



# A Study of Papuan Children's Preferences for Cross-Cultural Narratives: Understanding Early Literacy Engagement

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## Abstract

This study investigates the narrative literacy preferences of Indigenous Papuan children in the Bevak Pintar Community in Merauke. Recognizing the need for culturally diverse and contextually relevant reading materials, the research employs a descriptive qualitative design using observation, semi-structured interviews, and closed-ended questionnaires. Data were analyzed by classifying narrative types according to themes, character representation, and cultural values. Findings indicate four dominant preferences: (1) Papuan folktales highlighting local wisdom and identity; (2) cross-cultural friendship stories depicting interactions across diverse backgrounds; (3) inspirational global children's stories presenting resilience and social solidarity; and (4) fantasy narratives blending Papuan mythology with broader imaginative elements. Children favored stories featuring peers with relatable experiences and clear, engaging visual elements. This study contributes novel evidence on Papuan children's cross-cultural narrative interests and offers implications for developing culturally responsive literacy materials and early-grade curriculum design.

**Keywords:** *cultural narratives; early literacy; ethnic diversity; Papuan children*

## Introduction

Early literacy development in Indonesia, particularly in eastern regions such as Papua, continues to face significant barriers, including limited access to culturally relevant reading materials (Febriana, Nurkamto, Rochsantiningsih, & Muhtia, 2018). Research indicates that children engage more meaningfully with texts that reflect their lived experiences and cultural backgrounds, which in turn strengthens motivation, comprehension, and emotional connection to reading (Poedjiastutie,

2018; Scorer & Vardy, 2024). These findings underscore the importance of culturally responsive literature as a foundation for effective early literacy.

Culturally relevant stories not only support decoding and comprehension but also shape children's self-understanding and attitudes toward others. In a multicultural context like Indonesia, cross-cultural narratives play a key role in fostering empathy, inclusion, and respect for diversity (Fitriadi, Sinaga, & Muhammad, 2024). Banks and Banks (2019) further argue that integrating multicultural content through literature contributes to children's cognitive, emotional, and moral development.

Despite these benefits, most children's books available in Papua are produced in western Indonesia or by foreign publishers, resulting in narratives that are often disconnected from Papuan children's realities. This mismatch can lead to disengagement and hinder identity affirmation (Hakim, 2015; Gay, 2022). Prior studies show that culturally grounded and cross-cultural storytelling can foster cultural pride, strengthen identity, and facilitate intercultural understanding among marginalized learners (Ratminingsih, Budasi, & Kurnia, 2020; Yektiningtyas & Modouw, 2023; Méndez, Bitetti, & Perry, 2023).

The Bevak Pintar Community in Merauke, an informal learning space for Indigenous Papuan children offers regular reading sessions using diverse cultural narratives. This context provides a unique opportunity to examine how cross-cultural stories shape children's literacy engagement and what types of narratives resonate with them.

Given the limited representation of Papuan and eastern Indonesian identities in mainstream children's literature (Hakim, 2015; Yektiningtyas & Modouw, 2023), this study addresses the urgent need to develop inclusive, identity-affirming reading materials. Understanding children's narrative preferences is therefore essential for informing culturally responsive literacy practices.

In light of this context, this study aims to identify the types of cross-cultural narratives preferred by Indigenous Papuan children in the Bevak Pintar Community, examine the thematic, character-based, and cultural elements that shape their engagement with stories, and provide empirical insights to inform the development of culturally responsive literacy materials for early-grade learners in Papua.

## **Method**

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to investigate the narrative preferences of Papuan children in a naturalistic and contextual setting. This approach was selected for its strength in capturing participants' subjective experiences, meanings, and cultural responses to reading materials. The study not only sought to identify patterns of narrative preference but also to interpret the cultural and emotional factors shaping children's choices.

### ***Research Site and Participants***

The research was conducted at the Bevak Pintar Community, a community-based literacy initiative in Merauke, South Papua. The community serves Indigenous Papuan children aged 7–11 who participate in informal learning activities such as storytelling, reading circles, and creative expression.

A total of 20 participants (10 males and 10 females) were purposively selected based on regular attendance in weekly literacy sessions. The selection ensured gender balance and age diversity to obtain a broad range of perspectives from early to middle childhood.

### ***Data Collection Techniques***

To obtain a rich and triangulated understanding of children's narrative preferences, three complementary methods were used:

#### **1. Observation**

Both non-participant and participatory observations were carried out during reading sessions to document children's engagement, visual attention, verbal responses, and emotional expressions toward various narrative genres.

#### **2. Semi-Structured Interviews**

Individual interviews were conducted informally using open-ended prompts such as "Which story do you like the most?" and "What makes this story interesting to you?". Interviews were audio-recorded with child assent and parental consent, then transcribed verbatim.

