

Child as Co-Author: Interdisciplinary Integration of Visual Arts and Media Literacy in Early Childhood Education

Lana Skender¹, Darija Kuharić²

¹Academy of Arts and Culture, J. J. Strossmayer University of Osijek, Croatia

²Faculty of Education, J. J. Strossmayer University of Osijek, Croatia

Abstract

This paper examines the interdisciplinary integration of visual arts and media literacy in early childhood education, grounded in the concept of the child as a co-author in the process of meaning-making. Drawing on contemporary approaches to media literacy, visual culture, and constructivist pedagogy, the study positions the child as an active constructor of knowledge rather than a passive recipient of media content. The empirical part presents a qualitative case study of a six-year-old child who, after reading a story written by one of the authors, developed a narrative interpretation and translated it into a series of original illustrations. The analysis explores the relationship between verbal narrative and visual representation, focusing on how the child identifies and interprets elements of media messages—such as color, characters, emotional tone, and communicative intention—and reconfigures them through artistic expression. The findings suggest that integrating visual arts with media literacy supports the development of critical thinking, visual analysis, and creative interpretation. The child emerges as an active interpreter and co-author of meaning, highlighting the pedagogical value of artistic production in fostering early media competence and supporting interdisciplinary approaches in early education.

Keywords: *media literacy; visual arts; early childhood education; child as co-author; constructivism; case study*

1. Introduction

Children today grow up in a highly visual, media-saturated environment shaped by digital media, advertising, and public visual communication, all of which influence their perceptions and understanding of the world [4], [14]. Visual messages, particularly advertisements, function as complex systems of meaning that use symbolic and affective strategies to shape viewers' responses. Although often perceived as passive recipients, children actively interpret and negotiate media meanings within their social contexts, thereby calling for recognition of their capacity as meaning-makers [6].

Media literacy, defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media messages, is therefore essential from an early age [1], [10]. Research shows that even young children begin to understand persuasive intent, although their critical evaluation skills are still developing, so it is important to develop appropriate approaches in early education [15].

Visual arts offer a valuable pathway for fostering such competencies because artistic expression enables children to interpret and transform visual information. Grounded in constructivist perspectives, this study explores how integrating visual arts and media literacy supports children's interpretative abilities and examines how a child uses illustration to reconstruct a media message, positioning the child as a co-author of meaning within a multimodal framework [12], [13].

2. Theoretical Background

Contemporary pedagogical theories increasingly reject the notion of the child as a passive recipient of knowledge, instead positioning the child as an active participant in meaning-making. This perspective is grounded in the work of Piaget [19] and Vygotsky [25], who emphasize the child's active role in cognitive and symbolic development.

Piaget explains learning as a process of active construction through assimilation and accommodation, in which children interpret new experiences in relation to their existing cognitive structures [19]. In the context of media literacy and visual culture, children do not receive media messages as predetermined meanings but interpret them through their prior experiences and intellectual capacities. Visual expression, such as drawing, serves as a symbolic representation through which children externalize and reorganize their understanding [8].

Vygotsky extends this view by highlighting the social nature of learning, in which knowledge is mediated by interaction and cultural patterns [25]. Dialogue, reflection, and visual production support the

development of more complex interpretative abilities, positioning artistic expression as a key medium of meaning-making [12].

A model for such an approach can be found in Reggio Emilia, which conceptualizes the child as competent, expressive, and capable of constructing meaning through multiple symbolic systems, as reflected in the concept of the “hundred languages of the child.” [16], [20]. Learning is understood as a collaborative and interpretative process, with the adult acting as mentor rather than transmitter of knowledge.

Within this model, the concept of the child as a co-author emerges. Co-authorship aligns with participatory and democratic education, especially in foregrounding children’s interpretations and shaping meaning rather than reproducing content [6].

In visual culture and media literacy contexts, this is particularly evident. Visual production enables children to construct and communicate their own perspectives, positioning them as active participants in visual culture [9]. Meaning is not inherent in images but emerges through interaction between the viewer and the visual text [23]. Through drawing and illustration, children select, emphasize, and transform elements, revealing both understanding and a critical attitude.

In interdisciplinary contexts that integrate visual arts and media literacy, children engage in multimodal meaning-making, in which their visual choices serve as indicators of agency and interpretation. Co-authorship provides a framework for understanding children’s visual and narrative productions as the main arenas for meaning-making, positioning the child as an active participant within contemporary media environments.

