

An overview of South African studies on and with wordless picturebooks

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Wordless books, transcending generations and captivating illustrators and scholars, communicate narratives through imagery, stimulating creativity and overcoming language barriers. They possess cultural potential for advancing multilingualism and cultural awareness in South Africa; however, local production and research on wordless picture books are constrained. This study consolidates scholarly interest in wordless picturebooks in South Africa, published in English from 1990 to 2023, summarising prevailing research themes and proposing new avenues for exploration. A semi-systematic literature review (SSLR) was performed utilising Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Following the removal of duplicates and the application of exclusion criteria, 23 publications were chosen for thorough analysis. The review offers a thematic analysis, examining publishing trends, aesthetic and analytical methodologies, visual stimuli, cultural relevance, reading strategies, audiences, and engagement. This review emphasises their research potential and proposes future theoretical and practical developments.

Keywords: wordless picturebooks, semi-systematic literature review, children's literature, South Africa.

1 Introduction

Over the last three decades, wordless picturebooks have grown in popularity worldwide, with an increasing number of illustrators contributing to these texts. Arizpe (2021: 260) observes that it is unsurprising that the expanding field of picturebook research has produced numerous studies spanning educational, literary, linguistic, psychological, cultural, and media perspectives, appealing to a wide range of interests. These advancements have increased opportunities for transcultural exchanges, overcoming immediate language barriers (Arizpe 2021: 264) and allowing books to be enjoyed by readers from various cultures (Norton 1983: 153), as demonstrated by the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) Silent Book project. The IBBY (2024) initiative includes a library of silent books (wordless picturebooks) "that could be understood and enjoyed by children regardless of language." It was established in response to "the waves of refugees from Africa and the Middle East arriving on the Italian island of Lampedusa" (IBBY 2024). The accessibility of these picturebooks also opens up opportunities for educational research on language development and narrative skills (Arizpe 2021, 264; Crawford & Hade, 2000: 69; Whalen 1994).

Wordless picturebooks tell a story primarily through visuals (Serafini 2014). According to Arizpe et al. (2014), because these books lack text, readers must actively engage with the images to construct a story through their interpretation. Reading wordless picturebooks requires the reader to identify relevant signs, reconstruct sequences, and actively interact with the book (Bosch and Duran 2009, cited in Arizpe 2013). According to Arizpe (2013: 164), research on wordless picturebooks indicates that they are primarily used in educational settings to investigate language development, storytelling, and related skills. This research frequently includes young people with special needs, such as those learning a new language or struggling with reading. Arizpe (2021: 264) states that,

The challenge that wordless or nearly wordless picturebooks present to meaning making and the many forms they can take, from adaptations of fairytales and fables to panoramas and documentaries (Bosch 2018), is an invitation to study them from a range of perspectives.

In South Africa, wordless picturebooks are gaining popularity among academics, illustrators, and reading development advocates, as well as government and non-profit organisations. According to the National Reading Barometer's (2024: 22) special issue brief on reading and children, "distributing wordless picturebooks for young children, which can be enjoyed by anyone regardless of their reading proficiency." This brief summarises the findings of the 2023 National Reading Survey and National Reading Barometer on reading habits among both younger children (aged 10 and under) and older children (aged 11-18), as well as adults reading to young children (National Reading Barometer 2024: 22).

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Arizpe (2021: 296) contends that more research into picturebooks is required to fully comprehend how they can be used to create a better future for all. Based on this concept, an overview of South African research into or use of wordless picturebooks could help to shape scholarly debate on the genre by identifying research gaps, summarising existing knowledge, and laying the groundwork for future research.

The study investigates interest in wordless picturebooks in South African academic research from 1990 to 2023 using a semi-systematic literature review that combines systematic search strategies with narrative synthesis to provide a review of existing literature, summarise current research themes, and suggest areas for potential future research. Furthermore, it outlines significant advancements in the creation and use of wordless picturebooks, particularly by non-profit organisations, and the genre's increased focus as a research area in postgraduate studies.

2 Literature review

As previously stated, wordless picturebooks are a form of literature that conveys ideas, themes, information, entertainment, interaction, and/or narratives through a "series of illustrations without written text" (Dowhower 1997: 63). Crawford and Hade (2000: 66-67) noted the growing popularity of wordless picturebooks, as well as an increase in professional literature advocating for their use in the classroom, as early as 2000. Honaker and Miller (2023: 1) write,

WPBs [wordless picturebooks] can be used to develop literacy skills more equitably among learners with varying language proficiencies, even when in class with native-speaking peers. They transcend language and cultural barriers often found in traditional literature and can be a tool for exploring multicultural perspectives.

Wordless picturebooks allow learners of various literacy levels and language proficiencies to creatively explore different points of view, uncover personal interpretations, and participate as co-authors of the story (Arizpe et al. 2015 in Honaker & Miller 2023: 6). However, they should not be thought of as easier to interact with than picturebooks with words. According to Nodelman (1988: 186-7), inferring narratives from visual images requires careful observation and a broad understanding of visual conventions. Crawford and Hade (2000: 67) support this notion, emphasising the reader's active and critical role in shaping the story.

