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# Exploring the Emotional Responses of First-Grade Students at an Islamic Elementary School During Reading Activities with Leveled Picture Storybooks

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**Abstract**
This study explores the emotional responses of first-grade students at an Islamic elementary school during reading activities using leveled picture storybooks. It examines the verbal and nonverbal forms of these responses, the types of emotions expressed and the dominant emotions, and the relationship between emotional responses and students' cognitive and affective engagement in understanding the story. The study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with an exploratory design. Eighteen first-grade students were purposively selected as participants. Data were collected through observations during independent reading, brief post-reading interviews, and documentation. Data credibility was supported through method triangulation, and the data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model. Emotional responses were expressed through spontaneous utterances, questions, comments, and story retelling, as well as facial expressions, body movements, focused attention, and interactions with illustrations. Positive emotions were most prevalent, involving 14 students (77.78%), followed by neutral emotions (3 students; 16.67%) and mild negative emotions (1 student; 5.55%). Positive emotional responses co-occurred with high cognitive and affective engagement, enabling students to understand the story, connect it to personal experiences, and retell it coherently. These findings indicate that leveled picture storybooks can support students' emotional, cognitive, and affective engagement in early literacy activities.

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## Introduction

Reading is an important part of the learning process in elementary education. In the early grades, reading provides students with an initial experience of engaging with text, images, characters, and storylines. This experience is related to the development of reading comprehension as well as students' affective experiences as they interact with reading materials (Fadila et al., 2025). Leveled picture storybooks can support reading because their texts are adapted to students' reading abilities, while illustrations help clarify the meaning of the story. Illustrations, simple storylines, and characters familiar to students can help them understand the text and express their emotions (Budianto et al., 2024; Mutiasih et al., 2021).

Reading activities can also elicit a range of emotional responses from first-grade students. These responses may be observed in students' words, comments, questions, facial expressions, body movements, or attention to the illustrations and characters in a story. Emotional responses offer one way to understand how students make sense of their learning experiences (Apriliya & Cyntia, 2023; Nadia et al., 2023). While reading leveled picture storybooks, students may respond to the characters, plot, conflict, or illustrations in the book. These responses may be verbal or nonverbal and may occur throughout the reading activity.


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Picture storybooks have been widely used in literacy research in elementary education. Previous studies indicate that picture storybooks can improve students' reading interest and comprehension (Himawati et al., 2024; Paramita et al., 2022). They can also promote character values and empathy through storytelling experiences that engage students' feelings (Mertami et al., 2023; Yugakisha et al., 2024). Other studies have found that picture storybooks used in instruction can increase students' active participation in reading and discussion (Nuralifah & Masyithoh, 2024). Stories that are relevant to students' lives may encourage deeper social and emotional engagement because students can connect the experiences in a story with their own (Jannah, 2025).

A review of previous studies shows that research on picture storybooks has focused mainly on reading skills, reading comprehension, reading interest, and character education. Picture storybooks have also been studied in relation to empathy and students' emotional engagement. However, students' emotional responses or expressions have rarely been the primary focus of observation and analysis during reading. Expressions such as laughter, awe, fear, spontaneous questions, and attention to illustrations have more often been treated as supplementary observations. Yet these expressions may indicate students' emotional engagement in literacy activities.

This gap is particularly relevant for first-grade students at an Islamic elementary school (Madrasah Ibtidaiyah). At this early stage of development, students still need concrete learning experiences and visual support. Leveled picture storybooks allow students to engage with reading materials suited to their reading abilities and to focus on characters, events, and plotlines. Such interaction may elicit natural emotional responses during reading. The madrasah setting is also relevant for examining these experiences because students learn in an environment that reinforces social and religious values.

In response to this gap, this study focuses on exploring the emotional responses of first-grade students at an Islamic elementary school during reading activities with leveled picture storybooks. The responses were observed and analyzed in terms of their verbal and nonverbal forms and the types of emotions expressed, including the dominant emotions. Their relationship with students' cognitive and affective engagement in understanding the story was also examined. Observations were designed to record students' emotional responses systematically and were supplemented with reflective notes and simple questions to capture their emotional experiences during reading.

This study addresses the need to understand how students' emotional responses arise during reading activities with leveled picture storybooks, which emotions are expressed and predominate, and how these responses relate to students' cognitive and affective engagement in understanding the story. Accordingly, this study aims to describe the verbal and nonverbal emotional responses of first-grade students during such reading activities, identify the emotions expressed and the dominant emotions, and analyze the relationship between students' emotional responses and their cognitive and affective engagement in understanding the story.

