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## **Meaning-making from Wordless (or Nearly Wordless) Picturebooks: What Educational Research Expects and What Readers Have to Say**

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### **Abstract**

Wordless (or nearly wordless) picturebooks are intriguing in terms of how readers make meaning from them. This article offers a conceptualisation of existing studies in the field of education that use wordless picturebooks with young readers. While some of these studies contribute to understanding meaning-making, the pragmatic use of wordless picturebooks often does not take account of their particular nature and of the heightened role of the reader, leading to a mismatch between what the picturebook expects from the implied reader and the researchers' expectations of what 'real' readers must do with these books. By highlighting observations from children's literature scholarship and reader-response studies, this article aims to encourage a more interdisciplinary understanding of meaning-making. It also seeks to persuade educational researchers and mediators to consider investigative approaches that are not based on verbalization but are more in tune with the invitations that wordless picturebooks extend to young readers.

**Keywords:** wordless picturebooks; educational research; children's literature scholarship; reader-response; verbalization

‘The pictures go straight to my brain.’ Ali (10 years old) on *Flotsam* by David Wiesner

### **A growing field for research**

Wordless or “nearly wordless” books with pictures often raise the following question: What is expected of readers when a narrative has no words? It is not as if this type of text is an anomaly. In 1992 Richley and Puckett compiled a list of 685 wordless or ‘almost wordless’ books published in English. In 1997 Dowhower argued that the wordless book ‘genre’ was well-established given the ‘astounding’ proliferation of these books since the 1960s. In 2011, Bosch mentions her own personal collection of nearly 300, most of them published in non-English speaking countries and in 2012 Beckett notes that since the late 1990s they have become ‘a contemporary publishing trend’ with some specially created wordless series and some author-illustrators working exclusively in this genre (2012, p. 83 -84).

Among the award-winning illustrators who have created wordless picturebooks are Raymond Briggs, Mitsumasa Anno, Shirley Hughes, Quentin Blake, Tord Nygren, Istvan Banyai, Juan Gedovius, Shaun Tan, Suzy Lee and Bill Thomson. Since the 1990s, seven wordless picture books have been awarded Caldecott status, the highest accolade for American picture books: *Tuesday* by David Wiesner (1991); *Yo! Yes?* by Chris Rashka (1993); *No, David!* by David Shannon (1998) *The Red Book* by Barbara Lehman’s (2004); *Flotsam* by David Wiesner (2006); *The Lion and the Mouse* by Jerry Pinkney (2010) and, the latest medallist, *A Ball for Daisy* by Chris Rashka (2012). It may be that the Caldecott and other awards have

contributed to publishers, parents and teachers welcoming the genre, or at least, regarding it with less suspicion. In her recent study of 'crossover picturebooks', Beckett attributes the current popularity of wordless picturebooks to their versatility and their appeal to readers of all ages (2012, p. 84) and highlights the 'interactive' and 'cinematic' qualities which make them books for the 'digital age' (2012, p. 99).

There is not only a market for creating and publishing, institutional space for recognizing the artistic merit of these books but also an active group of readers that warrant investigation by scholars from different fields. In 2011, during the writing of this article, a search combining Google Scholar and the ERIC database revealed approximately 400 publications involving wordless picturebooks. The research studies tend to emerge from fields related to children's literature - where the most comprehensive study up to date is Beckett's (2012) chapter on the topic - and education (in a broad sense, encompassing literacy, language and psychology) from which no extensive in-depth research has yet been published.

