

# What should and should not be. Teachers' and student teachers' beliefs about picturebook selection

**Lo que debería ser y lo que no. Creencias de de docentes y futuros docentes sobre la selección de álbumes ilustrados**

**El que hauria de ser i el que no. Creences de docents i estudiants de professorat sobre la selecció d'àlbums il·lustrats**

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## Abstract

The medium of the picturebook is a literary genre that has undergone a major transformation in terms of narratology, genre typology and media. Innovative and challenging picturebooks are used less to convey obvious educational lessons and messages (Ommundsen et al., 2022). Rather, it is the multi-layered presentation of topics that invites readers to become active. Thus, the literary-aesthetic qualities of picturebooks make them a suitable subject for literary education.

Nevertheless, the choice of picturebooks for children is essentially determined by adults as gatekeepers. At school, the teachers select literature for their lessons. But what orientations determine the selection of picturebooks by teachers and student teachers? How are picturebooks received by teachers and student teachers in teaching programmes (Arizpe & Styles, 2016)? How are selection decisions justified? What knowledge and beliefs underlie professional competence?

As part of a qualitative study, primary school teachers and student teachers were tasked to read and assess picturebooks accompanied by interviews. These interviews were analysed in a reconstructive manner employing the documentary method (Ritter & Ritter, 2020a; 2020b; 2021). By analysing the justifications on several levels, structures of picturebook selection and justification are to be established. We discovered three different professional perspectives of handling picturebooks: using, experiencing and exploring them. These approaches are used by both, student teachers and teachers, to make didactic decisions. The perspectives are by no means permanently fixed for one person; they can also vary from picturebook to picturebook, especially emotionally moving or irritating picturebooks are worth taking a closer look at. Student teachers can consider for their own purposes, but also for the selection of picturebooks for the classroom, what appeals to them, what would they choose for the classroom and why.

**Keywords:** Teachers beliefs, Picturebook selection, Literary education, Teachers and student teachers for primary school, Professional competence, Children's literature

### Resumen

El medio del álbum ilustrado es un género literario que ha experimentado una transformación profunda en términos de narratología, tipología de géneros y soportes. Los álbumes ilustrados innovadores y desafiantes se utilizan menos para transmitir lecciones y mensajes educativos evidentes (Ommundsen et al., 2022). Más bien, es la presentación multiestratificada de los temas la que invita a las personas lectoras a activarse. Así, las cualidades literario-estéticas de los álbumes ilustrados los convierten en un objeto idóneo para la educación literaria.

No obstante, la elección de álbumes para la infancia está esencialmente determinada por adultos como prescriptores. En la escuela, es el profesorado quien selecciona la literatura para sus clases. Pero ¿qué orientaciones determinan la selección de álbumes por parte de docentes y estudiantes de magisterio? ¿Cómo son recibidos los álbumes por docentes y estudiantes de magisterio en los programas de formación docente (Arizpe & Styles, 2016)? ¿Cómo se justifican las decisiones de selección? ¿Qué conocimientos y creencias fundamentan la competencia profesional?

En el marco de un estudio cualitativo, se pidió a profesorado de educación primaria y a estudiantes de magisterio que leyeron y evaluaron álbumes ilustrados, y se les entrevistó. Estas entrevistas se analizaron de manera reconstructiva empleando el método documental (Ritter & Ritter, 2020a; 2020b; 2021). Mediante el análisis de las justificaciones en varios niveles, se pretende establecer las estructuras de selección y justificación de álbumes ilustrados. Hemos identificado tres perspectivas profesionales diferentes a la hora de abordar los álbumes: usarlos, experimentarlos y explorarlos. Estas aproximaciones son utilizadas tanto por estudiantes de magisterio como por docentes para tomar decisiones didácticas. Las perspectivas no están de ningún modo fijadas de manera permanente en una persona; también pueden variar de un álbum a otro —especialmente los álbumes emocionalmente conmovedores o inquietantes merecen una mirada más atenta. El alumnado de magisterio puede considerar, para sus propios fines y también para la selección de álbumes para el aula, qué les atrae, qué elegirían y por qué.

