What Does Peace Mean? Kindergarteners Share Ideas

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Kindergarteners’ (n=41) concept of peace, a foundational social studies concept, was investigated via pre- and post-assessments that first, asked them to physically demonstrate how they looked or felt when they were at peace, second, asked them to draw a scene showing peace, and third, to caption the drawing. In pre-assessments all but three children demonstrated aggression and drew aggressive stances accompanied by captions indicating aggression. After opportunities to read about, discuss, and explore the concept of peace over five weeks, post-assessment occurred. In the post-assessments none of the data indicated aggression. Categories coded showed peace described as enjoyable activities, pro-social behaviors, and quietness/calmness/privacy. The study suggests hypotheses for further research investigating the concept of peace among very young children and possible factors influencing their concept and implications for social studies curriculum.

*Keywords:* peace, very young children, conceptual development, social studies curriculum, aggression

“Peace is when I don’t pick a fight with my sister” and “Peace is picking flowers for my Mom” are quotations from two kindergarteners. How typical are these views? The kindergarten experience can lay foundations for much of social studies education, so, it should be considered a vital beginning element in the social studies curriculum (Brophy & Alleman, 2006). Within social studies, the concept of peace is addressed in the major themes identified by the National Council for the Social Studies (2011), for example, Culture (theme 1), Individual Development and Identity (theme 4), Global Connections (theme 9), and Civic Ideals and Practices (theme 10). A conception of peace is fundamental to the peacemaking and pro-social behaviors (Bergin, Bergin, & French, 1995) advocated in social studies, including helping young children learn to respect themselves and others, negotiate differing views, and work together in pairs and small groups. If we are to engage young children in meaningful activities that promote peace, we must first understand their conceptions of peace (Walker, Myers-Bowman, & Myers-Walls, 2008). In social studies education particularly, peace is a major concept. The literature on very young children’s conceptions of peace, however, is sparse, so the study reported here investigated the concept of peace as described by 41 kindergartners in two intact classes.
Background

Children of various ages and nationalities have been asked by researchers to define the concept of peace and the associated concept of war, although these studies are few in number. Schwebel (2001) noted, “an important starting point for social scientists who want to promote a culture of peace is knowledge about when and how children develop concepts of war and peace” (p. 2). Among the existing studies, most have investigated the concepts of European children and adolescents with very few involving children aged five and six years. So, there is little knowledge of early concepts of peace, especially among U.S. students.

Most studies have examined how children define the concepts of both peace and war. Australian children aged 4-16, were studied by Hall (1993) who found children across this age range knew as much about peace as about war. Although media did not appear to have an effect on the attitudes of these children across the age range, some indications of effects were found among the very young children in the sample. Another study of children’s concepts of peace and war over a large age range, ages 3-12, was conducted by Myers-Bowman, Walker, and Myers-Walls (2005). They interviewed children from two very different sociocultural environments: Belgrade and the Midwestern USA soon after the 1999-2000 NATO-Yugoslavian conflict. The two groups of interviewees represented differences in exposure to political violence. Despite their experiential differences, children mostly expressed very similar ideas of peace and war. When describing peace, the children generally identified it as the absence of war, conflict, and violence. They further described peace as pro-social interaction, quiet, agreement and treaty making, and the involvement of positive emotions. War generally was described with its objects and activities such as killing, arguing, weapons, and bombing, all of which were accompanied by a negative judgment. A study by Coughlin, Mayers, Dizard, and Bordin (2009) investigated concepts of peace and war by interviewing 41 children aged 5-10 years in the USA and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In this study, the U.S. children referred to peace in terms of quiet and tranquil environments while the UAE children described peace as the opposite of war. Most frequently by U.S. children referenced war as people and countries at war fighting, while UAE children referenced weapons, blood, destruction, fighting, and/or enemies, giving much more graphic detailed responses. In another study investigating quite different samples, concepts of peace and war were studied by McLernan and Cairns (2001) among children ages six and seven in a region of England with low political violence and in two regions of Northern Ireland, one with little to no political violence and one with high political violence. They found the northern Irish children emphasized the concept of peace as the absence of war to a greater extent than the English children. The children from the high violence region in northern Ireland also were more likely to emphasize the concrete aspects of war such as weapons, soldiers, and military activities.

