"You are Here to Teach Us, Not Kill Us": A Case Study of a Child's Fears of Gun Violence through Drawings & Writings

Shushan Vardanyan, University of Mississippi

Abstract

This case study explores a seven-year-old child's fears of gun violence expressed through drawings and writings during two literacy lessons in a public American school. The child's artwork and writing revealed a profound fear of attending school due to the possibility of being killed. This study raises critical questions: Should children's well-being be prioritized over academic achievements? And if so, to what extent should young children be allowed to express their fears of gun violence without becoming entangled in political debates? Utilizing critical theoretical lenses, specifically Piagetian and Freirean philosophies of education, this study employed case study methods with content analysis and narrative inquiry approaches. It analyzed three pieces of the child's artwork, along with his written and verbal narratives. The paper advocates for 'autonomy as the aim of education' and 'problem-posing pedagogy,' opposing traditional approaches that emphasize rote learning and standardized testing. The study concludes with recommendations for future research and a call to reevaluate current educational priorities.

Keywords: *school shootings, gun violence, autonomy, heteronomy, drawing and writing, moral reasoning, children's fears*

School shootings remain a significant concern in the United States, posing a serious threat to the safety of students and educators both physically and psychologically (Harris, 2024; Livingston et al., 2019). In today's rapidly evolving educational landscape, it has become increasingly imperative to not only prioritize academic achievement but also to attend diligently to the emotional well-being of our students (Chen et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education & Rehabilitative Services, 2021; Yoon & Templeton, 2019). The alarming prevalence of gun violence and other traumatic events has cast a shadow over the sanctity of the educational environment, leaving both educators, parents, and students grappling with fear and anxiety (Borum et al., 2010; Freilich et al., 2022; Moliner et al., 2021).

Recent research by Rapa et al. (2024) analyzed data from two public databases, covering 1,453 school shootings and mass school shootings from 1997-1998 to 2021-2022, defining school shootings as incidents where a gun is pulled out or fired, with mass school shootings involving at least three fatalities. Alarmingly, nearly 800 school shootings occurred between 2017 and 2022, indicating a sharp increase compared to the previous 15 years combined. While the annual number of mass shootings has remained relatively stable over the 25-year period, they have become deadlier since 2012, with the highest casualties recorded in the 2017-2018 and 2021-2022 school years.

Researchers also examined whether characteristics related to the school, shooter, and guns used are associated with the severity of school shootings, including casualty and fatality rates (Livingston et al., 2019). Analyzing data from April 1999 to May 2018, they found that handguns were used in most school shootings (81%), but rifles and shotguns resulted in significantly more fatalities. An interesting and yet disturbing finding was that the presence of school resource officers did not significantly impact shooting severity. Additionally, the intense media coverage of mass shootings has raised concerns about contagion effects, as highlighted by Dahmen (2018), who found that news organizations often provide disproportionate coverage to perpetrators compared to victims. This focus on gun violence in the news propagates fear and insecurity among adults, especially those with school-age children, who are uncertain about the timing and location of the next school shooting.

Despite extensive research on gun violence statistics, the existing literature on school shootings predominantly features perspectives from criminal justice, law enforcement, and psychology experts, with limited input from educational leadership (Marshal & Clark, 2023). This gap highlights the need for research to understand if current educational systems prioritize the well-being of children over academic achievements, particularly in the context of addressing their fears of gun violence. And if they do, to what extent should young children be allowed to express their fears of gun violence in school settings without becoming entangled in political debates such as gun control versus gun rights?

Priorities of the U.S. Education

The U.S. Department of Education's (DoE) 2021 report underscores the crucial balance between emotional well-being and academic achievement, advocating for evidence-based prevention practices and integrated support frameworks. Extensive research underscores the importance of children's social and emotional well-being in early childhood and elementary classrooms (Alzahrani et al., 2019; Aydemir et al., 2023; Carter & Cecily, 2018; Powell et al., 2018). It is well documented that social well-being significantly influences students' physical health, psychological well-being, academic performance, personal development (Alzahrani et al., 2019; Carter & Cecily, 2018), and emotional intelligence (Xu, 2023). Schools are recognized as pivotal environments for promoting children's social and emotional well-being, facilitating holistic development (Carter & Cecily, 2018; Powell et al., 2018).

Despite widespread acknowledgment of the importance of school children's social and emotional well-being in educational research, the "banking model of education," as characterized by Freire—where students are expected to "eat, digest, …[and] later vomit it back in the mandated exams and tests…to confirm the teacher's superior knowledge/bank-account" (Freire et al., 2018; 2020, p. 28-29)—calls into question the practicality of prioritizing students' social and emotional well-being by the DoE. This "digestive concept of knowledge", which emphasizes rote memorization and regurgitation, fundamentally conflicts with the holistic development and emotional support essential for students' overall well-being (p. 28).

Creating a safe space for children's expression is integral to the philosophy of Piagetian scholars like Kamii et al. (1994), who advocated for "autonomy as the aim of education" (p. 675). This approach emphasizes empowering children in their learning experiences, allowing them to freely express their thoughts, emotions, exchange ideas, and develop self-governance both morally and intellectually. The Piagetian approach to education, along with Freire's "problem-posing education," aligns well with the concept of empowering children's perspectives. If U.S. education

were guided by these philosophical approaches, it would secure not only children's social and emotional development but also their academic achievements (Freire et al., 2018, 2020; Kamii et al., 1994). In line with these philosophical perspectives, it is crucial to consider how adults' interactions with children impact their ability to express themselves. Yoon and Templeton (2019) noted that children's behaviors and conversations are influenced by adults' implicit and explicit cues, which can be seen as gestures of power. The authors highlighted the importance of truly listening to children, which can be challenging due to adult tendencies. The need for teachers and researchers to search for and respect the child's point of view, despite the potential discomfort of confronting hidden attitudes is essential in today's pedagogy. The current education system's focus on presenting concepts and skills for children to master may not provide a safe space for children to express themselves.

