

# Social-Emotional Intelligence and Picture Books:

## Visual Modality as a Challenging Stimulus for Discussion with Preschoolers

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*Abstract.* The chapter explores how illustration offers young readers a range of visual challenges in interpreting the emotions and the social-emotional skills demonstrated by literary characters when reading picture books. Literature studies focus either in the texts or in the response of the readers; our research attempts to combine two aspects: the creation and the interpretation. The author studies the choices of the creators – emphasizing on the illustration, and how those choices affect children's interpretation. To achieve this, the author applies a dual research design called the Social-Emotional Profile (SEP) and Book-based Social Emotional Thinking (BEST). The first approach focuses on visual elements that sketch the social-emotional skills of the literary characters. The second approach is an empirical program of reading with preschoolers to explore the way young readers interpret social-emotional skills based on the visual elements. This work involves an experimental process which combines theory from the fields of children's literature and cognitive literary approach, visual studies, social-emotional intelligence and applied educational research. The corpus of the study consists of five Greek awarded children's books published from 2014 to 2017. The initial findings indicate that discussing with preschoolers about the social-emotional profile of the literary characters is a challenging procedure, due to the complex nature of picture books and the special characteristics of preschoolers as readers. Insights gained from the implementing the procedure identify visual elements and choices made by the creators as playing key roles to the interpretation of the SEP of the literary characters.

*Keywords:* Critical thinking, emotional-social skills, picture books, preschool education, visual perception

**P**icture books communicate with young readers through words and images simultaneously. Children, when reading picture books, interpret the story by decoding the images while, at the same time, they read or listen the text. Goleman (1995) notes that an important element to guess how other people feel is the ability to understand the nonverbal elements of communication. Nikolajeva (2013) claims that “one potential way of fostering empathy in young children is through picture books” (p.249). Empathizing with fictional characters is a process with different characteristic from the one with real people because

a fictional character represents a perspective that is narrated by an author (Schmetkamp & Ferran, 2020), or in the case of picture books by an author and an illustrator. In this research the term picture books -- as two separate words -- is used, following the type Nodelman (1988) and Zipes (2005) used.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK --- CROSSING THE BOUNDARIES

The researchers' approach is an experimental combination of different epistemological fields: emotional intelligence, literature theory, visual studies, and, applied educational research. Crossing the boundaries between theories is an attempt to combine different concepts and terms to describe the relationship between social-emotional intelligence and picture books. The researcher follows Stafford's (2011) definition about visual literacy as "the active reading, interpreting and understanding images and visual media" (p.1). Stafford doesn't imply that there is one correct meaning of the visual stimulus but rather emphasizes the active role of the readers/viewers to effectively analyze what they see. Stafford underscores visual literacy as "not simply an ability that we possess; it is something that we 'do' and requires from us to develop a set of quite specific skills and abilities" (p.1).

The researcher used the Bar-On Model of Social-Emotional Intelligence (SEI, 2006) as the lens through which she studied the literary characters. She believed that the scales, skills and competencies from this model are more appropriate in analyzing the characters. The Bar-On model consists of five EQ-i Scales, EI competencies, and the skills assessed by each scale:

- Intrapersonal (self-awareness and self-expression)
- Interpersonal (social awareness and interpersonal relationship)
- Stress Management (emotional management and regulation)
- Adaptability (Change management)
- General Mood (optimism and happiness)

Choices made by the message producer are at the center of Social Semiotics. The producer wants to represent something and to communicate it. Therefore, the creator has to

make choices (Kress, 2000). Sign creation is a two-way metaphorical process: 1) what the producer of the meaning chooses to represent and 2) what which is the appropriate form for representing that meaning (Cope & Kalantzi, 2000).

The research focuses on the following three concepts from the field of children's literature theory:

- *Character development* --- Refers to the means the character is revealed to the reader (Lukens, 1999).
- *Emotion ekphrasis* --- Refers to the representation of an emotional state by textual, visual or multimedia means, (Nikolajeva, 2012; 2014).
- *Referentiality* --- Refers to the degree fiction is related to real life experience (Nikolajeva, 2014). Two different approaches on literary characters are widely recognized: 1) *the mimetic approach*, which considers characters as reflections or representations of the real world, and, 2) *the semiotic approach*, which considers that literary characters have no reference to the real world as they are constructions made from words (Nikolajeva, 2003).

