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With Pictures About Sounds. Picture Books for Children Shaping Active Attitude Towards Audiosphere

Obrazem o dźwięku. Książki obrazkowe dla dzieci kształtujące aktywną postawę wobec audiosfery

KEYWORDS

picture book,
children's literature,
audiosphere,
acoustic ecology,
sound in education

ABSTRACT

The article contains an analysis of selected picture books for children related to the issue of sound and the audiosphere in order to determine the possibility of their use in education in the field of acoustic ecology. According to the assumptions formulated in the 1960s by Raymond Murray Schafer, such education should develop sensitivity to sounds, awareness of the complexity of the audiosphere and responsibility for it. The content analysis method was used in the framework of qualitative research, referring to the areas of object and receptivity in the study of visual materials. Picture books have been found to be evocative of sound issues without the use of recordings or sheet music. They awaken the imagination and stimulate creativity. The sounds imagined or created by children while reading become the third, next to images and words, medium that creates a book. The non-verbal nature of the image brings it closer to the world of sounds and promotes aesthetic education, revealing the potential of picture books to cross the boundaries of the arts. The analysed publications provide many opportunities for interaction between a child and an adult who supports the reading process, and they are conducive to awakening sensitivity to the audiosphere in adults. The presence of such artistic measures is part of the noticeable tendency to treat young readers as capable of reflecting on topics of global importance.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

książka obrazkowa,
literatura dla dzieci,
audiosfera, ekologia
akustyczna, dźwięk
w edukacji

Artykuł zawiera analizę wybranych książek obrazkowych dla dzieci odnoszących się do zagadnienia dźwięku i audiosfery, dokonaną w celu stwierdzenia możliwości ich zastosowania w edukacji z zakresu ekologii akustycznej. Edukacja ta, zgodnie z założeniami sformułowanymi w latach 60. XX w. przez Raymonda Murraya Schafera, powinna rozwijać wrażliwość na dźwięki, świadomość złożoności audiosfery i odpowiedzialności za nią. Zastosowano metodę analizy treści w ramach badań jakościowych, w badaniu materiałów wizualnych odnosząc się do obszarów dotyczących obiektu i odbiorczości. Stwierdzono, że książki obrazkowe sugestywnie przedstawiają zagadnienia związane z dźwiękiem bez korzystania z nagrań czy zapisu nutowego. Rozbudzają wyobraźnię i pobudzają kreatywność. Dźwięki wyobrażone czy tworzone przez dzieci w czasie lektury stają się trzecim, obok obrazu i słowa, medium tworzącym książkę. Niewerbalność obrazu zbliża go do świata dźwięków i sprzyja edukacji estetycznej, ujawniając potencjał książek obrazkowych do przekraczania granic dziedzin sztuki. Analizowane publikacje dają wiele możliwości interakcji między dzieckiem a dorosłym, wspierającym proces lektury, i sprzyjają rozbudzeniu wrażliwości na audiosferę także u dorosłego. Obecność takiej tematyki wpisuje się w istotną tendencję traktowania małego czytelnika jako zdolnego do refleksji na tematy o globalnym znaczeniu.

Introduction

The dominance of visual messages in contemporary culture carries many implications for social life. The predominance of iconic texts gives the visual sphere more importance than human physiology and perceptual capacities would suggest. It leads to the neglect of messages received by the other senses, including the sense of hearing. A common problem is the overabundance of auditory stimuli, which overloads the body and yet often goes unnoticed.

Therefore, the importance of the sound environment for human well-being is increasingly becoming the focus of researchers (so-called *soundscape studies*) and educators. The assumptions of *acoustic ecology*, formulated in the 1960s by the Canadian composer, researcher and educator Raymond Murray Schafer (1933–2021) (Sasin, 2019), form the basis of scientific research and practical action. Schafer defined acoustic ecology as the subtle balance between living organisms, humans and their acoustic environment (Schafer, 1982, p. 312). Among other things, this means giving primacy to sounds created by humans over those generated by machines. The complex of all kinds of auditory impressions reaching a human being is called a soundscape, and, in cultural anthropology, there is a closely related term: *audiosphere* (Misiak, 2010).

