

Portrayal of Difficult Topics in Indonesian Crossover Picturebook's Illustrations

Refita Ika Indrayati

Visual Communication Design,
Faculty of Infrastructure and Regional Technology, Institut Teknologi Sumatera
Jl. Terusan Ryacudu, Way Huwi, Jati Agung, Lampung Selatan 35365
Correspondence Author Email: refita.indrayati@dkv.itera.ac.id

Abstract

Over the past decade, Indonesian picturebook industry has experienced rapid growth, offering an increasingly diverse range of topics for young readers. This diversity has given rise to a new genre of children's books known as crossover picturebook, which are inclusive narrative form that transcends age limits. This research sought to understand how difficult topics for children are portrayed in this new genre of picturebook. Forty-eight samples of picturebook which contains cross-generational aspects were taken from different categories, including government, non-profit organizations involved in children's education in Indonesia, and award-winning commercial books. All of these samples covered challenging subjects such as cultural differences, disabilities, environmental changes, physical and mental health, death, and social issues. The findings revealed that difficult topics are illustrated using Metaphors and layout compositions such as characters, settings, and activities that divert readers from challenging subjects are strategies employed by illustrator to soften images.

Keywords: crossover picturebook, illustration, difficult topics, intergenerational

Penggambaran Topik Sulit dalam Ilustrasi Buku Anak Lintas-Generasi di Indonesia

Abstrak

Industri buku cerita anak Indonesia terus mengalami perkembangan yang pesat dalam satu dekade terakhir. Topik-topik yang ditawarkan juga semakin beragam, mulai dari yang cukup mudah hingga yang kompleks. Keberagaman topik ini memunculkan satu genre buku anak baru yaitu buku anak lintas generasi yang merupakan media anak inklusif yang menembus batas umur pembacanya. Penelitian ini berusaha untuk mengungkap bagaimana topik sulit untuk anak diilustrasikan dalam media buku cerita lintas generasi di Indonesia. Sampel ilustrasi diambil dari 48 buku cerita anak dari tiga kategori penerbit; pemerintah, organisasi nirlaba yang bergerak dalam edukasi anak, dan buku komersial yang memenangkan penghargaan. Seluruh sampel buku mengandung muatan topik sulit spesifik seperti perbedaan kultur, disabilitas, perubahan lingkungan hidup, kesehatan jasmani dan rohani, kematian serta isu sosial. Temuan dari analisis mengindikasikan ilustrator Indonesia masih menggunakan pendekatan tidak langsung ketika menggambarkan adegan dengan topik sulit. Adanya penghalusan ilustrasi dengan cara metafora dan komposisi objek seperti penempatan karakter, aktivitas, dan setting membantu mendistraksi pembaca saat menjabarkan topik sulit.

Kata kunci: crossover picturebook, ilustrasi, topik sulit, lintas generasi

INTRODUCTION

As the awareness of children's education expand in Indonesia, so did the roles of media caters to children's education. Picturebook is one of such type of children's media that gained popularity within the last decade, with this genre still have the largest market share in Indonesian publishing (Prinsloo, 2019; IKAPI, 2015; Agus, 2017). Its core function in acquainting children with fundamental concept and environment has seen as an appealing medium for parents and teacher alike to transfer life knowledge. Picturebook, as the name suggest, greatly benefited by the presence of pictures and people believe that children cannot understand words without picture alone (Nodelman, 2010). That's why in picturebook, combination of text and illustration worked together in order to convey messages. The relations offer sophisticated system of representation with intricate implication that can reflect and expand on the meaning of each other to create deeper meaning, but also can express the meaning by themselves (Nodelman, 2010; Nikolajeva & Scott; 2001).

