

# The Role and Application of Picture Books in Pre-school Practice

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**Abstract.** Picture books occupy an important place in the life of a child both in family and in school. As a unique combination of illustration and text in a pedagogical mode, picture books teach, incite creative imagination and enrich the cognitive and socio-emotional world of a child. The goal of our research is increase understanding the place and the role of genre diverse picture books in Montenegrin pre-schools in the current context. Pre-school teachers noted key challenges in the use of picture books in pre-school practice in general

and singled out proposals for more efficient application. In this paper, we deal with parents' participation in mediating picture books' content and values to pre-schoolers. We took our research sample from the population of teachers in pre-schools of central, northern and southern region of Montenegro. Our research included 209 pre-school teachers from five kindergartens and 93 respondents from the three institutions, which we interviewed during the seminars. We combined elements of both quantitative and qualitative surveying and interviewing.

**Our** research indicates a significant and continued use of genre-diverse picture books, but also an absence of new titles, technical support in the selection of high-quality books, domestic authors and vague criteria in the selection of books, as well as a lack of parental involvement in the selection of books.

**Keywords:** picture books, children, pre-school, pre-school teachers, parents.

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## Introduction

The first book in a child's life that awakens curiosity and sensitivity to the world of literary art is certainly a picture book. By enabling an interactive transposition and essential interaction between two sign systems, the word and the image, this medium immerses the child into a unique engaging world of story that is rich in content while featuring various relations among the characters and interesting, distinctive plots. This is the type of discourse where the strands of the written

narrative and the picture are synthesised and complement each other in prompting unique cognitive experiences for children and motivating them for further reading enquiry. The American Association of Librarians [ALA 2008] distinguishes the picture book from other books with illustrations that provide visual experience for children. «The picture book has a substantial unity of the story flow, theme or conceptual framework, developed through a sequence of pictures that make up a book» [Batarelo Kokić 2015:378].

Among a vast diversity of picture books that serve varied educational goals and seek to convey numerous messages, we can find different title and genre choices that are conditioned by age, theme, transgenerational and experientially marked conceptual criteria, as well as by professional assessments of the quality of children's books. Yet, despite the broad variation in the type, composition, the content offered and other features that shape decisions to opt for any specific kind of this category of literature, there is a common understanding that the part that the picture book plays in achieving crucial learning and development goals within the early childhood context is of paramount importance. At the same time, we should also point to the highly significant role that adults (primarily parents and then pre-school teachers) play in the process of familiarising a child with distinctive literary and artistic qualities of the picture book [DeBruin-Parecki 2009].

In this paper, we focus on the selection of picture books in the current reality of pre-school institutions, how the picture book works as an interactive medium in the practice of early learning and development, the values that pre-school teachers recognise in the selected layered and semantically enriched children's stories, as well as the place and role of parents in this «magic world and cosmogony,» through the professional lens of pre-school teachers. In addition, we are particularly interested in how pre-school teachers identify specific challenges related to the existing market for and the selection of picture books, and what they propose as means to ensure more effective application of «the first children's book» in the pre-school practice of Montenegro.

### **Origin and types of picture books**

If we take a retrospective look at the variety of definitions and qualifying frames that describe the nature of the picture book, then perhaps we should first remark on an 1860 translation of Thiele's *Das Bilderbuch* by Šulek, where he refers to the book that marks a child's very first encounter with the literary world (a picture book) as a «storybook, a book with pictures» [Majhut, Batinić 2017:21]. The Encyclopedic Dictionary of Pedagogy [1963] defines the picture book as an illustrated book for children of pre-school age. The relationship between text and illustration, among other things, determines the genre attribution of the picture book and/or the children's book. Nodelman [1989] points out that picture books are primarily intended for small children and convey information or tell a story through a series of pictures com-

bined with little or no text. According to Batarelo Kokić, how the image and the word interact to convey meaning in picture books is different from any other type of discourse [Batarelo Kokić 2015:379]. As a distinctive form, the picture book is a “semiotic space” in which meaning is created and reflected through a kaleidoscope of unique experiences of pictures and words [Feathers, Arya 2015]. Where text prevails over the visual strand in the artistic composition, such books for children can be classified as the illustrated book, because «words serve as the primary means of narration, while pictures only bear a supportive or merely decorative function» [Nikolajeva 2002:88].

We are able to trace the advent of the very first picture book to as far back as 1658, when a unique illustrated primer, *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*, that was authored by the well-known educator J. A. Komenski was released in Nuremberg [Martinović, Stričević 2011]. There is reason to consider *Biblia Pauperum*, a popular, easy-to-comprehend version of Scripture that was intended for the less educated and dates back to the late Middle Ages, as the first example of the book to harness visuals as the primary strand of narration that was accompanied by just small amounts of text [Majhut, Batinić 2017]. Nevertheless, it was not until the 19th century that picture books that feature more artistic illustration than text began to gain mass ground [Ibid].

In providing a comprehensive account of how the children’s book came to be and has been evolving through history, Moebius [2011] distinguishes two major referential dimensions whereby we can understand and interpret how the multi-layered artistic discourse of the picture book unfolds, engages and affects the reader while also determining various applications of the picture book. On the one hand, Moebius emphasises such features as theatrics, dynamism, «the drama of the turning page,» «panorama,» the ritual, the process, etc. On the other, he points to the very experience of “getting immersed” into the visual strand of the content plane with its vibrant kaleidoscope of colours, patterns, textures, shapes, etc. [Moebius 2011:171]. Cope explains: «The book is not an object, but a form of text and a means of communication. The book is not a product, but the ‘architecture of information’» [Cope 2001:6].

