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To cite this article: Zuzana Jančík Petrová, Jana Vašíková & Iva Žáková (26 Feb 2025): “I’m Just Looking at the Pictures and ... ”: The Role of Illustrations in Books from the Perspective of Preschool Children, Journal of Research in Childhood Education, DOI: [10.1080/02568543.2025.2461563](https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2025.2461563)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2025.2461563>



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Published online: 26 Feb 2025.



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# “I’m Just Looking at the Pictures and ...”: The Role of Illustrations in Books from the Perspective of Preschool Children

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores perceptions of preschool children on the role of illustrations in books. Participants included 141 children (69 boys and 82 girls) age 5–6 years (average age: 5 years and 9 months). We used semi-structured interviews with children on their favorite book to stimulate conversation on how they conceive illustrations in the book and how they use them in book- and reading-related activities. The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using inductive thematic analyses. Data analyses showed that from children’s perspective, illustrations are important stimuli to become and stay interested in a book and that they play an important role in navigating the book and the text and in aiding their comprehension of the text. The potential of illustration to capture children’s attention and to foster their enthusiasm to actively engage in reading books has been found to be essential from the perspective of children. In addition, active attention to illustrations can serve as a tool to increase children’s independence from adults when reading books and engaging in book-related activities.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 August 2024



Accepted 6 January 2025

## KEYWORDS

Early literacy development; illustration; picture books; preschool

Scholars specializing in children’s literature found the illustrations in children’s picture books to be an integral part of the book, making an equally vital contribution to the book’s content as the verbal text (Genette, 1997; Golden & Gerber, 1990; Higonnet, 1990). Verbal and visual text rely on different means to convey meaning. Verbal text involves using words and their sounds, employing the phonetic and morphemic elements of the language. In contrast, visual text exploits lines, shapes, colors, textures, or other visual expressive means. Both kinds of text employ syntactic and semantic means to convey meaning (Kiefer, 2015). In children’s picture books, written text and illustrations are interconnected, creating a dynamic interplay that enhances meaning beyond what either could manage independently. When reading a book, young readers not only decode the text and its meaning, but also reach for other available sources of information such as what the illustrations provide (L. R. Sipe, 2015). They consult the illustrations, not only because of an interest in illustration itself, but also when they struggle to identify a word, when affirming the content of what they have read, or when forming an idea of the context (Feathers & Arya, 2012).

Even children who have not yet mastered the ability to read in the conventional sense and are still in the pre-reading period benefit from illustrations in their books, as they contribute to meaning-making (Hubbard, 1989; L. R. Sipe & Brightman, 2005; Yaden et al., 1989). Eye-tracking research has demonstrated that kindergartners spend the majority of their shared reading time visually attending the illustrations (Justice et al., 2005; Roy-Charland et al., 2007), even when instructed to pay attention to written text (Roy-Charland et al., 2015). During the shared reading, they pay attention to illustrations irrespective of the arrangement of text and illustrations on the page and the attractiveness of the illustrations (Evans & Saint-Aubin, 2005). Further, studies in this field have shown that illustrations in

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children's books used during shared reading prompt more interactive story reading and contribute to improved literacy outcomes (Greenhoot et al., 2014), such as narrative comprehension (Nicolopoulou et al., 2023). However, research has paid less attention to the specific motivations behind children's engagement with illustrations in books, what they pay attention to, their reasons for doing so, and how illustrations enable them to navigate books in the pre-reader period independently. The questions of how pre-reading children use illustrations to explore the content and meaning of a book's text, and also how illustrations enable them to explore the book as an object of literacy and to build a relationship with books and reading, open up the space for our present study.

### **The role of illustrations in preschool children's construction of the meaning of a text**

Illustrations can promote comprehension of written text by filling iconotextual gaps in a child's understanding. By exploring the illustrations, children can recognize the particular storyline, predict what will happen in the story, and consider multiple interpretive possibilities and endings (Arizpe, 2013). This also contributes to easier construction of a mental model of the text (Glenberg & Langston, 1992), as the complexity of the written text for the child is reduced. The illustrations support the child's perception of the temporal progression of the story, its setting, the historical context or mood of the book, or the story's characters by highlighting particular characteristics that the child may find interesting (Fang, 1996). In this way, they represent or enrich the story conveyed by the written text. For a preschool child with developing language skills (and, thus, limited vocabulary or experience with language syntax), this provides an essential means of text comprehension (Brookshire et al., 2002).

