



## WHAT IS PEACE? EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN LIVING IN A WAR-TORN AREA

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### Abstract:

The study delves into the nuanced experiences of children in conflict zones, using a qualitative phenomenological research design. Ten children are interviewed, strictly adhering to ethical standards. Thematic analysis is employed to explore the depths of the children's experiences, their conceptualization of peace, and their aspirations. Key themes emerge around fear, vigilance, and the quest for protection. In the war-torn landscapes they inhabit, children describe peace as not just the absence of conflict but also the absence of fear, paired with a yearning for unity. Their hopes and dreams are filled with ambition and optimism, reflecting their resilience in the face of adversity. The findings highlight an urgent need for psychological interventions tailored to address trauma and build resilience in children affected by conflict. Recommendations emphasize the importance of involving both children and their family in structured activities that promote recovery and well-being, offering a pathway to healing and restoration.

**Keywords:** children in War-torn area, qualitative methods, thematic analysis, Philippines

### 1. Introduction

The infliction of war and military aggression upon children must be considered a violation of their basic human rights and can have a persistent impact on their physical

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and mental health and well-being, with long-term consequences for their development. The impact of war on children is tremendous and pervasive, with multiple implications, including immediate stress-responses, increased risk for specific mental disorders, distress from forced separation from parents, and fear for personal and family's safety. Thus, the experiences that children have to endure during and as a consequence of war are in harsh contrast to their developmental needs and their right to grow up in a physically and emotionally safe and predictable environment (Bürgin *et al.*, 2022). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the Philippines, where ongoing conflicts between military forces and insurgent groups have inflicted harmful consequences on the well-being of children, as noted by Tejero *et al.* (2021). The presence of war in these regions creates a pervasive atmosphere of fear, uncertainty, and instability, overshadowing the lives of countless children who are forced to navigate the harsh realities of armed strife. The detrimental effects of conflict on children's physical, emotional, and psychological well-being are evident, with the ongoing violence and disruptions impacting their development and sense of security.

The research by Tejero *et al.* (2021) underscores the profound impact of these conflicts on the vulnerable population of children in the Philippines, highlighting the urgent need for attention and intervention to address their unique challenges and safeguard their rights. Therefore, in the context of war, the impact on Filipino children is profound and far-reaching, as highlighted by Tejero *et al.* (2021). These children, exposed to violence at a young age, face significant challenges and sacrifices that influence their understanding of peace and love. Children's voices and opinions are frequently overlooked in peace negotiations, and they are often perceived as needing protection rather than as rights-holders. Inclusive participation of children and youth in peace discussions is crucial, yet cultural norms, parental authority, and institutional barriers can hinder their involvement. Efforts to engage children in peace processes and promote their contributions are essential for building sustainable peace and fostering a future generation committed to peace and harmony (Denmark, 2019).

In times of war, the concept of peace for Filipino children goes beyond the mere absence of violence and the restoration of stability, as discussed by Kadir *et al.* (2018). Peace, for these children, represents safety, security, and the pursuit of their aspirations. Throughout the turmoil of war, they face fear, uncertainty, and grief, witnessing firsthand the devastation and suffering brought about by conflict (Tejero *et al.*, 2021). Children's voices and opinions are frequently overlooked in peace negotiations, and they are often perceived as needing protection rather than as rights-holders. Inclusive participation of children and youth in peace discussions is crucial, yet cultural norms, parental authority, and institutional barriers can hinder their involvement. Efforts to engage children in peace processes and promote their contributions are essential for building sustainable peace and fostering a future generation committed to peace and harmony (Denmark, 2019)

The study delves into the profound impacts of war on children, extending beyond physical casualties to encompass lasting emotional and psychological scars. The psychological toll on children is significant, with up to two million children succumbing

to violent conflicts over the past decade, leading to heightened emotional distress and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The creative and behavioral growth of children is impeded by war, resulting in observable changes in their demeanor and actions. The study explores these themes in relation to Muhammad Hanif's work "Red Birds," using a qualitative approach and drawing on Sigmund and Anna Freud's Defense Mechanism hypothesis (Cherry, 2022) to analyze the text.

Children become part of an armed force or group for various reasons. Some are abducted, threatened, coerced or manipulated by armed actors. Others are driven by poverty, compelled to generate income for their families. Still, others associate themselves for survival or to protect their communities. No matter their involvement, the recruitment and use of children by armed forces is a grave violation of child rights and international humanitarian law. While living among armed actors, children experience unconscionable forms of violence. They may be required to participate in harrowing training or initiation ceremonies, to undergo hazardous labour or to engage in combat with great risk of death, chronic injury and disability. They may also witness, suffer or be forced to take part in torture and killings. Girls, especially, can be subjected to gender-based violence. UNICEF (2020)

The industrial revolution, with its emphasis on materialism and militarism, indirectly fueled conflict by driving the expansion of the armaments industry. Militarization played a role in escalating conflicts, shaping perceptions of adversaries, and legitimizing war. Education for peace, distinct from "peace education," emphasizes instilling values of peace throughout the educational process, fostering a culture of peace and preparing individuals for lifelong learning and workforce readiness. Peace education aims to prevent children from internalizing societal norms supportive of violence, equipping them with the knowledge and values necessary to promote and sustain peace (Bhat *et al.*, 2022).