We are able to distinguish multiple approaches and frameworks in how a typology of the picture book can be established, which differ in whether it is an academic, experiential or any other perspective that underlies a given classification, the choice of specific criteria, etc.

Thus, Matulka [2008] speaks about the following five groups of picture books: picture books for beginner readers; picture books related to a particular concept or topic; picture books in the digital format; toy picture books; and picture books with rhymes and verse [Batarelo Kokić 2015:379].

Picture books of the first group, i.e., those intended for younger kids who are just beginning to get the hang of reading, are usually the most abundant and diverse type of the picture book that features a va-

riety of fairy tale, fable and/or other content, often expressed in verse and where illustrations prevail, so that a child can easily read it either independently or with some support from adults [Matulka 2008]. Picture books related to a particular concept or topic (thematic picture books) contribute to introducing children to letters, numbers, sizes, shapes, colours, occupations, plants, animals, etc., and often mediate multi-conceptual and complex messages (ibid). Digital picture books contain a variety of animation, film and other «add-ons,» which allow more interactivity and complement the reality through the virtual dimension [Hoffman, Paciga 2014]. Toy picture books offer children a multifaceted and engaging interactive space where the strands of visual and, if any, textual expression are synthesised with a specific mode of direct participation through play. Matulka subdivides such picture books into the following four types: cardboard picture books (board books) with rounded corners; three-dimensional picture books (pop-up books) with illustrations that rise up to form a three-dimensional scene or figure once the page is turned; flap picture books (flap books); and picture books with cut-outs (cut-out books) that have their parts cut in order for the story to unfold revealing gradually «hidden» parts of a comprehensive themed composition [Batarelo Kokić 2015].

Campagnaro [2012] divides picture books into two larger groups. The first group refers to those books whose composition fuses the strands of text and visual narrative in rendering plots that typically have a clear, predictable ending. Picture books of the second group are more interpretative and interactive in nature, and the type of communicative space they create is more dynamic, polysemic and articulating multiple messages [Ibid]. A newer format of picture books, which is the digital picture book, is distinctive in its meta-structure, narrative and form. It is distinguished by certain paratexts, layout and different display modes [Batarelo Kokić 2015]. The multi-dimensional and multi-functional interactive environment that picture books in the digital format offer early learners is created by synthesising different levels and modes of user participation that range from simply surfing through pages to full involvement through activities such as designing content or writing text [Al-Yaqout, Nikolajeva 2015]. When explaining the complexity of the digital format, Hoffman and Paciga [2014] point to the mandatory novel elements of the new «e-book,» such as animation, interaction and technology, alongside features of the common legacy that they share with traditional «paper» picture books.

### **Word and image in the picture book**

There are numerous considerations that are involved in developing judgement about the quality of picture books. When setting out to comprehensively evaluate a given picture book, one needs to thoroughly consider facets pertinent to both its structural dimension (i.e.,

type and format, texture, colour, illustration, technology framework, etc.) and the content plane (i.e., themes and conceptual patterns, values embedded and messages conveyed, etc.). It turns out that what we can reasonably call a quality picture book is always a product of well-coordinated joint efforts by teachers, psychologists, writers, designers, programmers, etc. that is consistent with the principles of ensuring meaningful and engaging content, age appropriateness and achieving relevant psycho-emotional (e.g., allowing an emotional outlet) and learning effects.

As already mentioned, the picture book is a medium where the semiotic dimensions of written narrative and image are equally important and interwoven in the matrix of expression in creating a unique interactive space whereby particular messages are transmitted and goals of learning and development are fulfilled. A review of the existing literature on the subject enables us to identify a variety of terms and definitions that have been proposed to describe the interplay of text and image, e.g.,: «duet,» «counterpoint,» «interference,» «congruence,» «alternation,» «alternative progress,» «synergy,» etc. [Sipe 1998]. There are various classifications that seek to identify and qualify the types and modes of how the textual and visual strands of artistic expression are related to each other in the picture book [Agosto 1999]. Below is one example of such a classification:

- Symmetric interaction – pictures and text convey the same information
- Complementary relation – pictures and text complement each other in rendering a cohesive storyline
- Intensifying relations – text and image have a mutually amplifying effect
- Contrapuntal interaction – the strands of written and visual narrative unfold in achieving polyphony, just like in music
- Contrastive relation – pictures and text interact in achieving the artistic effects of contrast, juxtaposition, etc. [Nikolajeva 2002] (according to [Vučković 2019]).

How words and visuals interplay in the matrix of expression of the picture book can be viewed, in particular, as two dimensions where the textual strand primarily serves to render temporal settings while the visual strand is most likely used to portray spatial settings [Nodelman 1988] (according to [Vučković 2019]). «The text–picture relation is not so much a matter of the power balance between the two, as rather the way that text and picture interact with one another and how much they transform one another» [Sipe 1998: 98].

Yet, it is interesting to note that once we come to reflect on matters related to the authorship of a picture book and how its various contributors are typically recognised, then we find that—although text and picture are just as important and have equal footing in rendering a coher-

ent and cohesive content plane—illustrators are barely ever listed as authors of a children's book proper. Also, when we deal with instances of critique by various commentators that address the quality, appropriateness and other facets of a specific picture book, we can note that such critical reviews mostly focus on the textual dimension and explore perspectives in the domain of literary theory, whereas discussions through the professional lens of illustrators and experts in aesthetic and artistic expression have so far been less common [Majhut Batinić 2017:22].

