



THE INTEGRATION OF WORDLESS PICTURE BOOKS IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES AMONG GREEK EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

Dimitrakopoulou Iliada-Anna¹ⁱ,

Latsou Eleni²,

Sidiropoulou Maretta³

¹Early Childhood Education and Care Educator,
Mandras' Municipality Public Nursery School,
Attica, Greece

Msc Pedagogy through Innovative Technologies and Biomedical Approaches,
University of West Attica,
Athens, Greece

²Early Childhood Education and Care Educator,
Glyfadas' Municipality Public Nursery School,
Attica

Msc Pedagogy through Innovative Technologies and Biomedical Approaches,
University of West Attica,
Athens, Greece

³Associate Professor,
Department of Education Sciences in the Early Childhood
Democritus University of Thrace,
Alexandroupolis, Greece

Abstract:

This study explores the pedagogical value of wordless picture books as an innovative educational tool in early childhood education, emphasizing their capacity to foster active meaning-making processes, as well as to enrich imagination and interpretive engagement among young learners. By shifting the reading process from passive reception to participatory experience, wordless books encourage children to construct narratives through visual literacy and personal expression. The research aims to investigate the level of familiarity of early childhood educators in Greece with wordless picture books and to examine their potential integration into nursery school settings, particularly for children aged 2.6 to 4 years. Furthermore, it seeks to identify the degree of familiarity of the Greek pedagogical community with them, as well as their views on the benefits of these books for both educational practice and children's development. Finally, it presents the thoughts and limitations regarding their integration into preschool environments. Methodologically, the study draws on a review of contemporary literature on the educational applications of wordless picture books, alongside qualitative data collected

ⁱ Correspondence: email elenaki.93@hotmail.com

through semi-structured interviews with practicing early childhood educators. Overall, the study underscores the importance of enriching pedagogical approaches through alternative literacy tools and advocates for the wordless picture books integration into early childhood curricula as a means of enhancing both teaching practices and children's learning experiences.

Keywords: wordless picture books, visual education, preschool education, early childhood education centers

1. Introduction

Early childhood education represents a critical period in a child's development, laying the foundation for cognitive, emotional, and social growth. In Greek kindergarten classes, reading fairy tales is an everyday phenomenon that offers various benefits overall to the development of infants and toddlers. Through reading texts and images, both educators and children process meanings, emotions and ideas, a process that plays a central role in the daily education of preschool children.

The traditional approaches to children's literature in both home and educational settings often follow predictable narrative structures, with a clear beginning, middle, and end, and also minimal variation in visual and textual content (Paschalidou, 2021). Teachers frequently select reading materials based on their own perceptions of childhood and the realities they wish to convey, which, while it is practical for instruction, can limit opportunities for children to engage with more complex and innovative forms of storytelling. Research indicates that such conventional practices may restrict young learners' ability to deeply understand narrative content and to independently apply comprehension strategies (Paschalidou, 2021). Consequently, there is a growing need for interactive and innovative educational approaches that enrich literary experiences and foster more active, critical engagement with texts.

In this context, wordless picture books offer a unique and promising pedagogical tool. Unlike conventional storybooks, these types of books rely entirely on imagery to convey narrative, allowing children to actively construct meaning, interpret visual cues, and generate their own stories (Dermata & Nika, 2024; Arizpe & Styles, 2015). This open-ended approach encourages visual literacy, creativity, critical thinking, and empathy, positioning the child as a central participant in the storytelling process rather than a passive recipient of pre-determined narratives. Wordless books thus provide opportunities for collaborative exploration between educators and children without linguistic barriers or textual limitations among students, promoting expressive freedom and participatory learning in early childhood classrooms. These possibilities, combined with the fact that emerges from modern research that wordless picture books are not yet so widespread and integrated into the educational community, make them ideal tools for innovative pedagogical practice.

2. Literature review

2.1 The wordless reading ecosystem in preschool education: roles, interactions and meaning-making process

The wordless reading ecosystem in the preschool classrooms represents a transformative pedagogical space where the absence of verbal narrative functions not as a void, but as a dynamic invitation for participatory interpretation and semiotic exploration (Terrusi, 2018). Within this frame, wordless picture books (WPBs) serve as catalysts for creative and critical thinking, encouraging children to navigate a narrative landscape that is unconstrained by the boundaries of written language (Dermata & Nika, 2024). This “active silence” compels young readers to focus intensely on visual cues, transforming the act of reading into a process of discovering non-verbal communicative content and constructing personal meanings (Terrusi, 2018). Unlike traditional narratives where the plot is anchored by text, the narrative flow in WPBs is contingent upon the reader's ability to identify temporal, causal, and symbolic links within the image sequence (Bosch, 2014; Jordanaki & Kalogirou, 2020). As exemplified by works like Istvan Banyai's book, “Zoom”, the non-linear structure of these books fosters “creative indecision,” where ambiguity becomes strength rather than a barrier, allowing for multiple, valid interpretations (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). This meaning-making process is deeply rooted in Iser's (1978) concept of “textual gaps,” which requires the reader to bridge interpretive silences by mobilizing their own experiences, emotions, and cultural references (Kanatsouli, 2015; Dermata & Nika, 2024).

