



The Concept of Heaven in Drawings by French Muslim Children

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Abstract

This study examined drawings of children’s concepts of paradise categorized by age, gender, and religious-cultural differences. Participants were Sunni Turkish Muslim children born in France and who attend Islamic religious education at France’s Strasbourg Yunus Emre Mosque on weekends. Three superordinate and 14 subordinate qualitative categories were formed from the children’s drawings analyzed by the phenomenographic method. Although concrete descriptions of heaven were seen in the drawings by children of all ages, abstract depictions increased with age. Whereas drawings of heaven by girls depicted love and compassion, boys’ drawings represented power. Although there are commonalities between the descriptions by children of Muslim background and children from other religious backgrounds and cultures, the children’s particular religious and cultural structures were reflected in their representations of paradise. Recommendations from this study are given for the nature of the education children receive regarding death and heaven and hell.

Keywords Heaven · Concept of paradise · Children’s drawings · Afterlife belief · Cognitive development · Education about heaven

Introduction

Many studies have been conducted on children’s perceptions of death (Koocher, 1973; Lansdown & Benjamin, 1985; Melear, 1973; Nagy, 1948; Reilly et al., 1983; Schilder & Wechsler, 1934; Tamm & Granqvist, 1995; Wenestam, 1984; Wenestam & Wass, 1987). Fewer studies have examined the development of children’s afterlife beliefs (Astuti & Harris, 2008; Bering & Bjorklund, 2004). Significant events, including the death of loved ones or pets, have been found to influence children’s perceptions about life after death. Children almost always state that their dead relatives and pets have gone to heaven (Frangoulis et al., 1996). However, there is no known study that has specifically investigated children’s perceptions of heaven. Children’s perceptions of paradise—what is heaven, where is paradise, when do people go there, who will go there—are addressed in research related to

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death and afterlife beliefs (Frangoulis et al., 1996; Gartley & Bernasconi, 1967; Sagara-Rosemeyer & Davies, 2007).

In some studies investigating the perception of death among children from various religious backgrounds, children's drawings are used as a diagnostic method (Nagy, 1948; Tamm & Granqvist, 1995; Wenestam, 1984; Wenestam & Wass, 1987; Yang & Chen, 2002). Some studies have investigated the perceptions of death (Tümlü, 2013) and heaven and hell of Muslim children (Koç, 2008; Ulcay, 2011) through drawings. However, there is no known research that focuses on investigating the concept of paradise through drawings. The studies dealing with the perceptions of children about heaven and hell suggest that children think about the two concepts in a bilateral way. In this sense, focusing only on the concept of paradise could produce different results. In this sense, focusing only on the concept of paradise could produce different results. It could provide an understanding of the development of the concept of heaven in children and reveal the educational principles in the construction of this concept.

The results of the present study are discussed along with the results of studies investigating perceptions of death, the afterlife, heaven, and heaven and hell among Muslim children, and children from other religious backgrounds. The primary purpose of the study is to identify the qualitative categories in the drawings of paradise by Muslim children using the phenomenographic method. The second is to investigate the similarity of this study to the Piagetian cognitive development approach. The third is to examine gender differences in paradise-related representations. The fourth is to try to determine the extent to which social, environmental, cultural, and religious factors may shape drawings of heaven.

Children's images of heaven by age and gender

In some studies, children tend to talk more about heaven and its relationship with the afterlife than about hell. (Frangoulis et al., 1996; Tamm & Granqvist, 1995; Vianello et al., 1992), and young children have been found to talk more about heaven than older children (Gartley & Bernasconi, 1967). When Frangoulis et al. (1996) asked children from three London schools between the ages of 5 and 8 about life after death, more than half of the participants spoke of heaven. Tamm and Granqvist (1995) investigated the death perceptions of Swedish children between the ages of 9 and 19; their drawings of heaven mostly fell in the heaven and hell subcategory related to the metaphysical death concept, and these drawings were seen at all ages. Likewise, in the research conducted by Pagnin and Vianello with children 6–11 years of age, it was found that the children talked about heaven rather than hell. Moreover, when children were asked to complete a story about a dishonest person in the afterlife, again it was discovered that heaven was more frequently expressed in comparison to hell. One remarkable aspect of their study is that after the age of 8 or 9, some children tended to deny hell. Even though children discuss the religious idea of hell, the concept of hell is not widely accepted (Vianello et al., 1992).

Gartley and Bernasconi (1967) investigated the thoughts about death of children between the ages of 5 and 14 who were attending a Roman Catholic school, asking them two questions about heaven and hell. Their findings indicated that younger children talk more about heaven than older children. Young children who speak more about heaven in the hereafter describe mostly concrete conceptions of paradise (Gartley & Bernasconi, 1967; Tamminen, 1988). These concrete depictions continued even as age and abstract thinking gradually increased. Gartley and Bernasconi (1967) found that as children grow

older, they begin to distinguish between body and soul; they know that spirits do not die and that people who go to heaven will not return to the world. Tamminen (1988) says that the concrete imagery of heaven continues until adolescence, and concrete descriptions of heaven could continue until high school.