When a picture book is applied in the educational process, its content plane that is rendered via this complex dyad of the textual and visual strands of expression, including the special colouring, multi-layer links, etc., begins to receive pedagogical interpretations that are shaped by individual mind-sets and experiential backgrounds that various actors involved (recipients, mediators, etc.) have developed themselves as well as by how they interact with each other once immersed into the book discourse. When surfing through a vivid, intense and engaging plot offered by a picture book, the child acquires in each particular case unique psycho-emotional experiences and perceptions, and the role that the teacher plays in guiding and facilitating this idiosyncratic process is undoubtedly of great significance [Korać et al. 2007].

Works of literary art certainly reflect the cultural matrix from which they originate and convey certain values of temporal and environmental «forms of representation.» Thus, we find explicit or implied [Bruner 2000] portrayals and narratives with textual or combined symbolic fictional descriptions of gender, racial, national, class and age-developmental features [Vučković 2018]. Textual and visual narratives that explore various interesting topics through synthetic rendition of the real, the imaginary and the mythical also contain certain value connotations [Opačić 2015]. Fairy tales reflect social relationships, positions and roles of different characters, etc. while naturally transmitting important value messages. Characters are usually depersonalised and depicted as bearing generic features that are conceived of as typical of certain social groups or classes, which is symbolically expressed through the interplay of the word and the image [Žižek 2013].

### **The child and the picture book**

It is already at an early pre-school age that the child begins to take interest in picture books. As children mature, their cognitive focus expands and changes, so this period in the child's life is known as the period of fairy tales [Vranjković 2011]. After the age of seven, the child is interested in both realistic stories that portray settings and phenomena common in everyday childhood experience, as well as in fantasy stories. Yet, according to Vranjković, as the child grows and develops across psycho-emotional and social dimensions to take more interest in picture books, fairy tales, fables, realistic or fictional story, etc.

at one age or another, we are unable to clearly demarcate between the stages in how this interest of the child evolves over time, because these developmental spans are never isolated, but are continuous and immediately interrelated while inducing both proactive and retro-active effects [Ibid].

If we look at the child from the humanistic and constructivist standpoints, then we have in mind the child's multidimensional capacities, including auditory-visual sensitivity, which enable the child to learn to speak and communicate and then to read and write from an early age [Martinović, Stričević 2011]. Therefore, the choice of the best appropriate format of the picture book, its content, how specific messages and particular values are mediated, etc. should always be made while taking into account the child's capacities of curiosity, questioning, reception, etc. [Xiaoyuan 2017].

The developmental and pedagogical foundations that prevail in the existing system of pre-school education in Montenegro consistently emphasise a paradigm of childhood that is anchored in the post-modern, socio-constructivist image of the child. This framework has particularly stressed the instructional, care-centric modern matrix of childhood development that reflects the so-called "deficit model of childhood" [Pešić 2009], where the intrinsically immature and inapt "child in need" is the main metaphor in interpreting childhood, which devaluates or rules out altogether the important internal powers and capacities that the child possesses since the very moment when he or she comes into this world.

Therefore, exploring how picture books are applied in practice and how they contribute to early learning and development, as viewed by pre-school teachers, which is the main focus of this analysis, possibly represents another research dimension that could provide novel perspectives for re-examining and rethinking the conceptions of the child and the paradigm of childhood education that currently dominate the realm of pre-schooling in Montenegro.

By delving into a multi-dimensional discourse of "picture book worlds," where the exploration of fascinating artistic plots is immediately interwoven with and facilitated by the direct interaction with real-life participants involved, the child advances in developing meanings and co-constructing his or her own understanding of reality [Miškeljin 2010: 135]. It is precisely this paradigmatic pedagogical starting point that brings about the entire spectrum of methodological treatments of the child, in the institutional and, we assume to a significant extent, in the non-institutional sphere, while also reflecting preferences in the choice of picture books of particular content as well as of how they are mediated to children.

De Bruin-Parecki [2009] specifically points out the importance of interactive reading for later school accomplishments of children. Studies investigating the relationship between increased access to digital picture books and the development of literacy in children of

pre-school age indicate a noticeable positive correlation, i.e., the former does add to functional literacy of children [Karemaker, Pitchford, O'Malley 2010; Korat, Shamir 2012; Shamir, Korat, Fellah 2012; Shamir, Shlafer 2011]. The latest neuroscience research has testified that reading can induce important changes in the brain and that, apart from empathetic involvement into the world of a book or a character, the process of reading also sparks changes that unfold in the neurophysiological domain [Popović 2018: 605].

### **Methods and sample**

The aim of our research was to examine how pre-school teachers in Montenegro evaluate the importance that picture books have for children, how they see their current role in the educational process, what kind of interest children and parents show in the selection of picture books, and the values that most frequently characterise favourite children's picture books. As well as looking at these aspects of the picture book application in pre-school practice, we also sought to 'read' the aspects of the current childhood model in pre-school institutional practice in Montenegro.

For considering this kind of the research objective/question, we singled out these key issues:

- Representation of a picture book in pre-school practice, as well as the children's interests in relation to the contents, titles and types of books
- Benefits from a continuous 'dive into the world of' high-quality picture books, i.e., the way children participate in the processing and adopting contents of the first children's book from the perspective of pre-school teachers
- The extent and means of parents' involvement in the mediation of the picture book contents to pre-schoolers.