With Indonesian Ministry of Education launching National Literacy Movement (*Gerakan Literasi Nasional*), picturebooks value has gone to the new heights. Not only government aids that improve the guide and system around producing better quality material, initiatives by local communities and non-governmental organizations also support the growth of children's reading material (Ghozalli, 2020). Several events such as academic discussions, writing trainings, and workshops specifically for making picturebooks began to grow among Indonesian citizens. This shift makes significant change to themes and genres that published over the years. Books that deliberately or unintentionally target both children and adult readers, as well as previously taboo and difficult themes, are now accepted and celebrated in contemporary Indonesian picturebooks. Death, divorce, family structures, lifestyle, sex education, and socio-cultural-ethnic diversity are among the topics that covered. Unfortunately, even with this changes, many children's books still emphasize imparting moral lessons through dictating storytelling (Hakim, 2020).

Despite its grown popularity with more mature readers, picturebook is, in essence, a form of medium that specifically made with young readers / viewer in mind (Nodelman in Op de Beeck, 2018). Its purpose is to make children feel satisfied after reading, and to do that picturebook primary consideration is often align with their interests and stage of emotional development (Sihombing, et.al, 2014). Crossover picturebook, on the other hand, addressed diverse age groups, which can include children, adolescents, and adults (Beckett, 2018). This offers an opportunity for all generations to learn, appreciate, or rediscover values present in the book's content (Ko, 2016). Crossover picturebook also open a space for

discussion and collaboration between cross generations, especially with challenging themes.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

This research used qualitative methods that done with purposive sampling, which is seeking out the best data by identifying the study's best cases and the result are based on those best samples (Patton in Leavy, 2017). This method was chosen in response to the research goal, which is to examine the cross-generational characteristics of Indonesian picturebooks, as well as how introducing challenging issues can be achieved through illustrations. The samples used were story driven picturebook that drawn from three sources; award-winning picturebooks, a list of government-recommended picturebooks in Indonesian Book Information System (Sistem Informasi Perbukuan Indonesia – SIBI), and picturebooks co-created or published by non-governmental organizations, all published between year 2014 to 2022. The book samples also chosen ranging from code A for early reader to code C for intermediate reader in accordance with the Indonesian Ministry of Education's Reading Level Guidelines (Kepala Badan Standar, Kurikulum, dan Asesmen Pendidikan, 2022). In total, there were 381 book samples gathered from three sources.

Identifying Cross Generational Aspects of Picturebooks

Beckett (2018) and Ommundsen (2015) both proposed different ways to look at crossover literature and thus can help to identify cross-generational aspect on Indonesian picturebooks. Beckett lists several factors, including cross-paratext and other distinctive visual and content elements, that can be taken into account when identifying books with cross-generational elements. These factors include, powerful visual storytelling, innovative formats, integration with other genre outside picturebook, visual references to fine arts and challenging subject matter. Ommundsen examined the correlation in a way that text and image interact with audiences. She proposed three categories from easy to challenging (naïve, complex, and existential) which describe on how authors present their works and how audiences can comprehend it. Through observation on illustration samples with these guidelines, we can identify Indonesian picturebook's crossover aspect from its entirety.

RESULTS

Representation of Difficult Topics in Illustration

Challenging subject matter is one of key factor of determining cross-generational aspect of picturebooks. Among 381 collected samples were narrowed down to those that mentioned, discussed or illustrated challenging topic. Using

Beckett's ways to identify cross-generational aspects in picturebooks, 48 books (12,6%) were found. The themes and sub-themes ranging from environmental awareness, multicultural diversity, health and wellbeing, disability, death and grief, to social issues. Illustrations in each book then analyzed into three coding categories. These categories showed representation of difficult topics in illustrations in correlation with its story. Samples were fell into these categories; as a main theme, as a sub-theme, and not represented in story but mentions or depicted in illustrations. Table 1 shows the frequency of difficult topic representation in Indonesian crossover picturebook.

Table 1. Frequency of difficult topics represented in illustration.