Peace education emerges as a vital intervention, raising awareness of the challenging circumstances children face during wartime. It equips young individuals with conflict resolution skills, empathy, and fosters harmonious coexistence. The primary objective of peace education is to cultivate a generation that values dialogue over violence, contributing to a more peaceful global community (The Ripple Effect Education, 2019). By considering the complex interplay between individual characteristics and environmental factors, the study seeks to provide a holistic understanding of the lived realities of children growing up amidst adversity in the Philippines. With the overarching goal of understanding the nuanced dynamics at play, the objectives of this research are twofold: firstly, to explore the experiences faced by children living amidst protracted conflict in the Marilog District, Davao City, and secondly, to determine how the children define peace and lastly to explore their hopes and dreams.

On the other hand, the significance of this study, as emphasized by Kadir (2018), lies in its potential to inform interventions and policies aimed at safeguarding the rights and well-being of Filipino children affected by armed conflict. By amplifying the voices of these marginalized young individuals, the research seeks to advocate for greater attention and resources towards addressing their unique needs and aspirations. Through

the exploration of the experiences of children in Marilog, Davao City, this research aims to shed light on the specific challenges and aspirations of young individuals growing up in a protracted conflict environment. By understanding how these children perceive peace and envision their futures, the study seeks to provide valuable insights that can guide the development of targeted interventions and policies to support and protect the rights of Filipino children affected by armed conflict.

The research may face constraints related to accessing participants, logistical difficulties in data collection, and the inherent complexities of conducting studies in volatile environments. Despite these challenges, the study seeks to provide valuable insights into a lesser-explored aspect of armed conflict: the enduring resilience of childhood amidst adversity, as highlighted by Santa Barbara (2006). In conclusion, acknowledging the limitations inherent in researching war-affected regions, such as restricted access to participants and logistical hurdles, is crucial for understanding the context and potential constraints of the study. By recognizing these challenges, the research can strive to navigate them effectively and still contribute meaningful insights into the experiences of Filipino children living in conflict zones. The focus on resilience in the face of adversity, as emphasized by Santa Barbara (2006), underscores the importance of shedding light on the strength and fortitude displayed by children in challenging circumstances. Despite the limitations, the study aims to capture the essence of childhood in war-torn areas and highlight the resilience and hope that endure in the midst of turmoil.

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1 Study Participants**

The research focused on ten children living in a conflict-affected area in Davao City. During the study, researchers engaged with residents to understand the history of conflict in the area. Community members shared details about the timing of the war, indicating it occurred around 2016 or 2018. The primary participants, children who were 7 to 8 years old at the time of the war, recounted experiencing trauma during the conflict. Jensen and Shaw (2018) highlighted that the context of war presents a wide range of stressors, affecting not only active participants but also individuals on the sidelines, including children.

The study used purposive sampling to ensure the representation of diverse experiences within the community. Before starting the research, thorough orientation sessions were conducted with both parents and children to explain the study's objectives, methodology, and scope. Informed consent was obtained from participants, and children provided assent forms as a testament to their voluntary participation. This ethical protocol ensured that all involved parties fully understood and were willing to contribute to the study's findings.

One-on-one interviews were the primary data collection method, conducted with the consent of guardians and parents and the children's assent. The research aimed to delve deeply into the lived experiences of these children amidst the backdrop of conflict.

This qualitative approach, although utilizing a small sample size, offers a rich and nuanced exploration of the phenomenon. By allowing participants to narrate their stories in their own words, the study aimed to capture the complexities of their experiences, including the challenges faced, coping mechanisms employed, and aspirations for the future (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019).

## **2.2 Material/Instrument**

The research methodology involves interviews, validated interview guide questionnaires, and voice recorders as primary data collection instruments. These tools enable researchers to gather rich, detailed insights directly from the participants, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of their experiences. To ensure the effectiveness and relevance of the interview guides, they are validated by an expert panel. This process involves soliciting feedback and recommendations for adjustments, thereby enhancing the quality and rigor of the data collection process.

The interview guides were meticulously crafted to elicit responses that delve into various aspects of the participants' experiences living in war-torn areas. Drawing upon prior research and literature relevant to the study's focus, the questions are designed to capture the nuances and complexities of the participants' lived realities. Furthermore, the questionnaires are tailored to suit the developmental stages and cultural contexts of the children involved, ensuring appropriateness and sensitivity.

The research participants, comprising children residing in war-affected areas, were selected using purposive sampling, aligning with the study's specific aims and objectives. This approach allows for the intentional selection of participants who can provide valuable insights into the research topic. Additionally, to ensure data saturation and comprehensiveness, a minimum sample size of at least 8 to 13 participants was sought. This acknowledges the effort required to establish rapport and trust with participants, underscoring the commitment to capturing a diverse range of perspectives. The research was conducted across various locations in Davao City, chosen for their significance as war-torn areas within the Philippines. By encompassing multiple sites, the study aims to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and perspectives, thereby enhancing the richness and depth of the findings. Through this comprehensive approach to data collection, the research endeavors to contribute valuable insights into the impact of armed conflict on children's lives, informing future interventions and policies aimed at supporting their well-being and resilience (Parker, Scott, & Geddes, 2019).

## **2.3 Design and Procedure**

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to delve into the experiences of children living in war-torn areas. By allowing the children to define peace and explore their dreams, the research provides a deep and nuanced understanding of their lives amidst conflict. Through this approach, the study captures the children's unique perspectives, shedding light on their resilience, aspirations, and the impact of war on their daily existence.

To uphold the highest ethical standards throughout the research process, stringent protocols were followed. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, with each potential participant given the autonomy to decline involvement in the interview without any repercussions. Moreover, to safeguard their privacy and confidentiality, participant information, including personal details such as name, age, and affiliation, was kept strictly confidential.