2.2. From Perception to Interpretation: Media Literacy in Early Childhood

Media literacy is widely recognized as a fundamental competence in contemporary societies, encompassing the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media messages [1], [10]. UNESCO further expands this concept by integrating media and information literacy, emphasizing an understanding of how media content is produced and situated within broader social and cultural contexts [24].

Contemporary approaches highlight the critical dimension of media literacy. As Buckingham argues, media literacy involves understanding representation, media language, audience, and production processes [4]. Developing media literacy requires recognizing how meaning is constructed and how spectators are positioned.

Important to this study is the shift from perception to interpretation. While perception refers to initial engagement with media, interpretation involves active cognitive and semiotic processing, questioning how meaning is constructed and why certain elements are emphasized. This approach is similar to constructivist and sociocultural perspectives on learning [3], [25].

Research shows that children begin to recognize persuasive intent between ages six and eight, although their critical evaluation remains limited [15]. It highlights the need for pedagogical approaches that move beyond awareness toward interpretative engagement.

Recent scholarship advocates moving from protectionist to empowerment-oriented models of media literacy, supporting children as active participants in media culture [5], [10]. Given children’s frequent engagement with visual media, developing visual interpretative skills is essential. As Kress notes, meaning is increasingly constructed multimodally, requiring the ability to interpret visual and spatial elements [12].

Pedagogically, this implies integrating analysis with creative production. Activities such as discussing advertisements and reconstructing media messages through drawing enable children to externalize and reflect on their interpretations [11].

Within interdisciplinary contexts, particularly those that combine visual arts and media literacy, this progression becomes evident. By creating their own visuals, children can reshape media messages. It shows what they understand and turns them into active participants. Media literacy thus emerges as a multimodal, participatory practice that supports the development of critical awareness and the child’s role as a co-author of meaning.

2.3. Drawing Meaning: Visual Arts as a Critical Literacy Practice

Given the central role of images in contemporary culture, media literacy necessarily includes the development of visual literacy, the ability to interpret, analyze, and construct meaning through visual elements such as color, composition, and symbolism [9], [23].

Visual culture theory emphasizes that meaning emerges through interaction between the image and the viewer within specific cultural contexts [23]. In educational settings, this involves encouraging children to question who created a message, for whom, and with what intent. Such inquiry supports the shift from perception to interpretation.

Duncum highlights the importance of engaging with media images in education, advocating a move from passive viewing to active interpretation [7]. When children reinterpret visual messages through artistic expression, critical reading becomes visible in their visual choices. In this study, illustration is therefore understood not as reproduction but as an interpretative act that transforms narrative meaning into visual form.

The sequential nature of illustrations further supports meaning-making by structuring temporal and causal relationships. It allows insight into how children organize and develop understanding over time. Illustrated sequences provide insight into how children organize and interpret meaning.

Visual arts can thus be seen as a critical literacy practice. Drawing supports symbolic thinking [19] and operates as a cultural tool for meaning-making [25], enabling children to reinterpret and transform visual information [12]. As Eisner argues, artistic activity fosters forms of thinking essential for interpretation and judgment [8].

Through visual production, children engage in processes of selection, evaluation, and transformation, which are considered core aspects of critical literacy [12], [21]. In interdisciplinary contexts, particularly those integrating visual arts and media literacy, drawing makes children's interpretations visible and positions them as active meaning-makers and co-authors within visual culture.

2.4. Illustration as an Interpretative Act

Picturebook illustration, particularly within a narrative sequence, represents a form of visual interpretation rather than a neutral reproduction of text. Illustrations construct and transform meaning by introducing visual, spatial, and affective dimensions. As such, illustration can be understood as a semiotic practice in which meaning is rearticulated through visual choices.

Visual production enables learners to develop personal perspectives and negotiate meaning within cultural contexts [9]. When children translate narrative into images, meaning is transformed rather than transferred [12]. Picturebook theory further emphasizes the dynamic relationship between text and image, where illustrations may complement, expand, or challenge the verbal narrative [17], [18].