Representation	Number of books per sources	Frequency per representation
Difficult topics as a main theme	Award winning books ($f= 3, 6,25\%$)	23 (48%)
	NGO books ($f= 12, 25\%$)	
	Government books ($f= 8, 16,6\%$)	
Difficult topics as a sub-theme	Award winning books ($f= 0, 0\%$)	14 (31,2%)
	NGO books ($f= 11, 22,9\%$)	
	Government books ($f= 4, 10,4\%$)	
Challenging subjects not represented in story, but depicted in illustrations	Award winning books ($f= 0, 0\%$)	10 (20,8%)
	NGO books ($f= 3, 6,25\%$)	
	Government books ($f= 7, 14,5\%$)	
Total		48 (100%)

From table 1, 48% difficult topics has been represented as main theme in illustration with most frequent were in book that published by non-governmental organization (25%). Representation of difficult topics as sub-theme and in illustration only were fairly even distributed with not much gap (31,2% and 20,8%). Table 1 also displays that all award-winning books and most non-governmental organization books both scored higher in 'represented as main theme' category, meaning that their books used more direct approach to inform and educate audiences about difficult subjects. Meanwhile, government books scored even in 'represented as main theme' and 'only depicted in illustration, which means that Indonesian government's book took both direct approach as well as gentle approach to impart difficult subjects.

Challenging subjects' portrayal in Indonesian crossover picturebooks

Illustrators have different abilities in conveying scenes from illustration brief into an illustration. Knowledge of a particular subjects, illustrator's visual bank, editor's choice and their own drawing style can determine how a certain scene depicted in books. Creating illustration that in accordance with the brief given is

one of key factor that determined how illustrator deliver certain scenes. Despite that, some similarity might appear as broad consensus on how certain scenes should be convey for younger audiences in mind. These tables below showed on how authors, especially illustrators, treated scenes that depicted challenging scenes across categories.

Table 2. Elements of challenging scenes per groups of theme representation.

Theme Representation	Components	Observed Elements
Difficult topics as a main theme	Compositions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illustration used comparison techniques of customs / situations
	Visual storytelling techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The usage of metaphors or realistic approach in accordance to how complex the issue discussed and book's reading level • Illustration focuses on world building / setting / environment / situation the characters is in as a part of introducing difficult issues • Some illustrations depicted scenes of how characters manage or handle difficult issues (for health and disability)
	Relation with post- reading activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some book contains illustrated pages for glossary / facts / list of questions / signs
Difficult topics as a sub-theme	Visual storytelling techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illustration focuses more on world building / setting / environment / situation / character's activity • Higher usage of metaphor and fantasy-like setting in illustration • Some illustrations still depicted difficult issues with realistic approach (for disability and grief)
	Relation with post- reading activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some books (notably from NGO) contain list of questions
Challenging subjects not represented in story, but depicted in illustrations	Visual storytelling techniques	Higher focus on world building / storytelling / setting / situation / activities of the characters
	Compositions	Obvious censorship according to issues complexity

From table 2, there were three main components that illustrators used when depicted difficult topics, subjects or scenes in crossover picturebooks; visual



Figure 1. Examples of varying degree of metaphor used in Indonesian picturebook illustration from lowest to highest. Taken from Tarian Sunyi (2021), Smong, si Raksasa Laut (2020), and Ira Tidak Takut (2019)
 Source: Indrayati, 2023

storytelling, compositions and its relations with reading activity. Crossover picturebook that framed difficult topics or challenging subjects as its main theme of their story listed more elements, especially from visual storytelling aspect. The technique used was mostly by metaphor, although the intensity was varied according to difficult topics covered. In Figure 1. we can observe how different topics illustrated with metaphors, from topic of disability (lowest) with just abstract elements, topic of natural disaster (middle) with substitutions and topic of terminal illness (highest) with fantasy-like setting.



Figure 2. Examples of post-reading activity explaining themes or difficult subjects from *Perjalanan Bilou Menuju Timur* (2022) and *Pesan Warna-Warni* (2021)
 Source: screenshot from buku.kemdikbud.go.id (left); literacycloud.org (right)

Relation with post-reading activity also only can be found in books with difficult topics as main theme and sub-theme. Both representations propose a way for children and adults to have a conversation, although books with difficult topic as its main theme offered more diverse and comprehensive explanations (Figure 2).