Schafer understands the human sound environment holistically, without separating musical and non-musical phenomena in it, and considering all of them together with their perceptual, social and historical-social context. The individual, subjective experience of the audiosphere is important. In Schafer's concept pedagogical aspects are important: in order to be able to consciously co-create the audiosphere, attentiveness and sensitivity are required, which can be awakened through so-called *ear-cleaning* exercises: "In order to improve the sonological competence of whole societies [...] large numbers of people (preferably children) should be subjected to *ear-cleaning exercises*; if such a culture were achieved, the problem of noise pollution would disappear" (Schafer, 1967, as cited in Kapelański, 1999, p. 157). Sound sensitisation also develops aesthetic sensitivity, which matches the aims of art education and promotes the enjoyment of beauty. It should be emphasised, however, that ear-cleaning exercises are intended for all members of society, not only future artists, because everyone lives in a sound environment, everyone is subject to its influence, and everyone co-creates it.

Although the concept of acoustic ecology originated more than half a century ago, its greater international popularity has only been brought about in recent years, marked by the need to reflect on man's negative influence on the climate and related environmental education activities. This has also happened in Poland. We see – and the pandemic has highlighted this even more clearly (Sasin, 2023) – that man's destructive actions have not been resisted by the audiosphere. They not only destroy the plant and animal world, but eventually they turn against the perpetrator of these changes, i. e. the man:

The fundamental question then arises: is it still possible, at this stage of civilisation (under)development, to recover silence, tranquillity, nature, dominated by anthropogenic pollution? I consciously use the category of (under)development, because the civilisation leap, in many dimensions, has turned out to be a catastrophe for man, a regression and retreat instead of moving forward (Szpunar, 2020, p. 16).

Schafer has already pointed out that legal regulations, although relatively easy to implement, are less effective than the educational process. This, in turn, should be directed primarily at children and young people. In line with these observations, every year brings new educational initiatives in the field of acoustic ecology, such as workshops conducted by sound artist Krzysztof Topolski, sound walks in interesting places (e. g. in a metallurgical plant), the social campaign "I can hear good sounds" (and related activities) of the Szczecin Philharmonic, or a series of educational films "Hear more", prepared and recorded for the Łódź Philharmonic by the author of this text. However, such initiatives are still aimed at a small group of people: those who, because of their interests and/or work, are more sensitive and aware of the problem.

A fully effective solution would be to introduce acoustic ecology issues into the core curriculum and link them to the curriculum of various subjects (Sasin, 2019).

Children's books on the subject of the audiosphere: its richness, its influence on people and the possibilities of shaping it, offer an opportunity to reach a large audience. Recently, more and more valuable books of this type have appeared on the Polish publishing market. Some of them focus on the subject of sound, while in others it is a secondary issue; some retain the traditional picture-to-text relationship, while others meet the criteria of picturebooks. The aim of this article is to determine the applicability of picture books relating to sound and the audiosphere in acoustic ecology education, based on an analysis of selected Polish-language books on the subject.

Specific Features of Books Concerning Sounds

Children's books about sounds may be associated with publications containing simple electronic elements that reproduce the sounds of animals, vehicles, etc. Such publications became popular in Poland in the 1990s. However, the initial enthusiasm of many adult readers soon gave way to the observation that they limit children's creativity, hinder the development of imagination, and the poor quality of the sounds generated has a negative impact on the formation of aesthetic taste. Books of this type are still on the market, but, for the above reasons, they have not become the focus of this analysis.

On the other hand, children's books showing the richness of the world of sounds and encouraging the kids' cognitive and creative activity are a valuable phenomenon. They have been present on the Polish book market only for a few years. Among them, we can distinguish popular science books such as Marcin Dymiter's *Przewodnik dla audio-kulturalnych [Guide for Audio-Cultural Ones]* (2021) or Irena Cieślińska's *Dźwięk [Sound]* (2015), as well as books that primarily affect emotions. Among the latter, picturebooks dominate.

Books for children are usually based on the interaction of two channels: the verbal (text) and the visual one (illustrations). Picturebooks are a special phenomenon, as their specific structure is based on the inseparability of words and images, and the complementary nature of their messages, as Janina Wiercińska (1986, p. 76) already pointed out in the 1970s. Books about sound introduce sound impressions into this dyad. However, such impressions do not exist physically, but only (or perhaps as much as) in the child's imagination. This gives a great deal of freedom in imagining them and possibly imitating them (with voice or with objects). The viewer (Śniecikowska, 2022) becomes a viewer-reader-listener, and the resulting three-dimensionality of the stimuli facilitates the viewer's creativity.

