

SHADOWS AND MARKS: THE POTENTIAL NARRATIVE OF CHILDREN ABOUT WAR

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Abstract

The war in Ukraine is in the order of the day. Every day we are exposed to information and images that tell of war scenarios and we all, without exception, absorb different war situations. In the educational landscape, the question arises whether or not we should talk to children about this issue, namely about what they see or hear on television and other media. The document "Talking about War", organized by the Portuguese Psychologists' Association, starts by making it clear that the best thing to do is to be available to listen to the children's concerns, talk to them and answer their doubts, trying to clarify them, keep them informed and correct misconceptions. The depth of this approach depends on the age of the child, their maturity and degree of development, as well as the likelihood of hearing from other sources or in the family relationship with the conflict (UNICEF, 2022). We understand that it is a subject that should also be approached in the classroom, with some care and reflection, allowing children to understand inherent concepts and associated practices. We also understand that, in parallel, there should be a concern to provide new learning opportunities, leading children to want to participate in building a better world, thus being true peace builders. This can be done by trying to answer questions such as What is war? Why is there a war? Will this war come to Portugal? What and who are the refugees? How can war end? among others. This article seeks to discuss the results of a research developed with young children, about their perceptions regarding the war in Ukraine and war scenarios. The study is qualitative in nature and made use of audio-recorded reflective dialogues. The participants were 24 children aged 7 and 8 years old, from the 2nd grade of a public school in the north of Portugal. In a perspective of peace building and education for non-violence, the results show that these children have a broad notion of what war is, and the scenarios associated to it, revealing that they are aware of the violation of human rights. They also show an attempt to find different possible solutions, such as dialogue and empathy, thinking about the advantages and disadvantages of each one.

Keywords: War, refugees, children's conceptions, reflective dialogues.

1 INTRODUCTION

This article presents a proposal for the production of reflective dialogues, as well as an analysis on which the children's discursive positions can be explained when taking a position on a current social problem, in this case the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. It is part of a research project whose objective is to show the discursive positions on the social representations that children have regarding the situation of the conflict experienced in the middle of the 21st century, between those two countries.

The culture of peace, according to Irina Bokova, the Director-General of UNESCO (2009-2017), would involve "overcoming the barriers between North, South, East and West and embracing coexistence and equality as fundamental values of humanity" (as cited in [1], p.8). More than a decade has passed since the publication of the document Culture of Peace: from reflection to action. Balance of the International Decade for the Promotion of the Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Benefit of the Children of the World by UNESCO in 2010. Besides the fact that we are still in the aftermath of the pandemic (COVID-19), which still does not release people from the use of the mask and other safety measures, we are again confronted with a delicate situation that could constitute a threat to world peace.

We all feel vulnerable in the face of war scenarios. We are constantly exposed to information and images that tell us about these scenarios and all of us, without exception, manage what we hear and see. As the Portuguese Psychologists' Association points out, "since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army, we are confronted with images of resistance, but also of bombings, destroyed buildings (including buildings of assistance and support organisations to the populations), wounded citizens, separated families and people trying to flee the country" [2, p.3]. Children are even more vulnerable to these scenarios, and in family and educational settings, questions arise about whether or

not we should talk to children about this issue, particularly about what they see on television and other media. In fact, children and young people question and wonder what war means. Adults feel doubts about what to tell them and how to talk about it, as emphasized by the Portuguese Psychologists' Association [3]. As stated in the document of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) "replacing the secular culture of war by a culture of peace requires a prolonged educational effort to modify reactions to adversity and build a development model that can suppress the causes of conflict" [4, p.12].