The use of wordless picture books in classrooms and literacy programs has been extensively documented in international research. This genre effectively integrates visual, cultural, and print literacy (Jalongo et al. 2002: 167). It helps to develop reading and language skills (Reese 1996: 172) and has educational benefits for young readers, such as sequential and inferential thinking, story comprehension, and visual discrimination (Knudsen-Lindauer, 1988, Serafini, 2014: 25).

Historically, few wordless picturebooks have been published in South Africa. Tiemensma's (2022) doctoral thesis looked at the "production profile of South African children's picture and illustrated books [which] provides evidence of the publishing history" in this genre. According to Tiemensma (2022:210), the genre of wordless books accounted for 2% of picture and illustrated books in South Africa, and he was unable to locate any wordless picturebooks published prior to 2000. Given South Africa's cultural diversity and 11 official languages, one could argue that wordless picturebooks have the potential to promote multilingualism and cultural awareness throughout the country.

According to Bosch (2018: 192), despite widespread interest in wordless picturebooks, they are rarely studied academically. According to Martin Salisbury (2018: 339), research on wordless picturebooks has primarily focused on analysing published artefacts, with little exploration into the processes and creators involved. Although research wordless picturebooks in South Africa is growing, the academic field of study exploring their potential is arguably still an emerging one.

3 Research methods and design

The study took the form of a semi-systematic literature review (SSLR). The SSLR provides an overview of topics that have been studied from various disciplines and perspectives. Snyder (2019: 335), citing Ward, House and Hamer (2009), writes that "this type of analysis can be useful for detecting themes, theoretical perspectives, or common issues within a specific research discipline or methodology, or for identifying components of a theoretical concept". An SSLR's contributions can include mapping research areas, summarising current knowledge, proposing future research directions, or providing a historical overview of a specific topic (Snyder 2019: 335).

The electronic databases Scopus and Web of Science were used to conduct the initial literature review for this study. These two databases are among the most popular and widely used for finding peer-reviewed academic research and publications. Google Scholar was used to expand the literature search until saturation was achieved (Rahimi & Khatooni

2023: 4). In this case, data saturation was determined by redundancy, or the point at which the data became repetitive. Saturation occurred when the researcher concluded that repeated data searches produced no new information (Rahimi & Khatooni 2024: 6).

The study's population consisted of English-language academic articles on wordless picturebooks from the identified electronic databases, as well as articles that had been translated into English. Purposive sampling was used to search for articles using the search terms "Wordless Picturebook*" or "Wordless Picture Book* AND "South Africa" or "Africa" and was repeated with the term "Silent" instead of "Wordless" because the genre is also known as silent books. In addition to advanced search tools on these platforms, the search results were verified using the Publish or Perish software. As a result of the small sample size, an additional Google Scholar search was conducted. This was accomplished by conducting an advanced search using the same keywords as for Web of Science and Scopus, as well as double-checking with the Publish or Perish software.

Table 1 shows the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the SSLR. Inclusion criteria included studies in which wordless picturebooks were a primary research element, tool, or focus, were strongly related to South African contexts, or were prominently thematic. Studies titled "wordless picture sequence" or "wordless stories" were included if they met the majority of the criteria and used illustrations in a specific order.

Exclusion criteria excluded studies that only briefly mentioned wordless picturebooks without making them a central focus or research tool, or that lacked detailed explanations or specific results related to these books.

Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria for the study

	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Study Topic	Wordless picturebooks as a primary research element, tool or focus of the article, and showed a strong connection to South African contexts; used wordless picturebooks as a research method or tool for research in the South African context-; or wordless picturebooks had a strong thematic presence.	Only briefly mentions wordless picturebooks without making them a central focus or research tool. Studies referencing wordless picturebooks without offering detailed explanations or specific results linked to these books were also excluded.
Study Type	Academic, theoretical, and empirical research (journal papers, chapters from edited books, research notes, papers and abstracts in conference proceedings, PhD thesis, MA dissertations, professional reports.) Publications must meet the standards of academic rigor by appearing in peer-reviewed journals, being guided by an appointed supervisor, or being published by reputable organizations.	Press archives, websites, blogs, opinion pieces.
Timeframe	1993 - 2023	Prior to 1990
Language	English or translated into English	
Context	South Africa, Southern Africa	Studies outside Southern Africa
Accepted variations on keywords	"Wordless picture story", "wordless story", "wordless picture sequence".	
Search location	Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar	University repositories

¹Publish or Perish is a software application designed to gather and evaluate academic citations (Harzing 2007).

After removing duplicate results from the three databases, a final list of publications was selected based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Snyder (2019: 335) describes thematic analysis as a common strategy in SSLR methods. Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for conducting thematic analysis were used in this study. Figure 1 depicts how the researcher engaged with data using Braun and Clarke's (2006: 87) six-step thematic analysis method. There were no human participants in the study.

