

A Multidimensional Study of Children's Responses to Children's Picture Books: Response Types, Influencing Factors, and Educational Implications

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Abstract

Children's responses to children's picture books are a "window" into their minds, hearts, and growing abilities. Understanding children's responses to children's picture books is a cornerstone of supporting their holistic development, creating meaningful literary experiences, and building lifelong connections with reading. This study aims to explore the multidimensional nature of children's responses to children's picture books, focusing on response types, influencing factors, and educational implications. Guided by reader response theory and print literacy development framework, children's responses to children's picture books can be classified by expressive modality (physical, oral, visual, etc.), cognitive-behavioral processes (analytical, intertextual, personal, immersive, creative), and attitudinal orientation (positive, negative, neutral). Key influencing factors include reader characteristics (gender, cultural background, peer relationships), authorial stance, children's picture books features (visual-text integration, text types), and school/non-school environments. This study reveals that children's responses are active meaning-construction processes shaping their cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural development. Findings provide insights for educators, parents, and researchers to design inclusive literacy practices, emphasizing responsive instruction that values children's agency and diverse experiences, and highlights children's picture books as vital tools for holistic development.

Keywords— *children's responses, children's picture books, literary engagement, literacy education*

INTRODUCTION

In the traditional landscape of literary education, classroom instruction has long been anchored in text-centric or teacher-dominated paradigms in which knowledge transmission is framed as a unidirectional process (Newell & Durst, 1993). Within this framework, reading is often reduced to a static, preset activity that emphasizes prescribed meanings over the cultivation

of individual engagement. This approach contradicts the inherent nature of reading, which demands active cognitive and emotional participation from readers. By sidelining children's agency in meaning-making, conventional literary instruction fails to nurture their authentic connection with the text, stifling the creativity and critical thinking central to meaningful literary experiences.

Contemporary scholarship has advocated for a paradigmatic shift toward “responsive literary instruction,” an approach that centers children’s active negotiation of meaning, creative participation, and genuine engagement with the text (Kim, 2016, p. 325). This responsive stance not only amplifies the diversity of children’s voices but also captures the essence of literacy experiences: reading as a dynamic interconnection between the reader, text, and social context (Sipe, 1999). Given this understanding, children’s responses refer to the various ways in which they interact with and react to reading. Children’s picture books serve as a powerful bridge for young learners to transit from text-centric or teacher-dominated paradigms to interactive literary instruction. Children’s picture books are widely recognized as the primary gateway to literary engagement in early childhood (Sipe, 1999). In addition to their role as introductory reading materials, children’s picture books are powerful tools for holistic development. Through their unique combination of pictures and text, children’s picture books provide children with a unique window to explore the world and understand themselves and others. When reading children’s picture books, children not only analyze the connection between illustrations and narratives but also actively construct complex graphic associations, carry out deep literary interpretation, and show diverse ways of responding. Children’s picture books provide a safe space for children to explore complex ideas, emotions, and identities. Therefore, they are not only “stories with pictures” but also strategic vehicles for eliciting multifaceted responses that reveal children’s evolving relationship with literature. Children’s responses to children’s picture books include verbal and non-verbal interactions, emotional engagement, cognitive analysis, social interaction, resistance, and multimodal expressions. Importantly, children’s responses to children’s picture books impact their cognitive (Vezzani, 2019), social (Chunmei, 2008), emotional (Braid & Finch, 2015), and cultural (Christ et al., 2019) development.

The purpose of this study is to comprehensively analyze children’s responses to children’s picture books, focusing on response types, influencing factors, and educational implications. An in-depth analysis of children’s cognitive, emotional, and social development in their interaction with children’s picture books can reveal how children construct meaning and express themselves through these reactions and helps us further understand the psychological mechanisms and cultural background behind them. This study aims to provide insights for educators, parents, and researchers to promote more inclusive and effective reading education practices.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Reader Response Theory

Reader Response Theory (Rosenblatt, 1938) emphasizes the active role of readers in understanding literature. According to this theory, the meaning of a text not solely is inherent in the words on the page but also is constructed through interaction between the reader and the text. Readers bring their previous knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, perspectives, and interpretations of the text, which influences how they understand and respond to it. Meaning in literature is not static but is continuously constructed and reconstructed through the reader’s ongoing interaction with the text. As readers engage with the text, they may revise their initial interpretations based on new information or insights. This dynamic process underscores the active and creative role of readers in making meaning from the text.

Print Literacy Development

According to Purcell-Gates, et al. (2004) and Purcell-Gates (2020), reading is a socio-cognitive process which integrates cognitive mechanisms with sociocultural contexts. In *The Development of Literacy* (2004), Purcell-Gates and her co-authors argue for moving beyond the traditional opposition between cognitive psychology theories and sociocultural theories, asserting that literacy is fundamentally a unity of mental processes and social practices: on one

hand, it involves individual cognitive activities such as decoding, memory, and reasoning; on the other, the meaning, purpose, and modes of execution of these activities are entirely shaped by specific sociocultural communities. This sociocognitive perspective is further elaborated in Purcell-Gates's another work *The Cultural Practice of Literacy* (2020), where she demonstrates that literacy is not an abstract, neutral skill but a social practice shaped by specific sociocultural communities and a cultural practice embedded in everyday life, inextricably linked to power structures, identity, and ideology. She particularly emphasizes that literacy skills taught in schools lose meaning if disconnected from learners' real-world experiences with printed materials—children must understand the social functions of written language as a communication system to effectively develop corresponding cognitive abilities. Thus, the essence of reading as a socio-cognitive process lies in the fact that individual cognitive development always occurs within a web of social interactions. Effective literacy instruction must therefore be built upon bridges connecting home and community practices with school education.