**Keywords:** Creencias del profesorado, Selección de álbumes ilustrados, Educación literaria, Docentes y estudiantes de profesorado de educación primaria, Competencia profesional, Literatura infantil

### Resum

El mitjà de l'àlbum il·lustrat és un gènere literari que ha experimentat una transformació profunda pel que fa a la narratologia, la tipologia de gènere i els mitjans. Els àlbums il·lustrats innovadors i desafiadors s'utilitzen menys per transmetre lliçons i missatges educatius evidents (Ommundsen et al., 2022). Més prompte, és la presentació multicapa de temes la que convida les persones lectors a ser actives. Així, les qualitats literàriament estètiques dels àlbums il·lustrats els converteixen en un objecte idoni per a l'educació literària.

No obstant això, l'elecció d'àlbums il·lustrats per a nens està essencialment determinada pels adults com a prescriptors. A l'escola, el professorat selecciona la literatura per a les seues classes. Però quines orientacions determinen la selecció d'àlbums il·lustrats per part del professorat i el futur professorat? Com són rebuts els àlbums per mestres i estudiants de magisteri en els programes de formació docent (Arizpe i Styles, 2016)? Com es justifiquen les decisions de selecció? Quins coneixements i creences fonamenten la competència professional?

Com a part d'un estudi qualitatiu, es va encarregar a professorat de primària i alumnat de magisteri que llegiren i evaluaren àlbums il·lustrats i se'ls va entrevistar. Aquestes entrevistes es van analitzar de manera reconstructiva utilitzant el mètode documental (Ritter i Ritter, 2020a; 2020b; 2021). Mitjançant l'anàlisi de

les justificacions en diversos nivells, es volia establir estructures de selecció i justificació d'àlbums il·lustrats. Vam descobrir tres perspectives professionals diferents per gestionar els àlbums il·lustrats: utilitzar-los, experimentar-los i explorar-los. Aquests enfocaments són utilitzats tant per estudiants de magisteri com per professors per prendre decisions didàctiques. Les perspectives no estan, de cap manera, fixades permanentment en una persona; també poden variar d'un àlbum a un altre – especialment els àlbums il·lustrats commovedors o irritants emocionalment mereixen una mirada més atenta. Els estudiants de magisteri poden considerar, per als seus propis objectius i també per a la selecció d'àlbums per a l'aula, què els atrau, què triarien i per què.

**Keywords:** Creences del professorat, Selecció d'àlbums il·lustrats, Educació literària, Docents i estudiants de professorat d'educació primària, Competència professional, Literatura infantil

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## 1. Introduction: How picturebooks should be

In an interview, a German teacher describes the picturebook *I want my hat back* (Klassen, 2012) as “clearly structured” and “easy to follow” – a feature she evaluates positively as it meets familiar picturebook conventions. Such evaluations, among others, served as the starting point for the present project, which examines the selection processes for picturebooks and the underlying rationales of student teachers and primary school teachers. This article provides insights from a study conducted as part of the qualitative research project "Between Pedagogical Convention and Literary-Aesthetic Emancipation: Orientations of Primary School Teachers<sup>1</sup> towards Picturebooks and their Didactics"<sup>2</sup>.

Picturebooks have fundamentally changed in narrative style, genre, and media (Pantaleo & Sipe, 2008). Newer, challenging picturebooks rarely aim to transmit clear didactic messages (Ommundsen et al., 2022). Instead, their complex topics invite readers to actively engage. The literary-aesthetic qualities inherent to picturebooks thus render them particularly suitable for use in literary education, for example, as a means to foster construction of meaning of a given work. In the case of the picturebook *I Want My Hat Back*, for instance, the narrative follows a bear in search of its missing hat. While the

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<sup>1</sup> In this context, the term "teachers" is understood to encompass both in-service primary school teachers and student teachers at the primary level.

<sup>2</sup> The study is situated at the University of Halle and is directed by Alexandra and Michael Ritter. The sub-project examines the selection decisions of pupils, student teachers, and in-service teachers, and was therefore identified as particularly appropriate for inclusion in this anthology. In this contribution, particular emphasis is placed on the statements of student teachers and practicing teachers. Further information can be found on the project website: [https://schulpaed.philfak3.uni-halle.de/grundschule\\_bereiche\\_mitarbeiter/deutsch/forschungsprojekte/bilderbuchstudie/](https://schulpaed.philfak3.uni-halle.de/grundschule_bereiche_mitarbeiter/deutsch/forschungsprojekte/bilderbuchstudie/) (14.07.2025).

bear ultimately realises where the hat has been seen and exacts revenge on the thief, the outcome of this act – and its implications – are left open to reader interpretation. But how do teachers engage with such picturebooks? What criteria guide their choices? How do they justify their decisions? And what beliefs underlie their professional competence?

