Breaking the Boundary: Crossover Picturebook as a Narrative Form to Introduce Difficult Topics for Children

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Abstract

With the increase of awareness and understanding of children's education in Indonesia, picturebook become one of popular media to transfer life knowledge. Picturebook combines visual and text in an interesting way and makes an optimal media for children to learn about their surrounding as well as to spark imagination. Crossover picturebooks are a narrative form that breaks through conventional boundary of traditional picturebooks we know today. Because of its cross-generational characteristic, hence its name, not only it can be enjoyed by children but also adults. This study aims to examine the cross-generational characteristic of Indonesian picturebooks that published between 2014-2022 and also explore the possibility to introduce difficult topics in narrative form. The samples will be gathered from list of award-winning picturebooks, lists of government recommended picturebooks in SIBI, and picturebooks that had collaboration or published by prominent non-government organizations and foundations such as YLAI, LITARA, The Asia Foundation, and Room to Read. The study shows that Indonesian children's books have experienced significant developments in terms of subject matter in the past five years. Many themes and subjects that were previously considered sensitive are now accessible to the public. From the selected samples, picturebooks with cross-generational characteristics can be a medium for conveying difficult themes, information, or ideas. Content adjustments such as the use of metaphors in illustrations, balanced comparison techniques, and information pages can help both adults and children to make reading process a fun experience. Of course, this needs to be supported by adults understanding of reading levels so that the delivered content is suitable for children's abilities and needs. Post reading activities are also encouraged to build and strengthen the child's connection with the story, thus can deepen the child's competence in literacy.

Keywords
Indonesian picturebook, difficult topics, storytelling, children's media

Introduction

With the increase of awareness and understanding of children's education in Indonesia, children's literature places an important role as a way to transfer life knowledge. One part of children's literature is picturebook (*cerita bergambar*). Picturebook is viewed as an attractive and effective media for introducing children to basic concept and their surroundings. Its compact form and playful visuals make children's reading experience, emerging or experience reader, easy and enjoyable. With the development of technology today, the types of picturebooks are very diverse. Starting from printed book formats, pop-ups, board books, some are even

available in the form of e-books that can be easily accessed. As Nodelman in Op de Beeck explained, picturebook is a form of literature that is made with the concept of children audiences despite growing adult readers also interested in consuming the media [1]. However, there is one genre of picturebook that can be enjoyed by both children and adults. Cross over the boundary of age, so to speak. Still, these crossover picturebooks are not a recent phenomenon and already existing date back to the golden era of children's literature between latter half of nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe. In typical picturebooks, adults hold a role as mediator, exist only to help child reader to understand the books content. In contrast, crossover picturebooks elevate adults as readers due to it transcend age boundaries capability [2].

Publication of Indonesian picturebook has flourish rapidly and have the largest market share after fiction and literature in the country for the past decade [3-5]. This growth also continues to be supported by initiatives from Indonesian children's book communities, private sector, non-governmental organizations, and Indonesian government focusing to improve the quality of children's reading materials [6]. Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture through 'National Literacy Movement' Program (*Gerakan Literasi Nasional*) is one of such attempts to not only to produce better books, but also make guide and system around producing good quality picturebooks. Through workshops and training from government's program and other organization had done, we can actually observe a number of diverse themes being brought up in recent publication. Social and political contexts more or less determined this shifting of content and themes found in Indonesian picturebooks [7]. Difficult and taboo themes that will not see the day of light in the era of Suharto (1966-1998), now accommodated in modern contemporary Indonesian picturebooks. Such themes include death, divorce, family structures, lifestyle, sex education, and social-cultural-ethnic diversity. Despite the growing number of difficult themes being accommodated in children's literatures, there's still many stories that focus on delivering moral lessons with dictating narratives [7]. Crossover picturebook has the potential to open a space for further discussion between children and adults. Especially for topics that many adults feel are not suitable for children's consumption.

This research seeks to explore the cross-generational realm in Indonesian picturebooks. It will discuss, among others, the cross-generational characteristics of children's picturebooks and whether this cross-generational aspect can be a solution to the delivery of difficult themes for children.

