Social Relations, Safety, and Acceptance — Making Meanings of Home in Children's and Young People's Visual Expression

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ABSTRACT

Aim. This article aims to understand children's and young people's notions of home by analysing how children express the meanings they invest in the concept of home both visually and in related explanatory texts.

Methods. The article explores outcomes of a creative task implemented in schools in six countries with students aged 5 to 15. The data consists of 559 visual artefacts and captions explaining their contents. In the examination of the data, we engaged in a thematic and contextual qualitative analysis that follows the inductive logic of close reading.

Results. Our analysis reveals three interlinked meaning-making modes through which the students dealt with the idea of home and identifies key elements that make them feel at home: home as social relations; home as safety; and home as acceptance. For the students, home commonly includes a material dimension, a house, but it becomes "a home" only through meaningful social relations, emotions, and everyday practices.

Conclusions. Our findings bring to the fore a rather unified understanding of home, pointing out that there are shared cultural and school-derived conventions that affect the manners in which creative tasks are approached by students in the school context. Yet general conformity also highlights the instances in which expressions of home deviate from expectations, as the depictions of safety as "protection from" exemplify in our data. In these depictions, the nationalistic and exclusionary aspects associated with home are brought to the fore.

Keywords: home, belonging, empathy, meaning-making, visual expression, children and young people

Introduction

Humans, like all animals, need shelter to survive. Shelter — housing — is therefore commonly perceived as a basic human need (Denton, 1990; Reinprecht, 2014). Housing provides comfort, safety, and security — and is filled with social, cultural, and political meanings (see Aaltojärvi, 2014). When a human shelter, such as a house, is invested with emotions, memories, and social relations, it becomes a home. Home as a place of growing, socialising to culture, and learning the first steps of social life is key in children's and young people's development and well-being (Dockery et al., 2010). Conceptually, home is a thoroughly idealised idea, as the phrase "to feel at home" with its positive connotations of comfort exemplified. This idealisation is contrasted by the fact that the material and emotional support of one's home may also be lost or absent in various ways. Homelessness, in a literal and a more metaphorical sense, may be caused by displacement due to war, poverty, and natural disaster, or non-functioning family relations and domestic violence — just to mention a few examples. In nationalist discourses, the concept of home, or homeland, also leads to practices of exclusion, sometimes even violent ones (Infante et al., 2012; Tange & Jenks, 2023). Home as a concept has thus also become "fragmented, disillusioned and fragile" (p. 5) as contemporary art practices exemplify (Lauzon, 2017). Since home is a central place for children and young people, it is necessary to increase knowledge of their ideas about it. Scholarship thus needs studies incorporating the perspectives of children and young people regarding the meanings of home.

In this article, we aim at mapping and critically scrutinising children's and young people's notions of home as expressed in the school context by analysing the out-

comes of a creative task implemented in over 250 classes in Cyprus, Germany, Israel, Lithuania, Spain, Portugal, and the UK in the school year 2019–2020. The creative tasks were implemented as part of a study programme that included 15 lessons aimed at three age groups: 5–6, 8–9, and 14–15. The programme was designed as part of a project promoting values such as tolerance, empathy, and inclusion in relation to European identity (on the project, see Maine & Vrikki, 2021). In this article, we focus on three of these lessons (one for each age group) that explicitly addressed the topic of home and belonging (for an analysis on other lessons, see Lähdesmäki et al., 2021). Our research questions are: What meanings does the idea of home evoke among children and young people, and how are these meanings expressed visually and textually?

We approach the concept of home by emphasising its conceptual links to feelings of belonging and non-belonging. The concepts of home and belonging indeed have several confluences. In scholarship, both are connected to varied spatial locations and social relations (Lähdesmäki et al., 2021). Scholars have approached the concept of belonging through the emotional register related to the idea of home. Marco Antonsich (2010), for instance, conceptualises the ties between place and belonging as "place-belongingness" (p. 645) and explains it as "a personal, intimate feeling of being "at home' in a place" (p. 645). Place-belongingness has both social and material dimensions. Environments, objects, and embodied practices are commonly used to construct and express it. Paolo Boccagni (2014) even claims that "there is a need to relocate belonging in something real" (p. 289). However, place-belongingness often draws from social relations in a place. It can manifest itself through private feelings of social attachment to other people with whom one is close, such as family members (Kobayashi, 2014). Scholars have emphasised how belonging usually has positive associations, but the flipside is non-belonging and exclusion (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016; Maine et al., 2021).

In what follows, we first introduce our approach to analysing children's and young people's visual expressions and describe our data and methods. Second, we present our analysis and key findings with visual and textual examples from the data. Finally, we conclude with a discussion on the meanings that children and young people associate with home and the key features that make them feel they belong.