As part of a qualitative research design, primary school teachers and student teachers participated in interviews in which they were invited to read and evaluate picturebooks. The rationales articulated by the interviewees were subsequently analysed using a systematic approach, and key findings are presented and discussed in this article. The data provide nuanced insights into the expectations primary school teachers hold regarding picturebooks, the pedagogical convictions shaping their selection practices, and the educational potential attributed to picturebooks within instructional contexts.

## 2. Theoretical background in three theses

We begin by presenting three theses that encapsulate the theoretical foundations of our research.

The genre has moved beyond its traditional function as an educational medium for young children and now frequently employs aesthetically sophisticated artistic techniques, such as collage, which invite multiple frames of visual interpretation. This development has been accompanied by an increased diversity of representational forms within the genre – including shifts in narrative perspective, the incorporation of intertextual and metafictional elements, and the integration of media convergences, among others (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2018; Pantaleo & Sipe, 2008).

The sample for this sub-study comprised three picturebooks selected according to the following criteria: Each work was required to exhibit a sophisticated yet distinct narrative concept and to have been published relatively recently, thereby ensuring that the picturebooks were largely unfamiliar to the participants. In the following, we provide a concise overview of the innovative narrative concepts exemplified by the three selected picturebooks.

Shaun Tan's *The Red Tree* (Tan, 2012) is distinguished by its sophisticated use of shifting perspectives and symbolic imagery. The picturebook narrates the experience of depression from an individual's point of view. Across a series of double-page spreads, complex visual metaphors are employed to evoke states of confusion, disorientation, hopelessness, and emotional overwhelm. These affective conditions are rendered especially powerful through the scale, density, and transpositional qualities of

**There is a considerable body of challenging picturebooks currently available on the book market that break new ground with respect to narrative structure, genre typology, and mediality.**

the illustrations. Ultimately, the recurring motif of the red tree serves as a symbol of hope and the possibility of change.

*The Little One and the Beast* (Sauermann & Heidschötter, 2011) draws intertextually on *The Beauty and the Beast* to depict a child's experience of parental separation. Both parents are portrayed as apathetic "beasts," temporarily imposing everyday expectations on the child. Over time, the mother's vulnerability is addressed and visually resolved as she returns to her human form. The picturebook employs cinematic narrative techniques, including shifts in perspective and rapid transitions.

Benjamin Lacombe's adaptation of Grimm's *Snow White* (Grimm et al., 2011) is characterised by highly expressive and metaphorical visual design. The picturebook employs rich imagery, such as ravens as omens of misfortune, and utilises stark black-and-white contrasts with striking red accents to intensify the narrative drama while maintaining an overtly artistic, stylised aesthetic. This visual approach, alongside the interpretive complexity of the work, broadens the intended audience to include not only children but also adult readers.



**Figure 1.** The German-language cover illustrations of the three picturebooks

In addition to the macro-conventions of aesthetic design and polyvalence (Schmidt, as cited in Weninger, 1994, p. 27), pedagogy emerges as a significant referential framework in the context of picturebooks. Recent shifts in educational science paradigms have increasingly conceptualised children as active agents (Fölling-Albers, 2010, p. 14), who are encouraged to engage in the construction of meaning and knowledge through educational processes. This reconceptualisation entails a corresponding transformation in the learner's role. In alignment with this perspective, a substantial body of contemporary picturebooks is less concerned with the transmission of unequivocal messages but rather foregrounds the deconstruction of textual traditions and the development of

**Challenging picturebooks foster the active construction of meaning on the part of the reader; rather than constituting a barrier, their complexity presents a productive challenge.**

autonomous interpretations (Pantaleo & Sipe 2008, p. 193). Many picturebooks encourage a critical, active stance that celebrates a diversity of response rather than univocal interpretation. (Pantaleo & Sipe, 2008, p. 5)

Empirical research on children's reception of challenging picturebooks<sup>3</sup> has highlighted the specific potentials associated with engaging with such texts (e.g., Arizpe & Styles, 2016; Kümmerling-Meibauer et al., 2015; Ritter, 2017; Ritter, 2013; Scherer et al., 2014; Sipe & Pantaleo, 2008). In the case of the aforementioned adaptation of *Snow White*, for instance, it has been demonstrated that children are capable of accessing and being captivated by metaphorically dense imagery (Ritter & Ritter, 2015, pp. 132–133). While children sometimes adopt interpretive approaches to literary artefacts that diverge from adult expectations, they nevertheless participate actively in the construction of meaning and engaging with picturebooks in ways that can be considered developmentally and contextually appropriate.