Previous studies regarding pre-reading children's perceptions of illustration in children's books include their responses to different types of illustrated books (Arizpe & Styles, 2003) or particularly to book illustrations (Danko McGhee & Slutsky, 2011), the interactions of children with the picture books (Kachorsky et al., 2017; Leech & Rowe, 2014), how design and illustration techniques in almost wordless picturebook are discussed with children (Pantaleo, 2023), and the role of others (parents or teachers) in facilitating children's path to meaning construction with the aid of illustrations (L. R. Sipe & Daley, 2005). A distinct area of interest investigates the process of meaning construction in children's interactions with wordless picture books (Lysaker & Hopper, 2015). Whether children's books contain both illustrations and written text or only pictures, it appears that children's access to meaning is facilitated by similar processes of meaning making. These processes involve prior knowledge and experience, attention to intertextual elements, the ability to perceive different perspectives, reliance on the narrative language and rituals associated with reading, and the inclusion of an active and playful approach as part of the reading experience (Crawford & Hade, 2000). The previous research provides an essential background for our research as well, as it investigated the child as an active subject, interacting with the book as a meaningful activity, aware that the content of the book can be explored through the illustrations and using his or her previous experiences and knowledge to make meaning of it.

### **The role of illustrations in the preschool child's exploration of books**

Although the process of constructing meaning is pivotal in a child's interaction with a book, as it accomplishes the core task of reading (deriving meaning and seeking comprehension based on the text, illustrations, and overall book design; Lewis, 2001; Rosenblatt, 1978), this process does not encompass the entire essence of reading. There are additional dimensions to reading that extend beyond mere comprehension and meaning-making. When pre-reading children engage with a book, they first perceive its material form and physical layout. Through specific literacy practices encountered in the home and later within the preschool environment, they come to recognize the book as a cultural artifact. This recognition necessitates an understanding of the cultural conventions that guide how to handle a book, navigate its structure, and use its various elements in the process of reading. Children learn that the content and meaning of a text are derived by following conventional directionality (e.g., that the text begins at the top left, is read line by line, page by page) or that

illustrations and written text are related to each other (Clay, 2000). The division of text across multiple pages in a book necessitates a specific cognitive approach from the child. Ensuring a continuous perception of the text as a cohesive whole is challenging without the child's comprehension of text structure and navigation, as well as their active participation in perceiving the textual organization and engaging with the content, particularly when turning the page after completing the reading on one side (Bartow Jacobs, 2016). Peritextual elements represent another example a child can recognize within a book and integrate into her or his understanding of meaning (Higonnet, 1990; L. R. Sipe, 2011).

When children engage with a book, the manner in which they hold and interact with it reflects their experience and understanding of its purpose, as well as how its functions are realized during their interaction. Since pre-reading children cannot independently decode the written text, they can fulfill their intention to read the book through interaction. This interaction bridges the gap in their perception of meaning created by the absence of written text by shifting their attention to the available characteristics and elements of the book and text. Thus, children can actively build on their own experiences and intentions in interacting with the book and can act as independent agents in situations where they reach for the book without relying on the other person's actual mediation of meaning. Doing so strengthens their sense of participation and enhances positive emotions while reading books (Zhang et al., 2020).

## The Czech and Slovak context

This research was conducted in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, two countries with shared historical, cultural, and linguistic ties rooted in their Czechoslovak heritage during the 20th century. Due to their shared historical experience, these nations have faced similar educational challenges in recent decades.

In both countries, shared reading is a significant component of language and literacy programs within national curricula, recognized for its role in fostering children's language and literacy development. The Framework Educational Program for Preschool Education (Research Institute of Education, 2004) in the Czech Republic and the Pre-primary State Education Program for Preschools (State Pedagogical Institute, 2016) in Slovakia define shared reading and access to books as essential for engaging children in reading and promoting language and literacy skills (Wildová & Kropáčková, 2015). In the Czech Republic, teachers most frequently use classic fairy tales, short stories, and nonfiction books, often favoring picture books with minimal text in education activities (Maňourová et al., 2019). In Slovakia, teachers predominantly use narrative texts (e.g., children's stories, fairy tales) and short rhyming poems during shared reading, while nonfiction and functional texts (e.g., instructions, recipes) are less common. Narrative texts are often employed to enhance listening comprehension and introduce information related to the text, with frequent pauses for questions assessing both explicit and inferential understanding (Zápotočná et al., 2022).

Parental interest in shared reading is moderate in both countries, with less than half of parents regularly reading to their children (Fasnerová, 2014; TNS Slovakia, 2015). Independent organizations play a significant role in promoting reading as both an important and enjoyable activity. Notable initiatives include *Every Czech Reads to Kids* and *Every Slovak Reads to Kids*. Parents often use shared reading to support their child's development and foster emotional bonds. During these sessions, they facilitate comprehension, encourage reflection on story characters, and stimulate the child's narration of the content. However, less emphasis is placed on pre-literacy activities, such as engaging with letters, words, and numbers (Gavora, 2018). Children also tend to approach books as objects of individual activity. Factors influencing their selection include humor, familiar themes, media-recognized characters, fantasy elements, attractive illustrations, and interactive features (Jančík Petrová, 2023).