Approaching Children's and Young People's Visual Expressions

Our approach to visual expressions is rooted in the understanding of children and young people as active makers and recyclers of meanings. According to Jamal Fathi Ahmad (2018) and Masami Toku (2001), children's creative works are always inspired by the culture or societies in which they live. Moreover, children reinterpret

familiar representations and ideas creatively by borrowing and recycling them (Corsaro, 1992; Cox, 2005; Mavers, 2011). Thus, children and young people contribute to the cultural meanings that are assigned to images, objects, people, and concepts — in this case, home. Our approach is therefore grounded in cultural studies, in which it is generally understood that cultural artefacts and representations are not only seen as reflections of the culture in which they are created but also as actively constituting said culture (e.g. Kellner, 1995; Hall, 2000). In such a constructive approach, focus on skill has, to a great extent, been replaced by an understanding of creation as a social practice (Coates & Coates, 2011). When creative practices are implemented across the curriculum, they do not focus on modernist paradigms of art for art's sake or free expression of inner feelings (or mere visuality, as noted by Paul Duncum [2004]), but acknowledge the role of visual culture in sociocultural meaning-making at large. This is why we refer to the children's creative outcomes as artefacts instead of art-works.

The artefacts, analysed in this article were gathered as part of the project Dialogue and Argumentation for Cultural Literacy in Schools (DIALLS), "a pan-European project focusing on the development of children and young people's cultural literacy and what it means to be European in the twenty-first century, prioritising intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding" (Maine & Vrikki, 2021, p. 1). The project – created as a response to the European Commission's Horizon 2020 research and innovation fund, within the topic "Inclusive, innovative and reflective societies" – sought to promote cultural literacy among children and young people. The countries where the creative tasks were implemented (Cyprus, Germany, Israel, Lithuania, Spain, Portugal, and the United Kingdom) were selected to provide a broad geographic scope within Europe, with Israel as an associated country. It is, indeed, one of the aims of the European Union to promote "the integration of Israel into European policies and programmes", as it is believed that the European Union and Israel share common "values of democracy, respect for human rights, the rule of law and fundamental freedoms" (European Commission, n.d., Eu and Israel). Given the present situation, where Israel is violating such rights and freedoms of the Palestine people (on violations against children, specifically, see United Nations 2024), it may seem inappropriate to include Israel in a project such as ours. The DIalogue and Argumentation for Cultural Literacy Learning in Schools project was, however, implemented before the escalation of the situation on the Gaza Strip (and beyond). Moreover, promoting intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding may be considered specifically important in areas prone to violence and social conflict.

The classes selected were located in schools from urban, sub-urban, and (slightly more) rural areas. The implementation of the project, including data collection, followed a detailed ethical code of conduct required by the European Commission. The artefacts were created during lessons dealing with belonging and home, a les-

son plan designed by the project. Before creating them, the students had explored wordless narratives, a film or a picture book, to stimulate class discussion around various themes reflecting the lesson design. The students, or their teachers in the case of 5–6 year olds, also wrote brief explanations (hereafter referred to as 'captions') for each artefact. Wordless films and picture books were selected as lesson prompts, since they were easy to use in different countries without having to translate any text, and their imagery also proved to inspire "rich dialogues as children worked together to explore their meanings" (Maine & Vrikki 2021, p. 2) – as well as artefacts full of symbolic layers. The lessons, during which the artefacts discussed here were made, used the wordless short film, Christopher Duriez's puppet animation *Baboon on the Moon* (2002), to stimulate class discussion and creative works around the concepts of home and belonging. The film was chosen due to its depiction of the themes of belonging and displacement. In the film, a sad blue and grey baboon lives alone in a blue house on the dark and empty Moon, longing for the bright, colourful Earth. The baboon is even shown playing a wistful trumpet serenade for the distant Earth.

These audiovisual cues of *Baboon on the Moon* easily evoke an interpretation of the film as an allegory for emotional displacement caused by migration. The lesson plan did not make this interpretation of displacement explicit, leaving the teachers freedom to construct their lessons; teachers were only guided to discuss how home has different meanings for different people and how it includes social and emotional dimensions. At the end of the lesson, students in the youngest age group were instructed to draw a picture on pieces of paper in the shape of puzzle pieces, guided by the question: "What does home mean to you?" They then put together a collage of the pictures that they had drawn, forming a collective interpretation of home. The mid age group was merely instructed "to create a collage of where they belong". "To create artwork to reflect the keywords and phrases that define 'home'", was the assignment for the oldest pupils. The last two tasks were created in small groups.

