

Picture Story Books as a Medium to Improve Analytical Skills in Islamic Religious Education Learning at SMP Negeri 2 Meulaboh

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the effectiveness of picture storybooks as a learning medium to enhance students' analytical skills in Islamic Religious Education at SMP Negeri 2 Meulaboh. The research employed Classroom Action Research (CAR) conducted in two cycles, each comprising planning, action, observation, and reflection stages. The research subjects were 30 eighth-grade students. Data were collected through analytical skill tests, observation sheets, and interviews. Results showed a significant improvement in students' analytical abilities following the intervention. In the preliminary stage, only 46.7% of students achieved the minimum mastery criteria. This increased to 70% in Cycle I and reached 86.7% in Cycle II. The data indicate that picture storybooks are effective in stimulating critical and reflective thinking, particularly in interpreting moral messages, drawing conclusions, and linking religious stories to real-life situations. The visual narrative elements of the media encouraged student engagement and supported group discussions, making the learning experience more meaningful. Thus, picture storybooks can be considered a viable alternative learning strategy to develop higher-order thinking skills in religious education, especially in environments with limited access to digital tools.

Keywords: Picture storybooks, analytical skills, Islamic Religious Education

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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, education is increasingly oriented toward the development of higher-order thinking skills, such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. These skills are essential to help students navigate the complexity of modern life, make informed decisions, and apply learned knowledge in real-life situations (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). In the context of Islamic Religious Education (IRE), analytical skills are crucial in helping students not only to understand religious texts but also to reflect critically on their meanings and implications. However, Islamic Religious Education in many secondary schools remains predominantly rote-based, relying heavily on memorization and passive reception of information, with little opportunity for students to develop critical or analytical thinking skills (Hasanah, 2021).

This condition is also evident at SMP Negeri 2 Meulaboh, where teaching and learning processes in IRE tend to focus on theoretical understanding rather than critical engagement. Observations and interviews with teachers revealed that students often struggle to analyze moral messages, interpret verses, or relate Islamic values to their

personal experiences. This lack of analytical competence is not only a pedagogical concern but also affects students' spiritual development, as they may not fully internalize or apply Islamic teachings meaningfully. Therefore, it is urgent to explore learning models and media that can foster students' analytical skills in IRE.

Various studies suggest that the use of appropriate educational media can bridge the gap between abstract content and student understanding. Instructional media, particularly those that integrate visual elements, have proven effective in increasing engagement, comprehension, and critical reflection among learners (Mayer, 2009). Picture storybooks, which combine narrative texts and images, are among the media that have shown strong pedagogical potential. They provide contextual and imaginative frameworks that help students process information more deeply (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001). In Islamic education, picture stories featuring prophets, Islamic figures, or moral parables can serve as reflective tools for students to analyze values, compare contexts, and derive lessons applicable to their lives (Dewi, Anggreani, & Imtihana, 2022).

Several previous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of visual narrative media in religious instruction. For instance, Amalia, Andriani, and Firmansyah (2021) developed illustrated religious storybooks for elementary students and found a significant improvement in both comprehension and character development. Similarly, Niam and Rahmawati (2025) explored the integration of Islamic storytelling in madrasah curricula and noted positive impacts on students' ability to interpret religious messages. However, most of these studies were conducted at the primary school level or focused on general learning outcomes rather than specifically targeting analytical skill development. The question remains whether similar interventions would be equally effective at the junior high school level, particularly in enhancing students' cognitive engagement with religious content.

This research seeks to address that gap by investigating the use of picture storybooks to improve analytical thinking skills in Islamic Religious Education among junior secondary students. Picture storybooks are particularly promising because they stimulate multiple dimensions of learning. Visually, they engage students through images that depict realistic or symbolic scenarios. Textually, they present narratives that can be interpreted on various levels—literal, moral, and contextual. Cognitively, they invite students to ask questions, draw conclusions, and consider different perspectives, which are the foundational processes of analysis (Zipes, 2012). When integrated into a cooperative learning setting, such as small group discussions, these storybooks can further enhance peer-to-peer learning and shared interpretation.