**Despite favourable evaluations in picturebook research, challenging picturebooks are not necessarily incorporated more frequently into classroom practice by teachers or student teachers.**

While there are compelling didactic arguments for the use of challenging picturebooks as subjects in literature lessons, studies (Thiele, 2003; Ritter, 2017) indicate that teachers primarily select more traditional works, frequently employing picturebooks to address specific factual topics in class. As further highlighted by the teacher's statement quoted above, criteria such as simplicity and clarity of educational message tend to predominate in the selection process (Ritter, 2013, p. 135).

Unconventional adaptations, such as *Snow White* (Grimm et al., 2011), are sometimes rejected by teachers because they do not align with their expectations of appropriate illustration. Similarly, the ambiguity of certain narratives – for example, the overlap of the monster narrative and the theme of parental separation in *The Little One and the Beast*, or the metaphorical depiction of psychological crises in *The Red Tree* – is occasionally perceived by teachers as too inaccessible, leading to their rejection of these works.

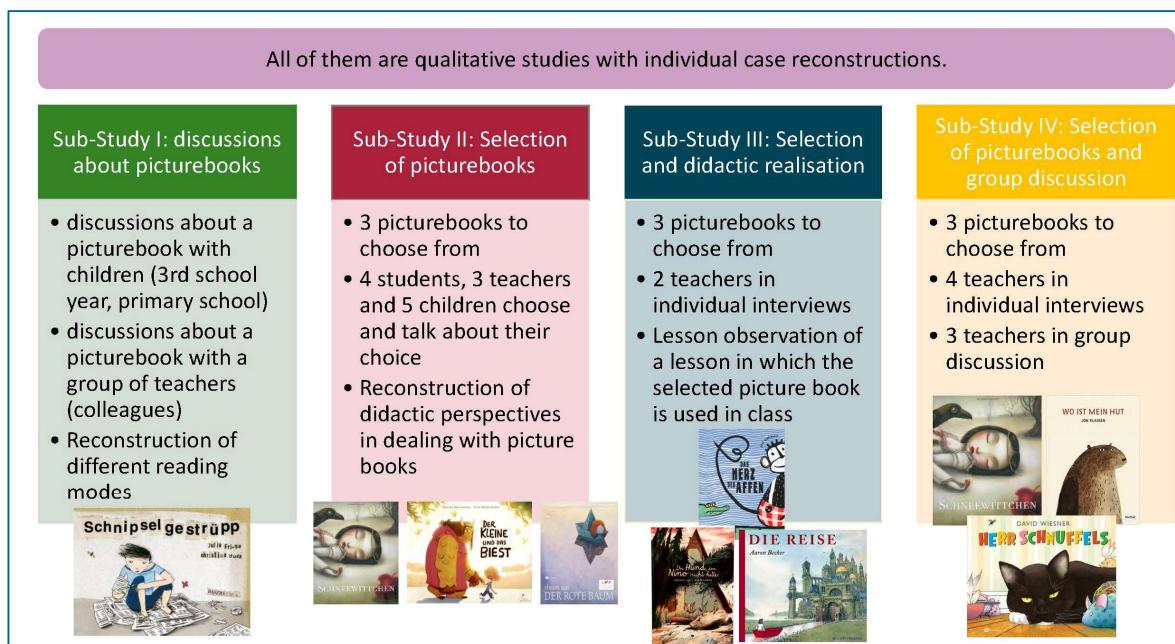
In the following, we examine this issue in greater detail and use our data to specify where teachers and student teachers identify the strengths and weaknesses of the selected picturebooks.

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<sup>3</sup> Challenging picturebooks are characterised by their intricate image–text interdependencies, which prompt children to engage in independent processes of meaning-making (Kümmerling-Meibauer/Meibauer, 2022, 37–38).

