

Work Package 2

R2.1 Research Report on the PIVOT's Theoretical Framework Based on Empirical Findings and Recommendations on Classroom Practices

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1. Introduction The educational landscape is becoming increasingly diverse. Students with diverse learning needs and those who experience discrimination or inequality are falling behind and underachieving in schools (EC, 2023). Over the past decade, inclusive education has been the subject of extensive research and advocacy, with a focus on efforts to include more students with diverse learning needs into general education schools and classrooms (Ferguson, 2008). Supporting the inclusion of all students requires -among other things- empowering and guiding classroom teachers in incorporating best practices and tools tailored to student needs. Thus, the PIVOT project aims to design and implement tools and practices for classroom teachers. As a first step, the consortium focused on defining the PIVOT's theoretical framework by conducting an empirical search to explore the research basis of wordless texts and high-leverage practices for students with diverse learning needs.

1.1 Wordless Texts - Definition

Wordless texts (WTs) are picturebooks, short films or theatre plays, that narrate a story through a sequence of visual elements and very little or no written text (Arizpe, 2013; Arizpe, 2014; Bosch, 2014; Serafini, 2014). The absence of written text is the key to the more open-ended nature of WTs. In particular, WTs texts are suitable for all readers, regardless of their age or experience. In addition, readers can explore the meaning of the narrative in a less restrictive and more playful way. An important characteristic of WTs is that they enable readers to discover cultural diversity, as well as their own and others' identity.

1.1.1 Wordless Picturebooks

A picturebook – as the term implies – contains pictures in a book. Interestingly, in the English dictionary, the spelling is with two words 'picture book', whereas in related research, the term is written as one word to emphasize the inseparability of the two units (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2017, p. 3). Picturebooks can contain only pictures or a combination of pictures and

text. In this review, we will focus on the former definition, which is called silent or wordless picture books. Wordless picturebooks are defined as a literary genre that tells a story in a book through a series of illustrations without written text (Dowhower, 1997). Hereby, “visual images have an almost infinite capacity for verbal extension, because viewers must become their own narrators, changing the images into some form of internalized verbal expression.” (Dowhower, 1997, p. 64). Historically, the first wordless book with a series of unconnected pictures was published in 1777 (Dowhower, 1997). Nowadays, wordless books come in several forms and styles suitable for every age, restricting their use not only to the kindergarten level. Dowhower (1997, p. 68) classifies wordless books into five categories (a book can also belong to more than one category):

1. **Concept-books** that give familiar sequences (e.g., alphabet, numbers, naming) in a certain serial order for identification.
2. **Thematic or sequential-books** in which illustrations are related but not in a conventional story line (e.g., several animals or toys).
3. **Expository-content area books** (e.g., science, social studies) give information.
4. **Visual games-books** that invite the reader to interact with the pictures (e.g., find hidden objects, touch surfaces, compare changes in the pictures, play with illusions and transformations).
5. **Narrative storybooks** contain simplistic to very complex story lines.

The reception of picturebooks has gained a lot of attention in children’s literacy research in the past years. Picturebooks are often among the first books that children encounter, especially before they learn to read. The analysis of visual images can be called *visual literacy*, this refers to the ability to recognize and understand symbols and code in visual texts (Crouch, 2018). Visual literacy needs to be taught to children to provide them with the appropriate terminology to evaluate and narrate visual work (Arizpe, et al., 2018). Deepening the

engagement with wordless picturebooks is one way for teachers or parents to gain knowledge about the visual codes and enrich the reading experience of wordless picturebooks.

Picturebooks “may potentially offer a powerful tool for understanding one’s own and other people’s emotions” (Nikolajeva, 2018, p. 110). Verbalizing these emotions through a narration of the pictures has the potential to connect the cognitive-affective responses to specific words and images. Empirical research studies show that even very young children understand emotional pictures in books and respond to these emotions independently of their own (Arizpe & Styles, 2015). The children’s non-verbal reactions were recorded, including facial expressions, body language, gaze movement, and the duration of time spent on each picture. These are interpreted in relation to the emotional engagement of the child with the depicted scene. Four areas of development capacities that wordless picture books can play in children’s development are cognitive, linguistic, moral, and aesthetic. We focus on the role of wordless texts in the students’ oral language development and active participation in the book’s narration.