In fact, in the educational panorama, the question of whether or not to talk to children about war and war refugees arises. The document "Talking about War", organized by the Portuguese Psychologists' Association [3], starts by making it clear that the best thing to do is to be available to listen to children's concerns, talk to them and answer their questions, seeking to clarify them, keep them informed and correct misconceptions. In fact, as journalist Clara Soares clarifies, "if a war is difficult for adults to understand, it will be even more difficult for children", so it is important to "adapt the language to the age and personality of each one and to know how to listen is also part of the package of survival measures, because the youngest are far from immune to what is happening around them" [5]. However, the core of this approach obviously depends on the child's age, maturity and level of development, as well as the likelihood that they will hear, from other sources, information about this armed conflict that puts at risk the lives of many human beings. It is also true that in this explanation we acknowledge that we should avoid resorting to stereotypes, since in communicating with others, we should "provide credible information" so as "not to encourage revenge or anger", limiting ourselves to "expressing what we think about the purpose of war, how we feel about war in general and promoting reflection on non-violent ways of resolving conflicts" [2, p.10].

On the other hand, war also provokes other types of behaviour besides destruction. We are talking about pro-social behaviours, since it challenges us to "greater civic engagement and participation", to show "more gratitude for what we have, compassion and solidarity, more advocacy for freedom and dignity, greater respect for diversity and human rights", as well as to have a better perception of how "we are all connected and how we relate to each other" [2, p.11]. We can state that, as human beings we "access the world by representing it to ourselves, infusing meaning into the stimuli we receive. Through our practices and discourses - which are both sayings and doings - we produce and reproduce reality" [6, p.91].

In view of the above, we understand that war is a subject that should be approached in the classroom, with some care and reflection, allowing children to understand its inherent concepts and associated practices. We also believe that, in parallel, there must be the concern to provide new learning opportunities, leading the children to want to participate in building a better world, being true builders of peace.

This article aims to discuss the results of a research developed with young children, about their perceptions regarding the war in Ukraine and the war scenarios, also focusing on the issue of refugees. As such we consider a perspective of building a culture of peace and education for non-violence. The study is of a qualitative nature and reflexive dialogues were used. The results show that these children have a broad notion of what war is and the scenarios associated to it, revealing that they are aware of the violation of human rights. They also show an attempt to find different solutions, which they consider to be possible, such as dialogue and empathy, thinking about the advantages and disadvantages of each one.

2 METHODOLOGY

In the research that illustrates this proposal, the units of analysis were the dialogues produced by the children in the discussion groups in which they were involved. The study of their speeches allowed us to account the different positions that they themselves structured/assumed in relation to the issue being studied. This process required the application of qualitative techniques that we call practices and not techniques. We designate them as practices because they were flexible in their planning and execution, always at the service of the production process itself and not the opposite.

The participants in this study were 24 children of the 1st cycle of basic education, aged 6 and 7 years old, attending the 2nd year of school in the 2021/2022 school year, in a public school in the north of Portugal.

The qualitative study used reflective dialogues which were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. It sought to answer questions such as: What is war? Why is there a war? Will this war come to Portugal? What and who are the refugees? How can war end? among others. The corpus, resulting from the narratives, was subjected to content analysis [8] [9], using software supporting this technique, namely MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020 [10].

The children's dialogues, carried out in groups, were audio recorded, becoming the relevant discursive raw material, whose analysis served us to account for their collective representations and images about the war. In each group meeting, the children talked and questioned each other, thus generating the discursive texture about the subject under study. The dialogues were mediated by the teacher, and her role was fundamental for the development of reflection, but her presence only served to support the mediation, without influencing the rhythm and form of the discussion among the children. As Brito [7] points out, the teacher should make sure that the topics which are part of the problem of the study are discussed, but should avoid limiting and imposing topics, giving his/her personal opinion, providing contexts and/or references, discussing the opinions or situations in which arguments or ideas are developed, justifying or invalidating points of view. In this sense, the teacher should listen without taking part in the discussion, and when speaking should do so in order to launch stimulus sentences and/or ask questions.