Contemporary picturebooks often deal with difficult subjects by detabooing them: “Thanks to the picturebook as a specific cultural medium intended mainly for young children [...] it often succeeds in introducing marginalised or detabooed content and forms related to humanity into public life” (Cackowska, 2013). This trends also includes the issue of the audiosphere, which – although not as sensitive an issue as death, illness or sexuality – is also controversial. The controversies concern, in particular, the level of importance of these issues (is this knowledge necessary for everyone? should this content be included in the school curriculum?), as well as the responsibility of individual members of society (who - individual citizens/institutions at various levels – should be considered responsible for the shape of the audiosphere in a given place? can regulations be introduced that restrict the freedom of residents for the sake of the well-being of the community?). In recent years, children have increasingly been the addressees of controversial content and have sometimes even become a kind of mediator in transmitting it to adults¹. This would place books on the audiosphere in a type of discourse that recognises the “political and ethical potentiality of childhood”; the other two types, distinguished by Astrid Męczkowska-Christiansen (2010), are the discourse of the child as a “grateful creature” and of childhood as a pre-human state.

Research Methods and Tools

Four selected children’s picturebooks published in Poland in recent years were analysed. For two of them, the world of sound is the main theme: *OCH! Książka pełna dźwięków* [*OH! A Book Full of Sounds*] (Tullet, 2017) and *Księga dźwięków* [*The Book of Sounds*] (Bravi, 2012); while for two others, it co-exists with another theme: *Zamieniam się w słuch, czyli opowieści dźwiękiem malowane* [*I Turn into Hearing, or Stories Painted by Sounds*] (Wiśniewska-Kin & Ignerska, 2020) and *Kołysanka na cztery* [*Lullaby on Four*] (Chmielewska, 2018). The items to be analysed were chosen to show as much diversity as possible, not only in terms of the approach to the topic, but also in terms of the style of illustrations and suggested activities for the child while interacting with the book. In addition, two of the items are works by native authors and two have been translated into Polish. Each of the authors has received recognition through publishing awards and high book sales.

The study used the method of content analysis, which, depending on the techniques used, is considered a quantitative method (Rose, 2010) or a qualitative method (Łobocki, 2000, p. 225). Treating the selected books as a unique value, carrying explicit and implicit content, and attempting to understand and interpret them taking

¹ It is worth mentioning that picturebooks for adults dealing with important, often painful topics are also being produced. Śniecikowska (2022, p. 49) calls them “intymistyka” [personal, intimate writings].

into account the artistic and social context, as well as the context of reception, allows the research to be classified as a qualitative method. Of the three areas, mentioned by Rose (2010), in the study of visual materials, I was primarily interested in the two relating to object and reception, while I omitted the area of production, representing the process aspect of the artwork. During the analysis, I sought answers to questions in which the object area dominates: What aspects concerning the audiosphere are represented in children's books? What artistic means are used to make content concerning the auditory medium transmissible in the visual medium? What are the functions of the verbal text? What is the indivisibility of image and word, as emphasised by the term iconotext (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006)? I also posed questions related to the area of receptivity: What aspects of the audiosphere are children sensitised to and are they also presented as co-creators of it? Are the books embedded in the child's everyday life and do they refer to the child's experiences?

I paid attention to the relationship between image and text, verbal and visual ways of evoking auditory imagery and sparking imagination, as well as ways of stimulating creativity. I analysed the presence of the content related to the ecology of the audiosphere and the relationship between the auditory medium not directly fixed on paper (none of the books use notation) and the iconic and verbal matter.

I deliberately exclude from my considerations books that deal directly with musical issues and related terminology (these include, for example, *Wszystko gra [Everything Plays]*, which meets the criteria of a picturebook – Czerwińska-Rydel & Ignerska, 2011). I did so because musical sounds are not prioritised in acoustic ecology: they are not excluded from the analysis, but they are seen as a part of the audiosphere that is equal with others. Musical picturebooks deserve a separate analysis, including an examination of the ways in which they combine artistic and popular science qualities.