In a study conducted with Muslim children aged 7–14, it was revealed that 13- and 14-year-olds tended to draw hell instead of heaven in heaven and hell drawings. Ulcay (2011) states that this may be due to the religious suspicion seen in this age group. In the research, in parallel with Piaget's cognitive development model, meaningful images mixed with humor and abstract figures were found as the age increased. In another study with Muslim children, children's knowledge of heaven and hell was more limited in early childhood compared to later childhood. Children who were 4 years old did not have information about heaven and hell (Nas, 2018). In some studies with Muslim children, the gender difference was reflected in children's drawings of heaven, and these studies also found that children drew their peers of the same gender in heaven (Koç, 2008; Ulcay, 2011).

Besides individual factors such as age and gender, according to research with Muslim and other religious children, some contextual factors could affect children's imagination of heaven such as the social and educational factors of their family, teachers, characteristics of the religious education they received, their school, their immediate environment, media outlets such as television, the Internet, and newspapers; and religious-cultural factors such as the theological structure of their religion, their religious beliefs; and various pervasive narratives about heaven (Frangoulis et al., 1996; Gartley & Bernasconi, 1967; Koç, 2008; Nas, 2018; Sagara-Rosemeyer & Davies, 2007; Tamm & Granqvist, 1995; Ulcay, 2011; Yang & Chen, 2002).

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants were Sunni Turkish Muslim children born in France and who attend Islamic religious education at France's Strasbourg Yunus Emre Mosque on weekends. After obtaining research permission from the parents, the study was carried out by the researcher herself with the help of Islamic religious education teachers. One hundred and twenty students aged 7 to 12 participated in the study. Forty-eight of the students were girls, and 72 were boys. There were 73 students in the 7–9 age group and 47 students in the 10–12 age group. The distribution of gender by age groups is as follows: 32 girls and 41 boys in the 7–9 age group and 16 girls and 31 boys in the 10–12 age group.

After the researcher introduced herself and gave information about the research, she tried to make the children feel comfortable by chatting a little with them. Stating that the participation was voluntary, she never forced students to participate who were not willing to. First, students sat in single rows to prevent them from being influenced by each other. A4 paper, crayon boxes with 12 colors, pencils, and erasers were handed out to each participant. Also, the very few students who did not want to participate in the research were given paper and colored pencils to make free drawings to keep the research environment calm. Then, the children were asked to think of the concept of paradise for a while and to draw whatever came to mind. The free drawing time was not limited, and this time varied between 20 and 30 min. The researcher collected the finished drawings and conducted an individual interview with each child about their drawings. The researcher did not interpret

the pictures drawn by the children and avoided asking leading questions when formulating questions to ask the children about their drawings. Later, the children freely described their pictures in their own words. The researcher noted the drawing interview, age, and gender of each subject on the back of each drawing. The interviews ranged from 5 to 8 min.

Data analysis

The data was analyzed using the phenomenographic method. Phenomenography emerged in Sweden and is designed to reveal the familiar and different aspects of people's perceptions of the phenomena around them (Marton, 1986). First, categories are established through phenomenographic analysis. After reviewing the data several times, either descriptive categories are created or existing categories are changed. This process continues until the categories established in the study can explain the data obtained from the sample (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998). The phenomenographic method is not based on an earlier theory. The categories that emerge in this research are based on the information obtained from the particular sample (Koballa et al. 2000). Children's perceptions about religious concepts such as God and death have been previously investigated with this method, and it has been found to be an effective method in this field (Tamm, 1996; Tamm & Granqvist, 1995; Wenestam & Wass, 1987; Yang & Chen, 2002).

For the reliability of the research in the current study, after the researcher coded the interviews, she meticulously created a chart from the codes, and this chart was prepared according to the table suggested by Guest and colleagues (2006). Together with the code chart, the data was sent to a peer who had experience in qualitative analysis. The codings made by the two researchers were compared using the "intercoder agreement/min. code intersection rate of X% at the segment level [%]" section of the MAXQDA program (MAXQDA, 2018, version 2.4). The result of the Kappa test was 95.18%. After the analysis, three superordinate categories and 14 subordinate categories were created for this study. The categories were then digitized using the MAXQDA software and analyzed according to age and gender variables.

Results

After the phenomenographic analysis of the drawings of heaven by children who were 7–12 years old, the concept of heaven was systematized in 3 superordinate and 14 subordinate qualitative categories.

Qualitative categories of the concept of heaven by gender and age

As seen in Table 1, some children expressed their thoughts about heaven using the concept of death. Boys stated that heaven is a place to go after death more than girls. The 7–9 age group expressed this more than the 10–12 age group. In this sample, the concept of heaven was mostly depicted with material and worldly features, then with spiritual and religious characteristics, and lastly as a place to go after death. More girls than boys represented heaven spiritually and religiously. Boys described heaven as more material and worldly than girls. The 10–12 age group expressed more spiritual and religious aspects of heaven than the 7–9 age group. The 7–9 age group described more material and worldly direction than the 10–12 age group.