The successful functioning of this ecosystem necessitates a fundamental shift in the traditional roles of the teacher and the child. The educator must transcend the role of a mere narrator or authority figure, evolving instead into a mediator and animator of the reading experience (Bayraktar & Bayraktar, 2024). This transition requires a conscious de-centering of the teacher's authority, as they must embrace the existence of polyphonic narratives and resist the urge to impose a single correct interpretation (Graikos & Tsilimeni, 2007). The teacher's role is multifaceted: they provide access to literary culture, facilitate the decoding of character emotions, and curate a supportive environment that encourages dialogue and spontaneous expression (Norton, 2003; Oikonomou, 2017). Effective mediation involves sophisticated storytelling techniques, such as the strategic use of body language, facial expressions, and vocal modulation to breathe life into the visual narrative (Anagnostopoulos, 1997). Furthermore, the educator acts as a scaffold for visual literacy, a skill that is not innate but developed through guided practice in understanding conventions like perspective, temporal sequence, and symbolic color use (Tsilidou, 2020).

Parallel to the teacher's evolution, the child assumes a protagonist role, becoming the primary architect of the verbalized story. In this wordless space, the child is not merely a spectator but an active narrator who self-teaches the skills of visual decoding and synthesis (Oikonomidou, 2016). This autonomy allows children to project their internal worlds onto the pages, fostering an intersymbolic connection that goes beyond

intertextuality (Ziougri, 2020). However, the interaction within this ecosystem is not solely between the child and the book; it is a collaborative co-construction of meaning between the child, the teacher, and the peer group. Peer-to-peer interactions during these discussions enhance social intelligence and mutual respect, as children learn to value diverse viewpoints (Bayraktar & Bayraktar, 2024). The pedagogical success of the WPB ecosystem ultimately hinges on the teacher's willingness to “*share the power of the word,*” ensuring that the intervention of the adult supports rather than stifles the child's voice (Bayraktar & Bayraktar, 2024). By repositioning the educator as an empathetic listener and the child as an empowered narrator, the preschool classroom is transformed from a site of didactic instruction into a vibrant community of visual and emotional inquiry (Dermata & Nika, 2024).

2.2 Pedagogical theories that encourage the use of wordless picture books in preschool education

The integration of wordless picture books (WPBs) into preschool settings is far more than an alternative storytelling method; it is a foundational pedagogical approach supported by robust theoretical frameworks. The absence of verbal text shifts the burden of meaning-making onto the reader, transforming the act of reading into a dynamic process of discovery, inference, and interpretation. In synthesis, there are theoretical perspectives that demonstrate that wordless picture books are not “silent” in the literal sense; rather, they elicit a rich internal monologue within the reader. By necessitating the filling of interpretive gaps, the inference of intentions, and emotional identification, these books constitute a powerful developmental tool that promotes cognitive and socio-emotional maturation in early childhood education.

2.2.1 The reader-response and reception theory: the reader as co-creator

According to reception theory, as articulated by Jauss (1995), a literary work is not a static object but a dialectical process between production and reception. Within this framework, the reader ceases to be a passive recipient and emerges as a co-creator of meaning, which is dynamically shaped during the reading event (Holub, 2004).

In WPBs, this function is intensified through what Iser termed “*interpretive gaps*” (indeterminacy). Iser argues that these gaps serve as textual strategies that activate the reader’s creative participation (Papailia, 2022). Similarly, Ingarden (1978) describes the literary work as a “*skeleton*” or a “*schematized structure*” that achieves completeness only through the active involvement of the reader, who utilizes personal experiences and expectations to forge a coherent narrative. For the preschooler, the absence of text provides the ultimate incomplete framework, necessitating the mobilization of their subjective world to fill the silence of the pages.

2.2.2 Theory of mind: decoding intention and social cognition

Engagement with WPBs serves as an advanced cognitive exercise in theory of mind — the ability to attribute mental states, desires, and intentions to others, which is central to

social development (Völlm et al., 2006). Bruner (1986) was among the first to highlight the connection between narrative activity and social-cognitive states, noting that a primary function of storytelling is the exploration of human intention.

In the case of wordless narratives, the lack of explanatory prose compels the child to interpret the internal states of the characters solely through visual evidence, such as facial expressions, gestures, and body language (Papailia, 2022). As children attempt to justify characters' actions based on inferred beliefs and motives, they develop cognitive tools that allow them to conceptualize abstract or non-visible situations, thereby enhancing their capacity to understand others as autonomous agents (Cates & Nicolopoulou, 2019).

2.2.3 Theory of emotional intelligence and empathy

The development of emotional intelligence, defined by Goleman (1995) as the capacity to recognize and understand emotions to inform decision-making, is deeply fostered by literary experiences. Literature provides vicarious emotional encounters that contribute to the development of neural circuits associated with empathy (Ghosn, 1998).

However, WPBs offer a unique quality of affective engagement. As Nikolajeva (2013) observes, the synergy of image and silence allows for direct, unmediated contact with a character's emotional state. Without the predetermined path imposed by a written text, children must construct their own meanings regarding the social interactions they observe (Yang, Cheng, & Chou, 2016). This interpretive freedom cultivates emotional sensitivity and openness to the "other," as children are invited to adopt different perspectives and navigate the complexity of emotional reactions within a safe, fictional space.