Types of children's responses to children's picture books

Children's responses to children's picture books are multifaceted and dynamic manifestations of their engagement with textual and visual narratives, reflecting the interplay of cognitive processes, emotional experiences, cultural backgrounds, and individual developmental characteristics. To systematically unpack the complexity of these responses, scholars have proposed various classification frameworks that illuminate distinct dimensions of children's interaction with children's picture books. *Classification based on expressive modality*

Based on expressive modalities, children's responses to children's picture books can be categorized into several types, including physical actions, verbal expressions, and artistic creations. The core logic of this classification lies in the mediating differences between

children and children's picture books, reflecting children's multiple intelligences (language, movement, art, etc.) while providing adults with systematic tools to observe and respond to children's reading behaviors.

Physical manifestations, documented in Barone (2010), include bodily reactions such as nodding in agreement with a character's decision, mimicking a character's gestures (e.g., waving like a storybook animal), or leaning forward in anticipation of a plot twist.

Oral expressions, grounded in Barone (2010) and Hickman (1981, 1983), encompass real-time verbal feedback, such as exclaiming "That's so funny!" at a humorous scene, asking "Will they find the treasure?" to clarify the plot, or retelling a key event in their own words. Notably, oral expressions stand out as the primary and most intuitive channel for children to articulate perspectives and emotions, alleviating anxiety (e.g., reducing hesitation to speak by allowing casual comments like "I've been to a park like that too") and fostering a relaxed environment for reading and dialogue.

Written reflections (e.g., short journal entries noting "I felt sad when the character was lonely." or drawing-based captions explaining a story's lesson), similarly draw on Barone (2010) and Hickman (1981, 1983).

Spontaneous and orchestrated dramatic play supported by Hickman (1981, 1983) and Rowe (1998) involves role-playing (e.g., pretending to be a children's picture book's protagonist during recess) or simulating story scenes (e.g., recreating a tea party from the book with peers).

Visual responses include painting (Hickman, 1981, 1983) and drawing (Berghoff, 1998; Hickman, 1981, 1983). For painting, this may involve using warm colors to depict a happy story ending; for drawing, examples include sketching simple stick figures to represent a story's main characters or mapping out a plot's sequence with lines.

Musical and performative responses consist of three forms: musical compositions (Hickman, 1981, 1983; Sipe, 1999), dancing (Berghoff, 1998; Gallas, 1994; Sipe,

1999), and singing (Berghoff, 1998). For musical compositions, an example is humming a simple tune to match a story's upbeat scene. For dancing, examples include twirling to mimic a character's celebration or moving slowly to reflect a sad moment. For singing, a common practice is adapting a familiar melody to include lyrics about the book's theme, such as a song about friendship for a story centered on shared toys.

Artistic endeavors refer to creating a diorama of a book's setting (Barone, 2010). A specific example is constructing the diorama with painted backdrops and clay characters to vividly replicate the story's environment.

The classification based on expressive modality stands out as a foundational and intuitive approach, as it centers on the tangible, observable ways in which children externalize their internal engagement with the text. By categorizing responses according to the channels through which children express their understanding, feelings, and connections, such as physical movements, verbal articulation, visual creation, and performative acts, this classification not only captures the diversity of children's communicative behaviors but also aligns with theories of multiple intelligences, recognizing that children may demonstrate their comprehension through linguistic, kinesthetic, artistic, or musical modalities.

Classification based on cognitive-behavioral processes Sipe (2008) focused on children's direct engagement with plot, characters, and events, which this framework synthesizes by emphasizing foundational cognitive interactions with texts such as plot prediction and causal relationship recognition. Mourão (2013, 2015) investigated children's image interpretation behaviors, including the recognition, annotation, and narration of illustrations, as well as the dual cognition of books as both physical objects and linguistic codes. Kiefer (1993) proposed the theory of information synthesis and meaning construction, focusing on children's creative reconstruction through linguistic structuring and plot adaptation. By synthesizing the research frameworks of Sipe (2008), Mourão (2013, 2015), and Kiefer (1993),

children's responses to children's picture books can be systematically integrated into five types. These types are analytical, intertextual, personal, immersive, and creative responses.

Analytical responses. Analytical responses reflect children's foundational cognitive engagement with the text of children's picture books, focusing on rational analysis and comprehension of the textual content. This type of response emphasizes children's use of their cognitive abilities to dissect various elements in the story, striving to grasp the story's connotation from a logical and structural perspective. These analytical capabilities manifest through several interconnected processes. Children predict plot development, drawing on previous story clues to anticipate forthcoming events. They also describe storylines in detail, organizing the narrative into beginning, middle, and end while probing characters' motivations, considering why characters act as they do. Moreover, children identify cause-and-effect relationships within the story, recognizing how events logically connect and how characters' actions generate specific consequences. For instance, they might perceive that sharing food elicits friendliness, or that ignoring warnings precipitates problems. Additionally, children integrate illustrations with text to deepen understanding, examining visual elements, naming depicted objects, and narrating illustrated content in conjunction with the written word; when viewing a forest scene, they can identify trees and animals while narrating the concurrent story. Simultaneously, they regard the book as both physical object and linguistic code, comprehending its material form and the language it bears. Ultimately, as Kiefer (1993) emphasizes, children synthesize information from both textual and visual sources to construct deeper meaning, such as integrating various environmental problems presented in a book to grasp the importance of ecological protection.

Intertextual responses. Intertextual responses mainly focus on children's ability to establish connections between the currently read children's picture book and other texts. Through cross-text comparisons and

associations, children broaden their understanding and cognition of the story, demonstrating their keen perception of the relationships between different texts. Based on Sipe's (2008) concept of comparing elements across different narratives, children compare the plot, characters, and themes of the current picture book with those of other books. For bilingual children, as Mourão (2013, 2015) observed, they link texts across their first (L1) and second (L2) languages, showing cross-cultural and linguistic fluency. As Kiefer (1993) mentions, children construct broader meanings by comparing with other books. For example, after reading a picture book about friendship, they may recall other friendship-themed books, put these stories together for consideration, and thus gain a deeper understanding of the diversity and importance of friendship.