In order to observe the educational practice in Montenegro pre-schools with picture books and to find answers to our research questions, we developed a questionnaire consisting of closed, semi-structured and open questions. In the second phase of research, after carrying out seminars with pre-school teachers from institutions in Podgorica, Nikšić and Budva, dedicated to the theme 'Picture books in kindergarten,' we talked with participants about previously marked issues, so that we can get a complete overview of the topic we are interested in.

### **The Sample**

Respondents were pre-school teachers from institutions in Montenegro. To ensure a representative sample, the questionnaire was addressed to representatives of the six kindergartens in the north (Plje-



Table 1. **The Sample**

Public kindergarten	Number of pre-school teachers	%
'Ljubica Popović' - Podgorica	98	46.89
'Dragan Kovačević' - Nikšić	39	18.66
'Naša radost' - Herceg Novi	37	17.70
'Eko-bajka' - Pljevlja	19	9.09
'Solidarnost' - Ulcinj	16	7.66
Total	209	100

vlja, Nikšić), central (Podgorica) and the southern part of Montenegro (Ulcinj, Herceg-Novi).

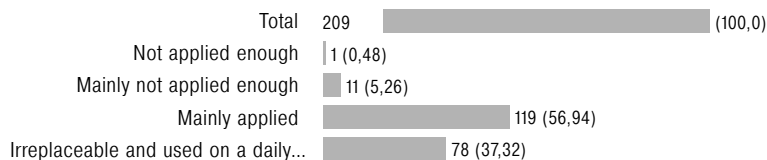
The seminars were attended by 93 pre-school teachers from three kindergartens (Budva, Podgorica and Nikšić) and through conversation with them and through their 'discursive engagement,' as well as internal group reflection on the current status of picture books in kindergartens, we tried to get a more layered and 'deep description of the phenomenon' [Geertz 1973] (according to [Cohen et al. 2007: 22]). The answers to marked questions, from the viewpoint of 'wondrous indexed daily life' [Garfinkel] (according to [Cohen et al. 2007: 25]) we transcribed and categorised results around the main focal points/concepts.

### **Application of picture books in kindergartens and children's interests**

In picture books 'words change pictures and pictures change words' [Nodelman 1988: 220]. Therefore, this illustration and literary format (different than usual text-centric approach as an illustration has primacy among the youngest), as the first 'meeting' of a child with literature and writing, is the most appropriate for children's cognitive-emotional sensitivity and 'fictional orientation.'

When answering about how frequently picture books are used in the teaching practice in kindergarten, pre-school teachers recognise and appreciate the high significance of the first children's book and expressed an affirmative stance on this issue by choosing the two first-offered options on the assessment scale: the picture book is irreplaceable, 37.32%; and mainly applied, 56.94% (Figure 1). They pointed out that they very often plan reading and processing different picture books in the educational work (84.69% of respondents choosing options every day and very often). However, when it comes to the current conditions we have a somewhat different distribution of answers. Despite awareness of the great significance that picture

Figure 1. **Application of picture books in kindergarten.**  
(Number of respondents (%))



books have in working with children, as much as 42.11% of respondents responded that the available corpus of picture books in kindergarten does not meet various children's needs and interests. It is not easy to determine precisely how and why: the pre-school teachers did not explain the concept of children's interests, nor did they classify the corpus of picture books according to more precise criteria, such as clearer indication of different levels of need, learning, cognition in children (artistic/poetic and/or non-artistic/prose, thematic, problem picture books). According to the teachers, the current corpus of picture books includes famous titles, classic fairy tales, thematic and realistic stories of known and/or unknown authors, as well as those in which children encounter different fantastic characters: witches, wizards, dragons and other creatures [Vučković 2013; Vučković, Pajović-Dujović 2016]. There there are also some new titles, and cartoons and animated films, adapted to picture book format.

Our respondents emphasised the scarcity of domestic, Montenegrin authors of picture books among those applied in the selected kindergartens. In particular, 80 pre-school teachers, which are 38% of those surveyed, estimated that the entire available marketplace of picture books for kindergarten totally lacks children's stories written by the writers of the Montenegrin community, while 19.62% of respondents reported that we do have several titles. What is the meaning of this significant lack of interest in this kind of creativity for children in our community and what is its correlation with the 'domesticated,' actual image of a child? The paradigm of 'deficient childhood,' which is implicitly culturally, even prescriptively perpetuated through regulations and recent traditionally declared programs in our community, also appears through the present practical, contextual relationship of the child's needs and potentials. Missing creative conceptuality and activity in the field of children's artistic and non-artistic stories, implicitly testifies to there being persistent 'passive promotion' of the model of the immature 'child in need' (deficient model).

Our respondents also highlighted that children of different ages have interests conditioned by their cognitive-emotional capacity and maturity, so that younger ones choose fabulous short stories filled with interesting and colourful illustrations.