3. Structural realities and pedagogical innovation in Greek early childhood settings

In Greek early childhood education centers, daily programs are designed to balance structure, flexibility, and responsiveness to children's individual needs, emphasizing safety, predictability, and the fulfillment of biological and emotional needs (Bredenkamp & Copple, 2009; Loizou, 2023). Educators act as facilitators, recognizing each child's uniqueness and promoting autonomy, while adapting activities to the dynamics of the group (Zakopoulou, 2023). These activities typically focus on music, visual arts, and traditional book reading, reflecting established practices that aim to support cognitive, social, and emotional development.

However, educators often face time constraints and a demanding workload, leaving limited space for innovative or child-centered approaches. In many public and private centers, due to limited state investments in preschool education, resources are scarce, with the materials and books available in the structures being minimal and out of date. This forces educators to dedicate personal time to searching for appropriate titles and to procure materials at their own expense. As a result, the introduction of new pedagogical strategies – the possibility of using wordless picture books in their practice

– depends largely on the financial situation and the initiative and professional development of individual teachers, making exposure to innovative practices inconsistent across settings.

4. Research approach

4.1 Research aim & questions

The present study focuses on the perceptions and practices of Greek early childhood educators regarding Wordless Picture Books (WPBs) in the teaching of infants and toddlers in the country's nursery schools. For this purpose, the research adopts a qualitative research approach, which is considered the most suitable for an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena, participants' experiences, and subjective perceptions. Given, on the one hand, the limited research and application on this subject in Greece, as well as its rich exploratory nature, a qualitative approach allows an in-depth examination of the participants' subjective experiences, professional concerns, and creative ideas (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The primary aim of this research is to understand how early childhood educators perceive the teaching value of the wordless picture books and investigate the degree of familiarity and the practical implementation of the wordless picture books by educators working in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) To what extent are Greek early childhood educators familiar with the term and concept of WPBs?
- 2) What are the perceived developmental and pedagogical benefits of utilizing wordless narratives in the preschool classrooms?
- 3) What roles do the students and the educator play during a classroom silent book reading, and what are the primary barriers to their integration at preschool care centers?
- 4) Are they integrated into preschool classes, and if not, what are the possible obstacles to their integration?
- 5) Is there a perceived need for professional development and academic training regarding this specific literary genre?

4.2 Research methodology

The research utilized semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection tool, allowing for methodological flexibility and in-depth probing. This particular option was considered suitable for the in-depth investigation of participants' personal opinions, attitudes, and experiences, as it constitutes one of the most effective techniques for collecting qualitative data, because it combines flexibility with the ability to focus on specific topics (Tsiolis, 2014). In this case, each researcher had a list of predetermined themes and flexible questions that could be reshaped during the discussion, depending on the flow of the interview and each participant's responses (Lagoumintzis,

Vlachopoulos & Koutsogiannis, 2015). Moreover, the process of data collection follows comparative analysis, where the responses are grouped, coded, and analyzed with the aim of categorizing thematic axes and drawing interpretative conclusions about the phenomenon under investigation (Lagoumintzis, Vlachopoulos & Koutsogiannis, 2015).

The study's collected data were analyzed following this approach, using Thematic Analysis, which facilitated the identification of recurring patterns that were subsequently categorized into five distinct thematic axes. More specifically, based on the research questions, five main thematic categories were identified, which were as follows:

- 1) The views regarding the levels of familiarity of educators with the topic of wordless picture books.
- 2) The views regarding the pedagogical value and the perceptions of children.
- 3) The views regarding the role of the educator and their incorporation into the daily schedule of nursery schools.
- 4) The views regarding the educators' need for training.
- 5) The views regarding the teaching utilization.

4.3 Participants

To address the research questions, purposive sampling was employed—a strategic approach where participants are selected based on specific criteria predefined by the researcher. As noted by Chalikias, Lalou, and Manolesou (2016), this method ensures the formation of a sample that is representative of the study's specific objectives, distinguishing it from convenience sampling. The study population consisted of educators enrolled in the Master's program "Education Sciences through Innovative Technologies and Biomedical Approaches" at the University of West Attica (academic year 2024-2025), specifically within the Early Childhood Education track. From a total pool of 33 students, ten female educators were selected. This targeted selection ensured that the data were gathered from individuals with specialized academic interests and active professional engagement, thereby enhancing the validity and contextual relevance of the findings. To ensure anonymity, participants are referred to by the alphanumeric codes P1 through P10. The sample reflects a high degree of professional and academic diversity, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Socio-demographic and professional profile of participants

Code	Educational background	Teaching experience (years)	Professional setting	Target age group
P1	Dual Degree (UE & TE)	18	Public ECEC	3–4 years
P2	TE Graduate	18	Public ECEC	3–4 years
P3	Dual Degree (UE & TE)	25	Public ECEC (Director)	Administrative of ECEC
P4	TE Graduate	2 months	Currently unemployed	N/A
P5	TE Graduate	22	Public ECEC	2.5–3.5 years
P6	TE Graduate	3	Public ECEC	2.5–3.5 years

P7	UE Graduate	15	Public ECEC	3–4 years
P8	UE Graduate	7	Public ECEC	3–4 years
P9	UE Graduate	16	Public ECEC	3–4 years
P10	TE Graduate	3	Private ECEC	1.5–2.5 years

Note: UE = University Education; TE = Technological Education; ECEC = Early Childhood Education Center.