## The current study

This research examines the role of illustrations in children's exploration of books, whether as part of their individual activities or during read-aloud sessions with adults (typically a parent), siblings, or peers. This subject finds its key foundation in approaches that view the child as a meaning-maker and

active agent (Kumpulainen et al., 2013), allowing for the exploration of activities rooted in the child's perspective and experiences throughout the path of becoming a reader. Although our understanding of how children who are not yet able to read independently identify the meaning of a text is limited, we know from the literature review that illustrations play a crucial role in influencing the appeal of books for children. Illustrations affect the intentions children pursue through their interactions with books and the opportunities to explore and enjoy the activity with the book available to them during these interactions. The primary aim of this research is to examine the perspectives of children in the pre-reader period – when they cannot decode written text independently – who explore illustrations in books and incorporate them into their activities. We posit that illustrations serve as a medium that enables children to engage with the book, allowing them to “read” it in their own way without the need to decode the written text, thus facilitating their understanding of the text's meaning. Also, as children explore books, they participate in activities that support cognitive and socio-emotional development, as well as fostering imagination, communication skills, moral learning, and engagement (for a systematic review, see Grøver et al., 2023).

In current research, we particularly focused on two major research questions:

- (1) What role do illustrations play in children's activities with books?
- (2) How do children use illustrations to “read” books when they cannot yet decode written text?

In order to capture children's perspectives, we conducted interviews that focused on the verbal expressions children used to describe and explain their activities with the book they had chosen as the subject of discussion.

## Methods

### *Participants*

A total of 141 children (69 boys and 82 girls) age 5–6 years (average age: 5 years and 9 months) participated in the study; the youngest child was 5 years old, and the oldest was 6 years and 11 months old. The children came from all over Slovakia and the bordering regions of the Czech Republic. The research was conducted in the child's mother tongue (Slovak or Czech).

The research was conducted in conformity with the APA's ethical code; the ethics approval was obtained from the institutional Ethical Committee associated with the first author. The study sought parents' signed informed consent and verbal consent from each child to be interviewed and recorded. Each child was given advance information about the focus of the interview, and they chose which book to present as their favorite before the interview. The child selected the place in their home setting where the interview took place as well (most often it was the child's room). Usually, parents were not present in the room used for the interview. Still, they could observe the interview from a close distance.

The participating children mainly came from families practicing shared reading, usually done before putting the child to sleep or during other quiet times. Children could easily access books in their homes by having a library or designated children's bookshelves (either their own or shared with siblings). To this extent, they can be considered suitable research participants, as they have shared reading experience and are interested in books and reading. However, the purposive selection of participants is also a limitation of the study, as it only includes children who have already developed a relationship with reading and books.

### *Data collection*

Interviews used in the research were semi-structured and divided into three thematic units. Each unit followed a set of framework questions adapted to the child's linguistic-communicative abilities. The

children were first asked general questions, supplemented by additional follow-up questions pursuing the themes highlighted in their answers.

The first theme focused on determining the child's favorite book and its content. The child introduced his or her favorite book and talked about the details of how he or she obtained it. Subsequently, the child was asked to retell its content. The second set of questions explored the essential characteristics that were relevant from the child's perspective in selecting it, and that determined whether the child found it interesting and suitable for individual interaction ("browsing") or shared reading. In the beginning, the child was asked why he or she liked this particular book and chose it as their favorite for the interview. Subsequent questions reflected what the child had mentioned in his or her answers and which was possibly also referred to non-verbally in the interaction with the book held in the hand. For each of the topics mentioned by the child, the child was asked to give an example and explain why that aspect of the book or text was essential or interesting to him or her. During this part of the interview, topics related to the content and thematic focus of the book, main characters in the story from the child's point of view, the mood of the book, its appealing elements, and the child's intentions for interacting with the book (having fun, gaining new knowledge, etc.) were covered. Follow-up questions about the topics not self-reported by the child were also asked. The third set of questions pursued the families' reading and book selection habits.

### **Data analyses**

Each interview with the child was audio-recorded, supplemented by notes taken during the interview, or videotaped (depending on the form of recording agreed upon by both parent and child). Each recording was transcribed (McLellan et al., 2003) and analyzed. The recording included the child's verbal expressions, as well as ongoing interactions with the book if the child chose to pick up the book and demonstrate important aspects of the book, the content of the text, and the reading process when talking about the book and reading practices. Interviews with children were processed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), aided by the qualitative data analysis tool ATLAS.ti, version 8. Inductive thematic analysis was used to prioritize the voices and experiences of our participants, allowing for the development of themes that authentically reflect their perspectives and insights.