Table 1 The distribution of qualitative categories of the concept of heaven by gender and age/number of coded segments of drawings

	Girl	Boy	7–9 Age Group	10–12 Age Group	Total
Heaven is a place people go after death					
After death	1	4	4	1	10
After burial	2	7	8	1	18
Spiritual and religious concepts of heaven					
Sacred places and religious items in heaven	6	15	9	12	42
Spiritual blessings in heaven	16	3	7	12	38
Holy beings (nonanthromorphic) in heaven	9	4	4	9	26
Symbols of heaven	2	5	0	7	14
Characteristics of people in heaven	1	7	2	6	16
Activities in heaven	2		2		4
Material and worldly concepts of heaven					
Natural beauty in heaven	47	110	89	68	314
Material blessings in heaven	22	30	23	29	104
Holy beings (anthropomorphic) in heaven	13	12	18	7	50
Heaven’s similarity to places in the world	18	20	30	8	76
Kinds of people in heaven	7	10	15	2	34
Activities in heaven	5	1	4	2	12
Total	151	228	215	164	758
N (Documents/Drawings)	48 (40.0%)	72 (60.0%)	73 (60.8)	47 (39.9%)	120 (100.0%)

Subordinate qualitative categories of the concept of heaven

Heaven is a place people go after death. This category consisted of two subcategories: “after death” and “after burial.” The pictures in this category included depictions of a grave, a cemetery, and a deceased person. See Fig. 1 for examples of drawings in this category.

Spiritual and religious concepts of heaven. This category consists of six subcategories. See Fig. 2 for examples of drawings in this category. **Sacred places and religious items in heaven:** In these pictures, there were images of the Qur’an, mosques, the Kaaba, and prayer rugs from the Islamic religion. **Spiritual blessings in heaven:** In this category, some drawings depicted children with their families in paradise, mutual gift-giving, treating guests well, and other things that they imagined would happen in heaven. The children said that there would be spiritual feelings such as “happiness, serenity, affection, love, goodness, friendship and joy” in paradise. Girls’s drawings were assigned to this category more than boys’. As their age increased, spiritual blessings in heaven were a key feature in their answers. **Holy beings in heaven:** These children’s drawings described the concepts of Allah, the angel, and Prophet Muhammad depicted in a nonanthropomorphic way as all being present in heaven. As seen in Table 1, the 10–12 age group expressed this category more than the 9–10 age group. **Symbols of heaven:** This subcategory contained strictly symbolic depictions of heaven. These children described paradise with the themes of a waterfall and rainbow, a garden with an infinite variety of flowers, an apple tree, the



Fig. 1 Children’s drawings from the category *heaven is a place people go after death*



8-year-old girl / spiritual blessings in heaven



12-year-old boy / characteristics of people in heaven



11-year-old girl / holy being (nonanthropomorphic) in heaven



10-year-old boy / sacred places and religious items in heaven

Fig. 2 Children’s drawings from the category *spiritual and religious concepts of heaven*

family’s home in Turkey, the Bosphorus Bridge, and reaching God. This subcategory was expressed only by children aged 10–12 years. **Characteristics of people in heaven:** Here, the children stated that people who carried out spiritual and religious behaviors such as reading the Qur’an, helping other people charitably, and daily prayers (salat) would go to heaven. **Activities in heaven:** These pictures depicted daily prayers (salat) in heaven.

Material and worldly heaven concept. This category consists of six subcategories. See Fig. 3 for examples of drawings in this category. **Natural beauty in heaven:** These pictures included features from natural landscapes and the sky, including objects (cloud, sun, rainbow), plants (various trees—palm trees, trees with various fruits, apple trees, other trees—as well as many different flowers), animals (ant, earthworm, mole, ladybug, rabbit, owl, crow, other birds, flying animals, cat, fish, butterfly, bee). **Material blessings in heaven:** In this category, there were images of food and drink (cola, chips, chocolate—a very large chocolate labeled “heaven,” Nutella—fruit—banana, apple—and cotton candy), electronics (computer, phone, robot, car, plane, television), electronic and computer games (game console, computer games, a toy car, a flying swing), gift packages, clothes, park, playground, amusement park, other material blessings children wanted to have, and houses (normal house, golden house, chocolate house, beautiful house). **Holy beings (anthropomorphic) in heaven:** Gods and angels the children thought would be in heaven were represented as similar to humans and in a fully human form. The 7–9 age group drew more



12-year-old boy / natural beauty in heaven



12-year-old girl / material blessings in heaven



10-year-old girl / holy beings (anthropomorphic) in heaven



8-year-old girl / activities in heaven

Fig. 3 Examples of drawings from the category *material and worldly concepts of heaven*

anthropomorphic representations than the 10–12 age group. **Heaven's similarity to places in the world:** In this category, the majority of the children drew the Kaaba, thinking that heaven might resemble the Kaaba. After the Kaaba, children likened heaven to a place with a big door. They imagined only the big door in that space. Only one child drew a golden gate. Some children thought that heaven might resemble a mosque. Only one child compared paradise to a castle. **Kinds of people in heaven:** Here, children said that all children would go to heaven, but only adults who deserved paradise would go to heaven. The children who drew children in paradise depicted themselves or peers of their own gender. **Activities in Heaven:** In this category, children depicted children playing various games together in playgrounds. Only one child drew an adult, and the adult was fishing.