Phase 1: Familiarising self with the data collected			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engagement with Data Removal of duplicate results. Understanding how data links with each other, e.g. postgraduate studies findings reported in subsequent articles Write up a description of the data 			
Step 2: Generating initial codes			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alternative publishing Analysis: narratology Analysis: semiotics Artistic elements Audience Capacity building Caregiver-child Child audience Community engagement Cross-cultural comparisons Cultural relevance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Culture of reading Diagnostic tool Dialogic book sharing Early childhood development Early literacy & language development Education Ethics Intervention Languages & linguistics Migrant children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multilingual context Narrative elicitation Ownership Parental involvement Participants Positive parenting Production and publishing Reading Reading for enjoyment Reading responses Reflection of reality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Representation Research focus Research tool Shared reading Silence Social innovation Speech, language & hearing therapy Strengths based Teacher / classroom use
Step 3: Search for themes within codes			
Initial themes: 1. Applications and Users 2. WBP as a Research Focus (Subthemes :Analysis methods) 3.WBP as a Research Tool (Subthemes: i. Assessment / Diagnostic tools; ii. Intervention (Reading / Literacy / ECD); iii. Visual Catalyst; iv. Community Engagement)		4. Audience & Participants 5. Publishing (Subthemes: i.Traditional publishing ; ii. Alternative publishing; iii. Publishing challenges)	Initial peer review of themes at Publishing Studies webinar, input sought from various fields of research (20 September 2023)
Step 4: Review themes			
1. Publishing patterns, 2. Aesthetic and analytical approaches, 3. Wordless picturebooks as visual catalysts (Subthemes: i. Diagnostic tools; Linguistic approaches)		4. Cultural appropriateness 5. Reading interventions 6. Audiences and involvement	Peer review of themes by colleagues.
Step 5: Definition of themes		Step 6: Write up the data	

Figure 1: Outline of thematic analysis used for the study

4 Results

The search on Web of Science yielded 25 results. After applying the exclusion criteria, only three publications remained. Scopus search yielded four publications, all of which were included in the final sample. The initial Google Scholar search yielded 50 publications; after applying the exclusion criteria, only 10 publications remained. After comparing the three lists and removing duplicates, the dataset contained a final list of 23 publications.

4.1 Description of the dataset

Figure 2 shows that no publications on wordless picturebooks in South Africa were found before 2002, with the majority of publications occurring in 2017 and 2021.

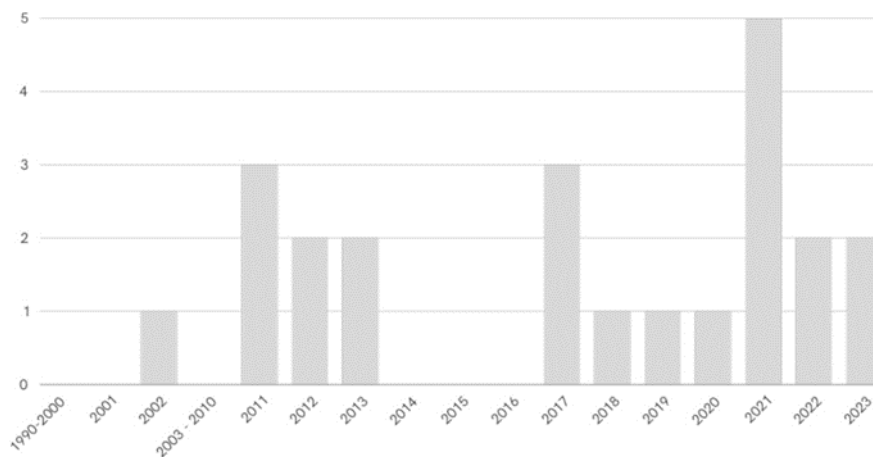


Figure 2: Publication by year

Table 2 shows the types of publications found during the search. The majority of publications are journal articles and postgraduate studies at the master's and doctoral level. Book chapters, reports, and articles by non-profit organisations were also identified.

Table 2: Publication by type

Publication Type	Number (out of 23)	%	Fields
Journal Articles	10	43%	Art and Design education (30%); Language Studies and Linguistics (20%); Communication Disorders (20%); Art and Design (10%); Play (10%); Humanities (10%).
Book Chapters	2	9%	Community Engagement and Social Innovation (50%); Research ethics (50%)
NPO reports	2	9%	Early Childhood Development (100%)
Postgraduate studies	9	39%	Speech, Language and Hearing Therapy (34%); Linguistics (11%); African Languages (11%); Visual Arts (23%); Arts Education (11%); Information Science (11%)

The search yielded Education journal themes such as Art and Design Education, Language Studies and Linguistics, Communication Disorders, Art and Design, Play, and Humanities. The two book chapters identified appeared in books on Community Engagement and Social Innovation, as well as one on Research Ethics.

