war.

### **Data Collection Method**

In this study, document analysis was used to collect data. Strauss and Corbin (1998), define document analysis as a systematic process of reviewing printed or electronic materials in order to understand them, find meaning, and develop knowledge. This definition shows that documents can include both written texts and images, and that they are recorded without the researcher's intervention. Document analysis includes several steps: finding and collecting the documents, coding the data, analyzing the data, and interpreting the results (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this study, the children's drawings were examined through document analysis. Since these drawings reflect the children's emotional and psychological experiences, they provided an important source for qualitative data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using descriptive analysis. Descriptive analysis means organizing and explaining the data in a clear and meaningful way. In qualitative research, data are examined according to a set framework, findings are described, and interpretations are made. In short, descriptive analysis is a method used to look deeply into data, to understand it, and to find general patterns (Dobbs, 1988). In this study, three main themes were identified: grief, migration, and war. Under each of the three themes, different categories were created, and the data were analyzed through the steps of describing, examining, interpreting, and evaluating according to these categories.

**Table 2:** Themes of Grief, Migration, and War

<b>Grief</b>	<b>Migration</b>	<b>War</b>
denial (d)	preparation (p)	preparation
anger (a)	migration	migration
bargaining (b)	crisis (c)	crisis
depression (d)	adaptation (a)	adaptation
fear (f)		

As shown in Table 2, the theme of grief is discussed under five categories: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and fear. The migration theme is discussed under four categories: preparation, migration, crisis, and adaptation. The war theme is also discussed under four categories: preparation, migration, crisis, and adaptation.

Each of the three themes -grief, migration, and war- was analyzed according to the stages of description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. These stages, adapted from Dobbs (1988), allowed for an in-depth examination of the data. In the description stage, the drawings were first examined by describing their surface features and general characteristics. In the analysis stage, specific details and symbols in the drawings were studied more closely, helping to understand the children’s emotional and psychological states. In the interpretation stage, the findings from the analysis were given meaning, showing how the children’s experiences and emotions were reflected in their drawings. Finally, in the evaluation stage, the results were considered within a broader framework and compared with findings from other studies in the literature to form general conclusions.

### **Validity and Reliability**

In qualitative research, validity and reliability are crucial for ensuring accuracy and trustworthiness. Validity refers to how accurately the findings reflect reality, while reliability considers whether similar results would be obtained if the research were repeated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2013).

The validity and reliability of this study were supported by a multiple-case study approach. Comparisons between different cases and contexts increased the reliability of the findings (Patton, 2014; Yin, 2017). Using systematic drawing analysis methods during the examination of the drawings supported the validity and reliability of the findings. In addition, expert opinions from different researchers were consulted during the analysis process, which ensured consistency and contributed to obtaining objective results.

### **Findings**

The students who participated in this study are primary school children aged 9–10. Children at this age are usually in the third or fourth grade. In terms of artistic development, they have completed the schematic stage and are in the transition to the stage of realism. During this period, they are more interested in reality and enjoy participating in social issues. Although they may still have difficulty fully perceiving reality, they show an eagerness to engage with it. They often wish to organize forms of protest to find solutions to social problems and form groups for this purpose.

Children in the stage of realism have cognitive development that is ahead of their physical development. Although they begin to express a sense of social awareness, they also feel the need to hide some of what they know. This is because they are only taking their first steps toward understanding the harshness of reality. The students in this study are children of families who had to leave their country because of war. Due to their age, they have both witnessed many wars through the media and live alongside people who have recently become victims of war. These students also come from middle-income families and attend school in an average neighborhood of Istanbul.

Their classroom teacher is an educator who collaborates with parents and is open to different practices to help prepare students for life. For this reason, the students who participated in this study did so believing they were “expert children” in describing a real social problem.

Table 3 shows the distribution of the drawings under the themes of grief, migration, and war according to age and gender.