From an educational perspective, wordless picturebooks are considered an ideal medium for investigating language development, storytelling and other skills, and there is a surprisingly large number of academic studies that 'use' them for these purposes. Most of these studies are usually framed within linguistics or educational psychology and involve participants who have a variety of special needs (e.g. gifted, deaf or autistic children), suggesting that wordless picturebooks will be an attractive tool for eliciting particular research data. There are also empirical studies of readers' responses which consider a range of readers from

different ages and backgrounds reacting to a variety of wordless picturebooks, usually within situations in which children are more likely to come across them – at home or in the classroom. Finally, there are plenty of annotated and recommended ‘lists’ both in print and on the internet as well as practitioner-oriented publications that suggest practical activities involving these books. While some of these studies contribute to understanding meaning-making, the pragmatic use of wordless picturebooks often does not take account of their particular nature and of the heightened role of the reader, leading to a mismatch between what the picturebook expects from the implied reader and the researchers’ expectations of what ‘real’ readers must do with these books. By highlighting observations from children’s literature scholarship and reader-response studies this article seeks to encourage a more interdisciplinary appreciation of meaning-making.

### **The perspective from children’s literature scholarship: definitions and reader engagement**

From the literary perspective, pictures as the sole narrative medium offer opportunities for analysing the way picturebooks work and the semiotics of image has evolved. Although references will be made to the work of children’s literature scholars specializing in picturebooks, there is no space to discuss it at length in this article. However, in order to approach the topic, it is important to consider definitions and some of the key points emerging from children’s literature scholarship.

Like Richley and Puckett, Dowhower defines a book as ‘wordless’ when the illustrations carry the main message or meaning of the book. However, Dowhower does not call them wordless *picture* books because she says it is a mistake to consider all books without words as ‘picture books’, given that not all of them “have stories in the conventional sense” (1997, p. 60). Presumably this is why some writers and publishers refer to them as ‘stories without words’; however, not all ‘stories without words’ are picturebooks either. Rowe prefers to call them ‘sequenced picture texts’ (1997, p. 221) which is accurate but awkward. Scholars in the field of children’s literature tend to use the compound word ‘picturebook’ as an indication of the interdependence of word and image that distinguishes these texts and as opposed to ‘picture books’ which are non-narrative (e.g. concept books with images). Beckett points out that given there are some words in every book, either in the images or as paratext, ‘wordless narratives’ might be a more accurate description than ‘wordless picturebooks’ (2012, p. 121).

In this article, a ‘wordless picturebook’ will be understood to be a text where the visual image carries the weight of the meaning and where, as Nières-Chevrel puts it, the absence of words is ‘not a simple feat of artistry [instead it is] totally relevant and in keeping with topic’ (2010, p. 137), so that even when there is little or no print, there is a significance in this lack which contributes to the overall meaning of the narrative. Although one side of this word/picture partnership seems to be ‘missing’, the title and other peritextual features as well as the embedded text can prove highly significant in some wordless picturebooks. In what follows, the compound word ‘picturebook’ will be used because it also signals that to use or discuss these types of text without considering the implications of picturebook theory is to ignore important analytical routes. It is often pointed out that, even discounting the information about the publication, all picturebooks have at least a few words, usually in the title but sometimes also embedded in the images themselves (e.g. the name of street or a shop), hence

the use of terms such as ‘almost wordless’, ‘nearly wordless’ or ‘sparse verbal text’. As yet, there is no consensus about exactly how many words determine one kind or another (Bosch 2011). In this article, ‘almost wordless’ will refer to books with a distinct tendency to minimize the role of print in the narrative.

Studies in the field of children’s literature on picturebooks with and without words have illuminated some of the demands that wordless picturebooks make on readers in order for them to make sense of what they see, such as filling in iconotextual gaps that are larger than those usually found in picturebooks with words; recognizing there is a sequence and connections must be made between images; elaborate a hypothesis about these connections without knowing what is significant or what could happen in the future and recognize that there are often multiple interpretative possibilities and ambiguous endings.

Most of all, scholars stress the increase in the active participation expected of the implied reader (Nodelman 1988; Rowe 1996; Nikolajeva and Scott 2001; Nières-Chevrel 2010; Bosch 2010 and 2011; Bosch and Duran 2009; Beckett 2012; Ramos and Ramos 2012). It would seem that it is *the degree to which readers are expected to actively engage* that marks the difference between picturebooks with and without words and which enables the reader to co-construct meaning (Arizpe, forthcoming 2013). This point is fundamental when it comes to ensuring that any research with wordless picturebooks allows for enough time for readers to engage with the text, to read, re-read and reflect before being asked to make sense of it.

