Yifeng LIN,
orcid.org/0009-0003-8565-2584
PhD Student at the Department of Art and Fashion Design
Kyiv National University of Technologies and Design
(Kyiv, Ukraine) linyf0604@foxmail.com

Olena GERASYMENKO,
orcid.org/0000-0001-8566-7215
PhD in Design,
Associate Professor at the Department of Art and Fashion Design
Kyiv National University of Technologies and Design
(Kyiv, Ukraine) gerasymenko.od@knutd.edu.ua

EVOLUTION OF THE DESIGN OF CHILDREN'S EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS: MAIN STAGES SINCE THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

This article examines children's educational materials from the early twentieth century to the present, focusing on primary school textbooks and educational children's books from China, the United States, France, Japan, Finland, and the United Kingdom, and traces the staged evolution of their visual forms from a design-historical perspective. In contrast to earlier studies that mainly draw on education and psychology, this article treats children's educational materials as a distinct category of book design, and, on the basis of literature review and comparative case analysis, constructs a four-dimensional analytical framework of "layout structure–text–image relationship–illustration style–cover and binding design," through which the design development since the twentieth century is summarised into four stages: "text-regulatory readers" in the first half of the twentieth century, "standardisation and differentiation of reading materials" from the post-war period to the 1960s, "intensified image-based narration" from the 1960s to the 1990s, and "coexistence of multiple styles and branding" since the late twentieth century. The study shows that, across different national contexts, the design of children's educational materials has broadly moved from text-centred layouts towards closer text–image collaboration, from dense linear composition towards modular, graded layouts, from decorative illustrations towards visual systems that participate in narration and meaning-making, and from plain binding towards serial visual identity systems. This analysis provides a periodisation scheme centred on design form for situating children's educational materials within modern design history, while also offering historical references for contemporary children's textbooks and children's books in terms of layout organisation, text–image proportion, illustration style and series strategies.

Key words: *Design of Children's Educational Materials, Design Evolution, Layout Structure, Text–image Relationship, Illustration Style.*

Їфен ЛІН,
orcid.org/0009-0003-8565-2584
аспірант кафедри дизайну мистецтва і моди
Київського національного університету технологій та дизайну
(Київ, Україна) linyf0604@foxmail.com

Олена ГЕРАСИМЕНКО,
orcid.org/0000-0001-8566-7215
кандидат наук з дизайну,
доцент кафедри дизайну мистецтва і моди
Київського національного університету технологій та дизайну
(Київ, Україна) gerasymenko.od@knutd.edu.ua

ДИЗАЙНЕРСЬКІ СТРАТЕГІЇ ДИТЯЧИХ ОСВІТНІХ МАТЕРІАЛІВ НА ЗАСАДАХ СИТУАТИВНОГО ПІЗНАННЯ: ПІДХІД «КОРИСТУВАЧ – ЗАВДАННЯ – СЕРЕДОВИЩЕ» ДО РАННЬОГО НАВЧАННЯ ГРАМОТИ

Із посиленням уваги суспільства до освіти дедалі більше батьків звертають увагу на ранній розвиток дітей, очікуючи сприяти формуванню в них різних здібностей уже на початковому етапі. Водночас у сучасній практиці навчання грамоти

зберігаються проблеми – передчасна формалізована підготовка, поверхові тренувальні вправи тощо, – які заважають дітям досягати стійких результатів і негативно впливають на подальше навчання та розвиток. Як важливий носій дитячих освітніх матеріалів, книжки-картинки досі не повною мірою реалізують свій потенціал у формуванні інтересу до читання та опанування письма. Щоб відповісти на зазначені виклики, у дослідженні запропоновано комплекс стратегій проєктування дитячих навчальних матеріалів із грамоти, побудований на засадах теорії ситуативного пізнання. Спираючись на теоретичний аналіз і кейс-стаді, стаття окреслює когнітивні особливості дітей та механізми оволодіння грамотою, а також показує внутрішній зв'язок між ситуативною природою знання, практикою навчання та типовими моделями дитячого навчання, на яких наголошує теорія ситуативного пізнання. На цій основі сформульовано три базові принципи проєктування: багатовимірний інтерактивний досвід, пов'язаний із ситуацією користувача; практично орієнтований зміст навчання грамоти, закорінений у ситуації завдання; приваблива візуальна подача, що враховує параметри середовища. Виходячи з цих принципів, виокремлено низку послідовних дизайн-стратегій: від аналізу потреб користувачів до фіксації контексту навчання грамоти, від відбору ключових точок дотику до трансформації візуальних елементів і, зрештою, до «вплетення» тексту в конкретні навчальні ситуації. Дослідження пропонує практично орієнтовані теоретичні орієнтири для проєктування дитячих матеріалів з навчання грамоти, розширює сферу застосування концепції ситуативного пізнання в галузі дизайну та окреслює новий напрям досліджень у сфері раннього навчання читання та письма.