Meaning, therefore, emerges through interaction between the image and the viewer [23]. Illustration thus functions as a visible trace of cognitive and interpretative processes. As Arizpe and Styles show, children actively engage with visual narratives, bringing personal and cultural understandings into their interpretations [2]. It becomes particularly evident in sequential illustration, where organizing events across images requires an understanding of temporal progression, causality, and narrative coherence [17].

Such processes position illustration as a multimodal practice through which children organize and negotiate meaning. By selecting, omitting, or reconfiguring elements, children reveal their interpretative strategies and critical engagement. In this sense, illustration becomes an analytically relevant site where media literacy, symbolic thinking, and agency are made visible.

Within this study, the creation of an illustrated narrative based on a misleading advertisement provides insight into how a child reconstructs media messages. The illustrations function as multimodal texts that reveal how perception is transformed into interpretation.

Illustration should therefore be understood not as a supplementary activity but as an interpretative act central to meaning-making. This perspective aligns with the concept of the child as a co-author, positioning visual production as a key site for constructing, negotiating, and transforming meaning.

3. Methodology

This qualitative case study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of how a child constructs and reinterprets media messages through visual expression. A qualitative approach was selected as it enables the exploration of meaning-making processes, symbolic structures, and interpretative practices, in line with constructivist perspectives that conceptualize the child as an active agent in knowledge construction [3], [25].

The case study methodology allows for a detailed, context-sensitive analysis of a specific phenomenon within its natural setting [22], [26]. In this research, the phenomenon under investigation is the multimodal interpretation of media content through children's illustrations, understood as an interdisciplinary form of meaning-making that connects media literacy and visual arts.



3.1. Participant and Research Context

The participant in the study is a seven-year-old boy. The research was conducted in an educational context through a structured activity that supported both interpretation and creative expression. The activity consisted of three phases:

1. Reading the story *Abad's Secret Plan*,
2. Producing a series of illustrations based on the narrative.
3. Engaging in a reflective conversation about the created illustrations.

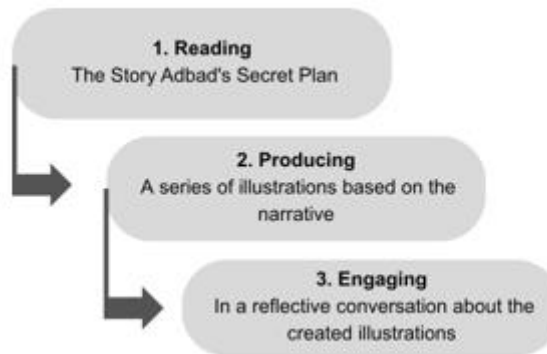


Fig. 1. Research activity sequence: reading the story, producing illustrations, and reflective conversation

This sequence enabled the collection of both visual and verbal data, allowing examination of relationships among narrative understanding, emotional engagement, and visual representation.

3.2. Analytical Framework: Multimodal Social Semiotic Approach

The analysis was conducted using a multimodal approach grounded in social semiotics [12], [13]. From this perspective, meaning is understood as emerging through the interaction of different semiotic modes, such as language and image, each offering specific affordances for meaning-making.

A mode is defined as a socially and culturally shaped resource for meaning-making [12]. In this study, particular attention is given to the interaction between the verbal mode (narrative) and the visual mode (illustration), through which the child reinterprets the media message.

Rather than treating illustration as a simple translation of the narrative, it is approached as a transformative multimodal act, in which meaning is reconfigured across modes. It aligns with a social semiotic understanding of communication as a process of design, where individuals actively shape meaning through the selection and organization of semiotic resources [12].

To systematically analyze the visual data, the study applies Kress and van Leeuwen's model of visual grammar, organized around three metafunctions: the representational, interpersonal, and compositional [13].

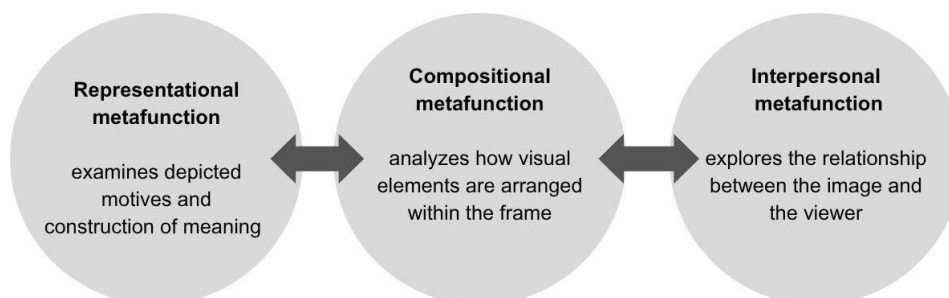


Fig. 2. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) model of visual grammar.