Building on the necessity of respecting children's perspectives, John Dewey's democratic approach to education highlights the importance of creating environments where children can actively participate in their learning process, fostering critical thinking and self-expression. Dewey (1916) argued that education should not only focus on the acquisition of knowledge but also on the development of individuals as active and engaged members of a democratic society. This perspective underscores the need for educational practices that support children's emotional and social well-being, providing them with the tools to navigate and contribute to their communities. Therefore, there is an urgent necessity for a profound and foundational shift in the goals of education.

"Autonomy as the Aim of Education" and "Problem-Posing Education"

In "The Six National Goals: A Road to Disappointment," Kamii and her colleagues (1994) argued that those who set educational goals rarely consider scientific knowledge on how children acquire knowledge and moral values. The authors made distinction between the political and Piagetian autonomy:

> In common parlance, autonomy means the right of an individual or group to be self-governing. When we speak of Palestinian autonomy, we are referring to this kind of political right. In Piaget's theory, however, autonomy refers not to the right but to the ability of an individual to be self-governing—in the moral as well as in the intellectual realm. (Kamii et al., 1994, p. 673).

The opposite of autonomy is heteronomy, where individuals are governed by others due to their inability to think for themselves. Understanding the distinction between the right and the ability to be autonomous is crucial because one can possess the right to self-govern but lack the ability to do so, and vice versa. An example of moral autonomy proposed by Kamii et al. (1994) is Martin Luther King, Jr.'s fight for civil rights, driven by his conviction against unjust and immoral laws despite severe opposition. Conversely, the Watergate cover-up exemplifies moral heteronomy, where individuals engaged in morally wrong actions for rewards from President Nixon.

Young children face two challenges in expressing themselves autonomously: their developmental stage and the role of adults. Piaget (1997) explored autonomy and heteronomy in children aged 6 to 14. When asked about lying, young children cited the fear of punishment as the reason it's wrong. They believed lying would be acceptable without the threat of punishment, indicating their heteronomous moral judgments influenced by external factors. Kamii et al. (1994) noted that babies are born neither autonomous nor heteronomous. They start as dependent on

adults, becoming heteronomous, but ideally, growing more autonomous. However, many adults do not achieve autonomy in their thinking as they mature. This is evident in the prevalence of crimes and gun violence reported daily in the news, highlighting adults' struggle to achieve moral autonomy (Kamii et al., 1994).

The second challenge for children is the role of adults. Piaget noted that adults hinder autonomy development by reinforcing heteronomy through rewards and punishments, a view shared by Kohn (1999) in his book titled 'Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribes." To promote autonomy, adults should engage in dialogue with children rather than resorting to rewards and punishments. This approach fosters mutual respect, honesty, and trust between adults and children.

When autonomous adults are oppressed and unable to practice their autonomy, they often rebel against oppressive entities. An example is the recent university uprising across the globe demanding a ceasefire in Palestine, where students and faculty risked their careers for justice, demonstrating intellectual/moral autonomy. However, young autonomous children face challenges when expressing autonomy, as rebellion against authority is often seen as 'naughty' or 'disrespectful,' leading to behavioral interventions. Thus, promoting autonomy among young children is more challenging, highlighting the crucial role of adults in fostering autonomy. Therefore, autonomy as the aim of education is essential for success in pedagogy and for democratic societies.

There is a strong connection between Piagetian and Freirean philosophies of pedagogy. While Piaget's philosophy emphasizes autonomy as the aim of education, Freire et al. (2018;2020) expands on this, especially regarding political influence. Related to this paper's topic, Freire's observation is that the oppressor's goal is to dehumanize the oppressed, thereby suppressing their ability to express themselves as individuals. The *banking model of education* exemplifies this dehumanization by turning schools into factories that produce compliant individuals who follow rules against their physical and emotional needs (p. 28). For instance, restrictions on bathroom breaks or limited recess deprive children of play and social interaction, while being silenced in literacy lessons undermines their autonomy. These examples demonstrate how children are conditioned to be heteronomous, unquestioningly obeying authorities like teachers or parents.

As noted by Kamii et al. (1994), individuals trained in this manner may become corrupt and engage in illicit activities due to their lack of self-governance and inclination to blindly follow orders. Therefore, there is a pressing need for a radical and fundamental change in education's goals. Reforms alone cannot address these issues; the very aim of education must be reevaluated (Kamii et al., 1994; Robinson, 2011).

Children's Autonomous Expression Through Drawings

Building on this understanding, one effective method to facilitate natural expression of thoughts and exercise intellectual autonomy is to encourage children to express their feelings and thoughts through drawings and storytelling. Children's drawings offer valuable insights into their cognitive and psychological well-being, providing a window into their world (Xu, 2023). For instance, Capurso et al. (2022) analyzed 257 children's drawings to understand their perception of the COVID-19 lockdown in Italy, finding that despite the lockdown's difficulties, children depicted primarily positive moments. Drawings may also serve as a medium for children to convey fears and negative emotions when verbal expression is challenging (Alzahrani et al., 2019).

