'NARRATIVES OF BELONGING': VISUAL LITERACY THROUGH THE WORDLESS PICTUREBOOK 'CLOWN'

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Abstract

Wordless picturebooks give an opportunity to the nonreader children to create the story on their own and bring in their own understanding of the world to the text. Preschoolers' visual literacy which can be defined as the abilities to understand (read) and use (write) images, as well as to think and learn in terms of images, can be influenced by their exposure to wordless picturebooks. A reading of Quentin Blake's 'Clown' that presents a clown toy searching for a place to fit in is ventured. Following the hero's quest issues of belonging are implied and the moral 'one person's trash is another person's treasure' is woven. Questions are raised referring to the conditions and terms of matching, adjustments and modifications to be included. The study explores preschool children's transaction with the visual codes of 'Clown', their making sense of the notion of belonging conveyed by this wordless picturebook, and their ability of storytelling by reproducing this wordless picturebook' s narrative structure. A sample of six children, each six years old, participate in this case study, where in their reading of the wordless picturebook they interpret the visual cues in terms of the message conveyed concerning the notion of belonging, and build their own wordless narratives by following the three-act structure technique. In the qualitative content analysis of children's produced narrative speech, data from their leporello wordless narratives are coded to interpret the speech patterns of the three-act structure of the character set up, the confrontation/twist, and the resolution. Results indicate the six year old children's ability to interpret the visual code in order to comprehend the message conveyed by a wordless picturebook, and to use the visual code in combination with a narrative strategy in order to produce their own wordless narratives conveying their own experiences. The study contributes to both the fields of literature and early childhood education since it promotes the discussion on the integration of the former to the latter while attempting to develop nonreaders' visual literacy and narrative skill by exploiting wordless picturebooks' possibilities.

Keywords: Clown, wordless picturebook, visual literacy, three-act structure, early childhood education.

1. Introduction

Wordless picturebooks jump out from the words, enable the readers to enjoy space of imagination and creation of stories. Since there are no words at all, the reader tends to pay attention to the messages of sense of vision. Given the complex range of multimodal texts, like wordless picturebooks, Arizpe and Styles (2003) in their earlier work highlighted the sophisticated nature of children's responses to visual texts, and showcased the indispensable role that visual literacies can play in developing and supporting creative and critical thinking. It can be strongly argued that children need 'visual literacy skills, the ability to understand, to interpret, to engage critically and to create multimodal visual narratives' (Arizpe, Noble, & Styles, 2023, 96). The current study presents Quentin Blake's 'Clown' as a case of a wordless picturebook that could convey messages of the notion of belonging and be used by preschool children to inspire the generation of three-act structure through comic-strip cartoon conventions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Wordless picturebooks influence on preschoolers' visual literacy development

Wordless picturebooks connect visual literacy (learning to interpret images), cultural literacy (learning the characteristics and expectations of social groups) and literacy with print (learning to read and write language). This genre supports learners who are not yet deciphering print and build their confidence as readers and writers (Jalongo et al. 2002). Wordless picturebooks mostly rely on visual narratives, such

as images, drawings, photos, and paintings to construct narratives, where children can focus on the visuals that are the narratives themselves. Wordless picturebooks give complexity, details, consistency continuity and every complex page is completely facilitated with detail (Rizqiyani & Azizah, 2019). In reading wordless picturebooks, readers face the variety of visual signs. These sign systems help them form a type of framework that show their interpretation of the text and helps them build construction of the story (Arizpe, 2013; Crawford & Hade, 2000).

Wordless picturebooks have comprehending gaps, serving a purpose of indeterminacy, that support readers to actively engage in comprehension activities and develop multiple aspects of literacy skills (Zhang, Xue, & Lysaker, 2022). The pictorial narratives embed implied and omitted information that require readers' active effort in reading (Arizpe, 2013). Gap filling activities welcome young children's agency in meaning-making, where children can activate their skills of inferencing, imagining, and using personal experiences and background knowledge to support comprehension (Mantei & Kervin, 2014).