Analysis of Selected Books on Sound

Księga dźwięków [Book of Sounds] (Bravi, 2012) is dedicated to the youngest children who are learning to speak. Printed on hard, thick paper, adapted to the child's motor skills, each double-page contains a simple, one-element illustration on a plain background. Taking into account the types identified by Centner-Guz (2017), it belongs to books with one-element representation illustrations. The aim of the book is to encourage children to make imitative sounds, such as *meow*, *bang-bang*, *atchoo*, etc., and to associate them with the source of the sound, which is important in stimulating speech development. What is unusual about this publication is that the illustrations include not only sources of sound, e. g. a cat signed "meow", a gun signed "bang-bang", but also objects that merely suggest a certain situation and require some action

to be imagined, e. g. a box of tissues and the caption: “A runny nose does *atchoo*”. Some sounds are obvious and already well-known to young children, e. g. *vroom*, *vroom* (the sound made by a car) or *meow* (cat). However, many sound sources can be surprising, and their verbal development is witty and non-obvious, e. g. “The blocks go *boom*”, “The electric socket goes NO!”. The verb used suggests that the object from which the sound comes is also the perpetrator of the sound (e. g. “The door goes *knock, knock*”, “The bottle goes *yum, yum*”). Some texts are questionable due to the repetition of stereotypes, e. g. “spinach goes *yuk*”, and especially: “mummy goes *kiss, kiss*” juxtaposed with “daddy goes *shhh, shhh*”. The very simple illustrations with limited colours, smooth backgrounds and clear, thick lines suit the perceptual abilities of young children. Because of its simplicity, the book can be used in different ways depending on the age of the child and the initiative of the adult. It can be used to draw attention to the variety of sound sources (people, animals, objects, situations), their colour, intensity and other characteristics.



Photo 1. Double-Page From *Księga Dźwięków* [*The Book of Sounds*]

In the book *OCH! Książka pełna dźwięków* [*Oh! A book full of sounds*], the main character is not a human exploring the audiosphere, but an anthropomorphised sound that laughs, cries, argues with friends, and even jumps on a trampoline. To bring it to life, however, a reader is needed. The short texts contain action suggestions directed towards the young viewer, e. g. “Will you make [the sounds] laugh like crazy?” (Tullet, 2017, p. 34). On the visual side, the sounds are shown as dots (not notes!). Touching

them allows the sound to be “brought out”, evoking associations with books containing recordings, which is further emphasised by the description of the publication in question as ‘interactive’”. By manipulating the colour, size of the dots, distance between them, the basic characteristics of sound, such as duration, pitch, tempo, timbre, etc., are shown. The more complex drawings, found on further pages, require a greater degree of imagination, as they are somewhat reminiscent of musical graphics: a phenomenon of the mid-twentieth-century musical avant-garde with a considerable degree of indeterminism (Kowalska-Zajac, 2019). Interacting with the book, however, does not require knowledge of musical notation or other specialized issues. Dots can just as well be associated with blobs of paint, planets in the solar system or splashes of water. In this way, the children imperceptibly enter the rich world of sound with its dynamic, timber, agogic and expressive diversity. They perceive the connection between sound and its visual representation. Above all, however, they learn that they can create sounds and give them a unique character, guided by their imagination and fantasy.



Photo 2. Double-Page From the Book *OCH! Książka pełna dźwięków*

An example of a book in which sounds play an important role, although they are not the direct subject of the book, is *Kołysanka na cztery [Lullaby on Four]* by Iwona Chmielewska (2018), one of the most internationally renowned Polish picturebook authors. Her works are valued, among other things, for their poetic and metaphorical qualities hidden in the image (Baszewska, 2016). The links with the audiosphere

are already indicated by the title *Kołysanka na cztery*, referring to the phenomenon of lullabies, rich in cultural connotations: their arrangement, singing and listening. “On four” in the title suggests a way of counting the rhythm in many musical pieces; in the content of the book, however, this phrase refers to many phenomena: the number of violin strings, the angles of a room, table legs and dog’s paws, and even the window panes. The author shows how, together with the child, the world around them settles down to sleep; sounds become silent and silence falls. The short sentences, in which “one, two, three, four” is repeated like a refrain, create the desired rocking-sleeping effect. This is deepened by the illustrations the colours and details of which are limited. Direct reference to music is made by the title illustration of a child playing the violin. The book encourages watching the environment, helps one become aware of the complexity of stimuli reaching human ears, and sensitises one to sounds. Chmielewska’s characteristic “stepping out” of her drawings beyond the boundaries of the page makes us realise that there are many sounds in the world, at any given time, that we cannot hear. The subject matter of the book and the world depicted indicate that *Lullaby on Four* is primarily intended for children; however, the author emphasises that she is mainly guided by the sensitivity level of the viewer rather than their age when working (Ludwiczak, 2019).

