



EXPLAINING PREFERENCES FOR ILLUSTRATION STYLE AND CHARACTERISTICS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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Abstract/Povzetek The purpose of this study was to explore how children perceive the style and characteristics of illustrations in picture books. It was found that six-year-old children preferred expressionist and surrealist illustrations, whereas four-year-old children preferred expressionist and romantic illustrations. They liked illustrations mostly because they were colorful, but also because they saw familiar motifs and actions in those illustrations. Children are also likely to prefer illustrations that are textile-shaped, illustrations that resemble children's drawings, and naive, happy illustrations. These findings are consistent with previous studies of children's preferences for illustrations and serve as a reference point for future studies.

Razlaga preference za slog ilustracije in značilnosti v zgodnjem otroštvu

Namen raziskave je bil raziskati, kako otroci dojemajo sloge in značilnosti ilustracij v slikanicah. Ugotovili smo, da so šestletni otroci dajali prednost ekspresionističnim in nadrealističnim ilustracijam, medtem ko so štiriletni otroci dajali prednost ekspresionističnim in romantičnim ilustracijam. Ilustracije so bile izbrane predvsem zaradi barvitosti ter znanih motivov in dejanj. Otroci najverjetneje preferirajo tudi ilustracije tekstilnih oblik, ki so podobne otroškim risbam, in preproste, srečne ilustracije. Te ugotovitve so skladne s prejšnjimi študijami otroških preferenc za ilustracije in služijo kot referenčna točka za prihodnje študije.

Introduction

The first type of book a child encounters is the picture book, which is intended to tell a story through a series of images combined with little or no text, and that combination of images and text conveys information differently than when the two are used separately (Batarelo Kokić, 2015). It can be a toy, an album of images with or without text, an illustrated poem for children, or a depiction of a fairy tale (Crnković, 1990). However, there is no single formal definition of the picture book. Nodelman's (1988) definition emphasizes the dominant role of illustrations in storytelling through picture books, whereas Marantz (1977) considers the combined effect of illustrations and text to be more important than either of the two elements on its own. Martinez and Harmon (2012) suggest that the definition of a picture book should be extended to include both definitions. Zalar (2013) agrees with the notion that illustrations and text can be equally important in a picture book or that illustrations can have a leading role and also includes a definition of wordless picture books that allows for the possibility of visual communication without any verbal text at all. The duality of visual images and writing is what requires readers to perceive and experience information via two different means of communication (Landes, 1985; Martinez & Harmon, 2012). That is why Kiefer's (2008) definition emphasizes the relation between illustrations and text, as well as the interaction between scenes that occurs as the reader/viewer turns the pages. It is also important to note that children experience picture books in different ways (Kiefer, 1986). According to Zalar (2013), illustrations have an abundance of information that cannot be matched by verbal text, which is why contemporary theorists define picture books as a dual discursive genre that combines the verbal and visual arts. As a general rule, illustrations are dominant in picture books because they are easier to process than words and can be perceived as complete symbols; the recipient can thus experience a chain of associations immediately upon viewing them (Hlevnjak, 2000). These definitions of picture books are based on traditional concepts, but contemporary picture books are conceived as multimodal because, in addition to combining verbal and visual elements, they can also introduce auditory, tactile and performance elements into one picture book (Težak & Gabelica, 2015).

Picture books can also be categorized based on a range of criteria. A general categorization of picture books by their format, the structure of their presentation, content, visual techniques and involvement of the recipients was presented in 2008 by Majhut and Zalar (as cited in Martinović & Stričević, 2011). Because picture books can cover a wide range of topics, their content is diverse, but the most common themes that can be used to categorize them are animals, daily life, the alphabet, games and fantasy. Based on the visual techniques used to shape

illustrations, picture books can contain photography, puppetry, collections of real children's drawings or works of art, comic book styles and interactive content. The involvement of the recipient can be used to categorize picture books as those with which children engage on their own and those for which they need the intervention of their parents. Matulka (2008) introduces a classification of different types of picture books into the following categories: picture books for beginning readers, picture books associated with a specific concept, digital picture books, toys, and lyrical picture books.