For example, Pajaro and Andrade (2018) documented a six-year-old boy's psychological healing process through gestalt therapy, where the boy expressed his emotions via drawings following his father's murder. Similarly, Aydemir et al. (2023) found that emotion-supported dialogic reading enhanced children's story comprehension by discussing characters' emotions and allowing children to express their feelings. These studies underscore the importance of creating environments where children may freely express their thoughts and emotions, facilitating their intellectual and moral autonomy in the process.

Given the literature on children's authentic expressions through illustrations, it is evident that drawing provides a visual and creative outlet for children to communicate thoughts and feelings that may be difficult to articulate verbally. Despite this, there is no research using young children's drawings and writings to reveal their social and emotional well-being regarding school shootings or gun violence. If the goal of the U.S. DoE is to enhance children's well-being, more research should focus on examining students' well-being through their authentic voices, spontaneous drawings, and writings while at school. This study aims to fill this gap by providing valuable insights into a child's expressions of inner fears and concerns through multiple drawings and writings during literacy sessions at school, as well as through conversations with the child during and after these activities. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How does a 7-year-old child express thoughts and feelings about gun violence through drawings and writing at school?
2. What do those expressions of thoughts and feelings reveal about the current educational system's prioritization of children's well-being over academic achievements?
3. How can these expressions be interpreted as an example of choosing autonomy over heteronomy from a Piagetian perspective?

Method

Approach

This is a qualitative descriptive case study; a research approach that aims to provide a detailed, comprehensive description and analysis of a particular case or cases within their real-life context (Yin, 2018). According to Creswell (2012) a case study is research that involves an issue that can be explored by one or more cases "within a bounded system" such as children's well-being at school, which was examined in-depth through the analysis of a child's fears expressed in his illustrations and writing (p. 73). This study involved capturing the intricacies and nuances of the case, considering relevant environmental, social, and temporal factors, and used multiple data sources such as conversation with the child, analysis of the child's drawings and writings to provide a well-rounded perspective.

Data Analysis

Patton (2015) described a case study as "a detailed and rich story about a person, organization, event, campaign, or program-whatever the focus of study" (p. 259). To provide a detailed and rich story this case study utilized a qualitative content analysis and narrative inquiry techniques for data analysis (Faggiano, 2023). Qualitative content analysis emphasizes identifying similarities within and differences between parts of the text (Graneheim et al., 2017). This approach allows

researchers to analyse both the explicit, descriptive content and the implicit, interpretative content. The explicit part of the data was the child's drawings, writings, and conversations used in this study. The implicit part of the data is the interpretation of his work and conversation using Kamii et al.'s (1994) lens: moral and intellectual autonomy. According to Patton (2015) the qualitative approach focuses on stories but distinguishes between a story and a narrative. Narrative inquiry goes beyond merely recounting stories; it involves treating the story as data and the narrative as the analysis. This approach includes interpreting the story, contextualizing it, and comparing it with other stories. While the story represents what happened, the narrative concerns how the telling of what happened is structured and scripted within a specific context for a particular purpose. In this study, the child's drawings and writings were treated as data, while his interpretation and explanation of them were considered narratives. Three artworks and writings were compared to understand his fears and emotional well-being at school.

The process of selecting a theoretical lens for analysing the data and narrative spanned nearly a year. Initially, Kohlberg's theories of moral judgment, known for their linear moral development model, were considered but later dismissed as they did not align with the child's non-linear moral reasoning narratives. The focus then shifted to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, but this was found insufficient to capture the entire narrative. Over time, the lens for analysing the child's narrative evolved. Finally, Piagetian and Freirean pedagogical philosophies, particularly the concepts of heteronomy versus autonomy and oppressor versus oppressed dynamics, provided the most suitable framework for the researcher to analyse the child's narratives and work. The findings were presented in alignment with the research questions that guided this study. Despite the challenges and complexities, this process enriched the researcher's analytical thinking.

Participant and Data Collection

The researcher volunteered once a week to assist a first-grade literacy teacher in transitioning from worksheets to hands-on literacy activities that align with the school district's learning objectives. This initiative, called the Developmentally Appropriate Learning and Teaching Approach (DELTA), was a mentoring program initiated by the author of this article to help first-grade teachers adopt active learning methods over traditional worksheet-based approaches. The program began in the second semester and continued for four months until the end of the school year.

The participant in this study was a seven-year-old white male first-grade student attending a classroom that was part of the DELTA program at an urban public school in northern Mississippi. He had proficient English speaking and writing skills for his grade level, with English being his native language. He had no reported special needs or developmental spectrum disorders. No family demographic information was obtained. The case was selected using an opportunistic sampling strategy, as Patton (2015) explains, where "during fieldwork, the opportunity arises to interview someone or observe an activity, neither of which could have been planned in advance" (p. 271). The selection of this case was driven by the unique quality of the participant's artworks and writings observed during the literacy class.

The data discussed in this study include the child's three drawings, writings, and informal conversations from two literacy sessions, all of which are detailed in the following section. Written notes were taken by the researcher following each informal conversation with the child. Additionally, video recordings and photographs were made during the sessions to document the child's work and their verbal explanations of his written and artistic creations.