### 3. Research design and methods

Our research focuses on teachers' beliefs regarding the didactic potential of challenging picturebooks, with particular attention to how competencies related to the selection and use of picturebooks can be fostered in teacher education and induction phases. In order to elucidate the underlying conditions, we conducted a series of sub-studies that reconstruct various aspects of this topic. The overarching research question is as follows:



**Figure 2.** An overview of the research design and the four sub-studies constituting the project

Summary of the sub-studies (Figure 2):

1. **Sub-Study I** examined how both children and adults read a challenging picturebook, identifying two **modes** of engagement: as **addressed readers** and as **evaluators**. Notably, both groups exhibited similar patterns in switching between these modes, suggesting that even adults were receptive and involved readers of challenging picturebooks. Children, moreover, demonstrated the capacity to evaluate picturebooks for their suitability to younger audiences.
2. **Sub-Study II** (the focus of this paper) explored how pupils, student teachers, and practising teachers model approaches to a range of picturebooks.
3. **Sub-Study III** investigated the relationship between explicitly articulated selection criteria and the actual classroom use of picturebooks, as documented via video recordings.

4. **Sub-Study IV** analysed teachers' collegial discussions, focusing on the types of argumentative and narrative knowledge that become salient in pedagogical discourse about picturebooks.

By synthesising the findings from the sub-studies, we anticipate gaining insights into the forms of professional knowledge required for teachers to effectively engage with challenging picturebooks in the classroom and to recognise and harness their potential for literary learning processes. We also hope to identify ways in which access to picturebooks – particularly those characterised by innovative and unconventional narrative concepts – can be facilitated in teacher education in order to foster openness to new approaches.

We applied a reconstructive, qualitative approach with small case studies based on ethnomethodology (Breidenstein et al., 2013). Interviews were analysed with the documentary method (Nohl 2008; Bohnsack 2012) to uncover underlying knowledge structures. The synthesis of findings from the individual studies yields a more nuanced and differentiated understanding of the processes under investigation (Ritter & Ritter 2013; 2014; 2015; 2019; 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2021).

## 4. Results: Didactic approaches to the selection of picturebooks

The sample of sub-study II comprised three primary school teachers, four student teachers, and five primary school pupils. Each participant engaged in an individual interview in which they were presented with the three previously introduced picturebooks for reading and evaluation. During the initial phase of the interview, participants were invited to articulate their observations regarding the picturebooks. In the subsequent phase, adult participants were asked to indicate which picturebook they would prefer to use in classroom instruction, whereas the child participants were requested to select one picturebook they would like to present to their peers. In both cases, participants were required to provide explicit justifications for their choices. In keeping with the focus of this anthology, the present analysis is restricted to the interviews with in-service and student teachers. The analysis of the adult interviews revealed three distinct approaches that serve to justify the selection of a picturebook for pedagogical purposes: collaborative exploration, the creation of meaningful reading experiences, and instrumental use aimed at addressing specific topics.

### 4.1 Exploring the picturebooks

Firstly, the selection of a picturebook may be motivated by the intention to engage in a collaborative exploration of the text with pupils. This is exemplified by Ms. Jahn, a student teacher, in her comments on Shaun Tan's *The Red Tree*:

ja-a (.) ja also ich glaube der rote BAUM würde ich als erstes bevorzugen (.) wei:l (.) ich GLAU:BE oder weil ich es SPANNEND finde wie kinder das aufnehmen würden oder damit umgeh'n würden (.) und was sie da auch rein interpretieren weil ich es immer total

interessant finde (.) äh (.) we- was für ne (.) teilweise sehr unterschiedliche perspekTIVE (.) kinder auf so'n BUCH haben oder auch auf so: sachen wo erwachsene oft nicht weiter wissen (Frau Jahn, Lehramtsstudierende)

yeah-uh (.) yeah so I think I would prefer the red TREE first (.) because (.) I THINK or because I find it EXCITING how kids would perceive that or how they would deal with it (.) and what they would also interpret into it because I always find it really interesting (.) uh (.) wh- what kind of (.) at times very different persPECTIVE (.) kids have on a BOOK like that or also on stuff where adults often don't know what to do either (Ms. Jahn, student teacher)<sup>4</sup>