The picture book has several purposes and benefits: it helps children discover the world of written works, supports their cognitive and emotional development, expands their speech and vocabulary and provides them with novelty. Picture books help build literary skills such as imagination, creativity and critical thinking because the reader needs to process text and illustrations independently and to integrate these to experience the story (Agosto, 1999). Picture books introduce children to books, develop their need for books and help them to perceive the world through the artist's eyes (Zalar, 2009). Landers (1985) emphasizes the importance of asking children simple questions ("e.g., What do you see?") to direct their attention between text and images, which helps them experience all elements of the story. Nodelman (1988) also recognizes the value of "reading pictures" and points out that the role of illustrations in picture books is a "communication of narrative information, and not aesthetic beauty for its own sake; [illustration] is more significantly meaningful than either accurate or beautiful" (p. 98).

Illustrations from picture books are the first works of art with which children come into contact during their early childhood and preschool education, and their interaction with those illustrations will facilitate their artistic and aesthetic development, as well as positive attitudes towards art in general. Using a modern teaching method in art education, such as the method of aesthetic transfer, ensures that the presentation of artwork to children leads to interaction between the observer and the artwork (Duh & Zupančič, 2011, 2013). In addition to providing observers with information about art, this method stimulates memory, experience, emotion and associations, which are unique to each child, so it is important to allow children the freedom to express their opinions without fear or reservation. "The experienced artwork can lead to an artistic reaction, which will be the individual solution of each child and will represent a new aesthetic experience" (Duh & Zupančič, 2011, p. 49).

Teachers who work with younger children report that the visual dimension of picture books is more important to children than the verbal dimension, and they

emphasize the importance of colour to children (Visinko, 2000). Picture books are important because they show children how relationships work in society, develop their ability to memorize and recall logical relations, and enable children to conceive phenomena they have not yet experienced. Contemporary picture books cover a variety of life activities such as experiences in the family, kindergarten and other settings. According to Zalar (2008), picture books are not restricted to positive life events and experiences, so they also try to illustrate all aspects of life using words and illustrations.

One of the greatest English fantasy writers, J. R. R. Tolkien, rejected the possibility of illustrating his work for years so that readers could create their own visual representations of his imagery rather than depending on existing illustrations (Hlevnjak, 2000). It is hard to say whether or not Tolkien was right, but Hlevnjak (2000) explains that good illustrators do not create boundaries for interpretation. They can instead reinforce and amplify the experience of reading the text, which makes it a work of visual art with a unique experience for everyone. According to Nodelman (2008, as cited in Narančić Kovač, 2015), illustrations “provide visual and emotional information that texts cannot convey” (p. 66). Therefore, illustrations in picture books are not subordinated to the text because they complement it and give it new meanings so that readers and listeners can experience new depths of the story (Zalar, 2009). In some cases, the text and illustrations can convey conflicting messages to create humor, on which children enjoy commenting (Zalar, 2009). Nikolajeva and Scott (2006) mention symmetrical picture books in which words and pictures tell the same narrative, but they also recognize complementary picture books (i.e., the words and illustrations tell different parts of the same story) and counterpointing picture books (i.e., the text and illustrations tell two independent narratives).

There is increasing interest in learning more about how children interact with picture books, understand them and derive meaning from them. According to Kiefer (1995, as cited in Narančić Kovač, 2015), children have no difficulty reading and understanding picture books, and they are willing to participate in games aimed at exploring hidden meanings and details that adults miss. Although children at an early age do not have the ability to articulate their experiences with picture books, they are able to derive meaning from extremely complex illustrations, especially if they are provided with assistance (Nikolajeva, 2010, as cited in Narančić Kovač, 2015). Children can always find meaning in visual and verbal elements, through active participation in events from readings, and by playing with numerous possibilities provided by the text, so Narančić Kovač (2015) concludes that doubts about children’s ability to work with contemporary picture books are unfounded.

The time adults spend reading from picture books to children provides children with satisfaction, improves their self-confidence and enhances mutual love and respect (Zalar, 2008). Reading picture books is an opportunity to communicate with children while they guess the content of the story from the illustrations and after having the picture book read to them (Zalar, 2009).

Several artistic styles can inspire how illustrations are created. Balić-Šimrak and Narančić Kovač (2011) identified the following styles in picture books:

- Abstract style – simple, concise, emphasizes visual elements such as colour, form and concepts (e.g., Metsola, 2015a, 2015b);
- Comic book style – playful and often humorous, similar to comic books (e.g., Marinković & Pavlić, 2008);
- Expressionism – emotions are expressed with colour and mannerist composition (e.g., Horvat & Divković, 2016);
- Impressionism – focuses on a moment from the story with an emphasis on lighting effects (e.g., Howitt & DiTerlizzi, 2002);
- Folk art – an extension of tradition that uses traditional techniques to create illustrations (e.g., Nordqvist, 2015);
- Naive style – appears childlike and is often two-dimensional (e.g., Zlatković & Zlatković, 2016);
- Realism – objects and characters are depicted precisely and in an orderly and realistic manner (e.g., Cooper, 2008);
- Surrealism – surprising and imaginary scenes with creative details (e.g., Browne, 2001);
- Romanticism – opulent decorations in the style of the old masters (e.g., Sanderson, 2002).