The artistic creations discussed in this study were generated over two literacy sessions held during the student's regular school hours (11:45 to 12:30). Writing an article about gun violence was not initially planned. The researcher incidentally discovered child's inner fears in his work and narratives, prompting an analysis of these illustrations. In essence, the participant was not recruited; rather, his work and self-expression brought him to the researcher's attention.

There were 24 students in the classroom, each producing unique work during both lessons. None of his peers exhibited fears of gun violence based on their literacy work.

Procedure

Creative Work 1—"Monster Mask"

The child's "Monster Mask" piece of work was produced when the learning objective was to identify the main characters of a story, accompanied by an art activity to enhance creative thinking. The procedure for Creative Work 1 – "Monster Mask" was conducted during a regular literacy class for first-grade students. After listening to a reading of Maurice Sendak's book "Where the Wild Things Are," students were provided with paper plates, yarn, scissors, glue sticks, and markers to create monster masks. They were tasked to make masks that were even wilder than the monsters in the story and were given approximately 30-35 minutes to complete their artwork. At the end of the session, the children showcased their masks to each other and engaged in discussions about their creations. No specific guidelines were provided for the discussions. The exceptional quality of one artwork prompted the researcher to conduct an in-depth analysis, providing unique insights and interpretations from the young artist. This exceptional artwork became the focus of the study, leading to the capture of several photographs of the piece, which are presented in Figures 1a and 1b. Additionally, the researcher documented the child's explanations and interpretations during their conversation by taking written notes.

Creative Work 2—"I Want to Go Home" and Creative Work 3 - "Intruder"

The creative works titled "I Want to Go Home" and "Intruder" were created by the same child two weeks prior to the monster mask activity. Students were provided with blank booklets, markers, and pencils and instructed to write and draw things that they *want* and they *won't* do. Students were given 30 minutes to complete their tasks. Towards the end of the session, the students were given about ten minutes to share their work with one another. Children's self-made booklets were retained by the researcher.

Role of the Researcher

In this article, the term "teacher" specifically refers to the first-grade class teacher, while the term "researcher" denotes the author, who conducted literacy lessons during the DELTA program. To address and mitigate potential researcher bias, it is essential to acknowledge that the researcher was a university professor specialized in early childhood education, and her work was influenced by the educational stance derived from Kamii et al. (1994), emphasizing autonomy as the aim of education. This acknowledgment ensures transparency and allows readers to consider the potential influence of the researcher's background and beliefs on the study's design, methodology, and interpretation of the findings (Patton, 2015).

The researcher visited the classroom once a week for a four-month period within the DELTA mentoring program. Prior to the program, there was no relationship between the researcher and the students, nor with the classroom teacher. The three work samples discussed in this article were collected during the first three weeks of the DELTA program.

Recognizing the researcher's role requires an understanding of her stance on gun policies and school shootings. As Pillow (2003) suggested, enhancing reflexivity in qualitative research necessitates that researchers critically examine how their identity and interests influence all stages of the research process. Notably, the researcher is not American, bringing an etic (outsider) perspective. Having grown up in a country where civilian gun ownership was not permitted, she never experienced a fear of gun violence during her schooling. Her educational background starkly contrasts with the reality children face in US schools. On the other hand, the researcher approached this case with a personal connection, as she has a son the same age as the participant enrolled in a public school in America. This connection underscored her sense of responsibility to make parents and educators aware of issues that might go unnoticed, defining her emic (insider) perspective. Balancing these emic and etic perspectives posed challenges for data analysis and reflection. Consequently, the analysis took nearly a year to present the data as objectively as possible while advocating for the child's right to be heard.

Research Ethics and Compliance

The research was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Verbal assent by the child and written parental consent were obtained for research using child's work samples without personal identifiers. The researcher adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research.

Results

In this section, the child's artwork and the dialogues between the researcher and the child are presented. The subsequent discussion section will address the research questions by analyzing the child's work. The first piece, titled "A Monster Who Killed a Child" by the researcher, was based on the child's writing, illustrations, and discussion about the mask centered around a monster who killed a child. The second and third works were created two weeks before the monster mask. After uncovering the disturbing story behind the monster mask, the researcher revisited the previous works and conversations to connect the dots leading to the creation of work 1.

Work 1: A Monster Who Killed a Child

During a literacy lesson in a first-grade classroom, the researcher noticed a written phrase, "I dat like this." The class had just read the book "Where the Wild Things Are" by Maurice Sendak. Fig. 1a depicts the child working on the mask, while Fig. 1b showcases the final artwork.

Figure 1 a and b: *A Child Creating a Monster Mask During a Literacy Lesson*

(a)   (b)

After the child completed the mask (Fig. 1b), the researcher approached the child and kindly asked for an explanation regarding both the writing and the images. The child began explaining the meaning of the images, starting with the depiction of the "green monster" attacking a child, which is presented with greater clarity in Fig. 1 c. The term green monster was assigned by the child.

Figure 1 c: *A Green Monster Attacks a Child*

"This is a monster," the child said, pointing to the green horizontally depicted figure. "The monster is trying to kill the child, and the child shouts, 'I don't like this,'" the child explained, pointing to the written message on the mask that read, "I dat like this." The researcher inquired about the fate of the child. "The child died, and here are all the bloodstains," the child responded, indicating the red areas surrounding the monster and the child. "What does the letter 'F' mean?" asked the researcher. The child corrected her, stating, "It's not 'F,' it's 'F minus.' You know, when you go to university and you fail, you receive an 'F.' Well, this is 'F minus.' We all got 'F minus.'"