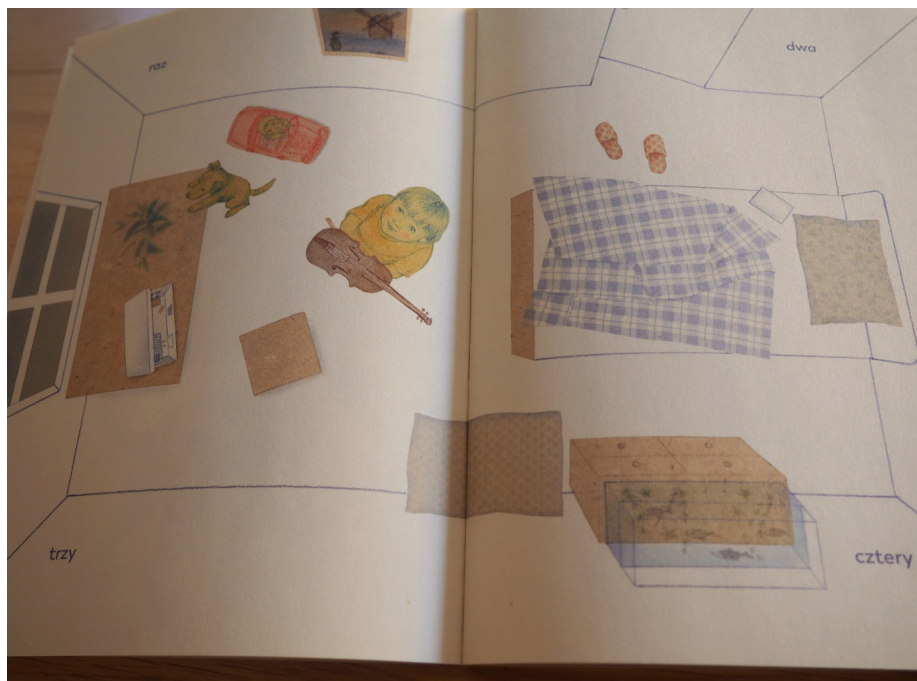


Photo 3. Double-Page From the Book *Lullaby for four*

The title of the book *Zamieniam się w słuch, czyli opowieści dźwiękiem malowane* [*I Turn into Hearing, or Stories Painted by Sounds*] draws our attention to the human sound environment and, in addition, thanks to the play on words, announces an adventure with language. The book was published as part of the “Skuteczne zdziwienie” (“Effective Astonishment”) series, which aims to teach children letters, reading and writing. According to the concept of “effective astonishment”, created by Monika Wiśniewska-Kin, “the initial learning of reading and writing should begin at the stage of pre-school education, because it is at this time that a child’s interest in the sound image of a voice and the graphic image of a letter is born” (2023, p. 51). For each letter of the alphabet there is a short rhyme with a question at the end, drawing attention to imitative words, and an inseparable illustration that develops the content of the rhyme. Next to it is a blank page for the child to fill in. The verbal and visual content draws attention to the multiplicity and diversity of sounds surrounding the human being. It emphasizes their association with emotions: joy, fear, delight, etc. Drawings by Marta Ignerska are full of dynamism and expression. The expressiveness of the outline, the strong but limited colouring and the smooth background, reminiscent of pop art, have an inspiring effect on the imagination. The richness of detail and the multiplicity of depicted scenes correspond to the characteristics of the audiosphere which is made up of a variety of incongruous sounds produced by the objects in the illustrations (e. g. a triangle, a shoe, scattered shopping) and living creatures (a screaming child, a mother calling out to her child, a growling dog). Most important, however, is the impression of movement that emanates from each illustration. Movement is a phenomenon immanent to sound, both in the literal sense, resulting from the laws of acoustics, and in the metaphorical sense. Although the direct purpose of the book is related to Polish literature and language education, it can be used no less effectively to raise awareness of the audiosphere. The space – both literal on the unfilled page and metaphorical, created by the non-obviousness of the illustrations and text – encourages creativity and awakens the imagination. The possibility of completing the book with one’s own drawings builds a sense of agency, important in the context of shared responsibility for the sound environment.