In a rare study with only very young U.S. children, ages four through six, Tephly (1985) used interviews asking the children to define peace and war. The data indicated Tephly’s subjects defined war by associating it with the activities of war and defined peace by associating it with quietness, calmness, and privacy. The literature, overall, indicates that children define peace as the absence of war when asked to define both war and peace.

The concept of peace has been rarely studied without an accompanying investigation of the concept of war, particularly among very young children. In Romania, a study by Cretu (1988) examined the concept of peace held by children ages 5 and 6. In Cretu’s study, 30 children were asked “to draw something in connection with peace” (p. 97). Two graphic
elements were most often found. First were elements connected with peace often seen in the media such as doves, olive branches, and the planet Earth. Second were elements conveying personal, direct, and concrete meanings such as children, flowers, butterflies, trees, and houses. Most researchers have relied on one interview with set questions for data collection even when the sample is very young children. Among the few exceptions is Cretu’s study because of its use of drawings. Another study using drawings was that of McLernon and Cairns (2001) reported above.

As so few studies investigate very young children’s conceptions of peace, our existing information comes mostly from studies of middle and high school students, where some patterns have emerged across national and cultural boundaries. Children have been found to understand war in terms of concrete details including the objects and activities of war such as military weapons or killing. Children also have been found to understand peace as the absence of war or violence. Such findings come from studies by Hakvoort and Oppenheimer (1993) in the Netherlands with children ages 8-16, by Oppenheimer and Kuipers (2003) in The Philippines with children aged 10, and de Souza et al. (2006) in Brazil with children ages 7-12, in addition to the studies cited above by McLernon and Cairns (2001) and Myers-Bowman et al. (2005). Children also have been found to recognize the presence of pro-social behaviors including being nice and/or sharing in studies by Covell et al. (1994) in Canada with children ages 7-18, Hakvoort and Hagglund (2001) in Sweden and the Netherlands with children ages 7-17, Myers-Bowman et al. (2005), and by Walker et al. (2003). In examining the research literature, Hakvoort and Hagglund (2001) concluded that the research supported three themes in across children’s development of the concept of peace, (a) the absence of war, (b) the absence of quarrels, and (c) social activities.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Perceptions of Peace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4-7</td>
<td>McLernen &amp; Cairnes (2001)</td>
<td>Absence of war</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tephly (1985)</td>
<td>Quietness, calmness, privacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cretu (1988)</td>
<td>Artifacts of peace from media &amp; personal experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Myers-Bowman et al. (ages 3-12)</td>
<td>Pro-social interaction, quiet agreement, social agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-12</td>
<td>Myers-Bowman et al. (2005) (ages 3-12)</td>
<td>Pro-social interaction, quiet agreement, social agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coughlin et al. (2009), De Souza et al. (2006), Oppenheimer (2003)</td>
<td>Quiet and tranquil, opposite of war, pro-social (being nice &amp; sharing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-16</td>
<td>Hakvoort &amp; Oppenheimer (1993)</td>
<td>Opposite of war, pro-social behavior (being nice and sharing)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In summary, then, most studies have not had a specific focus on younger children and primarily collected data via interviews, a method with many limitations for very young children.
who are likely to respond to a question with a story that may or may not be related to the question, or to just say “I don’t know” (Kelley, 2009). (See Table 1 for an overview of research studies.) In the few existing studies of preschool and kindergarten children, they have been found to be better able to describe war than peace. When they describe peace in interviews, they associate it with quietness or calmness and privacy. Only occasionally do young children define or indicate peace as an absence of war, as do upper elementary and secondary students. Children’s ideas of peace, when they are 5 to 6 years old, can be considered to be in an early stage of development.

The concept of peace and the associated concept of war may be related to the individual’s development of perspective-taking (Haakvort & Oppenheimer, 1993). An awareness of different perspectives via role-taking is important to our interpersonal relations (Selman, 1980) and necessary to understanding and perceiving the world. Although we initially are unable to distinguish between points of view, by adolescence, Selman theorized mutual role-taking abilities had developed through a sequence of five levels. Haakvort and Oppenheimer suggested that peace can be well understood and described by adolescents with a high level of perspective-taking (Selman’s stage 5) as friendships and the absence of quarrels among two people, and as cooperation and the absence of war among two nations.