The resulting data-set includes 559 creative works from Cyprus (77), Germany (32), Israel (339), Lithuania (32), Portugal (111), and the UK (152), made during the aforementioned lessons, with artefacts from each age-group (in collective works constituting different artefacts made by different groups, each puzzle piece was calculated separately). Since the number of drawings from each country varies strongly, with Israel representing 60% of the data, our findings are not meant to be quantifiable, but rather aim to highlight some recurring themes and – if prevalent – national specifics. The artefacts are mainly multi-coloured drawings but include some three-dimensional assemblages, sculptures, videos, paintings, and collages of magazine-cuttings. Co-creation enabled active interaction, collaborative experiences, and multidirectional learning (see Taylor, 2020). The teachers photographed their students' artefacts and sent the photographs and captions to the researchers.

The uneven number of artefacts in the data reflects the number of classes that volunteered for the project and the active participation of the youngest age group, which increased our data as we calculated each piece of the puzzle separately. For instance, most of the Israeli data consists of the puzzle-pieces made by the younger children.

One of the main characteristics of children's and youths' creative practices is the blending of visual and spoken modalities. The interaction of two or more semiotic resources (Deguara, 2015) is usually the basis for the artefacts in our data which was supported by the lesson plans that promoted multimodality and suggested artefacts to be accompanied by the short captions (Lähdesmäki et al., 2021). Children's drawings can be seen as a dialogue between the lines they make on paper and their spoken words, as Susanna Kinnunen (2015) points out. In a similar vein, Pihla Maria Siim (2019) has stressed that children's visual creations cannot be understood independently of the narrative context and the children's own explanations. Therefore, the multimodality of children's creative practices serves as the foundation for our investigation. The meanings that creators attached to their artefacts are largely revealed by the captions. Therefore, the multimodality of children's creative practices serves as the foundation for our investigation. The meanings that creators attached to their artefacts are largely revealed by the captions. Our goal in interpreting them is not to follow the children's thoughts in and of themselves. According to Gillian Rose (2001), we, as academics with training in the study of literature, art, and culture, interpret the data by decoding the signs that the students coded to the artefacts. Only between the objects as a complex symbol and us as interpreters can this decoding take place.

In practice, we engaged in a thematic and contextual qualitative analysis that follows the inductive logic of close reading. Understood broadly, the method refers to the wide range of interpretative investigations that allow for in-depth examination of communication at the levels of semantics, structure, representation, and culture (Dubois, 2003). Simply put, the method aims at the "mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings" (Brummett, 2010, p. 3). We have used this method to identify recurring themes from our data, which we have then analysed and situated in relevant cultural and theoretical contexts. As our approach is qualitative, quantifiable data is included only to give the reader an idea of how typical a given theme is in our data and to highlight some of the cross-country differences in the artefacts.

Moreover, our analysis draws on a collaborative and self-reflexive interpretation of the artefacts in the lesson's context (Rose, 2001; Lähdesmäki et al., 2021). The authors of this text were not part of the implementation of the creative tasks at the schools, but our interpretations were formed in close collaboration and open dialogue within the broader DIALLS project team during the research process, and the researchers responsible for gathering the school data provided us with further information on the context of making the artefacts, when needed. The first

author was mainly responsible for the categorisation and analysis of the data, but all three authors familiarised themselves with the artefacts and their explanatory texts and collaboratively identified a broad variety of themes and topics through which home was expressed and explored in the data. The reasoning behind the categorisation and the analytical approach was collectively discussed in depth during the analysis process. The examples from the data selected for a closer analysis were closely examined by all three authors.

These methods enable us to explore how creative practices function as a children's and young people's means of communication and a mode of making meanings of home. In the analysis, we use images and quotations from our data to illustrate these modes. We discuss the artefacts in the context of the children's and young people's age group and home country as these are the main background factors in the data. Other information, such as gender, was often but not always provided. However, gender did not prove a useful category for analysis (see Lähdesmäki et al., 2021) as most of the artefacts were created collaboratively and groups could include varying proportions of genders.

Analysis: Intertwined Iconic and Symbolic Meanings of Home

We identified three distinct but interlinked meaning-making modes through which the students commonly dealt with the idea of home: *home as social relations; home as safety; and home as acceptance*. These modes were not age-specific but used by all students—within their age-related expressive capacity—to explore the meanings of home and their sense of belonging to a place that feels like home. As our analysis shows, there was very little variation in the way that the younger age groups dealt with the idea of home. In the oldest age group, more differences were found both in the form and content of the artefacts.

