

# INDONESIAN PARENTS' CONSIDERATION TO SELECT CHILDREN BOOKS IN CONSTRUCTING MORAL IDENTITY

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## Abstract

Parents believe that books are the media to enhance children's knowledge enrichment, language development, and linguistic competencies. However, there are limited studies that envisage the involvement of parents in selecting books for their children. Current research that considers parents' background as one of the literacy resources remains rare. This narrative inquiry explores Indonesian parents' consideration in selecting children's books as a means of constructing moral identity. Parents of a second-grade elementary student in Yogyakarta were the participants in this research. A semi-structured online interview sparked a discussion on what factors they consider when choosing children's books and why. The responses of parents revealed some key concerns about book choices: their experience, child's contextual needs, and child's interests. Furthermore, it is found that Indonesian children's books tend to have moral fallacies that did not fit well with parents' moral identity. As a result, parents' book selection for the child was more into foreign publishers because they had more precise Islamic moral value representation.

**Keywords:** *children book; book selection; children literacy; moral identity*

## 1. Introduction

Selecting children's books has recently become parents' concern. Since reading books is believed to foster language development, linguistic competencies, and knowledge enrichment (Dickinson, Griffith, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2012; Umek, Fekonja, Kranjc, & Musek, 2003), many parents from different backgrounds consider some aspects of selecting books for their children. Children's preferences, moral or local values, illustrations, and educational contents are the aspects that were most highlighted by the parents in selecting children's books (Barza & von Suchodoletz, 2016; Bergman Deitcher, Aram, & Adar, 2019; Lynch, 2001; McNair, 2011). However, even though many books have attractive illustrations and knowledge-rich content, many of them normalize gender-binary, bisexual, transgender, atheism, or other related issues that are not in line with moral identity in some countries. Thus, moral identity becomes a parents' consideration in selecting children's books. This study aims to explore parents' narratives on selecting children books to read with their child as a means of constructing moral identity.

## 2. Literature Review

According to previous studies, it is found that moral values become one main consideration for parents to selecting children's books (Barza & von Suchodoletz, 2016;

Bergman Deitcher et al., 2019; Lynch, 2001; McNair, 2011). In Uni Emirat Arab, most of the books chosen by the parents as books for shared reading were books that include adventurous stories. Emirati parents want to build a patriotic spirit in their children through the heroic and patriotic stories in which the context is their country. Children in the future are expected to have a patriotic spirit in which children are expected to be proud of their country, and care about the nation and the fate of society; while in Israel where the majority of the population adheres to Judaism, parents' children's book preferences tended to focus on considering the mom as the most important person for children. In the *Where's My Mom* book, between mom and dad, the child is very much closer to his mother than to his father. Besides, in *Where the Wild Things Are*, the story tells about a child that realizes how important the role of his mom is for him and he also realizes that his happiness and comfort is being with his mom. Implicitly, this book gives the message that the blood and emotional bond of the Jews are through the mother. This notion has a strong relationship with the *nasab* or descent of Judaism that was taken from the mother (maternal descent) (Cohen, 1985). Besides, African American parents' book selection tended to rely on gender and children's interest in the book (McNair, 2011). For girls, the preferences of books to read were more into books with female main characters which had a female picture on the cover of books such as *Happy to be Nappy* and *Meet Danitra Brown*. For boys, the books chosen for reading were more books about sports and things which are popular among boys with the picture of male characters on the book cover. It seems that parents want their children to grow up as human beings with their natural gender.

The current discussion on parents' narratives in selecting children's books has been extensively conducted in developed countries such as the United States (Lynch, 2001; McNair, 2011), Uni Emirat Arab (Barza & von Suchodoletz, 2016), and Israel (Bergman Deitcher et al., 2019). However, rarely does the study investigate parents' narratives in selecting children's book with children in the Indonesian context. Research conducted by Dharmaputra (2019) shows that Indonesian parents who are aware of their children's literacy tend to be those whose children are in either bilingual or international schools where the curriculum tends to support literacy practices that create literacy interest in the children. The studies indicated that literacy practices in Indonesia tend to be engaged only in bilingual and international schools rather than at home. In fact, shared reading with children by using interactive books can foster children's cognitive, motor, and language development (Satriana, Heriansyah, & Maghfirah, 2021). To fill this gap, this study aims to explore home literacy and shared reading in the Indonesian context which focuses on the parents' narrative on selecting children's books as a means of constructing moral identity.