#### **3. Closed-Ended Questionnaire**

A child-friendly questionnaire with visual icons representing different narrative types (e.g., folktales, friendship stories, inspirational global stories, fantasy) was administered. Although closed-ended, the questionnaire served as a supportive tool within the qualitative design by validating observational and interview data and identifying general preference patterns. Its quasi-quantitative format strengthened triangulation without shifting the study away from a qualitative orientation.

The study adhered to ethical standards for research involving minors. Written parental consent and verbal child assent were obtained for all participants. Confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing children's names and limiting access to audio recordings and transcripts. All procedures were approved by the community leadership and aligned with child-protection protocols.

The researcher acknowledges their positionality as an adult outsider to the children's cultural and community context. Reflexive notes were maintained throughout the research process to minimize bias, ensure respectful interpretation of children's perspectives, and acknowledge the influence of the researcher's background during data collection and analysis.

**Data Analysis**

The Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. First, observational notes, interview transcripts, and questionnaire results were manually coded. Codes were then grouped into preliminary categories based on (1) narrative themes, (2) character types, and (3) cultural elements. An iterative analytic process was conducted to refine and consolidate categories.

To enhance trustworthiness, coding decisions were revisited multiple times, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion between the researcher and an external qualitative research advisor. Member checking was conducted with Bevak Pintar Community facilitators to verify thematic accuracy, contextual relevance, and cultural appropriateness of the interpretations.

**Results**

**Overview of Narrative Preferences**

The findings indicate that participating children demonstrated clear preferences for four main narrative types. These preferences were shaped by their cultural identities, lived experiences, and visual engagement with the storybooks. Percentages in Table 1 were derived from the closed-ended questionnaire and further triangulated through observations and interview responses to ensure accuracy.

Table 1. Papuan Children's Preferences of Narrative Types

Narrative Type	Description	Percentage of Preference (%)
Papuan Folktales	Stories based on local myths, legends, and indigenous wisdom	35%
Cross-Cultural Friendship Stories	Narratives involving intercultural friendships and cooperation	25%
Inspirational Global Stories	Stories of children from other parts of the world overcoming challenges	20%
Culturally Blended Fantasy Stories	Imaginative stories combining Papuan elements with global fantasy features	20%

**Engagement with Papuan Folktales**

Papuan folktales were the most preferred narrative type. Children displayed strong emotional resonance with the familiar landscapes, character names, and cultural values embedded in the stories. Observations showed increased attentiveness, active retelling, and enthusiastic reactions. One child remarked, “*I know this place... it feels like my village,*” highlighting the sense of cultural connection. The inclusion of rivers, forests, and Indigenous characters reinforced a sense of belonging and pride.

***Interest in Cross-Cultural Friendship Stories***

Cross-cultural friendship stories were also highly appreciated. Children expressed curiosity toward characters from different ethnic or national backgrounds, especially when the stories emphasized kindness, cooperation, and respect. Interview responses revealed comments such as, *“Even if they are different, they can still be friends,”* indicating the children’s developing intercultural awareness. This narrative type encouraged reflections on diversity while affirming shared values across cultures.

***Responses to Inspirational Global Stories***

Inspirational narratives about children from Africa, Latin America, and other global contexts captured children’s interest, though to a slightly lesser extent. These stories were admired for themes of perseverance, courage, and social responsibility. Children often expressed aspirational sentiments, such as *“I want to be brave like her,”* or *“He helps his friends like we do.”* Such responses suggest that global stories supported moral understanding and strengthened empathy.

***Fantasy Stories and Imaginative Appeal***

Fantasy stories that integrated Papuan mythology, such as references to the goddess Dema or iconic birds of paradise, with imaginative elements like outer space or magical realms were notably well-received. Children enjoyed the excitement of fantasy while appreciating subtle cultural familiarity within the narrative. Observational data showed heightened enthusiasm, with children frequently pointing to illustrations and asking questions such as, *“Can birds of paradise really fly to the stars?”*

***Visual Representation and Story Format***

Across all categories, visual representation significantly influenced engagement. Children preferred books featuring vibrant illustrations, expressive faces, and clear typography. Visuals supported comprehension for younger or emerging readers and strengthened emotional involvement. Many children responded positively to characters who resembled them, with one child noting, *“She looks like me, that’s why I like this story.”*

***Discussion***

The findings of this study underscore that culturally resonant and visually engaging stories play a central role in fostering meaningful literacy experiences among young Papuan readers. Rather than simply confirming the appeal of local narratives, the results illustrate how indigenous representation functions as an essential pedagogical tool. The strong preference for Papuan folktales supports arguments by Febriana, Nurkamto, Rochsantiningasih, and Muhtia (2018), who contend that culturally embedded stories enhance comprehension by drawing on

familiar symbols, landscapes, and social values. These narratives deepen emotional engagement and affirm children's identity, demonstrating that cultural relevance is not merely additive but foundational to early literacy development.