2. Impact of Wordless Texts on Student Oral Language Improvement and Academic Learning

Wordless texts can be particularly beneficial in diverse learning environments, where students have varying levels of language proficiency and learning needs. They can also provide a universal medium of communication and can be used as a tool for differentiated instruction, catering to the individual needs of every student. D’Angelo (1981) discusses the benefits of using wordless picture books for young children with language disabilities. They help children build their vocabulary, produce phrases and sentences, develop skills in understanding and predicting the sequence of events, and foster a positive attitude towards reading and books.

Research suggests that wordless picturebooks can be of major importance to the development of (early) literacy in beginning readers. Wordless books are used in classrooms for several reasons (Dowhower, 1997, p. 71). Mainly, they are used by teachers to develop the following skills:

- oral language and vocabulary,
- reading comprehension (e.g., prediction, inferencing, sequencing, noting details, drawing conclusions),
- book handling,
- dictation, group or independent writing,
- drama and pantomime,
- story sense,
- visual literacy (e.g., analyzing and understanding visual messages).

The picture book reader brings their own personal perspective into the narration and develops a more active participation in the story (Dowhower, 1997). Through oral narratives, teachers can observe whether children are able to identify the main idea of the story, predict possible story parts, and associate story events with their own personal experiences. Wordless picturebooks are a bridge between oral and written storytelling as well as reading because children might apply the same strategies in oral storytelling as they would in reading or writing. A few research studies on how teachers use wordless picturebooks in the classroom suggests

that either teachers (or parents) view them as not challenging enough for older children and as such not suitable sufficient for learning how to read (Graham, 1998), or teachers might think wordless picturebooks are too difficult to understand for children and avoid books without written words (Knudsen-Lindauer, 1988). The Visual Journeys project interviewed teachers and notes that as soon as teachers learn how to work with wordless picturebooks, they understand their value in terms of language and thinking skills and are encouraged to revise their expectations of wordless picturebooks (Arizpe et al, 2014).

Research suggests that “an expert mediator can help in the verbalizing tasks, but not all parents or teachers have the knowledge and experience to do so” (Arizpe, 2014, p. 104). In the beginning, children need some time to process the pictures before they can start telling the story. If they start too early with the narration their imagination tends to take over and

they might lose track of the story line. Teachers need to know the common thread of the book and guide children through the narration at the pace that is appropriate for the child. In order to understand a picturebook, Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer (2021) state that two concepts are essential: the **concept of skill** relating to the child and the **concept of markedness** relating to certain properties of the picturebook. The concept of skill is directly connected to learning to read and through years of training leads to **cognitive development**. It depends on acquired world knowledge and experience with (picture) books (Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer, 2021). Learning to read can be viewed as a continuous scale with two ends: novice and expert readers (Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer, 2021). Novice readers have a limited vocabulary to describe visual input and they are less flexible regarding understanding new texts. Expert readers comprehend the pictures more quickly and they can decode central aspects of the story as well as combine these into a story line. Development takes place between these two poles. Through experience with picture books, children learn to develop their linguistic, literary and visual skills. The question remains what fosters the understanding of picturebooks in children.

2.1 Picturebooks And The Development Of Children's Oral Language Skills

Already, research from the 80s shows that reading picture books can foster language skills very early in children because parents initiate a question-response-evaluation of the depicted scenes (Reese & Riordan, 2018). These reading routines “scaffold children’s learning of language, story structure and print” (Reese & Riordan, 2018, p. 381). Most importantly, research not only needs to look at quantity but also the quality of interactions between teachers or parents and children during the reading of a picture book. When these interactions go beyond the visualized scenes or objects and deal with internal states of the characters (e.g., emotions or thoughts), dialogues during reading involve a richer vocabulary, abstract language, and maternal education levels (Reese & Riordan, 2018). One reading method that has been developed by Whitehurst et al. (1988) is called *dialogic reading* and is especially suitable for language-delayed children. In this very interactive form of reading, the adult asks questions on every page of the book, summarizes previously seen pictures and asks the child about prediction for the upcoming pictures and storyline. Reading a book in such a way enhances the child’s understanding of the story and strengthens the emotional connection of the child with the book. The emphasis must be put on *how* the questions are asked, not how often the method is implemented. Teachers who are trained in the method of dialogic reading can easily adapt the complexity of the questions to the child’s oral language skills and improve their narrative skills (Reese & Riordan, 2018).