According to Balić-Šimrak and Narančić Kovač (2011), it is difficult to determine if children prefer one artistic style in picture books over another style because illustration styles also depend on the authors' unique personalities, skill and composition style, as well as their ability to harmonize illustrations and verbal text. Furthermore, illustrators and authors of picture books show different sensibilities in their expression, choose distinct materials and techniques, and are different in many other ways that make their illustrations unique and authentic. Novitzu (1977, as cited in Sipe, 2001) defines three levels of illustration style: visual style, artistic style and personal style. Visual style is recognizable and can be associated with a specific time or place (Novitzu, 1977, as cited in Sipe, 2001). The artistic style involves "changes in emphasis or in subject matter but not in overall methods of

depicting” (Kiefer, 1993, as cited in Sipe, 2001, p. 76). Finally, personal style is unique to every author and can be combined with visual and artistic styles to create a unique illustration (Zolotow, 1962, as cited in Sipe, 2001). Overall, when it comes to illustration styles, the most important thing is to consider whether or not a specific style is appropriate for the topic of the picture book, how effectively it conveys the meaning behind the story and how it complements the text (Sipe, 2001).

Methods

Purpose and aims

The purpose of this study was to explore how children perceive the style and characteristics of illustrations in picture books. The aims were to identify which styles are the most preferred, to learn why children prefer those particular illustration styles, and to determine which characteristics of illustrations children prefer when given a choice between two illustrations with different characteristics.

Research Hypotheses

In accordance with the purpose and aims, the data was analyzed to test the following research hypotheses:

H1: There is a statistically significant difference between the frequency of preference for different illustration styles.

H2: There is a statistically significant difference in children’s preference between textile-shaped and sculpture-shaped illustrations.

H3: There is a statistically significant difference in children’s preference between black-and-white illustrations and illustrations in colour.

H4: There is a statistically significant difference in children’s preference between digitally-shaped illustrations and illustrations with children’s drawings.

H5: There is a statistically significant difference in children’s preference between naive, happy, children’s illustrations and scary, mystical, surreal illustrations.

H6: There is a statistically significant difference in children’s preference between exciting illustrations and relaxing illustrations.

Participants

A total of 37 children, 17 boys and 20 girls, participated in the study. The participants were recruited as a convenience sample from two kindergarten groups,

a medium-sized group and a big group that consisted of children ages 4 and 6. The average age of children in the entire sample was 4.5 years.

Materials

A representative set of illustrations from children's books was assembled. For investigating whether children prefer kitsch or simple illustrations, a set of three simple illustrations (Bruna, 2007; Huseinović, 2010; McKee, 2005) and a set of three kitsch illustrations (Belineau, Beaumont, & Michelet, 2013; *Otvori prozorčić i nauči*, 2017; Videau, 2017). To investigate which art style children most prefer, one illustration was used for each of the styles included in the study: naïve style (Zlatković & Zlatković, 2016), expressionism (Horvat & Divković, 2016), romanticism (Sanderson, 2002), realism (Cooper, 2008), abstract style (Metsola, 2015a, 2015b), folk art (Nordqvist, 2015), comic book style (Marinković & Pavlić, 2008), surrealism (Browne, 2001) and impressionism (Howitt & DiTerlizzi, 2002).

Data Collection

Data collection began once the details regarding research methods were arranged with the kindergarten from which the sample was drawn.

To keep the children interested during the study, the data was collected while children played a game of modified monopoly, which was designed for this particular study. Before starting the game, the children were told that they were art experts who needed to evaluate the quality of illustrations. A maximum of four players per game was set. Three players participated in games with children four years of age, and four players participated in games with children six years of age. Each player started the game with nine envelopes containing questions and sample illustrations. They opened the envelope and answered the questions inside whenever they landed on a square featuring an envelope. Players moved with figurines and landed on squares with different instructions to follow: (a) two steps forward, (b) one step forward, (c) envelope, (d) get 1/2/3 houses to build, (e) lose a house, (f) land for construction, and (g) group assignment. The aim was to collect as many houses as possible and to answer all the questions. The game was over when each player answered all the questions.

