

# Current Portrayal of Character Education in Indonesian Children's Books

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# 1 Current Portrayal of Character Education in Indonesian Children's Books

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## 1 Abstract

Research studies in the western context indicated that the authors and illustrators had shown an effort to depict character education effectively through children's picture books. Conversely, in Indonesia, only a few research studies regarding character education. A study was focused on how to use the books to promote character education. Another research was examining the types of moral values. None of the existed studies investigated an approach to depict character education in Indonesia children's picture books. Using semiotic method, this study indicated that among all significant components of portraying character education, the children's books missed the two crucial elements, which are visual imagery and semiotic components.

**Keywords:** character education, Indonesia children's book, semiotic

## Abstrak

Penelitian di konteks barat menunjukkan bahwa penulis dan ilustrator telah berusaha untuk menggambarkan pendidikan karakter secara efektif melalui buku gambar anak-anak. Sebaliknya, di Indonesia, hanya sedikit penelitian yang membahas tentang pendidikan karakter. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis penggunaan buku untuk mempromosikan pendidikan karakter dan jenis nilai moral. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode semiotik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa di antara semua komponen penting dalam menggambarkan pendidikan karakter, buku anak-anak melewatkan dua komponen penting, yaitu citra visual dan komponen semiotik.

**Kata kunci:** pendidikan karakter, buku anak Indonesia, semiotik

## Introduction

A Current Look at Character Education Portrayal in Indonesian Children's Books  
Character education is found within the national culture of every nation. Indonesians tend to believe that forming a child's character is best accomplished through the school system. Raihani (2011) stated that the government, educationist, and researchers have worked hard to ensure that a school is a place of effective tolerance education. However, multiple changes in Indonesia's curriculum demonstrate that Indonesia's education system focuses on

curriculum content and textbook rather than character education (Raihani, 2011). Thus, Indonesian children lack opportunities to learn through literature and their surroundings how to live a life that demonstrates strong values. Within the current education model, both students and teachers are too focused on assignments, and the grades students must achieve. Thus, character education is relegated to a simply discourse in the school realm. With this lack of character education, the addition of media and technology in the Indonesian school setting compounds the problem.

Traditionally, Indonesians have shared a rich heritage of stories that demonstrate the value of human resources. However, this tradition is oral tradition rather than a reading culture (Sahetapy, 2011). Therefore, the advent of advanced media and technology has decreased the life values inherited through these oral stories. Thus, developing strategies for promoting character education is a pivotal element in children's development, which educators, parents, and the industries that support education must consider.

This research study was completing the previous study regarding character education portrayal in Caldecott-Winning books (Primasanti, 2014). Using a semiotics approach, this study examined the depiction of character education in 21 selected Caldecott-winning books. The resultant data indicated that character education in the chosen books was pictured by two components of character education proposed by Farrelly (1993) personal quality and environment quality. Although these authors and illustrators adapted all semiotics components, they used the visual image more intensely than others. The author also determined that the authors and illustrators tended to describe character education in the United States context from a cognitive perspective. A distinction of this research was the finding that the Caldecott children's books display character education by using a developmental approach. Meaning that the characters in each story experienced a developmental stage which demonstrated to the reader what it means to achieve the good character. While this research study presented complete and in-depth analysis, the findings

were not able to be generalized to other contexts. Hence, the researchers revised the research scope to examine character education in Indonesian children's picture books.

Nevertheless, in Indonesia, several research studied regarding character education in children's book were focusing only on finding methods to promote character education through a book (Rahiem, 2012). In addition, another study explored the type of character education embodied in a certain book (Sutari, 2014). Beside lack of studies regarding character education in Indonesia children's book, examining the contemporary approach to character development reveals a need to explore the approach of portraying character education in Indonesian children's picture books. This study gave insight of significant components, which considered pivotal for depicting character education portrayal in children's picture books.

Farrelly (1993) mentioned Erickson and Knowles' theory that moral development is a life-long process. Character education is categorized as the interaction of a person and his or her environment and includes a moral dimension. There is a bipolar interaction between a person and an environment. Farrelly (1993) argued that this approach is the most appropriate method to teach morals to children in this era because of the unique ability to support a child in becoming more active in playing his or her role in his or her environment.

