



## Research Article

# Art as a Window to Emotions: A Study on the Impact of Conflict on Children's Drawings

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## ABSTRACT



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This research investigates how students from two different backgrounds in a conflict-affected area—one group being internally displaced (IDP) and the other residing in permanent homes—express their emotions through art. The study aims to understand the emotional experiences of these students and explore the potential therapeutic benefits of art for children in conflict-affected areas. Two experiments were conducted: in the first, students drew freely without specific instructions; in the second, they were asked to express their emotions through their drawings and provide reasons for their choices. In the first experiment, students mostly used dark and dull colors, suggesting feelings of sadness and anxiety. In the second experiment, IDP students used vibrant colors reflecting resilience, while town students used monochromatic shades likely due to their recent experiences with conflict. Living conditions and recent traumatic events significantly influence the emotional expressions in students' artwork. Art-based interventions can be tailored to address their unique emotional needs.

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## Introduction

Millions of people worldwide are currently displaced within their own countries due to factors like forced relocations (Rusu, 2017; Alobo, 2016). This paper compares the drawings of students who fled their homes to avoid armed clashes to those of students whose permanent residence was unaffected by displacement in post-coup Myanmar in 2021. It focuses particularly on a conflict-affected area in Pekon Township in Southern Shan State, the largest state in eastern part of Myanmar. The study, which is based on experimental research analyzing children's drawings, found differences in the use of color and imagery when children were told to draw anything they wanted compared to when they were instructed to express their feelings in their drawing. This challenges previous research, which tend to provide a more simplified version of the relationship between color and imagery versus emotional mood of children and helps us reassess the role of arts as a therapeutic approach to children whose lives are in constant danger.

### Contextual Background: Educational Initiatives in a Conflict-Affected Township

This research is based on the experiences of an educator coordinating educational initiatives in a township in Shan State, Myanmar, following a significant political event in February 2021. The educator visited the township during a local festival in April 2021, a period marked by nonviolent protests that

encountered severe military responses, leading to numerous arrests, torture, and even deaths. The situation escalated quickly, and armed conflict erupted, causing the displacement of many civilians who sought refuge in the jungle. The researcher found himself among the displaced individuals, witnessing the dire conditions faced by vulnerable groups, including the elderly, women, and the children in the region. Despite opposition from the military junta, the researcher decided to help internally displaced persons (IDPs) by establishing the Pekon Board of Education, which includes 80 community schools and 12,000 children. As a result of the war's destructive effect on the educational landscape, the regular operation of schools in Pekon Township became a distant possibility. The military junta controlled approximately 25% of Pekon Township, mostly in the urban areas, while revolutionary armed groups governed the remaining 75% of the country, mostly rural territory and IDP camps. Even though schools in rural areas were revived through the combined efforts of teachers participating in Civil Disobedience Movements (CDM) and volunteer educators, urban students had to turn to private tuitions or home-based learning arrangements due to the lack of official school openings. This pressing educational challenge serves as the foundation for this research project, which investigates the artistic expressions of students from two distinct groups, urban students who live in permanent homes and students who live in internally displaced camps, within these conflict-affected areas.

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## Background: The Impact of Conflict and Displacement on Education in Myanmar

The military coup that occurred in Myanmar on 1 February 2021 has led to a nation-wide anti-military resistance, and resulted in massive death, injury, and property destruction. Approximately two million people have been displaced, including children of school age who have been forced to abandon their homes and schools. Eight to ten million children in Myanmar lost access to education as a consequence of the February 2021 military coup ([ispmyanmar.com](http://ispmyanmar.com), 2023).

According to Institute of Security and Policy (2023), an independent research institute based in Chaig Mai, Thailand, there have been approximately 8,100 armed conflicts in Myanmar to date, resulting in a significant number of IDPs, with only 198 of 330 townships considered to be politically stable ([ispmyanmar.com](http://ispmyanmar.com), 2023). The conflicts have also resulted in the destruction of approximately 60,000 homes and the loss of education for many students. Before the coup in Myanmar, in the 2019-2020 academic year, there were over 9.2 million students enrolled in the KG-12 education system. However, by the 2022-2023 academic year, the number of enrolled students had significantly dropped to only 2.3 million ([Elevenmyanmar.com](http://Elevenmyanmar.com), 2023). The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) has identified Myanmar as one of the top countries facing attacks on its education sector. According to Education Cannot Wait (2023), the ongoing conflicts in Myanmar have resulted in approximately 17 million students losing access to education ([Wait, 2023](http://Wait, 2023)). Additionally, it is estimated that approximately 300,000 to 500,000 university students are participating in the civil disobedience movement ([ispmyanmar.com](http://ispmyanmar.com), 2023).