### **The perspective from educational research**

The following overview of educational studies reveals how expectations about meaning making and what readers have to do change according to the educational purpose of the research, depending on whether it is aimed primarily at understanding the meaning-making process; at deriving benefits from the 'use' of picturebooks in a variety of contexts; at arriving at pedagogical strategies for assisting reading (either of images or words) or at improving the way these readings are articulated.

### ***Research studies before 1997***

Reviewing educational research up to 1997 and noting that by the 1970s educators were advocating the use of wordless books in the classroom, Dowhower categorizes approximately 50 publications on the 'uses and benefits of wordless books' according to their 'beneficiaries': very young children; beginning readers; adolescents and older readers; disabled readers and culturally and linguistically different readers. The 'descriptive' studies she summarizes focussed mainly on age differences and the length of the stories 'told' from the wordless books. The 'intervention' studies described targeted remedial reading and 'story structure training' but Dowhower notes there are contradictory and inconclusive findings. She goes on to summarize 'more productive' research which assesses a range of skills through wordless texts such as cultural differences in visual literacy (Omotoso and Lamme 1979) or oral language production (Purcell-Gates 1988). The studies with most relevance for meaning-making are those by Jett-Simpson (1976) who looks at higher order inferential thinking which could aid inference for comprehension and writing and Van Kraayenoord and Paris (1996) who found a strong correlation between comprehension and different types of literacy knowledge. Finally, Dowhower references studies that do not use wordless picturebooks directly but that support the use of images for visual literacy and emergent literacy, such as



Sulzby's (1982) finding that images are important in the 'pretend' storybook reading phase and may act as a scaffold to independent reading.

In addition to her categorization, Dowhower lists the skills which, according to this research, will be derived from using these books such as the following: oral language and vocabulary; reading comprehension; book handling and conventions; writing; drama; story sense and visual literacy. Knudsen-Lindauer in particular provides examples that show that wordless picturebooks aid children 'in developing prereading skills: sequential thinking, the development of a sense of story, observation, visual discrimination, inferential thinking, and predicting conclusions' (1988, p. 137). Dowhower notes that the texts are also used for assessment, motivation and for researching narrative and linguistic knowledge. Despite all these publications, however, Dowhower remained unconvinced that there was a strong enough research base to prove the claims made for the benefits of wordless books, particularly whether reading wordless picturebooks support 'real reading'. She cites Groff (1974) who argued that reading a wordless picturebook deprives children of hearing literary language and therefore may hinder learning to read and literary appreciation. While Groff's extreme views have been disproven by more recent research that reveals the higher order cognitive skills involved in reading wordless picturebooks (particularly the aesthetically sophisticated, contemporary picturebooks) which have a positive impact not only on visual literacy but also on learning to read print. Dowhower's doubts about the support for 'real reading' are still shared by many educators and although there are plenty of findings that suggest they do provide support, there is no study that has directly addressed this issue.

### ***Research studies from 1998 - 2012***

While the rest of this section does not aim to provide a review as detailed as that of Dowhower, it does comment on some of the research publications that have appeared since then, in the years between 1998 and 2012. Crawford and Hade (2000) add some publications to Dowhower's review and present their own empirical findings. The two tendencies that emerge from these earlier reviews, and which continue to appear, are the following: the first and most obvious one is that these books are seen mainly as "stimuli", as instrumental objects for developing literacy, rather than aesthetic creations that can be read for pleasure; and the second is the expectation that the reader must articulate 'the story of the pictures'..