Taking into consideration Zunshine's Theory of Mind (ToM) (2006), a term used to describe the ability to explain behavior, thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions, the research explores how the literary characters are constructed and how preschoolers interpret visual elements when they are involved in discussion about literary characters' skills and competencies. Purcell (2018a) noted that discussing picture book characters "involves talking about a character's knowledge and believes, desires and emotions" (p.91). According to Daly (2020) questions about feelings, words, elements of the illustrations such as colors, placement and facial expression are powerful tools for developing

empathy when reading picture books in relation to language learning, especially for minority language speakers.

The challenges the researcher had to face concerned two levels:

- The characteristics of the readers* --- Preschoolers, as novice readers, have limited life experience, less developed attention skills, limited capacity for causality, predictions, problem-solving and decision-making (Nikolajeva, 2014). Hunt (1991) underlines the fact that children as readers can't form the same meaning as adults, due to their different characteristics in psychology, in life experience, in the experience of reading texts, etc. Arizpe and Styles (2003) conclude that children are demanding readers of visual texts. They can understand different perspectives; analyze messages and emotions, and articulate personal responses to picture books. The ability to understand the emotional significance of design starts to grow from pre-school age (Misailidi & Bonoti, 2008), as preschoolers can identify the emotions expressed in drawings. Other studies reveal that, for 3 years old children, the strongest indication of an emotion was the consequences of behavior, while for older children the label of an emotion (Widen & Russell, 2004).
- The complexity of picture books* --- Nodelman (1988) describes picture books as a complex and unusual form of communication, in which text information is complemented by visual information and, as an unusual form of visual art, in which visual elements focus in aspects of the meaning. Reading picture books requires from the readers to combine elements from both sources - texts and images- and to create meaning from the synergy of

words and illustrations (Sipe, 1998). When reading, novice readers have also to take into consideration multiple conventions, such as the idea of downsizing, the display of three-dimensional objects in the space of the page, indications of movement or speech etc (Spink, 1990).

For the needs of this paper, we mainly focus on the illustrations. Specific references to the texts are made when they contribute to a better understanding of the given examples.

## **METHODOLOGY --- THE SOCIAL EMOTIONAL PROFILE (SEP) APPROACH FOR VISUAL MODALITY**

Literature studies usually focus either in the books or in the response of the readers; this research attempts to combine two aspects: the creation and the interpretation. The main issue studied is the choices of the creators emphasizing on the illustration- and how those choices affect children's interpretation when discussing about social-emotional issues. To achieve that a dual research design was applied:

- The Social-Emotional Profile (SEP) approach.* --- Refers to the analysis of the elements that reveal to the reader the social-emotional skills of the literary characters from the perspective of the adult. For this part of the research a dual approach was chosen: analysis of the SEP from the researcher's perspective and research focused on the opinion of the creators about creating the SEP of a literary character. Content analysis method was used, as the method suitable for the study of communication related to the questions focused on who communicates to whom, which is the content

and the means of the communication (Babbie, 2014). As picture books are made of texts and images, the researcher had to apply context analysis to the texts and social semiotic analysis to the images. In addition, the researcher also applied semi-structured, qualitative in-depth interviews to authors and illustrators in order to examine how they create, through words and images, the social-emotional skills of the characters. Such interviews are an alternative method of data collection in which the interviewer asks questions to the respondent in order to extract information about the subject under investigation (Babbie, 2014).

- *The “Book-based Social Emotional Thinking” (BEST) approach.* --- Refers to the empirical program based on Critical Thinking and Book Time (Roche, 2015) to explore the way young readers interpret social-emotional skills. A qualitative research method was employed, since the research questions were related to the characteristics of preschoolers’ way of thinking about the interpretation of social-emotional skills. The methodology was based on participatory observation – the researcher organized and implemented an educational intervention with preschoolers as described above. During the program, the researcher applied photo elicitation in a group setting with preschoolers, where illustrations instead of photos were used as a stimulus for discussion with the participants.

Five Greek children’s books, published between 2014 and 2017, were examined for this presentation (13 for the PhD study in general). All the books have been awarded in major literary competitions in Greece. Lewis

(2001) used this criterion and noted that the award “is a suggestion that these books belong among the best of their kind and are to some extent distinguished for their quality” (p.2). The selection of award-winning books published in different years and awarded by different committees ensures that the sample of the research is not the personal choice of a specific person or group (Lewis, 2001).