Jahn considers children's interpretations as independent and legitimate. She views different perspectives as enriching for her own reading and sees teachers and pupils as equals in the meaning-making process. A similar orientation is evident in the case of Ms. Stumpf, further illustrating an alternative approach to the selection of picturebooks by teachers:

bei schneEWITTCHEN (.) [...] da finde ich die ILLUSTRATIONEN einfach nur GRANDIOS (.) [...] ich könnte mir vorstellen dass das KINDER (.) es sehr STARK anSPRICHT (.) [...] also DAS würde ich GERNE im unterricht mal machen [...] (.) und würde die kinder also zu den also zu diesen BILDERN würde ich die kinder auffordern (.) äh irgendwas-irgendwas zu machen (Frau Stumpf, Lehrerin)

with SNOW WHITE (.) [...] I just think the ILLUSTRATIONS are absolutely AMAZING (.) [...] I could imagine that KIDS (.) would find it REALLY apPEALING (.) [...] so I would really LIKE to do THAT in class one day [...] (.) and I would have the kids- so with these- so with these PICTURES I'd encourage the kids (.) uh to do, like, something – something (Ms. Stumpf, teacher)

This example illustrates how personal fascination can serve as an impetus for didactic action. Rather than specifying concrete instructional strategies or learning objectives, the emphasis is placed on the collective experience of a positive encounter with the text. From a learning-theoretical perspective, this approach shifts the focus from the transmission of predetermined content or competences to the facilitation of interactive participation in a reading experience that is valued for its aesthetic and polyvalent qualities. In this sense, reference to literary macro-conventions becomes an explicit point of orientation within the didactic context. At least from the perspective of the adult participants, teachers and pupils are positioned as equals in this interpretive process. It should also be noted that these assessments pertain to two different picturebooks and are therefore not narrowly tied to specific subject matter.

## 4.2 Experiencing the picturebook

The second approach is oriented towards facilitating children's access to the picturebook and shaping it as a meaningful reading experience. This is articulated by Ms. Meier, a primary school teacher, in reference to Snow White:

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<sup>4</sup> All the transcripts are translated by OpenAI GPT 4.1.

also: (.) SCHNEEWITTCHEN (.) würd ich machen (.) aber NICHT VOR der vierten klasse [...] wenn ich das NUR vorlese dann haben die die das schon kennen als MÄRCHEN immer die gleichen bilder im kopf oder zumindest sehr ähnliche je nachdem wie man's gerade hört (.)durch die BILDER wird's dann mal noch ein anderes erLEBNIS [...] aber so: (.) VERBILDLICHT das zu sehen (.) da ERSCHRECK ich mich schon [...] dafür ist's zu gruselig (.) dann träumen die alle von dem RABEN (.) (Frau Meier, Lehrerin)

so: (.) SNOW WHITE (.) I would do that (.) but NOT BEFORE fourth grade (.) [...] if I ONLY read it aloud, then the ones who already know it as a FAIRY TALE always have the same images in their heads, or at least very similar ones, depending on how you're hearing it at the moment (.) with the PICTURES it becomes a different exPERIENCE [...] but like: (.) actually seeing it VISUALISED (.) that's where I actually STARTLED [...] it's just too scary for that (.) then they'll all be dreaming about that RAVEN (.) (Ms. Meier, teacher)

In this case as well, it becomes evident that the teacher is notably impressed by the picturebook. While she perceives it as potentially too frightening for younger children, she considers it appropriate for use from year four onwards in primary school, particularly as a means for pupils to engage with the traditional fairy tale from a new perspective. The shared reading activity is conceptualised as a guided experience, with the teacher already anticipating the responses and experiences intended for the pupils. In this context, pupils are expected to empathise with the teacher's interpretation of the picturebook, highlighting a consciously hierarchical structuring of the teacher-student relationship. The resulting clear differentiation of roles has broader implications, notably manifesting in concerns regarding the appropriateness of the text for pupils – concerns centred on their capacity for comprehension and the potential for the material to be unsettling or even frightening. Such apprehensions, often grounded in subjective assumptions, may contribute to the premature exclusion of aesthetically innovative or complex picturebooks from classroom use. At the same time, by focusing on an approach to the picturebook that the teacher has already deemed effective and meaningful, students are afforded the opportunity to engage deliberately with specific literary and aesthetic features. However, this instructional orientation tends to marginalise opportunities for students' independent exploration and personal interpretation of the text.