The procedure consisted of repeated readings of the interview transcripts and the generation of initial codes, which were subsequently grouped and categorized into themes according to proximity of content. The analytical process involved discussion among the authors of the article, and disputed cases were debated until the authors reached a consensus. Subsequently, the consistency of the thematic areas was reviewed, and the final agreement on them was made after one month.

During the analysis, nine codes were derived, which allowed the generation of three thematic areas. The following themes were derived from interviews as being related to the issue of illustrations in terms of the child's interaction with the book. (1) *Illustrations as an autonomous object of interest*: (a) browsing a book as an alternative to reading, (b) illustrations as appealing to children, and (c) illustrations as an aid to choosing a book; (2) *illustrations as an aid to navigating the text*: (a) navigating the book's content, (b) targeting the character, (c) sharing interesting content, and (d) orientation in the book; (3) *the child's participation in shared reading*: (a) engaging with illustrations and (b) content monitoring. A summary of the themes is presented in [Table 1](#), along with the frequency of their occurrence in the children's interviews.

Children's verbal expressions included comments on the genre of books they preferred, when and where books were read in their families, how often someone in the household would read to the child, and what shared readings looked like. However, as these topics are not the focus of the present study, the following text refrains from analyzing them.

### **Results**

The inductive thematic analysis of the children's interviews yielded three themes related to children's perceptions of illustrations in their interactions with books, presented in [Table 1](#).

**Table 1.** Number of children who reported the themes and subcategories of each theme in the interview.

Themes	Number of children (out of 141)
<b>Theme 1: Illustrations as an autonomous object of interest</b>	
Browsing a book as an alternative to reading	78
Illustrations as appealing to children	50
Illustrations as an aid to choosing a book	28
<b>Theme 2: Illustrations as an aid to navigating the text</b>	
Navigating the book's content	72
Targeting the character	44
Sharing interesting content	61
Orientation in the book	20
<b>Theme 3: The child's participation in shared reading</b>	
Engaging with illustrations	35
Content monitoring	2

### ***Illustrations as an autonomous object of interest***

In the interviews, children often referred to illustrations as the main object of their interest while interacting with books. They perceived them as autonomous, without the necessary link to the text and accessible without the need to master the decoding of written text. The presence of illustrations in a book allows children to interact with the book even without the participation of another person who can read, to perceive it through its content and aesthetic characteristics, and to make decisions about the choice of a book using these characteristics.

#### ***Browsing a book as an alternative to reading***

Seventy-eight children (out of 141) expressed in the interviews that they engage in browsing a book as particular activity while they focus on the illustrations as an object of their interest. The children explained that they do so because they cannot read independently. Some children (5/141) consider it an alternative that they choose when they cannot find a family member who will read a book to them.

Yeah, I sometimes look at them when my mom sleeps. When there's no one to read to me. [B\_01]

When mom is working or can't read to me, I look at [the illustrations]. [G\_75]

Primarily, however, they engage in this activity because they find it interesting (73/141).

I like to browse through books, and I like the different pictures in them. [G\_14]

Well, I can't read yet, but I look at pictures when I like them. [B\_52]

I like picture books because I can flip through them all the time and look at everything. [B\_03]

#### ***Illustrations as appealing to children***

In this theme, the descriptions of illustrations as objects with an aesthetic dimension, which are in some way "pretty" or attractive to children in itself, prevail. A total of 50 children (out of 141) reported this. In some cases, this perception of the appeal of illustrations also encourages children to engage in additional illustration-related activities involving their imagination. While looking at the illustrations, they make up stories based on the illustrations (10/141) or use them as a stimulus for drawing (2/141).

That I pick up a book and "read" it, and it's very often when I feel like it during the day. Or I look at the pictures and make up my own story based on them, whatever comes to mind then, and I laugh about it as well. [G\_39]

Sometimes, when I'm in my room, I think of taking a book. I start to read it and look at the pictures; sometimes, I draw the pictures from the book. [G\_45]

I absolutely love books, though, and I draw the pictures that are in there, too. [G\_67]

Most of the children interviewed who expressed that they liked books (28/141) remained general in their evaluations of the aesthetics of illustrations, saying, “*Because I like the pictures in the book*” [G\_22]. However, some children also explained why they find the book illustrations appealing. They mentioned two criteria: colorfulness (5/141) and thematic focus (17/141).