Based on Nikolajeva’s concept of *Emotion Ekphrasis*, the researcher used SEP (Social-Emotional Profile) approach in order to describe the social and emotional traits of the central literary characters, following the Bar-On Model of Emotional-Social Intelligence (ESI, 2006), mentioned above. A visual semiotic analysis was applied on the illustrations. The researcher studied how visual design and the choices of the illustrators in particular provide the readers and researcher with elements that reveal the social-emotional skills of the characters. Analyzing how illustration reveals the literary characters, the study focused on visual element such as the body language, size and placement of the character, lines and colors, setting including scenery and visual angle (Yannicopoulou, 2009). The results of our analysis identified the following:

- *Facial expressions* are the most common element illustrators use to express emotions. The eyes, the mouth and the eyebrows mainly reveal to the reader the emotional state of the characters. As in real life we may understand others by looking at their face, in picture books readers follow the protagonists express themselves through their facial expressions as depicted in the pictures.
- *Body language* is used to transmit messages about social – emotional skills. Closed body shapes indicate fear and sadness while open body shapes, indicate happiness and joy.

- *Color* as visual element plays a significant role to portraying emotions. The function of the color in characterization is meaningful and can be related to a series of traits of characters personality (Yannicopoulou, 2008). Lighter and pal colors (blue, green, white, etc) usually imply quietness, thus more dark or intense colors (black, grey, red, etc) are connected to difficulties, danger and threats. “White or light backgrounds feel safer to us because we can see well during the day and only poorly at night” (Bang, 1991, p.84).
- *Placement of the character* on the page holds a great significance. Figures placed lower than others, alone and in distance from others are usually characters demonstrating fear, having difficulties or experiencing bad interpersonal relationships. Placement on the bottom half of the picture communicates feelings “threatened, heavier, sadder, or constrained” (Bang, 1999, p.71). Moreover, changes of the placement of the hero can be a way to portray inner changes on the character’s behavior.
- *The type of the lines* used to sketch a literary character may provide readers with information about character’s social – emotional traits. “The uncertain or discontinuous lines may imply emotional insecurity or instability of the central character” (Yannicopoulou, 2008, p.122), while “soft, flat, horizontal lines reflect the sense of relaxation and calm atmosphere” (Bang, 1991, p.52).
- *The size of a character* may play a key role to sketching the personality of the character but also to revealing the plot; size can be connected to the

social status, or the emotional state, the relationship of the character with the each other, etc (Yannicopoulou, 2008).

- Literary characters feel, act and react, live in a space and time – *setting*. As Lukens underlines (1999) the setting can be characterized as backdrop or integral/essential. Dark settings are used to signify threatening places or situations while colorful settings indicate happiness and joy.
- The use of different *visual angles* in picture books is another way to reveal social-emotional states and traits. Heroes who are shy, scared, with low self-esteem, or being in a threatening situation are usually depicted from a high vantage point (a bird’s eye view) in emphasizing these traits.

The book of Argyro Pipini titled *Καλοκαίρι, φθινόπωρο, χειμώνας, άνοιξη, καλοκαίρι*, [Summer, autumn, winter, spring, summer] illustrated by Iris Samartzi (2016) is about second chances in life. An abandoned house becomes happy again after a family comes to leave in it. The title, referring to the passage from one season to another, signifies the new start. At the beginning of the story the house feels abandoned, unhappy and lonely. This social-emotional state of the house is represented visually with the choice of dark, grey colors on the walls, the abandoned colorless empty yard and the empty rooms. When a family comes to stay in the house, the setting changes (see Figure 1).

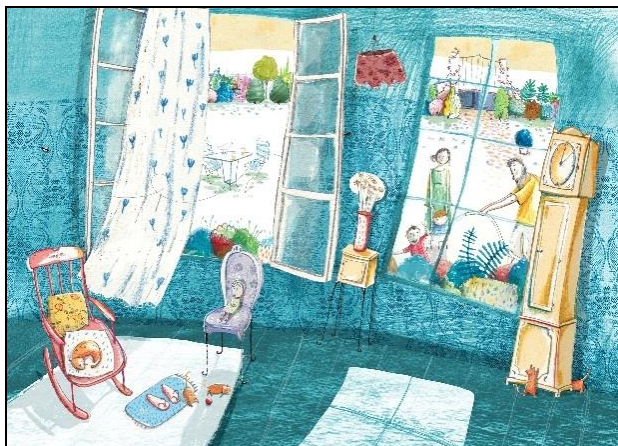


Figure 1. Pipini, A. (2016). *Καλοκαίρι, φθινόπωρο, χειμώνας, άνοιξη, καλοκαίρι...* [Summer, autumn, winter, spring, summer...]. Illustrated by I. Samartzi. Patakis Publishers. All rights reserved ©.