As one acquires perspective-taking ability, it is possible to understand how your actions will affect the attitudes of others toward you. And, you can then understand how the actions of a nation will affect the attitudes of other nations toward it. Very young children, before age six, were theorized by Selman to be at stage zero, unable to distinguish between their own and others’ points of view. Very young children can label other’s overt feelings but cannot understand cause-and-effect relations as reasons behind social actions. In stage one, between ages six to eight, Selman theorized a shift to awareness that others may have similar or different perspectives than your own. Stage one children understand that everyone’s perspective is based on personal and unique reasoning but do not coordinate perspectives. Stage two is qualitatively different, developing between ages eight and ten. Children in stage two become capable of self-reflective role taking. This stage is characterized by a self-reflective understanding that each individual is aware of the other’s perspective. Children also understand that their awareness influences their own and other’s views of each other, enabling them to form a chain of perspectives. In relation to the concept of peace, then, Hakvoort (1996, p. 4) assumed “young children initially will conceptualize peace in static, situation-related terms, dealing with peace as the absence of war (i.e. negative peace)” because they are not able to coordinate different viewpoints.

Because of the sparse research base, conclusions are drawn only rarely about children’s conceptions of peace, particularly with five and six year olds who are in kindergarten, despite the fundamental importance of this concept in social studies education. In this study, therefore, we investigated the question: “How do kindergarteners act out, and then describe, their conceptions of peace via drawings and dictated captions?”

Method

Two intact kindergarten classes totaling 41 children (aged 5.4 - 6.2 years old) served as the study’s sample. Each class was from a different elementary school in the southeastern USA.
School A’s kindergarten class included 19 children. This school’s intake population was composed of mostly (90%) European American rural and small town residents. The school served 360 students and was within 20 minutes drive of a small city of 150,000 with a mixed industrial and commercial base in addition to serving as the site of a research university. Family members of students worked in a mix of the agricultural, industrial, service, and academic sectors. Of the adults in school’s intake region, 12% were active in the military, military reserves, or National Guard. School B’s kindergarten class included 22 children in a school in the small city. Family members worked in a mix of sectors with about 18% of adults in the school’s intake region active in the military, military reserves, or National Guard. School B served a population that was 60% European American, 38% African American, 1.5% Hispanic American, and .5% other. Both schools served low and middle class families with about 40% of children qualifying for free or reduced lunches.

A researcher in each of the classrooms conducted the study with help from a research assistant in the photographing that took place during the study. The researcher worked as a visiting teacher in the classrooms for two mornings a week in weeks one to four prior to beginning the study, teaching social studies lessons focused on exploring areas found on a primary globe, so the children knew her as a familiar adult. The research assistant served as a teacher assistant in the classrooms during the same four week period.

This study began in week five in both kindergartens as the researcher privately asked each child to individually “Show me how you look when you are at peace, or feeling peaceful. Can you act out how you look and feel?” Because these are such young children, they often physically demonstrate their ideas, hence the request to show how they look and feel when at peace. The research assistant photographed these demonstrations. The children frequently were photographed by their teacher, the researcher, and the assistant, and took photos of each other with a digital camera supplied by the researcher. So, the children were used to having photographs taken as they were involved in activities. At the end of the study, as a post-assessment, the pre-task was repeated and photographed.

During both pre- and post-assessments, each child met individually with the researcher in a quiet private space near the classroom. They were used to meeting with the researcher, and with volunteers, in the private space as they often read to, or worked at an activity with, an adult.

On a second morning in week five, following the children’s initial physical demonstration of their understanding of the concept of peace the previous day, the children were individually asked to draw a scene showing peace and dictate a sentence telling the researcher what the scene depicted, creating a caption for the drawing. Each child sat in the private space with only the researcher as he or she engaged in the task. The three sources of data accomplished triangulation: physical demonstrations, drawings, and dictated captions.