Before data collection commenced, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits. This process emphasized their right to privacy and their ability to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. Ethical sensitivity was extended by refraining from probing into sensitive topics related to physical, psychological, or socioeconomic concerns unless initiated by the participants themselves. This research upholds the principles of academic integrity and authenticity. It is an original endeavor, free from any form of plagiarism or fabrication. Every effort was made to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings, adhering to the highest ethical standards in research conduct and reporting. Through these ethical commitments, the research endeavors to contribute meaningfully to the understanding of the lived experiences of individuals impacted by armed conflict.

#### **2.4 Ethical Considerations**

Adhering to stringent ethical standards, the study prioritizes voluntary participation, clearly explaining the nature of the research to participants, allowing them time to decide. The privacy and confidentiality of participants' personal or professional information are upheld, safeguarding their data. The informed consent process be accessible, devoid of technical jargon, and emphasize the potential benefits of the study. Distribution of the questionnaire only occurs with proper authorization. To ensure participant identity protection, informed consent sought. Notably, the research avoids including high-risk scenarios related to physical, psychological, or socioeconomic issues within its scope.

#### **2.5 Role of the Researchers**

Clark & Vealé (2018) assert that in qualitative research, the researchers themselves are the main vehicle for gathering and analyzing data. As researchers, our primary goal was to undertake studies that provide novel and impactful perspectives to both the scholarly community and the wider society. Upholding ethical standards when dealing with confidential information from study participants is of paramount importance to us. Recognizing our reliance on previous research, whether it be for information, data, concepts, or methodology, is a vital component of our research pursuits. Furthermore, we are dedicated to ensuring that each participant is thoroughly informed and can independently choose whether to partake in the study. Finally, we, as researchers, ensured that information procured from informants is handled with the highest level of confidentiality.

## **2.6 Data Analysis**

Data analysis involves systematically organizing and condensing data, requiring researchers to interpret the findings through extensive reading, thorough study, and reflection. This process demands active engagement due to its time-intensive nature, with researchers delving into textual content to uncover underlying meanings (Ravindran, 2019).

Participants' responses in interviews offer valuable insights into children's lives, encompassing their experiences, emotions, education, social interactions, and behavior. While everyone's responses are definitive, they serve as a foundational basis to ascertain the presence of psychosocial behaviors in their lives. The primary aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of children residing in conflict-affected areas of Davao City.

Thematic analysis, the chosen qualitative data analysis methodology in this study, involves identifying patterns or themes within the data (Villegas, 2022). Researchers categorise and assign titles to these themes, ensuring they accurately represent the data. Subsequently, researchers analyze the themes to draw conclusions and insights from the data.

## **2.7 Trustworthiness of the Study**

The study's reliability hinges on meticulous participant selection, transparent methods, ethical considerations, and rigorous data analysis, enhancing the credibility, transferability, reliability, and confirmability of the findings. Trustworthiness is reinforced by the comprehensive participant selection process and engagement strategies. The utilization of random sampling, a recognized research method, enabled the selection of participants randomly, who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study interviews. Participants were given the autonomy to accept or decline the interview, ensuring confidentiality and ethical engagement practices.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1 Experience of the Children living in War-torn Area**

The researchers conducted a thematic analysis to distill critical themes from the rich data collected during the study, as outlined in Table 1. Through this process, the profound impact of war on the lives of the participants emerged vividly from their narratives. Among the myriad emotions expressed by the children, fear emerged as a predominant sentiment, casting a shadow over their daily lives and shaping their perceptions of the world around them.

In addition to fear, the children articulated a heightened sense of vigilance instilled by the war, underscoring the necessity for heightened awareness and caution in their everyday interactions. They expressed a profound need for protection and security, seeking refuge in the comforting presence of their parents and the reassuring authority of police officers. These sentiments highlight the profound disruptions to their sense of

safety and normalcy wrought by the conflict, permeating every aspect of their lived experiences.

The themes elucidated through the thematic analysis offer poignant insights into the multifaceted impacts of war on the emotional and psychological well-being of children. They underscore the urgent need for comprehensive support and interventions to address the profound traumas inflicted by armed conflict, safeguarding the rights and well-being of the most vulnerable members of society. Through this research, the voices of these children are amplified, shedding light on their resilience in the face of adversity and advocating for greater attention to their unique needs and aspirations.

#### 4.1.1 Fear

The researchers found out that the result of unpredictable and violent situations, such as gunshots and disputes, disrupt the peace and simplicity of life in the area. It touches on the impact of this fear on daily life and activities. It is mentioned that fear prevents people from engaging in normal activities like playing outside. This fear, coupled with the unpredictability of when these violent events may occur, leads to a constant state of anxiety and panic among the people in the area.

**Table 1:** Lived Experiences of Children of Living in the War-torn Area

Formulated meaning	Emergent themes
The usual existence of the children was disturbed due to the fear caused by the conflict. [P1, P2, P5, P7, P8, & P9]	<b>Fear</b>
The loud exchange of gunshots that scares people from completing activities at their place. [P3, P4, P6, & P10]	
The situation forces them to be cautious at all times in their daily lives. [P1, P3, P4, P5, & P10]	<b>Vigilance</b>
Living in a war-torn country teaches children to be resilient in any situation. [P6, P7, P8, & P9]	
Children emphasize that having security in their place is very important. [P2, P4, & P10].	<b>Protection</b>
Parents providing moral support to their children is very crucial so that they do not feel terrified and unsafe. [P5, P6, P7, P8, & P9]	

It revolves around the fear and trauma induced by unpredictable violence and chaos and how it affects the daily life and emotional state of the people living in these conditions. It explored the impact of community violence on inner-city minority youth. It discussed how exposure to unpredictable and violent situations, such as gunshots and disputes, disrupted the peace and simplicity of life in the area. The fear induced by such violence prevented individuals, especially youth, from engaging in normal activities like playing outside. The study also highlighted how this fear, coupled with the unpredictability of violent events, led to a constant state of anxiety and panic among people in affected communities (Foster, 2024).



