

# Picturebooks as Inclusive and Participatory Play Objects in School

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## Abstract

How can children's literature serve as an inclusive and participatory play object in a school setting? Picturebooks in particular enable participation for children regardless of their starting conditions, thanks to their synergistic image-text relationship. Because they transcend the boundaries of the codex medium by creatively utilising its physical materiality for storytelling, they can be understood as playable objects. Especially toy books offer multimodal forms of reception and participation, which makes them predestined for inclusion. This article aims to design a classification that sorts toy books based on their underlying level of encouragement. The resulting observations are then used to weigh up the benefits and challenges of toy books in educational use. The question is how the potential for playful participation can be fully utilized as a pedagogical resource rather than just being a gimmick. Based on this, two dialogue picturebooks nominated for the German Youth Literature Award (Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis) 2023 – *Spinne spielt Klavier* and *How to Count to One* – are examined. The analysis shows that readers can also become constituent co-creators of literary worlds without mechanical or sensory modifications. It is primarily the communicative interaction, which is characterized by narrative affordances and appealing impulses, that encourages not only to learn with literature, but also to play with it. With this type of playable picturebooks, school can be easily expanded with playful, literary spaces.

## 1. Introduction

If we foreground the triangulation of children's literature, material culture, and play, our field stands to gain three substantial benefits. (...) The first benefit we stand to gain is a clearer vision of how children's literature actually functions in the everyday lives of children. (...) [Second] if we understand children's literature as persistently integrating with material culture and play, a very different picture emerges. We see adults producing children's literature and children's material culture, and we see children playing with and through both. (...) Third and finally, this approach renews the relevance and urgency of the study of children's literature across the university. (...) In other words, we can position children's literature and childhood studies as exciting and hotly relevant sources of insight and evidence for any department that already cares about play or material culture. (Bernstein, 2013, pp. 458–461)

This quote clearly outlines the orientation of this paper. When children's literature is considered in conjunction with play, a compelling argument can be made for its use in educational contexts. Children's literature that invites children to play – whether through physical interaction or appealing impulses – stimulates various sensory channels and learning approaches. When books can not only be read but also played with, they provide low-threshold, inclusive access to literature.

This article therefore explores what makes picturebooks “playable” and how they can be used to expand educational settings like the school with playful, literary spaces.

For this aim, an attempt of classification is made to differentiate the variety of toy books available on the market according to their affordances to play. Toy books are defined as offering physical or mechanical modifications. These additions transform them into interactive objects that go beyond mere reading and invite readers to playfully participate within the literary world. Due to their multimodal nature, toy books facilitate various approaches to literary learning through the use of different codes. This makes them ideal tools for inclusive learning. However, as a comparison of their benefits and challenges reveals, most of these books are difficult to use in educational settings, not least due to their fragility and often high acquisition costs.

Given these limitations, it is all the more important to consider alternative forms of playful literary engagement that are practically feasible in educational contexts. Especially primary schools have a responsibility to provide a wide range of literary experiences. Attention should be paid not only to the children's experiences and developmental needs, but also to the power of art emanating from good children's books. All children, regardless of their backgrounds, must be given the opportunity to become motivated readers. The responsibility of schools, as institutions for inclusive literature education and reading motivation, is huge. In light of this responsibility, it is essential to explore literary formats that actively engage readers.

This article therefore focuses on the use of "simple" picturebooks like dialogue books to demonstrate how active participation can also be demanded beyond mechanical modifications. To illustrate this, two picturebooks nominated for the German Youth Literature Award (Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis) 2023 were selected as examples: The textless picturebook, originally in German, *Spinne spielt Klavier* [Spider Plays the Piano] (Gottwald, 2022) and the English nonsense "counting book" *How to Count to One* (Salmon & Hunt, 2022). What happens when picturebooks become more than just something to read – when they invite playful interaction between readers and the books themselves? The selected examples offer holistic literary experiences and demonstrate the potential of such books to transform reading into a participatory and playful experience.

Recognizing the inextricable link between literature and play can serve as a source for exploring how the playful, literary spaces opened up by books can also be used as expansions in the school context.

## 2. Play – Picturebook – Playable Picturebooks

In the context of this article, the term "play" refers to the act of playing itself and is to be distinguished from plays in the sense of a board game or plays in the sense of theater.