These dimensions do not operate independently but interact to produce meaning, enabling the analysis to capture how visual, narrative, and symbolic elements are orchestrated within the illustrations [11]. The analysis was conducted in an interpretative and iterative manner, integrating visual and verbal data. The illustrations were examined in relation to the narrative content and the child's reflections, with particular attention to:

- the selection and emphasis of visual elements,
- the transformation or reinterpretation of narrative content,
- the use of symbolic strategies (e.g., exaggeration, abstraction),
- and the organization of meaning across the sequence of images.

This approach allowed for the identification of indicators of media literacy, such as recognition of persuasive intent, awareness of emotional appeal, and the emergence of critical distance.

At the same time, the analysis focused on moments of interpretative agency, examining how the child actively reorganizes and transforms meaning across modes. In this sense, the illustrations were treated as multimodal texts that make visible the child's meaning-making processes and support the conceptualization of the child as a co-author of meaning.

4. Results: Multimodal Analysis of Children's Illustrations

The multimodal analysis of the two illustrations reveals a clear progression in the child's understanding and reinterpretation of the media message. Across the representational, interpersonal, and compositional dimensions, the findings indicate a shift from perceptual engagement toward critical interpretation.

4.1. Perceptual Engagement with the Media Message

Figure 3 depicts children standing in front of a large roadside poster featuring a football player. At the representational level, three key elements are present: the observing children, the poster, and the media figure. The football player is shown in motion, kicking a ball, enhancing the image's dynamic and appealing character. The act of looking, in which one of the children directs attention to the poster, establishes a simple narrative of engagement with the media content.

A notable feature is the poster's exaggerated scale relative to the surrounding environment. Its size surpasses that of nearby houses and figures, visually signaling its dominance. This disproportion suggests how media messages occupy and control visual space. At the same time, the contrast between the everyday setting and the idealized image on the poster introduces a distinction between lived reality and mediated representation.

From an interpersonal perspective, the illustration constructs an indirect relationship with the viewer. The football player does not engage with the gaze but is absorbed in the action, while one of the children focuses on the poster. This positioning situates the viewer as an observer rather than a participant. The emotional dimension is conveyed through the child's attentive stance and the accompanying narrative, both of which indicate fascination. It reflects sensitivity to the advertisement's emotional appeal, though without clear critical distance.

Compositional analysis reinforces the prominence of the media message. The poster occupies a central, visually dominant position, while the children appear smaller and lower in the frame. Strong color contrasts further highlight the poster as the focal point. The spatial separation between the everyday environment and the media image emphasizes the latter as the primary carrier of meaning.

Overall, the illustration suggests that the children recognize the advertisement's attractiveness and visual power but engages with it primarily at a perceptual level. It corresponds to an early stage of media literacy, characterized by awareness of appeal rather than critical evaluation.

4.2. Critical Reinterpretation and Deconstruction

Figure 4 demonstrates a significant transformation in the representation of the media message. The previously appealing football player is replaced by a simplified, dark figure with a skull-like face and an "X" over the mouth, marking a shift from realistic depiction to symbolic abstraction.

At the representational level, the focus moves from action to meaning. The figure functions as a visual metaphor for deception, danger, or concealed intent. Its stylized form and raised arms contribute to a sense of tension and exposure, suggesting that the child is engaging with the media message's underlying implications rather than its surface features.

The interpersonal dimension also changes. The simplified, abstract representation reduces emotional identification, creating distance and unease instead. Unlike the first illustration, which invites admiration, this image evokes reflection and discomfort. The accompanying text reinforces this shift by introducing themes of fear and secrecy, further supporting a critical stance toward the message.

Compositional features intensify this reinterpretation. The poster remains central, but the surrounding environment is significantly reduced or omitted, isolating the media message. The use of darker, monochromatic tones within the poster contrasts sharply with the background, emphasizing its seriousness and symbolic weight. This visual simplification directs attention exclusively to the message's meaning.