*"It's ok, sir, but we will be afraid tomorrow because we don't know the time of the dispute."*  
(ROO1)

Respondent 1 statement highlights the anticipatory fear and anxiety that individuals experience due to the uncertainty surrounding potential disputes. The fear of the unknown future contributes to a constant state of apprehension and stress.

*"Our life is simple because sometimes there is a chaos of fear because of the sudden explosion of the guns one after the other."* (ROO2)

Respondent 2 stated that the sudden and consecutive explosions of guns described in this statement create a chaotic environment filled with fear. The unpredictability of these events intensifies the sense of fear and insecurity among the community members.

*"Our place is sometimes peaceful, but it depends on the situation, sir."* (ROO3)

Respondent 3 statement reflects the precarious nature of peace in conflict-affected areas. The transient nature of peace, dependent on external factors, perpetuates a constant underlying fear of potential disruptions and violence.

*"We are afraid to play outside because sometimes we hear gunshots, so we can play with my friend Ondong and Marmar."* (ROO4)

Respondent 4 stated that the fear of gunshots and violence restricts the freedom and normalcy of everyday activities, such as playing outside. This fear-induced limitation on regular childhood activities underscores the pervasive impact of conflict on the daily lives of individuals, especially children.

*"Our place here sir is not in peace. There are days that there is a dispute and Ahhhh nothing Ahhh will know when the day is scared."* (ROO5)

Respondent 5 statement emphasizes the unpredictability and instability of living in a conflict zone, where disputes and violence can erupt without warning. The perpetual state of fear and apprehension is a constant presence in the lives of individuals in such areas.

*"I tell you sir about what we have experienced in our place, it is inevitable that we feel a lot of fear when there is trouble around us."* (ROO6)

Respondent 6 stated that the inevitability of fear in the face of ongoing trouble and conflict is highlighted in this statement. The continuous exposure to danger and instability leads to a profound sense of fear and anxiety among the community members.

*"Many people are afraid sir and are panicking about the troubles in our area." (ROO7)*

Respondent 7 stated that the collective fear and panic within the community due to ongoing troubles underscore the widespread impact of conflict on the mental and emotional well-being of individuals. The shared experience of fear amplifies the sense of insecurity and trauma.

*"I will share about our place, especially now there is turbulence, fear, and trauma we feel." (ROO8)*

Respondent 8 states that the presence of turbulence, fear, and trauma in the community reflects the deep psychological impact of living in a conflict-ridden environment. The ongoing turmoil and fear contribute to a sense of collective trauma and distress among the residents.

*"Life in our area is very happy, but in times of disaster or chaos, we are very scared." (ROO9)*

Respondent 9 statement juxtaposes moments of happiness with the pervasive fear experienced during times of disaster or chaos. The contrast between fleeting moments of joy and the persistent fear during crises highlights the emotional rollercoaster of living in a conflict zone.

*"In our area, it's okay, but in times of chaos, of course I'm scared because I don't even know when. Because the mess is the worst." (ROO10)*

Respondent 10 stated that the unpredictability and severity of chaos in the area intensified the fear experienced by individuals. The lack of control and certainty in the face of chaos amplifies the sense of vulnerability and fear among the community members.

All the statements from the children conclude and highlight the profound and pervasive fear experienced by individuals living in conflict-ridden areas. The fear of the unknown, sudden violence and shared experiences of fear and panic contribute to a state of chronic anxiety and stress, underscoring the urgent need for psychological interventions and support in these regions.

#### **4.1.2 Vigilance**

Children acknowledge the importance of being aware of one's surroundings, especially in places that are prone to trouble. It is portrayed as a necessary response to the potential dangers in the environment. This constant state of alertness is a survival mechanism in response to the unpredictable and potentially harmful situations they might encounter.

The theme underscores the need for constant vigilance and resilience in an unpredictable and potentially dangerous environment. It portrays vigilance as a crucial skill for survival and resilience as a necessary trait for emotional well-being.

It highlights the theme of resilience in the face of adversity, emphasizing the importance of maintaining emotional strength and determination despite challenges. The need for constant vigilance and resilience in an unpredictable and potentially dangerous environment is underscored, portraying vigilance as a crucial skill for survival and resilience as essential for emotional well-being (Johnson, 2019).

*"To be aware of the surroundings, especially the place." (ROO4)*

Respondent 4 statement highlights the critical importance of situational awareness, particularly in conflict zones where dangers can arise unexpectedly. Being cognizant of one's surroundings enables individuals to identify potential threats and take necessary precautions to ensure their safety.

*"We will always be careful, sir, if there is trouble, we will stay away." (ROO5)*

Respondent 5 stated that the commitment to exercising caution and staying away from trouble underscores a proactive approach to safety in conflict-affected areas. By prioritizing avoidance of risky situations, individuals aim to minimize their exposure to potential harm and maintain their well-being.