Photo 4. Double-Page From the Book *Zamieniam się w słuch*

Research Results and Conclusions

The picturebooks demonstrate that there are many possibilities to present sound issues without using recordings or musical notation. This requires stimulating the imagination, referring to the child's previous experiences, and, preferably, also experimenting with sound. The books analysed deal with issues related to the child's everyday life and refer to the child's experiences starting from the simplest, everyday activities such as eating, walking or playing. In such books, the most important stimulus becomes primarily the image, which, like sound, has a non-verbal effect. The accompanying text does not specify the sound phenomena, but rather points to a multiplicity of possible interpretations. The indivisibility of image and word, which entitles us to use the term "iconotext", is noticeable in each of the analysed books, but manifests itself in different ways: most simply (as imitative sounds) in *Księga dźwięków*, and more suggestively (as a stimulation of the imagination and an incentive to specific actions) in the books by Wiśniewska-Kin and Ignerska and Tullet. The most inseparable link between image and text can be noticed in Chmielewska's book (2018), one manifestation of which is the treatment of words as graphic elements.

An important feature of the books analysed is the child's need to co-create them. A complete reading would not be possible without the activity of imagination and aural creativity. Just as the child is a co-creator of the audiosphere, so he or she becomes a co-creator of the book. It is worth noting that the very act of reading aloud is a way of modifying and enriching the sound environment.

Reading requires the active participation of the adult, who not only reads the verbal text, but also draws attention to the richness of the content with additional questions and directs the child's activities, e. g. encouraging drawing, making sounds, exploring the environment. To realise the full potential of the book, the cognitive efforts of the child and the adult must complement each other. What's more, some contents may also prove new and revealing to the adult.

The way in which the content is presented corresponds to the most important pedagogical assumptions of acoustic ecology and the aims of the exercises suggested by Schafer (1995), which are primarily: attentiveness to sounds, becoming sensitive to their diversity, developing an attitude of respect for the sound environment, as well as stimulating creativity in shaping sounds.

An analysis of picturebooks on the audiosphere leads to the question of the relationship between image, text and sound. A picturebook combines two modes of representation into one cultural text (Cackowska, 2013). The addition of sound takes us from two-dimensionality into three-dimensionality. Visual and auditory stimuli are not in competition with each other; providing complete information about the environment, they should complement each other in life and in art. A picturebook reveals the common features of image and sound, often contrasted in theoretical reflection: they present a type of discourse in which signs are not conventionally linear (Cackowska, 2017) and there is no clear instruction for reading them. Image and sound are also characterised by non-literalism, which gives room for interpretation. While it is taken for granted that sound is a function of time, picturebooks allow us to look at it as a function of space (Brozek, 2023). This approach is close to contemporary music which reveals new ways of interacting with sound, including through experiments with sound travelling in space.

Summary

Addressing the audiosphere in children's books corresponds with the presence of this issue in books for adults and in the activities of cultural institutions. At the same time, it fits in with current environmental and well-being themes (Sasin, 2022).

Treating the child as a being endowed with political and ethical potentiality (Meczkowska-Christiansen, 2010) indicates an awareness of the cognitive abilities of

the young person who is considered capable of undertaking reflection on meaningful topics. The theme of the audiosphere makes it possible to note that, in some situations, children are even potentially more capable than adults: unencumbered by deeply ingrained habits, they adopt new ideas more easily.

The specific features of the unique medium and, at the same time, the artistic form of a picturebook (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006), makes it a tool for aesthetic education. Sound issues can be addressed through a picturebook without the common fears, among teachers and parents, of a lack of musical skills. It is particularly important that in the pre-reading period, children are exposed to books that are graphically valuable, devoid of kitsch and, at the same time, visually diverse. The books analysed here have these qualities, while, at the same time, they deal with sounds which are a potential material of art.

The examples discussed demonstrate that a picture book can be an effective tool in developing an awareness of the audiosphere and awakening auditory sensitivity, which is the main postulate of acoustic ecology. Although not envisaged by Schafer, it aptly fits into his concept of “ear-cleaning” exercises. As he wrote:

I am convinced that the way to improve our sound landscape is quite simple. We must learn to listen. It seems to be a lost ability. We must sensitise our ears to the wonderful world of sounds around us. [...] The ultimate goal would be to be able to make conscious decisions about our sound surroundings (Schafer, 1995, pp. 5–6).

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