The advertisement is no longer represented as attractive but as deceptive and potentially harmful. Through abstraction, symbolism, and selective emphasis, the child demonstrates the ability to reinterpret and transform the original message.



Fig. 3. Child-produced illustration inspired by the story *Adbad's Secret Plan*: a boy and a girl observing the poster



Fig. 4. Child-produced illustration inspired by the story *Adbad's Secret Plan*: Adbad as the central figure

5. Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to ongoing discussions on early media literacy, visual arts education, and the conceptualization of the child as an active meaning-maker. By analyzing children's illustrations as multimodal texts, this research demonstrates how visual production can function as a site of interpretation, transformation, and critical engagement with media content.

A key finding is the shift from perceptual engagement to interpretative and critical understanding. As the analysis shows, the illustration in Fig. 3 reflects the visual logic of advertising, emphasizing attractiveness, scale, and emotional appeal. In contrast, the second illustration reconfigures these same elements to expose manipulation and hidden intent.

This shift reflects a movement from representation to transformation. The child does not merely replicate the given narrative but actively reorganizes its meaning through visual means. The introduction of symbolic elements, the simplification of form, and the recontextualization of the poster all indicate interpretative agency.

This progression aligns with developmental perspectives on media literacy, which suggest that children initially engage with media at the surface level before gradually developing the capacity for critical evaluation [15]. However, the present findings extend this understanding by demonstrating that such critical awareness can emerge earlier when children are supported through structured, multimodal learning experiences. The use of visual expression appears to facilitate this transition by enabling children to externalize and reflect upon their interpretations.

From a multimodal perspective, this process can be understood as a transformation of meaning across modes. The narrative is first encountered verbally, then interpreted cognitively and emotionally, and finally rearticulated visually. Each stage involves reinterpretation, rather than simple translation [12]. It supports the view that meaning-making is not linear but dynamic and recursive, involving continuous negotiation between different semiotic resources [11].

The findings also reinforce theoretical perspectives in visual culture studies, which emphasize that meaning is not inherent in the image but is constructed through the interaction between the viewer and the visual text [23]. In this study, the child's illustrations reveal how this interaction becomes productive:

the child does not passively receive the media message but actively reshapes it, introducing new symbolic elements and altering its meaning.

Through visual production, the child participates in reconstructing the media message, demonstrating not only understanding but also critical positioning. The illustrations thus function as multimodal texts that make visible the child's interpretative processes and emerging media literacy.

Importantly, this supports pedagogical approaches that position children as competent and agentic participants in learning processes, as advocated in sociocultural and Reggio Emilia-inspired frameworks [16], [20], [25]. The child's ability to reinterpret and transform the media message suggests that even at an early age, children can engage in complex semiotic practices when provided with appropriate scaffolding and opportunities for expression.

The role of the visual arts in this process is particularly significant. Consistent with Eisner's argument that artistic activity fosters forms of thinking essential for interpretation and judgment, the act of illustration enabled the child to analyze, evaluate, and reconstruct the media message [8]. Rather than functioning as a supplementary activity, drawing served as a primary mode of inquiry and critical reflection.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of interdisciplinary integration. By combining narrative, visual expression, and media analysis, the learning process becomes multimodal and dialogic. It supports arguments that media literacy education should move beyond analytical exercises toward creative and participatory practices [5], [10]. The integration of visual arts and media literacy provides a pedagogical framework in which interpretation and production are mutually reinforced.

At the same time, the study has limitations that should be acknowledged. As a single case study, the findings cannot be generalized to broader populations. The interpretation is also context-dependent and influenced by the specific task, narrative, and interaction with the researcher. Future research could explore similar approaches with larger sample sizes, across different age groups, or in varied media contexts to further examine the relationship between visual production and media literacy development. Despite these limitations, the study offers important implications for educational practice. It suggests that early media literacy education should not be limited to recognizing media messages but should actively engage children in interpreting and reconstructing them. Visual arts, particularly illustration, provide a powerful means of making children's thinking visible and supporting the development of critical awareness.

