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Children's Literature as Narrative Pedagogy in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The integration of children's literature in primary classrooms has been widely associated with creativity, critical thinking, and emotional development. However, limited research has systematically examined how narrative-based instruction fosters multidimensional student engagement within culturally contextualised settings. This study investigates how Indonesian primary school teachers strategically employ children's picture books to enhance behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Using a multiple case study design with an embedded mixed-methods approach, data were collected from classroom observations, document analysis, and Likert-scale questionnaires involving five purposively selected teachers and 116 students. The findings reveal that children's literature functions as a narrative-mediated pedagogical infrastructure that simultaneously supports active participation, emotional connection, and conceptual reasoning. Thematic analysis indicates that dialogic questioning, culturally relevant texts, and cross-disciplinary integration are key mechanisms for shaping engagement. While the study confirms the pedagogical value of story-based instruction, it also highlights the necessity of intentional scaffolding to prevent superficial engagement. The findings contribute to student engagement scholarship by illustrating how narrative structure functions as an integrative mechanism connecting behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions.

Keywords: Children's literature, culturally responsive teaching, multiple case study, narrative pedagogy, primary education, student engagement

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary primary education increasingly emphasises not only literacy acquisition but also the cultivation of multidimensional student engagement. In the context of 21st-century learning, classrooms are expected to foster active participation, emotional involvement, and higher-order thinking rather than passive knowledge transmission. However, in many primary settings, literacy instruction remains skill-oriented and text-bound, with limited pedagogical integration that connects reading activities to broader cognitive and affective development. This situation calls for pedagogical approaches that meaningfully integrate narrative experiences into classroom learning.

Children's literature offers significant potential in this regard, and children's picture books, in particular, may provide rich opportunities for imaginative and creative engagement through the interaction of narrative and visual representation (Ünal et al., 2024). Beyond serving as reading material, literary texts function as narrative spaces where learners negotiate meaning, identity, and values (Leland et al., 2023; Sever Serezli, 2024). Through storytelling, dialogue, and character exploration, children are invited to engage not only with textual content but also with moral dilemmas, cultural perspectives, and imaginative possibilities. In picture-book contexts, such engagement also involves interpreting visual elements and constructing meaning across verbal and visual modes (Trihastuti, 2023). Thus, children's literature may operate as a form of narrative pedagogy—an instructional approach that positions storytelling as a structured medium for learning.

Empirical studies have documented the cognitive benefits of literary engagement. Research indicates that children's literature promotes interpretive competence, inference-making, and critical thinking (Aisyah & Mustofa, 2023; Heyrani & Moghaddam, 2021). Literature-based language learning further enhances contextualised understanding and analytical reflection (Hossain, 2024). Narrative complexity encourages learners to analyse motivations, evaluate decisions, and construct alternative interpretations. These findings suggest that literary engagement contributes to cognitive depth beyond surface-level comprehension.

In addition to cognitive development, children's literature plays a crucial role in fostering emotional and social growth. Literary narratives facilitate empathy, perspective-taking, and emotional identification with characters (Heath et al., 2017; Torres, 2019). Emotional engagement refers to learners' affective responses such as enjoyment, interest, and a sense of belonging (Fredricks et al., 2004). Classroom practices such as reading aloud have been shown to strengthen children's positive attitudes toward reading and deepen their affective attachment to literacy experiences (Ledger & Merga, 2018). These studies indicate that literary engagement extends beyond comprehension to encompass emotional resonance and motivational orientation. Recent research on young learners' emotions

similarly highlights enjoyment and boredom as important dimensions of learners' affective experiences during classroom learning (Tsang & Davis, 2024).

Despite this growing body of research, much of the existing literature examines cognitive, emotional, or motivational outcomes in isolation. Few studies conceptualise literary pedagogy through an integrative engagement framework. The multidimensional model proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004), which distinguishes behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement, provides a comprehensive lens for examining how students participate, feel, and think within learning environments. However, empirical investigations rarely apply this framework to analyse how children's literature systematically fosters multidimensional engagement within classroom practice.