"What did we fail at?" the researcher asked curiously. "We all knew that there was a monster in the town, but we did nothing to kill the monster. The monster killed this child because we did not kill the monster. That's why we all got F minus," concluded the child.

The unexpected dialogue from a seven-year-old child, who saw himself as part of a society that failed to stop the monster and save the child, formed the central theme of this paper. After the conversation with the child, the researcher recalled another artwork of the child where he depicted an intruder who came to the school and shot a child.

Work 2: An Intruder Who Killed a Child

Two weeks prior to the first narrative (Fig. 1b), there was a literacy writing session where children were assigned the task of illustrating and writing about things they want and won't do. The child who depicted the monster killing a child in Fig. 1b, illustrated a man who came to school and shot a child (see Fig, 2b). The illustration says, "I [name of the child] not want a intruder to come [name of the school is covered]." When asked by the researcher if he considered the re-searcher as an intruder, the child replied, "No, you're here to teach us, not kill us."

Initially, the child's drawing did not contain any depiction of a gun or signs of blood. After the child explained the events portrayed, describing an intruder who came into the class and shot the child, the researcher asked the child to point out where in the picture the shooting was shown. The child responded, "We are not allowed to talk about guns or shooting at school, so I didn't draw a gun." The researcher then asked if he could make an exception and draw in the picture what he had just described. At this point, the researcher had Piaget's theory of autonomy in mind when she asked the child to express his feelings freely through his drawings.

The child then promptly included the gun and drew a red line to indicate the act of shooting (see Fig. 3, next page). Following the child's swift inclusion of a gun and a red line symbolizing blood to convey his intended message in the drawing, the researcher turned the page and discov-ered another written note. The note depicted an illustration of a child opening the classroom door, accompanied by the sentence "I want to go home" (see Fig. 2a, next page). The person on the left is depicted as himself with a black backpack on his back, hand stretched to the door handle, and the person on the right is his teacher, based on his explanation of the illustrations.

Figure 2a: *A First Grader's Writing and Illustration:"I want to go home."*

Figure 2b: *"I [name of the student covered] not want a entruter [intruder] to come [name of the school covered]"*
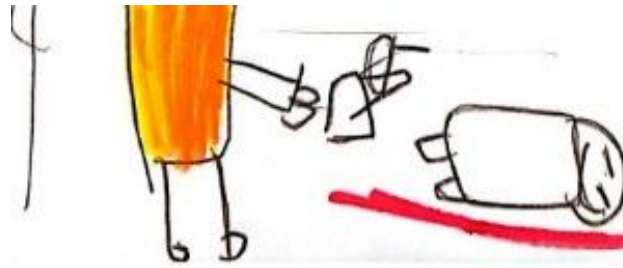

(a)   (b)

Figure 3: *A Closer Look at the Addition of a Gun and the Red Line Representing Blood*

Discussion

To address the first two research questions, figures 1-3 illustrate the child's deep-seated fear and desire for safety, as depicted by his wish to go home out of fear of a potential intruder. This poignant imagery underscores the critical need for educational strategies that prioritize students' social and emotional well-being, especially in light of the escalating frequency and severity of school shootings (Livingston et al., 2019). This paper reveals a disturbing reality that children in American schools may experience, as exemplified by the child in this study. The findings requires a recalibration of educational practices, echoing Carter and Cecilly (2018) and Borum et al.'s (2010) work, urging educators to prioritize students' emotional well-being alongside academic pursuits. It emphasizes the need for further research to explore the intersection of children's emotional experiences and their educational journey, utilizing methodologies such as drawing and writing to accurately capture their sentiments. In doing so, we can establish a more empathetic and responsive educational framework that nurtures the emotional resilience of young students, as evidenced by the insightful findings in Capurso et al.'s (2022) work.

Both Piaget's and Freire's theories suggest that education should foster critical thinking, autonomy, and active participation among students. In the context of school shootings, this means creating environments where students can openly discuss and address their fears, understand the underlying causes of violence, and develop strategies for prevention and resilience. In our example, the child who initially hesitated to depict a gun and bloodshed in a drawing due to fear of punishment reflects Piaget's (1997) concept of heteronomous morality. This child's adherence to the letter of the law, following rules strictly, changed when the researcher allowed the child to express his thoughts freely. This shift towards autonomous thinking allowed the child to articulate his fears, providing valuable insights into his emotional state and potential risk factors.

Freire et al.'s (2018;2020) concept of problem-posed education model is crucial in this context. By engaging students in critical discussions about violence and safety, educators can help them become aware of the social and political dimensions of school shootings. This awareness enables students to critically analyze the causes and implications of such events, fostering a sense of agency and empowerment. Instead of undermining and silencing students' thoughts and feelings, passively receiving information about safety protocols, students must become active participants in creating a safer school environment. This does not imply that children must engage in political debates for or against gun control policy (Carlson et al., 2020). Instead, it suggests understanding the reality through open discussions.

