International Journal of Enhanced Research in Educational Development (IJERED)
ISSN: 2320-8708, Vol. 14 Issue 1, January-February, 2026

Role of Illustration and Character Design in Children's Book Selection

Ashu Lata[1], Dr. Prof Bindulika Sharma[2]

[1]Ph.D Scholar, Department of Art Education, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi
[2]Guide: Department of Art Education, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

ABSTRACT

Illustration and character design play an important role in children's book selection, especially among children aged 6–10 years. At this stage, children are developing reading habits, imagination, emotional understanding, and visual preferences. Before reading the story, children often respond to the images, characters, colours, expressions, and visual scenes presented on the book cover. This paper examines the role of illustration and character design in influencing children's interest, curiosity, emotional connection, and book selection. Drawing upon theories of visual communication, visual semiotics, and children's visual literacy, the study presents a conceptual and interpretive analysis of how illustrations and characters function as meaningful visual elements in children's publishing. The paper argues that illustration is not merely decorative but works as a visual entry point into the story world. Character design helps children identify with the narrative, understand emotions, and form expectations about the book. The study also highlights the role of parents, teachers, librarians, designers, publishers, and booksellers as important stakeholders in children's book selection. The paper contributes to visual arts and design scholarship by offering a child-centred understanding of illustration and character design as powerful tools of visual communication in children's books.

Keywords: Illustration, Character Design, Children's Books, Book Cover Design, Visual Communication, Children Aged 6–10 Years

INTRODUCTION

Children's books are deeply connected with visual experience. For children aged 6–10 years, illustrations and characters often become the first point of attraction. A child may not immediately understand the author's name, publisher, or complete storyline, but the child can quickly respond to a friendly face, colourful scene, expressive animal, magical world, or playful character on the cover. This makes illustration and character design central to children's book selection.

Book selection among children is not always a logical process. It is often emotional, visual, and imaginative. Children may choose a book because the character looks funny, brave, kind, mysterious, or similar to them. They may also select a book because the illustration suggests adventure, friendship, magic, humour, or curiosity. In this way, illustration becomes a visual invitation to enter the book.

In children's publishing, illustration is not limited to decoration. It communicates the mood, theme, genre, and emotional tone of the book. Character design further supports this communication by giving the child a visual figure to connect with. Characters may be human, animal, fantasy-based, symbolic, or object-based. Their facial expressions, body language, clothing, actions, and surroundings help children understand what kind of story they may find inside the book.

Children aged 6–10 years are in an important stage of visual and reading development. They can understand images, symbols, simple narratives, emotions, and relationships. However, their reading choices are still strongly influenced by visual attraction. Therefore, the design of illustrations and characters on book covers can directly affect their interest in reading.

This paper examines the role of illustration and character design in children's book selection. It studies how visual elements create attention, emotional connection, imagination, identification, and expectation. It also discusses how different stakeholders influence children's book choices.

1. Illustration as a Visual Entry Point into the Story

Illustration works as a visual doorway into the world of a children's book. Before the child reads the story, the illustration gives an idea of what the book may contain. It may show the main character, setting, mood, conflict, or central theme. Through illustration, the child begins to imagine the story even before opening the book.

For children aged 6–10 years, illustration is often more powerful than written description. A child may be attracted to a book because the cover shows a forest, school, magical object, talking animal, funny scene, or adventurous journey. These images create curiosity and encourage the child to explore the book further.

Illustrations also make books less intimidating for children. A text-heavy cover may feel serious or difficult, while an illustrated cover feels friendly and accessible. This is especially important for children who are still developing reading confidence. A strong illustration can reduce fear of reading and increase interest.

The style of illustration also affects perception. Bright and playful illustrations may suggest humour and joy. Soft and gentle illustrations may suggest emotional warmth. Detailed fantasy illustrations may suggest adventure and imagination. Simple line drawings may suggest clarity and innocence. Therefore, illustration style communicates the emotional direction of the book.

In this sense, illustration does not merely support the story; it begins the story visually. It creates the first relationship between the child and the book.

2. Character Design and Emotional Identification

Character design plays a major role in children's emotional connection with books. Children often look for characters they can like, trust, admire, or identify with. A well-designed character can make the child feel curious about the story and emotionally involved in the reading experience.

Character design includes facial expression, body shape, clothing, posture, gesture, colour, and personality cues. A smiling character may appear friendly and safe. A brave-looking character may suggest adventure. A confused or surprised character may create humour or mystery. An animal character may create warmth, playfulness, or fantasy.
Children aged 6–10 years often form quick emotional judgments based on character appearance. They may feel that a character is funny, kind, naughty, magical, intelligent, or brave just by looking at the cover. These judgments influence whether they want to read the book.

Identification is especially important. When children see characters who look like them, behave like them, face similar problems, or express familiar emotions, they may feel connected. Such connection can increase reading interest. At the same time, fantasy characters allow children to imagine new worlds and possibilities beyond their everyday life. Character design also helps children understand emotions. Facial expressions and body language communicate happiness, fear, anger, surprise, sadness, courage, or friendship. This emotional communication helps children predict the tone of the story. Therefore, characters are not only visual figures; they are emotional signs that guide the child's response.

3. Illustration, Imagination, and Narrative Expectation

Illustration strongly supports children's imagination. A book cover illustration can suggest a whole story world through a single image. Children may imagine what happened before the scene and what may happen next. This imaginative response is one of the main reasons children become interested in a book.

For children aged 6–10 years, imagination is closely connected with visual storytelling. A cover that shows a magical door, flying object, mysterious map, hidden treasure, talking animal, or unusual setting can immediately create narrative expectation. The child begins to ask questions: Who is this character? Where are they going? What will happen next? Is this story funny, scary, magical, or adventurous?