The reader can see all the family members playing and laughing (face expressions and body language), while the house is depicted colorful, with a yard full of flowers and trees (colors and setting). The illustrator chose to depict the house from inside – as if the reader is in the house. This image comes in distinction to the grey and dark colors the illustrator used at the first picture to portray the feeling of loneliness of the house. Using bright and multiple colors for depicting the setting, the illustrator highlights the optimism and happiness of a new beginning for the protagonists. Most of the illustrations of that book adopt a general frame, as they include elements of the setting along with the characters. The setting in this book is a crucial element of portraying the social-emotional state of the protagonists (both the house and the family) along with the changes in colors and body language. The illustrator I. Samartzi shared her thoughts that *the book slowly becomes full of colors, just like the house is full of with smiles and joy; from gray it becomes what we see in the last living room: a warm colorful hug decorated with visual elements from the little boy's drawings. Here we can feel the adaptability of the little hero and his need to leave behind the difficulties and make a new beginning,*

*appreciating everything he lost but also what the house generously offered him.*

Adult researchers may analytically approach and combine different visual elements, such as color, visual angle, perspective etc, to create meaning about social-emotional skills when reading picture books. For preschoolers pictures are very important to create meaning when reading picture books. Which visual elements affect their interpretation of characters' social-emotional profile?

## DISCUSSING WITH PRESCHOOLERS --- APPLYING THE BEST APPROACH

Nikolajeva (2012) examines how emotions can be transferred to young readers through the interaction between words and images in picture books. She states that her approach in emotional literacy and children's literature may inspire scholars who work with books and children to test their ideas in practice with children. That was the starting point of this research. Book-based Emotional-Social Thinking (BEST) approach is an empirical program based on Critical Thinking (CT) and Book Time (BT) (Roche, 2015). Roche refers to the choice of picture books as stimulus for thought and discussion, considering children as active participants in building their own personal learning and development. Critical Thinking involves "thinking about one's self, making sense of one's own life and the world" (Roche, 2015, p.5). Such an approach requires active involvement of the participants. Moreover, it requires from adults to consider children as real people and "talk with and to them" (Roche, 2015, p.19).

Adjusting CT & BT to the social-emotional aspects of the stories, the researcher named this approach BEST. By the use of picture books as stimulus for thinking and discussing, the researcher focused on



discussing with children about the social-emotional skills and competences of the literary characters. In this approach, the researcher was not interested in the right interpretation --- and by “the right” the researcher meant the *expected, judging* as adults, *interpretation* --- but focused in stimulating preschoolers to get actively involved in discussion and express their thoughts and ideas about the social-emotional of the characters during readings. Garner and Tanaka (2018) suggested that picture books are an important source of information related to emotions for children and adults, and reading picture books may increase the emotional language used in early education centers.

The researcher organized a reading program of six modules. During each module three activities took place (Dermata, 2019):

- An exploratory activity, where the goal was to explore what preschoolers think about specific concept such as (i.e. self-confidence, problem-solving, etc).
- The main reading activity and discussion during which the researcher asked open questions about the feelings and the skills and the elements of images and texts which revealed to them the SEP of the characters.
- An after reading activity where the children participated in role-play, animating puppets or drawing activities inspired by the SEP of characters.

As data-collecting tools the researcher used the children’s recorded talk during the activities by the use of digital means. Also, the researcher took descriptive and reflective field notes during the readings and observations of how children reacted during the discussion (Creswell, 2012; 2016). The participants were preschool children, aged 5- 5,8 years old, who

attended a public kindergarten school in Athens, Greece. Readings with preschoolers were implemented under the title “My BEST friends, the books” program (Dermata, 2019). Primary aim of the reading program was to explore how preschool children perceive, understand and interpret the representations of social-emotional skills presented in picture books (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Children implement a role play activity and discuss about the possible solutions of the problem, after reading the book *Τα κίτρινα καπέλα [The yellow hats]*, written and illustrated by K. Matathia-Kovo. Patakis Publishers, 2017. All rights reserved ©.