**Table 2. What kind of picture books are most interesting to children, that is, which they usually choose?**

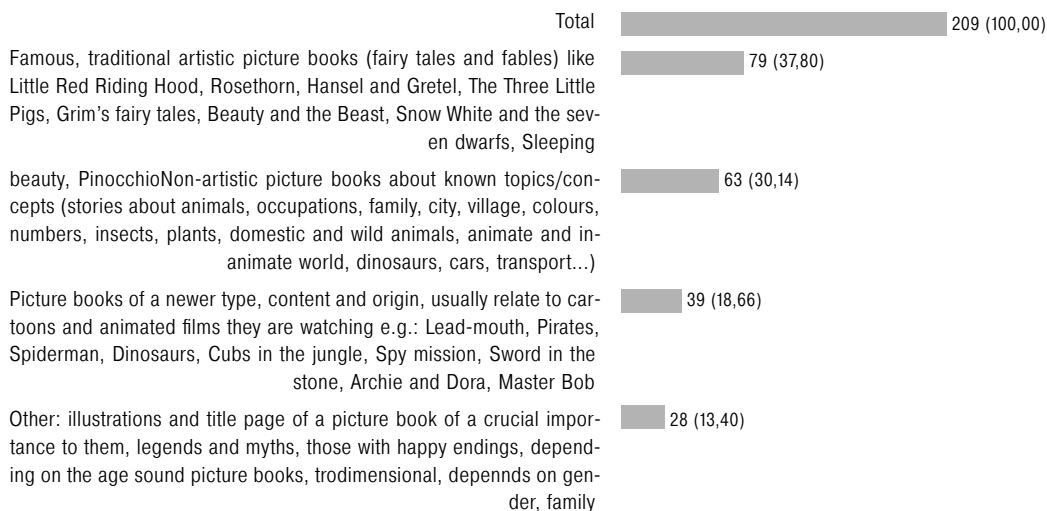
	Number of respondents	%
a) With more illustrations	128	61.24
b) Three-dimensional	53	25.36
c) Interactive	21	10.05
d) BC	2	0.96
e) ABC	4	1.91
f) Sensory	1	0.48
Total	209	100.00

At an early age, naturally, illustrations play a crucial role and are of a most importance in the picture book composition, so our interviewees point out that younger children predominantly choose such forms (Table 2). As Brian Sutton-Smith concludes, children prefer story-songs in particular, while at an older age their focus shifts to prose [Marjanović 1987]. During their development, children first observe pictures and link meanings that represent their experience of reality and later enter the world of symbols and verbal meanings. Therefore, Bruner [1990] stratified child development into three necessarily continuous phases: action, iconic and symbolic. Our pre-school teachers observe that with cognitive maturation and richer experience, children show intense interest in picture book contents in the form of fairy tales, but also fantastic tales, realistic forms garnished by relevant, interesting illustrations.

In the present context, the selection of children's picture books is primarily oriented towards famous, traditional artistic contents and titles of fairy tales and fables, 37.80% (Little Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel, The Three Little Pigs, the Brothers Grimm's fairy tales, Beauty and the Beast, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Sleeping Beauty, Pinocchio, The Ugly Duckling, Sleeping Beauty, Andersen's fairy tales, Bambi, Heidi, Disney picture books, The Tin Soldier, Puss in Boots, etc.), than towards picture books about known topics/concepts and of an educational character, which may contain complex material (30.14%), i.e., stories about animals, occupations, family, city, village, colours, numbers, insects, plants, domestic and wild animals, animate and inanimate world, dinosaurs, cars, transport.

Respondents also cited also some new, illustrated narrative genres, such as cartoons and animated films presented in a picture book format, as frequent children's choices, e.g.: Pirates, Spiderman, Dinosaurs, The Sword in the Stone, (18.66%), the quality of which is not

Figure 2. **Picture books chosen by children**  
(Number of respondents (%))



always certain. Some of our respondents observed that the illustrations and title page of a picture book appear to be of crucial importance for the selection and awakening of children's interest in the story content.

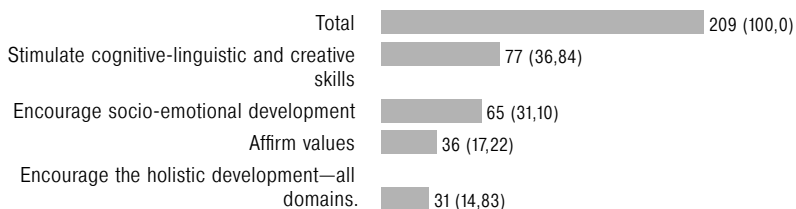
Picture books that help children face complex problems (multiculturalism, children with special needs, different family challenges, etc.), that children use to look for solutions or make critical judgements [Martinović, Stričević 2011], did not take a significant place in answers by our respondents.

### **Benefits of the application of picture books in kindergarten**

Undoubtedly, in the broadest sense, with numerous varieties and genre diversity, equipment, and age appropriateness, picture books occupy a very important place in the educational and pedagogical pre-school environment. In this respect, when considering a picture book's role in working with children, pre-school teachers remarked on the numerous benefits coming from purposeful application and elaboration of 'the first children's book' in the educational process. We condensed the answers about the benefits children gain from listening, reading, reception, experiencing and interpreting a picture book's contents into several thematic and semantically related categories:

- Picture books stimulate cognitive-linguistic skills (36.8%): speech, thinking, attention, imagination, memory, reasoning, adopting

Figure 3. **Benefits of picture books for children**  
(Number of respondents (%))



concepts, enrichment of vocabulary and sentence, free and creative expression, love of the book, written words, the pictorial expression, auditory-visual sensitivity, model learning, creative activities

- Picture books encourage socio-emotional development of children (31.1%): communication and socialisation skills, conflict resolution, empathy, understanding their own and feelings of others, bonding with each other, with parents, teachers, and other adults, love of the book, etc.
- Picture books affirm values (17.22%): building friendships, perseverance, courage, gaining respect, responsibility, recognition, appreciation and 'living' goodness, justice, distinguishing between good and evil, listening to and respecting the point of view of others, tolerance towards others and different, respect, compassion, love of the book, a love of reading, generosity, humanity, learning critical analysis of good and bad qualities of their own and others' behavioural practices
- Picture books encourage the holistic development of children (14.83%): all developmental domains are backed because children are active on all fronts while engaging with a picture book (Figure 3).