This study demonstrates that the transition from perception to interpretation can be effectively supported through multimodal and interdisciplinary approaches. By engaging in visual reinterpretation, children move beyond passive reception and become co-authors of meaning, actively participating in the construction and transformation of media messages.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the potential of integrating visual arts and media literacy in early childhood education through a multimodal, case-based approach. By analyzing a child's illustrations as interpretative acts, the research demonstrated how visual expression can function as a powerful tool for meaning-making and critical engagement with media content.

The findings indicate that children can move from perceptual engagement with media messages to more complex forms of interpretation when supported by structured, interdisciplinary activities. The progression observed in the illustrations highlights the child's ability to reinterpret and transform the given narrative, revealing emerging critical awareness and interpretative agency.

By conceptualizing illustration as a multimodal practice, this study contributes to understanding how meaning is constructed across modes and how children participate in this process. The results support the notion of the child as a co-author of meaning, actively engaged in reconstructing media messages rather than passively receiving them.

From a pedagogical perspective, the study underscores the importance of integrating visual arts into media literacy education. Such an approach not only enhances critical thinking but also makes children's interpretations visible and open to reflection.

Future research should explore multimodal and interdisciplinary approaches across contexts and age groups to better understand how early media literacy can be effectively supported in contemporary educational settings.



REFERENCES

- [1] Aufderheide, P., "Media Literacy: A Report of the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy", Washington, Aspen Institute, 1993.
- [2] Arizpe E., Styles M., "Children Reading Pictures: Interpreting Visual Texts", London, Routledge, 2003. [10.4324/9781315683911](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315683911)
- [3] Bruner J., "The Culture of Education", Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1996.
- [4] Buckingham D., "Media education: Literacy, learning and contemporary culture". Cambridge, Polity, 2003.
- [5] Burn A., Durran J., "Media Literacy in Schools: Practice, Production and Progression", London, Paul Chapman Publishing, 2007. [10.4135/9781446213629](https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446213629)
- [6] Corsaro W. A., "The Sociology of Childhood", Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2015.
- [7] Duncum P., "Visual Culture Art Education: Why, What and How", *International Journal of Art & Design Education*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2002, pp. 14–23. [10.1111/1468-5949.00292](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5949.00292)
- [8] Eisner E. W., "The Arts and the Creation of Mind", New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002.
- [9] Freedman K., "Teaching Visual Culture: Curriculum, Aesthetics, and the Social Life of Art", New York, Teachers College Press, 2003.
- [10] Hobbs, R., "Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action", Washington, Aspen Institute, 2010.
- [11] Jewitt C., "The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis", London, Routledge, 2009.
- [12] Kress G., "Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication", London, Routledge, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203970034>
- [13] Kress G., van Leeuwen T., "Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design", 2nd ed., London, Routledge, 2006. [10.25073/2525-2445/vnufs.4217](https://doi.org/10.25073/2525-2445/vnufs.4217)
- [14] Livingstone S., "Children and the Internet: Great Expectations, Challenging Realities", Cambridge, Polity Press, 2009.
- [15] Livingstone S., Helsper E. J., "Does Advertising Literacy Mediate the Effects of Advertising on Children? A Critical Examination of Two Linked Research Literatures in Relation to Obesity and Food Choice", *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 56, No. 3, 2006, pp. 560–584. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00301.x>
- [16] Malaguzzi L., "History, Ideas, and Basic Philosophy: An Interview with Lella Gandini", in: Edwards C., Gandini L., Forman G. (eds.), *The Hundred Languages of Children*, Greenwich, Ablex Publishing, 1998, pp. 49–97.
- [17] Nikolajeva M., Scott C., "How Picturebooks Work", New York, Routledge, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203960615>
- [18] Nodelman, P., "Words about Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books", Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988.
- [19] Piaget J., "The Origins of Intelligence in Children", New York, International Universities Press, 1952.
- [20] Rinaldi C., "In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, Researching and Learning", London, Routledge, 2006.
- [21] Serafini F., "Reading Multimodal Texts in the 21st Century", *Research in the Schools*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2012, pp. 26–32.
- [22] Stake R. E., "The Art of Case Study Research", Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 1995.
- [23] Sturken M., Cartwright L., "Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture", 3rd ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018.
- [24] UNESCO, "Media and Information Literacy Curriculum for Teachers", Paris, UNESCO Publishing, 2019.
- [25] Vygotsky L. S., "Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes", Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1978.
- [26] Yin R. K., "Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods", 6th ed., Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2018.