In addition to their pedagogical benefits, picture storybooks are accessible and practical for classroom use, especially in resource-limited environments such as Meulaboh. Unlike digital tools that require electricity, internet access, or specific technical skills, printed storybooks can be easily produced and implemented by teachers with basic training. This makes them a sustainable option for rural or semi-urban schools, where digital inequality is still a significant barrier to educational innovation (Latchem, 2018). Furthermore, storybooks can be locally contextualized, using themes, characters, and moral dilemmas that resonate with students' everyday experiences and cultural background.

This study is guided by constructivist learning theory, which posits that students learn best when they actively construct knowledge through interaction with meaningful content and their social environment (Vygotsky, 1978). The use of storybooks aligns with this perspective by providing open-ended narratives that students can engage with, interpret, and analyze collaboratively. According to Bruner (1990), storytelling is not only a means of conveying information but also a powerful cognitive tool for organizing experience and generating meaning. By engaging students in the co-construction of meaning through discussion and reflection, picture storybooks can foster deeper understanding and critical thinking in religious education.

The research aims to explore the effectiveness of picture storybooks as a medium to enhance analytical skills in Islamic Religious Education among eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 2 Meulaboh. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) describe students' baseline analytical abilities in IRE; (2) implement picture storybooks in a classroom setting across two intervention cycles; (3) assess the improvement in students' analytical performance following the interventions; and (4) identify the factors that support or hinder the effectiveness of this media in enhancing analytical thinking. It is expected that the study will contribute practical insights for teachers and curriculum developers in designing more engaging and reflective approaches to Islamic education.

By addressing the limitations of traditional instruction and introducing a medium that supports visual literacy, critical reflection, and moral reasoning, this research contributes to the growing body of work that rethinks how Islamic Religious Education is delivered in Indonesian schools. It aligns with national education goals that emphasize the development of independent, critical, and morally upright learners (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2020). Furthermore, it responds to the urgent need for innovative pedagogical strategies that are both culturally relevant and pedagogically sound.

METHODS

This study employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design aimed at improving students' analytical skills in Islamic Religious Education through the integration of picture storybooks as a learning medium. Classroom Action Research was chosen due to its cyclical, reflective, and practical nature, allowing teachers to examine and enhance teaching practices within the natural context of their own classrooms (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). This method is particularly suitable for addressing real-time classroom problems and testing innovative pedagogical strategies directly with students.

The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Meulaboh, located in Aceh Barat, Indonesia, during the second semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. The participants of the study were 30 eighth-grade students, aged 13 to 14 years, selected based on their accessibility and suitability for the implementation of picture storybooks. The class was chosen because of its representativeness of the broader student population and its observed struggles in applying analytical thinking during previous Islamic Religious Education lessons.

The CAR design used in this study followed two main cycles, with each cycle comprising four stages: planning, action, observation, and reflection, consistent with the model proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005). Each cycle spanned two weeks, with a total research duration of one month. Prior to Cycle I, a pre-test was conducted to measure students' baseline analytical skills in Islamic Religious Education. After each cycle, a post-test was administered to evaluate student progress. Additionally, qualitative data from observation and interviews were collected throughout the research to support and interpret the quantitative results.

In the planning stage, the researchers designed instructional materials including a series of three picture storybooks adapted from Islamic moral stories relevant to the curriculum, such as stories of the prophets, companions, and local Islamic legends. The stories were developed to include clear moral dilemmas, visual prompts, and open-ended interpretations to promote analytical thinking. Each story was accompanied by analytical task questions, discussion prompts, and guiding worksheets. In addition to the learning materials, observation sheets and semi-structured interview guides were also prepared.