## Research Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to describe and understand in depth the emotional responses of first-grade students at an Islamic elementary school as they read leveled picture storybooks in a natural learning setting. The study was conducted at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Tahfidzul Qur'an Ma'arif Nahdlatul Ulama in Madiun City, Indonesia. The participants were 18 first-grade students. Primary data were obtained


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through observations during reading activities, while supplementary data were obtained from the classroom teacher, instructional documents, and the teacher's reflective notes (Danuri & Maisaroh, 2019).

The research instruments consisted of an observation sheet and a reflective journal. The observation sheet was used to record students' verbal and nonverbal emotional responses during reading, including their expressions, comments, questions, body movements, and attention to the story and illustrations. It was also used to identify the types and prevalence of emotions and the relationship between emotional responses and students' cognitive and affective engagement. Cognitive engagement was observed through students' ability to retell the story, identify characters and events, answer questions, and connect the story to personal experiences. Affective engagement was observed through students' attention, interest, expressions, and participation while reading.

Data was collected through direct observation, interviews, and documentation. Students' responses were observed as they read leveled picture storybooks. Brief interviews using open-ended questions were conducted to obtain information about students' opinions and feelings after reading. Documentation provided supplementary data, including photographs or videos of the activities, teacher notes, and students' work. Data credibility was established through source and method triangulation by comparing observations, teacher reflections, interviews, and documentation (Samsu, 2021).

Data were analyzed interactively using the Miles and Huberman model, which involves data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification (Sofiyana et al., 2022). Observation, interview, and teacher-reflection data were organized according to the forms of emotional response, types of emotion, situations that prompted a response, and the relationship between responses and cognitive and affective engagement. The data were then presented as narratives, matrices, and thematic descriptions to identify patterns in students' emotional responses.

The research process comprised preparation, data collection, analysis, and conclusion drawing. Preparation involved coordination with the teacher and the madrasah. Data was collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. They were then analyzed interactively to identify patterns in emotional responses and their relationship to students' cognitive and affective engagement.

## Research Findings and Discussion

The findings show that reading leveled picture storybooks elicited verbal and nonverbal emotional responses from first-grade students. These responses arose as students engaged with characters, illustrations, plotlines, and events in the stories. The verbal and nonverbal responses observed during reading are presented below:

**Table 1.** Students' Verbal and Nonverbal Emotional Responses During Reading

| Response Form | Indicator | Number of Students | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Verbal | Expressed happiness verbally | 18 | 100% |
| | Showed curiosity | 16 | 88,89% |
| | Retold the story | 15 | 83,33% |
| | Showed empathy for a character | 14 | 77,78% |
| | Connected the story to personal experience | 12 | 66,67% |


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| Response Form | Indicator | Number of Students | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Nonverbal | Asked questions about the story | 11 | 61,11% |
| | Smiled | 18 | 100% |
| | Focused on the illustrations | 16 | 88,89% |
| | Displayed bright eyes / showed enthusiasm | 15 | 83,33% |
| | Laughed | 12 | 66,67% |
| | Imitated expressions or movements | 10 | 55,56% |
| | Showed sadness / concern for a character | 5 | 27,78% |
| | Showed momentary confusion | 4 | 22,22% |

The data show that positive emotional responses were prominent in both forms of response. All students expressed happiness verbally and smiled during reading. Curiosity, focused attention to illustrations, and enthusiasm were also observed in most students. This pattern suggests that interaction with leveled picture storybooks provided stimuli that attracted first-grade students' attention. The combination of text and illustrations helped students obtain information about characters, settings, and the sequence of events. This is consistent with the use of picture storybooks, which combine visual and verbal elements to support students' understanding of a story (Mertami et al., 2023; Sari & Yustiana, 2021).

Verbal responses such as curiosity, questions, retelling, empathy, and connections between the story and personal experience suggest that emotional responses arose alongside meaning-making. Curious students asked questions or commented on the story, while students who showed empathy responded to the characters' situations. The ability to connect a story with personal experience also suggests that emotional engagement with a story may encourage students to relate information in the text to what they already know.

Nonverbal responses offer insight into forms of student engagement that may not be expressed verbally. Focused attention to illustrations and expressions of enthusiasm show that visual information plays an important role in students' interaction with stories. Changes in facial expressions, body movements, and attention to illustrations occurred as students responded to particular characters or events. Some students showed momentary confusion when they encountered unfamiliar vocabulary. They then paused, repeated the word, or attended to the illustration to help them understand that part of the story. These findings suggest that nonverbal responses among beginning readers can indicate student engagement during reading comprehension.