### 3. Research Method

This research was designed by using a narrative inquiry whose central concern is the narrator's stories about their experiences. Barkhuizen (2014) explained that stories assist human life experiences to become meaningful and make them more mindful and thoughtful with the activity they do by connecting the past, present, and future and including reflective or evaluative commentary which portrays emotions and beliefs associated with the experiences. It was also meaningful for the researcher since it gave the narrators' reasons for the action and insight about making sense of the action through the eyes of the narrator. Thus, the narrative inquiry was shown to be a perfect tool for representing and understanding the participants' experiences on book selection consideration for children to construct moral identity.

Narrative inquiry data collection by Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr (2007) was applied in this research. Through an online semi-structured interview, the participants were asked to recount their stories, which the researcher then retold using a framework of temporality, spatiality, and sociality. In terms of temporality, the data were collected based on the life experiences of participants such as past and present experiences. Their plan also was considered. In terms of spatiality, the story was re-narrated by the researcher, which is considering the location where the participants live and the events that take place. In terms of sociality, the considerable things in collecting the data are the environment, people, conditions, and surrounding factors. The data were then analyzed with three strategies as suggested by Lewis (2019). They were transcription, member-checking, and coding. In the transcription phase, the researcher listened to the recording repeatedly and transcribed it manually. In the member checking phases, the researcher offered the transcripts which were sent via e-mail to the participants to review and confirm. After that, data coding stages from Whiffin, Bailey, Ellis-Hill, and Jarrett (2014) were applied. Firstly, the researcher arranged the story chronologically by considering temporality, spatiality, and sociality. Secondly, the elements of the story were highlighted in different colors. The researcher's senior in college and a lecturer ensure that data were coded accurately, and checked and examined.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Participants

Before describing the result of this research, the researcher would inform the participants' background. The participants in this study were the parents of a second-grade elementary student in Yogyakarta. Both of them have a good concern for education and literacy. The father, Fakhri (pseudonym), is a taxation officer who graduated from the taxation department in a government-affiliated college. He is not a literacy practice activist but he has a great interest and concern in literacy. He likes and gets used to reading a lot of books related to tax and manual books such as the law of taxation system. The mother, Aisyah (pseudonym), is a lecturer in English Language Education Department at an Islamic university. She has been interested in literacy practices since she was four when she started to be able to read. She get used to reading novels and educational books for teaching.

Through their story, Aisyah and Fakhri were found to be a couple who voiced their concerns about their son, Zaidan (pseudonym). They did not find difficulties in doing literacy at home as well as choosing the books for their son. Both Aisyah and Fakhri had similar understanding and philosophies about developing literacy at home.

### 4.2 The story from Aisyah: *"I think Indonesian children's books tend to have moral fallacy"*

Aisyah has been into literacy since she was in elementary school. She got used to reading books and chose her readings by herself. These experiences made her a well-trained book reviewer, at least for herself.

During pregnancy, Aisyah consistently read books and articles as references for teaching. This reading habit was brought about until the baby was born, Zaidan. She was still reading while she had free time and even when she breastfed Zaidan. When Zaidan was aged 1-3, Aisyah read him a book before sleeping and asked Zaidan's caregiver to read him a book in the morning.

For Aisyah, books were the media for explaining real-life situations. She often chose a specific book theme for explaining specific situations to Zaidan. For instance, when Zaidan

was afraid of taking care of the animals, Aisyah bought the book titled "Who's Hungry?" and read it together. The book presented a dialog between the animal and the reader which positions the reader as an animal feeder. The attractive illustration and child-understandable messages in the book had ensured Zaidan that taking care of the animal was enjoyable. There was also a time when Zaidan was afraid to go to the dentist. The book titled "Gira Sakit Gigi, ke Dokter Itu Asyik", a Korean children's book translated into Bahasa, was chosen by Aisyah to assure Zaidan that going to the dentist was fun. The book told of a giraffe who was initially afraid to go to the dentist but then became brave enough. Book also was the media for constructing moral identity, including introducing the Islamic teaching as their identity as Muslim. The book entitled "Share" by Anthea Simmons was chosen to explain the concept of *Sadaqah*.