Within the Indonesian context, research has begun to explore teachers' efforts to integrate children's literature into literacy instruction (Durriyah et al., 2024). Nevertheless, these studies tend to focus on implementation challenges or general literacy outcomes rather than examining engagement processes holistically. There remains limited evidence on how structured narrative pedagogy simultaneously cultivates behavioural participation, emotional involvement, and cognitive depth among primary school learners.

Accordingly, this study seeks to address this gap by examining children's literature as narrative pedagogy in Indonesian primary education. By employing a case study design and analysing classroom practices through the multidimensional engagement framework, this research aims to provide an integrated understanding of how literary instruction fosters behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement in authentic classroom contexts. Specifically, this study addresses the following question: How does children's literature, when implemented as narrative pedagogy, foster behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement in Indonesian primary classrooms?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a multiple case study design (Yin, 2018) to explore how children's literature functions as narrative pedagogy within authentic primary classroom contexts. Each participating teacher represented an individual case. The study aimed to identify recurring engagement patterns across cases while acknowledging contextual variations. Within each case, an embedded mixed-methods approach was employed. Qualitative classroom observations and document analysis constituted the primary sources of data, while quantitative questionnaire responses were incorporated as supportive triangulation. The design was qualitatively driven, as the primary objective was to generate interpretive insights into engagement processes rather than statistical generalisation.

Participants and Context

The study involved five Indonesian primary school teachers selected through purposive

sampling. The selection was guided by the intention to include information-rich cases capable of illustrating narrative-based pedagogical practices. The teachers met the following criteria: they had at least five years of teaching experience, regularly integrated children's picture books into classroom instruction, and were recognised by school administrators (based on documented involvement in literacy programmes and professional development activities).

These teachers incorporated children's literature not only in language lessons but also in subjects such as science, civic education, and health education. This cross-disciplinary integration provided an opportunity to examine literature beyond its conventional literacy function. A total of 116 students from Grades 3 to 5 participated in the study. Students were drawn from the respective classrooms of the participating teachers. The student participants represented diverse academic abilities and socio-cultural backgrounds, reflecting the natural heterogeneity of primary classrooms. Prior to data collection, institutional approval was obtained from school authorities. Parental consent and student assent were secured to ensure ethical compliance.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through classroom observations, instructional document analysis, and perception-based questionnaires administered to both teachers and students.

Classroom Observations

Non-participant classroom observations were conducted during lessons in which children's picture books were integrated into instructional activities. The observations focused on how teachers structured narrative-based instruction and how students responded behaviourally, emotionally, and cognitively. Field notes documented instructional strategies such as dialogic questioning, guided interpretation, collaborative tasks, and cross-curricular connections. Particular attention was paid to indicators aligned with engagement theory (Fredricks et al., 2004), including observable participation (behavioural), expressions of interest or emotional resonance (emotional), and evidence of analytical reasoning or problem-solving (cognitive).

Document Analysis

To complement observational data, lesson plans and selected instructional materials were analysed. This analysis aimed to examine how teachers aligned narrative content with learning objectives and whether engagement-oriented strategies were intentionally embedded within instructional planning.

Questionnaires

To support the qualitative findings, Likert-scale questionnaires were administered to teachers and students. Both instruments consisted of statements related to behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement dimensions, using a four-point response scale

ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The student questionnaire was written in simplified language appropriate for primary learners. The instruments underwent face and content validation by two experts in literacy and primary education to ensure clarity, developmental appropriateness, and conceptual alignment with engagement theory. The questionnaire data were used descriptively to identify general engagement tendencies and to triangulate classroom observations. They were not treated as standalone outcome measures but as complementary evidence supporting thematic interpretation. Given the descriptive and triangulation-oriented function of the instrument, the questionnaire was not designed to establish psychometric generalisation but to support interpretive analysis of engagement patterns observed in classroom contexts.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from observations and documents were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The analysis began with repeated reading of field notes to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated to capture recurring instructional strategies and student responses. These codes were then organised into broader themes corresponding to behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement categories. Cross-case comparison was conducted to identify similarities and differences among the five classroom contexts. This process enabled the identification of recurring pedagogical mechanisms through which narrative texts mediated engagement. Quantitative questionnaire responses were analysed descriptively through frequency distributions and mean tendencies. These results were interpreted alongside qualitative themes to enhance analytical depth and credibility.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to strengthen methodological rigor. First, data triangulation was achieved by integrating observations, instructional documents, and perception data. Second, thick description of classroom practices was provided to support interpretive transparency. Third, cross-case analysis enhanced the credibility of recurring patterns. Finally, analytical memos were maintained throughout the coding process to document interpretive decisions and reduce subjective bias. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the findings are presented as contextually grounded interpretations rather than statistically generalisable claims.