Literature Review

Picturebooks and its Role

In its simplest way, the term picturebook can be defined by its significant characteristic, which is a medium (book) and a content (picture) [8]. Nowadays, there is a lot of disciplines and approach to dissect picturebook. From literacy approach, picturebook conveys information either through sequences of picture and text combinations or picture only that tells stories and or description of something [9]. From design and art approach, it's an art form that specifically designed product to give children an experience of their surroundings, in which interdependence of picture and texts are essential to their enjoyment and understanding of the story [8,10]. Despite the ongoing debate of what picturebook truly means, we can all agree that picturebooks are complex. As picturebooks evolved through the ages, the impression of inclusiveness in terms of age, theme, and gender continues to be shown by children's books published today. This impression is also supported by the authorial nature left by the author or illustrator [8].

Because of this, like the definition mentioned above, children's books can be a medium for education, art appreciation, and so much more.

Challenging and Taboo Themes for Children

Challenging and taboo themes for children can be defined differently, which often depends on children's development stage and cultural perceptions. Nonetheless, many still believe that children's literature should be free from any inappropriate topics that often derived from a strong need to protect their young ones against unpleasant emotions. That's why the saying of "taboo topics are for adult's consumption" is so familiar, especially in conservative nation such as Indonesia. Restricting children's literary experience may deprive them of the chance to explore painful subjects that will be or already a part of their life. In the case of death as an example of taboo themes, neglecting and denying death as social phenomenon has a detrimental consequence to the child's ability to cope with emotions [11]. Through filtering methods by using simpler words and visual metaphor in certain aspects on illustration and text [12-13], we can still give children a chance to experience challenging themes and help them understand better.

Crossover Picturebook

Crossover picturebook refers to categories of picturebook that has a cross-generational readers [13]. Not like the usual picturebook that specifically targeted for children, reader of crossover picturebook is often ambiguous. Especially in Scandinavian countries, contemporary picturebooks with ambiguous target audiences that addressing difficult aspects of life are emerging. This is not something new, as a challenging aspect and difficult theme has been used in traditional fairy tales. Modern contemporary picturebooks take inspiration from old fairy tales. It discusses controversial or unconventional subjects, has an unsettling illustration style, and encourages readers to ask questions and understand the content of the book more deeply [14].

One other key ingredient to call a picturebook a crossover is it has to accommodate diversity, which can be interpreted from various perspectives. According to Beckett [2], there are things that can be considered when identifying books with cross-generational aspects, which are cross paratext and other distinguishing characteristics regarding visuals and content of the book. Cross paratext means that some picturebooks announce their status as a crossover media with recommendation such as "for all ages". Content of crossover picturebooks, on the other hand, often shows the power of visuals in storytelling, innovative formats and integration between genre and media outside picturebooks (like comic), extensive visual references to fine art, and of course challenging and difficult subject matter. With these codes, crossover picturebooks challenge the current definition of picturebooks for children, thus forging an innovative and exciting way for the future of children's literature and crossover narratives.

Beside characteristic offered by Beckett, Ommundsen propose another way to look at crossover literature that she divided into three main groups: Naïve, Complex, and Existential [15]. Each group looked at crossover aspects on how image and text present itself to its audience. Naïve style means that the author draws and write in a childlike fashion, implanting a child's perspective into their works. In Complex categories, children's books become more elaborate with advanced narrative that demands cognitive skills. As for Existential categories, these picturebooks might be challenging for both children and adults alike. Taboo topics such as life and death, loneliness, identity, war, domestic violence, child abuse, divorce, etc. can be tackle in this picturebooks. Often times, crossover picturebooks can belong in one category or three categories simultaneously.

Methods

This study aims to examine the cross-generational characteristic of Indonesian picturebooks that published between 2014-2022 and also explore the possibility to introduce difficult topics in narrative form. The analysis was conducted in two parts, first was to sort samples from sources and the second part was to identify and analyze cross-generational characteristic using visual analysis and analytical approach. The samples were gathered from list of award-winning picturebooks, lists of government recommended picturebooks in SIBI, and picturebooks that had collaboration or published by prominent non-government organizations such as YLAI, LITARA, The Asia Foundation, and Room to Read. The selected samples also chosen according to Indonesian Ministry of Education's Reading Level Guidelines from code A Pembaca Dini (early reader) to C Pembaca Semenjana (intermediate reader).