Figure 3. Examples of composition used as censorship to divert readers attention from challenging subjects in third category. Images taken from *Coba Dulu, Tora!*, 2022 (left); *Karena Anggrek Ibu*, 2022 (right)
Sources: Indrayati, 2023

Even though censorship through visual storytelling techniques and composition (through metaphors and shifting illustration focus) has been done by illustrators in all representation categories, only the third category used obvious composition as a way to divert readers attention from challenging subject by using actions, objects, or settings (Figure 3).

Table 3. Crossover book groups based on writing and illustration's presentation style (Ommundsen, 2015) of Indonesian picturebook samples.

Text and Illustration Delivery	Frequency per sources	Overall percentage (%)
Naïve (illustration and text)	Award winning books ($f= 2$ of 3, 66,7%)	56,25 %
	NGO books ($f= 15$ of 26, 57,6%)	
	Government books ($f= 10$ of 19, 52,6%)	
Naïve text – Complex illustration	Award winning books ($f= 1$ of 3, 33,3%)	22,91%
	NGO books ($f= 6$ of 26, 23,07%)	
	Government books ($f= 4$ of 19, 21,05%)	
Naïve illustration – Complex text	Award winning books ($f= 0$ of 3, 0%)	10,41%
	NGO books ($f= 1$ of 26, 3,84%)	
	Government books ($f= 4$ of 19, 21,05%)	
Complex (illustration and text)	Award winning books ($f= 0$ of 3, 0%)	10,41%
	NGO books ($f= 4$ of 26, 15,38%)	
	Government books ($f= 1$ of 19, 5,26%)	

While the script and narration device are not the main discussion in this research, it still influenced illustrator on how they chose to deliver difficult topics. Table 3 showed presentation that authors (illustrators dan writers) used to convey information about challenging subjects. Of all three groups proposed by Ommundsen, most of Indonesian crossover picturebook used naïve style, both in

illustration and writing (56,25%). Combination of naïve style in writing paired with complex illustration scored second with 22,91%, meanwhile combination of naïve illustration-complex text and complex style in both text and illustration scored draw with 10,41%.

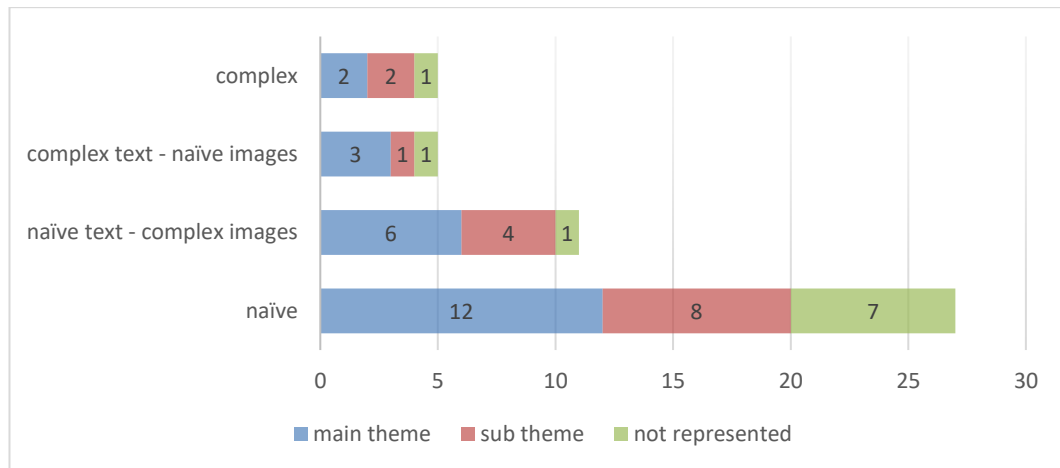


Figure 4. Distribution of difficult topics representation in correlation with illustration and writing's style presentation
Source: Indrayati, 2023

As seen in figure 4, naïve style has the highest number of usages across representation. This indicates that even when writing or illustrating about difficult subjects, Indonesian writers and illustrator still like to cater their work for younger audiences. This was accomplished by depicting both written content and illustration from the perspective of children. Other style representations were not as popular and only reserved for specific subjects that has more complex themes or advanced narrative structures (reading level with code B2 to C).