The primary goal in adopting Erikson and Knowles' theory would be the development of "a mature moral character" (Farrelly, 1993, p. 78). To achieve this goal, Farrelly

proposed two concepts: developmental goals and socio-cultural goals. The developmental goals were known as person-oriented goals. Within this concept, there are three components: vital, cognitive, and self. The vital component is defined as (a) physical development and (b) affective development. Physical development includes developing physical and sexual maturity as components of a full human identity, for example health, sexuality, sports, and art. While affective development addresses one's sensitivity to moral matters such as right or wrong, for example, friendship, compassion, and respect. The cognitive goal includes four components: (a) intellectual, (b) self-concept, (c) awareness of others, (d) awareness of the transcendent. First is the intellectual component, which is evinced by the development of a capacity to make the moral judgment. Example themes of this aspect include moral dilemmas and conscience. Self-concept explains how one becomes self-aware, self-chosen, and self-accepted in relation to others (e.g., inferiority complex, identity versus roles). Awareness of others relates to how one develops the capacity to be aware and sensitive to others and situations (e.g., view of others such as parents, sibling rivalry, manipulation, intolerance). Awareness of the transcendent considers developing a vision of life in which one makes moral choices (e.g., religious belief, astrology, cults, universal human values). Finally, Gorman (1992 as cited in Farrelly, 1993) defined self-goal as "... developing toward a self who can hope, will, imagine, act competently, be committed faithfully, can love and contribute to a loved one and

humankind and to achieve wisdom" (p. 79). Themes, such as hope, will, purpose, competency, fidelity, love, caring, and wisdom emerge from this component (Primasanti, 2014).

The second concept is a socio-cultural goal or environment-oriented goal (Farrelly, 1993 as cited in Primasanti, 2014). This concept has several components, such as social, cultural, and ecological. Farrelly (1993 as cited in Primasanti, 2014) explained that the social component explicates how a person develops the ability to share values in a social environment (e.g., interaction with students, teachers, communities, racism, democracy). The cultural component reflects the capacity to share values in a cultural environment (e.g., languages, belief systems, sports, arts, mathematics, and media). The ecological aspect addresses the process by which one shares values regarding interaction with the natural environment (e.g., concern for pollution, global warming, and deforestation).

#### **Promoting Moral Development through Children's Picture Book**

Literature presents innate resources that can be utilized by parents, teachers, and educators to encourage children's moral development (Lamme, Krogh, & Yachmetz, 1992; see also Wynn, 2008 as cited in Taylor & Scott, 2013, as cited in Primasanti, 2014). While reading, children can experience a variety of activities, such as viewing the illustration, analyzing the characters, and processing and relating to the characters' experiences and the setting.

Young children lack a broad field of experience and frame of reference for

developing their moral behavior. Therefore, they require models with whom they can identify. It is impractical, if not impossible, for parents and teachers to wait until a student has a particular experience before teaching related lessons. The 15 and 18-month-olds would be able to observe labels both from pictures to objects and from objects to pictures in a book. This demonstrates how books can enable children to connect with the book's reality. However, children lack the ability to understand the moral component of these stories. The role of teachers and parents therefore is to draw attention to the moral dimensions so that children can discuss them, learn from them, and criticize the message.

Children's picture books serve as a first portal to explore many situations, and concepts children would not experience first-hand. Therefore, in a country like the United States where reading is part of culture, children's picture books are a common activity for parents and children. American children under age three participate in book interaction several times per week (Ganea, 2008).

Additionally, both parents and educators admit that when their children are involved in reading picture books, they tend to develop their ability to engage with reality. Younger children tend to focus extensively on themselves. As they grow mature, they need to learn about their environments such as family, school, and the world. Children's picture books provide the opportunity to hear how characters in books behave and why they do so. They can then compare those actions to their experiences.

Ganea (2008) suggests,

"Pictures are symbols which represent entities from the real world, a term we used to refer to the unmediated experience of real objects, people, and events" (p. 46).

Sympson (2004 as cited in Primasanti, 2014) argues, "Picture book has become more significant to describe the narrative" (p. 31). A picture can illuminate the whole story. Reading a children's picture book can help a child to transfer information from the book's image to the real world image. Research studies indicate that young children improve both language and literacy when they read children's picture books (Burke, 2002; see also Ganea, 2008; Park, 2006).