Ключові слова: *ситуативне пізнання, дитячі освітні матеріали, книжки-картинки для навчання грамоти, когнітивний розвиток у ранньому дитинстві, дизайн книжок-картинок.*

Problem Statement. The children's educational materials discussed in this article refer to printed books produced for children, including textbooks used in class, extracurricular readers, and children's books and picture books with an explicit educational function. From the early twentieth century to the present, along with the establishment of the modern school system and the expansion of the children's book market, such materials have rapidly increased in both quantity and variety, taking on the task of transmitting knowledge and values while at the same time shaping the basic appearance of modern visual culture in everyday life. Yet the changes in layout structure, text–image relationship, illustration style, and cover and binding design across different historical stages have long been treated mainly as issues of education or publishing, and have rarely been incorporated into narratives of design history.

In terms of the current state of research, recent studies on visual elements of educational materials, multimodal meaning-making in picture books, and typeface legibility have enriched our understanding of children's reading experiences, but their objects of study are often confined to particular periods or limited samples and focus mainly on how current materials support learning, leaving long-term perspectives, cross-national comparison, and integration into design history relatively underdeveloped. At the same time, although design history and book design history frequently refer to children's educational materials, there have been few attempts to treat them as independent objects and to examine their visual evolution in a systematic way.

Analysis of research. Over roughly the past decade, discussions of the visual form of children's educational materials can be grouped into three strands. The first strand centres on illustrations and page layout. Studies by Guo, D. et al. (Guo, D. et al., 2018: 244–269), Qiu, L., & Abdul Ghani, D. B. (Qiu, L., & Abdul Ghani, D. B., 2024: 622–627), and Chung, S. (Chung, S., 2024: 409–426), for example, typically take primary school textbooks as their samples and, through content analysis and classroom observation, carefully sort out the types, functions, and locations of illustrations, then go on to examine how images contribute to knowledge presentation, emotional regulation, and learning motivation, and how image frequency, page density, and information load interact. This body of work makes clear that visual elements matter for subject learning outcomes, but its samples are largely confined to contemporary textbooks or specific curriculum reform periods, and it pays relatively little attention to how layouts and visual forms have evolved within educational materials since the twentieth century.

A second strand comes from the fields of typography and layout design. Drawing on research on typeface features and legibility, Bigelow, C. (Bigelow, C., 2019: 162–172) shows that variables such as letterform structure, letter spacing, and line spacing affect reading speed and comprehension load, while Walker, S. (Walker, S., 2012: 180–199) proposes a "feature checklist" for recording the design of children's books, itemising layout organisation, typeface and size combinations, the placement and form of illustrations, and materials and binding to create a workable framework for comparing different texts. Taken together, these studies also suggest that, if one wishes to trace the historical development of children's educational material design, layout, type, and text–image relations need to be treated as interconnected formal elements rather than isolated variables.

The third strand focuses on illustration in children's picture books, cover design, and multimodal

meaning-making. Wu, Z. (Wu, Z., 2024: 107–123) draws on shifts in illustration art and printing technology to outline recent trends in the formal style, use of colour, and media technologies of illustrations in contemporary children's books. Li, M., & Boonmoh, A. (Li, M., & Boonmoh, A., 2025: 1–25) use a multimodal discourse analytic framework to examine how English-language educational materials attract Chinese child readers through the interplay of title typefaces, image composition, and colour schemes, and to reveal how such design choices shape reading motivation. From this perspective, illustrations and covers are not merely decorative additions, but take part in organising knowledge and articulating values through gaze direction, image sequences, and the pacing of the page.