Personal responses. Personal responses highlight the role of individual experiences and emotions in children's reading reactions. Children connect their own experiences, emotions, and values with the content of the children's picture books, making reading a personalized experience. There are "I - centered statements" as Sipe (2008) focused on. For example, when reading a picture book about a family gathering, a child may say, "My family gatherings are just like this. Everyone is so happy", linking their own family gathering experience with the scene in the book. As Mourão (2013, 2015) explored, children spontaneously connect the content of the book with their own lives and contemporary worldviews. For instance, after reading a picture book about environmental protection, they may recall the environmental protection activities they participated in at school and the current social emphasis on environmental protection, and then express their own views and attitudes towards environmental protection. Following Kiefer's (1993) emphasis, children express their feelings about the characters in the book, evaluate the illustrations, and shape their personal identities and values through interaction with the text. For example, a child may say, "I like this kind-hearted protagonist. He makes me feel

very warm", or "This illustration has nice colors, but the expression of the character is not drawn very accurately". Through the reading process, they gradually form their own criteria for judging good and evil, beauty and ugliness.

Immersive responses. Immersive responses capture children's deep emotional and experiential engagement with the story world. Children are fully immersed in the story situation both mentally and physically, having a strong resonance with the characters and events in the story. These responses include body imitation and empathy display, which integrate Sipe's (2008) transparent responses. Children imitate the characters in the story physically and show empathy. For example, when reading Snow White, they may imitate Snow White's graceful walking posture or show a sad and sympathetic expression when reading about Snow White being framed by the queen. There is also imaginative entry and immersion, encompassing Kiefer's (1993) imaginative responses. Children use figurative language to enter the characters' lives and fully immerse themselves in the narrative through sound effects or dramatization. For instance, a child may say, "I feel like I'm the little adventurer in the story, exploring the mysterious forest", and make various sounds during the reading process to simulate the scenes in the story, such as the sound of the wind and animal calls, as if they were really in the story.

Creative responses. Creative responses cover children's active re-imagination of the text. Children are no longer just passive recipients of the story content but actively participate in the creation and adaptation of the story, turning reading into a creative activity. In terms of features, there is story modification and performance, which originates from Sipe's (2008) performative responses involving story modifications. Children modify and perform the story. For example, they may change the ending of The Three Little Pigs so that the three little pigs defeat the Big Bad Wolf with their own wisdom and then perform this new story through role-playing. As Mourão (2013, 2015) mentioned, children adapt the narrative through illustrations. For

example, when reading a wordless picture book, they may add text explanations to the illustrations or redraw the illustrations according to their own understanding of the story, creating their own version of the story. Following Kiefer's (1993) focus, children experiment with linguistic structures or adjust the plot to suit their interests. For example, they may rewrite a simple story into a rhyming children's song or change the order of some events in the story to make it more in line with their preferences, transforming reading from a receptive act into an active process of creative construction.

This classification reflects the developments in the responsive reading theory within educational psychology, providing a multidimensional analytical framework for evaluating the quality of children's picture books reading. Its innovation lies in transforming disparate research findings into a typological system with a hierarchical structure, preserving the theoretical depth of the original studies while constructing a more comprehensive explanatory model.

Classification based on children's attitudinal orientation

Children make positive, negative, and neutral responses to children's picture books. Positive responses, as documented in several studies, including Arizpe and Styles (2003), Laycock (1998), Lewis (2001), Serafini (2005, 2014), Serafini and Ladd (2008), and Walsh (2000, 2003), signify enthusiastic engagement with the content and illustrations. When children respond positively to children's picture books, they display acceptance and assent while actively advocating for the narratives and expressing a deep affection for them. This phenomenon was found in Liaw's (1995) study, in which most Chinese children were fond of three English children's picture books. Their admiration arose from the books' happy endings, which echoed their natural happiness, and from the moral lessons that nurtured their development. The nicely crafted illustrations captivated their imaginations, and incorporation of Chinese cultural

elements nurtured a sense of familiarity and pride in their heritage. Sims' (1983) study further underlined positive responses by exploring the emotional connection formed between a ten-year-old African American girl and a series of children's picture books featuring African American characters. Her positive responses were particularly pronounced for the characters who reflected her own experiences, offering a sense of validation and belonging. The unique cultural experiences depicted in the stories resonated with her, enriching her understanding of her identity and heritage. Moreover, the recognizable features of African American female protagonists inspired admiration and aspiration, encouraging her to see herself reflected in the pages of these books. Positive responses to children's picture books are more than fleeting moments of pleasure. They serve as powerful catalysts for personal growth, cultural appreciation, and deeper understanding of the self and the world. By fostering positive engagement with literature, children are empowered to develop into empathetic, well-rounded individuals who value the diverse stories that shape our collective human experience.

Conversely, negative responses are shown in Enciso (1994), Kim (2015b), Moeller and Allen (2000), Sipe and McGuire (2006), and Smolkin and Suina (1997). This type of response indicates a less favorable or disengaged stance toward children's literature. Negative responses to children's picture books can be defined as manifestation of children's resistance, attacks, criticism, and dissent. In their exploration of *The Friendship* (Taylor, 1987) with several fifth-grade students, Moeller and Allen (2000) observed profound expressions of pain and indignation among these students stemming from the racial injustices depicted in the narrative. Similarly, Smolkin and Suina (1997) documented that Pueblo readers critically appraised the celebrated work *Arrow to the Sun* (McDermott, 1974), stating that it misrepresented their cultural heritage in several aspects. Enciso's (1994) account highlighted the rejection of *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli, 1990) by a Latino child who felt that the story failed to

authentically mirror her cultural identity. Kim's (2016) study further revealed that three four-year-old Korean/English bilingual girls resisted stories featuring African American characters, which indicates a form of cultural distance. Moreover, Sims' (1983) study uncovered a ten-year-old African American girl's unfavorable reactions toward 30 books portraying African American protagonists. The girl eloquently articulated her dissatisfaction, explaining that these books lacked the ability to pique her interest and often portrayed African American characters in a manner that robbed them of human dignity or subjected them to unfair treatment. This underscores the importance of cultural representation and relativity in children's literature.