In weeks six to ten, the children investigated the concept of peace. Three trade books including one identified in 2008 by the National Council for the Social Studies as a social studies notable book, were read to the children by the researcher: A Little Peace by Barbara Kerley, The Peace Book by Todd Parr, and What Does Peace Feel Like? By Vladimir Radunsky “and children just like you from around the world.” The books were chosen because they were aimed at very young children and provided concrete examples, descriptions, and often photographs, of activities demonstrating peace. Twice a week, for 45 minutes, one of the books was read or re-read, and the pictures, photos, and text in the book were discussed. The Kerley book was read
during week six, the Parr book in week seven, and the Radunsky book in week eight. Each book was re-read once during week nine and once in week ten.

In weeks six through eight, as a book was introduced, it was available for students to look at when they had free time, while in weeks nine and ten, all were available. Students were given paper “worksheets” on which they were asked to draw and dictate a caption describing peace and elements of peace following the introduction of each book. The elements of peace built upon topics described within the book, for example, “I have a little peace when . . .” (Kerley book), “Peace smells like . . .” (Parr book), “Peace sounds like . . .” (Radunsky book), “Peace is . . .” (all books). A dictated statement was recorded on the drawing by the researcher or assistant and read back to the child for verification.

The activities in which the children engaged were not limited to reading the books. Children, for example, were interested in the question posed by one child, “Does peace smell?” and examined blooming hyacinths in pots, considering how they smelled. They discussed whether a sweet-smelling flower “was peace.” Then, they identified and described other smells they thought were peaceful, with the smells of chicken nuggets and ice cream commonly mentioned. Concrete activities beyond reading the books were incorporated daily. Children physically acted out their ideas and comments such as “Peace is giving your friend a hug” and “Peace is getting to wear my soft sweater.”

In week 11, post-assessment occurred using the procedures followed in the pre-assessment.

Content analysis was used in examining the photos taken of children acting out “how you look when you are at peace, or feeling peaceful,” their drawings, and the captions. According to Gillian Rose (2001), visual images such as photographs offer complex views of the world based on the photographer’s perception, and elucidate one’s understanding of it. Photographs can capture thematic visuals and reveal societal structures and influences underlying this micro-level point of reference. Kimberly Neuendorf (2002) describes content analysis as a method utilized with data that are mainly text, images, and/or expressions written to be read and having value-laden meaning. Data generally are read for purposes of analysis from visual and written responses within contextual situations such as those found in the study’s pre- and post-photographs, drawings, and dictated statements (captions) (Krippendorf, 1980). Frequencies are identified for each final coding category.

The categorization process focused on the photos and accompanying drawings and captions (Lutz & Collins, 1993). Initial categories derived from the literature served as beginning points for the coding (Cretu, 1988; Hakvoort, 1996; Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1994; Myers-Bowman et al., 2005; Selman, 1980; Tephly, 1985) focusing on whether the photos and drawings with accompanying captions indicated that peace was (1) the absence of war, (2) quietness/calmness/privacy, (3) being nice and/or sharing, and (4) being aware of, and accounting for, other’s perspectives. Initial coding of the photos, drawings, and captions found only the data from 3 of the 40 children fit within the initial categories for the pre-assessment, while some still did not fit within the categories at post-assessment. The coding categories, therefore, were revised. Each data sample was reviewed independently by two coders to identify one to three key elements in the photos, drawings, and words in the captions (Neuendorf ). These key elements and words were listed and linked with the photos, drawings, or the captions associated with them. Next, the coders met to discuss the key element and word identifications
derived from the captions and the accompanying photo list. Further discussion reduced the key element and word identifications to an agreed upon four categories, peace is (1) aggression, (2) quietness/calmness/privacy, (3) participating in a pro-social or helping behavior, and (4) engaging in an activity I find enjoyable. Two coders who achieved 81% agreement used the four codes.