Discussion

In this research, the children depicted heaven in three supercategories. They primarily imagined heaven with material and worldly features, then with spiritual and religious characteristics. Lastly, some children explicitly expressed that heaven is a place to go after

death. Under this heading, the most represented subcategories in depictions of heaven are discussed here. The most common qualitative categories depicting heaven.

The most common qualitative categories depicting heaven

Natural beauty in heaven. In my study, the most frequently mentioned subcategory in the whole sample was “natural beauty in heaven.” In this sense, it could be said that in this study the concept of heaven evoked images of natural beauty more than any other type of image. Similarly, in some studies with Muslim children and children of other religions, heaven was most often depicted in this way. In the study of Koç (2008), Muslim children drew the natural beauty, such as “mountains, rivers, trees, fruit trees, flowers, birds, cute animals, streams, houses, sky and sun” (p. 265) in the paradise. In the study of Nas (2018), late childhood children described paradise as “a beautiful place with flowers, trees, birds and fruits, palaces, and rivers” (p. 98). In Tamm and Granqvist’s (1995) study, Swedish children drew “tropical landscapes with groves of palm trees” (p. 211) in paradise. In another study, the heaven of Taiwanese Chinese children’s drawings were of “a rainforest under the blue sky or a beautiful scene with tropical palm trees” (Yang & Chen, 2002, p. 161).

Material blessings in heaven. First, children likened paradise to a place full of natural beauty. After that, they wanted heaven to have almost all the material blessings that exist in the world. In the “material blessings in heaven” subcategory, the children drew images of concepts particular to children, such as figures such as cola, chips, games consoles, and amusement parks, as well as many other foods, beverages, and objects. In addition, some children thought of things they could not have in life but imagined would be in heaven, such as a very big chocolate labeled “heaven,” a golden house, and other beautiful houses. Very few of the children believed that, unlike in the world, any material thing they wanted when they were in heaven would appear immediately, for example, a house or something small like sugar. Moreover, things such as computer games, game consoles, televisions, and phones were mostly expressed by boys. At the same time, some children, mostly girls, drew natural parks and playgrounds. Similarly, in Koç’s study (2008), various fruits and foods were depicted as being in paradise. In the pictures in that study, children named streams and rivers “cola stream” and “chocolate stream.” Similar to our study, children drew items such as “cars, bicycles, televisions, and computers” (p. 269). Koç interpreted this situation in heaven as “a reflection of the childish desires of the modern age” (p. 267). Moreover, there were depictions of children playing hand in hand in green spaces filled with flowers. Koç interpreted these representations as imagining paradise as a “playground” since playing games is essential for children. In her study, Ulçay (2011) found that children generally believed that they would have whatever they wanted in heaven, and this belief was seen at all ages of the children. However, only two children (9 and 10 years old) stated this belief in the current study.

Imagination of heaven by age

In the present study, children were asked to draw a picture depicting paradise. However, some students emphasized that not only did they describe heaven in their drawings, but also a person could only go to heaven after death. Children 7–9 years old expressed this more often. However, when talking about their drawings, it was clear that the 10–12 age

group knew this, too. Almost all of the children who said that they could go to heaven only after death said that those who went to heaven would not return to the world and would stay there forever. However, two students aged 7 were not aware of this. Similarly, according to the study by Gartley and Bernasconi (1967), all children, after the age of 5.5, know that death must occur for a person to go to heaven, and they mostly expressed this. However, the researchers found that they did not state the necessity of dying, believing that this was known as the children's age increased. In addition, children between the ages of 8.5 and 9.8 started to distinguish between soul and body (although they did not know what the soul was in the present study, most of the children at this age said that souls are not dead and that people cannot go back to earth after they go to heaven). Children's drawings of the qualitative category of "Christian concepts of the afterlife" in a study of 4- to 19-year-old Swedish and U.S. children's Christian concepts related to the afterlife such as "God, Judgment, Heaven, angels, the devil, Hell" (p. 108) are discussed in a study by Wenestam and Wass (1987). In a study by Tümlü (2013) with 5- to 12-year-old Muslim children, the children most often depicted their perception of death with the theme of "religious elements." In this study, it was observed that children who had gained the idea of living an intangible life, one other than the physical body, after death mostly reflected their perceptions of death with concepts such as heaven, hell, or soul.