2.2 Evidence on the Use of Wordless Texts in Teaching Students with Disabilities

In the project PIVOT (Promoting Inclusive Instruction for Active Participation in Diverse Classrooms), we focus on children with disabilities in primary school education and how wordless texts can promote their active engagement and oral language development in inclusive classrooms in Austria, Cyprus, Greece, and Romania.

Wordless texts are effective because children are visually oriented, they do not need to decode and understand any text, and pictures allow for a wider interpretation and elaboration than written words (Dowhower, 1997). These characteristics are especially beneficial for

children with a smaller vocabulary, for children who face challenges with reading (decoding or text comprehension), or children who lag in literacy skills (e.g., book handling such as left-to-right progression).

As Smith (2003) stated, wordless picture books often provide a meaningful context for enhancing students' oral and written communication skills. They can be used in a variety of ways to help develop literacy skills in children with or without special needs. Older children, who have limited proficiency in a specific language, or children who have reading or language difficulties are allowed to create their own story and enjoy the use of wordless picturebooks with excellent results (Jalongo et al., 2002).

When used with the sensitive population of struggling readers, wordless picturebooks can be used as a way to increase the reader's confidence in reading. As soon as these students come to realize that they can actually "read" a book, even if it has no words of its own, they begin to understand what reading means and that they can do it! Cassady (1998) described in detail the example of Robert, a middle school student, who was allowed to use wordless picturebooks to improve his reading. His confidence, automaticity and vocabulary development improved (Cassady, 1998). Students who struggle with reading, including students diagnosed with dyslexia or other disabilities that impair language processing, can greatly benefit from wordless picture books. McGee and Tompkins (1983) described a successful program using these books to emphasize prediction strategies and assist readers with word and phrase recognition. Another population that can benefit from the use of wordless picturebooks are children or youth with language disorders, who often struggle with communication skills. They may exhibit communication issues in the areas of articulation, voice, and/or intonation (McCartan, 1977; as cited in D' Angelo, 1981). Students with communication disorders need numerous opportunities to develop satisfactory oral language skills, which are a prerequisite for reading development. Success in oral language and reading for this student population can begin with wordless books.

Since wordless picturebooks have no text, they are valuable for students with language disorders who do not use or understand a wide variety of words and who do not use or have not yet acquired appropriate rules of syntax. Wordless books can promote those oral language and reading readiness skills necessary to becoming successful. Wordless picture books offer the opportunity to develop vocabulary and syntax, more specifically names of objects, shapes, animals, and people, as well as phrases and sentences that describe actions and events. They also offer the child an opportunity to produce statements in sequential order and to interpret and predict actions, events, outcomes, and feelings (Degler, 1979; Larrick, 1976; as cited in D'Angelo, 1981). Oral language skills can be expanded from the production of a single word or phrase to the production of several complete thoughts or sentences. Another population that can benefit from the use of wordless picturebooks is that of language learners, because lack of print allows them to use any language that they feel comfortable with. The language learner can read the book in their native language. The wordless picturebook seems to act as a story framer that can help learners process concepts and guide them through the structure and the plot (Fowler, 1982) without the barrier of language. It actually provides them with something to speak, read and write about.

What about the population of students who are struggling writers? When it comes to modelling good writing techniques, wordless picturebooks are an effective tool (Murphy, 2009). The images within the books might be used as entertainment, information, and can create a better understanding of literature and the world (Murphy, 2009). The wordless picturebook can hold the interest of students and keep them engaged while learning different writing strategies. Ekpe and Egbe (2005) suggest that “reading wordless books and sharing the stories with and among children offer a strong motivation for reading and writing among all children” (p. 27). Similarly, Swan (1992) argues that since wordless picturebooks are very enjoyable children are more likely to use them as a tool or prompt for writing. By integrating wordless picturebooks into the writing process, students may start using their creativity and produce more ideas (Paquette, 2007).