Most of the books selected for Zaidan were from foreign publishers. Aisyah thought that the issues and messages in books from foreign publishers were more related to a child's life. For instance, the book that was published by Pixar. Most of the book included multicultural things which tell children to respect the differences and acknowledge that everyone was different and everyone was unique on their own. This kind of book content was rare to be found in local publishers.

Choosing a children's book from a local publisher was sometimes tricky for Aisyah. Besides the unavailability of diversity or multiculturalism concept, she also found some moral value problems in the book. She had bought a children's book that told something bad must be paid for with something bad as well. Even more, the children's famous story from Indonesia, "Kancil dan Buaya" told the reader that the more cunning we were the bigger chance we had to become a winner. As a result, the contrast of moral values made the book no longer to be read together. Aisyah avoided the book with moral bias, she wanted her son to interpret moral values according to what he saw and read from the book. For Aisyah and Fakhri, choosing the book that had clear moral value representation made them easier to infuse the moral identity that they wanted to form: Muslim, caring, brave, easy to forgive, and respect others.

In terms of the way the book explained the situation, Aisyah realized that local publishers must learn from foreign publishers like Pixar. The explanation of a situation in a children's book from a local publisher tended to be straightforward. For instance, when telling the story of how children become friends, the book talked about two children who coincidentally met in the library and talked about the same theme of the book, and they became friends. Differently, when Aisyah checked the book from Pixar, she found that to become friends, children need 3-4 days to become familiar with each other. There was a gradual change in the story. According to Aisyah, a good children's book must be told from the children's perspective and real situation to make it easier for the children to process the information.

#### **4.3 The story from Fakhri: "My son's interest is the most important"**

Fakhri was raised in a well-educated family which has good awareness of literacy. Fakhri's father loved to read newspapers, he got used to annotating reading and doing clipping when the topic was interesting. While his mother was supportive of any educational investment including literacy practices like newspapers and reading comics to his children. His father's reading interest was brought by Fakhri. He was also interested in reading, especially reading children's magazines that featured many pictures and illustrations. His

interest in reading remained until now. He liked to read books with illustrations, especially Japanese comics.

Realizing that reading books was enjoyable when it was in line with his interest encouraged Fakhri to be aware of Zaidan's interests. When Zaidan was at an early age, Fakhri noticed that Zaidan loved to read a book with texture and shape including soft and pop-up books. Zaidan was also interested in the book featuring numbers.

As Zaidan grew older, his interest went wider. He liked to read books that featured numbers, animals, and child movie characters. During book selection, Fakhri believed that Zaidan's interests must be in line with his needs. At Zaidan's age, basic life skills (toilet training and eating attitude), moral education (politeness including how to say sorry, thanks, and ask for help), and Islamic teaching (for instance sharing and being honest) was needed to be taught. Therefore, in the book selection process, guidance and negotiation between parents and the son were done to balance Zaidan's interests and needs.

In selecting books, Fakhri liked to go to the bookstore together once a week or at least once a month, and walked around the bookstore to see interesting books. Regularly, Zaidan chose the book based on the illustration on the cover. He chose the book either because he was familiar with the illustration and character or he just liked it. During a bookstore visit, sometimes the toys section intrigued Zaidan. Of course, not everything that Zaidan wanted or chose was agreed upon by the parents. There was always a negotiation between them, especially when it came to Zaidan's choice of book and the level of reader and content in the book chosen was higher and not suitable for Zaidan's age. They would buy the book if it fits with their value and Zaidan's interest. Sometimes, when the book was not chosen by Zaidan, he would not be enthusiastic about reading it. Therefore, if they did not find the book that Zaidan was fond of and fit with their value, they would search for other places or come the other times.

There was also a time when parents gave their own value at the moment they found inappropriate content in the book they read together, and they would give further explanations or change the story.