4.4 Rationale for sample plurality

The sample is characterized by a wide dispersion in professional experience, ranging from 2 months (P4) to 25 years (P3). Specifically, the cohort includes "novice" educators (0–3 years, n=3), mid-career professionals (5–16 years, n=3), and "veteran" educators (18–25 years, n=4). This diversity is methodologically significant, as it allows for the triangulation of perspectives across different stages of professional maturity and "creative self-efficacy."

Furthermore, the inclusion of educators working across various age brackets—from infancy (1.5–2.5 years) to preschool (3–4 years)—as well as those in administrative roles (P3), ensures a polyphonic representation of the ECEC sector. This variety allows the study to capture how the pedagogical application of Wordless Picture Books is perceived across different developmental stages and institutional contexts.

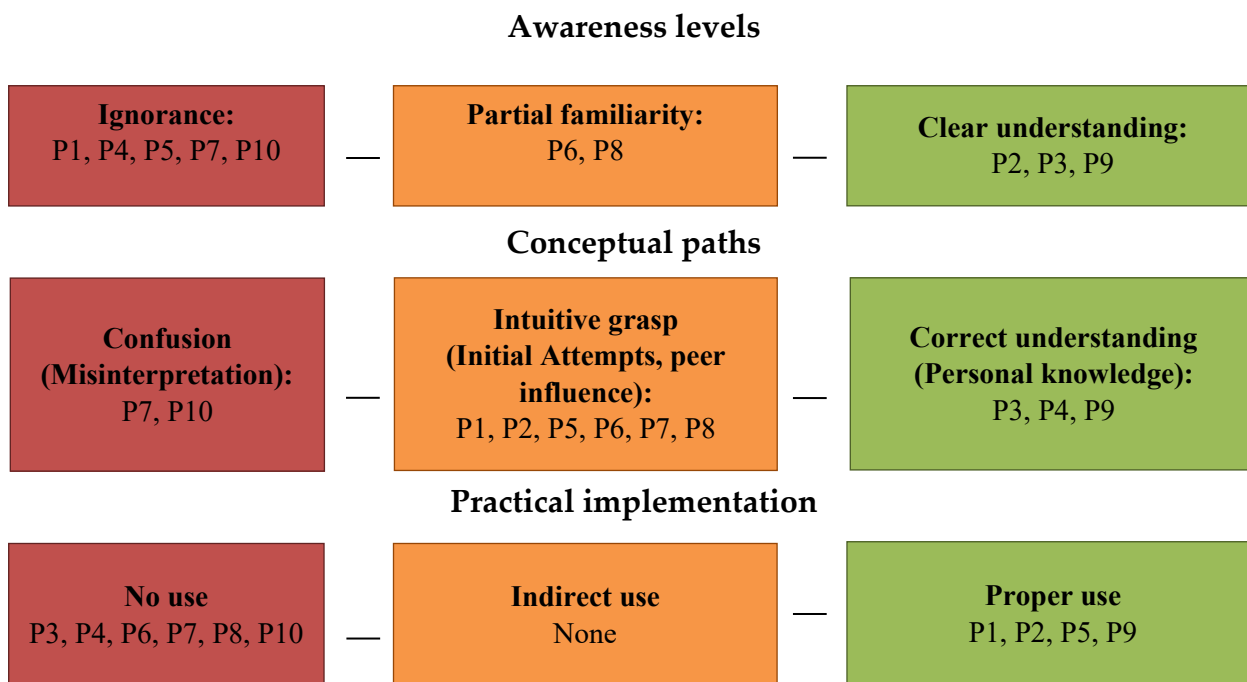
5. Research findings

5.1 Familiarity and conceptual understanding

The data, as they appear in chart 1, reveal a notable dichotomy in educators' awareness of the term wordless picture book. While 50% of the participants reported some degree of familiarity, further probing indicated the presence of conceptual ambiguity and uneven depth of understanding.

Moreover, the majority of educators (P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P10) have never worked with wordless books in their professional practice or during their internships, either due to lack of awareness (P4, P6) or because they did not recognize a clear distinction at the time between wordless books and other types of early childhood picture books (P7, P10). For example, P7 reported encountering similar materials in infant classrooms; however, her description suggested confusion with concept books aimed at vocabulary development, lacking narrative coherence. A similar misunderstanding was evident in the case of P10, who claimed to use such books daily, but also referred to materials consisting of isolated images for infants' verbal development without a narrative structure. These findings highlight the need for further training and conceptual clarification. At the same time, it is noteworthy that P8, although she had not formally used a wordless book, described a related practice during her internship, where she used self-made printed image sequences from familiar stories to encourage children's storytelling, indicating an intuitive—yet not fully articulated—understanding of the concept.

Chart 1: Conceptual map of educators' awareness and use of wordless picture books



Specifically, five participants (P1, P4, P5, P7, P10) stated that they had no prior knowledge, not even of the term. For instance, P1 reported that she was introduced to the concept for the first time by the research team and expressed immediate interest in borrowing relevant material for classroom use, a stance also shared by P5. Despite this initial unfamiliarity, several participants were able to construct intuitive definitions when prompted. P1 described wordless picture books as *“books with only pictures without words, in which the story is composed by the children and the educator”* while P4 emphasized their open-ended nature, noting that they are *“without a fixed story that changes each time depending on the reader”*. Similarly, P6 suggested that *“the educator probably tells her own story, which can change, or the children tell it”* and P9 added that *“the story is created by the educator or by the children themselves, depending on their level and age”*. In contrast, P3 provided a more precise and conceptually grounded definition, describing wordless picture books as *“books with few or no words, which rely on illustrations to convey meaning”* thereby highlighting their image-centric narrative structure. Notably, although P3 possessed wordless books for personal use, she had not incorporated them into her pedagogical practice, suggesting that recognition of their value does not necessarily translate into professional implementation.