**Table 3.** List of Drawings under the Themes of Grief, Migration, and War

Drawing	Gender	Age	Grief	Migration	War
Drawing 1	F	10	✓		
Drawing 2	F	9			✓
Drawing 3	F	9		✓	
Drawing 4	M	10	✓		✓
Drawing 5	F	9		✓	✓
Drawing 6	F	9			✓
Drawing 7	M	10	✓	✓	✓
Drawing 8	F	10			✓
Drawing 9	F	9	✓	✓	
Drawing 10	M	9			✓
Drawing 11	F	10	✓		✓
Drawing 12	F	10		✓	✓
Drawing 13	F	9			✓
Drawing 14	F	10	✓		✓
Drawing 15	M	9			✓
Drawing 16	M	10			
Drawing 17	M	9			

Summary:

- Total drawings: 17
- Gender: 11 female, 6 male
- Ages: 12 students aged 9; 5 students aged 10
- Themes-Grief: 6, Migration: 5, War: 14

When Table 3 is examined, it is seen that eleven of the students who participated in the study are girls and six are boys. Among the 9-year-olds, there are six girls and three boys; among the 10-year-olds, there are five girls and three boys. The 9-year-old girls created four drawings about war, which means they worked mostly on the theme of war. They worked the least on the theme of grief. The 9-year-old boys also worked mostly on the theme of war, with two drawings, and the least on the themes of grief and migration. The 10-year-old girls created four drawings about war, which is again the theme they worked on the most, while grief and migration were the least common themes.



The 10-year-old boys also created two drawings about war, making it the theme they worked on the most, while grief was the least common theme. One 10-year-old girl created a drawing that included all three themes -grief, migration, and war- which suggests that she saw them as connected to one another.

Looking at the data in Table 3, it can be said that students in the stage of realism worked mostly on the theme of war, because they can see the destructive effects of war more clearly. The second most common theme was grief. Since grief is considered equal to sadness, it may be an emotional intensity they can relate to more easily than migration. Table 4 shows the distribution of drawings according to theme, category, and symbol.

**Table 4.** List of Drawings by Theme, Category, and Symbols Included

Drawing	Theme	Category	Symbols in the Drawing
Drawing 1	Grief	Acceptance	Atatürk
Drawing 2	War	Crisis	Weapons, blood
Drawing 3	Migration	Migration	Mountains, desolate place, sad people
Drawing 4	War + Grief	Crisis + Anger	Tank, weapons, dead people, ambulance
Drawing 5	War	Crisis	Missile, dead and injured people, hospital
Drawing 6	War + Migration	Crisis + Crisis	Patient, organ loss, helicopter
Drawing 7	War	Crisis	Tank, weapons, soldiers, landmine, wounded people
Drawing 8	War + Grief + Migration	Crisis + Anger + Adaptation	Helicopter, blood, ruined house, crying woman, organ parts
Drawing 9	War	Crisis	Tank, soldiers, bullets, soldiers, melancholic sun, wilted flower
Drawing 10	Grief + Migration	Depression + Migration	Volcano eruption, fire, dead people, migrating people
Drawing 11	War	Crisis	Tank, weapons, soldiers, strategy plans, melancholic sun, wilted flower
Drawing 12	War + Grief	Crisis + Denial	loss of a loved one, dead people, cloud blocking the sun
Drawing 13	War	Adaptation	Soldiers, wounded people, health facility, mountains
Drawing 14	War + Migration	Crisis + Migration	Missile, ship, soldiers, dead people (children), scared people
Drawing 15	War	Crisis	Weapons, opposing sides, flags of different countries
Drawing 16	War + Grief	Crisis + Denial	Nuclear bomb, bomb machine, weapons
Drawing 17	War	Adaptation	Missile, tank, dead people, Masjid al-Aqsa

A total of seventeen drawings were included in the study.

When Table 4 is examined, it is seen that there are six drawings on the theme of grief, five on the theme of migration, and thirteen on the theme of war. Some drawings appear under more than one theme. There is one drawing in both the grief and migration themes, three in both grief and war, two in both migration and war, and one drawing includes all three themes.



Looking again at Table 4, it can be observed that within the theme of grief, there are two drawings in the denial category, two in the anger category, and one each in the depression and acceptance categories. Within the theme of migration, three drawings are in the migration category, while one drawing each is found in the crisis and adaptation categories. Within the theme of war, eleven drawings are in the crisis category and two are in the adaptation category. No drawings were produced in the bargaining category of grief, in the preparation category of migration, or in the preparation and migration categories of war.

Table 4 also shows that across the seventeen drawings, thirty-three different symbols were used, including Atatürk, flags of different countries, tanks, missiles, nuclear bomb, bomb machine, weapons, heart, mountains, desolate place, castle, ruined house, soldiers, crying woman, sad people, wounded people, dead people, opposing sides, organ loss, organ parts, loss of a loved one, health facility, hospital, ambulance, blood, airplane, helicopter, ship, volcanic eruption, fire, melancholic sun, cloud blocking the sun, and wilted flower.