The children's positive responses to cross-cultural friendship stories further reveal their openness to intercultural encounters. This resonates with the findings of Méndez, Bitetti, and Perry (2023), who highlight inclusive narratives as catalysts for building empathy and intercultural understanding. In this study, such stories enabled children to explore difference within a safe, relational framework, suggesting that multicultural picture books can promote respect and social cohesion even in early childhood contexts.

Meanwhile, the interest in inspirational global stories reflects a readiness to engage with universal moral themes such as courage, perseverance, and solidarity. This supports Poedjiastutie (2018) assertion that exposure to global narratives can nurture moral literacy and expand children's ethical horizons. The children's identification with characters overcoming adversity indicates that distant contexts do not impede moral connection; rather, they invite broader reflections on fairness and humanity.

The popularity of fantasy stories that weave Papuan cultural elements into imaginative global motifs further highlights the potential of hybrid narratives. As noted by Fitriadi, Sinaga, and Muhammad (2024), such stories stimulate creativity while grounding children in their cultural heritage. These findings suggest that imaginative storytelling can serve as a bridge between tradition and innovation, making indigenous knowledge more accessible and appealing to young readers.

A key contribution of this study lies in its emphasis on visual literacy. Consistent with Hakim (2015), the findings confirm that inclusive and vibrant illustrations not only support comprehension but also enhance enjoyment, especially for emerging or struggling readers. Visual cues help anchor children's understanding of characters, setting, and emotion, reinforcing the importance of multimodal texts in early literacy instruction. The preference for characters that resemble children's own physical features and clothing further indicates that visual representation plays an important role in identity affirmation.

Collectively, these insights carry both local and broader theoretical implications. Locally, the findings highlight the need for literacy curricula in Papua to prioritize culturally responsive narratives that reflect children lived realities while gradually expanding their exposure to intercultural and global themes. Such an approach can strengthen identity formation and promote inclusive social attitudes. Theoretically, the study adds to the growing body of multicultural literacy research by illustrating how indigenous children negotiate cultural familiarity and global imagination, demonstrating that multicultural engagement is possible without diminishing cultural specificity.

For the publishing sector, particularly in Eastern Indonesia, the results point to the urgency of producing high-quality children's books developed in collaboration with local storytellers, illustrators, and educators. Increasing the availability of culturally grounded yet globally connected storybooks can help address longstanding gaps in indigenous representation within mainstream children's literature.

This study is limited by its small sample size and its focus on a single community learning center, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the selection of storybooks may have influenced children's preferences, and the short research duration captured only immediate engagement rather than long-term reading trajectories.

Future studies could adopt longitudinal designs to examine how culturally resonant and intercultural narratives influence literacy development over time. Comparative research across different Papuan regions, or between indigenous and non-indigenous communities would further illuminate variations in narrative engagement. Exploring digital or multimedia storytelling formats may also offer valuable insights into how visual and interactive modalities support comprehension and cultural learning.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Papuan children in the Bevak Pintar Community exhibit diverse narrative preferences that encompass both culturally grounded and globally oriented stories. Their strong interest in Papuan folktales affirms the essential role of culturally resonant narratives in fostering identity, belonging, and emotional connection to texts. At the same time, the children's appreciation of cross-cultural friendship stories, inspirational global narratives, and culturally blended fantasy tales highlights their openness to broader worldviews and universal values that transcend cultural boundaries. Visual elements also emerged as a critical component of engagement, supporting comprehension and enhancing children's overall reading experience.

These findings underscore the importance of providing indigenous children with inclusive, culturally responsive, and visually appealing reading materials that integrate local heritage with global perspectives. By aligning reading content with children lived experiences while also exposing them to diverse cultural contexts, literacy programs can nurture both identity affirmation and intercultural competence from an early age.

The study offers meaningful implications for educators, literacy practitioners, and content developers in Papua and beyond. Schools and community organizations are encouraged to collaborate in designing storytelling activities that allow children to listen, respond to, and create stories drawn from both local and international traditions. Partnerships among authors, illustrators, teachers, and local communities can further support the production of high-quality children's literature that reflects the cultural hybridity and evolving identities of Papuan children. Additionally,

teacher professional development should emphasize effective strategies for integrating multicultural literature into dialogic and reflective classroom practices, thereby enriching early literacy experiences and promoting critical, empathetic young readers.

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