At the same time, five participants (P2, P3, P6, P8, P9) reported some familiarity with the term, often attributing their awareness to professional experience or peer collaboration. As P2 mentioned: *“I first encountered these books through a colleague who used them in her practice which inspired me to explore them further as well,”* highlighting the role of the educational community in the dissemination of innovative practices. This is further supported by P2's subsequent engagement with such materials by buying and using two of them in classroom themed projects, as well as by P9, who reported having already

implemented the wordless book *The Journey* by Aaron Becker in her teaching, using a gradual approach that moved from educator-led narration to children's active participation. However, this familiarity was not always accompanied by clear or in-depth knowledge. For example, P6 acknowledged familiarity but was unable to identify its source, indicating a rather superficial engagement with the concept. Likewise, although P8 and P9 appeared confident in recognizing the term, they did not always elaborate further, suggesting a general but limited understanding.

Finally, the case of P10 is particularly indicative of conceptual confusion. Although she initially stated that she had encountered the term, her subsequent explanation revealed a conflation with cloth baby books aimed at vocabulary development, as she described them as "soft books with only images and sounds." This misinterpretation highlights the lack of clarity surrounding the concept and reinforces the broader finding that even when the term is recognized, it is not always accurately understood.

5.2. Pedagogical value of integration

The findings reveal a robust consensus among educators regarding the integration of Wordless Picture Books (WPBs) in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings. Nine out of ten participants expressed a strong conviction that WPBs are invaluable pedagogical tools. A notable exception (P10) stemmed not from a rejection of the medium's value, but from a conceptual overlap with infant "vocabulary board books," highlighting a need for clearer terminological distinctions in professional training.

The educators identified diverse levels of implementation, ranging from autonomous exploration in the classroom library (P2, P3, P5, P7) to structured "organized pedagogical units or projects" (P1). A significant finding was the potential of WPBs in multicultural classrooms; as P4 emphasized, "*the absence of text renders the narrative accessible to children of diverse linguistic backgrounds*", fostering an inclusive environment where the image serves as a universal language. Therefore, the freedom that arises from the fact that every child in the classroom, regardless of race or literacy level, can read such a book without language barriers and boundaries that often arise in traditional intertextual books can function positively and "*can help children feel important and boost their self-confidence*" (P7).

The responses from educators demonstrated a broad recognition of the multidimensional benefits that wordless picture books offer, covering cognitive, linguistic, social-emotional and creative areas of development. The key emerging learning and developmental benefits articulated were those summarized into several developmental domains in Table 2.

Table 2: Perceived developmental benefits of wordless picture books

Developmental domain	Key contributions & pedagogical functions	Representative educator quotes
1. Linguistic development	Enhancement of oral expression, vocabulary enrichment, and narrative competence.	<i>"They develop speech... as the child wants to say something of their own accord" (P5).</i>
2. Imagination & creativity	Promotion of mythopoiesis (story-making), role-playing, and creative reconstruction of content.	<i>"WPB's don't limit, they cultivate the imagination, they can change the words every time." (P6).</i>
3. Cognitive development	Cultivation of critical thinking, active observation, memory, and attentional focus.	<i>"They focus on interpretive capacity and active observation" (P4, P7).</i>
4. Socio-emotional development & cooperation	Strengthening of teamwork, collaborative learning, and group cohesion.	<i>"If managed properly, collaborative learning can emerge" (P7).</i>
5. Emotional intelligence	Development of empathy and the ability to recognize and label complex emotions.	<i>"WPBs enrich empathy and the recognition of emotions" (P8).</i>
6. Psychology (Projective function)	Use of WPBs as diagnostic/projective tools to access a child's inner world and psychological state.	<i>"Very important projective and, by extension, diagnostic tools" (P1).</i>
7. Visual literacy	Ability to decode, interpret, and derive meaning from visual stimuli and illustrations.	<i>"Children may not know how to read words, but they already 'read' images in their own way" (P7).</i>
8. Confidence boosting	Empowerment through active participation and the validation of the child's personal narrative.	<i>"The reading process can help children feel important and boost their self-confidence" (P7).</i>

A poignant insight was provided by P1, who highlighted the projective function of WPBs. Drawing from her experience as both an educator and therapist, she noted that children may project personal traumas onto the silent narrative, citing a case where a child with a history of abuse mirrored their experiences through the reading of the book *The Chicken Thief* by Béatrice Rodriguez in her classroom. This perspective adds a unique dimension to the analysis, highlighting the possibility of using them to understand the inner world of children and the early identification of potential needs.