Each drawing is analyzed below within the scope of its theme and category. During the analysis, a drawing that appears under both migration and war themes is evaluated together under the combined categories (e.g., “grief and migration,” “grief and war,” “migration and war,” or “grief, migration, and war”) rather than separately repeating it under each theme.

### Grief – Acceptance

Children in the stage of realism, aged between 9 and 10, perceive grief as a feeling associated with sadness. Although they may have difficulty fully understanding it, they have usually learned through social experience that grief is an intense emotional state felt after a loss.

#### Drawing 1

Drawing by a 10-year-old girl



A commemoration ceremony for Atatürk was held on November 10, and all of the students at the ceremony are shown crying. The students in uniform, the Atatürk bust, the flag, and the large school building with a big gate show that the setting is a schoolyard. Atatürk’s face looks happy because he is a loved and respected national leader. The children are sad because they have lost Atatürk and will never be able to see him again in real life. The drawing uses the bottom edge of the paper as the ground line. Since there is no border line, the schoolyard looks very large. The use of a ruler while drawing the school building shows that the child who made the drawing belongs to the “complex” type. The students in the picture are all the same height, detailed, and drawn carefully, which shows a constructive type.

However, the perspective of the Atatürk bust does not match the perspective of the other figures, which also shows an “exhibitive” type. This drawing is in the acceptance category of the grief theme because the figures accept the loss and act in a way that fits the situation.

### Migration – Migration

Children aged 9–10, who are in the stage of realism, can easily understand the idea of migration as moving from one place to another. However, they may not fully grasp the meaning of leaving without returning. Leaving many of their own belongings behind is quite difficult for them to comprehend at this age. Forced migration caused by negative conditions such as war is seen by children as an unfair situation that they do not deserve.

### Drawing 3

Drawing by a 9-year-old girl



In the picture, there is a sad girl walking in a deserted area far from the settlement, with a range of mountains in the background. Only a graphite pencil was used, and no other colors appear in the drawing. The loneliness of the girl and the choice of color highlight how migration puts people in a difficult situation. In the upper left corner of the picture, a thought bubble featuring a beloved male relative suggests that the girl misses him. The painful side of migration is also emphasized with a speech bubble saying, “Ahh, migration!” The bottom edge of the paper is used as the ground line. The fact that the girl is shown without taking anything with her gives the feeling of a sudden escape, representing forced migration. Since there is no border line, the picture gives the impression of a large and open space. Although the perspective is used, the drawing is not highly detailed. Because it contains symbols of loneliness and longing related to migration, it is considered an “exhibitive type” child drawing. This drawing is in the “migration” category of the migration theme.

### War – Crisis

Children aged 9–10, who are in the stage of realism, perceive war as a major conflict. They may even think that they themselves are somehow responsible for the cause of the war. They might see it as a consequence of their own innocent childhood mistakes. Since war is a social problem, children may feel personally responsible for it. For this reason, it is important to talk to children about war and explain that a child can never be the cause of a war. This situation shows the child’s desire to participate fully in society, both in terms of doing good and avoiding harm.

### Drawing 2

Drawing by a 9-year-old girl



The drawing presents contrasts such as weapon–heart and conflict–love, reflecting the reality of society. The group engaged in conflict is made up of boys, while the loving group consists of girls. There is also a separate group of neutral boys. Most of the paper is left blank, emphasizing the ground where the figures are placed. In the group that is fighting, the victim figure is shown with open arms, calling for help, while the loving group stands hand in hand, showing trust and unity. Because the drawing lacks much detail, it is considered an “exhibitive type” child drawing. This drawing belongs to the crisis category of the war theme, as the left side of the paper is the most striking area and is where the fighting group is placed. It can also be interpreted as showing the stages of conflict gradually giving way to calmness and, finally, to a loving state, suggesting that the crisis eventually turns into adaptation.

### Drawing 5

Drawing by a 9-year-old girl



In this picture, which depicts the beginning of a war, the first images that come to mind are missiles, dead and injured people, the deaths of children, people calling for help, fires breaking out, and the presence of hospitals becoming more visible. This visual expresses how war is the complete opposite of life by using many contrasting images. Even the clouds are drawn as dark, making the grim atmosphere of the battlefield clearer. The catastrophic nature of war is further emphasized by a speech bubble that says, “The hospital is burning!” The dark clouds blocking the sunlight, the word “Exit” written above a door, and the painful expressions on people’s faces make this a very detailed drawing and, therefore, an example of a constructive type of child drawing. However, the human figures are drawn as stick figures, with limbs attached to a simple body and without detailed body parts, showing a lack of anatomical detail. All figures are fixed to a ground line. This drawing belongs to the crisis category of the war theme, as it depicts a war that is actively taking place.