Regarding the character development of children, picture books provide a method to guide children in their understanding of various types of characters, good or bad, in life. According to Lamme, Krogh, Yachmetz (1992):

"the importance of children's picture books is to teach self-esteem, responsibility, sharing, truthfulness, solving the conflict peacefully, respecting and appreciating others, ecological values, diligence, perseverance, patience, and unconditional love" (as cited in Primasanti, 2014).

In story *Happy Prince* by Oscar Wilde, the student can discuss why the statue of the prince lost all the valuables on its body. They would likely notice the picture with the unadorned stature, which has given away its possessions so that the people could live prosperously. From this revelation, children would learn about unconditional love. Furthermore, Martilotta (2013) argued that utilizing children's picture books is the most effective way to teach character in public school in light of budget cuts and other policies.

### **Selecting Appropriate Books**

It is believed, in both Japan and the U.S.A., that literature is the most effective method to teach character to children (Taylor and Scott, 2013). Taylor and Scott's research study also explained that there is a need to apply a contextual moral development approach in using children's picture books. The research study indicated that when addressing cultural questions Japanese and American educators gave dissimilar feedback.

Parents and educators should carefully select books to teach character according to Turiel and Gilligan (1983; 1998, as cited in Keefer, 2006) in their study regarding contextual-based moral development theory. Selecting appropriate books can be accomplished in several ways (Helterbran, 2009). First, the culture, background, ethnicity, gender, religion and other cultural aspects of the children should be considered by parents and teachers. Second, teachers should master a chosen book, by learning its characteristics, such as the main characters, the purpose of the books, and the settings. Third, teachers and parents should be able to identify the part which develops the moral dilemma from which students can learn. Fourth, teachers and parents should determine elements, which relate to the children's lives. Finally, teachers and parents should consider the affection presented by the story. The children will be able to relate the story to their experiences and, therefore, learn from it.

### **Problems of Using Children Picture Books**

Using children's picture books is an easy way to foster character development

in children both at home or at school in developed country such as United States of America, where reading is common in the culture. In developed countries reading is a habit from an early age. Schools incorporate reading activities into many school programs, such as reading time, reading center, reading assignments with the parents, and reading in a circle time with the teacher. However, in a developing country such as Indonesia, there will be various problems in using this method of character development.

First, in a developing country such as Indonesia, reading is not embedded in the culture (Sahetaphy, 2011). Reading requires alone time. This kind of activity can be difficult in Indonesia because of its collectivism culture. Indonesians lean toward oral tradition rather than reading tradition. The school generally focuses on activities-based learning. While there are some reading-based learnings, the school rarely provide with literature resources for students to study at home. Moreover, in pre-school, there are few activities which encourage students and parents to engage with books. Second, there are limited numbers of children's picture books available at the school, in the library, or at home. Human development index 2012 indicated that Indonesia was 124 out of 187 countries in meeting basic needs of its citizen including education (Library is Indonesian Basic Need, 2013). In a developing country such as Indonesia, children's picture books are considered expensive (Kamil, 2004). Many parents cannot afford books and read them with their children because of the lack of economic resources, and many are not sufficiently literate.

Another problem in a developing country such as Indonesia is that audio-visual media is more attractive and much less expensive. Television entertainment is becoming more common among Indonesian every day. It is easier for children in remote areas to access television than to access books. Also, audio-visual media is more attractive for children and parents who are not well educated. Moreover, watching television programs is much cheaper than buying children's picture books. These factors influence the willingness of educators and parents in Indonesia to use children's picture books to teach character to children. A practical solution for the problem of using children's picture books in developing countries is to create and promote children's picture books through communities, libraries, and schools so that they can be distributed to marginalized people as well as those families who have insufficient funds and education.

#### Method

This research conducted through textual analysis to discover depictions of character education in Indonesian children's picture books. The researcher used a semiotic analysis to examine children's picture books in Indonesia published after 2000 to 2016. This time limitation is determined to cover the novelty and relevancy of the literature.

The preliminary observation of Indonesian children's picture books in a bookstore demonstrated that there were few children's picture books, which represent stories from Indonesia, beyond those that are categorized as Indonesian folklore. Furthermore, there were few written by

Indonesians (Personal Interview, Pandu, Gramedia Bookstore Officer, December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014). Unfortunately, few schools purchase their library books from a bookstore. As a consequence, the researchers found only nine books that met at least two of this study's criteria: 1). Literature must be predominantly used in and owned by schools; 2). Literature must have the potential to teach character or morality; 3). The books can be easily accessed by teachers and students; 4). The books are included best-sellers in a bookstore. The researchers decided to use only two criterias for selection because there were no books that meet all four criterias.