The interviews were semi-structured, with open-ended questions to allow further exploration of why children chose a certain illustration style or an illustration with certain characteristics. Each child recorded their responses on an anonymous survey during the game, but conversations with the children were also recorded

during the game. The recorded responses were transcribed, and a content analysis was performed to identify common themes in their responses.

To determine which style was their favorite, children were asked to eliminate the illustration they liked the least until they were left with only one illustration. Examples of questions used are as follows: (a) Which of these illustrations do you like the least/find ugly? (b) Which one would you eliminate? When the children were left with their favorite illustration, they were asked questions such as (a) Why did you choose this illustration? (b) What do you like about it? (c) Why do you like this illustration the most?

To determine which characteristics children prefer in illustrations, they were presented with two choices. The illustrations had opposing characteristics (e.g., black-and-white vs. colour), and the children were asked a question such as (a) Which one do you like best? (b) Which one do you think is prettier? (c) Which one is your favorite?

Results

Preferred Illustration Styles

The results showed that children six years of age most preferred the expressionist style of illustration, since 11 of them (50%) chose that illustration as the prettiest. The second most popular style among six-year-old children was surrealism, which was selected as the best illustration by 22% of the participants. Children four years of age also most preferred expressionist illustrations ($n = 5$, 33.33%), but their second most liked style of illustration was romanticism ($n = 3$, 20%). The least liked artistic styles were realistic, folk art and impressionism. Hypothesis H1 (There is a statistically significant difference between the frequency of preference for different illustration styles) was confirmed because the children preferred certain styles of illustration significantly more than others, $\chi^2(5) = 24.30$, $p < .001$.

Eleven out of 22 (50%) six-year-old children chose the expressionist illustration as the most beautiful one, followed by the surrealistic illustration (22%). The children liked the vibrant colors they saw in the illustration ($n = 5$), they liked the illustration because it was pretty ($n = 4$), and they liked it because it showed a cat ($n = 3$).

Because it's pretty and colorful, and I like the kitty.

Because the colorful and pretty grass is around it. And the kitty is cute.

The children preferred the surreal illustration mostly because they liked the motifs in the illustration ($n = 3$), which included a rocket, a bear and a rabbit. In three cases, children also explained that they liked the illustration because it was pretty.

Because it is cute, this rocket, this bear and bunny going to space.

I like these towers. This rocket is very beautiful. And I like the bunny and the bear.

I like this here building and the moon, also the rocket.

Children who were four years of age preferred expressionist illustrations ($n = 5$; 33.30%) and romantic style illustrations ($n = 3$; 20%). Although the reasons for preferring a certain style of illustration varied, they preferred expressionist illustrations mostly because these were colorful and included familiar motifs.

Because I like colourful colours. And because I like butterflies.

Because it has pretty ears and pretty little paws.

I would take it with me to show everyone at the park.

OK, what do you like about it so much?

This kitty.

Four-year-old girls were the most likely to prefer romantic art illustrations ($n = 3$) because they saw a beautiful dress, and they also thought Cinderella was beautiful. Two girls also associated the picture of Cinderella and her dress with a cartoon they watched on television.

Because the dress is spinning and pretty.

Because it's pretty. I watched that one on the television. And it was dancing.

– *Because the dress is spinning.*

– *Is there any other reason?*

– *Because it was in the cartoon.*

Preferred Illustration Characteristics

The responses of children to illustrations with different characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Frequency of choices between two illustrations with opposing characteristics.

Measurement	Illustration	f (%)	N
1	Textile-shaped	33 (91%)	36
	Sculpture-shaped	3 (9%)	
2	Black-and-white	16 (43%)	37
	In colour	21 (57%)	
3	With children's drawings	28 (76%)	37
	Digitally-shaped	9 (24%)	
4	Naive, happy, for children	25 (69%)	36
	Scary, mystical, surreal	11 (31%)	
5	Exciting	18 (49%)	37
	Relaxing	19 (51%)	

The chi-square test was used to test hypotheses H2-H6, and three hypotheses were confirmed. Hypothesis H2 (There is a statistically significant difference in children's preference between textile-shaped and sculpture-shaped illustrations) was confirmed because children preferred textile-shaped illustrations ($n = 33$) over sculpture-shaped illustrations ($n = 3$), $\chi^2(1) = 24.03$, $p < .001$. H4 (There is a statistically significant difference in children's preference between digitally-shaped illustrations and illustrations with children's drawings) was confirmed because children were more likely to prefer illustrations with children's drawings ($n = 28$) compared to digitally-shaped illustrations ($n = 9$), $\chi^2(1) = 11.90$, $p < .001$. Hypothesis H5 (There is a statistically significant difference in children's preference between naive, happy, children's illustrations and scary, mystical, surreal illustrations) was also confirmed, $\chi^2(1) = 5.44$, $p < .005$, which means that there was a significant difference between the children's preference for naive, happy illustrations ($n = 25$) and scary, mystical illustrations ($n = 11$).