Home as Social Relations

In their artefacts, the students in the youngest and the mid age groups (5–6- and 8–9-year-olds) often recycled an archetypal image of a house with a pyramid-shaped roof (Figure 1) that commonly occurs in media content and products targeted to children—and with a slight variation in the film *Baboon on the Moon*. The artefacts depicting a house were quite similar within and between different countries. Besides the influence of media imageries and the film used as the lesson prompt, the similarities may derive from the collaborative creative work and peer influence between the students.

Figure 1

A Drawing by a Student in the Youngest Age Group (Portugal)

Source. Student's drawing.

Despite this tendency to draw a physical house, the youngest children associated home as a space with emotional, cultural, and social dimensions. The buildings in the artefacts do not (only) iconically depict physical houses but represent abstract qualities, such as social relations, emotions, ideals, and expectations associated with the idea of home. The students commonly expressed this by drawing a house accompanied by smiling people—identified in the captions as the students themselves and their family members, relatives, and friends—and visual elements like hearts, flowers, rainbows, butterflies, green grass, blue sky, and the sun (Figure 1).

Usually, children's visual expression is founded on a combination of symbolic and iconic communication (Anning, 2003; Lähdesmäki et al., 2021). The visual elements—borrowed from the imageries of contemporary popular culture and media contents and products targeted to children—strengthen the broader meaning of homes as places of social and emotional belonging in the artefacts through their symbolic dimension. These elements function as symbols of positive emotions, such as happiness, joy, and love, which also comes across in the captions. For instance, Cypriot children from the youngest age group explained their drawing by stating: "Home is a place where we sleep, play, eat, and learn. There is our family, our parents, our siblings, our cousins. Our home is our space, a hug, love, joy, warmth, our heart." In their explanation, they thus expressed the metaphor "home is where the heart is."

The archetypal image of a house can be a symbol for a place affixed with positive emotions, important social relations, and care associated with the idea of home. In addi-

tion to their symbolic level, images of trees, flowers, and other natural elements may be interpreted as indicative of the role of nature and other physical surroundings in constructing a home. Portuguese children in the youngest age group, for example, often drew or mentioned the beach as home, which is telling of the different everyday surroundings of the children.

Some of the artefacts and their captions by the students in the youngest and the mid age groups also indicated a sense of belonging to school, municipal area, state, or country. One Israeli student from the mid age group for example describes a sense of belonging to "school, grandma's home, the state of Israel." In the youngest age group, many also drew the Earth, the object of the baboon's longing in *Baboon on the Moon*. This may reflect more on the influence of the imagery of the film than the students' sense of belonging. As one Lithuanian student puts it: "I really like being home. I live [on] Earth."

In the artefacts created by the mid and oldest age groups, home attained even more symbolic meaning, expressed by depicting it through symbolic expression (that we will return to below) and, in the captions, by elaborating activities, routines, and social relations that make spaces feel like home. Some students from Germany, Israel, and Lithuania also mentioned memories shared with their loved-ones. Israeli students also often reflected on the differences between home as a physical place and as a spiritual place formed by social relations.

As said, home was also extended to broader communities– even to the entire Earth. This happened in artefacts from all age groups and nationalities, except for the Israeli students' artefacts. References to the Earth may rather derive from the visual imagery of the film used as prompt than the children's actual feelings of belonging, but it is interesting that none of the Israeli students circulated this thematic of belonging to the world at large. One Lithuanian group of students, for example, clearly stated that: "Home is: Earth, Europe, Country, City, Street, House, Family, Feelings." Another group also mused that: "Our house is the Earth, the whole planet, no matter where our house stands." Israeli and Lithuanian students also tended to mention their nation when describing home, implicating a sense of belonging to the nation state.

One reason for the fact that Israeli children specifically expressed a stronger belonging to the nation state (instead of the entire Earth) in their artefacts and captions might have to do with the history of Israel as an ethno-nationalist state. Israel is a young country that has, since its creation in 1948, sought to justify its existence as the Homeland of the Jews, with immigration open to anyone who can prove their Jewish ethnicity (Raijman, 2020). Central to this project is the idea that Israel is the place where Jews truly belong (Peled-Elhanan, 2022).

In the oldest age group, belonging was commonly explicitly mentioned in the captions. One group from Lithuania, for instance, wrote:

> When asked to think about what home means to us, the first thought that comes to our mind is a loving and caring environment. [...] The most important thing is a feeling of belonging, where the heart feels comfortable with all its surroundings. Home does not necessarily have to be the birthplace of a person. Home is where we feel secure and a place we always want to go back to or stay.