Taken as a whole, these three strands provide a foundation for understanding the visual form of children's educational materials, but they also reveal two gaps: most studies focus on classroom textbooks or picture books in a particular language, and therefore lack both a cross-national perspective and a long time frame that runs from the twentieth century to the present; moreover, research on educational materials, typography and layout, and picture books and multimodality belongs to different disciplinary traditions and has yet to be systematically integrated at the level of a design history of children's educational materials. Building on these three strands, this article takes layout structure, text–image relationship, illustration style, and cover and binding design as its core dimensions, and brings together dispersed findings into an analytical framework centred on design form, with the aim of outlining a periodisation of the evolution of children's educational material design since the twentieth century.

Purpose of the article. Based on the above research landscape and identified gaps, this article has three main aims. First, drawing on cross-national samples from the early twentieth century to the present, it proposes a historical periodisation framework for the evolution of children's educational material design from the four dimensions of layout structure, text–image relationship, illustration style, and cover and binding design, in order to systematically sort out a design practice that has long existed but has been relatively neglected. Second, through comparative analysis of representative educational materials from China, the United States, France, Japan, Finland, and the United Kingdom, it seeks to reveal both continuity and rupture in visual language across different stages, and to discuss how printing technologies, publishing systems, notions of childhood, and popular visual culture jointly shape design forms. Third, at the theoretical level, it underscores the place of children's educational materials as an independent design category within modern design history, and, at the practical level, it offers historically informed references for contemporary children's textbooks and children's books in relation to layout organisation, control of text–image proportion, illustration style choices, and strategies of serialisation and branding.

Research analysis. For reasons of practicality, this study builds on the preceding literature review and selects a number of representative cases from publications issued in different periods in China, the United States, France, Japan, Finland, and the United Kingdom, using cross-national comparison to sketch both common trends and key differences in the long-term development of the design of children's educational materials.

In terms of research methods, it combines three approaches: design history research, literature analysis, and visual form analysis. First, by reviewing studies on visual elements of textbooks, multimodal narration in children's picture books, typeface legibility, and book design history, it establishes the conceptual background and system of analytical indicators on which the analysis of children's educational material design is based. Second, on the basis of relatively broad sample collection, it conducts systematic observation and recording of representative textbooks and children's books from different periods, focusing on layout organisation, typeface and size combinations, text–image proportion and spatial arrangement, forms and styles of illustration, and cover composition and binding features, thereby building a "design feature dossier" that allows comparison. On this basis, horizontal cross-national comparison and vertical ordering along the time series are used to move from case-level observations towards more general accounts of stage-specific characteristics and trajectories of change.

Concerning analytical dimensions, the study treats children's educational materials as a designed whole composed of multiple visual layers, and concentrates on four aspects: layout structure, text–image relationship, illustration style, and cover and binding design. These four dimensions both respond to existing concerns with legibility, visual load, and multimodal meaning-making, and provide concrete and workable points of entry for the historical periodisation proposed in the following sections.

With regard to the logic of periodisation, the study seeks to identify "clusters of formal characteristics" that are relatively stable and cross-nationally shared within the time series of design forms. Concretely, it compares, within the four dimensions outlined above, layout density, text–image proportion, illustration

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style, and binding strategies in samples from different periods, tracking their degree of concentration and directions of change over specific spans of time, and on this basis roughly divides the development of children's educational material design since the twentieth century into four stages. This periodisation is primarily based on qualitative comparison, emphasising close reading of visual evidence and careful discrimination of cross-national commonalities and differences rather than seeking statistically generalisable claims, and it provides the methodological ground for the presentation and discussion of the characteristics of each stage in the rest of the article.

Presentation of the main material. On the basis of the sample selection and methods outlined above, this study summarises the design evolution of children's educational materials since the twentieth century into four representative stages. Each stage is discussed in terms of four dimensions–layout structure, text–image relationship, illustration style, and binding form–and the historical shifts in design features are shown through comparisons of typical publications.

The first stage is the phase of text-regulatory readers (approximately from the early twentieth century to the early 1950s). In this period the dominant form was a reader-like design centred on text and serving the purposes of national language standardisation and moral education. Representative examples include the *McGuffey Readers* from the United States (Fig. 1), the Japanese *Jinjo shogaku tokuhon* (尋常小學讀本, Standard Elementary Reader) (Fig. 2), and the French *Méthode Boscher ou « La journée des tout-petits »* (Boscher Method primer, "Day of the Little Ones") (Fig. 3), in which primary school readers typically adopted single-column layouts, long paragraphs, and tight line spacing, with narrow margins and very little white space so as to fit as much text as possible onto limited paper. Illustrations were few and small in scale, most often placed at the opening of a chapter or next to individual examples, and their main function was symbolic or mnemonic; stylistically they were dominated by black-and-white line drawings or simplified realism. Bindings were mostly in medium or small formats with board covers, with restricted colour use and minimal decoration. Overall, children were treated in reading situations as "scaled-down adult readers," and layout was used more to discipline the gaze and reading rhythm than to accommodate children's experiences in any specific way.