What I really like about this book is that it is pink-purple-blue. [G\_41]

I like that there are pictures. Lots of pictures, and that they are colorful. [G\_30]

Hmm... I like these flowers. And the other pictures. [G\_04]

Because I like those pictures in the book. I like all those dinosaurs. [G\_28]

### ***Illustrations as an aid to choosing a book***

Most of the children included in the study cannot yet read. However, they already have experience with books, as books are a regular part of the homes they grow up in, and they can partake in the text reading during shared readings. The children use this experience as a background for choosing a new book (in a bookstore or a library). In this sense, the illustration is the impetus for intentionally selecting a book, either in terms of the unspecified attractiveness of the illustration or in terms of its content. For this reason, children (28/141) referred to the illustrations in a book when explaining the criteria they used to choose a new book to read, as long as their parents gave them the opportunity.

I just say to my mum: Buy me this, buy me this! I look at the pictures in them. [B\_36]

I pick up a book, look at what kind of pictures it has, and if I like them, I ask my mom if she will lend me this book or buy it for me. [G\_62]

I also wrote to Jesus to get me some. I would like one with many pictures because I like looking at them. [G\_55]

### ***Illustrations as an aid to navigating the text***

The interview also included a presentation of the book’s content, aimed at observing how the children evaluate different aspects of their favorite books. At the beginning of the interview, the children had the book ready near them and during the interview could reach for it whenever they felt like it. In total, 108 children (out of 141) engaged with the book by examining the illustrations while discussing its content. In addition to observing the illustrations, many children also reflected on them and pointed to specific elements of the story during interview. Of particular interest in the analysis was not only the type of information the children engaged with in the book, but also the manner in which they communicated this information, using illustrations, to the researcher during the interviews.

### ***Navigating the book’s content***

When talking about the book’s content, children focused on retelling the storyline (in the case of narrative book genre) or the content of the book (in the case of nonfiction books). In doing so, 72 children (out of 141) relied on illustrations, either just flipping through the book or pointing to the elements representing the content of the text with their fingers. Some children used the book mainly to help them remember the story’s plot or to recall details of the content. During the storytelling, children flipped through the book while discussing its contents (38 children out of 72). Some children used illustrations to report on the book’s content (34 out of 72) and referred to the illustrations as a strategy to ensure they shared the content with the researcher. They combined pointing to illustrations, making eye contact with the researcher, and verbal instructions such as, “*Look! Wait, I’ll show you!*” They used both demonstrative pronouns (e.g., “this”) and interjections (e.g., “that”) to draw the researcher’s attention to a particular detail of the content.

Look, he’s running around and laughing. Here’s a goose, and she’s scared; the kitty is sitting there too [pointing a finger at the illustration]. [G\_33]

And then in the next story, he goes on vacation; um, because there's a lot of those stories, see?" [The child slides closer and pushes the book into the researcher's hands to look at the illustration]. [B\_48]

Look, here you see Elsa and Anna running away so their parents won't see them. Every time Elsa conjured something up, she and Anna quickly hid. [G\_62]

That's how thrilling it was here, this one [points the finger at illustration]. [B\_59]

That they get to know their neighbors. These are the neighbors, and that's where they live [points the finger at illustration]. [G\_74]

### **Targeting the character**

When discussing the textual content, children frequently referenced a character from the story; 44 out of 72 children also mentioned an illustration in the book in this context. Thirty-two children did so to introduce a character or characters, and 20 children did so to describe their characteristics. Referring to a character through an illustration enabled children to introduce the character or characters from the story without necessitating a detailed verbal description for the researcher. This procedure presupposes an understanding that both parties engage as active participants in joint attention, perceiving the same object or event. Such an approach is convenient for children because it does not impose higher demands on their language skills, and the sharing of meaning and understanding occurs through an illustration serving as a mediating element.

Here's a crocodile, look. [B\_14]

And this is her grandfather. [B\_23]

However, throughout the story, the children added other facts to the portrayal of the characters by describing their characteristics. This approach not only enabled the children to portray a character – either through their qualities or actions – in a more nuanced manner, but also allowed them to emphasize the traits they considered important by referencing the illustrations.

This one can also talk (pointing to a parrot); this one is blue; it has big blue wings. [B\_49]

Oh, and here she/he's picking cherries. [G\_28]

He's not learning at all; he's just into video games. That's why he's wearing a shirt and pants like that. [B\_34]

### **Sharing interesting content**

In addition to introducing the book by retelling its content and characters, children also focused on describing the specific content they found interesting. Talking about such content allowed children to explain why they found the chosen book intriguing. Sixty-one children (out of 141) used illustrations to do it. As in the previous cases, illustrations were used to help recalling the content details or to deliberately draw the researcher's attention to the content characteristics the child found interesting. Therefore, the child either simply viewed the illustration and described the details of the situation or directly invited the researcher to share the situation through the illustration. By doing so, the child could share his or her own experience and understanding of the content.