Pekon Township, located in the South Shan State of Myanmar, is home to over one hundred thousand people from various minority ethnic groups, including the Kayan, Shan, Kayah, Paoh, Inn Thar, and others. The township is renowned for its scenic beauty, with Inle Lake, the city of Taunggyi, and Kakku Pagodas serving as prominent tourist attractions. However, the township has plunged into violence following the coup in 2021 after the Myanmar military (known as the State Administration Council, or SAC) cracked down on popular protesters. Young protesters formed a resistance group (known as the People Defense Force, or PDF) with the help of existing ethnic armed groups to defend themselves from the military's atrocities and to defeat the military. As a consequence, the township has received a disproportionate share of armed clashes, airstrikes, and heavy artillery, which has disrupted the education of the children in Pekon Township.

Before the coup, over 30,000 KG-12 students were enrolled in 202 schools. The military coup in 2021 led to the closure of all schools. The ongoing conflict and political unrest have not only disrupted the children's education, but also negatively impacted their physical and emotional security.

### Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to examine and compare the emotional responses and artistic expressions of students from internally displaced person (IDP) homes and students from stable homes in a war-torn region, specifically Myanmar. By conducting two experiments that involve free drawing and drawing with emotional prompts, this research aims to understand how living conditions, experiences, and recent traumatic events influence the art produced by these two groups of students. Additionally, this study seeks to explore the potential therapeutic benefits of artistic expression for children

in conflict-affected settings and how art-based interventions can be tailored to their unique emotional needs.

This research study is intended to engage a diverse audience, including academic researchers, art educators, child psychologists, and humanitarian organizations with an interest in understanding the emotional and artistic expressions of children living in conflict-affected regions. For academic readers, this study offers insights into how children from IDP homes and stable homes in conflict zones differ in their responses to trauma and displacement, particularly through their artistic expressions. Through the findings, we aim to help educators and child psychologists working with these children gain a deeper understanding of the emotional impact of conflict and displacement. Moreover, humanitarian organizations operating in such regions can find implications for their programs and interventions aimed at supporting the emotional well-being of these children. We hope that our research will shed light on the potential of art-based interventions and creative programs in helping children cope with the emotional challenges posed by conflict and displacement.

### Implications for Practice/Policy/Future Research

The findings highlight the potential of art therapy in supporting the emotional well-being of children in conflict zones. Future research should focus on larger, more diverse samples and incorporate methods like interviews and focus groups.

### Plain-language summary

This research examines how students from two different backgrounds in a conflict-affected area in Myanmar express their emotions through art. One group consists of internally displaced students (IDP) living in temporary camps, while the other group consists of students living in permanent homes.

The study involved two experiments. In the first experiment, students were asked to draw freely without any specific instructions. Most students used dark and dull colors, indicating feelings of sadness and anxiety. Few drawings showed positive emotions. In the second experiment, students were asked to express their emotions through their drawings and explain their reasons. This experiment revealed differences between the two groups. IDP students used more vibrant colors, reflecting their resilience and hope, while town students used more monochromatic shades, likely due to their recent experiences with conflict.

The study found that living conditions and recent traumatic events significantly influence the emotional expressions in the students' artwork. The research highlights the potential therapeutic benefits of art for children in conflict-affected areas, suggesting that art-based interventions can be tailored to address their unique emotional needs. This research is important for educators, child psychologists, and humanitarian organizations. It provides insights into how art can be used to understand and support the emotional well-being of children living in conflict zones. The findings can help develop better art-based programs to help these children cope with their emotional challenges.

### Research Questions

1. How do students from IDP homes and students from stable homes in a war-torn region differ in their emotional responses and artistic expressions when given the freedom to draw without specific instructions?
2. To what extent do specific drawing instructions, encouraging students to express their emotions, affect the colours, imagery and symbols used by these two groups of students?

3. What implications do the findings of this study have for the development of art-based interventions and creative programs intended to assist children in conflict-affected environments in coping with emotional challenges?