Results and Discussion

Indonesian Picturebooks Theme and Trends from 2014 to 2022

Before identifying which books have cross-generational characteriscs, the samples were sorted from each book category. In total, there are 381 samples which then divided into 15 frequently occurred themes: *Diversity, Indonesian Art & Culture, Nature & Living Being, Environmental Awareness, Family, Social Issues, Moral & Ethics, Health & Mortality, Basic Concept, Folklore & Fantasy, Women & Gender, Community & Relationship, Occupation, Science & Technology,* and *Inspirational People / Role Models.* The most common themes found across each category are shown in table 1.

Table 1. Top theme of Indonesian Picturebooks across Categories

Categories	Theme	Number of books	Percentage
Award Winning Books (17 samples)	Indonesian Culture	6	35%
	Family	3	17%
	Nature & Living Being	3	17%
	Diversity	2	11%
	Environmental Awareness	2	11%
Non-Government Organization Books (159 samples)	Indonesian Culture	26	16%
	Nature & Living Being	23	14%
	Woman & Gender	21	13%
Indonesian Government Books (205 samples)	Basic Concept	49	23%
	Indonesian Culture	34	16%
	Nature & Living Being	26	12%

From all three categories, Indonesian culture is still seen as something important and thus prioritized. In picturebooks issued by Indonesian government, the theme selection is related to 2003 National Education System, which implied in article 36 paragraph 3 that while formulating a curriculum one must take account of regional diversity and environmental potential [16]. The Pancasila Student Profile (Profil Pelajar Pancasila) listed in Merdeka Curriculum also stated that local wisdom is one of the themes that should be explored at primary school level [17]. As for award-winning books, it is possible that Indonesian culture has a potential; diverseness that makes Indonesia unique in the global scene. Scholastic Picturebook Awards that made to foster and celebrate creation of picturebook with Asian content, by Asian writer and illustrator [18], and IBBY children's book awards that established to further promote international understanding through children's books [19] are some of such awards that can accommodate cultural themes on international level.

We cannot deny that non-government organizations and award-winning books (which are almost entirely published by non-government organizations) have their own freedom to choose themes to cover the imbalance of what Indonesian children need. We can observe in Table 1 that books in this category produced many unique themes that allow them to be included in crossover picturebook.

Table 2. Trend of Themes in Indonesian Picturebook (2014-2022)

Categories	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Award Winning Books (17 samples)	Indonesian Culture	Family	Moral & Ethics	-	Nature & Living Being	Indonesian Culture	-	Diversity	-
Non-Government Organization Books (159 samples)	Indonesian Culture	Basic Concept	Nature & Living Being	Family	Family, Moral & Ethics, Woman & Gender	Indonesian Culture	Indonesian Culture, Nature & Living Being	Woman & Gender	Inspirational People / Role Model
Indonesian Government Books (205 samples)	-	-	Basic Concept	-	Basic Concept	Indonesian Culture	-	-	Nature, Living Being, Community & Relationship

In table 2, we can observe a shift of themes in Indonesian picturebook for the last decade. Books that published by Indonesian government, as in table 1, still stick mostly to themes that align with Indonesian national curriculum since 2016 to 2022. While award-winning books and non-government organization books start with themes that align with national curriculum and begin to branch out in the last 5 years. We can detect a significant change, especially in non-government organization books, to more challenging themes namely about gender and differences in physical or cultural context. Undeniably, these themes can emerge thanks to collaboration from parties who bring themes based on their goals and views. For example, in 2018 and 2021, one organization produced gender and women themed books due to collaboration with ELCCF (Estee Lauder Companies Charitable Foundation). Likewise in 2022, several Indonesian publishers collaborated with Ashoka Indonesia and Young Changemaker Indonesia to publish books with hope to inspire Indonesian children.