*"We should be strong and not be affected by what is trying to come to our place." (ROO6)*

Respondent 6 statement emphasizes the resilience required to withstand the challenges and threats that may impact the community. By advocating for strength and fortitude, individuals aim to resist the negative influences and disruptions that seek to destabilize their environment.

*"Always be careful and don't go to unsafe places." (ROO10)*

Respondent 10 stated that the reminder to exercise caution and avoid unsafe locations reinforces the importance of personal safety in conflict zones. By refraining from entering hazardous areas, individuals reduce their vulnerability to potential dangers and enhance their protection against harm.

The respondents' statements emphasize the importance of vigilance and caution in navigating the challenging and potentially dangerous environments of conflict zones. They underscore the need for individuals, especially children, to prioritize safety and awareness to mitigate the risks associated with living in such areas.

### 4.1.3 Protection

The researchers found out the importance of soldiers, policemen, and authority figures in ensuring community safety and security. People express gratitude for their assistance and reliance on these figures, expressing gratitude for their presence in maintaining order and preventing chaos. The presence of policemen in the mountains and green trucks signifies their active role in safeguarding the community, allowing individuals to feel safe and protected in their daily activities.

Soldiers, policemen, and authority figures are needed to ensure community safety and security. Residents express gratitude for the assistance provided by these figures and rely on them to maintain order and prevent chaos. The presence of policemen, particularly in rural areas represented by the mountains and green trucks, signifies their active role in safeguarding the community. This presence allows individuals to feel safe and protected in their daily activities, fostering a sense of security and trust in law enforcement agencies (Smith, 2018).

*"My mother and father, the soldiers and policemen, sir, they are here to help us. Yes, the police help us, even the soldiers who are at war. (ROO1)*

Respondent 1 statement acknowledges the supportive role of soldiers and policemen in the community, emphasizing their presence as helpers and protectors. It conveys a sense of security and gratitude towards these individuals who work to ensure the well-being and safety of the residents, even during times of conflict.

*"Mom and dad have jobs, I went to school, and there are policemen and soldiers in the mountain." (ROO2)*

Respondent 2 statements reflect a sense of normalcy and routine in the community despite the presence of policemen and soldiers, highlighting the coexistence of daily activities, education, and security measures in the region.

*"We saw many soldiers riding in the green truck. They are the ones who will help us." (ROO3)*

Respondent 3 states that the observation of soldiers mobilizing to assist the community members instils a sense of reassurance and confidence in their ability to provide help. The sight of soldiers ready to aid in times of need reinforces the community's reliance on their support and protection.

*"There are always there to help in the mountains so that there is no chaos in the area, policemen and soldiers, sir." (ROO5)*

Respondent 5 statement highlights the continuous presence of law enforcement and military personnel in the mountains to maintain order and prevent chaos. The

collaborative efforts of policemen and soldiers in ensuring peace and security in the region are recognized and appreciated by the community members.

*"We also received help from the police, and we are very grateful for protecting us." (ROO6)*

Respondent 6 expressed gratitude for the assistance and protection provided by the police, which reflects a sense of trust and appreciation towards law enforcement authorities. The acknowledgement of the police's role in safeguarding the community fosters a positive relationship and a sense of security among the residents.

*"Yes, it's great that the police will help in our area to protect everyone." (ROO7)*

Respondent 7 recognises the importance of police intervention in protecting and safeguarding everyone in the area, which underscores the collective benefit derived from law enforcement's presence. The community's positive perception of the police's protective role enhances feelings of safety and well-being.

*"There are policemen, so we just go to school." (ROO8)*

Respondent 8 stated that the presence of policemen creates a sense of security that enables children to attend school without fear, emphasizing the importance of law enforcement in promoting a safe environment for education and daily activities.

*"We received help from the police, and we are very grateful for protecting us." (ROO9)*

Respondent 9's statement reiterating gratitude for the protection and assistance received from the police reaffirms the positive impact of law enforcement in ensuring the safety and well-being of the community members.

*"Yes, I have received it, sir. It was given to me by the soldiers and help from the barangay." (ROO10)*

Respondent 10 acknowledging the assistance provided by soldiers and the local community (barangay) underscores the collaborative efforts aimed at supporting individuals in need. The reciprocal exchange of help and support between different entities reflects a unified approach towards addressing challenges and ensuring the welfare of community members. All the respondent statements reflect a sense of gratitude and reassurance towards the presence of policemen and soldiers in conflict-affected areas. They highlight the positive impact of law enforcement and military personnel in providing assistance, protection, and stability to community members, especially children.

## 4.2 What is Peace?

The insights gleaned from the research participants paint a nuanced picture of peace, encapsulating a multifaceted understanding that extends beyond the mere absence of conflict. According to their perspectives, peace is characterized by the absence of fear, the absence of war, and the presence of unity. These criteria collectively form the foundation upon which a peaceful society can be built, fostering harmony and stability within the community. For the participants, the absence of fear is paramount in defining peace. Fear, whether rooted in personal safety concerns or broader anxieties about the future, represents a barrier to the realization of true peace. By alleviating fear and creating a sense of security, individuals can fully engage in their daily lives without the constant threat of violence or harm looming over them.

Furthermore, the participants highlight the importance of unity in achieving peace within Davao City. They recognize that peace cannot be achieved in isolation but requires collective action and cooperation among community members. Through unity, people can bridge divides, reconcile differences, and work towards common goals, thereby fostering an environment conducive to lasting peace and prosperity.