#### Literature review

Drawings have been widely accepted as an effective nonverbal medium for children to communicate about their feelings, thoughts, and past experiences (Kellogg, 1970). They serve as a visual representation of the individuals' experiences, providing insight into individuals' emotional states (Rusu, 2017). Drawings allow researchers and practitioners to obtain a greater understanding of the emotional responses of children living conflict areas (Hayne, 1998). According to (Malchiodi, 2018), children are able to successfully convey and understand their emotional states when they express themselves creatively through artistic mediums such as drawings, paintings, and other visual arts. According to (Elliot, 2015), colors play a key part in the expression of emotions in art, with warm and cool colors often being connected with specific moods. Children are able to symbolically and nonverbally express and transmit their emotional states by intentionally utilizing colors in their artwork. Warm colors, such as red and orange, are often associated with intensity, passion, or anger, whereas cool colors, such as blue and green, may convey a sense of calm, quietness or sadness.

Furthermore, the imagery and symbols used in drawings provide a better knowledge of complex emotional states and assist individuals to access and process their own feelings (Lusebrink, 2004). Certain images or visual symbols have personal and cultural significance, allowing individuals to express difficult-to-express emotions verbally (Lusebrink, 2004). For instance, the act of drawing a house may serve as a symbolic depiction of familial ties and values. On the other hand, drawings of individuals or humans can offer insights into anxieties, joys, aspirations, and grief, in addition to their connections to the world and others (Hashemi, 2011). By looking at the pictures and symbols in children's drawings, researchers and practitioners can learn a lot about their feelings and psychological well-being.

Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of art therapy to address children's emotional stresses. According to (Malchiodi, 2018), art therapy is becoming increasingly regarded as an effective technique that makes use of artistic approaches to foster emotional healing and self-expression. Individuals, especially children, are given the opportunity to express and work through their feelings, as well as explore their inner worlds, in a setting that is both safe and nonverbal (Klorer, 2017). Drawings, paintings, and other artistic forms are effective instruments for self-discovery and self-expression when used in art therapy (Cathy & Reynolds, 2018). Artistic expression provides individuals with a unique means of communicating their emotional states, especially when verbal expression is difficult or insufficient.

Within the framework of art therapy, colors, imagery, and symbolism all possess major therapeutic implications (Elliot, 2015). Colors may inspire specific emotional responses, and art therapists frequently encourage individuals to use colors deliberately to describe their emotions. By associating certain colors with particular emotions, individuals are able to communicate and examine their inner feelings through their color picking and application. Art therapy allows individuals to use imagery and symbols to go deeper into their emotional experiences (Malchiodi, 2018). Symbols enable the visualization and expression of complex emotions, providing powerful opportunities for self-expression and self-discovery. Symbols

allow individuals to convey and examine their internal experiences, allowing them to process and gain insight into their emotions, thoughts, and traumas.

The meanings given to specific images and colors however do not have a universal application. Understanding the cultural context is necessary when analyzing the drawings of children from different backgrounds, especially in conflict-affected areas. According to (Haroz et al., 2017), children's emotional experiences and the ways in which they express those experiences through artistic mediums are significantly impacted by cultural norms, values, and beliefs. It is possible for children to represent and symbolically express their experiences and feelings in a variety of ways, each of which is a reflection of the distinct cultural backgrounds and perspectives from which they come. For example, the research conducted by (Claudia Catani, 2008) on war-traumatized refugee children and adolescents from Yugoslavia found that cultural influences played a significant part in determining how the participants expressed their trauma and the symbols that they used in their artwork as a result of their experiences. According to that research, children's drawings are typically influenced by their immediate environment, which includes their daily lives, interactions with family and peers, and exposure to local culture. For example, the artwork depicted their family experiences, including separations and reunions, reflecting the impact of their immediate environment. And symbols related to the war, such as tanks and soldiers, were prevalent, showing the direct influence of their exposure to conflict.

Similarly, (Marianne Dalen, 2014) examined the drawings of refugee children and stressed the significance of cultural understanding for interpreting the children's emotional experiences through the use of cultural symbols, themes of homeland and identity, coping methods, depiction of traumatic situation. There are many different ways in which children's drawings might display the cultural influences that they have been exposed to. (Cathy & Reynolds, 2018) explored the emotional content seen in children's unprompted drawings in non-war-torn areas and underlined the necessity of addressing the cultural context in which drawings are generated and interpreted as children from diverse cultural backgrounds frequently integrated symbols and practices specific to their heritage, like religious symbols or traditional rituals, to convey their emotional experiences. (Maureen Fordham, 2001) also stressed the significance of contextual factors in comprehending young children's artwork and the need to analyze drawings in relation to the child's environment and experiences. For instance, in cases where children had experienced natural disasters, their drawings often included depictions of damaged homes or communities, reflecting their emotional responses to these traumatic events. By examining the cultural backgrounds of children, researchers can obtain a deeper comprehension of the symbols, imagery, and themes present in their drawings, enabling better understanding of their emotional expressions.