The whole book is funny, but probably most of all when they scared the farmer with a scarecrow, and he thought it was alive. Also, this picture [points to a picture of a sheep disguised as a man]. [G\_12]

Look how small the Earth is! The sun is next to it, and the Earth is tiny. And this planet here is even smaller. You can't even see how tiny it is! Jupiter is the biggest planet, and look how small the Earth is. And here the little rocks form this circle around Saturn [points to the illustration showing the size of the planets]. [B\_15]

It reminded me of Christmas. There was snow, people were selling and buying gifts, and the table was full of food. Because we also have a lot of food at Christmas [she looked at the picture showing a table laden with food]. [G\_40]

### **Orientation in the book**

In this context, we have noted situations in which the child introduced their book to the researcher by naming particular stories or parts of the text, looking for a specific story in the book based on an illustration, or looking for a particular illustration to recall or describe specific content. In total, 20 children used illustrations to help them navigate the book.

There are stories about Alice; I know that about Bambi and the Three Little Pigs; and another one about the Ugly Duckling [the child leafs through the book and shows the illustrations to the researcher]. [G\_48]

I'll tell you one story from that book that is my favorite. Let me show it to you [she flipped through the book until she found that particular story]. It's about this all-white kitty with blue eyes, and her name is Snowflake [she pointed to the illustration]. [G\_18]

Hmmm. . . [the child flips through the book until they find a picture of a house]. They have a kitchen where they cook. Two rooms where they sleep. A living room where they probably watch TV. They also have a pantry where they put their food away. [G\_55]

### **The child's participation in shared reading**

Shared reading appears to be an everyday activity in the families of the children we interviewed. However, not all children engage with the book visually when it is being read by another person. Children explained this by stating that they can “*concentrate on the story better there*,” “*listen to mom's voice*,” or “*fall asleep*” or “*play*” during reading sessions. However, some children involved in the study reported that they looked at the book and were particularly engaged with the illustrations.

### **Engaging with illustrations**

According to the children's reports, 35 of them look at the book and observe the illustrations during reading. In this context, engaging with the illustrations during shared reading represents a form of participation, with the actual reading being provided by the adult.

I usually lie down, and my mom sits next to me. I look at the pictures in the book. [G\_13]

Mom takes me in her arms, and I look at the pictures, and Mommy reads it to me. [G\_60]

We read in the room or the living room. Mom sits down, I lean against her, listen, and look at the pictures. [G\_56]

### **Content monitoring**

In addition to engaging with illustrations while reading, children at this stage also begin to develop an awareness of how they comprehend the text. Two children (out of 141) specifically mentioned in the interviews that they used illustrations as a strategy for monitoring their understanding of the text.

Well, sometimes I bring her a book, and she reads to me. Then I look at the pictures and maybe ask what they mean. [B\_06]

There are large pictures that are beautifully drawn, and when someone reads it to me, I know what's going on. [B\_11]

## **Discussion**

Our research focused on the perception of the role of illustrations in books from the perspective of 5- to 6-year-old children who are in the pre-reading stage and cannot decode written text in a book on their own. Our focus was specifically on children's perceptions of the role of illustrations in books and how they used them in their interactions with the text, including during the shared reading sessions with others. We posited that reading a book is a semiotic process, grounded in the construction of meaning through children's prior knowledge and experiences. Beyond decoding the written text, illustrations play a crucial role in meaning-making, as they carry their own distinct connotations (Kress, 1997; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Thus, illustrations can

serve as an important medium that enables a child who is not yet able to decode text independently to engage with the book and derive meaning from it, regardless of whether the written text-illustration relationship is one of symmetry, complementarity, enhancement, counterpoint, or contradiction (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006).

Our research indicates that illustrations serve as a stimulus for a child's interaction with the book and become the focus of their active interest. Through this engagement, children are drawn to the book and independently reach for it, even without being able to read in the conventional sense. In shared reading, where another person reads the text to the child, the child follows the illustrations, which refer to the content and meaning of the verbal narrative and contribute to meaning-making. In the illustrations, children also find support for navigating the book and the text and for sharing the content of the book, specifically information about the characters in the story and the content of interest from their point of view. Importantly, the presence of illustrations in the book provides an additional pathway for children to access the meaning of the text, particularly during shared reading. By observing the illustrations, the child can recall specific details from a familiar text and convey them to another person. Alternatively, the child can use the illustrations to form an understanding of the book's content that has not yet been read to them.