Re-evaluating Our Educational Priorities

To further investigate the first research question, existing literature underscores the prevalent practice of young children expressing their emotions through artwork. This method is commonly employed as a means for children to externalize and communicate their internal experiences, providing valuable insights into their emotional states and psychological well-being. Research consistently demonstrates that artwork serves as a significant medium for children to articulate feelings that may be difficult to convey through verbal communication alone. For instance, the focus child in this study parallels the child from Pajaro and Andrade's (2018) research, who used drawings to articulate emotional distress following his father's death. Over months of art therapy, this child achieved psychological reconciliation with his loss. Similarly, although the child in this study had not faced a personal tragedy, he expressed fears about intruders harming children at school through his drawings. The duration of these fears is uncertain, yet their expression reveals a concerning reality experienced by the child. When the researcher brought these fears to the attention of the school principal and teacher, their surprise indicated a gap in traditional pedagogical approaches, which may overlook complex emotional needs (Moliner et al., 2021). This underscores a critical point: the child's fears might have remained unaddressed due to the education system's priority on "feeding information" and subsequent testing (Freire et al., 2018, 2020, p. 29).

A profound re-evaluation of our educational priorities is necessary. First, we need to create environments where young learners feel empowered to express their fears and concerns openly (Borum et al., 2010). Second, we should shift from merely feeding information to actively listening to children's stories and addressing their concerns (Yoon & Templeton, 2019). An educational paradigm, as advocated by Freire and Piaget, which emphasizes autonomy and problem-posing pedagogy, could significantly address these issues. In a school system that promotes autonomous thinking and problem-solving, the child's fears could have been addressed collectively, involving his peers in perspective sharing and potentially uncovering similar anxieties among other students. Suppressing children's fears through a zero-tolerance policy on gun discussions neither eliminates the reality of gun violence nor makes these fears disappear.

Adult Roles

To explore the third research question, "How can these expressions be interpreted as an example of choosing autonomy over heteronomy from a Piagetian perspective?", it is essential to consider Piaget's (1997) concept of moral realism. According to Piaget, young children often operate within the heteronomous morality stage, where they view obedience to rules and authority figures as inherently good, regardless of the context. At this stage, rules are perceived as rigid and unchangeable, dictated by external authorities such as parents and teachers. Children believe that any deviation from these rules will result in immediate and harsh punishment, and they often overlook intentions when judging the morality of actions.

In this study, we observed an example of the distinction between autonomy and heteronomy in action. The child's initial desire to draw a gun and blood to express his fears (Fig. 2b) was constrained by external influences, such as the school rule prohibiting discussion of guns. This restriction could have been passed down from higher authorities and followed by the teacher as part of school policy. The chain of heteronomy can persist unless someone questions the intentionality of the rule and makes a conscious choice to prioritize the child's expression over strict adherence to the rule.

The researcher faced a choice between reinforcing heteronomy or fostering autonomy: either moving on to the next child and discussing their artwork, thus ignoring the child's expressed fears to avoid potential troubles, or helping the child find freedom to express his fears. By consciously deciding to ask the child to draw what he had just described about the intruder, the researcher provided an opportunity for the child to break free from blindly following school rules and suppressing his fears. The child then chose autonomy over heteronomy by drawing the gun and bloodshed. His release of breath after completing the illustration indicated his relief and happiness at being able to express his inner fears freely without concern for breaking the school rule.

The researcher could discern his persistent fears by closely examining his previous illustrations (Fig. 2a) and connecting them with later illustrations and writings (Fig. 1b), where he expressed himself more freely two weeks after the conversation about the gun and the intruder. In the later illustration (Fig. 1b), the child demonstrated the highest level of moral reasoning by considering himself responsible for not preventing the monster from killing the innocent child, as indicated by assigning everyone, including himself, an F-.

By actively listening to students and allowing them autonomy in articulating their emotions, educators can cultivate an atmosphere of trust and support crucial for fostering holistic development (Kamii et al., 1994). Yoon and Templeton (2019) advised researchers and teachers to practice listening to children as they express themselves, rather than hearing only what we want to hear:

> Researchers may be listening to their own desires for children and childhoods, as well as for the neoliberal pressures of publication rates, showy scholarship, and faculty positioning and security in this age of higher education job insecurity. While we can never fully extricate ourselves from these modern conditions, we might stay alert to the ways they impact our methods. (p. 81)

Admittedly, the researcher, under pressure to publish for faculty job security, initially overlooked the child's expression of fears regarding a school intruder. She did not give due attention to the child's statement, "You are here to teach us, not kill us," because her primary objective was to demonstrate evidence of teaching literacy learning objectives through active learning. This preoccupation led to a failure to recognize the child's call for help. However, a shift in research focus occurred when the same child expressed, through his artwork, that "We all failed…we all got F minus." At that moment, the researcher felt personally responsible for failing the child's hopes and made a conscious decision to listen more attentively to the child. "When we follow their [children's] lead and take the road they travel, we may wander into more exciting spaces of possibility" (Yoon & Templeton, 2019, p. 81). In this example, the child exhibited the highest level of moral judgment, symbolized by 'F-,' indicating a recognition of personal and collective responsibility in the face of danger.

Regardless of whether we limit children's discussions on societal matters like gun violence or assume they are too young to grasp its severity and likelihood, children will inevitably hold fears and anxieties about their safety at school. This was observed in the child's artwork depicted in Figure 2a and 2b. The child considered leaving school because he was afraid of a potential intruder entering the classroom. It was only through the child's artwork and conversation that the researcher and teacher became aware of the child's concerns. This raises an important question: How many young children silently hold fears about their safety while we, as educators, are focused on teaching them academic skills? For those who perceive this study as merely one child's story,

lacking practical significance, consider this analogy: discovering one child's fears is akin to finding a piece of gold while digging. Just as finding one piece implies the possibility of finding more in the same field, uncovering this child's fears suggests the likelihood of discovering similar concerns among other school children in the USA (Freilich et al., 2022).