In the current study, the older children expressed fewer material and worldly aspects of heaven and its spiritual and religious aspects than the younger children. However, concrete descriptions of heaven were common at all ages. Similarly, Tamminen (1988) said that a concrete image of heaven exists until adolescence and that concrete and settled heaven descriptions continue even into the high school years. Whereas children of 7–9 years of age depicted the concepts of Allah, the angel, and Prophet Muhammad, who is thought to be in heaven, mostly in the full human form or similar to a human, the 10–12 age group represented these concepts in writing instead of figures ("Allah," "Melek," "Hz. Muham-mad"). Also, only the 10–12 age group symbolically depicted paradise with symbols such as "a waterfall and rainbow, a garden with flowers, an apple tree, the family's home in Turkey, the Bosphorus Bridge, or as the real paradise is to reach God" (See Appendix, Fig. 4). Whereas children in the 7–9 age group stated that there would be children and adults who deserved to be in heaven, the 10–12 age group emphasized that those who went to heaven should have specific spiritual-religious characteristics such as doing favors for others or worshipping. Based on these age-related results, the children seemed to be evolving from concrete to abstract, similar to Piaget's cognitive development model, in their perceptions of heaven. These results are parallel to Ulcay's study (2011) and Nas's (2018) research.

Images of heaven by gender

In this sample, a high proportion of the children depicted heaven using both material and worldly images. Boys expressed this aspect of paradise more than girls. The girls described heaven more spiritually and religiously. For example, the idea that being with families in paradise, giving gifts, serving guests, dreams in the world coming true in heaven, and spiritual feelings such as happiness, serenity, affection, love, goodness, joy, and friendship were stated more frequently by girls in comparison to boys. Moreover, while boys included electronic equipment, computer games, and game consoles in heaven, these items were not drawn by any girl. Instead, the girls drew dresses, gift packages, playgrounds, and parks. There was also a gender difference in the food and drinks thought to be in paradise. Whereas boys mentioned cola and chips, the girls mentioned chocolate, fruit, and

candy. There were minor differences between the genders in terms of the animal figures they drew. For example, only boys drew an owl, crow, hare, ant, or cat. There was no animal figure drawn only by girls. However, the girls drew significantly more butterflies than the boys. Similar to our results, Ulcay (2011) found that in drawings of heaven, while boys drew “figures representing speed and power,” girls preferred representations that expressed “love, compassion, and goodness.” While there were concepts such as “plane, car” in boys’ drawing, the girls gave more places to “flowers and trees.” (p. 64). While boys included figures of “wild animals representing power,” girls included “domestic and cute creatures” (p. 129). Another conclusion related to gender in the present study was that children who drew children in heaven tended to draw themselves or their peers of the same gender. This result is compatible with Koç’s (2008) study. Ulcay (2011) found that children who were 7–8 years old drew their friends of both genders in heaven and hell, whereas children 9–10 years old drew the opposite gender in hell.

Religious and cultural factors affecting children’s images of heaven

In this study, beings such as Allah, angels, and Prophet Muhammad, who were thought to be in heaven in the subcategory of “holy being in heaven,” were widely seen in both genders and all age groups and were represented as either anthropomorphic or nonanthropomorphic. Similarly, in another study, Muslim children thought that God and angels were in heaven (Nas, 2018). Also, Swedish children (Tamm & Granqvist, 1995) drew “God and angels,” (p. 211) and Taiwanese Chinese children (Yang & Chen, 2002) drew “God, goddesses, pleasant angels, and souls” (p. 161) in heaven.

In the current study, in the subcategory “sacred places and religious items in heaven,” the children drew images of the Kaaba, mosques, the Qur’an, and prayer rug symbols belonging to Islam. In Ulcay’s work (2011), religious symbols belonging to Islam, such as the Qur’an, prayer rug, and skullcap, were depicted in heaven. Similarly, in Yang and Chen’s (2002) study, Taiwanese Chinese children’s drawings had traces of Christianity, Taoism, and Buddhism. Rosemeyer and Davies (2007) also found that Japanese children attending a Christian school combined elements of Shintoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Christianity and describe paradise and the afterlife accordingly.

In this study, in the “characteristics of people in heaven” subcategory, children expressed that those who worshipped and did favors in the world would go to heaven after death. It is believed in Islam that paradise is won by helping others and worshipping. Likewise, in other studies, Muslim children stated that those who believed in God, worshipped, and did favors would go to heaven (Koç, 2008; Nas, 2018). Similarly, children from other religions and cultural backgrounds believed that “good people, believers in Christianity” (Gartley & Bernasconi, 1967; Sagara-Rosemeyer & Davies, 2007) and “polite people” (Yang & Chen, 2002) would go to heaven.

In the present study, children mentioned two trees thought to be in paradise in the subcategory “natural beauties in heaven.” The apple tree was the most common type of tree described by the children (see Appendix, Fig. 5). Only one child mentioned a palm tree. During the interviews, almost all the children stated that they had heard about the apple tree from their parents or grandparents. This situation could be explained by the use of the apple tree symbol in a cultural narrative when talking about heaven in some Muslim societies.