Results

Pre-Assessment: Demonstrating, Drawing, and Captioning Peace

As documented by the pre-assessment photographs taken when the children physically showed their concept of peace, all of the kindergarteners in School A and 19 (86%) of those in School B stood and assumed what was interpreted as an aggressive stance. The children threw back their shoulders, stood rigidly with some having their hands in fists, narrowed their eyes, pursed their mouths or pulled them into a grimace, and most growled. The three School B children who did not assume an aggressive posture stood in a relaxed stance with two closing their eyes and the third dropping her head onto her chest.

The next day, the children were asked to draw a scene showing peace and dictate a sentence (caption) describing what the drawing depicted. Of the 19 School A drawings, eight (42%) showed a facial grimace including a downturned mouth. Among the School B drawings, 10 (45%) showed a downturned mouth. Of the 18 drawings from both schools with grimaces, 16 (89%) accompanying captions included the word “mean” in sentences such as “Peace is you are feeling mean” and “I am mean and cranky and that is peace.” The other two captions for drawings (11%) contained downturned mouths but said “I am going to get you” and “I am going to fight you” and “fighting is going to start.” Nine drawings (22%), three from School A (16%) and six from School B (27%), showed a child with arms out and a second child nearby. Examples of the accompanying captions were “Don’t push me or I will hit you” and “Don’t shove me because I don’t like it.” Other drawings and captions contained similarly aggressive wording.

The three children from School B who had not displayed an aggressive stance when asked to physically demonstrate peace, made drawings of peaceful events such as one with a stick figure holding out an arm on which a large butterfly balanced. These drawings were accompanied by a caption interpreted as peaceful such as the one for the drawing with the butterfly which said, “Peace is when a butterfly lands on your hand.”

Investigating the Concept of Peace

During the next six weeks, as the books were read, re-read, discussed, and extended via activities and drawings, the children associated some actions with peace. The documentation presented here is intended only to give some demonstration of children’s expressions of their understandings of peace during their investigations of it. The pre- and post-assessment activities described earlier serve as the data for deriving conclusions.

Most frequently, children’s responses related to a pro-social or helping behavior with children stating, for example, that peace is when “I help Mom set the table”, “I pick up all my stuff before I get in bed and so it is easy to get around”, “I play with my dog when he wants to play,” and “People in that picture (a marketplace in Nigeria in the Kerley book) have peace.
because they are smiling at each other and get along with everybody.” The second most frequently described was engaging in an activity I find enjoyable. Here, for example, children indicated “Peace is licking a vanilla ice cream cone,” “Peace is hearing my favorite song,” and “Peace is being silly with your friend on the beach like those kids in the picture (from the Kerley book).” Third, children described quietness/calmness/privacy with examples such as “Peace is hearing my cat purring,” “Peace is squeezing my Mom,” and “Peace is that man on TV who was praying by himself.”

**Post-Assessment: Demonstrating, Drawing, and Captioning Peace**

As a post-assessment, these kindergarteners again were asked to physically show peace, draw a scene indicating peace, and caption the scene. In both schools, none of the children assumed an aggressive stance and there were no growls, grimaces, or downturned mouths, so there were no codings in the category of aggression (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Ranking in frequency in post-demonstrations, School A/School B/Total</th>
<th>Ranking in frequency in post-drawings and captions, School A/School B/Total</th>
<th>Total across post-demonstrations, drawings, and captions, School A, School B, Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>0/0/0</td>
<td>0/0/0</td>
<td>0/0/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quietness/calmness/privacy</td>
<td>5/8/13</td>
<td>3/4/7</td>
<td>8/12/20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in a pro-social or helping behavior</td>
<td>4/2/6</td>
<td>9/7/16</td>
<td>13/9/22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging in an activity I find enjoyable</td>
<td>10/12/22</td>
<td>7/11/18</td>
<td>17/23/40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Demonstrating Peace**

Among the 41 children, each demonstrated peace in a manner different from others’ demonstrations, but each had a relaxed non-aggressive posture. Smiling was part of many of the demonstrations including those of 10 children (53%) in School A and 17 (77%) in School B. So, the aggression coded in the pre-assessment was not present in the post-assessment.