Jalongo et al. (2002) noted that as they invent narratives, children develop their sense of story, demonstrate an understanding of sequence, practice oral or written storytelling skills, and expand their cognitive abilities. Isbell et al.'s (2004) research has made it clear that a book with no words can provide a strong literary experience to influence the development of spoken language and children's story comprehension, especially in the development of their literacy. Moreover, more recent findings by Lysaker & Hopper (2015) on the use of wordless picturebooks indicated that when text is removed, children are able to demonstrate a greater understanding of the concept of story, as well as making inferences about the events taking place, creating dialogue and following narrative action.

2.2. A reading of notions of belonging at 'Clown' - *'One person's trash is another person's treasure'*

Quentin Blake's drawing technique, a spontaneous-looking free-flowing pen-and-ink line (Hopper Swain, 2014), creates a wordless picturebook energetic style that is encompassed in its protagonist, a clown toy running, jumping, somersaulting, miming and searching for a place to fit in. Following the hero's quest after his abandonment, issues of belonging are implied and the moral 'one person's trash is another person's treasure' is woven. Questions are raised referring to the conditions and terms of matching, adjustments and modifications to be included in and open space for interpretation is left according to readers' background experiences (Mohd Arif and Hashim, 2008) of the idea of belonging.

Pictures in Clown are presented in a cartoon style that exaggerates the protagonist's actions and appearance, a style that, according to Nodelman (1988, as cited in Hopper Swain, 2014), serves the need to be clear in their intention for the beholder to understand what is going on. The humour of the little clown's appearance is often offset by an element of pathos which could imply the smallness and vulnerability of children (Hopper Swain, 2014). These can be important factors in reading the body language of the little clown who has human characteristics when he is not playing at being a limp, soft toy. Thus, the protagonist is often placed in isolation against a white background so that the readers' attention can be completely focused on him, a strategy, which Doonan (1993, as cited in Hopper Swain, 2014) referred to as the placing of a component in a detached situation for emphasis. Establishing this interest and, perhaps, a sense of rapport with the main protagonist early on can help the readers become more involved in the unfolding narrative which is the character's search for a place to belong and the efforts that need to be made to fit in. Clown nature adjusts from animus to non-animus depending on whom it is referring to (animus in front of children and animals, non-animus in front of adults). Clown behaviour is changed from formal to informal (from entertainer/mime to defender of the rest of the abandoned toys). Clown roles are taken according to the situation (i.e., toy, mime, helper in household chores, rescuer). As Prior, Willson, and Martinez (2012) showed, children are drawn to images depicting characters' actions, facial expressions, body posture, colour and lines to explore characters' feelings. The clown's body language, expressive hands and facial expressions say it all, and Blake has given him unconfined, or unframed, space in which to perform. Frequently in this wordless picturebook there are no shadows at all to indicate the ground on which he stands, and this can accentuate the light, fleeting quality of the clown's antics (Hopper Swain, 2014). The use of framed and unframed illustrations in a way that can heighten the pictorial narrative's progress is also quite apparent in 'Clown'. In this way pictures that frame the clown's presence in concrete spaces (i.e., the dustbin, a member in the line of children in costumes, the rich apartment, the unprivileged family) appear more contained and less busy, whereas the frameless pictures depicting the clown's efforts to find a place to belong to, focus on physical action (Hopper Swain, 2014). It can be supported that the absence of frame implies a notion of shared experience between the protagonist and the reader. These sets of semantic cues, like the repetitive act of throwing (clown is thrown in the dustbin, thrown out the window, thrown like a hammer to be sent far away), according to Prior, Willson, and Martinez (2012) function as a visual strategy to generate progressive messages, messages about notions and definitions of rejection and belonging in this case.