*Playing* is the profession of every child: It is a social process, a self-determined activity free of compulsion (Huizinga, 1938). This means that players must regulate themselves without the intervention of an authority; it is

necessary to voluntarily follow the rules of the play (even those that have been invented in the process) – regardless of whether it takes place in interaction with others or alone. Through play, children acquire social practices and thereby grasp them (Huizinga, 1938; Morgenstern, 2009). They autonomously (re)construct the reality of their lives, process their experiences and make sense of their world, so the power of imagination released through play is essential, as it allows worlds to be created and playfully tested (Hoffmann, 2020). By this kind of imitation, human nature is stimulated to create knowledge, culture and other systems (Morgenstern, 2009); new perspectives can be developed, as well as previously non-existent courses of action. The potential for creativity and creation inherent in play fosters the development of cognitive abilities and affective learning processes (Russ & Wallace, 2013).

*Picturebooks* are also central elements in the world of children, besides plays. They can be understood as aesthetic objects, positioned at the intersection of literature, image, book, art and play object (Thiele, 2003, p. 180). This definition already makes clear what a special role the picturebook has, despite or actually because it cannot be clearly pinned down. The most significant characteristics are the medium (book) and the content (pictures and sometimes texts). As the term implies, picturebooks are easily conceivable without texts, but not without images. “We can say that the picturebook presents words and pictures in a ‘synergistic relationship’” (op de Beeck, 2018, p. 20). Unlike purely narrative children’s literature, picturebooks operate on two levels of communication: the textual and the visual. These levels do not only coexist and just accumulate, but they transform each other by their mutual influence, thereby creating a new dimension of storytelling. Picturebooks must be understood as multimodal texts (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2018, p. 5). The term multimodality in the context of picturebooks refers to their particularly interactive reception: This includes not only the interpretation of image and text but also materiality. “In a sense, all parchment or paper materials intended for reading and viewing are interactive, for the reader-viewer must engage directly with the material object in order to find the words and images requiring interpretation” (Reid-Walsh, 2018, p. xvii). The picturebook fundamentally utilizes its physical materiality for storytelling (Staiger, 2022). This is mainly due to the artistic creativity of picturebook creators, which is not exhausted by the intermedial interaction of text and image on flat book pages (Bader, 1976) – the book’s architecture also

significantly shapes the narrative flow and perception of the story. It provides the structure of the narrative and the very act of turning the page is decisive for the dramaturgy (Serafini & Moses, 2023). Picturebooks transcend the boundaries of the codex medium through the creative use of paper as a material, as well as through intertextual and intermedial references and their conception as play objects (Serafini & Moses, 2023; Staiger, 2022).

According to this understanding, picturebooks are therefore always automatically *playable*. Thanks to their structure and content, books are clearly connected to the realm of play (Schmitz-Emans, 2019) and insofar literary experiences can always be understood as a form of play. One possible starting point for play is the materiality of objects that prompt or encourage certain actions. The well-known picturebook artist Maurice Sendak (1988) remembers in an interview how he was given a book by his sister as a present: He smelled it, flipped the pages, even bit into it and developed “a love for books and bookmaking. There’s so much more to a book than just the reading. I’ve seen children play with books, fondle books, smell books, and that’s every reason why books should be lovingly produced.” (p. 173f.)

### 3. Toy Books

According to the considerations made, picturebooks can therefore always be playable because of their multimodal nature: constituted by the characteristics of play, they not only transcend the boundaries of the codex medium through the creative use of their synergistic relationship between image and text, but also utilise their physical materiality for storytelling.

In differentiation from this, and as their own distinctive subcategory, are picturebooks that are intentionally designed not only for telling stories but also for offering opportunities for interaction through their playful and performative features. Such books are known as *toy books* – this is the term used by publication houses and in reviews to describe books that are typically defined as physical artefacts, due to their materiality and special designs (Al Chammas, 2012; Dichtl, 2022; Drucker, 2004; Luptowicz & Dinkel, 2019; Reid-Walsh, 2018; Schmitz-Emans, 2019). Their added value lies mostly in physical alterations like movable or sensory elements that can be manipulated by readers.