In this study, in the subcategory “heaven’s similarity to places in the world,” the children likened heaven mostly to the Kaaba, then to a mosque, and lastly to a concrete place

with big doors. The Kaaba and mosques are places that Muslim children hear about and see in their social life as sacred places of the Islamic religion. Regarding the drawings of a place with big doors, many children expressed that they heard that heaven had big doors from their parents, teachers of religious education, friends, and others. Indeed, the phrase “the doors of heaven” is mentioned in the words of the Qur’an and Prophet Muhammed. In parallel with this result, in Ulçay’s (2011) and Koç’s (2008) studies with Muslim children, “the doors of heaven” were drawn in many drawings.

In this study, children of all ages demonstrated an absolute belief that heaven was a place of happiness; there would be no unhappiness in heaven, and they would live happily with their families. In parallel with this study, the absolute belief that heaven was the place of happiness was found in the studies of Koç (2008), Ulçay (2011), and Nas (2018) conducted with Muslim children. Similarly, in the research with Japanese children attending a Christian school, heaven was defined as “sunny in the presence of God, full of happiness and peace” (Sagara-Rosemeyer & Davies, 2007, p. 233). However, a study conducted by Gartley and Bernesconi (1967) with children attending a Roman Catholic school found that although children between the ages of 9.6 and 10.11 believed they would be partially happy in paradise, they did not think that heaven would be very fun. Likewise, in a study conducted with children attending the “Jewish school, the Church of England, and the non-denominational local authority school,” Frangoulis et al. (1996) found that although children mostly talked about heaven in terms of the afterlife, they thought that paradise might not necessarily be a pleasant place (p.120). These different results probably stemmed from the different contexts that affect children’s images of heaven such as the differences in education they receive or religious and cultural differences. In fact, in Islam and Muslim cultures, heaven is always known and described as a place of eternal happiness.

Limitations and future research

This phenomenographic study has some limitations. First, the qualitative method does not allow generalization of the findings; the results are limited to the participants. Future research might explore the conclusions of this study more comprehensively through the use of more varied samples. Second, since this study is cross-sectional, it cannot provide precise information about the causal aspects of relationships between variables. Future research could be carried out longitudinally by multiple qualitative methods in larger samples to define precisely the causal elements in shaping conceptions of paradise in children and the relationship between the immortality of the soul and heaven and eternal life. Third, the participants were a homogeneous group whose parents were Sunni Muslims. Future studies could compare Sunni and Shia children’s images of heaven. In addition, interreligious studies are needed to further examine conceptions of heaven held by children from other religious backgrounds. Fourth, the qualitative categories of the concept of heaven only dealt with age, gender, and religious-cultural similarities and differences. Social-environmental, educational, and media may also affect children’s beliefs about the afterlife. The concept of paradise as influenced by some contextual factors was only explored in terms of the knowledge children expressed and through previous studies in this field.

Conclusion and educational implications

In this study, which examines depictions of paradise by Muslim children, it was observed that the indicators, signs, and symbols about heaven were successfully represented in the children's drawings. However, when using this method, it is necessary to allow the children to provide a verbal explanation of their drawings. This ensures that the meanings and the sources of the images are reflected accurately.

In our study, as a result of analyzing drawings of heaven by the phenomenographic method, 3 qualitative supercategories and 14 subcategories emerged. The results of this study and of other research revealed that age, gender, and the theological and religious-cultural structure of the children's religion were influential in shaping children's concepts of paradise. In the qualitative categories, heaven was depicted as a place where natural beauty was the primary characteristic, and secondarily it was a place with a wide variety of material blessings. All of the participants portrayed heaven as a place of eternal happiness.

Although it is not known whether children 7–12 years of age fully understand the nature of the soul, the children in this study were sure that persons who went to heaven would stay there forever. The older children expressed fewer material and worldly and much more spiritual and religious aspects of paradise. However, concrete descriptions of heaven were common at all ages.

The girls' understanding of heaven was more spiritual and religious than the boys'. The boys had more perceptions of a material and worldly paradise. Whereas the girls' drawings included figures based on love and compassion, the boys drew drawings representing power.

There were similarities between children's descriptions of paradise from various religions and cultures. In this study, Allah and angels, who are thought to be in heaven, were also depicted as beings in heaven by other Muslim children and by Swedish and Chinese children, regardless of how they were portrayed. Another similar paradise portrayal was that children from both Muslim and other religious backgrounds emphasized natural beauty the most when describing paradise. Also, heaven for all the children was a place where there was no unhappiness, with the exception of a few studies. Moreover, according to the children, people who went to heaven shared certain features: they were right persons and helped others. There might be some differences in the descriptions of heaven seen in various religions and cultures. In this research and in other studies with Muslim children, there were religious symbols, objects, and places related to Islam in their drawings. Similarly, children from other religious backgrounds and cultures described heaven as having their own religious and cultural characteristics.