Indonesian Crossover Picturebooks: Between Visuals and Texts

Looking back to Ommundsen and Beckett's categories and characteristics of crossover picturebooks, the author found several that have a crossover potential. There books spread across three categories that can be narrowed down to specific themes, such as multicultural diversity, disability, environmental awareness, illness, death and grief, and social issues (with sub-themes like poverty, natural disaster, refugee, woman & gender role, and animal rights). Looking from the storytelling, most of them fall into naïve category, notably picturebooks with A and B code with short and easy to digest words. Books with C code is a bit more unique. All of the C code books are chapter books which have more difficult words and rather long sentences. Yet the writing styles were taken from children's point of view (as all of them use children as subject of the story), which then can be classified also into both naïve and complex categories. Examples of naïve and both naïve-complex storytelling are depicted in *Lihat! Lihat! (2019)* and *Witan dan Negeri Arana (2019).* Both stories use a child as a main character, yet it feels strictly different because of the choice of words by their respective authors.

Figure 1. Illustration from *Lihat! Lihat!* (2019), depicting Uma and her brother about to chase their flying dragon balloon.

In *Lihat! Lihat!*, we follow Uma as she babysitting her baby brother. The illustration presented in a 'naïve' manner from the children perspective with greyscale color pallete that turned into full color when they enter a fantasy world. In harmony with the illustration, the text also depicted a similar vibe with incorporating short and direct sentences that easy for children to understand.
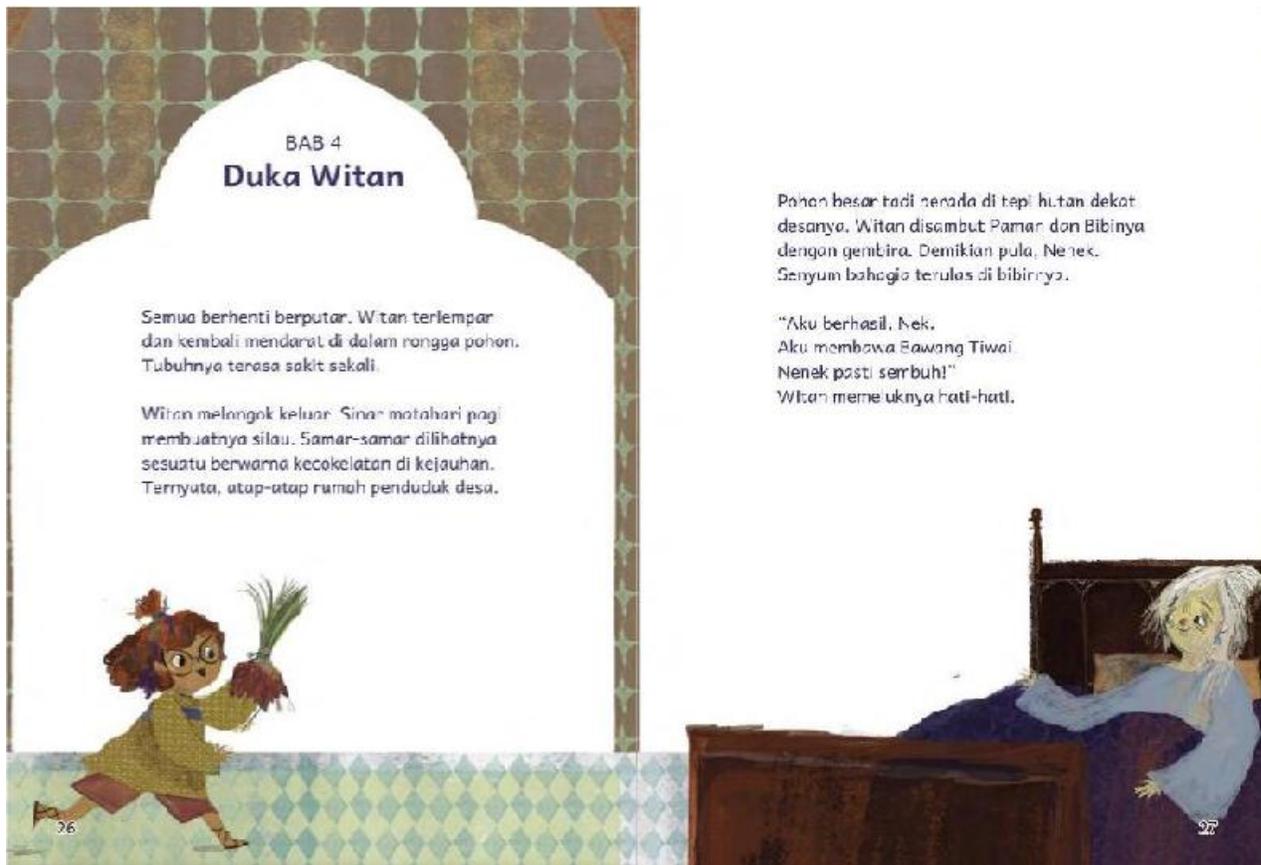
Fig 2. Illustration from *Witan dan Negeri Arana* (2019)*,* portraying Witan giving Bawang Tiwai or Bawang Dayak from Borneo (*Eleutherine bulbosa*) as medicines for her sick grandmother