Assessing children's drawings from different cultural backgrounds not only provides a more thorough comprehension of their emotional experiences, but also to a more comprehensive and culturally sensitive approach to research and practice. By understanding and valuing cultural differences, researchers can better support the emotional well-being of children and ensure culturally acceptable interventions (Haroz et al., 2017). Therefore, it is important to take into account these cultural influences when exploring children's drawings because they reflect different ways in which children express and control their emotions in their cultural contexts.



## Theoretical Framework

This study employs insights from the Color and Emotional Expression Theory to analyze the emotional states of children from internally displaced persons (IDP) camps and those residing in stable homes in conflict-affected areas of Myanmar. Research by Boyatzis and Varghese (1994) has shown that children's choice of colors in their drawings can reflect their inner emotional states, with warm colors (such as red, orange, and yellow) often associated with positive emotions like happiness and excitement, and cool colors (such as blue, green, and purple) typically linked to negative emotions like sadness and fear. By examining the use of colors in children's drawings, this framework facilitates an assessment of their emotional well-being and the impact of their living conditions and traumatic experiences on their emotional expressions.

Elliot and Maier's (2014) research further supports the understanding of color-emotion associations, demonstrating that colors can influence psychological functioning, including emotions and behavior. In this study, the drawings of IDP students and town students will be analyzed to identify the predominant use of warm or cool colors and to interpret these choices in the context of their respective living conditions and experiences with conflict. This approach aims to uncover the emotional impact of displacement and trauma on these children and highlight the potential therapeutic benefits of art-based interventions tailored to their unique emotional needs. By focusing on the colors used in the drawings, this theoretical framework provides a straightforward yet powerful method for understanding and supporting the emotional well-being of children in conflict-affected areas.

## Methods

### Setting

This experimental research project is based on the content analysis of the drawings of two different groups of students in the same conflict affected areas in Myanmar. The first group of students are currently displaced from their homes due to armed clashes, while the second group of students still reside in their permanent homes. The two groups of students in this study are located in Pekon Township, southern Shan State, Myanmar, but they are approximately 36 miles apart. Their living conditions and experiences, however, are significantly different. The first group of students are living in IDP camps in small tents in the jungle. The second group, on the other hand, lives in permanent housing in a military-controlled area. Some of the group members residing in permanent homes were previously displaced, but have since returned home, whereas the group that has been displaced has not been able to return home because of the ongoing armed clashes, the destruction of their homes and villages, and the dangers posed by landmines.

### Participants

The study included a total of 84 middle school students: 42 of them resided in IDP camps and the remaining 42 of them resided in permanent housing and attended schools run by the community since none of the formal schools are not able to open due to armed conflict in the area. The students from both groups were given the same drawing and coloring supplies.

### Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the University of Massachusetts Lowell Institutional Review Board (IRB #23-091). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with assent collected alongside guardian consent for minors. Participants received

detailed information about the study's voluntary nature, procedures, and confidentiality measures.

### Data Collection

Data collection occurred in two phases. In February 2023, all participants were initially instructed to create drawings without any specific directives. Subsequently, in June 2023, the same participants were asked to produce drawings specifically designed to express their feelings.

We compare the differences in the drawings between the two groups, as well as the differences in drawings when they were given free choice and when they were asked to draw images that reflected their feelings. Although we did not collect any demographic information on the students in our first experiment, we asked teachers to provide us with information such as age, gender, displacement experiences (if any), frequency of displacement, loss of family members during the conflict, parental status, and the rationale behind their selected drawings in the second experiments. Our analysis focused on the drawings, the accompanying information, the types of symbols or imagery employed, and the colors used.

### Coding Process for Analyzing Drawings

The coding process for analyzing the drawings in this research project was conducted by the first author, a PhD student in education. The coder maintained a detailed coding manual, which provided clear guidelines for categorizing drawings based on color, imagery and symbols and the reasons for drawing. To synthesize the results, the coder systematically analyzed and summarized the data within each coding category.