Nonhuman animals (pets) also featured in the students' artefacts and captions—often in the youngest age group, less frequently in the older groups. In them, pets are considered as family members and part of home—or even *as home*. In the youngest and mid age groups, animals are commonly connected to the good feelings and care expressed as important features of home. This is evident in the way animals are pictured happy and smiling. For instance, a Portuguese child from the youngest age group depicted a colourful house, a smiling person, and a smiling animal (Figure 2) with this caption: "We keep pets at home and help parents to take care of them." The text on this artefact explains directly the meaning of home: It is a place "where we eat and sleep. Where we take care of our pets." Similarly, a group of Israeli students in the mid age group note that: "A home to us is also the animals living with us at home, our home—it's our life."

Figure 2

A Drawing by a Student in the Youngest Age Group (Portugal)

Source. Student's drawing.

As stated above, animals and nature appear to have symbolic value even in the artefacts by the youngest age group, but this was most clearly articulated by the oldest students. A similar move towards abstraction can be identified from the captions. For instance, one Lithuanian group had made a small bird installation. In their caption, they explained that it was the Lithuanian national bird, the stork, that symbolised their belonging to the nation. A German student in the oldest age group, in turn, made an origami fish (Figure 3) that symbolises home, belonging, and the student's family history:

> For my fourth birthday, my uncle gave me a fish as a present. From this day on, we added [a fish] to our collection of fish every time someone at home has a birthday. At the end of 2017, we

> bought my parents a small statue of an orange fish to celebrate the end of a difficult part of my and my brother's life. This statue resides in our kitchen in our house in Sao Paulo. Unfortunately, we couldn't bring this statue to Germany yet. My artefact is an origami of the orange fish statue. I decided to do origami because this is something my brother and I used to do when we were sad.

Another German student in the oldest age group had created a small cat out of clay and explained it as follows:

> [F]or me, animals, in general, symbolise a feeling of security/comfort and love and I feel comfortable around cats because they often resemble me in their character. On the other hand, because I myself got a cat when I was eight years old, so this is again related to a childhood memory of home. Also, I always feel at home automatically when I pet a cat, especially because animals purr when they feel comfortable and secure. For this reason, I believe that it won't be as important for me where I will be living later on—as long as I have the right people and animals around me, it will be my home. And if I have a cat, I will always feel comfortable.

Here, the cat is not only a symbol for security, love, and comfort but also a concrete animal, a member of the family.

Figure 3

An Origami Fish by a Student in the Oldest Age Group (Germany)

Source. Student's origami.

The role of nonhuman animals in our data brings to the fore an often neglected sphere of home. As noted by Jane Hamlett and Julie-Marie Strange (2021): "Studies of homes, domestic practices and family relationships rarely mention animal presence," even though "scholars from different disciplines have increasingly called attention to the role of animals in social life" (pp. 77–78).

Home as Safety

The second mode of meaning-making highlights how home stands for safety for the students. Safety was explicitly mentioned by all age groups in the data—and by students from each participating country, with the exception of Portuguese students in the oldest age group. This was probably influenced by the fact that the oldest Portuguese students were asked to draw a script for a short film based on *Baboon on the Moon*, and their artefacts thus mostly dealt with the core themes of the film (belonging, empathy, and displacement). Safety was commonly connected to the care that children receive at home from their family members. The students thus often portrayed people as a source of safety. For students in the youngest age group, home was a place where "you have friends and family, feel safe and loved," as a group of students from the UK explained. Safety was also expressed through the concept of security, mainly in the oldest age group. As one German student describes it: "For me, the term home is a place where I feel comfortable and secure."

Within this discussion of safety and security, one comment stands out. Among the data, one UK student mentioned school as a safe place, stating: "Home means school to me because I just feel really safe there and I have lots of friends around me." This comment might be read simply as highlighting the importance of belonging to a broader social network, such as friends. It may, however, also be interpreted as an indication of a less safe situation outside of school.

The theme of safety was sometimes also expressed through the idea of protection. The use of the word "protection" highlighted differences between countries: it was mentioned by Israeli students in *all the age groups*, Portuguese students in the youngest group, and one German student in the oldest age group. Students from Portugal and Germany explored protection through the idea of home as a shelter that protects people from natural phenomena, such as the cold, sun, and rain. In the case of Portuguese students, the mentions of protection against natural forces may reflect the fact that Portugal has a warm, mediterranean climate, and for the last century or so the country has also been tested by natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods caused by heavy rains. In the case of Israel, protection was, however, more explicitly used to describe safety from an outside human threat, as exemplified by a caption of an image by the youngest age group that stated that at home one may "feel safe and [be] protected from projectiles." In this caption, protection quite clearly implies armed conflict—marking a stark contrast between Israel and the other countries in our data.