The researchers design several criteria to select the stories that would be observed. These criteria were designed with the intent to adjust the material by the focus of this study, which was to explore Indonesian children's picture books. The criteria to select the stories to be observed: 1). The story should be an original story written by an Indonesian author; 2). There is an evidence of morality in the story or morality is the main theme of the story; 3). The ratio of illustration or visualization compared to written text is proportional; 4). The main character is human being. Out of nine selected books, based on these criteria, the researchers chose five books. From the five selected books, the researchers chose a minimum three stories from each book to be observed.

#### Result and Discussion

The authors' intention was to explore the approach of portraying character education in the selected books. To define character education, the authors referred to

Hoge's definition of character education, which is "a conscious effort to influence the development of desirable individual qualities or traits" (2002, p. 104). After reviewing this concept, the researchers believed that each individual has certain traits or qualities that characterize one's cognition, affect, and behavior regarding morality. Through a text analysis, the researchers developed a picture of the authors' efforts to impact individual qualities that are observed in the selected books. These efforts were to develop person-oriented qualities and environment-oriented qualities as proposed by Farrelly's concept of Integrated Character Education.

The researchers noted that all of the stories from the five selected books underscored development of person-oriented qualities and environment-oriented qualities with various levels of emphasis. Also, all three semiotic components were used to depict the uniqueness of character education in the Indonesian context.

*Dongeng untuk Karina*. This book is a collection of short stories from the famous Indonesian children's magazine, *Bobo*. It consists of 128 stories that have been previously published separately. All of the stories were edited by Kususani Prihatmoko and illustrated by Iwan Darmawan. From this book, the researchers selected three stories based on the criteria: *Kupula dan Kupuli*, *Opo Dawi yang Bijaksana*, and *Kisah Une dan Hembo*. In *Dongeng untuk Karinda*, the authors and illustrators underlined the person-oriented quality by showing self-respect, loving good, and one's will. The characters were developed through narration.

The narration exposed the characters' physical appearance, purpose, competence, pursuance of hopes and dreams, intimacy with God, and their view of the value of life. Through the plot of the narration, each story develops these aspects.

*Cerita Rakyat Nusantara 2012*. This book is a collection of short stories considered to be Indonesian folktales. This book consists of 15 short stories. All of the stories were written by Dian K and illustrated by Yol Yulianto and Aji Mei S. The researchers selected four stories from this book: *Semangka Emas-Cerita Rakyat Kalimantan Barat*, *Pak Lebai Malang-Cerita Rakyat Sumatra Barat*, *Raja Mintin*, and *Tonamalangi*. In *Semangka Emas* the person-oriented qualities were depicted through the narration, describing two opposite characters: good and bad. The good character was humble, kind, and loyal, even though he was poor. The opposite character was characterized as greedy, jealous, and judgemental. The illustrations presented two types of characteristics with semiotics codes expressed in their facial expressions. For the environment-oriented qualities, the researchers noted visual and semiotics codes were utilized as decoration to support the narration. In *Pak Lebai Malang*, *Raja Mitin*, and *Tonamalangi*, the researchers found person-oriented qualities were exposed more intensely because these stories describe an individual's experience within a particular society. The environment-oriented qualities were demonstrated through social and cultural aspects, especially with the exploration of cultural inheritance, such as family possessions, ability, or supernatural power,



which are inherited from one's ancestors. The narration dominated the semiotics role in presenting character education in this book.

*Dongeng dan Cerita Rakyat Nusantara Paling Melegenda*. Similar to the previous book, this book is a collection of Indonesian folktales. This book consists of 34 stories, which have been passed from generation to generation through oral tradition. All of the stories were written and illustrated by Ajeng Restiyani. Based on the assigned criteria, the researchers selected three stories: *Dongeng Provinsi Bangka Belitung-Si Penyumpit*, *Dongeng Provinsi Jawa Tengah-Timun Mas*, *Dongeng Provinsi NTT-Bete Dou No Mae Loro*. This book did not incorporate visual images to deliver the moral message. In these three stories, the researcher and illustrator expressed the moral issues solely through the narration. Moreover, the illustrations were merely used as decoration.