**Table 1: Artwork Categorization Criteria**

Category Criteria	Explanation
Color Palette	This category involves classifying drawings based on two distinct color palettes. The first category is the "Warm Color Palette," which includes drawings predominantly using warm colors such as reds, oranges, and yellows. The second category is the "Cool Color Palette," encompassing drawings predominantly using cool colors such as blues, greens, and purples.
Imagery and symbols	Subject matter coding involves examining the visual elements, objects, and scenes present in the artwork (e.g. war-torn landscapes, destroyed homes, displaced families, blooming flowers or serene rivers and specific symbols related to their experiences).
Emotions/Themes	Emotions and themes coding focused on identifying the emotions or themes expressed in each drawing, including happiness, sadness, conflict, or hope.
Reason for Drawing (only on the second experiments)	This process of coding includes a thorough examination of the statements provided by students concerning why they created a particular drawing.

## Results

### Findings from the First Experiment

The investigation in the first phase reveals that children from both permanent homes and displaced homes tended to use black, brown, blue and gray colors, which are frequently associated with negative emotions (Boyatzis & Varghese, 1994). This suggests that the artwork of these students might express sadness, fear, or anxiety. Additionally, the limited use of warm colors, which are typically associated with positive emotions (Boyatzis & Varghese, 1994), suggests that their drawings lack a sense of happiness or joy. Notably, regardless of their residency status, approximately half of the students (50% of both IDP and

permanent resident students) displayed negative emotions in the images or themes of drawings. Only a small percentage of students (2.38% of the total sample) drew images that are associated with positive emotions, with none of the internally displaced students falling into this category. These results suggest that there may be specific aspects of their living conditions that prevent them from experiencing positive emotions (see Figure 1 and Figure 2 in the Figure Captions section).

Examining the first phase of drawings reveals that despite having access to the same coloring materials and drawing resources, there are obvious differences between the two groups.

**Table 2: Comparison of Drawings (February 2023)**

Categories	Displaced Students Group	Students living in Permanent Homes	Potential Reason of Drawing
Vibrant and diverse color palette	26.19%	40.48%	Desire for lively and energetic expressions (such as showing vitality, emotions, or positivity)
Predominantly gray tones, limited use of color	47.62%	28.57%	Showing how sad and quiet they were, perhaps because of how they lived or how they felt.
War-related images with guns, knives or soldiers	14.29%	16.67%	Showing how war has affected them, which could mean they have been exposed to violence or are worried about their safety.
IDP camps or dry field landscapes	71.43%	33.33%	Reflecting their displacement, homesickness, and desire for stability despite their difficult circumstances.
Lonely figures sitting alone and/or staring in the distance	14.29%	11.90%	Expressing feelings of isolation, loneliness, or disconnected emotions, possibly as a result of their displacement experiences.
Lively and colorful figures (i.e., artwork that exhibits a sense of liveliness, vibrancy, and energy using bold colors with active figures, and/or playful compositions)	2.38%	21.43%	Expression of liveliness, enthusiasm, and excitement, maybe showing a way to overcome obstacles or desire for positivity
Abstract (i.e., artwork that does not depict the representation of people or objects in a realistic or detailed manner but using shapes, lines, and colors) or other figures	0%	21.43%	Reflecting their creativity, using non-representational art to express emotions, thoughts, or abstract concepts.

In the course of our investigation, we saw unique patterns in the artwork created by the two groups of students—those who were internally displaced and those who were residing in permanent homes. When looking at the use of colour, it is clear that students who lived in their permanent homes preferred to create artwork that looked more colourful, with 40.48% of them using sparkling and distinct colour schemes. The internally displaced student group, on the other hand, showed a remarkable preference for primarily grey tones, with 47.62% of their artwork falling into this category. The differences in emotional states and living circumstances between the two groups may be reflected in this colour preference discrepancy. In addition, there was a considerable difference in how certain themes were portrayed. Notably, 71.43% of students who were internally displaced created scenes of IDP camps or dry field landscapes, highlighting their need for stability and home despite their difficult circumstances. The choice of similar themes by 33.33% of students from permanent homes, in

comparison, suggests a less profound connection to these concepts.

Despite these variations, both groups' drawings focused on a few common themes. Both students who were internally displaced and those who were residing in permanent homes portrayed war-related images, including elements such as guns, knives, or soldiers, with 14.29% and 16.67% representation, respectively. Drawings of lonely figures sitting alone and staring into the distance, a representation of the loneliness and isolation felt by both groups.

Additionally, only a small percentage of students from both groups (2.38% of students who were internally displaced and 21.43% of students who were from permanent homes) displayed lively and colourful figures, showing a sense of energy, enthusiasm, and excitement that might have been interpreted as a drive to conquer challenges or a wish for happiness in their life. Furthermore, a few students residing in permanent homes (21.43%) used abstract forms to communicate emotions and

abstract concepts, whereas none of the internally displaced students did.