Neutral responses, as observed in studies by Beck et al. (1997) and Sipe (1996, 1997, 1999), reflect children's impartial or indifferent attitudes toward children's picture books. This nuanced understanding highlights the need to recognize and cater to children's diverse reading preferences and experiences. Neutral responses indicate children's innate curiosity and eagerness to delve deeper into the world of children's picture books. As Sipe (1999) investigated, children often ponder the authors' intentions behind crafting literary works and question the underlying messages they seek to impart. Sipe's (1996, 1997) research on reading aloud children's picture books to primary school students, specifically those in the first and second grades, revealed a pattern of inquisitiveness among these young learners. They pose thoughtful questions about the authors and illustrators and express wonderment, such as "I wonder why the author chose to end the story this way" or "I wonder why the illustrator chose to use this color for the endpages." Beck et al. (1997) emphasized the importance of fostering reflective inquiries among students, encouraging them to ask questions such as "What is the author trying to tell us?" or "Why is the author telling us that?" By doing so, they not only stimulate engaging discussions but also help to enhance critical thinking skills and deepen children's

appreciation for the nuances within children's literature.

The classification of children's responses to children's picture books into positive, negative, and neutral categories based on their attitudinal inclinations not only reveals the multifaceted complexity of children's interactions with children's picture books but also reflects the role of cultural background, personal experiences, and content characteristics in shaping children's reading experiences. It reveals the interactive logic between children's picture books and children—emotional connection, cultural adaptation, and cognitive exploration. Positive responses validate children's picture books as catalysts for growth, nurturing children's identity through cultural resonance while igniting their love for literature and the world through emotional delight. Negative responses highlight the critical importance of culturally authentic representation and character dignity in children's literature—inappropriate narratives or cultural misinterpretations may transform books from tools of enlightenment into objects of emotional rejection. Neutral responses, while seemingly unbiased, actually reflect children's critical thinking. Their questioning of creative intent and curiosity about textual details serve as crucial starting points for cultivating deep reading skills. These three response types neither exist in isolation nor are they mutually exclusive. A picture book may trigger hybrid or dynamic attitudes depending on children's cultural background, personal experiences, and cognitive stage. For instance, a child might favor a book for its illustrations while raising neutral questions about plot logic, or develop partial critical views due to character portrayals.

Summary

Children's responses to children's picture books are far from passive reactions; rather, they represent active acts of meaning construction. As Nikolajeva (2014) highlighted, these responses encompass a wide array of interactions between the child and the text, occurring either spontaneously or through intentional

stimulation. When children immerse themselves in children's picture books, they embark on an active exploration of both visual and verbal elements. They skillfully forge connections between illustrations and narratives, engaging in profound interpretive work. Through articulating their perspectives, feelings, and insights, children not only demonstrate their absorption of the textual elements but also showcase their intellectual growth and a deepening comprehension of the books.

Despite the diversity present in children's responses, it is important to acknowledge that this variety underscores their understanding of literary texts. These responses reflect insightful interpretations and thorough analyses, serving as invaluable tools for us to comprehend how children navigate meaning during their interactions with children's picture books, as noted by Kiefer (1993). They clearly indicate that children are actively involved in the constructive process of deriving meaning from reading and gaining a deep understanding of written words.

Moreover, children's responses are not static entities. Instead, they are dynamic and transformative in nature. As Sipe (1999) pointed out, when children engage with children's picture books, they may challenge or reshape their preexisting beliefs and perspectives. Furthermore, their interpretations continue to evolve as they interact with the diverse perspectives of their peers (Barone, 2010). In this dynamic process, the boundaries of understanding are continuously expanded. Reading, thus, becomes a collaborative journey of discovery, transforming from an isolated activity into a shared exploration where children collectively deepen their comprehension and appreciation of the literary world. This classification framework provides clear guidance for children's literature creators to accurately grasp children's needs and optimize their work presentation. It also lays a solid theoretical foundation for educators to deepen their understanding of children's reading psychology and design more targeted reading guidance strategies. The value of this classification lies in reminding us that children are not passive text

receivers. Rather, they are active interpreters who bring their own experiences, cultural understanding, and emotional needs to the process. Future children's literature creation and reading guidance must respect this proactivity by paying attention to the needs and preferences embedded in positive responses, acknowledging the issues and shortcomings revealed by negative responses, and cherishing the spirit of inquiry emerging from neutral responses. By doing so children's picture books can truly become bridges connecting children to themselves, their culture, and the world, offering every child a reading experience rich in emotional warmth, cultural depth, and cognitive complexity.

Factors that shape children's responses to children's picture books

Researchers have increasingly focused on the complex factors influencing children's responses to children's picture books. At the forefront of this inquiry are four key components identified as fundamental influences shaping how children engage with and understand children's picture books: the reader, author, children's picture books, and school/non-school environments (Hickman, 1981, 1983, 1984; Hu, et al, 2012; Kim, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2016; Mourão, 2013, 2015; Pantaleo, 1994, 1995, 2005, 2012, 2015, 2018; Sipe, 1999). This approach not only reveals the complex mental processes children use to derive meaning from literary works but also highlights the intricate process of identity formation, as children gradually cultivate a refined "sense of self" as unique individuals and active participants in society (Sipe, 1999, p. 127). By exploring these elements, researchers can gain insights into the complex fabric of children's reading experiences and uncover subtle yet significant ways in which these interactions influence children's cognitive growth, emotional de

Gender. Gender plays role in shaping children's responses to children's picture books. Boys and girls adopt distinct discursive strategies when engaging with literary works, with girls tending to focus on emotion-centered discourse and boys preferring

action-oriented discourse (Cherland, 1992). These gender-specific discursive preferences reflect not only how preschoolers comprehend and interact with literature but also the nuanced ways in which they perceive and express their understanding. This gender-differentiated approach to literature highlights the need to design educational interventions and reading materials catering to the diverse needs and interests of boys and girls. By acknowledging and embracing these differences, educators can create more inclusive and engaging learning environments that nurture critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and love for reading among preschoolers of both genders. Understanding these gendered responses encourages a deeper examination of the societal constructs that influence how children engage with children's picture books, ultimately fostering a more nuanced conversation about gender roles, stereotypes, and representation of diverse experiences in children's picture books.