### 3.1 Attempt of Classification

Traditional books follow a fixed norm and predictable nature. Regularly they are static with a spine, a front and a back cover, and pages to turn (Ramos & Ramos, 2014). Toy books furthermore offer physical or mechanical modifications such as movable elements, 3D pop-up features or special characteristics like hidden or transformable elements or acoustic, haptic, even olfactory effects, which makes these books clearly playable. The variety of interaction possibilities challenges the reader's expectations of what constitutes a book and expands their experience by breaking through the normative boundaries of a book (Ramos & Ramos, 2014). The additional elements transform them into interactive objects that go beyond mere reading and invite readers to playfully participate. Due to their design, these "affordances" demand certain acts (Reid-Walsh, 2018, p. 17). The result is an overwhelming variety of existing designs and forms (Al Chammas, 2012; Luptowicz & Dinkel, 2022), making it difficult to manage the flood of books labelled as playable. The inconsistent terminology used by publishers further contributes to unclear or blurred definitions of the various types of toy books (except for pop-up books, which are clearly defined, and feel books, which are relatively well outlined).

While existing classifications focus on specific types of toy books (Al Chammas, 2012; Rothwell Montanaro, 1993), the underlying idea here is to classify toy books according to their affordances to play – as Kurwinkel (2020) has already implied (Figure 1).



Figure 1 – Classification of toy books (wide grid). Copyright 2024 Elisabeth von Leon

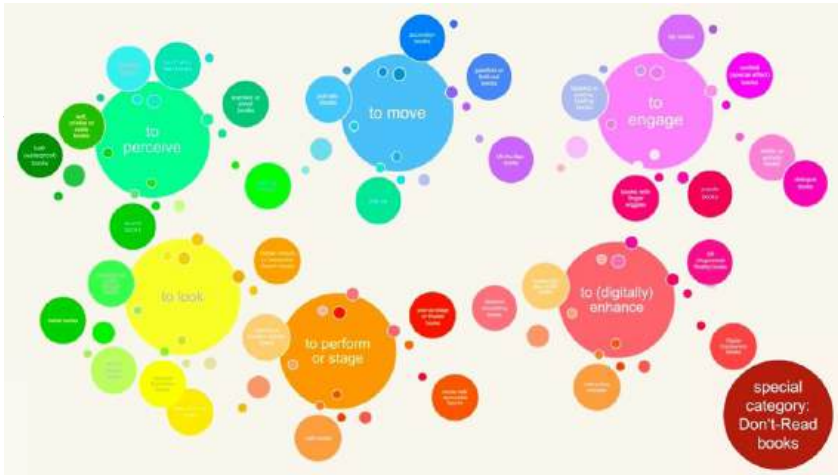


Figure 2 – Demands for action from toy books (fine grid). Copyright 2024 Elisabeth von Leon

According to this variety of actions, the common designations and categorizations of toy books made by publishing houses or reviewers can be assigned to the following classification grid:

- There are toy books whose affordance lies in urging the reader *to move* something due to mechanical modifications, such as accordion books, pop-up books or lift-the-flap books.
- Also due to physical modifications, some toy books encourage sensory perception, inviting readers to touch, taste, smell, listen, – in short: *to perceive*.
- The sense of sight in particular is served by toy books *to look* at, whose appeal lies in looking closely or, for example, exploring seek-and-find or Hidden Picturebooks.
- All toy books with an inherent dramaturgical character suggest the reader *to perform or stage* them, such as craft books or theatre books, some of them even contain figures (to be cut out).
- Some multimedia books utilise technological achievements *to digitally enhance* the physical world of books with immersive experiences. Some e-books offer this; alternatively, additional resources to the conventional print medium, e.g. QR code books, can also have a supplementary effect.
- Similarly, toy books with finger wiggles or books designed for tapping,

poking or tickling aim to prompt interaction. The affordance of all these types, including books to zip or special effect books with confetti to shake, is *to engage*.

Of course there are fluid transitions between the individual categories, as some toy books cannot be neatly classified into a single category. For example, lift-the-flap books invite both the physical act of moving the flaps and active engagement. Other toy books are combined formats, that contain a variety of modifications: with one page inviting you to unfold them, while the next one encourages crafting and so on.

Another observation that could be made during the classification process is that, with few exceptions, nearly all types of toy books involve physical alterations – except for Hidden Picture or Interactive Search Books and dialogue books. These are the only types of playable books that rely solely on the image-text relationship and narrative tricks to provoke interaction (on the significance of narration in toy books, see also Dichtl, 2020). This way they prove that interactive experiences do not necessarily depend on mechanical modifications. “Even when an individual children’s book has no material ties, the material commodity still exists as potential” (Bernstein, 2013, p. 460). An unusual, participatory reading experience can achieve similar effects by demanding heightened attention and active co-creation; the aim is to make readers an integral part of the literary world (Iser, 1984) and thereby enhancing their involvement in the literary experience by engaging them through entertainment and a playful approach (Luptowicz & Dinkel, 2022). Like mechanically modified toy books, Hidden Picture or Interactive Search Books and dialogue books rely on specific manipulation methods inherent in their concept to enable characteristic interactions (Reid-Walsh, 2018) – although without using tactile elements. Instead, dramatic requirements of the plot serve as affordances in order to promote specific (re-)actions (Reid-Walsh, 2018).