In summary, children depicted paradise using sacred objects and symbols they encountered and observed the most in their social life. Accurate religious and spiritual messages and texts they received through parents, educators, and other means could also influence their drawings of heaven. Cultural and traditional narratives might influence children's imagines of paradise. Also, the idea of heaven could be affected by their social and educational environment, such as family, teachers, religious education, school, and media influences such as television, the Internet, and newspapers.

One of the most effective methods of revealing the relationships between the concepts that an individual is trying to learn or understand is phenomenographic research. Using the children's drawings of heaven seems to be an effective way to discover the child's images and build their concept of heaven. Without doubt, talking about the afterlife is with children intertwined with talking about death. Thus, in referring to the need for education

about death, I will make some suggestions about communicating with children regarding heaven and hell.

Obedying the principles of death education (Adams et al., 1999; McNeil, 1982; Worden, 2018)—not using false expressions in death education and not communicating the wrong attitudes and behaviors—is also valid when talking about the afterlife or providing regular education about it. According to research on death education, the general opinion is that this education should start in the preschool period or earlier (Lee et al., 2009; Powell, 1994). So, at what age should children receive information about the afterlife through death education? Talking with children about the afterlife means talking about both heaven and hell (Vianello et al., 1992). First of all, children must understand that death is irreversible. Moreover, children seem to need to be aware of the distinction between the soul and body to understand the afterlife better. As mentioned above, it was understood in some studies that children have an awareness after they reach 5 years of age that paradise is a place people go after death (Gartley & Bernasconi, 1967). However, it is often impossible for children to distinguish between the soul and the body at this age. Children 5 or 6 years old may not understand the soul's nature, and they could perceive it materially (Vianello et al., 1992). Gartley and Bernasconi (1967) found that children between the ages of 8.5 and 9.8 began to distinguish between the soul and the body, although they did not know precisely what the soul was.

In the current study, although it is not clear whether the children in the 7–12 age group fully comprehended the nature of the soul, they were sure that a person who went to heaven would remain there forever. When all these results are evaluated together, it seems possible to talk comfortably about the afterlife with a 7-year-old. However, although readiness is linked to a stage by age, it should not be overlooked that each child is unique and that their views on the subject may change according to the individual situation of the child, such as their knowledge and own experiences of death that cause them to ask questions about the afterlife. For example, sometimes a 6-year-old child can talk about the afterlife, but others can only understand these pieces of information at the age of 8.

Education about the afterlife should be given to children of any religion based on their religious perspective. There is an afterlife belief in religions. People believe that they will be viewed negatively or positively based on what they do in the world through the concept of divine justice. According to the research, explanations of the afterlife in religions or beliefs in the afterlife in other forms may reduce fear and anxiety about death in children and adults (Anthony & Bhana, 1989; Thalbourne, 1996). Information about the afterlife and heaven and hell in the Islamic religion is explained in concrete and abstract terms in the Qur'an. This information may be convenient for parents and educators. In our study, young children depicted heaven more concretely and as having material blessings, and older children depicted it abstractly and symbolically with spiritual gifts. For this reason, the concept of heaven could be taught from concrete to abstract based on age. Abstract topics such as death and the afterlife touch the emotional and spiritual worlds of children. In the teaching of religious and spiritual conceptions, the effectiveness of expression and the educator's body language should not be forgotten. The hopes of the children should not be discouraged.

In the current study, all the children believed that death was the continuation of life, not the end, and that heaven was where people reside after death. Also, in this study, all children believed that paradise is an eternal place of happiness. This happiness in heaven was much more beautiful than happiness in the world. Children mostly thought that they would have or achieve many things that they could not have or dream of in the world. Children had endless and magnificent hopes about heaven in the current study. As mentioned

above, studies of children from various religions and cultures have shown that children tend to talk about paradise rather than hell concerning the afterlife. Also, as they grow older, some children tend to deny the existence of hell. One possible reason for this is that children think of God as a being who forgives, not punishes. This knowledge is significant for parents and especially religious educators as they shape future education about the afterlife. When answering children’s questions about the afterlife, immediately mentioning hell to young children tends to evoke ideas that may cause them to sever their ties to God or weaken their relationship with God. Based on phrases that children may hear such as “Don’t be naughty” and other parental threats such as “God does not love, God burns, God punishes, God makes you the stone” may suddenly destroy children’s religious hopes and may negatively affect children’s perceptions of justice.

Hell can be discussed with children when suitable environmental and other conditions have been established. However, the important point here is that, first of all, children’s hopes about heaven should be reinforced (Malcom, 2011) by talking more about heaven and listening to their narratives. Children aged 7 or 8 often know the concept of good and evil. In this light, they should be made to feel that God always has endless love and compassion and wants to reward every person with heaven. However, it must be said that some people may go to hell because they insist on doing evil and continue to harm people, animals, and nature. In the Muslim context, it should be especially emphasized that Allah will forgive those who feel regret after doing evil and that these behaviors should not be repeated (Vianello et al., 1992). After all these explanations, children can easily understand the concept of hell with their sense of justice that starts to develop at this age. Thus, the concepts of heaven and hell will be clearly shaped in their imagination before the period of religious suspicion in children.