*Cerita Rakyat Nusantara 2014*. This book depicts the main characters as ones who achieve morality through deeds. They would be considered moral if they demonstrated moral awareness and moral value. The stories demonstrate that through various trials the characters find that life is meaningful. The final book entitled *Indahnya Negriku* presented the person-oriented qualities through the cognitive development aspect. The characters gain knowledge through the journeys presented in the stories. Farrelly (1993) categorized this as intellectual growth. The most outstanding aspect of all of the books is the exploration of intimacy with God, which is depicted through traditional worship and prayer, the appearance of gods, reward and

punishment from a spiritual power, and special revelation for the character.

*Indahnya Negriku*. This book contains a collection of short stories from several famous, yet authentic places in Indonesia. This book consists of 6 stories all written by Fitri Kurniawan and Watiek Ideo and illustrated by Ferry Magenta. From this book, the researchers selected only two stories because of the similarity of the stories: *Susu Kuda Liar dari Sumbawa* and *Pesona Danau Sentani di Papua*. Both stories develop person-oriented qualities by describing several key characters that possess particular traits that can be utilized as role models for the readers. The themes emerging from these stories include self-awareness, self-fulfillment, and loving good. The environment-oriented quality the author and illustrator emphasize included multiculturalism, tolerance, cooperation, and valuing friendship.

Beyond emphasizing person-oriented qualities, all of the books also emphasize environment-oriented qualities. Farrelly explained that this quality relates to one's interaction with the environment, and includes several themes, such as valuing friendship, respecting tradition, and maintaining natural resources (1993). All of the books presented all of the themes with varying emphasis. Those that are considered folklore or *Cerita Rakyat* portrayed "respecting tradition" more intensely. One book, which underlined different facets of Indonesia, presented "valuing friendship" and "maintaining natural resources" more deeply than other themes.

The authors have conducted a semiotic

analysis to explore the portrayal of character education through *denotation*, *connotation*, and *myth* found in the narration, visual, and semiotics codes of the texts. The result indicated that the authors and illustrators utilized narration more extensively than visual and semiotics codes to emphasize the values taught in their books. This finding seemed illogical considering that reading is not an integral part of Indonesian culture as stated by Sahetapy (2011). Also, all of the books incorporate *myth* as the most common tool to present character education. In a semiotics approach, *myth* is a dominant ideology hidden in a text. It is generally related to the presentation of beliefs. Within the selected books in this research, character education was demonstrated by incorporating *myth* as the tool, with the text being the primary representation. The authors and illustrators told the stories by presenting beliefs, from Indonesia culture, such as passing wealth from a king to his descendants, the wicked are punished by gods and the power of brotherhood. Incorporating these values in Indonesian children's book is logical because Indonesia is rich in folklore.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this <sup>1</sup> semiotics study was to discover the approach of portraying character education in Indonesian children's picture books. The findings indicated that the authors and illustrators appeared to be aware of the importance of presenting *person-oriented qualities* as well as *environment-oriented qualities* as forms of character education in their stories. Both types of qualities have been presented within the selected books with different levels emphasis. Additionally,

since there were both male and female main characters in the selected stories, the *personal quality* aspects were depicted from both male and female perspectives. Intellectual growth was an intense focus in only one book, while the others emphasized other personal qualities, such as physical appearance, the purpose of life, competence, pursuance of hopes and dreams, intimacy with God, the value of life, moral knowing, and moral awareness. Also, this study found that the selected books presented a gradual process of achieving certain values, such as having a meaningful life and moral knowledge. In regards to the representation method, the findings showed that the authors and illustrators used narrative, visual, and semiotics codes to depict character education. However, the plot narration was used more intensively than other aspects. The illustrations did not deliver certain messages. They seemed to be used only to support the flow of the narration and stimulate the imagination. In other words, the visual images tended to simply provide decoration in each book. Also, the author and illustrator incorporated *myth* as the primary means to depict character education. This is logical because the selected books were considered Indonesian folklore.

The findings demonstrated that even though Indonesian children's books depict character education from various emphases, they needed to be developed further by incorporating other semiotics components, such as visual image and semiotic codes. The findings should become a recommendation for the children's book publishing industry to increase the number of children's picture books that have rich yet meaningful

illustrations so that children can engage in character education through books. Hence, the book industry plays an important role in developing the idea of incorporating visual images and other aspects of character education in children's book to provide appropriate and effective depictions so that readers would read the meaning of character education comprehensively.

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