Postgraduate studies were not found using Scopus or Web of Science searches. However, an extensive search on Google Scholar yielded several relevant studies. The postgraduate studies included three doctoral studies in Visual Arts, Information Science, and African Languages, as well as six master's degrees in visual arts (with a focus on illustration and art education), Linguistics, and Speech, Language, and Hearing Therapy. Four journal articles based on the postgraduate studies' findings were also identified. These articles are an additional way to disseminate the findings and may not necessarily indicate separate findings.

Table 3: Findings from postgraduate studies reported on in journal articles

Field of Study	Postgraduate Studies	Journal Article from findings
Speech, Language and Hearing Therapy	3 MA	1
Visual Arts (Illustration)	1 MPhil and 1 PhD	2
Visual Arts (Arts Education)	1 MA	1

The reports from nongovernmental organisations were only discovered after the search was expanded to include Google Scholar. Both publications can be traced back to The Mikhulu Child Development Trust, with the first appearing in a collection of essays on Early Childhood Development in South Africa and the second as a research report on a joint study between the NPO and an international university.

Titles and the frequency with which wordless picturebooks appear in the data set. The literature search turned up information about South African and internationally created wordless picturebooks that were used in the South African context. Table 4 lists the South African wordless picturebooks mentioned in the data set, as well as the frequency with which they appeared, and the approach used. For example, they could have been analysed as artefacts or used as diagnostic tools. However, this list excludes Tiemensma's (2022) bibliographic study, which lists all WPB produced in South Africa without contextualising their use or application in academic studies. It also excludes picturebooks that were not discussed but only mentioned 19 books in total.

Table 4: South African wordless picturebooks appearing in the data sample

South African WPB	Date	Author and Illustrator	Times	Context in which reported on
Abongi's Journey	2004	Kerry Saadien-Raad and Tania Rosser	5	Book Analysis / Reader Response Study / Use in Joint Reading Sessions / Visual Catalyst (Narrative Elicitation for Diagnostic Purposes)
A Very Nice Day	2006	Anne Walton and Natalie Hinrichsen	3	Book Analysis / Reader Response Study / Use in Joint Reading Sessions
Max	2010	Warwick Goldswain	2	Reader Response Study / Use in Joint Reading Sessions
One Starry Night	2011	Geoff Walton	2	Reader Response Study / Use in Joint Reading Sessions
The Rainbow Birds	2001	Piet Grobler	2	Reader Response Study / Use in Joint Reading Sessions
The swimming pool	2002	Fiona Beal and Karen Engeldow	2	Reader Response Study / Use in Joint Reading Sessions
Stella's Story	2018	Khanya Xhegwana and Neeske Alexander	2	Community Created Book/ Book Analysis / Reader Response Study
The Responsible Mother	2018	Lisa Mrosoro and Daria Kriel	2	Community Created Book/ Book Analysis / Reader Response Study
The Monster and the Granddaughter	2018	Bulela Sonka and Manuela Ohsiek	2	Community Created Book/ Book Analysis / Reader Response Study
Ibhokisi lemilingo (The magic box)	2002	Ian Lusted and Comien van Wyk	1	Book Analysis
Serepana	2018	Raisibe Rosina Kekana and Astrid Blumer	1	Community Created Book
The Woman and the Baboon	2018	Akhona Mwretyana and Neil Badenhorst	1	Community Created Book/ Book Analysis / Reader Response Study
Don't Give Up!	2018	Athenkosi Mdashe and Christi-Lee Du Plessis	1	Community Created Book/ Book Analysis / Reader Response Study
The Boy	1992	Heinemann Let's Use English	1	Visual Catalyst (explore topic or prompt activities)
The Bicycle	1992	Heinemann Let's Use English	1	Visual Catalyst (explore topic or prompt activities)

International books used in South African studies are noted in Table 5, with the same criterion as above indicated in the table.

Table 5: International wordless picturebooks appearing in the data sample

International WPB	Date	Author and Illustrator	Times	Context in which reported on
Frog Where Are You	1969	Mercer Mayer	3	Visual Catalyst (Narrative Elicitation for Diagnostic Purposes) / Contextualise Book
Wave	2008	Suzy Lee	2	Book Analysis / Reader Response Study / Use in Joint Reading Sessions
One Frog too Many	1975	Marianna Mayer and Mercer Mayer	1	Visual Catalyst (Narrative Elicitation for Diagnostic Purposes)
The Arrival	2006	Shaun Tan	1	Visual Catalyst (explore topic or prompt activities)

4.2 Themes identified in the publication

Snyder (2019: 334) asserts that "consideration of prior, relevant literature is essential for all research disciplines and all research projects." As such, literature reviews play an important role in laying the groundwork for a variety of research projects. Academic research on wordless picturebooks can help to uncover their potential as a research subject in South Africa.

Thematic analysis of the 23 publications resulted in the development of six themes. The following themes were identified: publishing patterns, aesthetic and analytical approaches, wordless picturebooks as visual catalysts (with subthemes, diagnostic tools, and linguistic approaches), cultural appropriateness, reading strategies, audiences, and involvement.