2.3. Aim of the current study

Given that visual literacy can be defined as 'the abilities to understand (read) and use (write) images, as well as to think and learn in terms of images' (Avgerinou & Pettersson 2020, 439), as well as children are able to handle multimodal semiotic systems, to understand how and why multimodal books are produced, and to connect their conclusions after reading works such as wordless and wimmelbooks with their own experiences (Angelaki, 2024), the hypothesis of the current study is that the use of Clown's visual signs, cues and modes from preschool children could enable them to generate wordless visual narratives which notably include the basic three-act structure. In particular, the study explores 6year-old children's transaction with visual codes, their making sense of the notion of belonging conveyed, and their ability to create narratives of belonging by reproducing this wordless picturebook's three-act narrative structure.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample

A sample of six 6-year-old children of typical development from a Greek public Kindergarten formed the focus group in this case study. The age was chosen since their narrative skill is developed radically into distinctive developmental stages enabling the comprehension and generation of specific structural and morphological narrative elements (Applebee, 1978). In their reading of the wordless picturebook 'Clown' they interpreted the visual cues in terms of the message conveyed concerning the notion of belonging and built their own wordless narratives by following the three-act structure technique.
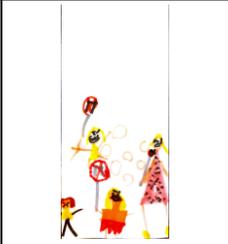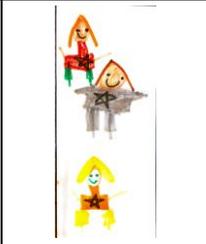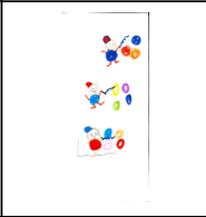
3.2. Framework

The present study was based on the framework of previous One Group Pretest-Posttest Design approach by Rizqiyani and Azizah (2019) concerning the use of wordless picturebooks to improve preschoolers' ability of storytelling and Kalaitzi and Panos' s (2023) P.R.O.S.E. framework to evaluate the development of narrative elements in 5 and 6-year-old children's speech through the exploitation of picture-text interaction types. Preschoolers were introduced to the reading of 'Clown', they discussed the messages conveyed regarding the notion of belonging, they distinguished the narrative's three-act structure, and they generated their own wordless narratives on the topic of belonging by reproducing the three-act structure.

4. Content analysis of preschoolers' wordless narratives of belonging

Preschoolers' performance was evaluated through content analysis of their visual narratives, on the basis that this qualitative approach treats data as representations of image patterns identified and interpreted by the researcher's personal judgment (Huckin, 2004). Specific visual cues of the three-act structure and the notion of belonging were set before the wordless picturebook reading to form the data for identification and interpretation by the researchers. After the generation of visual narratives, data from the wordless leporello folds were coded to interpret the visual patterns of the three-acts, the character set up, the confrontation, and the resolution. Table 1, below, oulines the visual patterns of the three-act structure of preschoolers' wordless narratives and the identification of the notion of belonging portrayed.

Table 1. Visual patterns of the three-act structure identified in preschoolers' wordless narratives of belonging.

	First act of character set up	Second act of confrontation	Third act of resolution	The notion of belonging connotations identified
M_Girl				***Connotations of the notion of belonging identified in divergent gender-related activities:*** *The heroine is rejected by the boys' basketball team because of her gender. She creates her own basketball team that consists of girls where she is accepted and feels she belongs.*
F_Boy				***Connotations of the notion of belonging identified in family role inequality:*** *The heroine feels as treated unfairly by the members of the family as she is doing all the household chores by herself. After the members of her family start sharing the chores she feels as an equal member that is being treated fairly.*