The picture storybooks were validated by experts in Islamic education and instructional media to ensure their appropriateness in terms of content accuracy, language clarity, illustration quality, and potential to stimulate analytical skills. This validation process followed expert judgment techniques as suggested by Fraenkel and Wallen (2012), ensuring the instructional tools met pedagogical and content standards. During

the action stage of each cycle, the teacher (also the main researcher) implemented the picture storybook-based lessons during the regularly scheduled Islamic Religious Education classes. The instructional process was conducted in small-group settings to facilitate interaction and peer discussion. Students first read the picture storybook collaboratively, then identified key moral issues, interpreted character actions, and connected the stories to real-life scenarios. These activities were guided by the analytical worksheets and class discussions facilitated by the teacher.

In Cycle I, the focus was on familiarizing students with the storybooks and encouraging group interpretation. In Cycle II, enhancements were made based on reflection from Cycle I, such as allocating more time for discussion, providing more probing analytical questions, and improving the scaffolding strategies used by the teacher to guide deeper inquiry. During both cycles, observations were conducted using structured observation sheets to record student engagement, interaction, use of visual elements in analysis, and participation in discussions. Observers (assistant teachers) documented behavioral and cognitive indicators, such as how often students referred to images when interpreting messages, their ability to ask analytical questions, and the level of collaboration among peers.

In addition, the teacher kept field notes on classroom dynamics, challenges, and student reactions to the media. These qualitative observations provided essential context to understand how students responded to the instructional intervention beyond what could be measured by test scores alone. After each cycle, reflection meetings were conducted between the teacher-researcher and fellow educators to review the collected data, analyze outcomes, and identify necessary adjustments for the next cycle. The reflection included analyzing pre- and post-test results, reviewing observation data, and summarizing insights from student interviews. Informed by Elliott (1991), this reflection process enabled continuous improvement in instructional strategy and media use, aligning with the core purpose of action research as a practitioner-centered inquiry.

Three main instruments were employed to collect data: (1) analytical skills tests, (2) observation sheets, and (3) semi-structured interviews. The tests were developed based on Bloom's taxonomy, focusing on indicators such as identifying core themes, comparing values, and drawing logical conclusions (Krathwohl, 2002). These tests were administered before the intervention (pre-test), after Cycle I, and after Cycle II.

Observation sheets were used to capture student behavior and engagement during the learning process, focusing on indicators such as visual referencing, verbal reasoning, group discussion participation, and level of critical questioning. Interviews were conducted with selected students and the teacher after each cycle to gather qualitative data about their experiences, perceptions of the learning process, and challenges faced. Interview data were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically to support the interpretation of quantitative results.

Data analysis was conducted through both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative data from pre-tests and post-tests were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The results were interpreted in terms of students' achievement of the minimum mastery criteria (KKM) set by the school, and the percentage of students meeting or exceeding this threshold in each cycle was calculated. Comparative analysis was conducted between cycles to determine the level of improvement.

Qualitative data from observations and interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), where emerging patterns and insights were coded, categorized, and interpreted. This allowed for an in-depth understanding of students' learning processes, their interaction with the media, and the overall classroom dynamics that influenced the learning outcomes. To ensure data credibility and validity, triangulation was applied by comparing and corroborating results from different data sources (tests, observations, and interviews) as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Member checks were also conducted during interviews to confirm the accuracy of the responses. Ethical considerations were upheld throughout the research, including

informed consent, anonymity of student participants, and respect for cultural and religious sensitivity in content delivery.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the Classroom Action Research (CAR) conducted in two cycles aimed at improving students' analytical skills in Islamic Religious Education through the use of picture storybooks. The data obtained from pre-tests, post-tests, classroom observations, and student interviews were analyzed and triangulated to assess the impact of the intervention. The results are presented chronologically, starting from the baseline condition, followed by improvements observed in Cycle I and Cycle II.