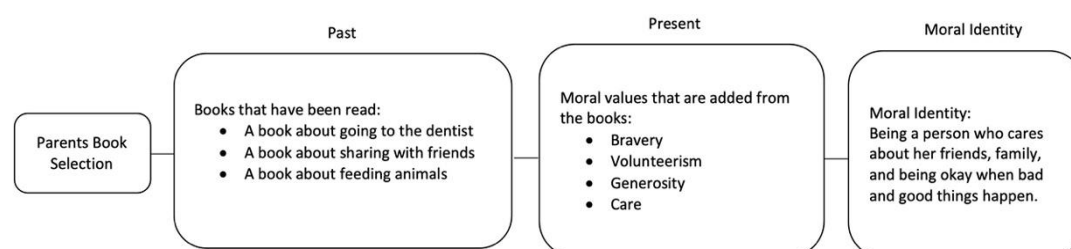


Figure 1. Lifetime framing

#### 4.4 Parents' book selection: children's interests, contextual needs, and moral values are the most considerable things

This study drew upon an Indonesian parents' narrative on selecting children's books as a means of constructing moral identity which considered their past, present, and future experiences and perspectives. The two participants have been familiar with literacy practices since they were children. It makes them knowledgeable in doing literacy at home as well as choosing the books for their son. Both of them had a similar understanding and philosophy about developing literacy at home. Findings indicate that children's interests, contextual needs, and moral values are the most considerable things in selecting children's books.

In line with the result of previous research, Mcnair (2011) showed that children's interest was the significant factor in deciding book selection between children and parents. It was explained that children's interest was mostly related to the familiarity of the book with the child's experience, interesting title, and cover in the book. In the same vein, in selecting the books to read together with their son, Fakhri and Aisyah considered Zaidan's interest and involved him in choosing the books to buy. If not so, Zaidan would not read the book or would read the book as an obligation, not as something that he was fond of.

Aisyah recounted:

"Sometimes when choosing a book without negotiation since it's for understanding concepts in school, the risk is he doesn't want to. He would say *I don't like this book, what it is, I don't like the pictures*. So indeed the most effective way is a book that he chose by himself. He will definitely read it."

Fakhri added:

"Or he would get bored quickly. Sometimes he just reads the book and feels like he's done his job."

Related to children's needs as parents' consideration to choosing the book, this study supports evidence from the study conducted by Barza (2016). Parents preferred the book with sciences, ethics, morality, and religion to enhance children's knowledge and cognitive skill, and moral development. The book chosen was the book that provides factual information and the content that parents need to be taught to their children. Likewise, Fakhri and Aisyah as the participant in the present study guided Zaidan to choose the book based on his contextual need.

Fakhri recounted,

"We direct (our son) to choose books that contain knowledge of basic needs (life skills) like toilet training, eating, tidying up. We believe that needs and interests must be in line."

Related to moral value, this result ties well with previous studies wherein moral value is one of the crucial consideration components in selecting children's books. Barza (2016) proved that the most popular preference of Emirati parents is the books on the topic of ethics, morality, or religion. Since the participants are Muslim Emirati parents, the Islamic teaching including ethics and etiquette such as respecting parents, honesty with self and others, tolerance, a set of Islamic rules that control accepted behavior, and everything related to religious content are valued.

#### **4.5 The selected book for constructing moral identity**

To develop moral identity from the selected book, as retold by the participants, the book must fit the readers' moral beliefs or values and be able to present a real-life situation that will be easily comprehended by children. As what being described by Blasi (1983), moral identity was made up of three components. The first was the judgment of responsibility, in which an individual would believe in a value and made it his or her responsibility if he or she was a member of a group that does. If we define ourselves as students, for example, we will embrace the identity of a student and act and behave in the manner of a student. Individual differences are the second factor to consider. It was a set of values that were reflected in

acts that distinguish one person from another. The third is self-consistency. It occurred when the implemented value becomes a consistent action, resulting in motivation to act regularly.

When it comes to finding, local books publishers do not meet the components mentioned in the Blasi (1983) because many books do not reflect the moral values of the participants and do not show real-life situations from the perspective of children. On the contrary, books from foreign publishers such as Pixar were more likely to contain content with proper values and include a simple message for children. In the other words, books from foreign publishers tend to match the book selection criterion of participants.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the data analysis, it can be concluded that parents' consideration of book selection is based on the parents' experience, children's contextual needs, and based on children's interests. Since there was a limitation about Islamic moral values in Indonesian children's books, the parents try to select the book that infuses Islamic moral values in foreign publishers. Children's conceptual understanding that affects moral identity development is parents' reason for choosing the book that has clear moral value representation.

This study was limited to Indonesian parents with good educational backgrounds and literacy awareness. This study also did not have as much face-to-face interaction as it could have, which would have allowed participants to tell deeper information. This contextual limitation shall be the reference for further research to get a better result.

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