## VISUAL CHALLENGES FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS

Illustrators have in their disposal a variety of elements to create their art. Those elements work independently and at the same time work together in combination to compose the image. Which of the visual elements children interpret when reading picture books to discuss about social-emotional skills? The research examines characteristic examples of the illustrations. First the choices of the illustrators to represent the SEP of the character are

examined. Then the research focuses on the interpretation of the same pictures by young readers, through reading and discussing (BEST).

*Is the True Triceratops Scared?* A book authored by Vagelis Iliopoulos (2015) and illustrated by Konstantina Kapanidou told a story of Paris who was bullied by his classmates, till he met the True Triceratops and found the strength to fight for his own rights (see Figure 3). A minimal double spread depicts Paris' difficult situation: he is depicted at the bottom of the page. He is looking down while five huge – in comparison to his size - fingers point at him. The representation of the boy's feelings in the picture included the use of red color spreading around him, and the vertical angle depicting a bird's eye. The reader views the scene from the top, symbolically participating, as one of the fingers pointing towards the object on the page. K. Kapanidou, the illustrator, mentioned how important empathy is for an artist and shared with the researcher her thoughts about this picture *as the hand depicted at the center points to the reader, because the reader could be in the place of Paris. This is a visual element open to reader's interpretation.* Body language, color, visual angle and placement of the hero are the visual elements through which the illustrator indicated Paris' social-emotional difficulty.

How did preschoolers interpret this picture during the reading activity? Which visual elements influenced their interpretation of the protagonist's social-emotional state and skills? The following children's responses to the questions were translated to English from Greek:

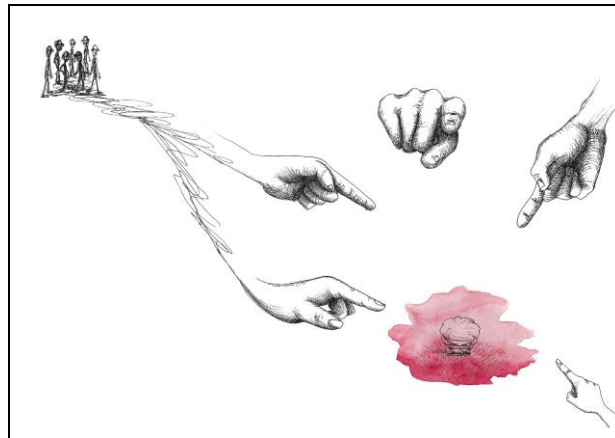


Figure 3: Iliopoulos, V. (2015). *Ο Αληθινός Τρικεράτωψ φοβάται; [Is the True Triceratops Scared?]*. Illustrated by K. Kapanidou. Patakis Publishers. All rights reserved ©.

- *He is small. He is afraid.* --- The size of the protagonist in combination with the visual angle - from the bird's eye – shows the boy even smaller in size. Young readers interpreted those visual elements as an indication of the protagonist's small body size. Readers also connected the small body size (*small*) with the negative emotions (*afraid*) of the character, as those emotions were the result of his small body size.
- *He is crying.* --- *Those lines are his tears:* the small lines depicted under the protagonist's figure were interpreted as an indication of sorrow and fear. This small visual detail played a key role to the formation of the meaning in social-emotional level, following a scheme: *vertical lines* (visual element) → *tears/crying* (body reaction) → *sadness* (emotional state).
- *His head is like that, looking down.* --- Body language, in combination with the visual angle, for young readers clearly indicated Paris' bad emotional state. Moreover, children, when tried



to support their point of view, not only expressed themselves verbally but also, they performed with their own body, imitating Paris body language as he was depicted in the picture. We can clearly say that preschoolers, besides the verbal expression of their opinion, were often involved in reading the images in a holistic way: with their eyes (looking), mind (thinking), language (talking) and body (performing) (Dermata & Skarpelos, 2017).

- *He is afraid. He is ashamed, that's why he is red.* --- The use of red color under the protagonist's body was an indication of his emotions (shame, fear). Very often red color is related to emotions like fear, anger or shame in western culture.
- *They point at him. That's why he is sad. He has no friends.* --- Body language of the other characters was interpreted as an indicator of the reason that caused protagonists' negative social-emotional state.