Moral and Intellectual Autonomy: A Possible Road to A+

To shift from an F- to an A+, National Educational Goals must be founded on the principles of moral and intellectual autonomy. This approach involves children making conscious choices for the sake of the 'truth' they follow, regardless of external influences such as rewards or punishments. In contrast, intellectual heteronomy is characterized by individuals governed by others, lacking the ability to think independently and make their own decisions. Unfortunately, the current education system promotes practices that hinder children from developing autonomy. Critiquing the National Educational Goals, also known as the "Goals 2000 Act," Kamii et al. aptly noted:

> Goal 6—that schools be safe, orderly, and free of drugs and violence—would also be eliminated if autonomy were the aim of education because individuals who can take relevant factors into account do not take drugs or resort to violence. The statement that every school in America "will offer a disciplined environment" also reveals a traditional way of thinking. Schools cannot offer a disciplined environment. A disciplined environment has to be created from within by students and teachers together. (1994, p. 676)

The statistics on mass shootings and gun violence from April 1999 to May 2018, as reported by Livingston et al. (2019), affirm Kamii's predictions of a road to disappointment. This path of disillusionment continues with the disturbing findings on gun violence by Rapa et al. (2024). The child in this study further echoed Kamii's predictions by saying, "we all got F minus."

Summary and Implications

This case study underscores the importance of educational priorities. Parents, teachers, school administrators, and policymakers must listen to children's perspectives by creating an environment where they can freely express themselves in a safe and reciprocal manner. The rigid adherence to rules should never outweigh the importance of understanding a child's persistent fears and addressing them appropriately. Additionally, schools should focus more on strategies for preventing gun violence, moving beyond mere physical security measures such as locked doors and the presence of police officers. Open discussions led by classroom teachers could significantly reduce children's fears. This case study provides a glimpse into the emotional turmoil experienced by young students as they navigate their daily lives in school. Even though they may not openly articulate their fears, these anxieties linger, impacting their classroom experiences. By exploring their artistic creations, written expressions, and engaging in honest conversations, we can gain deeper insights into their innermost thoughts and emotions. Ignoring or suppressing children's fears while prioritizing academic demands will only lead to societal F minus.

To enhance elementary education, this study recommends re-evaluating educational priorities to help young children express their inner worlds, whether happiness, fear, or sadness. Educators must first embrace the idea of giving children the freedom to think and express themselves without adult-imposed constraints. Once this is accepted, the following can be implemented: integrating drawing and storytelling into the curriculum to foster emotional intelligence, well-being, and development; encouraging children to express their emotions to improve coping mechanisms and resilience; improving teacher-student relationships by gaining insights into students' inner worlds; using non-verbal expression to make classrooms inclusive for children with language barriers, learning disabilities, or those who are introverted or hold inner fears. Addressing school shooting fears, children can express anxieties through drawings and writings, providing educators and parents with insights into their emotional states. This trauma-informed approach supports psychological healing and holistic development, enhancing cognitive, social, emotional, and creative growth, as well as critical thinking and problem-solving skills. These practices can lead to innovative curriculum designs that connect art with other subjects, making learning more engaging. Additionally, including creative outputs in assessments offers a holistic view of a child's abilities. Recognizing the importance of artistic expression can influence educational policy and funding, advocating for more resources for art programs and mental health support. Finally, involving parents and the community through art exhibitions and storytelling events can strengthen the home-school connection and promote a collaborative education that truly recognizes and celebrates the humanity of each student.

Limitations and Future Research

In this study, several specific limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, qualitative researchers must be mindful of how their personal beliefs and values influence data interpretation. Subjectivity can lead to conclusions that align with the researcher's perspective while neglecting other factors. For instance, the researcher whose educational philosophy, like Kamii's belief in autonomy, differed from those who prioritize obedience. While some might view a child's adherence to school rules as positive, the researcher saw it as restricting the child's self-expression. Thus, the significance of the child's drawings and writings can vary based on the researcher's perspective. Researchers who emphasize heteronomy may not even consider the child's drawings significant enough to warrant further exploration.

Second limitation is, although the researcher met with the school principal and classroom teacher to discuss the child's fears and intellectual morality, she did not meet with the child's parents. This additional context could have provided deeper insights into his fears. While the teacher and principal confirmed no known incidents of gun violence related to the child, the parents might have had more context for his fears of intruders in school. Lastly, the researcher regrets not seeking clarification from the child on who he meant by "we" in his statement, "we all failed." At the time, she assumed he was referring to himself and society as a whole, but this assumption could have been more accurately informed by the child's explanation.

Future studies could explore children's fears of potential gun violence through interviews and drawings following lockdown drills at school, thereby investigating their social well-being. Additionally, involving parents through interviews to understand their children's fears will be an important consideration for future research.