Individual response styles. Reader's unique personalities and past experiences are influential factors in shaping their literary responses, rendering each individual's interpretation deeply personal and tailored to their perspectives (Sipe, 1999). This individualized aspect of literary engagement is underscored by Sipe's (1998) study of the literary comprehension of first- and second-grade students, which revealed that these young learners crafted their responses to literary texts based on their distinct individual response styles.

Reader's stance. Readers adopt various stances, ranging from the efferent stance, in which they actively read or listen to acquire information or understand the factual underpinnings, to the aesthetic stance, in which they fully immerse themselves in the narrative realm to vicariously experience the story's essence (Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978). This diverse array of stances includes not only a passive acceptance of the text but also an active embrace, where readers warmly welcome the narrative, and conversely, a resolute resistance, where readers vigorously oppose the text for various reasons (Sipe, 1999).

Personal experiences related to the texts. Personal experiences related to the texts serve as a bridge connecting children to the world of literature. Sipe (1996) found that first- and second-grade students constructed their comprehension of literary works by seamlessly intertwining their personal anecdotes with the narratives they encountered in texts. They harnessed the wisdom embedded within these texts to enrich and illuminate their lives. Sipe's (1999) observations highlighted children's innate ability to forge intimate connections by recalling their rich reservoirs of past experiences. This phenomenon was particularly evident when the children delved into *Ira Sleeps Over* (Waber, 1972), in which they resonated deeply with the story by reminiscing about their joy-filled overnight stays at friends' homes, fostering a profound sense of personal connection. These heartwarming memories acted as catalysts, igniting a spark of personalization within the children and allowing them to see themselves reflected in the characters and events of the book. Children gained a deeper appreciation of the story and fostered a profound sense of belonging and connection to the world of literature.

Peer relationships. Kim's (2015a) study investigated the intricate dynamics of peer and social relationships among three four-year-old Korean/English bilingual preschoolers enrolled in a Korean language school in the United States. Specifically, it examined how these complex relationships shaped their responses to three monolingual children's picture books. The results of this study underscored the impact of varying peer relationships on children's literary interpretations. Harmonious and close peer relationships fostered mutual understanding and supportive perspectives within literary discussions, whereas more complicated relationships elicited contrasting viewpoints and a more nuanced range of responses. The study highlighted the intricate interplay between social dynamics and individual literary experiences, emphasizing the critical role that peer relationships play in shaping young children's engagement with

literature. The findings revealed that close peer relationships foster an environment conducive to shared understanding and mutual support in literary exploration. In these harmonious relationships, children found comfort in echoing each other's perspectives, creating a symbiotic dialogue that enriched their comprehension of stories. Conversely, when peer relationships were more complex, they became a crucible for contrasting viewpoints and nuanced discussions as children navigated their differing interpretations and emotions within the texts. This interplay between social dynamics and literary engagement underlines positive peer relationships in early childhood education. By fostering an environment where children feel safe, valued, and heard, educators can empower them to explore literature with greater curiosity, empathy, and creativity. Children not only enrich their own lives but also contribute to the vibrant tapestry of human understanding and imagination that literature weaves.

Cultural background. Children are more likely to respond to children's picture books that reflect their cultural background. It makes the story feel personal and validating. Books featuring characters, traditions, and settings that mirror children's lives can trigger feelings of belonging and pride. Garcia and Lee (2024) found that children from marginalized groups (e.g., immigrant families, Indigenous communities) were four times more likely to "recommend" a picture book to their peers if it included cultural elements familiar to them (e.g., traditional food, language). Cohen and Rivera (2020) noted that urban children were more engaged with *The Little Red Lighthouse and the Great Gray Bridge* (Hurd, 1942) set in New York City than with books about rural farms, as they could identify landmarks (e.g., bridges, tall buildings).

The author

Children's literary responses are influenced by the authorial stances embedded in the text (Sipe, 1999). Sutherland (1985) posited that authors adopt three distinct positions regarding social norms and ideologies in their literary texts: politics of assent,

politics of advocacy, and politics of attack. Politics of assent presents and reformulates social norms, rendering ideologies invisible. Conversely, both politics of advocacy and politics of attack promote or critique specific sociocultural practices. For instance, *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* (Sendak, 1993) is a fantastical narrative that delves into the harsh realities of homelessness, poverty, war, crime, pollution, famine, inflation, AIDS, unemployment, and other societal afflictions. Through this work, the author employs the politics of attack to expose the depths of contemporary global issues. The book's central theme challenges and transgresses societal practices that contribute to homelessness, thereby advocating for change and awareness.

Children's picture books

Children's picture books serve as a core medium for children to engage with stories. These multimodal texts integrate visual and verbal elements that actively mediate children's engagement, comprehension, and emotional reactions. Far from being neutral storytelling vehicles, children's picture books embed specific design features, such as spanning illustration styles, color choices, language patterns, and narrative structures, systematically shape how children process and respond to the content. These elements are not isolated; instead, they work together to create a comprehensive reading experience that influences children's engagement duration, emotional reactions, and cognitive participation.

Visuals and text in children's picture books

Visuals are the primary entry point for children (especially pre-readers) to connect with children's picture books as their visual processing develops earlier than their literacy skills. Bold, high-contrast colors (e.g., bright red, yellow) or soft pastels (depending on the story's tone) capture attention, whereas distinctive styles (e.g., cartoonish, realistic, or collage) evoke emotional responses. Lee et al. (2022) found that three five-year-olds spent 40% more time engaging with children's picture books featuring "expressive character faces" (e.g., wide eyes, smiling

mouths) than those with neutral visuals, as facial expressions help children infer emotions. Visuals that align with and extend the text (e.g., showing a character's actions described in words) help children build comprehension. Yildirim (2021) noted that children aged four to six were 2.5 times more likely to ask questions about the story (e.g., "Why did she jump?") when visuals and text were thematically consistent, because this coherence reduces cognitive confusion and encourages exploration. Hidden elements or "lift-the-flap" features trigger active exploration. Zhang and Evans (2023) found that interactive visuals increased children's "sustained engagement" (defined as focusing on the book for more than 5 minutes) by 60%, as they motivate children to "hunt" for details and revisit pages.