The crossover picture book titled *The yellow hats* written and illustrated by Kelly Matathia-Kovo (2017), a multilevel reference to the history of the Holocaust, refers to the story of the Be family which is threatened by the wild beasts. In the illustration (see Figure 4) of the protagonists being in prison, the illustrator chose to depict the characters behind a sharp wire mesh. They stand very closely attached to each other. There is no free available space around them. They look sad; they are all obliged to wear yellow hats. The illustrator depicted them looking directly in front – looking at the reader with the gaze that demands, according to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996). The black and dark background indicates night or the difficult situation they have found themselves in. Even though the wild beasts – that is how the writer refers to the threat in the

text - are not depicted in this picture, and in the book in general, the dark color of the background and the synthesis of the visual elements (bodies closely attached together, mouth shape, etc.) creates the heavy and threatening atmosphere the characters experience. The illustrator K. Matathia-Kovo shared her thought that *it is very important to create a setting, an atmosphere. At the beginning there is a happy family in a calm atmosphere (blue sky, green grass). Then the danger approaches - and the colors gradually become grey and dark.*

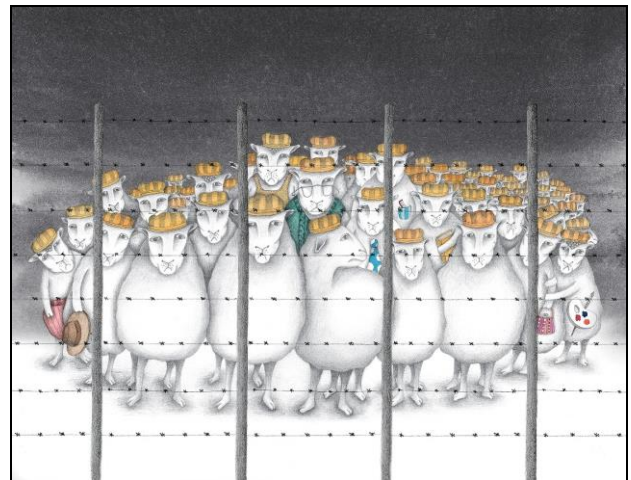


Figure 4: Matathia-Kovo, K. (2017). *Τα κίτρινα καπέλα* [*The yellow hats*]. Illustrated by K. Matathia-Kovo. Patakis Publishers. All rights reserved ©.

During the reading of the picture book, the comments of the children for this image were:

- *They feel afraid because the sky is so dark. It is going to rain.* --- The dark color of the background was the visual element that formed this interpretation. The hypothesis -based on the dark color of the sky- that the rain will come soon was interpreted as a threat.
- *They are afraid because they are in a cage.* --- The setting (sharp wire mesh) was the main element that

children referred to as an explanation of the protagonists' fear.

- *They look very very very very unhappy. Because their mouth is like that.* --- Facial expressions were the indicator of character's emotions. The repeated use of the adverb "very" --- four times --- was used from the child to express the increase of the negative emotion, in comparison to previous pictures that the characters looked gradually happy, skeptical, afraid, etc.
- *They are afraid. They are too many. There is no place to sit.* --- Body language, the tightly attached bodies along with the lack of space all around them, was interpreted as the cause of hero's sadness.

The picture book *Melak, all alone!* written by Argyro Pipini and illustrated by Achilles Razis (2016) told the story of a young refugee travelling away from his homeland to survive from the war and seek for a better life. The illustrator chose to emphasize the protagonists' body reactions to express Melak's difficult situation instead of a clear depiction of his facial reactions. The reader can only see Melak's face at the last page of the book. From the first picture, the reader may think that Melak is afraid, as the illustrator depicts him at the center of the page, hidden behind a big rock, lying with his limbs tucked close to his body. Small rocks are spread all around him (see Figure 5). The following spread showed Melak running away with his sister while an explosion or fire depicted at the background.

As the illustrator A. Razis explained to the researcher in his interview the focus on body's reactions instead of detailed facial expressions was a conscious choice because he *wanted to show this troubled figure – a child in danger, in panic, his life is threatened – in a changing, hostile environment, which becomes more friendly from page to page, as he is travelling to find a new homeland.*

Young readers focused on different visual elements to interpret this picture (see Figure 5). Their interpretation was influenced also by the text -the word *afraid* that is repeatedly used by the author in several sentences-, as they referred to specific words when explaining their ideas. Their main answers were:

- *He is afraid. He is afraid of the dark and the night.* --- The dark brown color of the big rock was interpreted as lack of light or darkness, and the reason for the negative emotions of the protagonist.
- *He is afraid and he is hiding. That's why he is like that.* --- The reader, in his/her attempt to explain how Melak feels, performed with his/her own body imitating the body shape of the characters as represented in the picture when their explanation included the phrase "like that". Body language as depicted to this picture was a very strong and clear indicator of Melak's emotional state.