### Findings from the second experiment

The results of the second experiment show how specific instructions might affect students' artistic creations. We found no obvious distinctions between the drawings created by the two groups when students were particularly told to utilize drawing as a way to convey their emotions. In the second experiment, we also have teachers asked students to explain why they made particular drawings. Students provide a short explanation of the reasons for particular drawing. We use their explanations as additional supporting evidence to assess the difference in drawings between two groups (see Figure 3 in the Figure Captions section).

The majority of drawings by town students emphasize the impact of conflict (21.67%) and the wish for peace and beauty (16.67%). This reflects the difficult conditions they confront as a result of ongoing conflicts and their desire for a peaceful and

harmonious environment. In addition, 13.33 % of the drawings continue to convey direct criticism of the military junta, demonstrating the students' frustration and anger at military's actions and the resulting damage.

Images of Loss and loved ones (10%) reveal the emotional costs endured by the students, emphasizing the significance of their relationships and the hardships they face as a result of separation and displacement. Still, 8.33% of the drawings show a sense of bravery and unity, as students show their desire to protect their communities and stand together in the face of trouble. A lesser percentage of students (5%) still express optimism for their country's development and progress, demonstrating their desire for a brighter future and the same level with other nations.

Notably, 24.32 % of the drawings did not provide a justification or fell into categories that were not clearly defined, suggesting a wide range of individual interpretations and expressions (see Figure 4 in the Figure Captions section).

**Table 3: Comparison of Drawings (June 2023)**

Drawing Categories	IDP Students (%)	Town Students (%)	"Students' reasons for drawing."
Vibrant and diverse color palette	74%	23%	These students' vibrant and diversified colour choices may indicate their persistence and optimism despite hardships. Hope, cultural vibrancy, and a desire to physically express their experiences may be represented by these colours.
Predominantly gray tones, limited use of color	26%	77%	The use of mostly grey tones with little colour may be intentional to convey the gloomy reality of conflict and displacement. This approach may be influenced by the urge to express the tragedy of their position and induce audience empathy.
Desire to Return Home	31.43%	0%	When discussing the motivations for their drawings, many students (31.43% of IDP students) expressed sentiments such as, "I want to go back home and to my farm," "I draw a picture of my village which I am missing," "I am very upset my life living in a small tent. Tents are not homes," etc.
Impact of Conflict	25.71%	21.62%	Students from both groups who depicted conflicts as their subject matter conveyed reasons such as, "I am not happy among the wars", "After the coup, civilians are dead and lose everything. ", "I can't relief as my house, which is my life, being destroyed. ", "I want to show a village being burned by airstrike.", "I don't want to experience such danger anymore. ", "I hate running away by the bomb's explosion. I want to escape asap. "etc.
Nature and Freedom	11.43%	0%	Students who portrayed natural landscapes or beautiful flowers expressed their underlying reasons as "I want to convey the freedom and happiness of the past" and "The flowers are blooming beautifully."
Negative portrayal of Junta	8.57%	13.51%	Some students who criticized the Junta expressed their reasons as, "I hate them as they are so cruel to civilians.", "I want to kill those dog-like soldiers and I stand for the truth and justice. ", "Soldiers are attacking unprotected civilians using airstrikes. ", "military soldiers are being cruel to civilians and made them homeless.", etc.

Building a Better Future/Development and Progress	8.57%	5.41%	Students focusing on building a better future expressed their hopes by expressing like, "I expect a good leader and united citizens without any wars. ", "I want my country to be developed more than other countries. "I want a safe country where we get equal rights and want to get away from a country under the coup. ", etc.
Family and Loss	8.57%	10.81%	Students addressing themes of family and loss expressed sentiments like, "He has left", " the feeling of the living family members after losing their valuable son in the battle. ", "seeing the fallen heroes", "the one who sacrifices his life to protect his family", etc.
Peace and Beauty	0%	16.22%	Those who drew about peace conveyed their desires with statements such a, "I want peace and want to learn freely.", "I just want my safe home and peaceful life again. ", "I want a peaceful place where my family can live", "I want a peaceful environment", etc.
Bravery and Unity	0%	8.11%	Those students who drew about "It's about bravery. We have to be united to protect our own village courageously. ", "we have to be united", "I want to see united citizens without any wars. ", etc.
Other/Not specified	5.71%	24.32%	Some students did not provide a reason, or their reason did not clearly fit into a specific category. They drew artwork that does not depict the representation of people or objects in a realistic or detailed manner but using shapes, lines, and colors

Experiment 2 found a noticeable difference in color preferences between the two groups. IDP students had a strong preference (74%) for vibrant and diverse colors, which seemed to represent their ongoing perseverance and optimism in the face of adversity. Town students, in contrast, showed a notable use (77%) for grayscale tones, maybe as a result of their emotional response to a recent armed conflict.