Prior to the implementation of the intervention, a diagnostic test was administered to assess students' analytical skills in the context of Islamic Religious Education. The test was composed of questions that required students to interpret the moral messages in short religious stories, draw logical conclusions, and relate the messages to their own lives. The results showed that only 14 out of 30 students (46.7%) achieved the minimum mastery criteria (KKM) set at 70%. The remaining 16 students (53.3%) demonstrated difficulties in identifying key ideas, providing relevant examples, or justifying their interpretations with evidence from the stories.

Observations of classroom behavior during this stage confirmed that students were largely passive. They tended to listen without asking questions, and their responses to teacher prompts were mostly factual or literal rather than analytical. Furthermore, when asked to interpret a Quranic verse or a hadith, most students provided memorized explanations rather than personal or contextual reflections. These findings echoed previous studies that have identified limitations in student-centered thinking in traditional Islamic education environments (Suyadi & Sutrisno, 2020).

Interviews with students revealed that they often found the material abstract and disconnected from their daily experiences. Many expressed that the texts used in class lacked emotional or visual engagement, making it difficult to understand the relevance of the content. These responses aligned with Mayer's (2009) cognitive theory of multimedia learning, which emphasizes that students learn better when information is presented through both visual and verbal channels.

In the first cycle of intervention, the teacher introduced picture storybooks as the main instructional medium for two weekly Islamic Religious Education sessions. The storybooks used were adapted from Islamic narratives, such as the story of Prophet Ibrahim's test of faith and a contemporary story about honesty in business. Each story included rich illustrations, moral dilemmas, and open-ended questions at the end. Students were divided into small groups and encouraged to read the stories collaboratively, discuss the underlying messages, and answer analytical questions provided on worksheets. The teacher facilitated by prompting students to justify their interpretations and connect the stories with personal or social contexts.

After the first cycle, a post-test was administered, and results showed a significant improvement. A total of 21 out of 30 students (70%) achieved the minimum mastery score, indicating an increase of 23.3% from the baseline. Observation data also reflected a change in student behavior. Students began referencing the illustrations during discussion, asking more questions, and showing interest in interpreting character motivations. One group debated the intentions of a character who lied to protect someone else, showcasing a deeper engagement with moral ambiguity.

Despite these improvements, several challenges remained. Some students struggled to express their thoughts clearly, particularly in written responses. Others relied too heavily on the illustrations without fully analyzing the textual content. Moreover, classroom management during group work needed refinement, as some groups were less collaborative than others. These reflections guided the planning of the second cycle with

targeted adjustments, such as improving question scaffolding and assigning clear group roles to ensure more balanced participation.

In Cycle II, the intervention was refined to address the gaps identified in the first cycle. Additional time was allocated for group discussions, and the teacher used guiding questions with progressively deeper levels of inquiry. For example, students were first asked to summarize the story, then to identify the moral conflict, and finally to evaluate the actions of characters based on Islamic values. Visual prompts such as symbolic images were used to encourage interpretation beyond the literal meaning of the text.

The storybooks used in this cycle included more emotionally resonant themes, such as justice, forgiveness, and courage, which were drawn from both classical Islamic tales and local narratives. The inclusion of culturally familiar contexts made the stories more relatable to students, aligning with the findings of Zipes (2012) that cultural relevance enhances student identification with narrative content.

At the end of Cycle II, a final post-test was administered. The results showed that 26 out of 30 students (86.7%) reached or exceeded the mastery criteria. This indicated a cumulative improvement of 40% from the initial pre-test results. Additionally, students who were previously passive began to actively contribute during discussions and demonstrated improved written analysis in their worksheets.

Observations during Cycle II revealed a significant shift in classroom dynamics. Students not only engaged with the visual content but began to critically question it. For instance, one student questioned whether the image of a character wearing a crown truly reflected humility as described in the text, prompting a discussion on visual symbolism and religious virtues. This level of engagement reflected a growth in metacognitive awareness, as students began monitoring their own understanding and reasoning processes (Schraw & Dennison, 1994). Interviews conducted at the end of Cycle II confirmed these behavioral changes. Many students reported that the stories helped them “see” the values they were learning about, making it easier to understand and reflect. One student noted, “I used to just memorize the hadith, but now I can explain what it means and how it applies to my family.” Such testimonials highlight the transformative potential of integrating visual narratives into religious instruction.