### ***Illustrations as a stimulus to become interested in a book***

Several studies have suggested that illustrations can distract the child's attention from the text, thus eliminating the child's opportunity to engage with its formal characteristics and explore them as important domain of early literacy (Elster, 1994). Conversely, illustrations can act as a catalyst for the child's interest, encouraging engagement with the book and fostering the experience of the book as both a cultural and social object. Through this engagement, the child is invited to explore meanings that the book represents. As the current research has demonstrated, exploring illustrations in a book can be an independent activity for a child, with the illustration being the stimulus to engage with the book and the text. In doing so, the perceived appeal of the illustrations forms a mere background to their book-related activities; as they browse it, it becomes one of the relevant criteria they use to make their book choices (Cetin & Bay, 2015).

Children's verbal expressions indicate that the book's illustrations may influence whether the book becomes object of their engagement. More than half of the children participating in our research expressed that they reach for a book as an object of an individual activity. When children engage with a book by flipping through its pages, their attention is predominantly directed toward the illustrations. Some of these children's interests may be motivated by the perceived appeal of illustrations as aesthetic objects (L. Sipe, 2001), with the potential to foster children's sensitivity to art and beauty. The children involved in the research expressed this aspect of illustrations as decisive in their book choices. However, their criteria for assessing illustrations indicating their aesthetic aspect were purely subjective. As preschool children are not yet able to integrate all the cognitive domains necessary to perceive an illustration as an aesthetic object (Schickedanz & Collins, 2012), they expressed their evaluative attitude primarily through declarative appreciation of the appeal of illustrations, emphasizing the subjectivity of such an expression (saying, "I like the illustrations," "I like this illustration"). A minority of children were able to indicate a particular aspect of the illustrations contributing to their perceived appeal, mostly by expressing a preference for colorful illustrations (House & Rule, 2005). The relevance of illustrations to something familiar to the child – such as aligning with the child's experiences and prior knowledge (Mesmer, 2018) – has been identified as important from the children's perspective. This alignment facilitates their understanding of the book's content, making it easier for them to navigate and comprehend. It also enhances the appeal of the illustrations and, consequently, increases their interest in engaging with the book (Flack & Horst, 2018). Thus, illustrations can stimulate an activity based on recognizing the connection between the depiction in the book and the real world (Ganea & Canfield, 2015; Ganea et al., 2008).

Children also perceived the illustrations in the book as a representation of its story or content. In interviews, the children reported that they constructed narratives using the illustrations in books, although it is not clear from their expressions whether they were retelling a familiar story or creating their own. In doing so, the children picture the objects depicted in the illustrations within the context and flow of events; thus, they straddled the boundary between an interest in the visual and verbal elements of representing meaning (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). This contributes to previous research findings that children, at this phase, are able to construct stories and perceive the relationship of the illustration to the story in addition to naming objects or looking for interesting details in illustrations when browsing through a book (McCabe & Rollins, 1994). It is noteworthy that children find these activities satisfying and actively seek them out as a form of personal engagement.

### ***Navigating the book and text***

Regarding children's awareness of the role of illustrations in meaning-making, participants in the current research used illustrations to share the content of the book and its characters. While discussing the book, the instructions addressed to the researcher, such as "see," the demonstrative pronouns "this one" and "this," as well as the reassurances "see?," indicate that the children recognize that the process of deriving meaning occurs in the interaction between the individual and the illustration, and that their interaction with the illustration can substitute for or supplement verbal communication about the content. In interactions with a book, children also try, through pointing, to induce shared attention with the other person with whom they are interacting. This is a strategy children use in a shared activity to fill gaps in understanding (Durkin, 1995; Racine & Carpendale, 2007) while talking about the book. The use of this strategy assumes that the child is aware that the other sees what the child sees, but also a will to communicate about his or her view of the book and its elements.

While illustrations can function as independent objects in a child's activities, preschool children also recognize their relationship to the meaning conveyed by the written text of the book. In the case of literary texts, illustrations can display the context of the story (describing the setting, the activities that take place in the setting, the mood of the story), define and further characterize the characters, enrich and develop the plot, provide a different perspective, contribute to the coherence of the story, and support the content of the text (Fang, 1996).

Among the previously mentioned functions of illustrations, interviews with children revealed that they perceive illustrations as representations of the text's content and characters, as well as tools for enhancing the coherence of the text. Children used illustrations as visual aids when discussing the book, which facilitated their reference to specific details of the story and enhanced their understanding of the book's content. Similar processes occurred in shared reading, where the child observed the illustrations while the other person read the story. As the research participants commented, this allows them to focus better on the content of the written text. Such observation is consistent with previous research indicating that pre-readers spend little time on the written text in shared reading (Justice et al., 2005) and if they do look into a book, they are interested in the illustrations (Evans & Saint-Aubin, 2005). Exploring illustrations while discussing the content and specific elements of a text, particularly during shared reading, effectively demonstrates the children's perception of reading as a semiotic process that occurs in the interplay between the written text and the illustrations (L. R. Sipe, 2015).