From these ideas and thematically classified benefits, as assessed by our respondents, we conclude, firstly, that there are very important and numerous measures of good in assessing a picture book's contents when working with children and it is possible to notice an interweaving of meanings between given thematic units. The ideas of fairness, humanity, kindness, empathy, changing focus to other persons and different points of view, appreciation, listening and communication skills and so on, permeate all of the above thematic constellations: cognitive, socio-emotional and the attitude valuing sphere. Therefore, it is clear that the picture book medium has a significant potential for the promotion of the child's overall development. However, our re-

**Table 3. Activities of children after reading a picture book**  
 (What activities for children most often arise from working with a picture book?)

	Number of respondents	%
Activities in the visual arts centre, drawing, painting, illustrating.	79	37.80
Retelling, the story in pictures, dramatisation, drama and puppet shows.	63	30.14
Completing a story, making up stories: 'I give you a picture – you give me a story'	34	16.27
Activities in manipulative, sensory and musical fields.	33	15.79
Total	209	100.00

spondents emphasised that adults can mediate all of these benefits and value notions of picture book contents, if they themselves have these specified values in their own implicit epistemology, starting from a love of the book.

Picture books are a very challenging medium, but also very interesting to children. It is a medium for the exchange of ideas, opinions, different perspectives, as well as opening opportunities for new activities. Therefore, answering the question about the most common choices and activities induced by reading, listening, talking about the content of the picture book, pre-school teachers mention several directions of children's interests and spontaneous, inquisitive activity:

From the perspective of pre-school teachers, picture book application has a multidimensional importance for the development and learning of a child and naturally it is not an isolated medium, relevant only to one activity field (e.g., speech-linguistic area), but a necessary integrative and binding element of various contents and activities, which children live daily in a family and kindergarten.

Despite the diverse indicated fields of the picture book application, in addition to mentioned positive aspects of being the first children's book, and in terms of further life of a picture book's themes and contents, pre-school teachers do not list as an option in-depth interpretation and project consideration of some thematic concepts in practice. All the 'output' activities that teachers cited as originating from the work on a picture book are at the first level of a picture book's messages transfer, i.e., illustrating stories, simulation of characters and relations in the visual arts and drama centre, retelling, as a reproduction of what was memorised, and following at the next level there are 'story opening,' inventing new contents, adding original completion (15.79%). Prediction, analysis, creation of new solutions, the choice of different strategies to solve problem situations, encouraging chil-

dren to apply metacognitive forms to reflect on a story are considerably less prominent in the answers of our respondents (34 respondents), because 'children are still too small' (according to one teacher). This fact once again affirms the implicit infantilisation of the 'child at need' and a certain underestimation of their capacities.

**Parents' involvement in picture book mediation**

In an era of widespread segregation of children and adults into separate domains [Marjanović 1987], as well as missing jointly spent time within the family, the question arises about the ways, intensity and quality of parents' involvement in the mediation of picture book content and messages to children. On the other hand, in the current pre-school paradigmatic concept and experience of childhood, one of the basic starting points of the pedagogical system action is also a deliberate, multidimensional affirmation of partnership with parents and their full involvement in the planning of child-oriented educational process. The obligation of a pre-school teacher is to motivate parents to be more active participants in shaping the environment and the overall socio-emotional climate in kindergarten (systemic-ecological model of natural joining of social contextual connections, according to J. Bronfenbrenner), even in the domain of working and familiarising children with their first books.

In the view of Cheng and Tsai, parents and children can have different relationships during reading picture books: parent as the dominant person, child as the dominant person, communicative parent-child pair relationship, and low communicative parent-child pair relationship [Batarelo Kokić 2015: 384]. Also, the authors suggest a significant correlation between parent-child relationships and cognitive performance of a child. Chang and Tsai [2014] investigated how the process of joint reading of picture books 'built on the basis of an enlarged reality' between parents and children (33 pairs) affects the behaviour of children and their cognitive progress [Ozdamli, Karagozlu 2017]. During research and content analysis, the authors have interpreted the previously mentioned models in a simpler way, with four different patterns of behaviour between children and parents in the process of reading picture books: 'dominant parent,' 'dominant child,' 'talkative child and parent' and 'poorly talkative child and parent.' During the later test verification, children in pairs 'dominant parent' and 'poorly talkative child and parent' have shown a lower degree of cognitive progress in development [Ibid].

Bearing in mind the importance of parental involvement in the mediation of a picture book's content and values to children, we wanted to know how much time, interest and commitment the parents have to do so at home and in kindergarten. When asked whether parents read picture books to children, pre-school teachers answered that parents read to children regularly (3.83%), and mainly (58.85%), while a sig-

Figure 4. **Frequency of reading picture books (parents)**  
(Number of respondents (%))

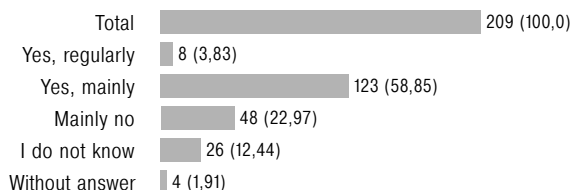
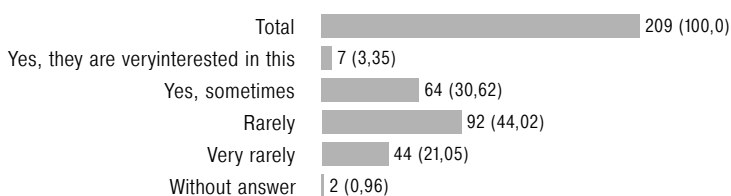


Figure 5. **The level of parental involvement in kindergarten activities, picture books**  
(Number of respondents (%))



nificant 22.97% of respondents observed that parents do not do read to children at all.

