Journal of Language and Literature
Vol. 24 No. 1, April 2024, pp. 241 – 252
DOI: 10.24071/joll.v24i1.7310
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Extending the Dialogue: Responding to Indonesian Multicultural Children's Literature *Cap Go Meh*

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Abstract

Cap Go Meh is an Indonesian picture book with interreligious and multiethnic themes and has been translated to English and been awarded for promoting multiculturalism. Studies that focus on reader response to interreligious theme of children's literature are scarce. This study examines a reading engagement of a group of Muslim preservice to Cap Go Meh read aloud. Using a framework of reader response theory that pays attention to cultural influences including religions, this qualitative study posed a question: How do Indonesian Muslim preservice teachers respond to the multicultural story in Cap Go Meh. The respondents' writing responses generated two major themes. One was concerned with how the preservice teachers relate to Cap Go Meh and how its narrative leads to their reflections about diversity. The other one focused on how the participants might extend the story of Cap Go Meh and highlighted the preservice teachers' concerns with the role of adults (parents) in the story. Additional data from one participant could potentially show a case for furthering literary experiences using multicultural children's literature. The researchers note that responses to sensitive issues such as religious diversity occur mostly in a context where there is encouragement from teachers. In this case, it is crucial to highlight the importance of bringing multicultural children's literature like Cap Go Meh as a medium to discuss the lives and perspective of others.

Keywords: *reader response; multiculturalism; children's literature; interreligious; higher education*

Article information

Received: 4 October 2023

Revised: 5 January 2024

Accepted: 11 January 2024

Introduction

As the most populous Muslim country, Indonesia's diversity is well represented in the national official motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika,* an Old Javanese phrase translated as "Unity in Diversity." This motto is written in a scroll held by the country's national symbol, the Garuda Bird, and is explicitly mentioned in the National Constitution. However, enacting the motto in everyday social practice has been a complex challenge. Despite the visible diversity within schools, attitudes toward diversity are still varied. A survey conducted

by the Center for Islamic and Community Studies at the State Islamic University of Jakarta in 2018 revealed that 56.9% of teacher respondents expressed intolerance toward followers of other religions. This attitude was shown by their disapproval of the construction of a non-Muslim school in their neighborhood. They also expressed negative attitudes toward religion, evident in their disapproval of the construction of a non-Muslim school in their neighborhood.

Similarly, the relationship between Indonesian indigenous and Indonesian Chinese has been marked by dynamic tension. Indonesia has witnessed a disappearance of the embodiment of the minority Chinese culture, including the celebration of the Chinese New Year in public spaces due to the New Order's ban and instruction to the Chinese Indonesians to 'assimilate' to the dominant culture. After the ban was removed in 2000, the Indonesian society's acceptance of Chinese culture has been proven to be dynamic. For example, while the New Year has been acknowledged to be an official public holiday and Confucianism is one of the country's official religions, the minority Chinese culture has been underrepresented in media as evidenced by its portrayal merely in terms of food, clothing, and joyous celebrations rather than deeper representations of religion and beliefs. This underlines the need for interreligious dialogues to foster a more profound understanding, especially in an educational context where children's literature can play a pivotal role.

Multicultural children's literature holds the potential to facilitate open discussions about religious tensions and promote mutual understanding. Chai (2001) emphasizes the importance of helping children both commonalities and differences across cultures, urging educators to address embedded messages in visual and linguistic portrayals.

It has been observed that there is a lack of research on reader responses to multicultural children's literature that includes discussions about religious diversity. Herdiana's (2023) dissertation research strongly indicated that religious background plays a prominent role in shaping students' responses to multicultural literature. While there have been discussions on religious diversity from a religious studies perspective (e.g., Baidhawy, 2007; Sakai & Isbah, 2014; Kusuma & Susilo, 2020), there is little discussion on this topic within the realm of reader response studies. Similarly, discussions about multiculturalism tend to focus more on linguistic perspectives (e.g., Wijana, 2015). This research seeks to address this gap by focusing on reader responses to multicultural literature that highlights themes of religious diversity, making it a valuable contribution to research on this topic.

Building on Singer and Smith's (2003) work, the study aims to understand how Indonesian preservice teachers, specifically those of Muslim background, engage with multicultural literature. The researchers observed a group of Indonesian student teachers of Muslim background as they discussed *Cap Go Meh*, a multicultural children's book written and illustrated by Indonesians, Sofie Dewayani and Euginia Gina. Specifically, this study investigated the ways in which Muslim readers utilize a multicultural book to build perspectives of Muslim and Chinese relationships in the dynamic sociopolitical context of Indonesia.