Appendix

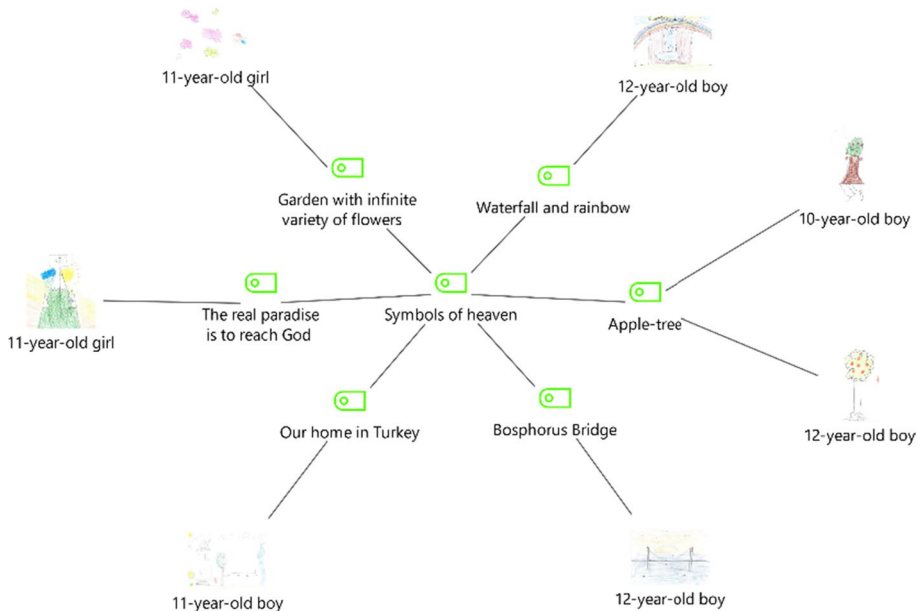


Fig. 4 Symbols of heaven: code-subcodes-segments model

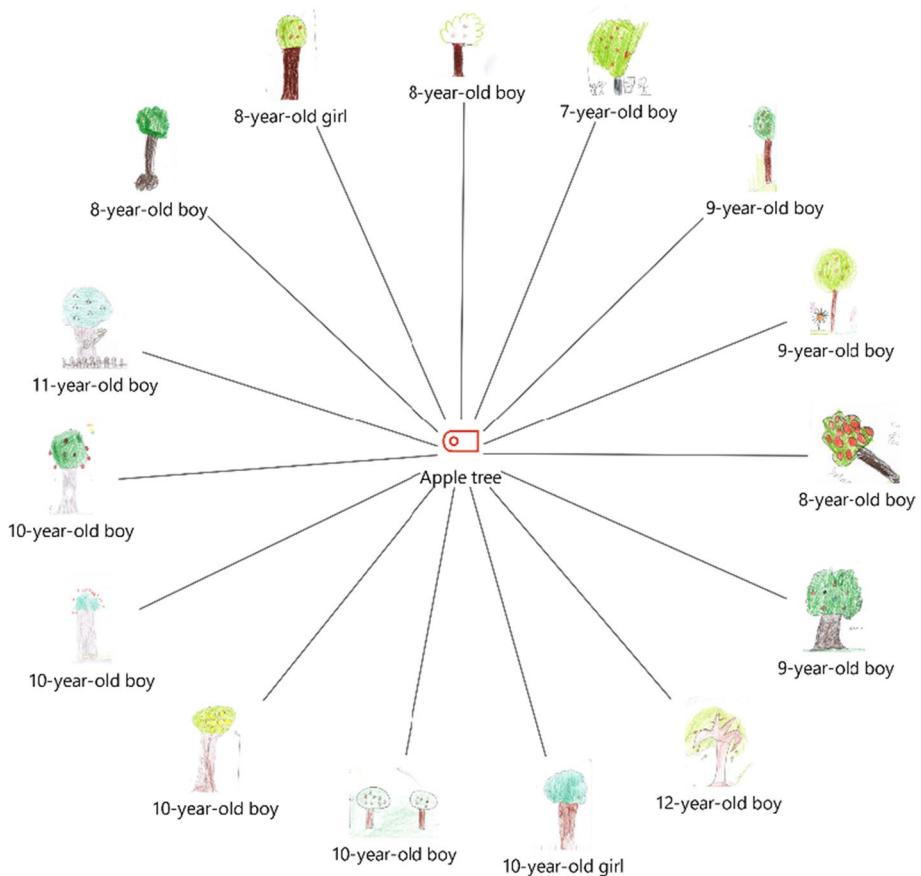


Fig. 5 Apple tree: single-code model

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