As we can see from the presented case, pre-school teachers have a very sceptical attitude towards the responsibility and seriousness of parental involvement and the degree of their commitment in mediating picture book content and values to their children. As a limiting factor here, we must bear in mind the lack of parents' perspective in this regard, so that we compiled data on the family affirmation of children's book values through evaluation by pre-school teachers.

Parents have the opportunity to participate directly in kindergarten activities, and to read picture books to children, share impressions of content and messages with them resulting from the joint experience of stories, and initiate other activities as continuation of work on picture book material.

We were interested to which extent are parents involved in the work and mediation of picture book's content to children in kindergarten, in the opinion and awareness of pre-school teachers in our sample.

In Figure 5, we can observe the level of parental involvement in educational activities concerning picture books and conclude that the significant 65.07% of teachers opted for option rarely and very rarely, while just 3.35% of respondents opted for the only completely affirmative option, very interested in this type of activity.



**Table 4. Type of picture books that parents prefer**  
(Picture books that parents prefer—dominant messages/values)

	Number of respondents	%
Those that have messages about family, kindness, friendship, love.	64	30.62
Traditional, well-known stories.	51	24.40
Those that have interesting and rich illustrations.	51	24.40
We do not have information and did not talk with parents about it. Parents do not have the time or the interest to work with children.	43	20.57
Total	209	100.00

**Table 5. Activities that parents initiate**  
(Which activities parents initiate after working on a picture book  
(if you have such experiences or findings)?)

	Number of respondents	%
We have no findings; we do not talk about this topic with them.	66	31.58
Drawing, painting, common games, engaging in small plays in kindergarten.	49	23.44
Visits to the library, bookstore, children's theatre.	47	22.49
They do not have time to do it; they just give them games and do not deal with these issues enough.	47	22.49
Total	209	100.00

Once we gave picture books to children and suggested to them that they read them with the parents and afterwards tell us how it was. Most of them returned pristine picture books, stating that parents did not have time to deal with them! (Respondent from a kindergarten in Podgorica.)

We had a project in which we visited all kindergartens in Nikšić, talked with children and parents about the importance of books and libraries, instructed them how to borrow a picture book, take it home and read it together. However, although they took picture books home, most of them did not even open them. Parents think that it should not be imposed to them, as that is our job to do! (A pre-school teacher who works in the kindergarten library in Nikšić.)

To our open question about which picture books parents prefer, i.e., which are dominant features and/or messages/values that parents

mediate to children, we got a variety of answers from the interviewed teachers. We classified them into four categories from the point of semantically congruent contents:

From the responses of pre-school teachers, as well as from interviews with them after the seminars that had picture books as a topic, we learned that parents do not engage enough in educational activities at the kindergarten.

When asked which activities parents initiate after working on a picture book, pre-school teachers answered:

Most of the interviewed teachers answer that they did not have any information about parental behaviour (31.58%), how much attention they actually gave to the selection of picture books, whether they considered it important and how much they read to children, how they did it or whether they followed their children's interests. Significantly, 22.49% of respondents assumed that parents did not have any time at all to choose picture books with children, and that they diverted children to other resources that do not require their (parental) engagement and practiced a 'highly communicative parent-child relationship,' as Chang and Tsai [2014] define it. Based on the responses we received from teachers during the interviews and additional observations and reflections on this subject, it is possible to conclude there is some dissonance with parents regarding the application of picture books in working with children and other spheres of cooperation. Teachers reported that parents lack interest in this topic, were uninformed and inflexible, but in turn, they self-critically concluded that they did not have enough information, or initiative to find out more from parents.

A constructive, proactive model of childhood rests on the concept of respecting a child's potential, opinions, perspectives, as well as on a solid team 'circle' of all direct and indirect participants who believe in and share the best interests of the child. From the answers of our respondents, we conclude that there is no cooperation between teachers and parents when it comes to picture book application, i.e., adults generally do not have and do not build a shared image of the needs and interests of the child. The love of the book, promoting the value of reading, caring about the book, exchanging ideas about picture book content is to be developed in an atmosphere of support and encouragement of adults in the family and pre-school institutions. From these findings, it is possible to 'read' the lack of joint interest of adults in a child's need for profiling fundamental reading affinities. Here again we witness implicitly epistemological deficit model of childhood, according to traditionally established matrix 'at school, we will begin all seriously.'

**Application of  
picture books:  
group interview**

Answering the question of the quality and type of picture books that they prefer in working with children, interviewed teachers (interviews

at picture book's seminars) answered that they selected titles depending on the age of children, children's affinity, but also their own assessment of the valuable contents. A pre-school teacher in the seminar group in Budva told us:

I discovered a picture book story The Story of the Little Mole Who Knew it was None of His Business by authors Werner Holzwarth and Wolf Erlbruch, which was not known in our surroundings. The kids were delighted, and so were we! They were happy they could learn about different animals in such an interesting and likable way. They laughed, watched inquisitively and raced to answer.