### Drawings 7, 9, and 11

Drawings by a 10-year-old boy and 9- and 10-year-old girls

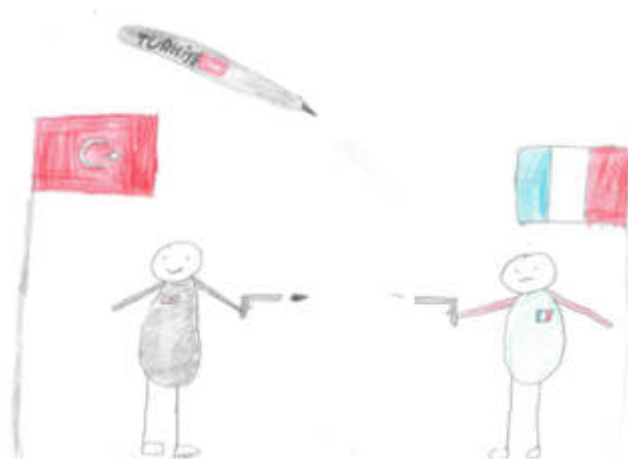




In these drawings, tanks, weapons, soldiers, castles, medical tents, dead and injured people, and flags of different countries are used to depict the war headquarters of opposing sides. The soldiers are shown as unhappy because they are fighting. Even the sun appears sad, and the flower is drooping with sorrow. In this way, it is expressed that war has no good outcome for anyone. The bottom edge of the paper is used as the ground line. The soldiers inside the castles are drawn as if the castles were transparent, making them visible. The drawing is made in a top-down (plan) view. In this way, its flat, single-plane composition is clearly visible. The subject of war is presented as separate pieces within a whole, which makes these drawings examples of the “complex type” of child drawing. These drawings belong to the crisis category of the war theme, because each one shows a war that is actively taking place.

### Drawing 15

Drawing by a 9-year-old boy



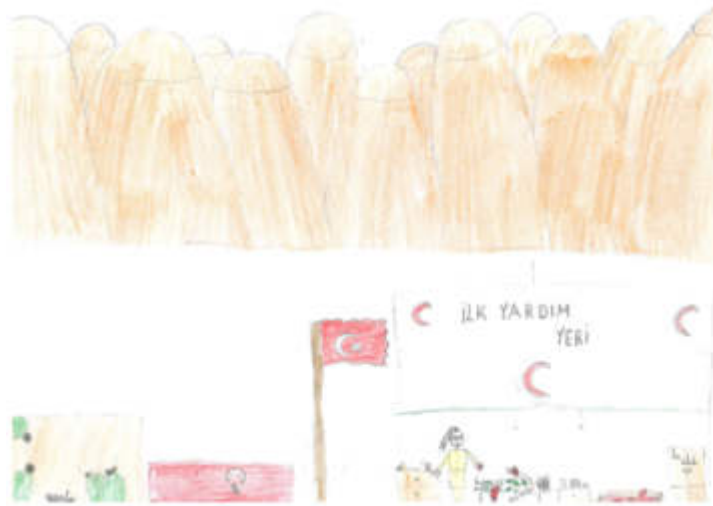
In this drawing, there are two different national flags, a missile, and two people trying to harm each other. The way they are placed under their own flags gives the impression that they see this as a patriotic duty. The smiling face of the person from the child's own nation, contrasted with the sad and tense face of the opponent, highlights the child's nationalist point of view. The bottom edge of the paper is used as the ground line, and most of the paper is left empty, emphasizing that the figures are standing on the ground.

The human figures are drawn as stick figures, with arms and legs simply attached to the body and without anatomical details, showing that they are incomplete drawings. Because the drawings are not very detailed but are neatly colored, this is considered an “exhibitive type” child drawing. This drawing belongs to the crisis category of the war theme, as it shows two people in open conflict.

## War – Adaptation

### Drawing 13

Drawing by a 9-year-old girl



In this drawing, which suggests that a war is taking place in distant mountainous areas, soldiers are shown making strategy plans while a nurse is treating the wounded. When looking at many of the drawings in this study, it is striking that children often include health workers next to soldiers. This highlights the principle of contiguity, showing how they naturally associate soldiers and health workers as always being together. The presence of health workers alongside soldiers is clearly emphasized.