Furthermore, teachers reported increased motivation and classroom harmony, as students became more respectful of differing viewpoints during discussions. This aligns with constructivist theories that emphasize social interaction and dialogue in developing higher-order thinking skills (Vygotsky, 1978). The data across both cycles confirmed that the use of picture storybooks significantly enhanced students’ analytical skills in Islamic Religious Education. There was a consistent upward trend in the number of students achieving learning mastery, with a total increase of 40 percentage points from the baseline to the final test. Observational and interview data further corroborated these findings, demonstrating increased student engagement, interpretive ability, and personal connection to the material.

While the intervention was generally successful, it also revealed the need for continuous teacher facilitation, well-structured group work, and culturally relevant story content to maximize its effectiveness. The findings support the integration of visual narrative media in religious education, particularly in contexts where traditional instruction has failed to promote critical thinking.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the use of picture storybooks significantly improves students’ analytical skills in the context of Islamic Religious Education (IRE). This improvement aligns with existing theories in cognitive psychology and pedagogy, particularly those emphasizing the role of multimodal learning and constructivist teaching approaches. According to Mayer’s (2009) Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning, combining visual and verbal inputs helps students process information more effectively,

leading to deeper comprehension and higher-level thinking. The results of this study—showing a 40% increase in students achieving mastery—reflect this theory in action. The visual narrative elements of the storybooks functioned as cognitive supports, helping students decode abstract religious messages and relate them to familiar experiences.

Moreover, the observed development of critical discussion and interpretation during classroom interactions supports Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in the construction of knowledge. By engaging in group analysis of moral dilemmas presented in the storybooks, students participated in scaffolded learning that encouraged the co-construction of meaning. These group discussions were particularly effective in prompting students to justify their opinions, question assumptions, and refine their interpretations—key components of analytical thinking.

When compared to previous studies, the results of this research are consistent with the work of Amalia et al. (2021), who found that illustrated religious texts enhance both understanding and character development among elementary students. However, the current study extends these findings by focusing specifically on analytical skill development at the junior secondary level. It addresses a gap in existing research where most media interventions in IRE focus on motivation or moral development but not on higher-order thinking skills. This supports the argument made by Suyadi and Sutrisno (2020) that Islamic education must move beyond transmission of doctrine and begin cultivating students' ability to reflect, analyze, and contextualize values.

Another key point of comparison is the study by Dewi et al. (2022), which emphasized the value of narrative media in moral education. Dewi's research focused on elementary school settings and showed that storytelling helps children internalize moral concepts. This study, in contrast, reveals that narrative combined with visual literacy—in the form of picture storybooks—also facilitates analytical engagement, not merely moral absorption. In other words, students were not only learning what values to adopt, but also how to evaluate moral choices, compare character actions, and relate lessons to societal norms and current events.

The increase in student engagement observed throughout the two cycles also supports findings by Zipes (2012), who argues that culturally relevant and emotionally resonant stories can foster empathy and intellectual curiosity in adolescents. The use of stories with local cultural relevance—such as Acehese legends adapted with Islamic values—helped students see themselves within the narrative, enhancing their emotional connection to the content. This emotional engagement, in turn, seemed to stimulate more reflective and critical responses. When students feel personally connected to content, they are more likely to invest cognitively in its analysis (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001).

From a pedagogical perspective, this study offers meaningful implications for classroom practice. It shows that Islamic Religious Education can be made more interactive, reflective, and student-centered through the integration of visual narratives. Traditionally, IRE has been delivered through expository methods, often with limited room for discussion or interpretation. This mode of instruction may limit students' ability to internalize and critically engage with the subject matter. The findings from this study suggest that storybooks—when designed with pedagogical intent—can serve as powerful tools for fostering independent thought, moral reasoning, and text analysis, particularly among young adolescents.