3 RESULTS

The results of this study allowed us to present children's discursive positions on war and war refugees. The objective was to disclose the discourse and the discursive positions taken by 24 children about the social representations they have of this problem on a global scale. In this sense, what mattered to us was to produce information from the presentation of the texts generated, considering a set of questions that the children themselves raised in the discussion groups.

3.1 The case of childhood discourses about war and refugees

We reiterate that, after the constitution of the discussion groups, the teacher made it clear to the children that her role and her presence in the group would be that of a mediator, noting that she was not part of the discussion, but that she would be present to ensure that the questions put by the children would not be repeated and that the topics would result in a voluntary way. From the five groups that were formed, in a first moment, a set of questions emerged. After drafting all the questions, the teacher mediated the groups in order to eliminate those that were similar. In a second moment a reflective dialogue between the children was promoted. All the children had the opportunity to give their opinion on each of the questions, making sure that their answers were spontaneous. The teacher was always vigilant so that her interventions, when necessary, did not break the discursive texture of the group of children. If we consider the topics under analysis, the result of the questions that concern the children is evident in a large matrix, as shown in table 1.

Table 1. Childhood questions about war and refugees.

<i>Topics</i>	<i>Questions</i>
War	How did the war start? Does everyone agree with the war? Why is it happening? How do people manage to film moments of war? Why do many countries support Ukraine? Why are men aged 18 to 60 not allowed to leave Ukraine?
Refugees	When people see their city, their homes and their lives in danger, where do they flee to? Why do refugees go more to Poland and not so much to other countries? What help are countries offering?

On each of these topics, and considering the various issues under discussion, we present the reflective discourses of some children in tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. Childhood Text Fragments - Discursive inference about War.

Topics	Questions	Children's Reflective Discourses
War	How did the war start?	<p>The war started because [someone] wanted to rule Ukraine and since they wouldn't let them, then this war started.</p> <p>I think it was to have more space.</p> <p>Because [someone] ordered the military to destroy Ukraine.</p> <p>[someone] wants to destroy Ukraine because (...) wants to conquer land (...).</p>
	Does everyone agree with the war? Why is it happening?	<p>No, because they shouldn't kill people because that's very ugly.</p> <p>No. (...) People in Russia also can no longer send the things they do to other countries (...)</p> <p>In Russia there are also people who don't like the war.</p> <p>They are also suffering.</p> <p>Some want peace, they don't want to fight, because otherwise they might die and they don't want to move from country to country.</p> <p>Because there are Russians who have Ukrainian friends and they don't want to kill their friends.</p> <p>Not all [people] agree, because not all of them like war and they don't like to have a gun thrown at them.</p>
	How do people manage to film moments of war?	<p>The journalists are well hidden, they use drones, satellites...</p> <p>Because they went in helicopters and when there was a special moment they [the journalists] would come down to film better.</p> <p>They were able to film because (...) they filmed through the holes.</p>
	Why do many countries support Ukraine?	<p>Because they are not the ones who started this war and Ukraine was innocent. The other countries believe that Ukraine is right.</p> <p>It's because Russians are more and Ukrainians are less.</p> <p>Because Russia is the country where everything started and the other countries don't think it's right (...). And then the other countries stood by the innocent country.</p>
	Why are men aged 18 to 60 not allowed to leave Ukraine?	<p>To protect their country, to support their country. Women, as they have children to raise and care for, can leave.</p> <p>To defend their country and when the war is over women come back with their children, safe and well.</p> <p>They have to defend their country because if they leave, someone else can take their country.</p> <p>Because men are stronger and if no one stays in Ukraine to defend it, the country is left alone.</p> <p>Men have to protect the country because women can't because they risk... they have to leave the country to protect their children.</p> <p>The women who are not pregnant and who have no children to look after also stay there to fight for their country.</p> <p>If everyone left the country, who would stay there to defend it? Then the whole country would be destroyed and they would have nowhere to live.</p>

Observing the table and analyzing the reflective speeches on these issues we realize that the children think of this conflict as a "land conquest" or even for the invading country to have "more space". The sovereignty, or supremacy of one nation over another, is also indicated when they say that "the war started because [someone] wanted to rule (...)". Far from understanding the geopolitical issues, which are inherent to any conflict, it can be said that there is some scientificity in these perceptions.

