

”Men drakar finns väl inte?”

Variationsteoretiska studier av
barns föreställningsförmåga i läsaktiviteter
med facklitterära och skönlitterära bilderböcker

av
Anna Backman

Akademisk avhandling som för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen i Humaniora med utbildningsvetenskaplig inriktning vid Göteborgs Universitet, som med tillstånd av humanistiska fakultetsnämnden offentligen kommer att försvaras i Jubileumssalen (J222), Humanisten, Renströmsgatan 6, fredagen den 20 mars 2026 kl. 13

Abstract

Title: 'But dragons don't exist, do they?' Variation-Theoretical Studies of Children's Imagination in Reading Activities with Non-Fiction and Fiction Picturebooks
Author: Anna Backman
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In Swedish preschools, reading practices largely prioritise fiction, leaving children with limited exposure to non-fiction picturebooks. Moreover, research on children's literature has long overlooked children's perspectives as readers of non-fiction, resulting in limited insight into how non-fiction picturebooks engage their audience. This thesis addresses this gap by exploring how children experience non-fiction and fiction picturebook depictions and how these experiences relate to their imagination.

The aim of the thesis is to contribute to an in-depth understanding of children's imagination in reading activities involving non-fiction and fiction picturebooks. The overarching research questions are: (1) What knowledge can preschool children develop through variation-theoretically designed teaching about non-fiction picturebooks? (2) How can variation theory explain children's ability to imagine fictional depictions in non-fiction picturebooks?

The thesis comprises four sub-studies drawing on video-recorded reading activities conducted with two small groups of five-year-olds and two teachers. The empirical material includes sessions from 2016 examining the phenomenon of shadow and design experiments from 2020 focusing on fictionalised non-fiction about dinosaurs and dragons. Analyses adopt children's perspectives, examining what they express as they discern aspects in words and actions. Variation theory underpins both the analysis and design, offering an explanatory model for how children's discernment of aspects enables changes in their ways of experiencing and imagining.

Sub-study I (Backman, 2020) focuses on children's perspectives on the multifaceted phenomenon of shadow in picturebooks and on how they interpret this phenomenon during reading activities. Sub-study II (Backman, 2023) highlights the theoretical idea that aspects discerned by children through diachronic and synchronic simultaneity represent two keys to their imagination. Sub-study III (Backman, 2023) focuses on children's perspectives on what a non-fiction book is and on how they respond to teaching that seeks to broaden their understanding of what non-fiction books can be. Sub-study IV (Backman, 2022) examines children's perspectives on combined depictions in fictionalised non-fiction picturebooks for children, and how children respond to teaching that seeks to separate fact from fiction in reading activities centred on combined depictions in fictionalised non-fiction picturebooks.

In response to the first overarching research question, the thesis demonstrates that teaching informed by variation theory supports children in distinguishing fiction from non-fiction and identifying combined depictions in fictionalised non-fiction. In response to the second overarching research question, the thesis provides a conceptualisation of imagination through a variation-theoretical lens, highlighting how diachronous and synchronous discernment of explicit and implicit aspects shapes imaginative possibilities. The findings offer implications for goal-oriented reading activities that foster critical thinking and playful imagination.