These response patterns were also reflected in the emotions that predominated during reading. The dominant emotions identified among the 18 students are presented below:

**Table 2.** Students' Dominant Emotions During Reading

| Dominant Emotion | Number of Students | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Happiness | 8 | 44,44% |
| Enthusiasm | 5 | 27,78% |
| Curiosity | 3 | 16,67% |
| Empathy | 2 | 11,11% |
| Total | 18 | 100% |


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The data show that happiness was the most frequently observed dominant emotion, followed by enthusiasm, curiosity, and empathy. The prevalence of positive emotions was associated with students' interest in the illustrations, characters, and continuation of the story. Interviews indicated that students felt happy and curious because they were interested in the pictures and characters and wanted to know what would happen next. This suggests that the visual and narrative features of leveled storybooks can elicit positive emotional experiences during reading.

Mild negative emotions were also observed in the form of brief confusion, which arose when some students encountered unfamiliar vocabulary. This response did not always prevent students from following the story. Some tried to understand a word by rereading it, examining the illustration, or considering the story context. These findings indicate that emotional responses during reading are dynamic. Less pleasant emotions may arise when students encounter difficulties, but visual and narrative support can help them continue reading.

The predominance of positive emotions was also evident in the overall emotion categories. Fourteen students were categorized as displaying positive emotions, three as neutral, and one as displaying mild negative emotion. This pattern reinforces the finding that the reading experience in this study was generally characterized by happiness, enthusiasm, curiosity, and empathy. It is consistent with previous research showing that picture storybooks can support reading interest and provide experiences related to character development and empathy (Himawati et al., 2024; Mertami et al., 2023; Paramita et al., 2022; Yugakisha et al., 2024). The present study extends these findings by describing emotional patterns observed directly during reading among first-grade students.

The emotional responses observed during reading were also related to students' cognitive and affective engagement. Student engagement data are presented below:

**Table 3.** Students' Cognitive and Affective Engagement During Reading

| Engagement Aspect | Category | Number of Students | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cognitive | High | 15 | 83,33% |
| | Moderate | 3 | 16,67% |
| Affective | High | 16 | 88,89% |
| | Moderate | 2 | 11,11% |

The data shows that most students demonstrated high levels of cognitive and affective engagement. Cognitive engagement was evident in students' ability to retell the story, answer questions, observe illustrations, ask questions, and connect the story to personal experiences. Some students retold the story coherently in their own words. These activities indicate that students were understanding, remembering, and organizing information from the text.

Affective engagement was evident in students' attention, enthusiasm, expressions of happiness, empathy for characters, and interest in the story. Students who showed positive emotional responses tended to focus more closely on the story, actively examine illustrations, ask questions, respond, predict the plot, and retell the text. Interviews also indicated that students found the story easier to understand when they felt happy, interested, or curious about it.

This relationship can be seen in students' response patterns during reading. Curiosity accompanied asking questions and predicting what would happen next. Happiness and enthusiasm were accompanied by more focused attention to the text and illustrations. Empathy for characters appeared alongside comments about their circumstances and connections


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between the story and personal experiences. These patterns suggest that emotional responses and cognitive-affective engagement occurred together in students' reading experiences.

This integration may be explained by the characteristics of leveled picture storybooks, which present text and illustrations together. Illustrations help students connect textual information with visual representations, while reading levels suited to beginning readers help them follow a story step by step (Arianty, 2023; Himawati et al., 2024). This support may help students sustain their attention to the story while responding emotionally to its characters and events.

Overall, this study shows that students' emotional responses appeared in verbal and nonverbal forms, were predominantly positive, and co-occurred with cognitive and affective engagement in understanding stories. Together, these findings indicate that first-grade students' literacy experiences involve an integration of emotional responses, meaning-making, and engagement with story content. Emotional responses therefore offer a useful perspective for understanding how students experience and interpret reading activities with leveled picture storybooks.

## Conclusion

This study found that reading leveled picture storybooks elicited verbal and nonverbal emotional responses from first-grade students. These responses reflected students' engagement with characters, illustrations, plotlines, and events in the stories. Positive emotions predominate, particularly happiness, enthusiasm, curiosity, and empathy. Emotional responses also co-occurred with students' cognitive and affective engagement in understanding the story, as shown by their attention to illustrations, ability to retell the story, questions, comments, and connections between the story and personal experiences. These findings indicate that first-grade reading experiences integrate emotional, cognitive, and affective dimensions. Leveled picture storybooks support such engagement by combining text and illustrations suited to beginning readers.

## Recommendations

The findings highlight the importance of attending to emotional aspects of early literacy because students' emotional responses occurred alongside cognitive and affective engagement during reading. This may inform classroom reading practices, particularly the selection of leveled picture storybooks suited to students' abilities and characteristics. Future research could include more participants, a wider range of books, and longer observation periods to capture a broader range of emotional responses. This study was limited to first-grade students at one madrasah and to observable emotional responses during reading activities.

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