The second stage is the phase of standardisation and differentiation of reading materials (approximately from 1945 to the 1960s). In this period, the design of children's educational materials gradually shifted towards child-centred legibility and everydayness of expression. Standardised textbooks for classroom teaching still maintained relatively strict grid systems and clearly articulated chapter structures, but began to introduce looser line spacing, more prominent heading hierarchies, and clearly demarcated functional zones such as exercise sections and chart areas, making page hierarchy and functional relations easier to read. Children's reading materials aimed at home use and early literacy, by contrast, moved closer to picture books in terms of layout and illustration. *The New Fun with Dick and Jane* from the United States (Fig. 4) is a representative example: the upper half of a typical spread uses a full-colour illustration to establish a situation, while the lower half carries short sentences with repeated patterns, guiding children to link language with everyday experience through looking at the pictures and recognising words.

Fig. 1. «McGuffey Readers»
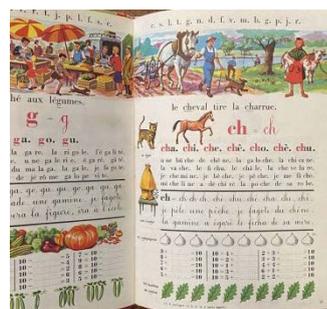

Fig. 2. «Jinjo shogaku tokuhon»

Fig. 3. Méthode Boscher ou «La journée des tout-petits»

Fig. 4. «The new fun with Dick and Jane»

In terms of illustration style, watercolour, coloured pencil, and simplified realism gradually replaced the earlier dominance of black-and-white line drawings; in terms of covers and binding, single-colour paper covers gave way to colour-printed covers and more durable perfect binding structures to withstand frequent classroom use. Taken together, this stage maintained the normative function of textbooks while introducing clearer visual hierarchy, and it laid the groundwork for the later development of image-narrative-based educational materials.

The third stage is the phase of intensified image-based narration (approximately from the 1960s to the 1990s). As ideas about childhood shifted and picture-book art flourished, children's educational materials began to adopt image-based narrative design, in which pictures and words jointly formed the core of knowledge organisation and meaning-making. Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Fig. 5) uses double-page collages, large areas of white space, and strongly rhythmic page structures to weave the book's content into a highly visual learning experience. The Japanese *Guri and Gura* series (Fig. 6), with its soft watercolour style and continuous action, encourages children to understand the story by telling it through the pictures.

Fig. 5. «The Very Hungry Caterpillar»

In Finland, *Iloinen aapinen* (Fig. 7) – first published in the 1930s and reissued many times after the 1950s-combines alphabet learning with everyday narrative scenes through multi-colour offset printing and

large situational images: the visual centre of the page is taken up by full-colour illustrations, while text in large type and short sentences is arranged at the edges of the image, so that children move from recognising images to understanding content as they scan the page. In this stage, layouts shifted from linear chapter structures to scene-based; the text–image relationship moved from text-led with images as supplements to a more balanced arrangement; and illustration and binding showed a diverse mix of collage, cartoon-like drawing, symbolic flat imagery, and hardback formats.
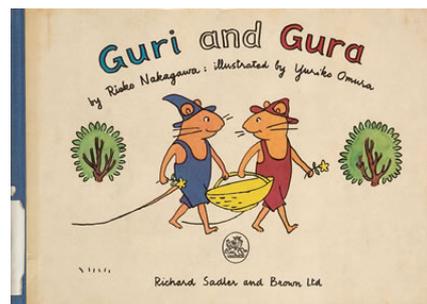

Fig. 6. «Guri and Gura»

Fig. 7. «Iloinen aapinen»