In June 2012, an ERIC database search for "wordless picture book" (as a separate word) produced 127 references (56 published since 2000) with 72 appearing in general journals, 39 in peer-reviewed journals plus 15 conference papers. A Google Scholar search results in 436 since 1998, many of which are also in the ERIC database (it is important to note that chapters in edited books are often missed out in these searches and that the references are almost exclusively in English). From the more pedagogically related literature in this corpus, three main points emerge: first, as in earlier research, the words 'uses' and 'benefits' continue to appear frequently; second, the importance of mediation is highlighted and third, most of the references continue to fit into Dowhower's categories, with the research reflecting current concerns in education:

- emergent literacy (e.g. Jalongo *et al*, 2002)
- second language learning (e.g. Chen and Pan, 2009)
- linguistic and cognitive abilities of children from different language and /or cultural back grounds (since most of these are conducted in the US they usually concern either Spanish, Chinese or African American children) (e.g. Gorman *et al*, 2011)

- home/family literacy research and intervention (e.g. Caspe, 2009)
- creative writing (e.g. Henry, 2003)
- development of self-esteem, identity or social imagination (e.g. Lysaker, 2006; Lysaker and Miller, 2012)
- assessment of narrative comprehension among children with particular language impairments or other disabilities such as ADHD, dyslexia or aphasia (e.g. Leonard *et al*, 2009)

It certainly appears to be the case that, at least in the world of educational researchers, wordless picturebooks have established themselves as a useful medium. The main reasons are that the books tend to be brief; deal with ‘child-friendly’ themes that are expected to be of interest to readers of all backgrounds; prevent the reader from becoming anxious about decoding words and therefore minimize bias against low-literacy participants. Most of the research focuses on different aspects of the task of ‘retelling’ the story rather than looking at the processes of meaning-making or at least taking them into account.

For most researchers, whether or not they are picturebooks only makes a difference in terms of whether the books have a narrative sequence of images. Peritextual or embedded text is usually ignored. Some studies even used the books in a way that undermined their aesthetic qualities: for example, one study (Arif and Hashim, 2008) blocked out the words of John Burningham’s *Come Away from the Water Shirley*, in which the overall narrative impact is a result of the ironic interplay between word and image, in an attempt to broaden an approach to the teaching of reading (it is not clear why they didn’t select wordless picturebooks in the first place). In another study photocopies were made of the original picturebook and then spiral bound, having ‘omitted some irrelevant pages’ to shorten the task (Paris and Paris,

2001, p. 6). Even within a study that explored visual perception using picturebooks, one of them a wordless one, there was no consideration of the differences between them and the emphasis was on the idea that ‘picture books are useful visual exercises’ (Yu, 2012, p. 298). With a few exceptions, most of these empirical researchers are not really interested in theoretical frameworks for understanding how picturebooks work from an aesthetic, visual perspective and neither are they interested in what readers have to say about their role in making meaning.

### **What the readers expect**

This section summarizes empirical research with an focus on the ways in which readers make sense of wordless picturebooks as children’s literature (as a compound idea, if not always as a compound spelling). Although studies on response to picturebooks go back to the 1990s those that exclusively consider wordless texts are more recent. Despite the differences in context, readers, books and methodologies in the studies mentioned here there is a shared understanding of the act of reading as a ‘transaction’ between text and reader (Rosenblatt, 1968) and of the active role of the reader in “the semiotic, sense-making processes” (Crawford and Hade, 2000) involved in this transaction. Because this research tends to be less prescriptive in terms of the task readers are asked to do and the focus is on the process rather than the result, the findings provide a better understanding of children’s own expectations of what they must ‘do’ with a wordless picturebook in order to make sense of it.

### ***Real readers reading wordless books***

Graham (1998) carried out individual reading sessions with children between 4 and 6 years of age. She notes their 'perplexed' responses and mis-readings, as well as the tendency to provide a running commentary in the present tense, resulting in a restricted use of language, monotonous language rather than fluent stories. When asked to start the story with 'Once upon a time' (using the narrative past tense) the retelling became more detailed and eloquent. Re-reading also made a difference. However, despite the fact that Graham concludes that children can be fluent and creative provided the circumstances are 'optimal', her initial suggestions that children have a 'quiet longing for a picture book with words' and that 'the wordless book can be less than enjoyable to those children who, used to reading-like behaviour with picture books, miss the fluency that memory of the written text gives' (1998, p. 42) tend to suggest the contrary. It may be that they are less than enjoyable because of what adults expect children to do with them.