4.2.1 Publishing patterns

Tiemensma's (2022) PhD thesis, *Publishing History and Production Patterns of South African Children's Books from 2000 to 2020*, reveals that South African wordless picturebooks (WPBs) were not published prior to 2000. Between 2000 and 2020, only 2% of children's books were wordless. Several studies have also addressed publishing issues, particularly

language and the under-representation of Indigenous languages in children's literature (Ntuli 2011: 1; le Roux 2012: 2; Haese et al. 2018: 598). According to research, using wordless picturebooks can reduce translation needs by only translating the title and peritext (le Roux 2017: 203; Ellmann, Costandius, Alexander, de Villiers, and Haese 2022: 3; Haese and Costandius 2021: 66). This is especially important in South Africa, which has twelve official languages and low literacy rates among children and adults (Ellmann et al. 2021). Of the 38 books identified by Tiemensma (2022: 210-211), 34 came from local non-profit organisations. A comprehensive survey conducted by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (RTI International 2015: 47) of children's reading materials in eleven African countries highlights the significant role played by non-profit organisations, faith-based groups, and international development agencies in producing reading materials for children in African languages. This phenomenon spreads across the continent, not just South Africa.

Several studies have identified alternative publishing methods, such as "community-authored books," which involve gathering stories directly from communities to create wordless picturebooks (le Roux 2017; Haese et al. 2018; Haese and Costandius 2021; Haese et al. 2021). In her PhD study, Le Roux (2017) used this approach to create wordless picturebooks, which led to additional funded research projects. Ellman's (2020) MA study and the subsequent article by Ellman et al. (2022) both employed this strategy.

In their book chapter, Haese, Claassens, Mzayidume, and Costandius (2021) describe the Dithakga tša Gobala project. Their chapter emphasises the strengths-based approach, project choice and ownership, and the advantages of academic-nongovernmental organisation collaborations. Haese and Costandius (2021: 52), using stories from two communities, discovered that creating wordless picturebooks improved participants' self-concept and relationship with reading. Despite challenges such as authorship issues and misunderstandings between authors and illustrators, the books were well-received by the community for their ease of use, promotion of positive parent-child interactions, stimulation of imagination, and relateable content. Such studies provide alternatives to traditional publishing methods and highlight the potential of community engagement in shaping children's literature.

4.2.2 Aesthetics and analytical approaches

Arizpe (2021: 262) emphasises that the "aesthetic" aspect of picturebook studies is concerned with the formal characteristics and components of the picturebook as an artistic entity. The study of aesthetics focusses on its connections to other art forms and movements, as well as how contemporary creators use specific elements to create meaning. Within the dataset, the visual elements of wordless picturebooks were not extensively studied as standalone subjects, despite the fact that some publications included analyses of the books as standalone artefacts. Semiotics, social semiotics, and narratology were among the methodologies used.

Le Roux (2012: 2017) used semiotics, narratology, and multimodal social semiotics to analyse existing South African wordless picturebooks during his postgraduate studies. Ntuli (2011) investigated two wordless picturebooks as part of a larger study of children's literature in indigenous African languages, with a focus on Zulu. The books *Ibhokisi lemilingo* (The Magic Box) (Lusted and Nan Wyk 2002) and *A Very Nice Day* (Walton and Hinrichsen 2006) were analysed; both are classified as fantasy stories because they feature unusual characters in unusual situations. On first glance, *A Very Nice Day* depicts a seemingly ordinary day in which a young girl prepares for the day, buys groceries, and prepares a meal. Ntuli (2011) states that the lack of adult presence qualifies it as fantasy. The story may also reflect the reality of child-headed households, which are one type of family structure in South Africa (Department of Social Development Republic of South Africa 2021: iv).

Ellmann's 2020 MA study examined wordless picturebooks published using alternative methods and compared them to feedback from external readers. Ellmann et al. (2020: 18) elaborated on these findings in a journal article, identifying differences between the illustrated culture depicted in the books and the real culture of the external, adult readers.

4.2.3 Wordless picturebooks as visual catalyst

Wordless picturebooks are frequently used to facilitate dialogue, activities, or contemplation on specific topics. Hanna (2021) used Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (1996) with migrant children to explore identity, challenging simplistic portrayals of migrant learners and acknowledging silence as a form of resistance. In De Jager and Steyn's (2023) research study, a wordless book was used in the South African mainstream school setting to raise awareness of social issues, such as deforestation and climate change, by utilising visual affordances. *Window* (Baker 1991) served as a starting point for students to engage in creative activities such as painting, drawing, and collage, fostering exploration and expression.

Subthemes identified in this theme included the use of wordless picturebooks as diagnostic tools and linguistic approaches. Both subthemes use wordless picturebooks to elicit narratives or responses from participants.