Finally, wordless or with short texts can be a valuable asset in helping young students with disabilities understand their own emotions and how to regulate them (Zambo, 2007). For example, students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have difficulty with behavioral inhibition, which in turn hinders self-regulation of emotion or affect (Barkley, 1998). Another group of students who experience difficulty with emotion regulation are children with emotional disorders (ED). Children with ED have extreme difficulty regulating how they feel, or exhibit externalizing behaviors such as aggression and non-compliance or may internalize their feelings, such as show flat affect (Lambrose et al., 1998). With the help of wordless picturebooks or picturebooks with a few words as text, the students can listen carefully to the story and try to understand how someone feels when experiencing various feelings. The book illustrations can initiate conversations about emotional regulation. Teacher can model emotion regulation strategies, and students could set goals and plans for using these strategies (Zambo, 2007). Although research on the usefulness of wordless texts and students with diverse learning needs is scarce, a recent review on the use of wordless books with certain populations such as people with intellectual disabilities and/or autism suggests that these people selectively attend to visual information so using wordless texts minimizes cognitive load, anxiety and empowers them.

In conclusion, wordless texts have been shown to be valuable for developing reading, writing, and oral language with virtually all students who have the proper guidance and encouragement. These attributes make wordless texts the ideal tools for literacy development as well as emotional development in inclusive classrooms.

3 Method 3.1 Article selection criteria

We completed a search in Google Scholar, SCOPUS, and the EBSCO database. Furthermore, we searched the local national libraries of the partner countries (Austria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), the curricula for primary education, and the curricula for special needs education in our respective countries. In addition, we have included European reports, policy papers and

educational websites from the partner countries. We used the search strings “wordless picture book”, “special needs education” and “inclusion/inclusive classrooms”. We tried to limit our search results to literature resources published from 1998 until 2023.

4. Results As per Table 1 shows these are the results from the literature review for each partner country separately.

Table 1 Categories of the publications reviewed

Countries	Total no of Resources found	Total no of publications		Total no of curricula/ websites/national reports
		Journal papers/theses	Books	
Austria	86	51	29	6
Cyprus	27	9	1	17
Greece	13	-	-	13
Romania	17	1	16	10

4.1 Austria In the curriculum for primary education as well as the curriculum for schools with special education we did not find any occurrence of *wordless picturebook(s)* (German: textloses Bilderbuch - singular, textlose Bilderbücher - plural) or *wordless* (German: textlos). In the library of Austrian University Colleges for Primary Education, that are solely in charge of the education of primary school teachers in Austria, we found 3 resources using *wordless picturebooks* from 1998 to 2023. One was a master thesis, one was a book, and one was an article published in a book. All of them are available through library loan. We reviewed the 3 resources in more detail and want to highlight the master thesis related to primary education and wordless texts: Pleger (2022) conducted a 2-month-intervention with wordless

picturebooks with children in first grade to support oral narrative skills (e. g., vocabulary, cohesion of the story, predictions, structure of the story). Pleger observed and recorded the children's storytelling of two stories while using material to promote their narrative skills in the classroom. Before and after the intervention Pleger used a screening grid to evaluate characteristics of storytelling. The results show that all children benefited from the intervention and wordless picturebooks are suitable to nurture literary and language skills in first graders. The Library of the University of Vienna, the biggest University in Austria, yielded 8 resources with the key words *wordless picturebooks* between 2011 and 2023. The search in scholar google for *wordless picturebooks* (German: textlose Bilderbücher) in combination with *inclusion* (German: Inklusion) and *primary education* yielded 51 resources in total (years 1998-2023). This search in google-scholar for Austria was conducted in German and included resources from the German-speaking countries: Austria, Germany and Switzerland.