Even though we do not wish to speculate on the children's thoughts beyond their artefacts and captions, a contextual analysis suggests that the Israel-Palestinian conflict has very probably influenced the themes expressed in the Israeli children's artefacts. As mentioned before, the state of Israel has sought to justify its existence as the Homeland of Jews. Seizing Palestinian land and property, discriminatory housing policies,

and a separate and unequal citizenship structure are means of controlling and dividing the demography of the state to this day. The theme of ”home” is therefore an especially ideologically laden subject in this context, because questions of land ownership and the right to live in a certain place (citizenship, right to housing, and family unification) form the core of the Israel-Palestinian conflict (Amnesty International, 2022; Pappe, 2017). Furthermore, scholars have noted that the history of the persecution of the Jews and the prolonged occupation of Palestinian land have affected the Israeli society psychologically, generating a feeling of victimhood and fear as well as high levels of aggression in the civil society (Greenbaum & Elizur, 2012; Peled-Elhanan, 2022). Moreover, the idea that Israel is the only place where Jewish people can truly be safe is a central argument used to justify the existence of the state of Israel (Peled-Elhanan, 2022).

Drawings by the Israeli students mostly referred to this violent conflict in a rather metaphorical manner without detailing what or who they are protecting themselves from. The Israeli students in the oldest age group often depicted shields and mentioned the idea of being “shielded” in their captions. Shields are powerful symbols of safety. In the Israeli data, they depict home as a private, safe space protected from the outside. One of these drawings (Figure 4) portrays a house with wings and an ornamental shield floating within a heart-shaped space. The caption elaborates on the symbolism: the wings stand for freedom, the heart symbolises love, and the shield represents safety.

Figure 4

A Drawing by Students in the Oldest Age Group (Israel)

Source. Student’s drawing.

Another group of the oldest Israeli students described protective equipment in a more literal manner. They drew tanks, missiles, and a fence protecting a house (Figure 5). The house itself is decorated with hearts. According to the caption, the fence is meant to keep out unwanted people, making it a clear statement of exclusion. The students explain:

> We chose to draw a fence since the home is our safe zone and the warning signs express the fact that the home is our private zone and often we distance people since we are in our private zone.

Figure 5

A Drawing by Students in the Oldest Age Group (Israel)

Source. Student's drawing.

In this image, the protective gear is less symbolic, but the hearts that decorate the house still symbolise love, emphasising a view in which the military protects something good and valuable. The artefact in Figure 5 thus depicts safety and privacy simultaneously. The hearts denote the warmth felt inside but the fence reflects fear of a threat from the outside. Another caption by Israeli students also contrasts "hurt" coming from outside with the love inside: "At home, you feel protected and that it's impossible to hurt us from the outside and from within you feel love and warmth from the family/friends living in the house."

This depiction of an outside threat directed towards the loving atmosphere inside the home reflects academic discussions on belonging: the experience of belonging is demarcated by its counterpart, non-belonging. Scholars have noted how "longing for and constructing belonging often emanates from the fear of its flipside, non-belonging, unfamiliarity, dislocation, and missing home where one cannot be or that one does not have" (Maine et al., 2021, p. 3). The concept of belonging thus "emphasises the relational dimensions of inclusion and exclusion" (Gerharz 2014, pp. 553–554), since it encompasses the potential for exclusion (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016).

Home as Acceptance

The third meaning-making mode includes artefacts that connect the idea of home to a place of acceptance, thematised through freedom, the ability to be oneself, and self-expression. The three age groups approached this theme with different levels of abstraction. The students in the first two age groups dealt with the freedom to be oneself by emphasising home as a place where "we can also feel sad, but our family and friends are there [to] help us feel happy again," as a group of the youngest students from Cyprus wrote, while the oldest students elaborated on the theme in their captions by focusing on the preconditions for this freedom.

In the artefacts by the oldest students, the idea of being able to be or express oneself often appeared together with safety, meaning that freedom to be oneself requires a safe space (cf. Lähdesmäki & Koistinen, 2021). One group of Lithuanian students explained their artefact by stating: "A family provides the feeling of safety and freedom." Also, freedom and safety were associated with the privacy of the home. The students from Israel and Lithuania, in particular, brought up privacy as a precondition for a safe home environment. The interconnections of freedom, safety, and privacy were also elaborated through symbolic visual expression. For instance, one student from Germany in the oldest age group drew a rectangle in the middle of the paper (Figure 6), representing home, with people holding hands inside it, and colourful, messy lines outside the rectangle representing chaos. The student explained the drawing by noting: "Home means freedom, social contacts, and a frame of security, independent of place and constant chaos of life."