War undoubtedly affects many areas of society, but health workers are among the first service groups to be present in the field during war. Naturally, this captures children’s attention, and it also shows that they have a certain level of awareness. The bottom edge of the paper is used as the ground line. Because the drawings are quite detailed, this is considered a constructive type of child drawing. This drawing belongs to the adaptation category of the war theme. It can be interpreted that the war has already started or perhaps even ended; during this time, the soldiers are shown making assessments of the situation while the health worker tends to the wounded. Since there are no figures of direct conflict in the picture, it can be interpreted this way.

### Drawing 17

Drawing by a 9-year-old boy



This drawing was made during a time when an actual conflict was taking place, so the figures reflect very current choices. To represent the Turkish nation standing with Palestine, a Turkish Red Crescent tent is drawn. Because it is a war scene, there are dead people, a tank, a plane, and missiles in the picture. The bottom edge of the paper is used as the ground line. The level of detail in the drawing is not very advanced, and it cannot be said that much care was taken in coloring. For these reasons, this is considered an “exhibitive type” child drawing. This drawing belongs to the adaptation category of the war theme. The presence of the Red Crescent health tent represents people being treated and symbolizes an attempt by people to adapt to the conditions of war.

### Grief and Migration

#### Drawing 10

Drawing by a 9-year-old boy



This drawing shows the damage caused to a settlement and its residents after a natural disaster a volcanic eruption. Some people are injured, and others have very tense facial expressions. Some people are migrating because their living spaces have been destroyed. The bottom edge of the paper is used as the ground line. Because the drawing is quite detailed, it is considered a constructive type of child drawing. This drawing can be placed under both the grief and migration themes. A natural disaster deeply affects people both materially and emotionally. Since losses occur after such a disaster, the grieving process is present. In this drawing, the people in the disaster area seem to be experiencing the depression stage, as they witness what has happened. At the same time, since there is no immediate individual solution possible in the early stages of the disaster, the presence of people migrating is an understandable and realistic situation.

## Grief and War

### Drawings 4 and 16

Drawings by 10-year-old boys



The drawings show a scene of conflict that includes a tank, soldiers, dead people, and an ambulance. A Turkish flag is being raised by a soldier with a smiling face. Even though there is a sense of victory, the presence of losses highlights the need for a grieving process. Apart from the flag and the symbol of grief, no other colors are used, which emphasizes the cold and harsh reality of war. The bottom edge of the paper is used as the ground line. In Drawing 4, the soldiers inside the house are shown as if the house were transparent. The drawing is made in a top-down view, which clearly shows its flat, single-plane composition. In Drawing 16, on the other hand, the use of color is vivid and varied, emphasizing the heat and intensity of the war.

The coloring is very careful and neat. Because both drawings are highly detailed, they are considered constructive type child drawings. These drawings belong to both the grief and war themes, as they depict an active war scene. Since the figures are shown in the middle of a battle, there is a state of crisis, and the symbol of grief is included to represent the losses.

### Drawing 12

Drawing by a 10-year-old girl



The picture includes tanks, weapons, and people who are frightened, dead, or grieving a loss. The sun, which does not want to see this battlefield, tries to hide itself behind a cloud. The people holding weapons are civilians, which shows a scene of social conflict and internal disorder. It suggests that society is so chaotic that everyone might be armed. The variety of colors is striking. Although the coloring is not very careful, the drawing is detailed enough to be considered a constructive type of child drawing. The bottom edge of the paper is used as the ground line. This drawing can be placed under both the grief and war themes. Because there is an active conflict, it represents war as a crisis, and since there are people who have lost their relatives in this scene, it also represents grief. The loss is new and unexpected, which indicates the denial stage of grief.