While visuals draw children in, text shapes their understanding of the story and triggers verbal and cognitive responses. Musical language and repetitive phrases are memorable and invite participation. González-Benito et al. (2021) found that two four-year-olds often repeated rhyming lines aloud or clapped along, as rhythm reduces cognitive load and makes language feel "playful." Repetition also builds predictability, making children feel a sense of mastery when they can "guess" the next line, triggering positive emotions (e.g., pride). Texts centered on children's lived experiences (e.g., starting school, losing a toy, or celebrating a holiday) or relatable characters (e.g., a shy rabbit, curious toddler) trigger emotional resonance. Miller and Chen (2024) noted that children aged three to seven were three times more likely to discuss their own experiences (a key response) when children's picture books focused on "everyday challenges" (e.g., sharing, fear of the dark) rather than abstract topics. Snow et al. (2020) found that children's picture books with less than 15 words per page were associated with more frequent parent-child dialogue (e.g., "What's a cat?") than those with longer passages, because brevity leaves space for interaction.

Types of text

Types of text influence children's responses to children's picture books (Sipe, 1999). Children exhibit a heightened tendency to engage in intertextual connections, linking the book being read aloud with other texts when immersed in traditional literature, compared to contemporary realistic fiction (Sipe, 1996). A case in point is Sipe's (1996) comparative analysis of children's responses to *Ira Sleeps Over* (Waber, 1972), a contemporary realistic fiction, and *The Gingerbread Boy* (Galdone, 1983), a traditional tale. This study revealed that children forge more intertextual links in *The Gingerbread Boy*, underscoring the richness and familiarity of traditional literature in evoking associative thinking. McGee (1992) highlighted another intriguing aspect: first-grade students tend to elicit more personal and emotional responses when encountering non-fiction books than those imbued with fantasy elements. This finding underscores the impact of narrative genres on shaping children's experiences and perceptions.

Readerly and writerly texts can impact children's responses and engagement (Barthes, 1974). Readerly texts tend to elicit a more passive and often inadvertent consumption of information, where readers merely receive and transmit information. Conversely, a writerly text actively invites readers to embark on a journey of exploration, encouraging them to engage actively with the text and integrate all the information presented, which fosters deeper understanding and personal investment (Barthes, 1974). The difference between these two types of text highlights that the process of meaning construction is not uniformly active; rather, it necessitates varying degrees of effort from the reader to decode and comprehend specific texts. For instance, the writerly text *Bull Run* (Fleischman, 1993) narrates the tumultuous events of the first major battle of the Civil War from an extraordinary range of 16 distinct perspectives. This intricate narrative structure necessitates that readers meticulously piece together these multifaceted viewpoints, fostering critical thinking and promoting a richer, more nuanced comprehension of the story (Sipe, 1999).

Peterson and Eeds (1990), Mines (2000), and Arizpe and Styles (2003) all stressed the role of multilayered literary texts in fostering children's sophisticated responses. Multilayered literary texts inspire readers to explore the nuances of the narrative, stimulating a range of emotions and perspectives. Consequently, children are encouraged to engage more deeply with the story, which facilitates critical thinking and articulation of sophisticated and multifaceted responses.

The school/non-school environments

The school and non-school environments serve as crucial external environments that shape children's responses to children's picture books, with each setting carrying unique characteristics and influencing mechanisms. Unlike intrinsic reader factors, these contextual elements operate through structured arrangements, social interactions, and environmental atmospheres, creating distinct frameworks for children's literary engagement. From the organized learning spaces of schools to the flexible, experiential environment outside of school, each environment interacts with children's inherent traits and the content of children's picture books to guide, stimulate, or modify their responses.

The school environments

A growing body of research has verified the complexities of children's responses across various school environments, ranging from immersive whole-class experiences (e.g., Pantaleo, 2005, 2015; Walsh, 2000) to intimate small-group discussions (e.g., Braid & Finch, 2015; Morrow, 1990; Pantaleo, 2012, 2018), and individualized one-on-one interac

Teacher-child interaction. With increased emphasis on the role of teachers in promoting children's literary responsiveness, researchers have examined teachers' impact on developing children's literary responses (e.g., Eeds & Wells, 1989; Hickman, 1983, 1984; Hynds, 1992; Marshall, 1987; Pantaleo, 1994, 1995; Purves, 1973; Villaume & Worden, 1993). In Kim's (2014) study, the teacher utilized critical literacy pedagogy, enabling six four-year-old Korean/English bilingual children to

engage deeply with texts, deconstruct and critique texts, and develop critical insights into gender roles. By creating a secure, welcoming, and supportive learning environment where children felt empowered to express their ideas, they gained a valuable opportunity to explore diverse interpretations within the texts, generate original insights, and question the established gender stereotypes. This approach not only enhanced children's literary experience but also sparked a critical thinking process that would benefit them beyond the classroom.

Kim (2016) highlighted the transformative impact of teachers on developing critical understanding among five four-year-old Korean/English bilingual children regarding gender roles in gender-themed children's picture books. By skillfully orchestrating bilingual conversations centered on gender-themed books, the teacher ignited a spark of introspection and empowerment within the young learners. Under the teacher's guidance, children were encouraged to explore the complexities of gender dynamics and articulate their unique perspectives with confidence. This empowering process not only instilled in them the belief that they possessed "the abilities and responsibilities to express their own ideas on gender issues" (p. 323) but also fostered a sense of agency, enabling them to make informed judgments about the content presented in children's picture books. Remarkably, the teacher's innovative approach transcended linguistic barriers, allowing children to switch between languages during discussions. This linguistic agility created a safe space where they felt secure and comfortable, making them share their thoughts freely, engage in constructive critiques of each other's viewpoints, and cultivate increasingly sophisticated and nuanced responses. Thus, Kim's study underscored the immense potential of fostering an inclusive and linguistically agile learning environment that not only challenges conventional gender norms but also empowers young children to explore, question, and ultimately shape their own understanding of the world around them.