### 3.2 Participative (Interactive) and Inclusive Character

As already stated, the unifying moment of all toy books is the invitation to participate. This succeeds due to the aforementioned affordances that encourage interaction. At the same time, all affordances are characterized by



liveliness and dynamism: Thanks to their playful character, it is significantly easier to participate in the story. Under these circumstances toy books can be perceived as living objects that seek interaction with their counterparts, positioning the readers as play partners (Drucker, 2004). Through this interaction, the book is brought to life, providing both entertainment and enjoyment (Schmitz-Emans, 2019). Such lively animated texts can be quickly identified as suitable objects for inclusive education.

Inclusive literature education means high-quality instruction that is accessible to *all* learners – regardless of their individual dispositions; the aim is to enable literary learning for all (Leiß, 2020). Due to their multimodality, toy books are particularly significant in this context. They offer various access points through the use of different codes, such as movable or sensory elements, media variations or narrative affordances. The wide-ranging potential of sensory impressions makes it possible to explore its facets on different levels and in different ways. This enables to consider individual differences in modes of reception even beyond the distinction of disabled / non-disabled (Hoffmann & Naujok, 2014, p. 221). Literary-aesthetically challenging books with an inherent experimental character provide irritations, which slow down the entire reception process and so far enable inclusive approaches to literature (Hoffmann & Naujok, 2014, p. 201; Serafini & Moses, 2023). It is exactly the complexity and the irritation that result from the specific, semiotically based comprehension requirements of toy books that are seen here as a starting point for inclusive literature education, from which readers with a wide variety of learning backgrounds can benefit (Leiß, 2020).

### 3.3 Educational Practice: Benefits and Challenges

According to Luptowicz and Dinkel (2019, p. 93) learners should primarily engage with literature through active, hands-on approaches. Toy books offer a wide range of possibilities for such engagement. For example, they use elements of suspense and entertainment that can enhance reading motivation and enjoyment. The spectrum of interactive, tactile, visual and textual modalities plays an important role as a pedagogical resource for engaging the reader's attention and interest (Serafini & Moses, 2023). Toy books teach in clever ways because they are unlike traditional illustrated books, as they make the reading experience more interactive, effective and memorable (Montanaro

Staples, 2018). Especially for early readers and weaker readers, toy books represent a motivating alternative. “The reluctant reader may be captivated by the stimulating action of the moving paper and be challenged to follow the story in the text.” (Montanaro Staples, 2018, p. 188) In addition to the opportunity to acquire knowledge in self-directed and innovative ways, a subjective and universal interaction with texts is made possible, which favours personal literary experiences (Spinner, 2007). Another advantage of using toy books with mechanical modifications lies in the engagement of multiple senses, particularly through tactile experiences. This also plays a role with enhancing fine-motor skills. Such an interaction with the medium of the book enables a holistic aesthetic experience (Thiele, 2010). So, there are many good reasons for using toy books in the classroom and thereby expand the school with playful literary spaces.

But there are also significant challenges associated with using toy books in school environments. One major issue is their fragility. Because of their delicate nature these editions are rarely, if ever, to be found at elementary classroom libraries. The fragile nature of the paper elements requires careful handling to preserve the mechanical features for a long time, which makes them less suitable for use in classrooms with younger children and often necessitates adult supervision (Serafini & Moses, 2023). Toy books with physical alterations are also often bulky. This can require additional space in the classroom and make storage more difficult. Another problem is the high acquisition costs of toy books. According to Serafini & Moser (2023) the complexity of their paper and material requirements, the engineering involved, and the labour costs for assembling movable picturebooks contribute to their elevated prices. Moreover, with the rise of digitalization, books that incorporate virtual or augmented reality are becoming increasingly important. These technologies offer new possibilities for interactive learning and engagement, enhancing the educational experience by integrating digital elements with traditional book formats. But since not all educational institutions have the necessary digital infrastructure and digitally enhanced toy books still face the issue of high acquisition costs and the fragility of handling technical accessories, they do not appear to be a satisfactory alternative to traditional movable books.