4.2.3.1 Diagnostics tools

In Speech, Language, and Hearing Therapy, wordless picturebooks are used to diagnose language disorders using a variety of assessment methodologies (Aacker 2012; Engelbrecht 2011). Narrative skills are strongly associated with later reading and writing abilities (Aacker 2012: iii). Wordless picturebooks and sequenced picture cards are two common visual modalities used in research. Aacker (2012: 23) cites Hemphill et al. (1991), who identified 12 narrative diagnostic devices such as attention-grabbers, qualifiers, exclamations, repetitive elements, onomatopoeia, reported speech, and expressions of thoughts, feelings, and intentions. Creating wordless narratives for diagnostics is difficult, with a noticeable lack of relevant material.

Frog, where are you? (Mayer 1969) was identified as the most frequently used book in narrative research due to its popularity; it has been used to "investigate the differences in children's narrative structure and content" (Engelbrecht 2011: 14). However, both Engelbrecht (2011) and Aacker (2012) deemed it inappropriate for the South African context due to the unusual story, in which a boy searches for a pet frog. The authors felt that because frogs are uncommon pets, South African children would not easily relate to this, so they created their own books instead. Rausch et al. (2017: 15) used Frog Where Are You? (Mayer 1969) and One Frog Too Many (Mayer & Mayer 1975) to elicit narratives from ADHD patients during on/off medication testing. Limmerstedt and Lyhre (2011) investigated how a dynamic assessment method affected the narratives of South African children. They used assessment materials developed by the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST), specifically a wordless picture sequence. This sequence is part of the Language Impairment Testing in Multilingual Settings (LITMUS) toolkit, designed to improve language assessment for minority language children (Litmus Network 2024).

4.2.3.2 Linguistic approaches

Some researchers investigated the linguistic or narrative aspects of using wordless picturebooks. Jiyane (2017) examined narratives by isiZulu-speaking children in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The author compared storytelling structures and cultural influences between rural and urban children, focussing on two wordless books. The South African book Abongi's Journey (Saadien-Raad & Rosser 2004) was used to represent local context, while Frog Where Are You? (Mayer 1969) was chosen as an example of a 'foreign', western-themed book. According to Ntuli (2011, 253), wordless picturebooks could be especially beneficial in a diverse, multiracial, and multilingual country like the "new" South Africa, also known as the "rainbow nation". This is because they do not need to be tailored to a specific age group if they accurately reflect the country's life and diversity. The study also looks into the benefits of wordless books for developing reading and writing skills, as well as their relationship to storytelling.

Jiyane (2017: v) highlights the growing interest in understanding children's experiences in multilingual societies, where cultural and linguistic practices differ from the languages used in education (Tappe and Hara 2013, 299; Jiyane 2017: v). This interest is bolstered by the author's citation of findings from studies such as Kruger's (2013) investigation into Afrikaans reading of unfamiliar material and Mthethwa's (2017) exploration of visual stimuli familiarity, which emphasises the importance of cultural familiarity in children's performance, revealing the complexities of this issue (Jiyane 2017, 21: 96).

Breedt et al.'s (2021) collaborative project investigates wordless sequences specifically designed for the South African context. Their interdisciplinary approach, which was founded on linguistic and visual communication theories, sought to develop a new method for studying impersonalisation strategies. Graphic design students developed visual questionnaires to determine linguistic preferences and strategies for impersonal applications. The researchers saw promise in the visual questionnaire as a tool for investigating impersonalisation and learning about actual language use. Creating visual questionnaires necessitated several considerations, including responsiveness to various display sizes, consideration of viewers' backgrounds, explicit depiction of sequential relationships, and clarity to prevent ambiguity. These considerations aimed to ensure that the visual sequences effectively captured speakers' language use (Breedt et al. 2021: 173).

4.2.4 Cultural appropriateness

Cultural appropriateness has emerged as a recurring theme in several studies, emphasising the importance of respecting and accurately portraying diverse cultural contexts across disciplines. Research in these areas highlights the importance of incorporating cultural nuances and traditions to ensure relevance and avoid misrepresentation or offence. This theme was discovered through an analysis of existing wordless picture books, as well as studies on linguistics, languages, speech, and language and hearing therapy. Existing books have cultural relevance.

Jiyane (2017: 27) emphasises the importance of characters in interpreting picturebooks, pointing out their symbolic roles in traditional African stories. In the novel Abongi's Journey, the protagonist is accompanied by a white bird, reflecting the African belief that white birds represent good omens and black birds represent bad ones. Le Roux's (2017) study discusses the cultural relevance and appropriateness of reading materials in South Africa, with a focus on the creation of

culturally relevant, economically viable wordless picturebooks to promote a love of reading at home. Ellmann et al. (2021) conclude that their research provides "evidence of the importance of understanding context-relative knowledge and of using appropriate signs, symbols, and signifiers when translating and portraying narratives in wordless picturebooks".