There was also an overwhelming agreement (P1-P9) that children respond to WPBs with enthusiasm and active agency. Educators observed that children relish the role of the narrator: *"They particularly enjoy the role of the storyteller and participate actively"* (P2). While the majority identified the 2–4 age group as the "optimal developmental period" for incorporating WPBs in kindergartener classrooms—since these children *"already read images in their own way"* (P7)—a minority (P1, P3, P6) argued that even younger infants (1–2 years) can engage if the material is developmentally attuned. However, participants cautioned that the quality of children's engagement is heavily mediated by the educator's stance. As P3 and P4 noted, the success of the medium depends on whether the practitioner *"knows how to work with it correctly."*

Additionally, the concept of polyphony (the simultaneous emergence of multiple interpretations) was met with a predominantly positive or neutral stance. Eight educators viewed this interpretive plurality as an asset that enhances collective meaning-making. P8 observed that *"each child complements the other,"* while P9 suggested that *"multiple voices can uncover hidden layers of the imagery."*

Despite this optimism, the data suggests a pragmatic concern regarding classroom management. Educators (P5, P6, P8, P9) stressed the necessity of establishing a communicative culture. P5 specifically advised that WPBs should be introduced only after a framework of dialogue rules has been established, to prevent chaotic situations during reading. Interestingly, P4 expressed a degree of *"anticipatory anxiety"* regarding the management of this plurality, linking it to a lack of prior experience with unstructured activities. Ultimately, polyphony was framed not as a problem, but as a pedagogical challenge (P3) that, if managed well, leads directly to collaborative learning.

5.3 The educator's role and systemic barriers

5.3.1 The educator as a scaffolder: redefining the narrative role

The findings suggest a paradigm shift in the educator's role during the "reading" of Wordless Picture Books (WPBs). Participants moved away from the concept of the traditional, authoritative narrator, adopting instead the role of a facilitator and scaffolder who creates the necessary framework for children's active agency.

A central theme in the educators' discourse (P3, P4, P10) was the necessity of flexibility and preparedness. P10 underscored the absence of a "one-size-fits-all recipe," arguing that the pedagogical approach must remain fluid, adapting to the immediate needs and group dynamics of the classroom. This non-prescriptive stance is crucial for WPBs, as it allows the narrative to emerge organically from the children rather than being imposed by the adult. The role of the educator as an animator was explicitly highlighted by the majority of participants (P2-P9). Their primary contribution is not to provide answers but to pose open-ended, dialogic questions that spark reflection and guide the narrative flow without predetermining its meaning. P8 noted that this supportive role includes holding space for children's personal projections and life experiences, ensuring they are *"heard and not hindered"*, and P9 further refined this role by suggesting that *"the educator acts as a connective link,"* using recapitulation to help children weave individual observations into a cohesive story.

The data also revealed a sophisticated understanding of gradual intervention based on the children's age and familiarity with the medium (P1, P5, P6, P9). P1 provided a longitudinal perspective of this process through her experience with three different WPBs: *"In the beginning, the educator might be more interventional with questions until the children become familiar... In the first book (The Chicken Thief), the children were hesitant. By the time we read the third book (Once Upon a Forest), they narrated the story entirely on their own, and I simply summarized their words while recording the story."*

This trajectory illustrates a transition from high-support intervention to minimal mediation, where the educator's presence fades as the children's interpretive confidence grows. P5 succinctly captured this developmental curve, noting that "*the older the children, the smaller the teacher's intervention.*"

Finally, the educators emphasized the importance of active listening (P1, P7, P8). The pedagogical goal is to accept all child interpretations, even those that deviate from the visual narrative's perceived direction. P7 described this as a two-phase process: initially allowing free expression without judgment, and only later, through reflective questioning, gently guiding children toward deeper visual observation. This approach fosters a safe emotional environment conducive to empathy and self-expression.

5.3.2 Navigating the personal challenges of implementation

The transition from theory to classroom practice reveals a nuanced landscape regarding educators' perceived readiness. While a significant majority (P1, P2, P3, P5, P7, P8, P9) views the integration of Wordless Picture Books (WPBs) as a "creative challenge" and an inherently "interesting activity" (P7), their readiness is contingent upon a complex interplay of personal, professional, and contextual factors, such as:

a) Lack of creative disposition and imagination

The absence of a fixed text requires the educator to be "imaginative" and "spontaneous"—traits that not all participants felt they possessed in equal measure. For instance, P6 admitted to personal difficulty in "thinking of something imaginative," suggesting that colleagues with a more natural inclination toward storytelling might find the medium more accessible. This indicates that the use of WPBs is often perceived not just as a pedagogical skill, but as an artistic performance that requires high levels of creative confidence.

b) Personal insecurity

The data highlights a critical gap in professional development. Participants who expressed hesitation (P3, P4) explicitly linked their anxiety to a lack of formal training and methodological tools. P4's statement—"*difficult due to inexperience and insufficient training*"—underscores a common theme in ECEC: the desire to innovate is often hindered by a perceived lack of "*scaffolding*" for the teachers themselves. These educators expressed a need for a "*basic design*" or a "*navigational guide*" (P3, P5) to transform the difficult into manageable.

In contrast to these concerns, for the majority of participants, the integration of WPBs is perceived as a seamless and inherently rewarding process, primarily due to the dynamic interaction it fosters. These educators describe the medium as an "*invigorating challenge*" (P7) that breaks the monotony of conventional storytelling. According to their insights, the ease of implementation is not a matter of simplified instruction, but rather a result of pedagogical readiness and the establishment of a stable communicative culture within the classroom. They emphasize that once basic classroom rules and linguistic

foundations are laid – typically towards the end of the school year – the WPB becomes a self-sustaining tool for collective meaning-making. This perspective is further reinforced by a child-centered orientation, where the educator’s enthusiasm is fueled by the children’s spontaneous responses; as P5 noted, “*the success of the activity is often dictated by the children’s own agency, which guides and differentiates the practice in real-time.*” Ultimately, for this group, the perceived ease of use is inextricably linked to a professional identity that values authenticity, spontaneity, and the personal resonance between the educator and the literary material.