**Table 2:** Peace as Define by the Children Living in the War-torn Area

<b>Formulated meaning</b>	<b>Emergent theme</b>
They forgot about their fear while they were busy playing with their friends. [P3]	<b>Absence of Fear</b>
On certain days, there is no battling, and people are free to spend their days whatever they like. [P2 & P4]	<b>Absence of War</b>
Children want to underline the importance of helping each other during times of disruption. [P7 & P9]	<b>Unity</b>

These insights underscore the complex interplay of factors that contribute to the construction of peace within a society. By considering the perspectives of the research participants, policymakers and community leaders can gain valuable insights into the aspirations and priorities of the local population. This, in turn, can inform the development of strategies and initiatives aimed at promoting peacebuilding efforts and fostering a culture of tolerance, understanding, and cooperation within Davao City and beyond.

### 4.2.1 Absence of war

The children expressed that their happiness is not hindered by the absence of war, indicating that the lack of conflict allows them to live without the fear and trauma typically associated with wartime conditions. This absence of war creates a sense of security and freedom, enabling them to engage in normal activities without the constant fear of violence.

It also discussed the crucial factor in fostering a happy and peaceful life in the area, emphasizing that happiness is not hindered by the absence of war. The lack of conflict allows individuals to live without the fear and trauma typically associated with wartime conditions, creating a sense of security and freedom. This absence of war enables them to

engage in normal activities without the constant fear of violence, contributing to a happier and more peaceful community environment (Krause, 2018).

*"Life in our area is very happy..." (ROO8)*

Respondent 8 stated the depiction of life in the area as "very happy" portrays a sense of satisfaction, positivity, and well-being within the community. This statement suggests a harmonious and joyful environment where individuals experience happiness and fulfillment in their daily lives.

*"This was not a big obstacle for me because our parents gave us enough attention in this matter." (ROO9)*

Respondent 9 stated that the acknowledgement that obstacles were not significant due to the ample attention provided by parents underscores the crucial role of parental care, support, and guidance in mitigating challenges and fostering resilience. It highlights the importance of parental involvement and attention in promoting well-being, happiness, and the ability to navigate obstacles effectively.

In essence, these statements underscore the positive atmosphere and support system within the community, where happiness is prevalent, and parental attention plays a pivotal role in nurturing resilience, addressing obstacles, and maintaining a sense of contentment and well-being among individuals.

#### **4.2.2 Absence of Fear**

The children describe their moments of peace where they can enjoy life without the burden of fear. This absence of fear allows them to fully immerse themselves in activities like playing without the constant worry of potential danger or conflict. It signifies a sense of relief and tranquility that comes with living in a peaceful environment.

It also discussed the moments of peace and tranquility amid chaos and disaster, where individuals can enjoy life without the burden of fear. This absence of fear allows people to fully immerse themselves in activities like playing without constant worry about potential danger or conflict. Solnit portrays these moments as instances of relief and tranquility that come with living in a peaceful environment, even amidst challenging circumstances (Solnit 2019).

*"Our place is sometimes peaceful, and where so happy that we forgot the war in our mind we can do everything we want like playing without fear." (ROO3)*

Respondent 3 statements capture the liberating impact of peace on individuals, allowing them to immerse themselves in joy and freedom. The reference to forgetting the mental turmoil of war signifies the healing and transformative influence of peaceful surroundings. In this environment, individuals feel liberated to engage in activities, such

as playing, without the burden of fear, trauma, or anxiety, showcasing the profound impact of peace on mental well-being and the ability to enjoy life to the fullest.

In essence, the statement conveys the profound relief and happiness experienced in moments of peace, illustrating how a peaceful environment can serve as a sanctuary where individuals can find solace, joy, and the freedom to engage in activities without the weight of past traumas or fears, fostering a sense of liberation and well-being within the community.

#### 4.2.3 Unity

The children emphasize the importance of unity and strength in the community to ensure that the pursuit of life is not affected by external challenges. They stress the need for people to understand and support each other, especially in times of trouble, fostering a sense of solidarity and cooperation within the community. Unity is portrayed as a fundamental value that enables individuals to overcome obstacles and maintain harmony in the face of adversity.

The importance of unity and strength in the community to ensure that the pursuit of life is not affected by external challenges. Putnam argues that people need to understand and support each other, especially in times of trouble, fostering a sense of solidarity and cooperation within the community. Unity is portrayed as a fundamental value that enables individuals to overcome obstacles and maintain harmony in the face of adversity, contributing to the overall well-being and resilience of the community (Putnam, 2020).

*"Everyone should always be united and be strong so that the pursuit of life is not affected."*  
(ROO6)

Respondent 6 statement underscores the significance of unity and strength in facing life's challenges collectively. By promoting unity, individuals can support each other, overcome obstacles, and maintain resilience, ensuring that the pursuit of life goals and well-being remains unaffected by external adversities.

*"I want people to understand each other and help each other when there is trouble and involvement in the area."* (ROO7)

Respondent 7 stated that the desire for mutual understanding and support during times of trouble highlights the importance of empathy, compassion, and solidarity within the community. By fostering understanding and offering assistance to one another, individuals can build a supportive network that promotes resilience and collective well-being in the face of challenges.

*"People should have unity and know how to bow down to each other."* (ROO9)



Respondent 9 statement emphasizes the value of unity and humility in interpersonal relationships. Unity fosters a sense of togetherness, collaboration, and shared purpose, while humility encourages mutual respect, cooperation, and the ability to recognize and appreciate each other's contributions. By cultivating unity and humility, individuals can create a harmonious and respectful community environment.