This questioning process creates curiosity. Curiosity becomes a strong reason for book selection. If the illustration gives too little information, the child may not feel interested. If it gives too much information, the mystery may reduce. Effective illustration creates a balance between clarity and curiosity.

Illustrations also help children understand genre. A fantasy book may use magical scenes, unusual creatures, or dreamlike colours. A school story may show classroom, friends, bags, books, or playgrounds. An adventure story may show movement, travel, danger, or discovery. A moral story may show family, nature, kindness, or relationships. These visual cues help children select books according to their interests.

Thus, illustration works as a narrative sign. It helps the child imagine the story, understand the genre, and form expectations before reading.

4. Visual Appeal and Book Selection Behaviour

Children's book selection is strongly influenced by visual appeal. When children see many books together in a bookstore, library, classroom, or online platform, the cover illustration and character design often decide which book receives attention first.

Visual appeal is created through colour, clarity, composition, expression, movement, and uniqueness. A cover that looks lively and clear may attract a child more quickly than a cover that looks dull or confusing. Children usually prefer covers that feel energetic, friendly, and emotionally inviting.

Character placement also affects visual appeal. A large central character can create immediate focus. A character looking directly at the viewer may create a personal connection. A character in action may create excitement. A group of characters may suggest friendship, teamwork, or fun. These visual arrangements guide the child's attention and influence selection.

Children may also choose books based on repeated visual memory. If they remember a particular character from a series or previous reading experience, they may select the book again. This shows that character design can create brand identity in children's publishing. Famous children's book characters often become memorable because their visual identity is simple, expressive, and consistent.

Therefore, illustration and character design affect not only first-time attraction but also long-term recognition and repeated book selection.

5. Age Appropriateness in Illustration and Character Design

Illustration and character design must be age-appropriate to communicate effectively with children aged 6–10 years. This age group is neither very young nor fully mature. Children at this stage can understand stories, emotions, humour, fantasy, and simple symbolic meanings, but they still need visual clarity and emotional accessibility.

For younger children within this group, such as ages 6–7, illustrations may need to be simpler, brighter, and more direct. Characters should be expressive and easy to understand. For older children, such as ages 8–10, illustrations can include more details, complex scenes, mystery, humour, and stronger narrative suggestions.

Age appropriateness also includes emotional suitability. Very dark, violent, abstract, or frightening imagery may create discomfort. Overly childish imagery may not attract older children within the same age group. Therefore, designers must understand the psychological and visual needs of the target age.

The balance between simplicity and sophistication is important. A good children's book cover should not underestimate the child's imagination, but it should also not overload the child with visual complexity. The illustration should encourage reading, not create confusion.

Thus, age-sensitive illustration and character design are essential for effective children's book selection.

6. Multi-Stakeholder Role in Children's Book Selection

Children do not select books in isolation. Their choices are influenced by parents, teachers, librarians, designers, publishers, booksellers, and sometimes peers. Each stakeholder views illustration and character design differently. Children mainly respond to attraction, emotion, curiosity, humour, fantasy, and character appeal. Parents may look for safety, educational value, positive behaviour, and moral meaning. Teachers may prefer covers that support learning, imagination, language development, and classroom discussion. Librarians may consider diversity, theme, readability, and long-term interest.

Designers focus on visual communication, composition, originality, and age suitability. Publishers focus on market appeal, sales, visibility, and genre positioning. Booksellers focus on display impact and customer response. Therefore, a successful children's book cover must communicate to both children and adults.

This multi-stakeholder nature creates a design challenge. A cover must be attractive enough for children and trustworthy enough for adults. It must be imaginative but also appropriate. It must be playful but also meaningful. Illustration and character design play a central role in achieving this balance. Understanding these stakeholder perspectives can help create better children's book covers that support reading interest
and book selection.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the role of illustration and character design in children's book selection, particularly among children aged 6–10 years. It has argued that illustration and character design are not merely decorative elements but

important visual communication tools that influence attention, curiosity, emotional response, imagination, and selection behaviour.

Illustration works as a visual entry point into the story. It helps children imagine the book's world before reading it. Character design creates emotional identification and allows children to connect with the story. Facial expressions, body language, colour, action, and personality cues help children understand the emotional tone and narrative direction of the book.

The study also shows that illustration and character design must be age-appropriate. Children aged 6–10 years need visual clarity, emotional accessibility, imagination, and meaningful character appeal. Effective design balances simplicity with curiosity and attractiveness with suitability.

The paper further highlights the importance of a multi-stakeholder approach. Children, parents, teachers, librarians, designers, publishers, and booksellers all influence children's book selection. Therefore, illustration and character design must address both child interest and adult approval.

Recognising illustration and character design as meaningful visual systems can help scholars, designers, and publishers understand their deeper role in children's reading culture. Future research may include surveys with children, interviews with parents and teachers, visual analysis of children's book covers, and observational studies in libraries, classrooms, and bookstores.

REFERENCES

[1] Barthes, R. (1967). *Elements of Semiology*. Hill and Wang.
[2] Genette, G. (1997). *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge University Press.
[3] Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Sage Publications.
[4] Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
[5] Nikolajeva, M., & Scott, C. (2001). *How Picturebooks Work*. Garland Publishing.
[6] Nodelman, P. (1988). *Words About Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books*. University of Georgia Press.
[7] Salisbury, M., & Styles, M. (2012). *Children's Picturebooks: The Art of Visual Storytelling*. Laurence King Publishing.
[8] Sipe, L. R. (2008). *Storytime: Young Children's Literary Understanding in the Classroom*. Teachers College Press.
[9] Tschichold, J. (1991). *The Form of the Book: Essays on the Morality of Good Design*. Hartley & Marks.
[10] Van Leeuwen, T. (2005). *Introducing Social Semiotics*. Routledge.