4.2.5 Assessments in the South African population

Speech and language therapists in South Africa face challenges because they frequently work in the language of education rather than the child's first language (Limmerstad & Lyle 2011:18). Incorporating culturally familiar materials into educational settings is critical for accommodating linguistic and cultural diversity, especially in multilingual societies like South Africa. To establish accurate testing norms, narrative assessments tailored to the South African child population are required (Limmerstedt and Lyhre 2011: 11; Aacker 2012: 89), as well as consideration of the diverse language landscape (Engelbrecht 2011: 12). As previously stated, Breedts et al. (2021: 173) regard consideration of viewers' backgrounds as a critical aspect when developing visual questionnaires.

Engelbrecht (2011) questions the relevance of *Frog Where Are You?* for South African audiences, citing content and audience differences, and criticises the outdated content of the Test for Oral Language Production (TOLP), particularly in terms of corporal punishment laws. Limmerstedt and Lyhre (2011: 38) highlight the significance of illustrations, citing children's misinterpretations of character motivations and emotions. Aacker (2012) discovered that commercially available assessments were unsuitable for the South African context due to socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural differences, prompting collaboration on a culturally relevant book. These studies highlight the importance of using culturally appropriate signs and symbols in WPBs, particularly in multilingual contexts like South Africa, where cultural familiarity has a significant impact on children's performance and narrative comprehension. In response, Aacker (2012: 43) and Engelbrecht (2011: 51) worked with a professional illustrator to create a book with 14 colour illustrations depicting a story familiar to the South African context.

4.2.6 Reading strategies

Promoting a "culture of reading" was another key term that appeared multiple times in the dataset (Haese 2021: 63; Haese et al. 2018: 596; Le Roux 2017: 203; Le Roux & Costandius 2013: 53). This category also includes studies that were not specifically a 'intervention' but used joint reading as part of their methodology. In this regard, wordless picturebooks were identified as a strategy for reading, literacy, and early childhood development (ECD), as well as studies that emphasise or employ joint reading, book sharing, and dialogical book sharing. The genre was used to promote literacy skills, facilitate discussions about specific topics, and raise awareness, particularly in the context of art education and community engagement initiatives.

Jeffrey (2021), Le Roux (2012, 2017), and Haese et al. (2018) emphasise the suitability of wordless picturebooks for these activities due to their distinguishing features. Jeffrey (2021: 82) emphasises that "wordless picturebooks are uniquely well suited for supporting child development because they require parents and children to discuss the pictures to make sense of the story," which promotes conversational exchanges that aid language development. Le Roux (2017) and Haese et al. (2018) discovered that parents used wordless books in both their native language and English to facilitate multilingual conversations (Haese et al. 2018: 594; Le Roux 2017: 162). This adaptability to multilingual settings, such as South Africa, was observed throughout the data (Haese et al. 2018, Haese & Costandius 2021, Haese et al. 2021, Le Roux 2017; Ntuli 2020).

According to research, using wordless picturebooks can facilitate parent-child interactions, especially when parents or carers lack confidence in decoding text (Haese et al. 2018; Haese 2022; Jeffrey 2021; Le Roux 2012, 2017). Joint reading can foster positive parenting and contribute to positive self-perceptions among adults, eventually reshaping the reading relationship between adults and children (Foulds & Bucuvalas 2019, 34; Haese et al. 2018: 593; Le Roux 2017: 149). Foulds and Bucuvalas (2019) used WPBs in the Play Every Day initiative in India, Mexico, and South Africa to change carer attitudes towards play and its developmental benefits (2019: 17). Carers reported that the wordless storybooks promoted imaginative play outside of workshops (Foulds & Bucuvalas 2019: 29).

Teacher-learner shared reading improves teacher skills and child outcomes, as demonstrated by Ebrahim et al. (2021) in Namibia and South Africa. Buchorn-Stoll's (2002) study looked at South African pre-primary children with limited English proficiency and how interactive storybook reading affected their English language development. One of the tests consisted of three "wordless picture stories" from Heinemann's *Let's Use English* (1992), which were used to record spoken language. The study found that interactive reading can significantly increase language and vocabulary in preschool children.

4.2.7 Audiences and Adult Involvement in the use of wordless picturebooks

In the data sample, wordless picturebooks were primarily designed for children but required adult supervision. When used for diagnostic purposes in speech, hearing, and language therapy, adults acted as assessors, prompting narratives and evaluating children's responses (Foulds & Bucuvalas 2019; Haese et al. 2018; Haese 2021; Haese et al. 2021; Le Roux 2012; Le Roux & Costandius 2013; Le Roux 2017).