5.3.3. Navigating the systemic challenges of implementation

From a theoretical perspective, the majority of educators did not identify any barriers to integration, with the exception of P2 who pointed out that some children actually have difficulty expressing the meaning of the book adequately due to low verbal level or other specificities. On the contrary, there seemed to be a general assumption that their philosophy is compatible with modern pedagogical approaches in preschool education. Three participants (P3, P7, P8) even agree that these books are easily integrated into the daily program and that they can be compatible with the programs of daycare centers. Even P4, who in the previous question expressed anxiety about her personal management, did not refer here to theoretical barriers, but to her own personal need for further training.

However, the common point shared by the two groups is the difficulties from the part of the Greek preschool educational system, where the most significant obstacles were identified. Although, it is noteworthy that a subset of participants (P5, P8, P9) did not identify any practical barriers, a finding that may be associated with their professional experience, supportive working environments, or particularly positive attitudes toward the use of wordless books, the in depth analysis of participants’ responses revealed a range of practical barriers that may hinder the full integration of wordless picture books in Greek early childhood settings.

a) Teacher centered approaches

The most prominent obstacle identified was related to the educator’s own pedagogical orientation, followed by material and structural limitations. More specifically, half of the participants (P1, P2, P3, P6, P10) emphasized that the educator’s teaching style constitutes a critical determining factor. A rigid, teacher-centered, or controlling approach was perceived as limiting children’s opportunities for authentic expression and active participation, thereby restricting the implementation of more open-ended and creative pedagogical practices. P2 characteristically noted that “*an uninspired educator with a teacher-centered approach can become an obstacle to the implementation process,*” a view also supported by P1. Similarly, P6 emphasized that “*the only factor that can act as a barrier is the educator and their skills.*” These perspectives highlight the centrality of educators’ beliefs, flexibility, and creative disposition in shaping classroom practices.

b) Lack of suitable material equipment

In addition, practical constraints were identified at the institutional and material level. Wordless books are not yet widely known among Greek educators, nor established in pedagogical practice, which may indirectly hinder their adoption (P3). Several participants (P2, P3, P7) also pointed to the lack of available wordless books in Greek nursery's settings, noting that educators are often required to source such materials independently, which is not always feasible. This issue is further compounded by limited institutional support, affecting both resource availability and collaborative practices within educational settings.

c) Colleagues' collaboration difficulties and poor management support

Collaboration among educators emerged as another important factor. Participants highlighted that the successful implementation of such approaches requires a shared pedagogical framework and coordinated practice. However, as P7 indicated, collaboration may be challenging, particularly in contexts where structural conditions—such as child-to-educator ratios—are not adequately maintained. Similarly, P2 emphasized that *"it largely depends on the school administration, in combination with the quality of the educators and their level of collaboration."*

5.4 The training deficit

A critical finding is the institutional silence regarding WPBs in formal teacher education in Greece. A striking 90% of participants reported a total lack of exposure to this genre during their undergraduate or postgraduate studies. This academic gap leads to a heavy reliance on self-directed learning and incidental discovery, which also appears to contribute to the limited dissemination and pedagogical use of wordless picture books in practice. The case of P10 especially further underscores the need for greater conceptual clarity regarding terminology, as well as the inclusion of concrete, practice-oriented examples during professional briefings, in order to minimize misunderstandings and support a more accurate and informed differentiation between types of books. Consequently, there is an overwhelming demand (90%) for continuing professional development (CPD). Highlighting this need, P3 stated she would participate *"even at her own expense"* if the training provided concrete methodological tools.

5.5 Creative applications and interdisciplinary potential

The analysis of participants' responses revealed a wide range of activities that can be generated through the use of wordless picture books, highlighting their strong pedagogical flexibility and interdisciplinary potential. Educators consistently emphasized that such books function as open-ended stimuli, capable of supporting diverse forms of learning across multiple developmental domains. The proposed activities were organized into key thematic categories, as presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Activities emerging from the use of wordless picture books

Category	Type of activity	Description / Examples
Language activities	Oral storytelling	Children narrate the story based on images
	Dialogue creation	Creation of imaginary dialogues (e.g., speech bubbles)
	Pre-reading & pre-writing	Early literacy, logical thinking, pre-math games
Drama & symbolic play	Dramatic play / dramatization	Acting out the story, puppet theatre, "silent puppet theatre"
	Symbolic play	Role-play (e.g., child acting as teacher), improvised games
Art activities	Drawing & constructions	Drawing, collage, group constructions, favorite scenes
	Book creation	Creating new wordless books or transforming existing ones
Music & emotional development	Music and movement	Rhythm, movement, song creation
	Emotional intelligence	Emotion-based games, inclusion activities
Interdisciplinary / Projects	Project-based learning	Starting or enriching thematic units
	Thematic connections	Identifying themes across books
	Educational visits	Museums, programs, experiential learning
Technology use	Digital activities	Video creation, image scanning, digital storytelling

As shown in Table 3, the range of suggested activities confirms that wordless picture books are perceived as highly versatile pedagogical tools, capable of supporting learning across cognitive, linguistic, socio-emotional, and creative domains. Their open-ended nature allows educators to design flexible and child-centered learning experiences, while also facilitating interdisciplinary and project-based approaches. This versatility reinforces their potential to function as a central element in early childhood educational practice.