The information gathered from IDP students revealed their strong desire to return home (31,43%). They were dissatisfied with their present living conditions in temporary camps, expressing a strong desire to return to their familiar homes, farms, and villages. Both groups addressed the impact of conflict, with IDP students (25.71%) slightly more centered on this topic than town students (21.62%). They demonstrated the damaging impacts of military actions and demonstrated compassion for those suffering from it.

Unexpectedly, 11.43 percent of IDP students frequently depicted nature and freedom, such as landscapes and blossoming flowers, in an attempt to convey the beauty and freedom they recalled from the past. In contrast, town students did not include such imagery in their drawings, indicating that IDP students found comfort in remembering peaceful times during their displacement.

Regarding their negative portrayal of the military junta, town students (13.50%) slightly surpassed IDP students (8.57%), with both groups expressing deep resentment and anger at the actions of the junta. Moreover, IDP students (8.57%) demonstrated a greater ambition for a brighter future than town students (5.47%). Both groups shared a vision of better leadership, united citizens, and overall development.

Students from town areas slightly depicted family and loss more often than IDP students, with rates of 10.81% compared to 8.51%. Both groups used art to depict the effects of war on their families and the sacrifices made by loved ones, stressing the enduring importance of family in their emotional expression. Notably, town students focused on peace and beauty (16.22%)

more strongly than IDP students, reflecting their desire for a peaceful and positive environment.

### Discussion

In the first experiment, both groups of students, those from permanent homes and those who had been displaced, tended to use dull colors like black, brown, blue, and grey. These colors are commonly associated with negative emotions, implying that the artwork expresses sadness, fear, or anxiety (Boyatzis & Varghese, 1994). Warm colors, which are typically associated with positive emotions, were rarely used in their drawings, indicating a lack of happiness or joy (Elliot, 2015). Significantly, only a small number of students depicted positive emotions in their artwork, while the majority displayed negative emotions. Students who were internally displaced lacked drawings depicting positive emotions.

A comparison of the two groups' drawings from the initial experiment revealed differences. The majority of IDP students (47.62%) employed grayscale tones, whereas students from permanent homes (40.48%) employed more colorful palettes. This suggests that while both groups experience negative emotions, the IDP students' ongoing displacement might result in more pronounced feelings of despair (Boyatzis & Varghese, 1994). Moreover, 71.43% of IDP students frequently depicted IDP camps or dry field landscapes, highlighting their desire for stability despite their circumstances. Comparatively, fewer students from permanent homes (33.33%) selected similar themes, indicating a weaker connection to these concepts. This aligns with previous research showing that children's drawings often reflect their immediate environment and experiences (Claudia Catani, 2008; Haroz et al., 2017).

In the second experiment, when students were instructed to express their feelings through drawings, no significant differences between the two groups were observed. Students from IDP camps and students from the town showed similar themes regarding the impact of the conflict, peace, and beauty, as well as criticism of the military junta.



However, there were noteworthy distinctions. 74% of IDP students displayed a strong preference for vibrant colorful tones, which reflects their resilience and optimism in the face of adversity. In contrast, 77% of town students preferred monochromatic tones, possibly influenced by their emotional response to a recent war (Boyatzis & Varghese, 1994).

31.43 % of IDP students expressed a strong desire to return home, indicating their discontent with temporary living conditions. In addition, they placed a slightly greater emphasis on the consequence of conflict (25.71%) than those who lived in town (21.61%). Surprisingly, 11.43 % of IDP students depicted nature and freedom in their artwork, thinking about the beauty and freedom of the past. In contrast, town students did not include such images. This difference suggests that IDP students find relief in memories of more peaceful times, while town students may be more focused on their current struggles (Lusebrink, 2004).

Regarding the negative depiction of the military junta, town students (13.51%) expressed greater frustration than IDP students (8.57%).