#### 4.3 Using the picturebook

The third didactic orientation identified in the study is categorised as 'instrumental use of the picturebook.' This approach involves employing picturebooks primarily to achieve specific, extra-literary educational objectives. For instance, Ms. Meier views *The Little One and the Beast* as an appropriate resource for introducing the topic of parental separation to children. However, such an instrumental perspective presents further challenges, as it necessitates that the picturebook authentically and sensitively reflect the individual life circumstances of the targeted pupils.

dann das: das klein- der KLEINE und das BIEST (.) das würd ich nicht mit allen mit- LESEN (.) DAS wäre was fü:r (.) wenn ich würde das da also in dem MOMENT also es sei denn es ist das THEMA (.) IN der KLASSE weil zum beispiel einer geärgert wird (.) weil die mama ein BIEST ist und weil die nicht mehr nett ist (.) [...] beziehungsweise (.) weil die mama von

EINEM plötzlich mit dem vom ANDERN zusammen ist und so weiter und so fort DANN vielleicht das WIRKLICH thema für ALLE ist irgendwie aber au-auch da GLAUB ich wäre das was was ich WENN überHAUPT mit EINZELNEN (2) lieber und auch da: (.) WÄRE ich VORSICHTIG (Frau Meier, Lehrerin)

so that: the little- the LITTLE one and the BEAST (.) I wouldn't READ that with everyone (.) THAT would be more for (.) if I actually read that there, like, at the MOMENT unless it's the TOPIC (.) IN CLASS, for example, because someone is bullied (.) because the mum is a BEAST and because she's not nice anymore (.) [...] or (.) because now one's mum is suddenly with the other one's dad and so on THEN maybe it's REALLY a topic for EVERYONE somehow, but even then I THINK I'd rather – IF at all – do it with INDIVIDUALS (2) and even there: (.) I WOULD BE CAREFUL. (Ms. Meier, teacher)

In contrast to the second perspective, which centres on the enjoyment of shared reading and potential concerns regarding pupils' cognitive and emotional demands, this third approach foregrounds the thematic content of *The Little One and the Beast* as the primary impetus for didactic engagement. Addressing topics such as 'divorce' or the 'emotions of separation' serves to legitimise the book's use in classroom settings; at the same time, the teacher frames the subject matter as pedagogically challenging due to its emotional complexity.

Systematic analysis of selection rationales reveals a marked tendency to reduce the picturebook to its central theme, thereby facilitating its instrumental use in classroom practice. Such thematic instrumentalisation often entails a differentiation between pupils personally affected by the theme and those who are not. Other literary and aesthetic aspects – such as plot, humour, and visual design – although acknowledged, are largely marginalised in didactic considerations.

The analysis of the adult interviews revealed three distinct approaches that serve to justify the selection of a picturebook for pedagogical purposes: collaborative exploration, the creation of meaningful reading experiences, and instrumental use aimed at addressing specific topics. While each orientation implies specific didactic assumptions and priorities, they are also shaped by the personal experiences and beliefs of the participants. This prompts a number of questions concerning the implications of these approaches for classroom practice and literary learning: How do differing selection criteria affect the interpretive possibilities afforded to pupils? To what extent might these professional perspectives enable or constrain the use of aesthetically and thematically challenging picturebooks in educational contexts?

In what follows, we discuss these issues by relating our findings to broader debates regarding the role of teacher beliefs, the negotiation of literary conventions, and the boundaries of pedagogical practice.

## 5. Discussion

The interviews enabled the reconstruction of distinct orientations among teachers and student teachers regarding the selection of picturebooks. A comparative overview of these three perspectives

highlights the question of how these underlying approaches position picturebooks as either 'suitable' or 'unsuitable' for educational use. In the first perspective, suitability is grounded in the potential for a multiplicity of independent interpretations. In the third, by contrast, a picturebook is deemed appropriate if its thematic content closely aligns with the specific life situations of pupils. The second perspective, which foregrounds the experiential dimension of shared reading, further emphasises the importance of 'child-appropriateness' as an individualised concern with the alignment of theme and student experience.

In the third approach, the didactic criterion of experiential relevance is foregrounded, construing picturebooks primarily as tools for identification and socialisation. The core thematic issue of the book is elevated to a model for children's own lives, and this perceived effect becomes the central criterion for selection or exclusion. Consequently, literary-aesthetic qualities become secondary, if not marginalised entirely. While it is not the intention here to dismiss the legitimacy of a content-focused perspective – albeit such reservations exist (Thiele. 2003; Scherer et al.. 2014; Ritter. 2017) – the limitations of this approach are readily apparent: the picturebook is reduced from a multi-layered literary artefact to a pedagogical instrument, with its literary distinctiveness largely neglected.