Hypotheses H3 (There is a statistically significant difference in children's preference between black-and-white illustrations and illustrations in colour) and H6 (There is a statistically significant difference in children's preference between exciting illustrations and relaxing illustrations) were not confirmed. Therefore, no significant differences were observed between the preference for black-and-white illustrations and illustrations in colour or between exciting and relaxing illustrations.

Discussion

Children ranked expressionist illustrations as their favorite style of illustration, and they were significantly more likely to prefer expressionist illustrations compared to

other styles. Qualitative analysis of their open-ended responses was used to determine why they preferred expressionism to other styles in illustrations, and it was found that most participants, regardless of their age, preferred those illustrations because they were colourful. The illustration they chose as the most beautiful contained the entire spectrum of colours in a range of tones, from deep to pastel colors, so it comes as no surprise that children are attracted to the liveliness of that style. The motif of the illustration was also intriguing because it featured a cat, one of their favorite pets.

It is difficult to determine if children prefer certain styles and characteristics of illustrations over others because several other elements contribute to the final illustration, including the author's personality, skill, approach to creating a composition and ability to combine illustrations with verbal text to tell a story (Balić-Šimrak & Narančić Kovač, 2011). Each artist also has their own, unique style that can be combined with existing visual and artistic styles (Novitzu, 1977, cited in Sipe, 2001). Therefore, there are many nuances besides visual and artistic styles that can affect how children perceive an illustration and why they prefer it to other illustrations.

Another important consideration is the role of motifs in children's decisions to prefer one illustration over the other. House and Rule (2005) found that children prefer illustrations they can identify with because they are familiar with the objects and settings, as well as the actions depicted by the illustration, whereas colour had the least impact on their choices. This study found that children prefer colourful illustrations, but they also mentioned familiar motifs and actions in the illustrations to explain why they liked a given illustration or chose it over another. Therefore, it is consistent with previous reported findings that colour is an important element of illustrations to children (Visinko, 2000) and that they like to see familiar motifs in illustrations (House & Rule, 2005).

Children were also likely to choose illustrations with certain characteristics over other illustrations. Specifically, illustrations with children's drawings were preferred to digitally-shaped illustrations; textile-shaped illustrations were preferred over sculpture and naive, happy illustrations were preferred over scary, mystical illustrations. Several characteristics can influence children's preference for visual artwork. For example, Kuscevic, Kardum, and Brajčić (2014) found that "pupils better preferred those directions with recognizable motive, cleaner colors, and three-dimensional representation of the shapes and space" (p. 301), whereas they did not like abstract art or artwork in which it is difficult to observe clear spatial relations. Therefore, it is possible that the children who participated in this study

applied a similar set of criteria when they chose between two images, e.g., a naive, happy illustration contains a recognizable motif and has cleaner colours than the surreal image.

The findings of this study are difficult to generalize with confidence because a convenience sampling strategy was used to recruit participants from two kindergarten groups. However, these findings provide insight into children's preferences for illustrations and can be used as a reference point for exploring why children prefer certain illustrations in picture books.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how children perceive illustration styles and the characteristics of illustrations found in picture books. The children participating in the study were four and six years of age, and they all preferred expressionist illustration to other styles of illustration. According to their responses to open-ended questions, the participants liked those illustrations because they are colourful and pretty. They also preferred illustrations in which they saw familiar or interesting objects, such as a cat, rocket or a similar motif, as well as illustrations with certain characteristics. Textile-shaped illustrations were significantly preferred to sculpture-shaped illustrations; illustrations with children's drawings were significantly preferred to digitally-shaped illustrations, and naive and happy illustrations were significantly preferred to surreal and scary illustrations. The findings reported in this paper cannot be generalized, given the limitations of the sampling strategy, but they establish a good starting point for further investigations of children's preferences for certain illustrations.

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