A_Girl				***Connotations of the notion of belonging identified in social constructions (i.e. dressing codes):*** *The heroine is being rejected by the rest of people because of her dressing choices. After insisting on wearing pants, the rest of girls start wearing pants too, so the heroine feels she can fit in.*
B_Boy				***Connotations of the notion of belonging identified in gender-associated toys:*** *The hero likes to play with a toy that is not associated with his gender. Due to his toy choice, he is marginalised until he invites his peers to play with his toys.*
K Girl				***Connotations of the notion of belonging identified in cultural constructions:*** *The hero feels alienated from his cultural customs due to his occupational choice. He feels liberated and a member of his cultural group when he joins other people doing the same occupation.*
M-E Girl				***Connotations of the notion of belonging identified in peer play:*** *The hero is separated from his friends because of his play choices that differ from the others. He becomes part of the group as soon as they all decide to share their different toys and play all together.*

All six children drew a hero for the character set up act by choosing a fictional one already encountered in their readings. They presented their characters' unique feature (i.e. a Saudi Arabia boy, a girl who wears pants in an era where women are only allowed to wear dresses, etc.). For the confrontation act, they all drew a twist that makes the hero feel isolated, rejected or alone (i.e. the boy who plays with dolls is marginalised by peers, the girl who plays basketball is rejected by the boy's team, etc.). In the resolution act, the children drew the solution to the hero's problem by placing them into a group where they belong to (i.e. a family that shares the chores makes the mother feel equally treated, etc).

Regarding connotations of belonging, children associated the notion with different concepts in their narratives. The implication of the notion of belonging was identified as the visual cue of diversity in gender-related activities, the confrontation of family role inequality, the de-identification of external characteristics based on social constructions, the deconstruction of gender-associated toys, the expansion of cultural constructions.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Preschool children's wordless narratives confirm previous findings regarding both the development of visual literacy in this age and its implications in the ability to comprehend the visual features, cues and codes when learning visual concepts and metalanguage (Arizpe, Noble, & Styles, 2023), and to generate notable narrative structures, like the three-act structure exploiting the wordless picturebook's conventions for conveying their own versions of the notion of belonging (Kalaitzi & Panos, 2019).

Comic-strip cartoon conventions presented in 'Clown' pictorial devices (Hopper Swain, 2014), were identified in all six children's wordless narratives. Similarly to the 'Clown's non-verbalised expression of emotions, children employed the smiling mouth suggested by an upward curved line and the mouth conveying sadness by a line curving down, to express their own protagonists' range of readily recognizable moods and mental states. Three out of six children also employed the action dots that accompany balloons picturing their protagonists' thoughts usually to elaborate and emphasize the second act of confrontation in their narratives, confirming Prior, Willson, and Martinez's (2012) findings that children-readers pay attention to images that convey such kind of information of feelings and actions.

The diversity in which preschoolers framed the notion of belonging proves that, as Mohd Arif and Hashim (2008) and Mantei and Kervin (2014) noted, the reading of a wordless picturebook is an open-ended process where viewers read stories by bringing their background experiences and personal

histories to bear on the visual images they encounter within the text. 'Clown' leaves indeed wide-open space for interpreting the notion of belonging. The last picture in 'Clown' gives complexity, consistency continuity and as a complex page is completely facilitated with detail (Rizqiyani & Azizah, 2019) while conveying the story's moral. The notion of belonging in 'Clown' is restored through what could be implied as the reader's last looking-from-the-door-lock glance of a united happy family of which the clown is finally a member. Correspondingly, the notion of belonging in children's wordless narratives is identified through the third act of resolution, where in every case they portrayed a glance of their characters belonging in a group or feeling integrated despite their diverse characteristics and behaviours.

The combined use of three-act narrative structure and comic-strip cartoon conventions functioning as a framework (Crawford & Hade, 2000), enabled preschool children to exploit comprehending gaps conventions, embed implied and omitted information (Arizpe, 2013), serving indeterminacy while conveying their own understanding of abstracted notions through visual codes (Zhang, Xue, & Lysaker, 2022) and to build construction of their own pictorial narratives, confirming Jalongo et al. (2002), Isbell et al. (2004) and Lysaker and Hopper (2015), by making inferences about the events taking place, creating non-verbal dialogue and following narrative action.

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