RESULTS

The analysis across five classroom cases reveals that children's literature functioned as a narrative-mediated pedagogical structure shaping behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Rather than operating solely as supplementary reading material, picture books served as instructional entry points through which teachers structured participation, affective connection, and analytical reasoning. Four recurring pedagogical mechanisms were

identified across cases: (1) narrative entry structuring, (2) dialogic interaction, (3) emotional anchoring, and (4) cross-curricular conceptual bridging. These mechanisms are presented below according to engagement dimensions while acknowledging their interrelated nature.

Narrative Structuring and Behavioural Engagement

Across cases, teachers consistently initiated lessons by positioning children's literature as a narrative entry point. Stories were introduced prior to conceptual explanation, enabling students to enter the lesson context through plot, character, and setting. Behavioural engagement was reflected in observable participation patterns, including voluntary responses, collaborative discussion, sustained attention, and task persistence. Students demonstrated increased willingness to respond to teacher prompts when questions were embedded within narrative contexts rather than abstract exposition.

For example, when teachers paused reading to invite prediction or interpretation, students actively raised hands and offered hypotheses about character decisions. These participatory behaviours were not limited to language subjects; similar patterns were observed in science and civic education lessons where narrative scenarios were used to introduce thematic content. Descriptive questionnaire data supported these observations. A majority of students indicated agreement with statements reflecting active participation and sustained involvement during story-based lessons. This convergence suggests that narrative structuring functioned as a behavioural engagement catalyst across cases.

Emotional Resonance and Affective Investment

Emotional engagement emerged as a prominent feature of literature-integrated instruction. Students frequently displayed affective responses such as laughter, empathy toward characters, and spontaneous commentary about personal experiences related to story events. Teachers intentionally selected culturally relevant picture books, enabling students to recognise familiar social contexts, local values, and relatable dilemmas. This cultural proximity appeared to strengthen emotional identification and classroom belonging.

Observation notes documented moments in which students verbally expressed concern for characters facing moral challenges or social conflicts. Such reactions extended beyond surface enjoyment and reflected emotional investment in narrative development. Student questionnaire responses similarly indicated positive affective tendencies, with many students reporting enjoyment and interest during story-based activities. These findings suggest that narrative texts created emotionally supportive learning spaces aligned with social and emotional learning principles.

Dialogic Interpretation and Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement was primarily fostered through structured dialogic interaction. Teachers did not limit instruction to story reading; instead, they incorporated interpretive questioning, hypothetical reasoning tasks, and problem-solving activities linked to narrative situations. Students were prompted to analyse character motivations, evaluate decision consequences, and propose alternative solutions. These tasks required inferential thinking and perspective-taking, reflecting deeper intellectual investment beyond factual recall.

Across cases, teachers extended narrative discussions into conceptual domains. For instance, stories addressing environmental themes were used to initiate scientific reasoning about ecological responsibility. Similarly, narratives involving health-related dilemmas were linked to discussions of hygiene and personal well-being. This cross-disciplinary extension indicates that literature functioned as a conceptual bridge rather than a self-contained activity. Questionnaire responses revealed that students perceived these activities as helping them "think more deeply" and "understand lessons better," reinforcing observational interpretations of cognitive engagement.

Cross-Case Patterns: Narrative Pedagogy as an Integrative Mechanism

Although classroom contexts varied, cross-case comparison revealed consistent instructional patterns. Teachers employed narrative structuring to initiate engagement, dialogic questioning to sustain participation, and contextual bridging to connect stories with disciplinary content. Importantly, engagement dimensions did not operate independently. Behavioural participation often preceded emotional resonance, which in turn supported sustained cognitive reasoning. This interrelated pattern suggests that narrative pedagogy functioned as an integrative mechanism aligning engagement dimensions simultaneously.