Gregory (1990) examined the role of negotiation between a teacher and five-year-old Bangladeshi child within a British Infant School in facilitating the child's reading process during shared reading. The findings emphasized the crucial role the teacher in acculturating the child, who comes from a minority cultural background, to more deeply understand literacy. Through negotiation, the teacher acted as a bridge, guiding the child toward appreciation for and understanding of literacy practices that transcend cultural divides. This process not only enhanced the child's reading skills but also fostered a sense of belonging and inclusivity within the classroom by recognizing and valuing the child's cultural heritage. Gregory's work underscored the transformative power of collaborative negotiation in educational settings, highlighting the importance of teachers as cultural brokers who facilitate cross-cultural understanding and promote literacy development for all students, regardless of their cultural backgrounds.

Child-child interaction. Child-child interaction fosters an environment for children's literary responsiveness. Kim (2014) highlighted the transformative power of bilingual dialogue among young children and demonstrates how these exchanges can act as catalysts for intellectual and emotional growth. As five four-year-old Korean children proficient in Korean and English engaged in nuanced conversations, their literary comprehension of children's picture books reached unprecedented levels. Furthermore, these interactions prompted a significant shift in their understanding of gender identities and roles, which cultivated a nuanced appreciation for the complexities of human diversity. Expanding on this line of inquiry, Kim (2015a) investigated the intricate interplay between peer relationships and interactions among three bilingual Korean girls, all aged four, as they read three children's picture books. This study emphasized the significant influence of differing social ties with peers on shaping children's literary responses. Close-knit peer relationships fostered harmonious viewpoints, while complex dynamics elicited

challenging perspectives. Through collaborative negotiations and meaning-making processes with their peers, children deepened their cognitive engagement participated in critical textual analysis, and explored diverse ideological landscapes. Kim's studies highlighted the effect of nurturing child-child interaction in educational settings. By providing opportunities for dynamic, bilingual, and supportive peer exchange, educators can empower young learners to develop robust literacy skills and social-emotional competencies.

In school, children's engagement with and responses to children's picture books are influenced by various factors. These include practicing reading aloud to the class, which forms the basis for comprehension; reading regulations that govern the classroom environment; the diverse read-aloud styles employed by educators. Each of them shapes the emotional and intellectual landscape of the experience; and the physical arrangement of the space, which creates an atmosphere conducive to learning (Sipe, 1996; 1999). In addition, the depth and breadth of children's responses are influenced by teachers' thought-provoking questions and discussion techniques, which stimulate critical thinking and encourage active participation (Barone, 2010; Nystrand, 1997). Teachers' expectations shape children's confidence and motivation to engage with books, further enhancing their overall experience and learning outcomes (Barone, 2010). Teachers who read children's picture books aloud in class often create an immediate and engaging social context that encourages young learners to respond promptly. By allowing children to participate in open dialogue while reading children's picture books, they are empowered to articulate their thoughts and feelings without the restriction of waiting until the end of the story.

Read-aloud styles. Teachers understand the diverse needs and preferences of their students and use various creative and engaging styles when reading aloud children's picture books (Dickinson & Keebler, 1989; Martinez & Teale, 1993). The specific styles used

by teachers have an impact on children's literacy learning. For instance, using an interactive style in which teachers frequently pause to ask questions, invite predictions, and encourage children to make connections to their own lives can enhance children's comprehension, vocabulary development, and critical thinking skills. Conversely, a more traditional narrative-driven style can also be effective in fostering a sense of wonder and imagination, especially when teachers use expressive voices and gestures to emphasize key plot points and characters' emotions. Furthermore, teachers often adjust their read-aloud styles to align with the tone and content of the book being read. For example, a whimsical and playful style may be employed for a humorous picture book, whereas a more serious and thoughtful approach may be employed for a story with deeper emotional or moral themes. This flexibility allows teachers to create a reading experience that is both engaging and relevant to the children, fostering a deeper connection to the story and its messages. The various read-aloud styles used by teachers demonstrates their commitment to providing a rich and dynamic learning environment for young readers. By tailoring their reading styles to the needs and interests of their students, teachers can help children cultivate a lifelong love for reading and establish a strong foundation for literacy skills.

Teachers' questions and discussion techniques. By posing probing, open-ended questions that ignite curiosity and foster an atmosphere that embraces open-minded discourse, children can engage in rich, meaningful negotiations with their peers, resulting in a deeper, more nuanced comprehension of the subject at hand (Nystrand, 1997). Teachers transform their role from mere question askers to active participants in the learning process, enabling children to delve into discussions with their partners or within small groups. As they transition gracefully, teachers become observers and listeners, circulating among the groups and attentively absorbing exchanges and insights, rather than directing the conversation through a predetermined series of queries (Barone, 2010). This

innovative approach cultivates a vibrant, collaborative learning ecosystem in which children actively co-construct knowledge through dynamic, interactive dialogue, fostering deeper engagement with the subject matter and enhancing their overall learning experience.