The researchers organize this paper as follows. First, the researchers trace the conceptual framework in multiculturalism in the field of children's literature and reader response as teaching and research approaches as lenses through which to analyze our findings. The researchers then present our research method while explaining the book, the participants, and the data collection method employed in this study. Further, our analysis section is divided into two sections: the constructions of participants' multicultural identities as a way of connecting the story with the self and also the participants' reflections on how they see themselves as they create and expand the story in a way that makes the story more meaningful for the student teacher research participants. A negative case is presented to emphasize the importance of engaging with multicultural children's literature. This paper concludes with a brief reflection on how the study and the findings

make a case for the importance of multicultural children's books for raising diversity awareness in Indonesian classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

On Multiculturalism and the Construction of Cultural Identity through Children's Literature

Mingshui Chai (2001) highlighted three definitions of multicultural children's literature. The first one relates to the portrayal of multiple cultures (= multicultural) without distinguishing the dominant culture and the dominated cultures. Stories like these promote the importance of diversity while introducing a minimum effort to understand fully underrepresented cultures. The second one features the underrepresented cultures, and the third one promotes the idea that all literature is multicultural children's literature, expanding the definition of culture as something beyond otherness and exoticism while focusing on rich varieties within a culture. Multicultural literature should move from merely informing children about a culture to bringing them to pluralism in this contemporary modern era. Multicultural literature should enable children to openly discuss bullying and interreligious tensions, among other themes, that will empower the school curriculum. Further, Chai (2001) encourages educators to help children see not only the commonalities across cultures, but also the differences that distinguish cultures and then to discuss those aspects.

The second issue underpinning multicultural children's literature is the issue of cultural representations. Who deserves to represent a culture, and what is 'the essence' of the culture to be represented? These questions are rooted in a worry that a multicultural story does not depict a culture in an authentic way but rather enforces and perpetuates a stereotype (Bishop, 2003). The issue of representations highlights the needs for teachers in classrooms, even in elementary schools, to explore the critical traditions of literary analysis in children's literature promoting multiculturalism.

Berry and Candis (2013) highlight the importance for teachers to discuss their cultural identities as well as experiences since both influence teachers' beliefs and praxis when teaching students with multicultural backgrounds. The authors also note that teacher cultural identity and experience constitute knowledge that enables teachers to establish cultural responsiveness in teaching. Supported by many studies (Ladson-Billings, 1994; 2001), this study also supports the belief that teachers who are keenly aware of their cultural identities are able to connect their own cultural experiences with those of students in attempts to affirm, strengthen, and honor students' cultural identities, which in turn build students' sense of tolerance and self-confidence.

Studies on Reading and Responding to Multicultural Children's Book in Teacher Education

Louise Rosenblatt's theory of reader response has benefitted the field of education as an approach for both pedagogy and research. Reader response's core principle in teaching is that readers and texts are equal contributors in the meaning making process (Sipe, 2008). This is manifested through activities that solicit students' responses to a text,, Lehman's (2007) *children's literature and learning* overviewed literature instructional practices that centers on readers' active engagement with a text such as read aloud and journal (written) responses, to name a few. One of several things that Roser and colleagues (2011) identified about researching using reader response theory is the attention to a text selection (text-centered). Such kind of study typically focuses on the influences of a text by examining the ways in which a reader responds to a particular text, for example an investigation of reader response to a multicultural text. Sipe's (2008) typology explains how a reader connects with a text in different ways. It could be through drawing inspiration from the story or relating it to one's personal self, or by envisioning oneself in the future based on the reading. This is helpful in understanding the different ways in which readers engage with a text.

Studies on student teachers' responses to multicultural literature shed light on some of

their reading stances. Singer and Smith (2003) found that the preservice teachers' responses varied from acknowledging differences to distancing themselves; for instance, they showed no initiative to explore a culture unknown to them. With regard to an issue of religiosity in a multicultural children's book, Dávila's (2015) inquiry into preservice teachers' reader response found a tendency of the study participants toward 'making generalizations' about and 'labeling' others whose narratives are not known as in the case with minority groups.

Research findings such as these help to inform our understanding of multicultural children's books and responses in a teacher education context. We recognize the benefits that student teachers from dominant culture backgrounds gained from reading and responding to multicultural children's literature, through which the preservice teachers of dominant culture could 'discover' "their sense of who they are" and 'introduce' to 'the reality that other people [minority groups] experience the world in ways that they do not" experience as a dominant group (Singer & Smith, 2003).

Cap Go Meh in the Context of Indonesian Religious Diversity

The story of *Cap Go Meh* follows two little girls, Nisa, a Muslim, and Lily, a Chinese-Indonesian. Nisa invites Lily on Eid, the Islamic Holiday, and proudly explains to her about Cap Go Meh, an iconic Eid meal that her father has made. After Nisa excitedly explains her family tradition during Eid days, Lily curiously claims that Cap Go Meh is a meal associated with the Chinese New Year celebration. Following Nisa, Lily also shares the joyful New Year celebration her family usually has. After a little debate, both then come to an understanding that despite the differences, they share the same favorite meal.