“Engaging in an activity I find enjoyable” was the most frequently found category among both groups of kindergarteners (n=22, 54%) with demonstrations by 10 (53%) students from School A and 12 (55%) from School B coded in this category. Five children, 3 from School A and 2 from School B, for example, pretended they were stroking a pet. Also within this category were other responses in which children pretended they were licking an ice cream cone, eating chicken nuggets, listening to music, or laying down and reading a book. The second most frequently found category (n=21) was quietness/calmness/privacy with demonstrations by 13 children (32%), of whom five were from School A (26%) and eight from School B (36%). Most often, children pretended they were hugging a peer or parent, while a few quietly sat down or
walked about the space. The third most frequently found category was participating in pro-social or helping behaviors (n=6, 15%). As examples, five children simulated helping with a household chore, such as setting the table or pulling weeds in the family garden, while one other organized materials (crayons, markers, paper, and erasers) that had been laid on the table in a large pile.

**Drawing and Captioning Peace**

The children, next, were asked to draw a scene showing peace and to dictate a caption describing what the drawing depicted. All of the 41 drawings from both schools showed what was interpreted as a positive and non-aggressive perception of peace (see Table 2).

Eighteen of the 41 children’s drawings and captions (45%) focused on peace as associated with a range of enjoyable activities, the most frequently found category overall. Of School A’s drawings and captions, seven (37%) were coded in this category while 11 (50%) of School B’s were associated with this category. Examples include drawings and captions describing “Peace to me is going to the beach,” “Peace is when you get to go to NASCAR races”, and “I like jumping rope by myself because peace is when you got rhythm”. Participating in a pro-social or helping behavior (n=16, 39%) was the second most frequently coded category. In School A, however, this was the most frequently found category (n=9, 47%) while in School B’s sample this was the second most frequently found category (n=7, 32%). Examples of the captions were “I’m buying a new house for my Mom”, “I help my Dad with the outside work”, “Peace is remembering to change XXX’s water,” “My little sister, XXX, likes it when I show her how to throw a ball and it’s peaceful,” and “Peace is letting other kids go first on the swings.” The third category was quietness/calmness/privacy with seven drawings/captions (32%) coded into this category such as “When everybody is outside and I’m inside its quiet, and that’s peace”, and “Outside with the stars is peace.”

The physical demonstration totals for frequencies in each category (see Table 2) identify engaging in an activity I find enjoyable as most frequent (n=22, 54%), quietness/calmness/privacy as second most frequent (n=13, 32%), and participating in a pro-social or helping behavior as third most frequent (n=6, 15%). Totals for the drawings and accompanying captions show engaging in an activity I find enjoyable was most frequent (n=18, 44%) which is consistent with the finding for physical demonstrations. The second most frequent category coded for drawings and captions was participating in a pro-social or helping behavior (n=16, 39%). The pro-social category was third in the physical demonstrations. The third most frequent category coded for drawings and captions was quietness/calmness/privacy (n=7, 17%), which was second most frequent in the demonstrations.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

Very young children between ages six and eight were theorized by Selman (1980) as moving from stage 0 to stage 1 in perspective-taking. In stage 0 the focus is on one’s own point of view while recognizing that others can have different thoughts. Children in stage 0 also may confuse their own thoughts with those of others. In stage 1, children become aware that others may have similar or different perspectives than one’s own because each of us may have access to different information, but we are not capable of coordinating perspectives. Children in stage 1 are not yet ready to view their own thoughts from another person’s perspective.

The children we studied often created drawings and used captions indicating their personal perspective such as “Peace is hearing my cat purring”. They demonstrated and drew
solitary activity that was physically quiet such as lying down and looking at a book, or active such as shooting a basketball through a hoop by oneself. Each could describe his or her own perspective through the mediums used for data collection in this study. All had accomplished Selman’s (1980) stage 0 when describing the concept of peace.

Much of the data further indicated abilities indicative of Selman’s (1980) stage 1 in perspective-taking. These children recognized that others associated peace with activities and experiences sometimes similar to, and sometimes different from, their own. Peace frequently was described and demonstrated as shared with others including close family members, classmates, and friends as in “Peace is playing ball with my brother,” and “Peace is being silly on the playground with XXX”. These children acknowledged differences in views, considering those differences to be personal and unique. There were no instances, however, in which peace was described as an attempt to coordinate differing points of view, which is a limitation Selman (1980) describes as characteristic of stage 1.