6. Discussion of the results

6.1 The paradox of high value vs. low implementation

The findings of this study reveal a compelling paradox: while early childhood educators demonstrate a multidimensional and positive attitude towards wordless picture books, viewing them as innovative pedagogical catalysts, their actual integration into Greek classrooms remains sporadic due to training gaps and both personal insufficiencies and systemic barriers. This aligns with the material gap identified by Tsiflidou (2020) and Iordanaki and Kalogirou (2020) in their studies, where the scarcity of titles in the Greek market and school libraries acts as a primary structural barrier. However, the data suggest that the root of the problem is not merely logistical but also conceptual. The "silence" of these books often meets the "noise" of pedagogical uncertainty and teacher-centered environments, where a lack of specialized training on the one hand, and on the

absence of dialogic, child-centered pedagogical environments on the other, prevents educators from fully unlocking the medium's potential.

a. Age range of implementation in ECECs'

A dominant theme in the interviews was the recognition of wordless picture books as powerful tools mainly for oral language development and vocabulary expansion. Participants consistently noted that the absence of text forces children to "read" images and construct meaning in their own words. This confirms the theoretical framework of Giannikopoulou (2016) and Bayraktar and Bayraktar (2024), emphasizing that wordless picture books foster a dialogic environment. Interestingly, while the literature highlights benefits for all ages, many interviewed educators expressed hesitation regarding children under 3 years old. This cautiousness reflects a persistent, perhaps subconscious, text-centric bias—the belief that written word is indispensable for meaning-making (Giannikopoulou, 2016). Yet, as the data suggest when educators are flexible and open to the process, wordless picture books can bridge the gap between visual perception and verbal expression even in toddlers.

b. Psychological benefits

Beyond cognitive gains, the study underscores the socio-emotional impact of wordless narratives. By interpreting facial expressions and social cues without the "crutch" of a narrator's explanation, children develop empathy and emotional regulation—a finding that resonates with Nikolajeva's (2013) work on theory of mind and was recognized also by the study's participants. Additionally, a particularly insightful finding from the interviews was the projective and diagnostic function of these books. Experienced educators noted that these books allow children to project their internal world onto the illustrations, providing a safe space for expressing personal experiences. This highlights the educator's role not just as a teacher, but as an active listener and a supporter of the child's psychological landscape (Dermata & Nika, 2024).

c. Shifting the pedagogical paradigm: from authority to facilitator

The most critical barrier to success identified by the participants is the pedagogical philosophy of the educator. The shift from a teacher-centered, monologic model to a collaborative, democratic one is essential. As Bayraktar and Bayraktar (2024) argue, a rigid, authoritative approach stifles the very creativity that wordless picture books are designed to provoke. The findings suggest that for wordless picture books to thrive, the educator must undergo a "metamorphosis" into an animator and guide. This requires sensitivity and active listening, by respecting the child's unique interpretation without imposing a correct version and a structured freedom, by establishing rules of dialogue to manage the "polyphony" of multiple narratives, ensuring that all children feel heard rather than overwhelmed.

7. Conclusions

In summary, the study highlights the wordless picture books as a dynamic and versatile educational tool that can contribute substantially to the holistic development of preschool children. The multitude of developmental benefits for preschool children as well as the broad spectrum of activities they can trigger at school level—encompassing oral storytelling, dramatic and visual arts, music, movement, interdisciplinary projects, and the integration of digital technology—firmly validates their considerable flexibility and added value within pedagogical practice. However, the successful integration of these wordless narratives is fundamentally contingent upon a sustained investment in the specialized training of educators and the logistical support of educational structures, alongside the promotion of a pedagogical philosophy that prioritizes freedom of expression, creativity, and the active participation of children. Consequently, bridging the existing gap between the recognized value of wordless picture books and their systematic, everyday application emerges as the central challenge for the enrichment of children’s literature and the evolution of early childhood education in Greece.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

About the Authors

Dimitrakopoulou Iliada-Anna and **Latsou Eleni** are both early childhood educators, actively working in early childhood public centers of the municipality of Athens for the past 10 years. They both hold a master's degree in "Pedagogy through innovative technologies and biomedical approaches" from the University of West Attica. They actively participate in seminars and conferences. In 2025, they presented their research about the wordless picture books at the preschool educational systems, to the IE' Greek Conference of Preschool Education. Their common interests lie in topics related to applied pedagogy in early childhood, new age educational practices and preschool literature innovations.

Sidiropoulou Maretta is an associate professor at the Department of Education Sciences in the Early Childhood Democritus University of Thrace, Greece. Her field of expertise is “Reading and writing: teaching approaches and applications”. Her research interests include literacy practices, visual texts and representation and anthropological aspects of reading in contemporary landscapes. She has authored numerous articles in international journals, books and conferences. Her books focus on contemporary reading as a dynamic, multimodal experience, highlighting its connection to new literacies, visual storytelling, and reading engagement.

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