References

Alzahrani, M., Alharbi, M., & Alodwani, A. (2019). The effect of social-emotional competence on children's academic achievement and behavioral development. *International Education Studies, 12*(12), 141. https://doi.org/10.5539/ ies.v12n12p141

Aydemir, M., Bilir, A. N., Geçgin, İ., & Sarı Uğurlu, B. (2023). Does talking about emotions impact young Turkish children's emotion recognition, word learning, and story comprehension? *Education 3-13, 51*(5), 731-739. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2021.2004191

Borum, R., Cornell, D. G., Modzeleski, W., & Jimerson, S. R. (2010). What can be done about school shootings? A review of the evidence. *Educational Researcher*, *39*(1), 27–37. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27764551

Capurso, M., Buratta, L., & Mazzeschi, C. (2022). Primary and middle-school children's drawings of the lockdown in Italy. *Frontiers in psychology, 13*, 982654. https://doi.org/10.3389/ fpsyg.2022.982654

Carlson, J., ProQuest (Firm), & YBP DDA. (2020). *Policing the second amendment: Guns, law enforcement, and the politics of race (1st ed.).* Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691205861

Carter, S., & Cecily, A. (2015). *Contemporary perspectives on the impactors and enablers to wellbeing. In* Wellbeing in Educational Contexts, 1-18. *University of Southern Queensland.* https://usq.pressbooks.pub/wellbeingineducationalcontexts/chapter/contemporary-perspectives-on-the-impactors-and-enablers-to-wellbeing/

Chen, X., Fan, X., Cheung, H. Y., & Wu, J. (2018). The subjective well-being of academically gifted students in the Chinese cultural context. *School Psychology International, 39*(3), 291-311. https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034318773788

Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among the five approaches (3rd ed.).* Sage.

Dahmen, N. S. (2018). Visually reporting mass shootings: U.S. newspaper photographic coverage of three mass school shootings. *The American Behavioral Scientist (Beverly Hills), 62*(2), 163-180. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218756921

Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. Macmillan.

Faggiano, M. P., & Brill Evidence Based Selection. (2023). *Content analysis in social research: Study contexts, avenues of research, and data communication strategies*. Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004537835

Freilich, J. D., Chermak, S. M., Connell, N. M., Klein, B. R., & Greene-Colozzi, E. A. (2022). Using open-source data to better understand and respond to American school shootings: Introducing and exploring the American school shooting study (TASSS). *Journal of School Violence, 21*(2), 93-118. https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2021.1991804

Freire, P., Ramos, M. B., & Macedo, D. P. (2018;2020). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (50th anniversary ed.). Bloomsbury Academic.

Graneheim, U. H., Lindgren, B., & Lundman, B. (2017). Methodological challenges in qualitative content analysis: A discussion paper. *Nurse Education Today, 56*, 29-34. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2017.06.002

Harris, E. (2024). School shootings in US reach highest recorded levels. JAMA: *The Journal of the American Medical Association, 331*(16), 1354-1354. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama. 2024.3706

Kamii, C., Clark, F. B., and Dominick, A. (1994). The six national goals: A road to disappointment. *PHI DELTA KAPPAN, 75*(9), 672-677.

Kohn, A. (1999). *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribes*. Houghton Mifflin Co.

Livingston, M. D., Rossheim, M. E., & Hall, K. S. (2019). A descriptive analysis of school and school shooter characteristics and the severity of school shootings in the United States, 1999–2018. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 64*(6), 797-799. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2018.12.006

Marshall, J. M., & Clark, B. L. (2023). A systematic literature review of educational leadership and U.S. school shootings: Establishing a research agenda. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 59*(3), 594-632. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X231166335

Moliner, L., Alegre, F., Cabedo-Mas, A., & Chiva-Bartoll, O. (2021). Social well-being at school: Development and validation of a scale for primary education students. *Frontiers in Education 6,* 1-6. https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2021.800248/full

Pajaro, M. V., & Andrade, C. C. (2018). Case study in gestalt therapy: *Phenomenological readings of children's drawing. Revista Da Abordagem Gestáltica: Phenomenological Studies, 24*(2), 204-225. https://doi.org/10.18065/RAG.2018v24n2.10

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods (4th ed)*. SAGE Publications.

Piaget, J. (1997). *The moral judgment of the child*. Free Press Paperbacks.

Pillow, W. (2003). Confession, catharsis, or cure? rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 16*(2), 175-196. https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839032000060635

Powell, M. A., Graham, A., Fitzgerald, R., Thomas, N., & White, N. E. (2018). Wellbeing in schools: What do students tell us? *Australian Educational Researcher, (45)*4, 515-531.

Rapa, L. J., Katsiyannis, A., Scott, S. N., & Durham, O. (2024). School shootings in the United States: 1997–2022. *Pediatrics (Evanston), 153*(4) https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2023-064311

Robinson, K. (2011). *Out of Our Minds*. Capstone Publishing.

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. (2021). *Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral, and Mental Health Needs*. Washington, DC

Xu, J. (2023). Developing emotional intelligence in children through dialogic reading, self-made books, and visible thinking routines. *Early Childhood Education Journal.* https://doi-org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/s10643-023-01520-9

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (6th ed.). Sage Publications.

Yoon, H. S., & Templeton, T. N. (2019). The practice of listening to children: The challenges of hearing children out in an adult-regulated world. *Harvard Educational Review, 89*(1), 55-84. https://doi.org/10.17763/1943-5045-89.1.55

Shushan Vardanyan is an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education at the University of Mississippi. She earned her Ph.D. in 2019 from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Her research focuses on children's play development, the influence of culture on child development, and the integration of Piagetian perspectives into early childhood education. Dr. Vardanyan has

12 years of experience teaching young children in Dubai and the United States, working in kindergarten as well as first, second, and fourth-grade classrooms. For inquiries, she can be reached at svardany@olemiss.edu or by phone at +1 (662) 915-7622.