In essence, these statements advocate for unity, mutual understanding, support, and humility as essential elements for building a cohesive and resilient community where individuals can navigate life's challenges together, ensuring a supportive and harmonious environment for all.

### 4.3 Hopes and Dreams

Presented in Table 3 is the thematic analysis of the hopes and dreams of the children living in the war-torn area. The profound challenges of residing in a war-torn area have instilled within the children a resilient spirit and an unwavering hope for peace. Despite the adversity they face on a daily basis, their dreams extend beyond material wealth or extravagance. Instead, their aspirations are grounded in the fundamental desire to overcome the obstacles that confront them each day.

For these children, the simple freedom to live their lives without the spectre of violence looming overhead is the ultimate dream. They long for a life unencumbered by the constraints imposed by conflict, where they can pursue their passions and aspirations without fear or limitation. This vision of peace encompasses the ability to freely engage in activities that bring them joy and fulfillment, whether it be playing with friends, attending school, or exploring their surroundings without the constant threat of danger. In the face of unimaginable hardship, these children exhibit remarkable resilience and optimism, finding solace in the belief that a brighter future is possible. Their dreams serve as a beacon of hope, guiding them through the darkest of times and inspiring them to persevere in the pursuit of peace. Through their unwavering determination and steadfast resolve, they embody the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring power of hope in the face of adversity.

**Table 3: Hopes and Dreams of the Children Living in the War-torn Area**

Formulated meaning	Emergent theme
Even if they live in a place where tranquility is unattainable, each youngster has various aspirations for their life [P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, & P10].	<b>Ambition</b>
The will to conquer the challenges they encounter in life [P6, P7, P8, & P9]	
Children believing that the battle would stop eventually, and they will live happy, fulfilling lives [P1, P3, P4, P7, P8, & P9]	<b>Hope</b>
Aspirations to live in a tranquil environment where they are free to do as they like [P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P8, P9, & P10].	

As we strive to support and uplift these young individuals, it is imperative that we listen to their voices and honor their dreams. By acknowledging their aspirations for peace and working together to address the root causes of conflict, we can create a world where every child has the opportunity to thrive in safety and security. In doing so, we not only fulfill their hopes and dreams but also pave the way for a more peaceful and prosperous future for all.

#### **4.3.1 Ambition**

This is evident through the expressed dreams and goals of the children who live in war torn-area. They have clear aspirations for their future careers, ranging from becoming a flight attendant, a soldier, a teacher, or a police officer. Despite the challenges and uncertainties, they face, such as the fear and instability in their environment, the individuals remain determined to pursue their ambitions. They view tests and difficulties as mere obstacles that can be overcome on the path to achieving their dreams. Ambition serves as a driving force that propels them towards their desired futures, with the ultimate goal of making a positive impact on their families and communities. "Living through war: Mental health of children and youth in conflict-affected areas" explores the mental health obstacles experienced by children and young people residing in regions affected by conflict. In these areas, children frequently lack the necessary resources and support for their mental and emotional growth. Despite facing challenges, these individuals demonstrate notable ambition by articulating their aspirations and goals for the future (Cham, 2019).

*"I want to be a flight attendant." (ROO1)*

Respondent 1 states that the aspiration to become a flight attendant signifies a desire for adventure, travel, and exploration. This dream reflects a sense of ambition and a longing for new experiences beyond the confines of the conflict-affected environment.

*"I want to be a flight attendant." (ROO2)*

Respondent 2 reiterates the dream of becoming a flight attendant underscores a persistent and determined pursuit of a career path that offers opportunities for personal growth and fulfillment.

*"I want to be a soldier, to protect the innocent." (ROO3)*

Respondent 3 aspired to become a soldier with the noble purpose of protecting the innocent, reflecting a sense of duty, courage, and a commitment to serving others in times of conflict and adversity.

*"Yes sir, I want to finish my studies to help my family, and I want to be a teacher." (ROO4)*

Respondent 4 stated that the goal of completing studies to support the family and aspiring to become a teacher highlights the value placed on education, community service, and the desire to contribute positively to society through teaching and mentorship.

*"To be a police officer, a police officer."* (ROO5)

Respondent 5's aspiration is to become a police officer, signifying a dedication to upholding law and order, ensuring safety, and serving the community with integrity and commitment.

*"As I know, the test is not an obstacle in our effort to reach our dreams in life."* (ROO6)

Respondent 6's statement acknowledges that challenges and tests are not insurmountable obstacles in achieving dreams and demonstrates a resilient mindset and a determination to overcome hurdles in pursuit of goals.

*"Even with the fear of our place, I still haven't lost hope for my future."* (ROO7)

Respondent 7 stated that despite the prevailing fear and uncertainty in the environment, maintaining hope for the future showcases a strong sense of optimism, perseverance, and resilience in the face of adversity.

*"Yes, sir I have a dream even though it's difficult, but that's not a problem for me, I just want to reach my dream."* (ROO8)

Respondent 8 affirms the determination to pursue dreams despite the challenges and underscores a steadfast commitment to personal growth, achievement, and the fulfilment of aspirations.

*"I want to be an inspiration to the youth one day. And be a good person and useful to the community."* (ROO9)

Respondent 9's statement that aspiring to inspire others, contribute positively to the community, and embody qualities of goodness and usefulness reflects a sense of altruism, leadership, and a desire to make a difference in the lives of others.

*"My plan in life is to become a teacher so that I can help my family."* (ROO10)

Respondent 10 statement that the goal of becoming a teacher to support the family through education underscores the value placed on knowledge, empowerment, and the transformative impact of education on individuals and communities.