In terms of aspirations for a better future, IDP students (8.57%) exhibited a stronger desire for better leadership, united citizens, and development than town students (5.41%). Town students depicted themes of family and loss more than IDP students (10.81% vs. 8.57%), highlighting the enduring significance of family. This aligns with research indicating that children's drawings often reflect their immediate environment and significant personal experiences (Haroz et al., 2017). In addition, town students were more concerned with peace and beauty (16.22%), indicating their desire for a peaceful and positive environment.

## Conclusion

Our examination of the artistic expressions of two distinct groups of students - those from internally displaced populations (IDP) and those residing in permanent homes within a conflict-affected region - reveals a nuanced interplay between emotions, experiences, and artistic representations. Through two experiments that guided students to convey their feelings through drawings, we gained valuable insights into the emotional landscapes of these young individuals.

The first experiment unveiled a shared tendency among both groups to employ somber color palettes, primarily composed of black, brown, blue, and gray. This color choice resonated with negative emotions, suggesting that their artwork was a means to express feelings of sadness, fear, or anxiety. The sparing use of warm, joyful colors further indicated a deficiency of happiness or joy in their expressions. Notably, positive emotions found limited representation, with internally displaced students notably lacking such depictions.

Comparing the two groups, differences were discerned, particularly in the emphasis placed on specific themes. Internally displaced students showcased a higher affinity for grayscale tones and frequently depicted IDP camps and arid landscapes. This artistic choice underscored their longing for stability despite their adverse living circumstances, illustrating their unique experiences as internally displaced individuals. Conversely, students residing in permanent homes used more varied and colorful palettes, demonstrating a somewhat weaker connection to displacement-related themes.

In the second experiment, wherein students were encouraged to depict their emotions, differences in color preferences and themes remained evident. Internally displaced students exhibited a marked preference for vibrant and diverse colors, signifying their resilience and optimism in the face of adversity. Conversely, students from the town displayed a clear preference for monochromatic tones, possibly influenced by their recent experiences with conflict.

The themes revealed in this experiment were strikingly convergent between the two groups, encompassing reflections on the impact of conflict, aspirations for peace, beauty, and critiques of the military junta. However, the nuances are of note. Internally displaced students demonstrated a strong yearning to return home and expressed discontent with their current living conditions. Their drawings also portrayed a stronger emphasis on the consequences of conflict. Surprisingly, they frequently incorporated imagery of nature and freedom, recalling more peaceful times, which was absent in the drawings of town students.

In terms of their depictions of the military junta, students from the town exhibited more pronounced frustration. Furthermore, internally displaced students voiced a greater desire for a brighter future, emphasizing better leadership, unity among citizens, and overall development. Town students, in contrast, delved deeper into themes of family and loss, underlining the enduring significance of familial bonds. They also placed a heightened focus on peace and beauty, reflecting a strong yearning for a tranquil and positive environment.

These findings underscore the powerful role of art as a medium for children in conflict-affected areas to communicate their emotions, experiences, and hopes. The influence of specific instructions on artistic representations is evident, as is the stark contrast between the internally displaced students' resilience and the town students' reflections on conflict and peace. Such insights are invaluable for tailoring art-based interventions to support the emotional well-being of these young individuals and provide a platform for their voices to be heard and understood.

## Limitations of the study

This study's small sample size of 84 participants and lack of detailed demographic data limit its generalizability. The reliance on self-reported reasons for drawings introduces potential bias, and the specific socio-political context following Myanmar's military coup further constrains the applicability of the findings. Additionally, the subjective interpretation of artwork could vary between researchers. Future research should address these issues by using larger, more diverse samples and incorporating methods such as interviews and focus groups.

**Implications for policy, practice and further research:** The findings suggest that art-based interventions can effectively support the emotional well-being of students in conflict-affected areas. Policymakers should consider integrating art therapy programs in schools and IDP camps to help children process their emotions. Educators and practitioners can use structured art activities to foster resilience and optimism among displaced students. Future research should aim to enhance robustness and understanding by addressing the study's limitations, using larger and more diverse samples, and employing methods like interviews and focus groups.



**Figure Captions**

**Figure 1: Drawings by Students Living in Permanent Homes (February 2023)**

*Examples of drawings without any specific instructions, created by students living in their permanent homes.*



**Figure 2: Drawings by Internally Displaced Students (February 2023)**

*Examples of drawings without any specific instructions, created by internally displaced students.*



**Figure 3: Drawings by Students Living in Permanent Homes (June 2023)**

Examples of drawings instructed to express feelings, created by students living in their permanent homes.



**Figure 4: Drawings by Internally Displaced Students (June 2023)**

Examples of drawings instructed to express feelings, created by internally displaced students.



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