Figure 6

A Drawing by a Student in the Oldest Age Group (Germany)

Source. Student's drawing

Freedom to be and express oneself was connected to empathy through acceptance and allowing each family member to be themselves. The idea of acceptance also broadened to encompass families other than one's own. In this view, each family is accepted to live their lifestyle. This is illustrated in an artefact created by Israeli students in the oldest age group who defined home with keywords—empathy, respect, love, safety, aspiration, acceptance, freedom, happiness, empathy, and respect—and illustrated their definition with two houses inhabited by people living different lifestyles. In the caption, the students note how they "wanted to clarify that in both homes the values are not exactly matching to the other one, but it's possible to see the basic and common values in both homes (respect, love)." Empathy comes across as a way to find common ground. Even though the artefacts or their captions did not explicitly discuss for instance empathy between different peoples or ethnic groups, these kinds of lessons have the potential to extend the discussions of empathy from one's immediate inner circle to a broader context, as the artefact depicting the life led in different homes illustrates.

The lesson plan, including its prompt *Baboon on the Moon*, sought to invoke discussion on home and belonging and teach empathy. Art and literature are indeed often used as tools in empathy education (Lähdesmäki & Koistinen, 2021). It has been claimed that engaging with art or artistic practices can engender empathy and the ability to step into the shoes of another person (e.g., Fialho, 2019; Leavy, 2017), or even imagine the experiences of nonhuman animals (Weik von Mossner, 2017). In our data, the character of the baboon inspired some students to imagine the experiences of other animals. The Portuguese students in the oldest age group, who wrote a script for a short film based on *Baboon on the Moon*, were most vocal about this. These items conveyed concepts of empathy and belonging as the students thought about the baboon's perspective and feelings, like a yearning for home. As one caption explains: "This short film talks about loneliness and the notion of having a mission (the sacrifices necessary to achieve certain goals). It speaks of longing, of the feeling of wanting to 'return home,' of feeling displacement." Another group wrote: "A baboon who worked lighting the moon died, and so it was necessary for another to be hired. Thus, the 'new baboon' arrives at the Moon to replace the old baboon, but when he arrives there, he realises that he has made a big mistake, because he misses the Earth so much." Here, home is where one comes from or where one belongs to, which is why the baboon misses Earth.

The empathy that the students expressed at the baboon's displacement and loneliness also took on more political tones. One Portuguese artefact explicitly dealt with the rights of nonhuman animals. This script for a movie includes images of the baboon dreaming of Earth and playing their saxophone, which is heard by another baboon on Earth. The caption explains:

> Humans consider themselves the superior species, and therefore their life is more important than that of other beings, in this case the baboon. However, when the baboon ar-

rives [on the Moon], it misses not only its companion, but also its habitat. He decides that his new home should become more welcoming and starts building a house. There comes a time when he can communicate with the baboons on Earth.

A sign in frame eight of the script reads: "We want equality!!!" This slogan not only enforces the sense of belonging between all baboons but expresses empathy with the predicament of other animals. Although the children's expression of the baboon is anthropomorphised (as in the film), this can be interpreted as indicating the students' capacity for empathy and care beyond human beings. Engaging with the emotions and experiences of the fictional animal led the students to create a visual expression that expresses empathy for the baboon and promotes respect for both human and nonhuman living creatures. Creative expression may therefore enable extending the concept of belonging and home to nonhuman animals and nature — making it possible for students and educators to discuss the pressing planetary-scale concerns of human relations to other animals and nature (cf. Lähdesmäki et al., 2021).

Discussion and Conclusions

Our analysis shows how in the students' visual expression, iconic and symbolic meaning-making of home are intertwined. To recap our findings, the student's depictions of home included a material dimension, but they also emphasised that a home becomes a home through meaningful social relations, everyday practices, and feelings of care, comfort, love, safety, and security. The artefacts and captions thus tended to express a sort of place-belongingness (Antonsich, 2010), as the data included expressions of home both as a physical space and as an abstract idea of belonging (see also Lähdesmäki et al., 2021). In our analysis, we singled out three modes of meaning-making — home as a place of *social relations*, *safety*, and *acceptance* — and noted that the three age groups approached these themes with different levels of abstraction. The first mode dealt with home as belonging with people and animals with whom the students had a meaningful relationship. The second mode portrayed home as a place where the students felt safe and protected. In the third mode, the meaning of home was connected to the freedom to be oneself, to express oneself freely, and to be accepted as you are.

In research, the concept of home has often been approached through social and emotional ties to a place. Even though home usually has a material basis, research has underlined social relations in their definitions of the concept: a material place becomes home through its intersecting cultural, sociodemographic, and psychological meanings (Lawrence, 1987; Saegert, 1985). Julie Botticello

(2007) defines home "less as a particular geographical and/or architectural entity, and more as a space where specific forms of sociality take place" (p. 7). The sense of belonging and being at home, in a place that is familiar, cosy, and emotionally connected, is a socially and intimately shared experience.