### Migration and War

#### Drawing 6

Drawing by a 9-year-old girl



A helicopter is seen in the sky, which could be there either for medical purposes or for an airstrike. Because of its color, it can be interpreted as military and therefore related to an air attack. The hospital in the drawing serves as a symbol representing the dead and injured. On the left side of the picture, there is a woman who has lost her hand and part of her arm. She is far from the hospital, giving the impression that she was not able to reach it in time. Just behind her is a small house, drawn in such a way that it appears to be far away. The woman who lost her limb is migrating from the war zone to a place where she can live under better conditions. The bottom edge of the paper is used as the ground line. Most of the paper is left empty, emphasizing the ground. The areas that are meant to be highlighted are colored, while the rest of the picture is left colorless. Because both the drawing and the emphasis on the event are quite detailed, it is considered a constructive type of child drawing. This drawing belongs to both the migration and war themes. Considering the woman's organ loss and the fact that she is far from her home, it can be said that this represents the crisis stage of migration. Since the military helicopter suggests that the war is continuing, it also belongs to the crisis category of the war theme.

## Migration and War

### Drawing 14

Drawing by a 10-year-old girl



In this drawing, soldiers, weapons, a missile, civilians, dead people, two different national flags, and a person escaping by boat are depicted. In the heat of the war, one person decides to migrate because they feel they cannot cope with the situation. The two figures to the left of the missile seem as if they are trying to reach the boat as well. The bottom edge of the paper is used as the ground line. Most of the paper is filled with figures and coloring, and the figures are clearly placed on the ground. Because the drawings, coloring, and emphasis on the event are very detailed, this is considered a constructive type of child drawing. This drawing belongs to both the migration and war themes. The person boarding the boat highlights the act of migration, and since a moment of active conflict is shown, it represents a crisis.

## Grief, Migration, and War

### Drawing 8

Drawing by a 10-year-old girl



The first striking image in this drawing is the ruined house covered in blood. The child has drawn this image in the most noticeable part of the page and much larger than the other elements, suggesting that the destruction of homes during war is what most captures her attention. The house is still being bombed. Next to it stands a woman who is crying because she has lost her legs. She cannot return home and is standing far away, deciding to go somewhere else. Blood is shown around the scene. Because the figures are drawn with tense and strong lines, it suggests that the child pressed hard with the pencil while coloring. Since war is a time when many tragic events happen and cause grief, a symbol of mourning is included in the drawing. The bottom edge of the paper is used as the ground line. Most of the paper is filled with figures and color. Because the drawings and the emphasis on the event are very detailed, this is considered a constructive type of child drawing. This drawing belongs to all three themes: grief, migration, and war. The house under aerial attack shows a moment of crisis in war. The woman's organ loss suggests the anger stage of grief, as she now has to start a life without her legs and face many difficulties. Her position, standing far from her house and unable to enter, also represents the moment of migration.

### Conclusion and Evaluation

In this study, the drawings made by 9–10-year-old primary school students who have witnessed traumatic experiences such as grief, migration, and war were analyzed to understand how children make sense of these events and what emotional and cognitive responses they develop. The results showed that war was the most frequently represented theme in the drawings, followed by grief and migration. Content analysis revealed that the war theme was mostly concentrated in the “crisis” category, that the “denial” and “anger” categories were prominent within the theme of grief, and that the children mostly illustrated the “migration” and “crisis” stages within the migration theme.

The frequent use of images such as tanks, missiles, nuclear bombs, weapons, soldiers, dead and wounded people, ambulances, medical tents, hospitals, helicopters, and the Al-Aqsa Mosque in war-themed drawings indicates that children see war as a threat equivalent to destruction and death. In some drawings, the presence of flags representing opposing sides, groups in conflict, and castles drawn for defense shows that war is not only perceived as physical destruction but also as a form of social division (Ayar & Celbiş, 2023). Symbols such as the melancholic sun and the wilted flower were striking indicators showing that children internalize the destructive effects of war on nature and living beings.

The war theme was predominantly depicted through images of conflict, destruction, loss, and death, showing that children strongly reflected the destructive effects of war. The fact that the war theme appeared so frequently in the children's drawings can be explained by the normalization of war in their sociocultural environment (Binay & Başgöl, 2022). This suggests that children try to make sense of and express traumatic experiences through their drawings (Howard & Hodes, 2000).

In the drawings that included the grief theme, it was observed that children mostly focused on the denial and anger categories (Kıvılcım & Doğan, 2014), whereas the acceptance, depression, and fear stages (Ekici & Tuncel, 2015) appeared less frequently. This indicates that children have difficulty concretizing abstract concepts such as death and loss (Doğan, 2025) and that they express more intense emotional reactions such as anger and denial during this process (Lowenstein, 2022). Images such as crying children, dark skies, and clouds covering the sun were frequently noted. The children's denial and anger reactions were often represented with dark tones, civilians holding weapons, dead bodies, and crying faces. The use of speech and thought bubbles representing the lost person in some drawings suggests that children have difficulty facing the loss and continue to keep the lost person alive in their minds (Çolak & Hocaoglu, 2021).