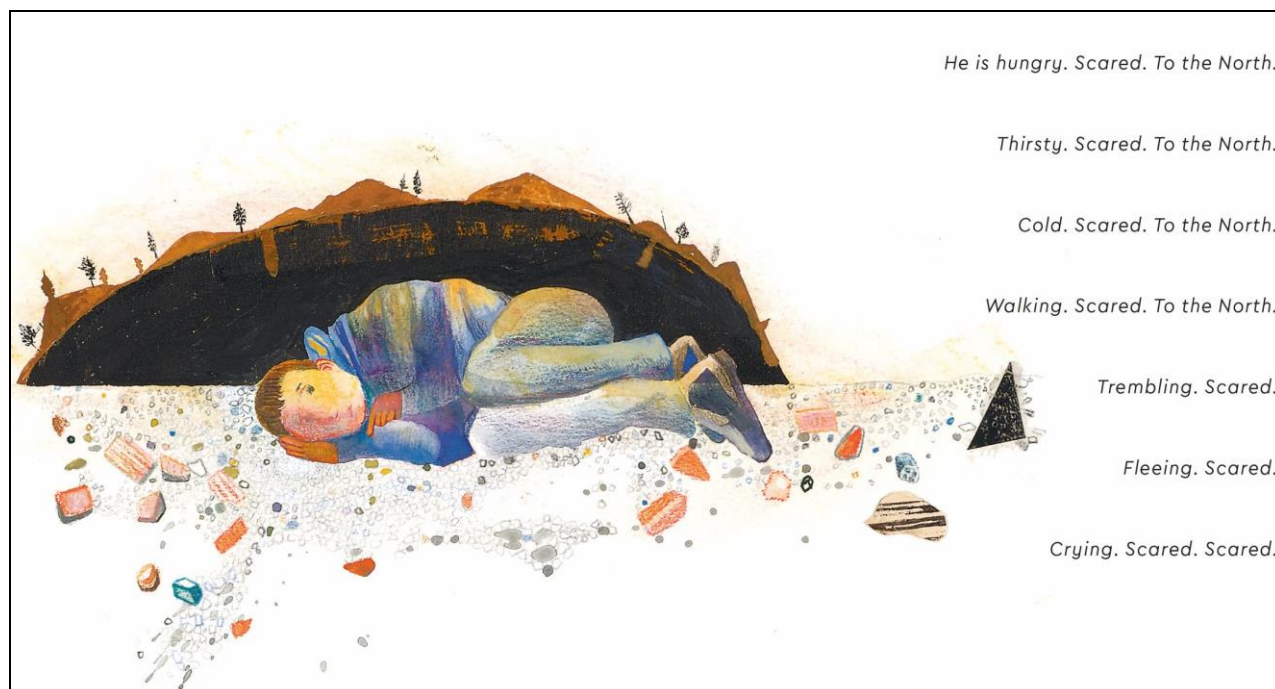


Figure 5. Pipini, A. (2016). *Μελάκ, μόνος [Melak, all alone]*. Illustrated by A. Razis. Kaleidoscope Publications. All rights reserved ©.

- *He is tired. He walked far away. He is thinking that he is all alone and he feels sad.* --- This interpretation was clearly connected with the verbal text in two ways: first, the reader referred to the situation “all alone”, directly connected with the title *Melak, all alone* and, second, the reader referred to the fact that the protagonist is tired because he had been walking and fleeing, as the verbal text declares. Moreover, the absence of other people in the picture enforces the feeling of being “all alone”.
- *He is in a tunnel and he is afraid, because there are those dirty rocks everywhere.* --- Small details of the setting (rocks) were used to support the reader’s interpretation about the cause of Melak’s fear.

One of the visual elements used to represent the social-emotional skill of high self-esteem (intrapersonal scale) is chosen from the illustrator of the book *How to make an elephant dance*, written by Angelos Angelou and Emi Sini (2014), and illustrated by S. Touliatou. The story is about a mouse feeling weak because of its petite physical size. At the end of the story shared a lesson that strength is something totally different from body size. S. Touliatou, as the illustrator, explained that *in this book the visual elements that reveal the emotional state are mainly the size of the hero, his position on the page, body language and facial expressions. As the animals he meets grow older, he gets smaller. The environment is very simple since the emphasis is on the size (power - different animals) and the role of size on what one can achieve.*



Figure 6: Angelou, A., & Sini, E. (2014). *Πώς να κάνετε έναν ελέφαντα να χορέψει* [How to make an elephant dance]. Illustrated by S. Touliatou. Papadopoulos Publishing. All rights reserved ©.