Crawford and Hade (2000) invited three children aged 4, 5 and 8 to look through a book they selected, read the story aloud and share their impressions with the researcher. The youngest did not yet attend school or read and had less experience than the others with wordless books. The researchers confirmed that children rely on many of the same strategies for constructing story in texts with combination of print and image: signs evoked specific contextualized responses as well as intertextual links with books and other media. In terms of the retelling, the children supplied their own perspective (combining past and present tense) using story language register and imposing story structures. They also responded actively and playfully, both bodily and verbally.

Pantaleo (2005) analysed Grade 5 pupils' written responses to Istvan Banyai's *Zoom* and *Re-Zoom*. These children were well-versed in reading picturebooks and their writing shows how they were trying to make meaning by 'describing their reading strategies, explaining what they were thinking, feeling and wondering and understanding during and after reading the books' (2005, p. 228). She found this task encouraged an even more active co-authoring role and the use effective comprehension strategies, 'filling in' the signifiers with meaning and reflecting constantly changing expectations and interpretations.

Bosch and Duran (2009) also underline the main skills expected of the reader of wordless picturebooks (and note just how complex and exhausting this activity can be): identifying relevant signs, reconstructing sequences; creating or discarding hypothesis and reading actively and collaboratively. The readers of different ages that they observe concentrated on different aspects: the 3 year old focused on the actions of the character; the 9 year old followed the character's adventures and recognized some of the historical and cultural references; the 20 year old comic book reader made a careful reading and concluded that 'this is a book you tell to yourself'; the 47 year old skilled reader 'suspect[ed] there is a key or clue to discover' and 66 year old, less skilled with picturebooks, does not really follow the story but takes pleasure in recognizing cultural and historical references. The readings were therefore rooted in previous visual reading experience and on their intertextual and world knowledge.

The Visual Journeys project involved working with groups of readers from diverse immigrant communities in different countries reading two wordless books: *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan and *Flotsam* by David Wiesner (Arizpe, 2010; Arizpe, Colomer and Martínez-Roldán, forthcoming 2013). While *The Arrival* is often considered to be more of a graphic novel than

a picturebook, its lack of words was found to have the same effect as that of the wordless picturebook. As well as discussing the idea of only ‘reading’ images, the children responded through visual media such as graphic strips, annotated spreads and photographs. Researchers observed that the children were surprised by the absence of words and found it a challenge to make sense at the beginning but that they quickly began to move towards an inferential level of response. They applied strategies similar to those described by the researchers mentioned above, learning from their peers and generating an understanding for the whole group (Fittipaldi, 2008). They assumed the role of ‘translator’ of the images, speaking ‘for’ the characters and were aware of the need to become the narrators or ‘writers’ (Bellarín and Silva-Díaz, 2011).

A few other descriptions of readers interacting with wordless picturebooks can be found in less formal studies. For example, Nájera Trujillo, a Mexican librarian in a rural school introduced a group of children, for the first time, to a wordless picturebook (Nájera Trujillo, 2008). Although children felt a bit lost without the words, once the librarian helped them locate the settings, discuss the characters’ emotions and reflect on the intertextual details, they began to risk making their own discoveries and were surprised at the important role they had as readers. They even spoke of enjoying ‘the luxury’ of naming the characters and playing with circumstances and endings.

### ***Conclusions from reader-response studies***

This group of studies reveals some of the expectations of young readers:

- first and foremost, they expect words; many were surprised and even ‘shocked’ at their absence
- following from this, because they expect to derive meaning from words, they were puzzled and somewhat intimidated and even pre-literate children asked questions such as ‘how are we going to read that if it doesn’t have letters?’
- they tend to adopt the position of commentator and use present tense in the retelling
- they tend to ‘hang’ their interpretations on the few words that do appear, such as the title, often placing far too much weight on the sparse text
- they gradually realize they are expected to modify their usual reading progression: look more closely, follow the action carefully, find patterns, take more risks, imagine dialogues and ‘continually form and modify expectations’ (Pantaleo, 2005, p. 230)
- they also realize they are given the freedom to use ‘imagination’, to play with image and to make select readings
- they frequently make comments like ‘it makes you think more’, ‘you have to use your imagination more’, ‘you have to make up your own words/story’
- but although they became aware of the multiple options for interpretation the authority of ‘the word’ still remains hard to shake off
- they expect more guidance from the mediator if present –parent, teacher or librarian- in the process of understanding not only the text but also as to what the text expects of them