4.2 Cyprus & Greece

Since Cyprus and Greece both share the same language, they obtained the same results in google scholar. Therefore, we will present the results from both countries in one section. In the curriculum for primary education as well as the curriculum for special education there was no occurrence of the terms: *wordless picture book*, *silent books* (Greek: βουβά βιβλία) or *picture books* (Greek: εικονοβιβλία). During the search in google scholar for the key words: *wordless picture books* or *silent books*, in Greek language we found 11 hits: 9 of them are articles, one is a master thesis and one is a bachelor thesis. When we tried to search a combination of key words: *wordless picture books*, *inclusion* and *primary education*, there were no results in Greek literature.

4.3 Romania

The use of "wordless texts" in Romanian primary school classrooms remains relatively unexplored, primarily due to the emphasis on foundational learning skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic during this stage. Consequently, instructional methods in primary education heavily prioritize written texts, often overlooking the potential benefits of wordless

materials. However, in preschool education, wordless texts are frequently employed as a pedagogical tool to foster language and cognitive development in young children. Building upon this pedagogical approach, we conducted a search using the following string: "lectura după imagini" OR "cărți fără cuvinte" OR "cărți cu imagini" AND "ciclu primar" OR "învățământ primar" OR "școlari mici" AND "elevi cu CES" OR "copii cu CES" OR "elevi cu dizabilități" ["reading after pictures" OR "books without words" OR "books with pictures" AND "primary cycle" OR "primary education" OR "small school children" AND "students with SEN" OR "children with SEN" OR "students with disabilities"]. This search aimed to explore the integration of wordless texts into primary education, particularly among students with disabilities, providing valuable insights into innovative teaching methods and inclusive practices. Only 72 bibliographic records were retrieved on February 22, 2024, from journals spanning various categories (e.g., education, psychology, linguistics, child development). When the term "primary education" was added to the search string, the number of records was reduced to three hits, while adding "students" (or "children") with disabilities yielded no results. A detailed analysis of the 70 records included identifying educational practices in the use of wordless texts in the Romanian educational contexts. Of the 70 records, 16 covered primary education, 51 preschool education, and three inclusive education.

5. Recommendations for Using of Wordless Texts in Inclusive Classrooms

Beginning readers, such as children in primary education, require adequate learning situations with a didactic point of view to fully understand wordless texts. Learning situations could be offered in a classroom or an everyday situation at home. The key to lead wordless texts is interaction has been i.e. communication. Teachers need to learn how to jointly look at wordless text with a child and motivate certain speech acts that drive the narrative forward. They can learn how to fine-tune their infocusyles according to specific visualized topics.

The integration of nearly wordless picture books presents an opportunity for educators to enhance students' critical reading skills, particularly in inclusive classrooms. By reducing reliance on linguistic elements and prioritizing visual cues, teachers can foster the development of students' ability to analyze and interpret texts effectively (Mantei & Kervin,

2015). Using wordless texts in inclusive classrooms fosters dialogue and critical discussions by encouraging students to interpret visual cues, infer meaning, and engage in collaborative analysis of the illustrations (Papen, 2020). Other studies emphasize the benefit of wordless picture books on enhancing literary understanding, by allowing students to engage with narratives on a deeper level (Sipe, 2008), and facilitating aesthetic development, by encouraging children to explore the artistic elements of illustration (Doonan, 1993). Using wordless texts in inclusive classrooms provides a flexible tool for educators to address various educational objectives while accommodating students with different abilities. Wordless picture books offer a rich and engaging educational resource for enhancing students' learning experiences.

6. Conclusion

It seems that wordless texts are only a side issue in curricula that are not worth mentioning directly. One reason could be that wordless texts are considered to be suitable only for quite young children such as preschoolers, because without any text they might not be able to enhance their reading skills. Wordless texts are easy to understand and self-explanatory, hence any interpretation and reading is possible. However, these arguments especially support the reading of wordless texts. They contain complex texts with different semantic levels, which can highlight the reader's very specific connection or relationship with the depicted elements and symbols. Through dialogic reading, the oral language skills are developed and the engagement with wordless text can open the door to early literacy skills that are the foundation for learning reading and writing school. The multiple levels of interpretations offer a multitude of levels of complexity that invites all ages and even students with disabilities to read wordless texts.

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