This form of pedagogical instrumentalisation presumes that (student) teachers are able to assess the social and emotional needs of individual children or groups, thereby making those needs the primary criterion for selection and use. The resulting narrowing of focus not only reduces the book to a few thematic aspects but also heightens the 'problem of fit', frequently leading to exclusionary decisions. For example, in the case of Ms. Meier, only those children whose biographical experiences most closely correspond to the narrative are considered appropriate recipients, in order to preclude potential disappointment.

These findings demonstrate that the 'suitability' of picturebooks is assessed according to fundamentally divergent criteria, reflecting different didactic stances towards literary learning. Teachers' orientations decisively shape their selection practices, which in turn frame and delimit the interpretative possibilities afforded to pupils within the classroom. Ultimately, each approach is accompanied by a specific set of expectations with respect to both the function and how picturebooks should be – or how they should not be.

At this juncture, we conclude by referencing the reflections of Ms. Stumpf, an in-service teacher open to engaging with challenging picturebooks, and Ms. Fischer, a student teacher, with regard to *The Little One and the Beast*:

das LETZTE bu:ch [Der Kleine und das Biest] (.) find ich (.) FÜRCHTERLICH (2) ähm (.) weil ICH denke dass: (.) man MÜTTER und auch VÄTER so nicht darstellen darf [...] und es ist NICHT AUFGABE von KINDERN (2) ähm dafür zu sorgen dass es den müttern und vätern (.)

gut geht (3) [...] das buch find ich find ich richtig SCHLIMM [...] es fällt vom INHALT her durch (.) und für MICH fällt auch von der ILLUSTRATION her durch weil ich denke (.) das: das kann man SO nich-nich-nicht DARSTELLN (Frau Stumpf, Lehrerin)

that LAST book [The Little One and the Beast] (.) I think it's (.) TERRIBLE (2) um (.) because I think that (.) you just SHOULDN'T portray MOTHERS and also FATHERS like that [...] and it is NOT the TASK of CHILDREN (2) um to make sure that their mothers and fathers (.) are okay (3) [...] I think that book, I think it's really AWFUL [...] in terms of CONTENT it completely fails (.) and for ME it also fails in terms of the ILLUSTRATION because I think (.) tha- that you just can't- can't- can't portray it LIKE THAT (Ms. Stumpf, teacher)

also ich betrachte das sehr KRITISCH (.) weil (.) also so (.) n BIEST als MUTTER wegen ner SCHEIDUNG das äh: (.) muss nicht unbedingt (.) SEIN (Frau Fischer, Lehramtsstudierende)  
so I see that very CRITICALLY (.) because (.) like (.) a BEAST as a MOTHER because of a DIVORCE that uh: (.) doesn't really (.) have to (.) BE (Ms. Fischer, student teacher)

It becomes apparent that the criteria for respectful intergenerational interaction are clearly delineated, with the expectation that the picturebook aligns with the teacher's pedagogical standards. Should the picturebook fail to meet these expectations, it is categorically designated as 'unsuitable'.

This evaluative process is closely linked to normative conceptions of childhood and intergenerational relationships. Within the self-understanding articulated by the participants, there is an implicit requirement for picturebooks to provide pedagogically and ideologically desirable – or at minimum, non-controversial – representations of childhood. This expectation positions children's literature as a vehicle for direct modelling and identification for its presumed readership. However, a significant number of contemporary picturebooks resist such straightforward appropriation. The tension between literary macro-conventions, specifically those of aesthetic complexity and polyvalence, and the pedagogical conventions historically embedded in children's literature emerges, as outlined at the outset, as a decisive and critical factor in teachers' selection decisions.

## 6. Conclusion

This sub-study reveals that both in-service and student teachers base their picturebook selection on a dynamic interplay of personal inclinations and professional considerations. The insights generated highlight how underlying professional beliefs not only guide the choice of texts, but also shape the interpretive opportunities afforded to pupils. Teachers' orientations, whether focusing on exploration, experience, or instrumental use, strongly influence literary learning environments and the perceived potential of picturebooks in educational contexts.

Critically reflecting on these selection criteria and underlying assumptions should be an integral component of teacher education. By encouraging prospective teachers to become aware of their beliefs and attitudes, teacher training can foster greater openness to innovative and aesthetically complex texts. Such reflexivity ultimately expands the range of literary experiences in primary education and strengthens the foundations for a more differentiated approach to literary learning.

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