In sum, research on readers’ responses confirms that the wordless nature of the picturebooks demands a heightened co-authoring role that requires taking risks with the imagination,



activating intertextual and cultural knowledge and trusting in the readers ability to make sense of the story. The degree to which readers are aware of and act on the demands of wordless picturebooks depends on age and previous experience with picturebooks with and without words. It would seem that for children who for either cultural or socioeconomic motives, have had less contact with picturebooks in general and wordless picturebooks in particular, it takes more time to get round the idea that not all books have words and move of authority. Crawford and Hade, for example, noted that one pre-literate boy relied on the presence of words: ‘as a support system and as an assurance that there was a story to be read’ (200, p. 73).

Another two examples from the Visual Journeys project also show the authority given to words. The first is a spontaneously written text for *Flotsam*, by an 11 year old from Kurdistan with English as an additional language, who used the title and the name of the author (among the few words in the book) to name the main character: the boy was called David and his last name was ‘Flotsam’. The second is a comment from one 10 year old boy (a refugee from Congo who had only been in the school for a year) made after spending several weeks reading and discussing *The Arrival*: he asked whether they could now have the version with the words in it because he wanted to see if they had got the story ‘right’. (Arizpe, Colomer and Martínez-Roldán, forthcoming 2013)

The research shows that active engagement and awareness of the demands of the wordless picturebooks can develop and increase through collaborative reading with peers or adult mediators depending on the context, the aims and the strategies used in approaching and reading the text. This leads to the expectations of those who normally mediate these books

with children: parents and teachers. While there is no directly focused study on the interaction of either group with wordless picturebooks (although there are many anecdotal comments about parents being more disconcerted and uncomfortable than their children by these books) there are a few indications of teachers' expectations in some of the research with this genre.

### **What the teachers expect**

Based on the scant evidence, it does not seem that there has been much change in teachers' attitudes towards these texts in the last 25 years, although the recent awards, the presence of more wordless picturebooks and more publications on the topic may now be having an effect. In 1988, Raines and Isbell (cited in Jalongo *et al* 2009, p.4) observed that teachers did not take wordless picturebooks seriously and or use them in the classroom because the genre was relatively unfamiliar to them and they did not know how to select them (nor were the texts easy to find in school libraries). Also in 1988, Knudsen-Lindauer notes some teachers think they may be too difficult and not as 'enriching' as reading a picturebook with 'artistically written text' and that they may avoid them because they don't know how to deal with the absence of verbal text (1988, p. 137). In what seems to contradict this, ten years later Graham notes that, like many parents, teachers often believe they are not useful for learning to read or assessing reading and that they are not challenging for older children (1998).

Writing in 1994, Whalen noted she was not the only teacher who felt 'discomfort' or 'bewilderment' when using wordless picturebooks. However, after reading sessions with various wordless picturebooks in which children responded enthusiastically and intelligently,

she quickly realized their benefits and particularly the way in which they provided a safe and secure environment where children could explore and create meaning without fear of ‘getting it wrong’ (Whalen, 1994). Judging from more recent comments about books and book reviews posted on the internet (e.g. Amazon) during the period of researching and writing this article (throughout 2011), it is not uncommon to find teachers who are still surprised to find wordless picturebooks exist and are ‘bewildered’ by them, however, there are also plenty of enthusiastic comments about this genre as well.