Within the three modes of meaning-making, empathic relations were also explored—especially in the third mode. Our analysis thus supports claims of art (being exposed to art as well as making art) potential in empathy education made by earlier research (e.g., Morizio et al., 2022; Martínez-López de Castro et al., 2023). Moreover, this mode emphasised the interaction of humans and nonhumans in the context of home, the emotional importance of this interaction, and empathy towards nonhuman animals stemming from it.

There was little variation in the way that the idea of home was expressed by the younger age groups, whereas in the oldest age group there were slightly more differences. This reflects the lesson guidelines for the three age groups and the teachers' choices in implementing them, as well as the age-related expressive capacity of the students. The similarities found in the artefacts can also be partly explained by children's tendency to reinterpret, borrow, and recycle familiar symbols and images, which makes even copying a mode of selective borrowing and reconfiguration that does not merely reflect or passively repeat the culture in which it is done (e.g. Corsaro, 1992; Cox, 2005). Additionally, academics contend that the school environment, which includes peers, teachers, classroom procedures, and curricula, either overtly or covertly emphasises particular beliefs, values, and expectations that affect how children express themselves visually (Deguara, 2015). The schools in which the data was collected were also mainly from urban areas, and a more diverse group of students may have provided less uniform results.

Most of the 559 depictions of home in the data may be regarded as more or less idealised articulations of home as a general cultural category. As articulations of an ideal home, the artefacts do not depict family tensions or other negative experiences/ideas related to home but rely on rather stereotypical imagery. Critical takes on home, as expressed in contemporary art (Lauzon, 2017), are not visible in our data. Students did not discuss, for example, immigration, although the lesson material provided opportunities for this. To our knowledge, teachers also did not explicitly raise the topic of immigration in the classroom. The rather uniform idealised view of home was troubled by only the cases in which the safety of home was discussed in relation to outer threats. Exclusion as a binary opposite to belonging and inclusion was highlighted in the artefacts by the Israel students who had drawn fences, shields, and even tanks to protect their homes. Even though there was little variation in the data, the differences found bring to the fore the different everyday surroundings and cultural contexts that the students live in. One UK child also stressed that school feels like home, since it felt safe

with so many friends around. This may simply indicate the importance of social relations in the meaning-making of home, yet it might also imply a less safe situation outside of school.

These more complex takes on safety indicate that images of home may be used as springboards for explorations of ideas and social realities as well as cultural practices that make out cultural differences. It has, for example, been argued that art can foster intercultural dialogue (Gonçalves & Majhanovich, 2016). Today, growing xenophobia and polarisation call for an augmented focus on cross- or intercultural communication—also within art education (Del Gobbo & Galeotti, 2018; Gonçalves & Majhanovich, 2016). Indeed, some students expressed a sense of belonging even to the "entire Earth", which was probably inspired by the film *Baboon on the Moon*. This may have served as a fruitful starting point for a discussion on, for instance, solidarity with people from diverse backgrounds. These discussions nevertheless need to be facilitated by teachers. The question then becomes: how are teachers and educators in school contexts equipped to discuss troubling notions of home within classrooms? Depictions of or allusions to issues such as exclusion, unsafety, or even violence may make anyone feel uncomfortable (especially when coming from a child). Comparing Finnish and Estonian student's perceptions of forbidden subjects in school art, Karolina Kiil (2009) has indeed claimed that violence is one of the subjects considered forbidden in school art. This may cause self-censorship, caution, or wariness in expressing views that deviate or diverge from the ideal depiction of home.

To conclude, our analysis indicates that creative practices can be useful for discussing complex concepts, such as home and belonging. That said, it should be noted that creative practices do not necessarily inspire children to engage in specific meaning-making processes (Fialho, 2019; Lähdesmäki & Koistinen, 2021). The manner in which children assign meaning to objects and ideas in the school context is influenced by the lesson material, teachers, peers, and the larger cultural context. In our data, the lesson plan encouraged an exploration of home, belonging, and empathy. The students appropriated information from the study material, classroom discussions, and the world outside the classroom through reinterpreting and combining narratives, ideas, and visual elements from different sources. By transforming the children from communication agents of their own worlds to communicative agents of their society and culture, the school context has been said to effectively unify the children's cultural and communicative resources (Deguara, 2015). Such cultural and contextual influences should not be considered only negative: becoming a communicative agent of society and culture is about becoming a contributor to them. Teachers and educators (as well as research designs exploring teaching, learning, and students' outcomes) should, nevertheless, pay close attention to these different contexts and influences.

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