The fourth stage is the phase of coexistence of multiple styles and branding (from the 1990s to the present). Under the combined influence of globalised publishing and curriculum standardisation, children's educational materials have come to display features such as graded reading systems, series-based branding, and heightened social sensitivity to visual issues. The British *Oxford Reading Tree* (Fig. 8) is a case in point: a large number of readers revolve around a fixed set of characters and a family, and employ a unified title area, colour bands, and icons to indicate reading levels, while the inner pages maintain a high degree of consistency in grid and word count so that layout, illustration, and textual difficulty together form a graded sequence. In China, the *Chinese-language textbooks* (Fig. 9) substantially increase the use of colour illustrations, thematic unit openings, and exercise sections, resulting in layouts with more white space and clearer functional separation. In subsequent

revised editions, these textbooks further strengthen text–image collaboration and establish continuous series identities across different grade levels.
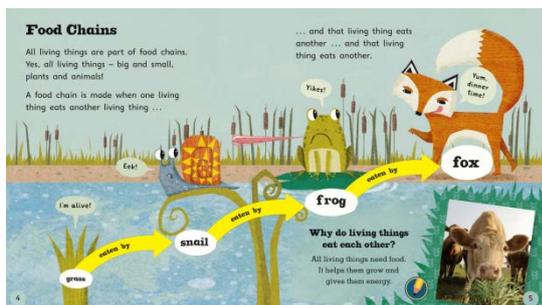

Fig. 8. «Oxford Reading Tree»

Fig. 9. «Compulsory education textbook: Chineses (Language Arts)»

Taken as a whole, lower-grade children's reading materials are largely image-led, with text playing a supporting role; as age increases, text density and sentence complexity are gradually raised, but illustrations continue to be treated as visual elements that sustain interest and aid comprehension. Perfect-bound hardbacks, laminated board books, and water– and tear-resistant papers are widely used in this stage, and the controversy that arose in 2022 around the illustrations in some Chinese children's textbooks suggests that the design of children's educational materials has become a public issue closely tied to social sentiment and debates over values.

Looking across these four stages, the layout structure has moved from dense linear composition towards modular layouts with hierarchy and rhythm; the text–image relationship has shifted from text dominance to closer collaboration between text and image; illustration styles have developed from black-and-white line drawings into colour visual systems that combine knowledge structure with emotional expression; and binding and series strategies have become increasingly entangled with market competition and public taste. This periodisation offers a historical frame of reference for discussions of evaluation criteria and future directions for contemporary children's educational materials from a design studies perspective.

Conclusion. This article adopts an evolutionary perspective and treats children's educational materials from the early twentieth century to the present as a relatively independent design category; based on cross-national samples and four dimensions–layout structure, text–image relationship, illustration style, and cover and binding design–it proposes a four-stage framework of "text-regulatory readers – standardisation and differentiation of reading materials – intensified image-based narration – coexistence of multiple styles and branding," outlining the main trajectory of their development since the twentieth century.

In relation to the research questions, children's educational materials in different historical stages display relatively stable stage-specific features and key turning points across these four dimensions; in cross-national comparison, these features converge into shared trends of moving from "text discipline" to "text–image collaboration" and from a single textbook line to more diverse systems of materials. To a large extent, these changes mirror parallel shifts in printing and publishing technologies, textbook systems and market mechanisms, as well as notions of childhood and popular visual culture, and they suggest that children's educational materials offer a meaningful entry point for discussing trajectories of modern design.

At the theoretical level, the study brings together observations that have previously been scattered across research on textbooks, picture books, typeface legibility, and book design history, and integrates them into a long-term account organised around design form; in doing so, it proposes a discussable periodisation framework for the design history of children's educational materials and offers a historically grounded reference point for future work that approaches this field from the perspective of design history. At the practical level, the comparison of the four stages suggests that contemporary designers of children's educational materials need to balance several concerns: controlling information density, avoiding visual noise, making effective use of text–image collaboration to build clear learning paths, and handling strategies of serialisation and branding with care, while remaining alert to the risks of over-designed pages, convergent layouts, and stereotyped depictions of children.

This study nonetheless has clear limitations: the number and geographical scope of samples are relatively limited, focusing mainly on mainstream children's educational materials from a small group of countries, and coverage of different subjects, publishers, and non-mainstream or alternative materials remains incomplete; methodologically, it relies chiefly on visual form analysis and literature review,

so its discussion of children's actual reading behaviour and learning outcomes is still largely indirect. Future research may build on this framework by incorporating reading experiments, classroom observation, and interviews to examine more directly the relationships between specific design features and learning outcomes, and by extending its scope to digital textbooks and interactive reading products, so as to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how the evolution of children's educational material design continues and is transformed in today's multi-media environment.

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