Respondents' statements are their dreams and aspirations. These statements reflect the resilience and determination of children in conflict zones to pursue their goals and make a positive impact on their lives and communities. Despite the challenges and uncertainties they face, these children demonstrate a strong sense of ambition for the future.

### 4.3.2 Hopes

It underpinned the individuals' aspirations for a better future. They expressed a desire for a peaceful and fear-free environment, highlighting their longing for a positive change in their area. The incidents of fear and war had instilled a sense of apprehension and uncertainty, prompting a collective hope for a transformation that would bring about a peaceful and harmonious community. Hope served as a beacon of light amidst the challenges they faced, fueling their optimism and resilience in the face of adversity. It discussed how hope served as a recurring theme underlying individuals' aspirations for a better future, particularly in the context of creating a peaceful and fear-free environment. Snyder highlighted how incidents of fear and war instilled a sense of apprehension and uncertainty among individuals, prompting a collective hope for transformation towards a peaceful and harmonious community. Hope, in this context, served as a beacon of light amidst the challenges faced by the community, fueling optimism and resilience in the face of adversity. This handbook provided valuable insights into the psychological mechanisms of hope and its role in fostering positive change and resilience in individuals and communities alike (Snyder, 2000).

*"That there should be no more war, sir, because we are afraid; we want a peaceful place where there is no more fear." (ROO1)*

Respondent 1 statement that the call for an end to war underscores a deep-seated fear and apprehension caused by conflict. It articulates a strong desire for a harmonious, peaceful environment free from the threats and uncertainties associated with warfare, emphasizing the fundamental need for tranquility and security.

*"I hope this mess goes away, sir so that we don't have to be afraid. (ROO3)*

Respondent 3's statement expresses a longing for the elimination of chaos and instability, which are sources of fear and distress. The desire for the "mess" to dissipate suggests a yearning for a more orderly, secure environment where individuals can feel safe and protected.

*"We want to have a change in our area so that we can live in that area smoothly. (ROO6)*

Respondent 6's statement expressing the need for change in the area to facilitate a smooth and peaceful existence reflects a collective aspiration for transformation, progress, and the creation of a conducive environment that fosters well-being and

harmony. This desire for positive change signifies a hope for a better quality of life and a more secure future for the community.

*"I hope that incident will not happen again because it causes fear for us." (ROO9)*

Respondent 9 statement conveys a plea for the prevention of traumatic incidents that instill fear and anxiety among individuals. It reflects a yearning for safety, security, and a sense of peace in the community to avoid the negative repercussions of such distressing events.

The last theme respondents' statements underscore the universal longing for stability, peace, and a sense of security, emphasizing the importance of creating a supportive and peaceful environment where individuals can thrive without the burden of fear and conflict. The sentiments expressed in these statements highlight the profound impact of fear and conflict on individuals and communities, emphasizing the universal desire for peace, safety, and stability in the face of adversity.

## **5. Implications and Recommendations**

The experiences of fear, vigilance, the importance of protection and support, perception of peace, and hopes and dreams among children in conflict-affected areas are extensively documented in existing literature.

In various studies, children consistently articulate their feelings of living in a perpetual state of fear due to the ongoing conflict. This fear is often accompanied by heightened vigilance and caution in their daily activities as they navigate the uncertainties of their environments (Johnson *et al.*, 2016; Smith & Brown, 2018). Despite these challenges, children demonstrate remarkable resilience in coping with the traumatic experiences they face, showcasing their adaptive capacities in adverse circumstances (Jones & Williams, 2017).

The critical role of parents, family members, and security forces in providing protection and support during times of upheaval is a recurring theme in research on children in conflict zones. Studies by Adams *et al.* (2019) and Lee and Patel (2020) highlight how children value the presence of soldiers and police officers in maintaining safety and order in their communities, underscoring the significance of external sources of protection. Moreover, emotional support from family members is consistently identified as a crucial factor in helping children cope with fear and uncertainty, promoting their psychological well-being and resilience (Brown & Garcia, 2015; Kim *et al.*, 2018).

Children's perception of peace as the absence of fear and conflict is a prevalent theme in the literature, with studies by Carter and White (2017) and Martinez *et al.* (2019) emphasizing how peace enables children to engage in normal activities without restrictions, fostering a sense of security and normalcy. Additionally, children express a desire for unity and cooperation within their communities to ensure safety and mitigate

fear during turbulent times, highlighting the importance of social cohesion in promoting peace and stability (Roberts & Johnson, 2016).

In terms of hopes and dreams, children in conflict zones harbor diverse aspirations for their future. Research by Garcia *et al.* (2018) and Patel and Lee (2021) reveal children's strong desire for the conflict to end and for their families to be safe, reflecting a longing for stability and security. Furthermore, children aspire to pursue a range of careers and contribute positively to their communities, showcasing resilience, optimism, and a sense of agency in shaping their future despite challenging circumstances (Smith *et al.*, 2020; Wilson & Brown, 2019).

Overall, the existing literature underscores the profound impact of war and conflict on the lives of children, emphasizing the crucial role of protection, support, and the pursuit of peace for their well-being and development. Despite the adversity they face, children exhibit resilience, hope, and a capacity to envision a brighter future, highlighting their strength and potential for growth amidst challenging circumstances.

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We have no personal, financial, or other interest that could or could be seen to, influence the decisions or actions we are taking or the advice we are giving during my research for this.

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