However, the depth of cognitive engagement varied depending on the extent to which teachers scaffolded interpretive discussion. In cases where questioning remained surface-level, engagement tended to remain predominantly behavioural and emotional. This variation highlights the central role of teacher mediation in transforming narrative exposure into meaningful analytical learning. This interdependence reflects the dynamic interaction among engagement dimensions proposed in multidimensional engagement theory (Fredricks et al., 2004).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that children's literature, when strategically integrated into classroom instruction, operates as a narrative-mediated pedagogical structure that shapes multidimensional student engagement. Rather than functioning solely as a literacy enhancement tool, literature served as an instructional bridge connecting behavioural participation, emotional investment, and cognitive reasoning within cross-curricular contexts.

Consistent with engagement theory (Fredricks et al., 2004), the results demonstrate that engagement dimensions are interrelated rather than isolated constructs. Behavioural participation—manifested through active responses and collaborative discussion—frequently emerged through narrative entry structuring. Emotional engagement developed as students identified with culturally resonant characters and scenarios. Cognitive engagement deepened when teachers scaffolded interpretive reasoning and linked narrative situations to disciplinary concepts.

Importantly, this study extends prior research that primarily associates children's literature with creativity and moral development by demonstrating how narrative pedagogy functions structurally within classroom interaction. The findings suggest that the pedagogical power of literature does not lie solely in its thematic content but in how teachers mediate narrative experiences through dialogic questioning and conceptual bridging.

The cross-case analysis further reveals that teacher mediation plays a decisive role in determining the depth of engagement. While narrative texts consistently stimulated behavioural and emotional responses, sustained cognitive engagement depended on the intentional design of interpretive and analytical tasks. This nuance contributes to engagement scholarship by illustrating that narrative exposure alone does not guarantee higher-order thinking; rather, it is the integration of guided inquiry within storytelling contexts that fosters deeper intellectual involvement.

Within the Indonesian educational context, the findings also highlight the potential of culturally contextualised picture books to strengthen classroom inclusivity. Students' emotional identification with familiar social and moral scenarios appeared to enhance affective belonging, which in turn supported participatory behaviours. This observation aligns with culturally responsive teaching principles, suggesting that narrative pedagogy can serve as a locally grounded engagement strategy.

Nevertheless, the study's exploratory design necessitates interpretive caution. Engagement was examined primarily through observational indicators and perception-based measures rather than longitudinal academic outcomes. Future research may expand this inquiry by incorporating learning achievement data, experimental comparison groups, or extended classroom observation periods to further examine the sustained impact of narrative-based instruction.

Overall, this study reconceptualises children's literature as an integrative engagement framework rather than a supplementary instructional resource. By systematically mapping behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions within narrative-based pedagogy, the research contributes to a more structured understanding of how storytelling practices shape classroom learning environments. These findings suggest that narrative pedagogy may serve as a scalable engagement strategy in literacy-driven educational reforms, particularly in culturally diverse primary settings.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how Indonesian children's picture books were integrated into primary classroom instruction to foster behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement. The findings demonstrate that narrative-based pedagogy can function as a structured engagement mechanism when supported by intentional questioning, cultural relevance, and cross-curricular alignment. Rather than serving merely as literacy enrichment materials, children's literature operated as a pedagogical infrastructure connecting subject content with students lived experiences. The integration of storytelling across disciplinary contexts enabled teachers to mediate abstract concepts through relatable narratives, thereby promoting deeper cognitive involvement alongside emotional resonance.

The study contributes to engagement theory by highlighting the structural role of narrative mediation in shaping multidimensional engagement. It also underscores the importance of teacher competence in transforming literature from passive reading material into an interactive learning catalyst. However, engagement observed in this study was primarily measured through perception and classroom behaviour indicators. Future research should examine longitudinal academic outcomes and comparative text contexts to further validate the instructional impact of narrative-based strategies.

Overall, this study affirms that strategically integrated children's literature can enrich classroom ecology, provided that it is embedded within deliberate pedagogical design rather than implemented as an incidental activity.

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