Picture books that provoke a sense of participation and empathy, encourage the child to explore the reality and help release negative emotions were particularly important for younger pre-school children. However, talking to pre-school teachers in our sample, we concluded that they need help in both selecting quality picture books and presenting new editions.

A teacher from Podgorica kindergarten explained that 'sometimes we are not sure what is good and really instructive for children. Illustrations are unclear, some say they are good, symbolic, interesting, some that they are inadequate ... I do not know; we need help from someone who has the right knowledge of it. Maybe a psychologist, an art teacher, I do not know ... It's not easy.' Our respondents suggested that a team of experts (pedagogue, psychologist) could give this subject more attention, in terms of information about good picture books, assessment in the selection and purchase of new titles, all that which is lacking in the current context. Also, our respondents in all three focus groups underlined the extremely important role of teachers and adults in mediating picture book's content.

### **Additional challenges**

From the presented answers of teachers on the survey questions, it is possible to clearly identify the most common and pronounced challenges in working with picture books. We added to these items the broader responses supported by interesting narratives from interviews with our respondents from all three communities. Taking into account the overall review of the present work with picture book in kindergarten received from pre-school teachers surveyed, it is possible to identify the following challenges:

- Insufficient picture book corpus in kindergartens (42.11% of surveyed and 76.34% of interviewed teachers)
- Lack of professional support and assistance in the selection and application of quality picture books in working with children; lack of professional advice by pedagogues, psychologists, illustrators (interviewed teachers, 54.84%)

- Continuous professional development in the field of picture book for all pre-school teachers (exchange of experiences and workshops at the level of an institution, corresponding training programmes, etc.) (Interviewed teachers, 49.46%)
- Lack of conditions for the application of 'e-picture books,' being that the present possibilities of digital interaction are exceptionally huge (interviewed teachers, 60.22%). 'There is enormous number of titles offered by web page "Goodreads" and so many others, and that is very well known, but we are still using hook and crook,' according to a pre-school teacher from the coastal municipality of Budva.

During conversations with teachers at seminars, we asked them why their working spaces lacked picture books, why there were no domestically-authored picture books, and why there was no serious effort toward qualitative selection and mediation of important messages and values in the first books children encounter. Our respondents pointed out that these problems are caused by insufficient understanding in the system of the potential and needs of children at an early age.

**Examples of good practice in the picture book application**

As one of the most important breakthroughs in terms of participatory and co-creative involvement of children in deeper thinking and organising their own picture book-story, our respondents specified the practice of creating domestic picture books, which teachers create together with children and point out that it is a highly beneficial activity. Our interviewees, pre-school teachers from all three regions, explained that children love to participate in the process of designing a picture book; they create it, reflect on its contents, explore and find illustrations with which they will complete the composition of the picture book, draw parts of the story, cooperate and negotiate, thereby building their cognitive-linguistic and socio-emotional competence. When asked about the recommendations/proposals for the efficient use of picture books in the future, teachers responded:

- Work on creating picture books that are made and illustrated by children, teachers and parents, 'to jointly devise the beginning and the end' (35.41%)
- Follow children's interests, increase application, take account of the picture book's appearance, text and pictures to be appropriately composed (28.23%)
- Picture books with some current, educational topics, modern challenges: diversity tolerance, ecology, etc. (19.62%)
- Find more picture books for younger children, sound-books, interactive, pop-up, etc. (16.75%).

The answers and recommendations of teachers indicate the need for more serious teamwork in the application of picture books in teaching and adequate multidisciplinary practice in working with children at an early age. It is clear that a picture book can induce children's expression of inner or internalised reality, the release of repressed fears and prohibitions, as well as creative imaginative activities and linguistic semantic games, so the role and responsibility of professionals in evaluating, selecting, preparing and interpreting a picture book in educational activities with children is crucial.

**Conclusion** Given the complexity, multidimensionality and interdisciplinary foundation of picture book as a medium used for teaching children of early and pre-school age, this paper aims to assess the place and role of picture book from the perspective of pre-school teachers in Montenegro, considering the current concept of childhood. Attitudes towards this topic, reflects, in its own way, the current nurturing paradigm of childhood underlying pre-school practice of Montenegro. As expected, picture books are in continuous use in the educational process. Teachers and children choose them according to the age, thematic criteria, equipment and the level of openness and interactive provocation. However, our respondents (pre-school teachers from the three regions in Montenegro pre-school institutional sphere), point out the lack of systematic focus on this field of children's interests and that as a result they do not have at their disposal sufficiently rich and purpose-built corpus of appropriate titles. They remarked on the lack of interest among the Montenegrin public to engage in creation and production of domestically-authored picture books, while in the case of parents, they pointed to the lack of a continuous exchange of ideas on the careful selection and planned teamwork while mediating the lessons and benefits of picture books to children. Teachers observed that parents were not sufficiently devoted to reading and mediating content to children, but also pointed out that these are only their assumptions, because there has been no intensive and detailed communication with parents concerning this topic.

As for the practice of working with picture book contents, we conclude that teachers apply traditional methods, mainly stimulating content-reproductive knowledge (retell, illustrate, paint, role-play, etc.), while more complex activities, such as critical thinking, team exchanges, producing ideas in different ways, developing positive habits and a love of reading, are mainly lacking in our research findings. Again we have a confirmation that instead of the model of the 'powerful,' resourceful, active child, we have in practice predominantly a 'view from above,' i.e., an adult-centric approach towards the 'child in need' (deficient childhood).

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