The story in *Witan dan Negeri Arana* tells us about a girl named Witan that tries to cure her sick grandmother. In search of the right ingredients, Witan encounters a fantasy world called Arana. The text depicted in long narration since the story is full of twists and turns. In contrast, the pictures illustrated beautifully in childlike and colorful style.

It is unwise to use the western standard of challenging and controversial picture book illustration as benchmark to measure the cross generational aspects of these books. As stated by Ratri, et al. and Indrayati, et.al. [12,13], Indonesian picturebook illustration use metaphor in both their texts and visuals as a way to soften sensitive subjects for young readers, which is exactly shown in all of the samples. The use of metaphor in illustration comes in three different variations: metaphors in words and picture, metaphors in pictures only and simplification of texts and visuals with no metaphor. Examples of metaphor in text and picture variation and simplification of text variation can be found in *Smong, Si Raksasa Laut (2020)* and *Itam dan U (2019).* As can be seen in Fig 3., both books depicted tsunami event in Aceh, where people use the word 'smong' to describe tsunami. Metaphor used in *Smong* illustrations shows tsunami as a raging sea dragon and with characters called it 'smong' rather than tsunami. But for *Itam and U,* tsunami depicted with more realistic approach. Tsunami is still called *smong*, but sometimes

it is described as *ombak* (wave). Although we can still see some kind of softening within the illustration itself with black background, as if it's filtering out the tsunami's destructiveness.

Fig 3. Different portrayal of 2004 Aceh's Tsunami event from *Smong, Si Raksasa Laut* (2020) and *Itam dan U* (2019) illustrations. One using visual metaphor (above), one is using realistic approach (below).

Metaphors in pictures only can be seen in some picturebooks with more complex themes. In these themes, metaphors can be used as a substitute or comparison to elude young readers from sensitive or hard to approach subject. The substitution type can be seen in themes such as illness and death, which manifest in a form of fantasy settings or side characters like objects, shadows and monsters. In *Srinti* (2014), for example, in order to talk about the aftermath of 2006 Jogjakarta Earthquake, the story put focus on doll objects and the two characters reaction. In the eyes of children, this could be just another story about sharing dolls. Yet to older readers like teens or adults, they can pick up underlaying message about natural disaster, how it affected the surrounding and how the survivors deal with loss and grief.

Fig 4. Four samples of illustration with metaphors in pictures only, substitute types. From left above to right below in row order, *Srinti* (2014), *Tenang Tigi* (2022), *Pergilah, Monster Pengganggu!* (2021), *Ira Tidak Takut* (2019).

Other approach that authors like to use to explain sensitive topics are by comparison. This is commonly seen in children's books with themes of disability and cultural differences. In order to avoid demeaning one particular culture or person with a disability, this comparison method must also be done from a position of equality. As a result, many Indonesian picturebooks do not

emphasize disability as the main theme, but rather as a complement in illustrations that children are expected to analyze for themselves. In addition, some of picturebooks that do emphasize disability as a main theme often express it in some kind of activity and the use of other senses rather than by comparison. Examples of comparison approach can be seen in the illustrations from *Teman Baru Epi* (2019), *Tiup! Tiup!* (2020), and *Cap Go Meh* (2014), where each illustration uses cultural comparison differently.