Furthermore, the collaborative learning model used in this study promoted inclusive participation, with students of varying ability levels contributing to group discussions. This aligns with the benefits of cooperative learning strategies described by Johnson and Johnson (1999), which include improved academic achievement, enhanced social interaction, and better retention of knowledge. In this case, group analysis of picture storybooks allowed students to practice listening, negotiating meaning, and explaining their viewpoints—skills that are essential not only in school, but also in broader civic and religious life.

However, it is important to note that the successful implementation of such media-based instruction requires teacher readiness and support. As noted by Latchem (2018), the introduction of alternative educational media often fails when teachers lack the training or confidence to use them effectively. In this study, the researcher—also acting as the classroom teacher—had a strong understanding of both the content and the pedagogy, and was thus able to scaffold student learning effectively. For broader adoption of this approach, professional development initiatives would be essential to prepare teachers in designing or adapting picture storybooks and integrating them into reflective classroom dialogue.

This study also contributes to the national discourse on curriculum reform in religious education. The Ministry of Education in Indonesia has emphasized the importance of developing critical, independent, and morally upright learners (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2020). Yet, curriculum implementation at the school level often falls short of this goal, with many classrooms still relying on rote-based instruction. The findings of this study offer a practical strategy for aligning instructional practice with these national objectives. By equipping students with analytical tools to interpret religious narratives, teachers help students become more reflective, ethical decision-makers.

Limitations of the study must also be acknowledged. The research was conducted in a single school with a relatively small sample size, which may limit generalizability. Additionally, while the study successfully measured improvements in analytical skills, it did not explore long-term retention or transferability of these skills to other subjects or real-life situations. Future studies could investigate whether students maintain their analytical competencies beyond the classroom context, or whether similar methods could be applied effectively in other religious or moral education frameworks.

Despite these limitations, the study makes a meaningful contribution to both academic research and educational practice. It demonstrates the pedagogical power of visual storytelling in enhancing not only engagement but also deep analytical processing in a subject often considered rigid or dogmatic. It also repositions students as active interpreters of religious knowledge, capable of engaging with complex moral and spiritual questions. This shift has the potential to transform Islamic Religious Education into a more dialogic, dynamic, and student-centered learning experience. In conclusion, this study validates the use of picture storybooks as a culturally relevant and pedagogically effective medium for improving analytical thinking in Islamic Religious Education. It confirms the synergy between visual narratives, collaborative learning, and reflective instruction in fostering higher-order thinking. As educational institutions strive to cultivate critical and ethical citizens, such innovations in pedagogy are not only timely but necessary.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the integration of picture storybooks into the teaching of Islamic Religious Education significantly enhances students' analytical skills. Conducted through two cycles of Classroom Action Research, the study observed a notable improvement in students' ability to interpret, evaluate, and contextualize Islamic moral narratives. The baseline data showed only 46.7% of students met the minimum mastery standard, but this figure rose to 70% in Cycle I and reached 86.7% in Cycle II. These gains indicate that the use of visual narrative media fosters deeper engagement and encourages critical thinking processes, particularly when students are given the opportunity to discuss, reflect, and draw conclusions collaboratively. The picture storybooks used in this study acted not merely as learning aids but as cognitive and emotional stimuli, allowing students to connect abstract religious values to real-life situations. Their effectiveness lies in their capacity to combine visual cues with moral content, providing a rich and accessible platform for reflective learning. Moreover, the group discussion format created a supportive environment in which students could explore multiple perspectives and

refine their interpretations. These findings affirm that Islamic Religious Education, when taught using student-centered and creative approaches, can contribute not only to knowledge acquisition but also to the development of higher-order thinking.

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