There is a consensus among the children that not all people agree with this conflict situation, giving reasons like: "killing is very ugly"; people "are suffering"; "they don't want to fight because they might die". This reasons that are perfectly acceptable in situations of this kind. There is a very clear notion that war harms all people, as well as the space they occupy and that it is something very negative, and can

cause discomfort, even for those who might be friends: "because there are Russians who have Ukrainian friends and they don't want to kill their friends".

In the children's opinion, it was journalists who were able to film some of the moments of war that we see in the media, using certain means, such as: "satellites"; "drones"; "helicopters"; and "being well hidden and filming through holes". It seems to us that the children believe that by being 'well hidden', people are safe.

For these children, most countries support Ukraine because it is "innocent", "they are less [people]", and they believe that Ukraine is right in this armed conflict. They condemn the action of a stronger and more powerful country invading a less strong and smaller country.

Regarding the idea that men aged between 18 and 60 should or should not leave their country, the children consider that this is due to the fact that someone "stronger" should stay behind to "support", "protect" and "defend" the country which is under attack. There was also reference to women, especially "women who are not pregnant and do not have children to take care of", who "also stay there and fight for their country". It seems obvious from the children's speeches that someone has to attend to the problem and participate in the conflict because "if everyone left the country, who would be left there to defend it? Then the whole country would be destroyed and they would have nowhere to live.

Table 3. Childhood Text Fragments - Discursive inference about Refugees.

Topics	Questions	Children's Reflective Discourses
Refugees	When people see their city, their homes and their lives in danger, where do they flee to?	<p>They hide underground.</p> <p>They hide in factories, underground stations, in relatives' homes in other cities or underground.</p> <p>They flee to holes under the ground... to the basements of buildings, to churches.</p> <p>They also flee to other countries, to the countries that border their country, but they flee most to Poland and then they go to others further... away.</p> <p>They also come to Portugal. I have already seen a girl here in XXX. I tried to talk to her, but I couldn't understand anything she was saying and she also couldn't understand anything I was saying. I saw her parents and her parents could speak, more or less Portuguese, with a different accent. I couldn't play with her because I couldn't understand her and she couldn't understand me.</p> <p>I also met a family of Ukrainians in XXX. My mother couldn't understand anything she said either, but then with the mobile phone she was able to understand and speak something.</p> <p>Yeah, people protect themselves in bunkers. They built bunkers... which are holes under the ground and they are living there.</p> <p>Some continue to live in their houses, even if they are destroyed... they stay there, in a little corner and pray a lot that the war will end.</p> <p>There are also many Ukrainians who have nowhere to go...</p>
	Why do refugees go more to Poland and not so much to other countries?	<p>They also go to the other countries that border Ukraine, but they go more to Poland, because it offers help, it's bigger and gives them more conditions for everything. They also go to the others, except for Belarus (...) and they couldn't go to a country that is helping to destroy their country.</p> <p>They go to other countries, but they go more to Poland because they have more security (...) and the people of Poland welcome them and have more conditions to live in.</p> <p>They go to Poland because it is a country that borders Ukraine. And they can't go to a country that is helping to destroy their country.</p> <p>Because Poland helps more, it's bigger... they also go to the other countries, but this one is closer.</p>