One of the findings of the Visual Journeys project was that teachers became more convinced about the potential of wordless picturebooks as they got to know them and to see their pupils working with them. In an interview, one teacher said that the books had opened ‘new paths’ for the readers and the children had gained ‘a lot’ in terms of language and thinking skills but that they had also enjoyed the ‘aesthetic value’ of the books. One of the teachers in the US school involved in the project spoke of the wordless picturebook serving ‘as a bridge’ between linguistic differences but more importantly it created an awareness of what children could do as they brought their knowledge and experiences to ‘read between the pictures’ (Martínez-Roldán and Newcomer, 2011). Teachers also made the following observations about the children’s interaction with the books: it was not hindered by words; it involved an active approach; it increased their capacity to focus for longer periods; it involved interpretation and evaluation; it allowed them to move back and forth between the pages, connecting ideas and gaining a better idea of the ‘whole’ text (Arizpe, Colomer and Martínez-Roldán, forthcoming 2013).

Pantaleo (2005), Ghiso and McGuire (2007), Fittipaldi (2008) (and, albeit briefly, Nájera Trujillo 2008) describe the difference that expert teacher mediation has in widening and deepening children's understanding of wordless picturebooks. It seems that even a little bit of information on visual techniques or the modelling of reading a wordless text can encourage pupils not only to transform their approach to wordless picturebooks but also to think about their processes of meaning-making. Ghiso and McGuire analyse teacher mediation in sessions with wordless or almost wordless picturebooks in great detail and confirm it can provide 'multiple entry points' for the students into the text (2007, p. 355) and 'is particularly critical in maximizing the affordances of these semiotic resources, helping students recognize and utilize what is present in the storybook' (2007, p. 344).

### **Reconsidering expectations about readers responses**

The potential of wordless picturebooks for both learning about how readers make meaning but also for the development of readers' meaning-making skills has been evident throughout this overview of research. Both educationalists (researchers and teachers) and children's literature scholars could learn much from each other's work if disciplinary boundaries were crossed more often. The first step would be to counter the tendency to simply 'use' these books as 'stimuli' for eliciting particular types of responses which are analyzed according to the particular objectives of a psychological or linguistic study (and this applies to all picturebooks, wordless or not). Only a handful of empirical studies are interested in the wordless picturebook as an aesthetic object in itself, are grounded in general picturebook and children's literature theories and take these into account when analyzing response. Although some researchers would argue that this is not relevant to their investigations, this background could be enriching and might point in new directions. It could also help researchers consider what their expectations are about how meaning is made and how readers respond.

Another tendency that is present in many studies and urgently needs addressing is that readers must verbalize or ‘tell the story’ of the pictures, often without what seems to be enough time for the full engagement required for meaning-making.

### ***The demand for words***

Nikolajeva and Scott write that the wordless picture narrative ‘demands that the reader/viewer verbalize the story’ (2001, p. 9) and Nodelman points out that children ‘tend to express their enjoyment of wordless books by telling, in words, the stories the pictures suggest to them; they themselves turn purely visual experiences into verbal ones’ (1988, p. 186). While the response to this demand is indeed often –but not always- to put the story into words, the problem arises when this response becomes a required pedagogical strategy to ascertain understanding. Even researchers like Pantaleo state that ‘wordless books always require readers to provide the oral/written text’ (2005, p. 230) and Graham claimed that the children in her study ‘revealed a longing for the written word and the frisson it creates and also the fluency that their reading [of verbal text] gives them’ (1998, p. 30).

The expectation that the reader must tell the story in words seems to go back to the use of early wordless picturebooks which ‘are generally presented as books from which the text has been removed with the expectations that it will be restored by readers, who are encouraged to verbalize the story’ (Beckett 2012, p. 81). Linked to the verbalization is the expectation (sometimes reinforced by publishers’ blurbs, as Bosch (2010) points out) that ‘active participation’ means readers must ‘imagine or invent a story’, an activity which is completely

different from what most wordless picturebook illustrators intend given that the story has already been ‘invented’, there, in the pictures (Wiesner, 1992).