DISCUSSION

The study's findings imply that Indonesian picture books are starting to cover a wider range of topics, including difficult ones. Nonetheless, Indonesian authors took a kinder stance by simplifying topics that were thought to be too delicate. This is seen in Indonesian folktales picturebooks that often have challenging narration. Visualization of those scenes often portrayed using middle or high-level metaphor (Indrayati et al., 2018). Therefore, as Ratri et al. (2021) stated, in order to effectively teach complex subjects in folklore to Indonesian children, a formula of reduction, simplification, removal of sensitive content, and narrative construction from the perspective of the child is required. Although the subject of folklore was not specifically discussed but rather a small part of the samples, this study found similar conclusions. Metaphor technique and censorship

within illustration by purposely placing objects, settings, or activity of the characters are still preferred by Indonesian illustrators.

Percentages of representation also important to how elements in scenes were portrayed. Results indicated that the more difficult the theme, the more aspects of the illustration—such as setting, mood, and plot—had to be taken into account. As stated by Lukens and Cline (in Martinez and Harmon, 2012), all literary elements greatly aided reader's comprehension and interpretation of author's underlying theme. There's a significant difference of emphasis with depiction of worldbuilding in picturebooks that discussed difficult topic as main theme and picturebooks that only mentions them in illustration. One as a point of entry to discuss challenging issues, and the other to distract readers. This suggests that the illustrations in Indonesian crossover picturebooks provide varying degrees of bargaining power to the readers. It also implies different focus to construct meaning from illustration that opens non-linear reading of literary understanding with both readers fill each other gaps (Shi, 2022). Martinez and Harmon (2012) stated that younger children frequently rely essential information on illustration, while older readers more attuned to the text but still paying close attention to illustrations to understand setting, mood, and character relationship. While this can be the case with different purpose of worldbuilding in Indonesian crossover picturebook, futher research is needed.

Illustrations in crossover picturebooks leaves space for children and adults to communicate. Its nature that frequently deal with difficult and contentious subjects, needs vehicle to encourage younger audiences to be curious. Having in-depth conversations with educators and parents following reading sessions with other exercises such as Q&A, drawing, creative writing, and role-playing can also be beneficial. In addition to being enjoyable, these exercises help kids form a stronger emotional bond with the narrative and advance their language and literacy abilities (Hasegawa, 2020; Wahjudi, 2010).

This study has limitations as well, especially in relation to the sample materials and associated studies on crossover picturebooks in Indonesia. Large and small publisher picturebooks were not yet represented in the study's sample pool. Further investigation is necessary to pinpoint the characteristics of crossover picturebooks published by these publishers, as well as challenging subjects found in Indonesian picturebooks.

CONCLUSION

In light of the public's growing interest in high-quality children's media and with information is now easily accessible, inclusive media has gained popularity. Children's picturebooks have evolved into one of the most popular forms of media

through substantial changes. It's even given birth to a new type that transcends the generational divide and is more inclusive. It takes a great deal of responsibility to produce picturebooks as the quality of illustrations affects how well the audiences responded to it (Hladikova, 2014). Moreover, for books with challenging subjects or topics.

The purpose of this study is to determine how illustrations depicted complex and challenging subjects in Indonesian crossover picturebook. The findings showed that, Indonesian crossover picturebooks dealt with difficult themes and topics by using indirect and gentle approach. Metaphors and layout compositions such as characters, settings, and activities that divert readers from challenging subjects are strategies employed by illustrator to soften images. This opens countless reading between text and illustration for both children and adults to fill each other's gap.

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