Parents or primary carers played an important role in reading sessions, community engagement projects, and alternative publishing, often as authors using alternative methods (Foulds & Bucuvalas 2019; Haese et al. 2018; Haese 2021; Haese et al. 2021; Le Roux 2012; Le Roux and Costandius 2013; Le Roux 2017). Teachers and researchers led guided reading sessions, book discussions (Hanna 2021; De Jager and Steyn 2023), and dialogical book sharing (Ebrahim et al. 2021). Adults read wordless picturebooks without children, such as teachers giving feedback on books written by children (Ellmann 2020; Ellman et al. 2021) and participants filling out visual questionnaires (Breedt et al. 2021). In Breed et al. (2021), parents and carers served as authors for books, while university students designed wordless questionnaires. Adults were the primary data sources in these studies, with parents sharing their experiences with wordless books and teachers reporting on children's behaviour during book-sharing or their perspectives on wordless picturebooks. Hanna (2021) and De Jager and Steyn (2023) both used children's responses as data in their research.

Participants in the development and research of wordless picturebooks, Tiemensma's (2022: 210-211) research identified 38 wordless picturebooks published in South Africa since 2000, 34 of which were produced by local non-profit organisations. This suggests that non-governmental organisations are primarily responsible for the development and promotion of wordless picture books. BookDash, SmartStart, the Mikhulu Trust, Collaborate Community Projects, and the African Storybook Project are among the key organisations involved. These groups use wordless books to encourage literacy, stimulate the imagination, and accommodate children from various linguistic backgrounds. The aforementioned organisations promote early literacy through a variety of initiatives. BookDash (2024a) provides high-quality books to young children and families, The Mikhulu Trust (2024) empowers parents as primary educators, and Smart Start (2024) aims to improve access to early education. They all emphasise the significance of early exposure to books and storytelling for children's literacy and development, especially for those from diverse backgrounds. The African Storybook (ASb 2024) project creates picture books in African languages for young readers.

Wordless books are one component of these organisations' offerings. BookDash (2024b) emphasises their role in instilling a love of reading, noting their accessibility to families with low literacy levels. SmartStart worked with poet Gcina Mhlophe to create wordless storybooks that bridge language barriers and instil a love of learning (Pillay 2024). The Mikhulu Trust (2024) creates wordless books to encourage deep conversations between parents and children, addressing a local shortage. The Dithakga tša Gobala project encourages reading and storytelling for all literacy levels and language preferences by providing free downloadable books created by South African communities (Collaborate Community Projects 2021). While the African Storybook Project (2024) frequently relies on other organisations or users to upload books, some "ASB approved" collections are intentionally created wordless books.

5 Limitations

The search excluded conference papers and abstracts, as well as systematic searches of institutional research repositories. Furthermore, some studies, such as Schaffer and Watters' (2003) Formative Evaluation of the First Phase of First Words in Print Summary Report, are no longer available and did not appear in the search results. It is reasonable to assume that other studies were not included as well. Even though "wordless stories" are listed on educational publishers' websites, such as Oxford University Press (2024), none of the research cited in this study mentioned or included wordless picturebooks published by educational publishers. This could be a future research avenue. An overview of wordless picturebooks available through educational publishers can provide more insight into how they are created and promoted for classroom use in South Africa.

6 Conflict of interest

The author's interest in wordless picturebooks stems from previous and related academic work. This data was included not for self-citation, but to provide an accurate overview of the South African research landscape.

7 Conclusion and recommendations

This study synthesised academic interest in South African wordless picturebooks published in English between 1990 and 2023. Despite increased awareness, use, and creation within NGOs and reading interventions, wordless picturebooks are understudied in South Africa. Existing studies highlight various aspects of WPB. Some concentrate on the use of books, such as diagnostic tools and strategies for improving reading skills and literacy. Others focus on the book's characteristics, such as different publishing practices/patterns and aesthetic aspects of the books; and some emphasise the books' cultural

relevance. There is a growing interest in WPBs, and in addition to research, several NPOs are involved in their use, particularly for the development of literary skills and parent-child storytelling.

The use of wordless picturebooks includes both children and adults, with adult roles varying depending on the purpose. Adults adhere to structured guidelines for assessments, whereas active and less structured parent/adult-child interaction is essential for literacy development. Wordless picturebooks provide several advantages for professionals and educational outcomes, and they are applicable in a wide range of cultural and linguistic contexts; however, more context-specific material is required, particularly as assessment tools. This is especially important in multicultural societies like South Africa. According to studies, the genre can be beneficial to children, adults, and communities.

The study identifies a research gap regarding the aesthetic and material aspects of WPBs. This field is important, for example, considering different conceptualisations of visual material in different cultural groups, investigating the illustration process involved in creating a WPB, and understanding how WPBs may function as social practices embedded within specific cultural contexts (Gannon & Fouchon). 2021).

The potential value of using wordless picturebooks in South Africa's multicultural context provides avenues for future research. Translanguaging pedagogy using wordless picture books could be investigated in educational settings to see how it can strengthen the connection between schools and homes, particularly given the differences in home language and language of instruction that students face. Furthermore, there is an underexplored opportunity to increase the readership of wordless picture books in South Africa, particularly among older audiences such as reluctant teen readers and adults. According to Arizpe (2021), future sociocultural research should look into how wordless picturebooks address concerns about equity, diversity, and inclusion.

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