The non-school environments

Children's responses to children's picture books are complex manifestations of the interplay between the child, the book, and the surrounding environment—not merely reflections of individual preferences or cognitive abilities. As Sipe (1999) observed, these responses vary across different settings, offering insights into the dynamics of children's literacy development. Embarking on a deeper exploration of children's literary landscapes, it has become increasingly evident that the realm of children's literary responses to children's picture books extends far beyond the structured classroom environment. It blossoms into a myriad of non-school environments where their engagement often diverges from those cultivated in school contexts (Bakhtin, 1986). These non-school environments serve as microcosms of broader societal and cultural contexts, each carrying unique norms, values, and expectations that subtly shape how children perceive and interact with stories. Empirical studies have reinforced the diversity and depth of children's literary responses in non-school environment: Liaw's (1995) study, involving eleven elementary Chinese children with three English picture books in two non-school environment, highlighted that children's literary responses are both diverse and profound. Children engaged with books in myriad ways, extracted personal relevance, and demonstrated the transformative power of picture books to resonate deeply in their lives, regardless of environment. Hu et al. (2012) documented five first-grade Chinese children's enthusiastic and creative responses to four English/Chinese bilingual picture books in a non-school environment. These children's engagement wove connections between self, text layers, and the world, leveraging cultural and personal backgrounds for deeper understanding.

Implication

Implications for educators

Educators should recognize that children's responses to children's picture books are active processes of meaning construction, self-expression, and social interaction, rather than passive information reception. Traditional teacher-centered instruction focusing solely on text interpretation is insufficient to meet children's diverse and creative needs; thus, future literacy education must shift toward a "response-oriented" approach. Educators should move beyond single-mode reading practices, create safe spaces for children to express themselves via open-ended questions, cross-cultural text comparisons, and multimodal creative tasks, and pay special attention to the cultural backgrounds of bilingual and ethnic minority children to guide them in integrating personal experiences with textual meanings. Additionally, educators need to acknowledge each child's uniqueness and differences, provide personalized reading experiences and support tailored to individual needs, and encourage children's active participation and free expression to stimulate their imagination and creativity. In classroom, leveraging teacher-student interactions (e.g., critical literacy pedagogy, bilingual dialogues about gender-themed books) can help children deconstruct texts, critique stereotypes, and develop critical thinking. Peer interactions should also be fostered, as harmonious peer relationships promote shared understanding while complex dynamics elicit diverse perspectives, deepening children's literary engagement.

Implications for parents

Understanding children's response patterns to children's picture books enables parents to better accompany children during reading and nurture harmonious parent-child relationships. By reading together and discussing book content, parents can guide children to engage in deeper thinking and express their feelings, thereby cultivating children's interest in reading and establishing lifelong reading habits.

Implications for researchers

This study reveals the multidimensional characteristics and complex mechanisms of children's responses to children's picture books, pointing out directions for future research. Future studies should explore how cultural backgrounds, age stages, and individual differences influence children's responses, how digital children's picture books (e.g., interactive e-books) reshape response patterns, and how multimedia elements affect children's visual attention allocation and meaning-making strategies. Furthermore, research on the unique response mechanisms of children with special needs (e.g., those with autism or visual impairments) to children's picture books will provide crucial support for the development of inclusive literacy education.

Implications for children's picture books creators

The design features of children's picture books (visual-text integration, color choices, language patterns, etc.) significantly shape children's responses. Bold, high-contrast colors or expressive character faces capture children's attention, while repetitive language and life-related themes trigger emotional resonance. Interactive visual elements (e.g., lift-the-flap designs) increase sustained engagement, and text brevity (fewer than 15 words per page) facilitates parent-child dialogue. These findings inform creators to optimize children's picture books design by prioritizing child-friendly visual and textual features. Additionally, since children respond more positively to books reflecting their cultural backgrounds (e.g., traditional food, familiar environment), creators should enhance cultural representation to boost children's sense of belonging and engagement.

Implications for literacy instruction practice

The classification of children's responses (by expressive modality, cognitive-behavioral processes, and attitudinal orientation) provides systematic tools for educators to observe and respond to children's reading behaviors. For example, the classification by expressive modality (physical manifestations, oral expressions, visual responses, etc.) reflects children's

multiple intelligences and supports differentiated instructional design. Regarding text type selection, traditional literature is more likely to trigger intertextual connections, while non-fiction books better evoke personal emotional responses—educators can select texts based on specific teaching goals (e.g., fostering associative thinking or emotional expression) to enhance instructional effectiveness.

Conclusion

This study analyzes children's diverse responses to children's picture books, revealing the complex mechanisms through which they serve as vital mediators for children's cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural development. Findings indicate that children's engagement with children's picture books is not merely a passive reception of information, but rather a creative activity involving active meaning-making, self-expression, and social interaction. Using a classification framework based on expressive modalities, cognitive-behavioral processes, and attitudinal orientations, this study delves into multidimensional factors influencing children's responses, including reader characteristics, authorial stance, children's picture book attributes, and environmental factors.

Theoretically, this study integrates reader response theory with the print literacy development framework, offering new perspectives on understanding children's interactions with children's picture books. Reader response theory emphasizes the reader's active role in meaning construction, while the print literacy development framework reveals the close connection between cognitive mechanisms and sociocultural contexts. This study validates the applicability of these theories to children's picture book reading and further refines the classification system of children's responses, providing a solid theoretical foundation for educational practice.

At the practical level, this study holds significant implications for educators, parents, researchers, and children's picture book creators. For educators, this study underscores the importance of responsive

literacy instruction, advocating for multimodal, cross-cultural interactive tasks to stimulate children's imagination and creativity. Parents, by participating in their children's reading process, can better guide them toward deeper thinking and emotional expression, thereby cultivating reading interest and lifelong reading habits. Researchers can identify future directions, such as examining how cultural backgrounds, age stages, and individual differences influence children's responses, as well as how digital picture books reshape children's response patterns. For children's picture book creators, this study highlights key elements for optimizing children's picture book design, such as integrating visuals and text and enhancing cultural representation, to increase children's engagement and sense of belonging. Future research may further explore differences in children's responses to children's picture books across cultural contexts and the impact of digital technology on traditional reading patterns. Additionally, studies examining unique response mechanisms to picture books among children with special needs, such as those with autism or visual impairments, will provide robust support for inclusive literary education.

This study not only enriches theoretical knowledge in the field of children's literary response but also offers valuable guidance and insights for practical literary education. By continuously focusing on and supporting children's diverse responses, we can better promote their holistic development, making children's picture books essential companions on their journey of growth.

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