Thus, illustrations in a book represent more than merely a means for the child to engage actively in constructing meaning as they navigate its pages (Nodelman, 1988; Ramos & Ramos, 2012; Rowe, 1996). They invite children to explore the interplay between the illustrations and the written text, even when they are not yet able to read independently. Researchers have not yet gained sufficient understanding of the aspects of illustration that allow this participation to take place more actively on the part of the child. From the perspective of developing reading skills, it is significant that this participation is bolstered by the child's intention to discuss the text's content, enabling them to articulate what they find engaging about the book. This also illustrates how, from the child's viewpoint, they can

handle the book in a manner that fosters personally meaningful interaction, assuming that the other person engaged in the discussion will similarly make an effort to connect.

Our results also highlight significant practical implications. The findings emphasize the importance of promoting both shared and individual interactions with books for children in pre-reading period of development. Shared reading, whether at home with parents or in preschool settings with educators, including particular activities, such as visual storytelling (Norling & Lillvist, 2016), analyzing illustrations (Arizpe, 2014), or comparing different illustrations (Pantaleo, 2017) creates a space for shared experiences in exploring the role of illustration in a book and meaning-making. Through these shared activities, children can explore the role illustrations play in identifying the meaning of the text and how they assist in navigating both the text and the book itself across different contexts and purposes of shared reading. However, for this approach to be effective, it requires teachers and parents to be aware of how illustrations contribute to their child's interest in the book and their understanding of its meaning. Teachers and parents should actively support child's involvement in shared reading by engaging in discussions about the text and illustrations. They also should be mindful of the child's perspective, which is shaped by previous experiences and expectations, and encourage the child's initiative and active participation in discovering the meaning of illustrations in the book.

Our findings also highlight the importance of children having access to books and being able to choose them according to their own preferences. Children's individual activities with book illustrations can foster and deepen their relationship with books and reading. In this regard, the potential of interactions with illustrations to help children develop their own strategies for identifying meaning is particularly significant. Specifically, these interactions can serve as a means for children to develop and apply pre-reading strategies for text comprehension (Dooley & Matthews, 2009). Nonetheless, further research is required to identify the various strategies children use for this purpose and how these strategies contribute to their ability to use book illustrations as a tool for navigating and understanding the text.

### **Limitations of the study**

Our research was conducted with several limitations. The methodology primarily relied on interviews with preschool-age participants, whose cognitive and linguistic development may have constrained their ability to fully articulate or reflect upon their experiences. Consequently, the findings are limited to the aspects of the children's experiences that they could verbally express or non-verbally indicate during their interaction with the book.

From the research method used, which focused on child participants, another limitation stems. This approach allowed us to explore only those elements of the child's interaction with illustrations that the child identified as significant or were available from the child's interaction with the book in the specific context of the book discussed. However, this methodology did not encompass an examination of the broader process of meaning construction through the semiotic resources present in children's books (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

Another limitation of the research is related to the participant selection criteria. As we recruited children who had already developed a relationship with books and had rich experiences of reading within their families, allowing us to interview children eager to share their experiences, the results cannot be generalized. The current research does not allow conclusions to be drawn regarding how children with limited exposure to books and shared reading use illustrations to interact with the book and navigate the text of the book.

### **Conclusion**

Our research showed that children perceive their engagement with books as an activity that is attractive for them and that, eventually, contributes to identifying the meaning of the text through the use of various aspects of illustrations, interacting also with written text and overall book design. Using interviews as a research method, we were able to examine the child's perspective – specifically, how children

engage with illustrations in books in ways they themselves find meaningful. In this respect, we view our research as complementary to studies that have explored children's use of semiotic resources in constructing meaning during book interactions (Kachorsky et al., 2017). Unlike previous research on pre-readers, which focused on the process of meaning-making through picture books (Arizpe et al., 2014; Crawford & Hade, 2000; Lysaker & Hopper, 2015), interviews with children revealed that other motives for interacting with books also come into play. Children use books not only as a source of meaning but also as an enjoyable activity and a pathway to acquiring reading and literacy skills. Consequently, our findings contribute to the discourse on autonomy and agency, drawing on the sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1990; James et al., 1998) and contextual-relational developmental psychology (Sommer, 2010; Stern, 2004), by incorporating children's perspectives into early childhood education (Sommer et al., 2010).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under Grant No. [APVV-19-0074]; the Scientific Grant Agency Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic and Slovak Academy of Sciences under Grant [VEGA 2/0026/21]; and the Faculty of Humanities of Tomas Bata University in Zlin under Grant [RVO/FHS/2023/002].

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