Teman Baru Epi (2019) tells the story about Epi's family from Indonesia and Fatimah's family, war immigrants from Afghanistan that stayed in Indonesia. The comparison shown in a literal style on a one-page spread illustration (fig. 5), but not visible in the text. Different gestures and contrasting colors of the two cultures add to the comparison in the illustration. *Cap Go Meh* (2014) on the other hand, tells the similarities of holiday food in two different religions and cultures (Javanese Islam and Chinese Confucianism). The visual comparison is done in character's point-of-view style, when each character talks about the customs of their holiday and the role of *Lontong Cap Go Meh* (fig 6). In other means, the comparison shown here is literal in both text and image. The book *Tiup! Tiup!* (2020) propose another way to shown comparison of disability, since it is not mentioned at all in the visuals or text. There are only a few indications that can be seen in the characters (fig 7), such as the blurred eye color and the use of a white cane for the blind. In this case, child readers are encouraged to be more observant to see the differences.

Fig 5. Literal comparison on one spread illustration from *Teman Baru Epi (2019),* showing different culture between Epi with her family and Fatimah, a war immigrant from Afganistan, with her family.

Fig 6. Direct comparison in both text and visuals from Cap Go Meh (2014). Illustration above shows Nisa and Lili talking about Eid al-Fitr and lontong Cap Go Meh as it's signature dishes.

Fig 7. Illustration from *Tiup! Tiup!* (2020) which depicted Nubi (blind boy) and his neighbor Mr. Kumis.

Books with cross-media were also found in the samples, namely picturebook with comic format. It gives alternative approach on how to engage reading activity that might appeal to older children. Information books were also found among the samples. Since crossover picturebook commonly contain challenging and controversial subjects, glossary page or a list of questions provide children with space to stimulate their curiosity. Parents and teachers can also gain the benefit by having meaningful discussions after reading sessions together. Post-reading activities such as quizzes, question and answer activities, drawing, creative writing and role playing are recommended. Apart from having fun, these activities also enhance children's personal connection with the story and help develop aspects of literacy and language skills [21,22].

Fig.6 Example of genre blending taken from *Tenang Tigi* (2022), where picture book using sequence art and elements from comics in their storytelling.

Fig.7 Pages with additional information and glossaries to help children recognize unfamiliar objects or themes in *Naik-naik ke Puncak Bukit* (2022, above) dan Perjalanan Bilou Menuju Timur (2022, below).

Conclusion

Taboo and difficult topics for younger children are not commonly presented on literary media, especially picturebooks in Indonesia. Public stigma about these topics is still rampant and has become the main reason why these topics are difficult to find. In fact, books with these topics are needed to maintain children's resilience when facing the journey of life in an increasingly globalized era and its various challenges. In the past five years, Indonesian children's books have experienced significant developments in terms of subject matter. Many themes and subjects that were previously considered sensitive are now are accessible to the public. One could say that Indonesia experiencing the surge of cross generational picturebook thanks to communities, foundations, non-government organizations (local or international), and government itself are becoming more aware the importance of early literacy.

From the selected samples, picturebooks with cross-generational characteristics, or simply crossover picturebook, that already available in Indonesia can be a medium for conveying difficult themes, information, or ideas. Content adjustments such as the use of metaphors in illustrations, balanced comparison techniques, and information pages can help both adults and children to make reading process a fun experience. Of course, this needs to be supported by adults understanding of reading levels so that the delivered content is suitable for children's abilities and needs. Post reading activities are also encouraged to build and strengthen the child's connection with the story, thus can deepen the child's competence in literacy.

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Biography

Refita Ika Indrayati was born and raised in Bandung. Thanks to two of her grandfathers who loved to tell stories, fairy tales were always a part of her childhood. Her interest in children's books began to emerge when she took a course on Children's Book Illustration at Bandung Institute of Technology. After earning her master's degree with a topic on death in children's books, Refita devoted herself to teaching as a lecturer at Visual Communication Design, Sumatera Institute of Technology. Besides teaching, Refita also worked on several children's book illustration projects in collaboration with publishers, non-government organizations, or Indonesian Ministry of Education. Some of the books she has illustrated are "Lili dan Kolam Misterius", "Penari Iraw", "Gelang untuk Bunda", and "Pacu Itiak", which can be read online for free.