This study provides limited corroboration of the first part of Hakvoort’s (1996, p. 4) assumption built on Selman’s (1980) theory, “young children initially will conceptualize peace in static, situation-related terms dealing with peace as the absence of war”. The children in the current study both demonstrated and drew peace as represented in a static situation and described it in situation-related terms so, while they acknowledged others’ differing conceptualizations, they did not attempt to coordinate them. Such coordination may not be possible for most very young children because of their limited experiences in social interaction with a wide range of individuals who have diverse perspectives, and also their limited development of inferential thinking skills. The subjects did not directly demonstrate, draw, nor describe peace as the absence of war as Hakvoort assumed, instead focusing on personally positive and satisfying experiences in the post-assessment. Because most studies have examined children’s concepts of both peace and war, one possibility is that subjects’ responses in previous studies may be biased toward connecting both concepts. Hence, children have described peace as an absence of war. Because our study focused only on the concept of peace, the children may have been able to describe peace more deeply in the post-assessment without consideration of war and violence, instead associating peace with “engaging in an activity I find enjoyable,” quietness/calmness/privacy,” and “participating in a pro-social or helping behavior.”

During the four weeks prior to beginning the study, these children exhibited few behavior problems in the classroom. There was occasional bickering among the children, but no shoving or hitting. The children sometimes complained or tattled about others’ behavior but managed to avoid or negotiate situations with little physical conflict. The display of aggression in pre-assessment physical stances and via the drawings and captions, therefore, was unexpected. As about 12% of adults in School A’s intake area and 18% in School B’s intake area had military ties, there were opportunities for the children to be aware of deployment and of the worry associated with it, because they knew someone who had been deployed. The researchers, therefore, interpreted the pre-assessment finding of aggression as possibly related to being a member of an age group born in the USA after the beginnings of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. All of the children were familiar with the word “peace” because they immediately began their physical demonstration of peace in the pre-assessment and were able to construct a drawing of peace and dictate a caption once they were given the task. It appeared that these children were interpreting peace as a form of aggression or war, perhaps because the two words,
peace and war, often are linked in conversation among adults and in the media. The aggression shown in the pre-assessment also may have been indicative of an association of peace with war such as that assumed by Hakvoort (1996) when he theorized a conception of peace as an absence of war. The prior knowledge of the concept of peace these children brought into the classroom, however, contrasted somewhat with Hakvoort’s assumption. Peace was not demonstrated and described as an absence of war, but as aggressive actions that might be found in war.

In the pre-assessments there also was a demonstration of peace as quietness/calmness/privacy by just three children, which differs from as Tephly’s (1985) finding among similarly aged children. We found the children’s pre-assessment drawings did not contain any traditional peace symbols such as olive branches as found in Cretu’s (1988) study with Romanian kindergarteners, perhaps because such symbols are not often viewed in the U.S. media. Our findings, then, differ from some of the literature perhaps because much of previous work does not sample children’s ideas at more than one point in time, and primarily uses interviews (Coughlin, et al., 2009; de Souza, Sperb, McCarthy, & Biaggio, 2006; Hakvoort & Hagglund, 2001; Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1993).

After the pre-assessment, the children had opportunities to discuss three books about peace, and draw their conceptions of peace as associated with various perspectives. They engaged in activities investigating concrete characteristics of peace, such as that engendered by the satisfaction of having eaten a favorite food like chicken nuggets, hugged a friend, stroked a pet, helped with a chore usually done by an adult such as setting the table, or experienced the relaxation of laying in the sunshine on a quiet afternoon.

As noted above, the post-assessments found no indications of what was interpreted as aggression. It is likely that, as children became engaged with considering and discussing examples of peaceful behaviors and feelings, they reconstructed their associations with the concept of peace. They may not previously have had opportunities for exploration of the concept of peace. Since adults may use peace and war together in comments, and the media also may do so, these children might not have been exposed to opportunities to conceptualize them as independent concepts. While the children in our study did not live in a violent region, they may have indirectly experienced the violence of war through hearing discussions at home or viewing violent images from Iraq or Afghanistan in the media. This may explain their initial pre-assessment aggressive demonstrations, drawings, and captions. Although none of the children mentioned war, their aggression may have indirectly addressed it.