Quite apart from the difficulties mentioned above, the currently enormous number of toy books on the book market is primarily aimed at tod-

dlers – children of school age are less in the focus. For these target groups, mainly non-fiction books are published that use various of the above mentioned techniques to illustrate certain physical, biological or other phenomena (Grünewald, 1993). One problem with these books is that the playful affordances can quickly become exhausted.

As with any picturebook, the narrative and the visual, the content and the design should form a high-quality unit. Playful effects must not just be a gimmick, but rather an integrated, indeed compelling offer that increases the pleasure – and not a short-term illusion. (Grünewald, 1993, p. 100)

If physical alterations are merely used as embellishments, there is a danger that the content of the book will be completely overshadowed: The impressive techniques distract from a deeper examination (Luptowicz & Dinkel, 2019).

#### 4. Two Examples of Playable Picturebooks as Inclusive and Participatory Play Objects

At this point the discussion shifts to the use of playable picturebooks that are independent of mechanical modifications. This includes the Hidden Picture or Interactive Search Books and dialogue books previously recognized in the classification attempt. (Re-)Actions in these books are not provoked by physical alterations but rather through the image-text relationship and purely narrative tricks: These include dramatic demands and a participatory reading experience. It is primarily dialogue books that achieve active engagement through these methods. Their kind of interaction is of a communicative nature, expecting a dialogue. By addressing readers in an appellative manner (usually using the pronominal form “you”) and through indirect prompts, the reception becomes an active exchange. Without readers, these books would be unfinished; they require a counterpart. The reader becomes the central figure of the play’s plot (Dichtl, 2020, p. 194). The interactive design of dialogue books can only be activated through reading. The advantage of these picturebooks is that they are neither fragile nor particularly expensive. This enables them to avoid the major challenges faced by toy books, as described above. Nevertheless, they encourage playful participation and can

be used to add playful literary spaces to the classroom. “They can not only be used for reading, reading aloud, looking at a picture, but also for playing” (Al Chammas 2012, p. 59). In other words, the potential for play is not merely a gimmick but is realized through engagement with the narrative part, the literary component of the book. The combination of play and literature not only increases motivation but also simplifies reading. In addition to text comprehension and the subsequent communicative exchange (Luptowicz & Dinkel, 2019), advanced reading promotion also focuses on sensory-aesthetic perception, concentrated accountability, understanding of structure and critical reflection (Blei-Hoch, 2022, p. 149). Innovative picturebook productions facilitate these learning experiences through their modern, stylistically diverse forms of literary and visual aesthetic expression (Blei-Hoch, 2022, p. 149). Readers do not only interpret the story through the visual and textual elements; the specific techniques used even encourage them to co-create the content based on their own interpretation (Grünwald, 1993). This approach supports heterogeneous learning types – thanks to covering different preferences and needs, more readers get the chance to find an individual approach to literature (Leiß, 2020).

To show how active participation can also be demanded beyond mechanical modifications and how simple picturebooks like dialogue books can be used to expand the school with playful spaces, two books are selected as examples. There would have been countless other books suitable to illustrate the main point. The choice was made for *Spinne spielt Klavier* [Spider Plays the Piano] (Gottwald, 2022) and *How to Count to One* (Salmon & Hunt, 2022), due to the following reasons: On the one hand both examples have already been analyzed in terms of their narrative-verbal and visual dimensions in other works (von Leon, 2024; Schäfer, 2023), which testifies its scientific relevance. On the other hand the selection was motivated by their recent nomination for the 2023 German Youth Literature Award (Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis) in the picturebook category. This prestigious award for international children’s and young adult literature can be seen as a trend marker, it consistently honors books of outstanding quality. In the nomination justifications (Arbeitskreis Jugendliteratur [AKJ], 2023), the emphasis is placed on the high level of engagement, liveliness, playfulness and eccentricity (the latter of which can be understood as innovation) – criteria that classify both books as toy books.

Both examples demonstrate that unusual elements do not necessarily need to be tactile in order to achieve the aforementioned added value.

#### 4.1 *Spinne spielt Klavier*

Already the indirectly appellative subtitle *Geräusche zum Mitmachen* (Sounds to play along with) (Gottwald, 2022) of this wordless picturebook published by Carlsen in 2022 serves as affordance and determines the role of the readers. By the time one reaches the dialogically designed preface, the pronominal appeal becomes clear: “Listen to this book! Can you hear what you see? (...) Just mimic the sounds. You should read this book out loud.” (Gottwald, 2022, n. p.) But there is hardly anything to read: The stroke of genius lies in the full-page illustrations that represent various sounds completely without text (Figure 3).