Regarding migration-themed drawings, children mostly focused on the migration and crisis stages, while symbols of adaptation to the new environment were limited. Lonely walking figures, deserted spaces, and a sense of uncertainty were common features, showing that children associate migration more with loss and uncertainty (Borch, 2022; Erbaş, 2020). The frequent appearance of deserted areas, mountains, ruined houses, solitary walking figures, and people escaping by boat drew attention. Black-and-white drawings, figures carrying no belongings, and expressions like "Ahh migration!" suggest that children associate migration with loss, loneliness, and uncertainty (Dawson-Hahn et al., 2024). In some drawings, children included figures with organ loss, while others depicted ruined houses and bloody streets, expressing traces of trauma through their drawings.

Another striking finding of the study was that some children represented more than one traumatic theme in the same drawing. Especially in the drawings where war, grief, and migration appeared together, losses experienced during conflict, forced migration, and related emotional reactions were reflected in an integrated way. The use of such combined symbols suggests that children do not perceive traumatic experiences as isolated events but rather as interconnected and interactive processes (Barglowski, 2019; Öztürk, 2023). The fact that nine-year-old girls were the group who drew war scenes most frequently, and that ten-year-old girls presented more holistic narratives including all themes, indicates that with increasing age, children gain the ability to represent more complex emotions in a single drawing (Buyurgan & Usal, 2018). Boys, on the other hand, focused more on the theme of war and represented abstract, internal themes such as migration and grief less often (Binay & Başgöl, 2022). These differences provide clues about how gender-based ways of expressing emotions and areas of interest can vary during developmental stages.

Overall, it can be concluded that children aged 9–10 tend to express the traumatic experiences they live through or witness in their environment through drawings, externalizing their emotional and psychological responses via images. The figures, symbols, and scene arrangements in the drawings are expressions of the anxiety, fear, anger, and helplessness experienced in their inner world. War, in particular, stands out as a theme that captures children's attention and carries intense emotional content, while grief and migration are mostly expressed through the concepts of loss, separation, and uncertainty (Rowland, 2016). These findings show that drawings can be a powerful and meaningful tool for understanding children's feelings and thoughts about their traumatic experiences. The themes and symbols that emerge from children's drawings provide important clues about their psychosocial state and contribute to understanding their emotional processes.

In line with these findings, it is important for teachers and school counselors to evaluate not only children's verbal expressions but also their artistic and creative works, interpreting the images they use in their drawings to plan psychosocial support processes. In particular, to support the post-traumatic psychological well-being of children exposed to difficult life experiences such as war, migration, and loss, the implementation of art therapy practices and creative art workshops in school settings is recommended (Perryman, Timothy & Frost, 2025; Rubin, 2005). Finally, in light of the limitations of this study, future quantitative and qualitative research with larger and more diverse age groups may provide a deeper understanding of the psychological and artistic responses of children to traumatic experiences and contribute to the literature.

### Recommendations for Classroom Teachers

- Classroom teachers may encourage students to draw around a specific theme rather than making completely free drawings during art lessons. In this way, by selecting a different theme each week, teachers can gather clues about students' subconscious thoughts and emotional states. For example, a theme of "hope" could be given, and students could be asked to create drawings based on that theme.
  - Supportive and open classroom environments can be created where students feel free to express their emotions.
  - Lesson plans can include games, activities, and exercises that help students recognize and understand their emotional states.
  - Above all, teachers should work on improving themselves in the areas of trauma awareness, understanding emotions, and developing empathy. It is important for teachers to protect their own emotional well-being and keep their emotional state stable when hearing students' experiences. Otherwise, failing to respond appropriately and being unprepared for difficult situations can have negative effects both on the student's well-being and the teacher's own psychological health.
  - When necessary, support can be sought from families, the surrounding environment, school counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists.
- Teachers can also attend seminars and training programs on trauma knowledge and awareness to increase their own sensitivity to these issues.

### Ethics Statements

Necessary ethical approvals have been obtained for this study, and voluntary consent has been obtained from the participants. It has been reviewed and approved by Istanbul Aydın University. Participants provided written informed consent to participate in this study.

### Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest between the authors.

### Generative AI Statement

Generative AI and AI-enabled technologies were not used in this study.

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