While Nodelman refers to the need for ‘a *visual* story-making competence’ in making meaning from wordless picturebooks (1998, p. 190, my emphasis), this is very different from the ‘*verbal* story-making competence’ that most researchers are concerned with. Children do enjoy talking about what they are looking at but this is different from having to mould it into a story. As Graham herself writes, the demand to ‘tell me the story that the pictures tell’, evoked a perplexed and limited response and she was not convinced that the children in her study were ‘discovering their voices’, ‘enjoying a rewarding sense of co-creation’ and they were ‘not interested in shaping in any truly literate way (1998, p. 42). But then again, why should they? Even adults familiar with books and storytelling would struggle to tell a ‘truly literate’ shaped story from looking at a wordless picturebook, especially for the first few readings.

The educational research method tends to be one where the child is given the book and almost immediately expected to create a story with little opportunity, if any, to explore the picturebook on their own first. Purcell-Gates (1991) for example, asked pupils to ‘decontextualize and recontextualize experience into a written-language register’, without any mention of visual language. For a start, it biases the research in favour of children who have grown up in language and literature-rich homes. Research also shows that an expert mediator can help in the verbalizing tasks, but as has been noted, not all parents or teachers have the knowledge and experience to do so. When left on their own with a wordless picturebook, children tend to read it individually first before sharing, a form of ‘silent reading’ in accord

with the absence of words. As Ali, a boy in the Visual Journeys study put it, when you read a wordless picturebook, 'the pictures go straight to your brain'. It is not until later that words are put to those pictures.

Talking about the picturebook usually starts with pointing things out, noticing details before making the connections between them and between one page and another. As has also been noted above, the demands made on the reader mean that when reading a picturebook for the first and for several consecutive times, there is much going back and forth between the pages. If this happens with a picturebook with words, why should a wordless picturebook be different and be expected to evoke an almost immediate chronologically structured narrative? Fransecky, one of the pioneers of visual literacy points out that

We know that increased verbalization is necessary to the emerging personality so that ideas may be given the form in which they are usually accepted by the mechanism of the mind. But should we not also consider the form of our sensory impressions? Often our practice of excessive verbalization floods the life of the senses and interferes abruptly with visual perception and creative play. (1969, p. 31)

### ***Wordless responses***

If readers are to 'tell the story' they must be allowed to spend time with the book on their own or with an experienced mediator first or even to co-create the story with their peers, in an interpretative community of readers that encourages dialogue and builds up gradually into a story-like form. In the experience in the Visual Journeys project (Arizpe, Colomer and Martínez-Roldán, forthcoming 2013) when children felt the need to tell the story

immediately, they read too fast and failed to observe the illustrator's clues and as a result their imaginations tended to take over and a completely different story emerged. This resulted in the situation described by Nodelman where the misreading of wordless books can become a 'threat to literacy':

Unfortunately, we confuse the ignorance of children with imagination far too often. If we encourage children to misuse wordless books in their attempts to find stories in them by ignoring details the picture actually do show, then these books will indeed be a threat to literacy that some commentators believe them to be. But viewed with an attitude of respect for the communicative powers of visual codes of signification, wordless books can be as powerful a source of education in the attentiveness basic to literacy as are books with words. (1988, p. 191)

If children are expected to recreate the story in words this should be only after a process of meaning-making that does not force the words into the process until they are ready for them. The only study that encouraged a response to wordless picturebooks through an alternative *visual* medium was Visual Journeys (graphic strips, annotated spreads and photographs). Perhaps drawing, collage, photographs, diagrams, mind maps could also be used – or at least as a first step.

The illustrator Shaun Tan has described wordless narratives as 'a space that happens inside the soul' and the illustrator as a storyteller whose 'ideas can only be expressed through a silent language of images [...] with no attachment to words or to specific fixed meanings' (2011). Paraphrasing another wordless artist, Sara, Beckett writes that 'In a society that privileges verbiage and the written text [...] her picturebooks are an apology of silence, the unspoken, and non-verbal communication, all of which favour reflective thought and



meditation' (2012, p. 112). Wordless picturebooks allow readers a respite from the authority and weight of the words they must continually deal with both in school and elsewhere; why not, rather than expecting them to immediately add their own, allow them to make the most of this silent space.

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