Figure 3 – From *Spinne spielt Klavier* by Benjamin Gottwald, Carlsen. Copyright 2022 by Carlsen. Reprinted with permission.

The visual stimuli intuitively enter through the eyes and exit loudly through the mouth without words, creating a head theatre for multiple senses. In a delightful way, the illustrations awaken the desire to co-create by vocaliz-

ing them with pleasure (von Leon, 2024). The result is a reading performance (Morgenstern, 2009) that only works if someone can be found to respond the intuitive prompts – otherwise its potential remains unrealized. This playable picturebook is not designed for passive readers, it craves interaction. In a school context, both music lessons and language lessons can utilize this potential. Due to its wordlessness, the silent picturebook is ideal not only for compositions but also for narrative text. It enables access to fictional worlds and thereby offers an expansion to school with its playful, literary spaces. It can be used entirely on its own, as it is also completely self-explanatory, or it can be shared in a social setting as a starting point for playing (music or sounds) together.

## 4.2 *How to Count to One*

Once again, the subtitle of this “fun new counting book” (Salmon & Hunt, 2022) published by Nosy Crow in 2022 indicates that this is something special: “And don’t even THINK about bigger numbers!” Expressed as a warning, the affordance is actually an order. By a mischievous gesture of under-challenge, on each successive double-page the narrator asks to count just to one (Arbeitskreis Jugendliteratur [AKJ], 2023). The gaze on the colorful illustrations always spontaneously captures countable items in increasingly large quantities. But at the text level, the pronominal appeal remains to count only unique things (Figure 4).



Figure 4 – From *How to Count to One* by Caspar Salmon and Matt Hunt, Nosy Crow. Copyright 2022 Nosy Crow. Reprinted with permission.

This picturebook is primarily a seek-and-find book. However, it is not a conventional one. The interactive dialogical situation assumes that readers will solve the search puzzles correctly; the challenge lies in the paradoxical (restrictive) tasks (von Leon, 2024). It is up to the readers' judgement to decide whether they faithfully follow the implicit instructions of the book or whether they listen to their intuitive impulses or act against the instructions (von Leon, 2024). This opens up various reading paths and playful reading experiences. This autonomy is considered an essential characteristic of play. Precisely because schools are bound to rules, it is good to open up (literary) spaces in which playful freedom is possible. One opportunity for this can be found between the covers of this book.

## 5. Concluding and Suggestive Reflections

In sum – as the attempt of classification has also shown – especially toy books with physical alterations demand different acts due to their variety of affordances. As a result they offer significant opportunities in terms of reading motivation and innovative, self-directed knowledge acquisition. However, the high costs and fragile mechanical modifications present challenges, especially for the acquisition of movable toy books for use at school. Playable picturebooks, which work by way of dialogue and focus on the image-text relationship and narrative tricks, prove to be effective alternatives. They could be a category of its own within the classification grid: toy books *to chat with*.

The selected samples have shown that readers can also become constituent co-creators of literary worlds without mechanical or sensory modifications. These playable picturebooks rely on the dialogue between the reader and the book itself to develop its playful potential. As complex picturebook productions, they manage to foster the interest of readers in the image-text relationship and to train their skills to engage with literature; as well as to develop their appreciation for picturebooks as playable objects of art (Blei-Hoch, 2022).

If we look at this from the perspective of school education, literary experiences of this kind hold enormous learning potential: If literary learning is organized as a participatory experience, on the one hand aesthetically suc-

cessful illustrations, but even more playful engagement stimulates imagination; on the other hand, a playful, enjoyable approach promotes a stylistic sense for literary expression, the fictional character of literature and narrative patterns (Spinner, 2007). Furthermore, the variety of individual modes of reception and approaches enables equally varied personal literary experiences and consequently unique encounters with or within fictional worlds (Spinner, 2007; Hoffmann & Naujok, 2014). Experimenting with the different approaches is part of the play and stimulates other, unusual ways of handling (Reid-Walsh, 2018). The resulting ambiguity is particularly suitable for heterogeneous learning groups in their complexity (Hoffmann & Naujok, 2014). This satisfies inclusive literature education: thanks to the playful character, it is significantly easier to participate in the story. School is thereby expanded to include playful literary spaces in which children not only learn together but also play together. And by playing they learn.

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