	What help are countries offering?	<p>A lot of people are helping; my family has already given some things...</p> <p>People are sending clothes, food, everything they need... they send weapons and medicine.</p> <p>We gave food and I gave some of my toys.</p> <p>My family also gave money; there are also families who give houses to Ukrainians. There are a lot of people helping. Some give them food, others let them go to their homes and also stay in other places... like this... in tents, in abandoned houses... the Ukrainians get those houses and stay there... it is better than having nowhere to go.</p> <p>Many people are asking and collecting things and money to help them. Countries are helping.</p> <p>The presidents of other countries are also helping... and there are also other people from other countries who went to fight with them to help defend their country.</p> <p>Some are fine because they went to live with their families living in other countries, others were helped by good people..., but there are also many who play nice, say they want to help and (...) do them harm.</p> <p>People are being left with nothing... they had to leave everything in their country.</p> <p>Many are deceived by bad people, but there are also many good people who are helping them.</p> <p>The other countries are giving people places to live and letting the kids go to school.</p> <p>They also give jobs... some Ukrainians are already working in the countries they went to.</p> <p>Some countries are also sending weapons to make Ukraine stronger.</p>
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The children, as we can see, have a fairly clear idea of what a refugee is, based mainly on what they see and hear in the media. There were also references to direct contacts with war refugees, with one child highlighting that language becomes an obstacle to communication and play and another adding that the language problem has been easily overcome with the use of mobile phones.

Appealing to the more humanist side of this conflict, it was also mentioned that some people did not flee their country, but remained "hidden underground", "in factories", "in metro stations", "in family homes, in other cities" and "in bunkers". Another child mentioned that some people "continue to live in their houses, even though they are destroyed... they stay there, in a little corner and pray a lot that the war will end". This leads us to believe that this war scenario is having a strong impact on children and their perception of the distinction between good and bad actions and between situations of despair and hope, for example.

Children have, above all, the idea that refugees are people who had to flee their country to be safe. And the perception is also conveyed that one of the countries closest to the country in conflict is a place that welcomes these people and helps them with their rights to provision. The aid includes jobs, housing, food, and schooling for children, money, weapons and medicines. Another idea expressed was to disagree with some people who "deceive" and are "bad" towards the refugees, showing concern and lack of understanding.

3.2 Children's messages to end the war

After the debate, the teacher asked the children to think about what they would do if they could leave a message to end the war. From the analysis of the speeches we can see that the children are aware that this war has no sense, demanded that it should stop immediately, questioning: "Why are they destroying the world, if we live in the world? We don't deserve this".

The children also recognize that there is someone, an adult perhaps, who has a rigid posture and imposes rules of conquest, domination and control over others. They are aware that those others have the same rights as the invader, by stating, for example: "You must not do to others what you don't want them to do to you".

Once again a discourse of indignation is evident, as they state: "You are being very foolish to start this war... because you are harming innocent people". The need to respect diversity and human rights is thus perceived. In a very polite way they make an appeal for hope and peace, asking: "Can you stop this war, please?!".

We can clearly see that the binomial war-peace disturbs the thought of these children who try to find solutions, not always through peace, to solve this conflict ("have a duel of swords"; "kill the person responsible"; among other solutions...).

4 CONCLUSIONS

When talking about a war situation that involves humanitarian issues, as we are currently experiencing, given the amount and diversity of information, conveyed by both the mass media and social networks, it is important that children develop cognitive and affective tools that allow them to manage, understand and assimilate this information, as pointed out by the Portuguese Psychologists Order [2] and UNESCO [4]. We believe that war can be dealt with in different ways, and within the classroom the teacher's responsibility is increased. Questioning children about what's going on in the world creates opportunities to think about and question the child's place in that context. Although these children do not experience this conflict at first hand, they certainly take its effects on board and develop empathy for those who are actually experiencing it.

The construction of a culture of peace implies developing skills that make it possible to resolve conflicts, thinking in a non-violent situation. To resort to dialogue, negotiation, mediation, creating awareness that war and conflict situations cannot be acceptable in contemporary society. These children, through their reflective speeches, tried to demonstrate precisely that, pointing out assertive thoughts, attitudes of tolerance, respect and solidarity towards others.

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