The drawings and their captions were considered to be consistent across the sample in both schools. The children all dictated a caption while pointing out elements in the drawing that the caption was describing. Frequencies in the categories of the post-drawings and captions show some differences from those in the physical demonstrations of peace captured in photographs. In the physical demonstrations, drawings, and captions “engaging in an activity I find enjoyable,” however, was the most frequently found category (Table 2). While 37% (n=7) of School A’s drawings/captions were in this category, 50% of School B’s (n=11) were in the category. The percentage of differences was not considered large, however, because of the small numbers of students in each class.

“Quietness/calmness/privacy” was the second most frequently found category in the physical demonstrations while it was third in the drawings and captions. The codings were similar for both schools. The physical demonstration may have been a more manageable means
through which these children could convey quietness/calmness/privacy but may have been more difficult for them to describe through drawings or commentary. The inherent concreteness and physicality of the demonstrations may be more appropriate for very young children whose drawing and verbal description skills may not be well developed.

“Participating in a pro-social or helping behavior” was the third most frequently found category in the physical demonstrations, but the second in frequency in the drawings and captions. In this category, a higher percentage of School A’s drawings/captions were coded than among School B’s, but, again, the differences were not considered large. We suggest the lack of consistency between physical demonstration versus drawings and captions partially may be due to the difficulty of simulating participation in pro-social or helping behaviors such as “I am buying a new house for my Mom”. These behaviors, however, can be drawn and captioned more easily. In the drawing associated with the above caption, Mom, her new house, and the child were drawn while the caption described buying the house.

Three prevalent themes in research investigating children’s development of the concept of peace from pre-school through secondary school were identified by Hakvoort and Hagglund (2001): the absence of war, the absence of quarrels, and social activities. As previously noted, our findings do not indicate these children defined peace as an absence of war. In our study, the children also did not focus on the second theme, an absence of quarrels. Most students focused on positive demonstrations and drawings that were not in response to a negative such as “Peace is smelling the rain when it starts” or “Peace is hearing my cat purring.” The third theme, social activities, was prominent, for example, “I help Mom set the table” and “Peace is when you get to go to the NASCAR races.” Responses, however, also identified private and personal activities that were associated with peace such as “Peace is laying on the hot sand at the beach” and “Peace is putting my foot in the fur in my boot.”

The totals (Table 2) suggest physical demonstration, drawing, and captioning may encourage children to highlight different aspects of their understanding of the concept of peace. Researchers should consider using all three data collection methods. The addition of interviews, which have been used by most other researchers, also should be considered as different aspects of children’s concept of peace may be accessed via interviews. The research on the effectiveness of data collection with such young children, however, indicates there are limitations to their understanding of interview questions and their ability to respond to the question asked (Kelley, 2009).

The study results cannot be generalized, but questions arise that should be further investigated since the findings from both schools were similar despite some differences in school population characteristics. Questions arising from this study include, “Are today’s very young children interpreting peace as aggression and war?” “What factors are influencing the interpretations expressed?” and “Can opportunities to discuss and carry out relevant, age-appropriate activities have an effect on very young children’s conceptions of peace?” This study goes beyond previously reported studies which mostly are limited to one-time child interviews addressing both of the concepts of peace and war with many investigating children who have experienced political violence. Methods are suggested by the study for investigating very young children’s concept of peace and also possibilities for influencing the characteristics they associate with peace via the curriculum. The conclusions here have implications for
kindergarten social studies curriculum regarding how educators can access children’s conception of peace and build activities enabling them to explore and deepen their conception.

Peace is a complex and difficult concept central to educators’ emphasis on civic ideals and civic action. Today’s media strongly impact very young children in the USA, so may influence their concept of peace at an early age. Because the existing research base with very young children such as the kindergarteners in this study is so limited, social studies educators need more and deeper description of their concept of peace. Such description might be used to consider the role of the social studies curriculum in building a meaningful understanding of peace.

References


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