In Figure 6, the small flea is depicted as huge in comparison to the other animals --- even bigger than the elephant --- because the flea believed in itself and expressed that directly with words (*I am the bug, the giant*). Following the text, the illustrator used visual exaggeration as a technique to depict the flea as giant, standing tall in comparison to other animals, and talking with a loud voice. This choice of the huge size is a visual metaphor of the skill of self-confidence. To indicate the loud voice of the flea, the illustrator depicted red colored sharp edges in front of the bug's head. In emphasizing the main character's high self-esteem, the illustrator drew all the other animals like shadows --- depicting the outline of their bodies as line sketches. How did young readers react to that visual element?

A very interesting conversation took place about the changes in the size of the flea. Often, the size, as a quality characteristic, was interpreted as an indication of strength. If the character is depicted big, he/she is stronger than the others. The change of size was interpreted by preschoolers in different ways:

- *Maybe the flea saw a dream that it was a giant.* --- The change of size was interpreted as a dream.
- *Maybe the flea was lying down to the previous picture and now it is*

*standing.* --- The change of the size was interpreted as the result of the change of the body in the space of the picture.

- *The flea believed in its own strength, that's why it said it was a giant. But it was lying.* --- The change of size was interpreted as an indication of high self-esteem.
- *The flea has high self-esteem because now it is strong and huge.* --- The change of size was interpreted as a real fact and as a result of high self-esteem.
- *The flea made some magic tricks.* --- The change of size was interpreted as the result of magic.

As Purcell noted "the reader's capacity to access the metaphorical meaning of a visual image or verbal expression is a skill that is likely to develop over time and through experience" (2018b, p.362).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The author introduced the Social-Emotional Profile (SEP) and the Book-based Emotional Social Thinking (BEST) approaches --- an experimental process which combines theory from the fields of children's literature and cognitive approach, visual studies, social-emotional intelligence and applied educational research.

The SEP approach is a way to study literary characters focusing on their social-emotional traits. Skills and traits of the literary characters differ in the degree and scope of appearance from character to character, from book to book, etc., depending on the verbal and visual means creators choose to represent their characters. Illustrators can sketch a whole range of traits revealed through body language, size and placement, lines and colors, visual angle, etc. The variety of visual elements and their synthesis highly contributes

to represent the SEP of the characters, and offers the readers the visual expression of the characters emotions and social-emotional traits.

The BEST approach places children in the centre of the educational activity, seeking for their ideas and thoughts about the social-emotional skills as represented in picture books. Using visual modality as stimulus for discussion, picture books provide children a complexity of elements to look at, think, interpret, discuss about and express themselves in the level of social-emotional intelligence, as active participants.

The level of interpretation plays a central role in this approach. There were visual elements young readers referred more often and direct when they explained their point of view and interpret social – emotional traits. The most common were facial expressions and body language. Colors were also very often mentioned from the children as an indicator of the emotions of the characters. Visual elements as placement, visual angle, lines, were indicated by children not always in a direct way. The researcher had to analyze children's explanations and words to detect those elements and their affection to the interpretation of the SEP. In some cases, small visual elements also affected children's interpretation, such as rocks, lines etc. Not only the visual elements as depicted in each picture but also the change of visual elements from page to page was a crucial factor for children's interpretation. Change of colors, setting, and placement of characters from page to page were indicators of the change of social-emotional state, very often indicated by the children as a sign of problem or difficulty and related to positive or negative emotions. The research revealed that preschool children mentioned the visual elements to support their opinion in a high degree, even it was challenging that not every reader based his/her opinion on the same visual elements. There were also some references on the same element were that were interpreted by preschoolers in two opposite ways (i.e. an open mouth as an indicator of happiness, and as an indicator of fear).

In this approach the right interpretation was not important; mistakes in interpretation were stimulus for dialogue. The focus was on investigating how preschoolers think and express themselves when talking about social-emotional skills and especially how illustration plays a key role to their interpretation. In conclusion, if one add the challenges of the verbal text and the variety of the visual challenges “picture books present a whole new dimension of cognitive and affective challenges to novice readers” (Nikolajeva, 2014, p. 99) also to the level of perceiving and interpreting the social-emotional profile of the fictional characters.

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