Wishing a "Merry Christmas" for Christians and a "Happy New Year" for Confucian communities has been controversial among the Indonesian Muslims. Muslim scholars have been debating whether such greetings are *haram* (forbidden) because by wishing a Merry Christmas, a Muslim would acknowledge the Christian God as his god. Even though Indonesian presidents have always attended the national Christmas ceremony held in Jakarta, the Indonesian Ulema Council *(Majelis Ulama Indonesia or MUI)* declared that "Muslims become sinners if they attend Christmas gatherings and it is also forbidden to say Christmas greetings." It was challenged by a few Muslim mass organizations like *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) that assert that Christmas greetings show religious tolerance and have nothing to do with Islamic confessions of faith. A similar controversy also occurs with the Chinese New Year celebration where the opinions of Indonesian ulemas on the matter are also contested. Several Islamic religious authorities insisted that it is prohibited for Muslims to participate in the Chinese New Year or *Imlek* celebration (see Chiou, 2013). Such a belief may explain the careful attitudes of the Chinese business community in presenting Imlek as a glorious, superficial celebration associated with Chinese culture rather than with Confucianism. This has, unfortunately, reduced the deep meaning of *Imlek* and detached it from the sacred Confucian belief. All the debates and controversies have truly put a test to the enactment of the national slogan of unity in diversity.

Methodology

The data for this research is culled partly from a larger research on children's literature teaching in a teacher education context. The research site was a government-funded Islamic university located in the outskirt of Indonesia's capital city. Graduates of the university's teacher education program have long served teaching needs in Islamic schools. This site selection is very relevant to the research objectives given the need to raise the theme of diversity in homogeneous circles such as Islamic schools and that Muslim teachers are the dominant teacher figures in Indonesian public schools (Center for Islamic Studies and the Community, 2018).

Eleven preservice teachers, consisting of 10 female and 1 male students, voluntarily participated in this project during a semester-long university break (like a summer break). As a note, all female participants wore Muslim

clothes and headscarves. The research participants' agreement to participate included attending weekly meetings where the researchers read children's books and discussed relevant topics to the participants. All sessions were video recorded. This present study focuses on data collected from a read aloud session on a children's book titled *Cap Go Meh*. Data was gathered primarily from the participants' written responses posted on a private Facebook group specifically created for the research project. The use of Facebook was part of a larger research inquiry with the same group of preservice teachers on digital technology integration for teaching and learning purposes (Durriyah & Zuhdi, 2018). After the reading aloud session ended, the researchers posted a set of open-ended questions to the Facebook group, prompting the participants to write their responses to *Cap Go Meh* in a more elaborate and thoughtful manner.

The list of open-ended-questions included:

1. What did you remember and find interesting about the *Cap Go Meh* story?
2. Did you see any similarities with main characters Nisa and Lily? Please describe what kind of similarities.
3. If you were to be Lily or Nisa, how would you have extended the story?

This last question is inspired by Enciso's (1996) suggestion of making visible a reader's position in a story through a range of forms such as drawing and writing. The research participants in this study were asked to write a story extending *Cap Go Meh*'s narrative.

Overall, the purpose of selecting that open-ended list of questions was first to glean some information about the preservice teachers' immediate response to the story (what they found interesting) regarding similarities and differences, if any. Finally, acknowledging the importance of making a reader's engagement with a story visible, we directed our questions to reveal how the preservice teachers might extend the story of *Cap Go Meh*.

The study attempted to examine the Indonesian preservice teachers' responses to *Cap Go Meh* whose story centers on contesting two characters of different religious backgrounds to claim a traditional food called Cap Go Meh. To do so, the authors referred to related research on how readers would read and respond to the multicultural children's story *Cap Go Meh*.

Data analysis follows procedures typically conducted in a qualitative study (Glesne, 2006). After watching a *Cap Go Meh* read-aloud video, we read comments about *Cap Go Meh* that the participants posted on Facebook group. Guided by our research questions, we searched for common themes and created a narrative description using the participants' words. In a later stage of data analysis, we explicated a range of themes included in these findings.

Results and Discussion

Two major themes are found in Indonesian preservice teachers' responses to *Cap Go Meh*. The first one focuses on how the story would relate to them personally or simply how the preservice teachers made connections to the story with a reference to life experiences (Sipe, 2000; 2008). The second theme revolves around the participants' suggestions for extending the story of *Cap Go Meh*. In addition, we also presented data that was obtained from a single response. Although the data was not considered a theme, we decided to present it in the finding because it contained a strong religious reference that might offer evidence about a shifting nature of literary experience (Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019). The framework to analyze the data follows Rosenblatt's reader response theory which describes how a reader's engagement to literature would call upon lived experience expressions (Sipe, 2008) involving cultural influences (Enciso, 1996) including religions (Choi & Sach, 2016) to exercise an identity of the reader.

Connecting the Story to Self: Thinking About Diversity

The theme of connecting the story to self revolves around a reader's attempts to transact with a story and to use it to bring out their own story, or text-to-life response (Sipe, 2008). The specific texts of *Cap Go Meh* that

Journal of Language and Literature
ISSN: 1410-5691 (print); 2580-5878 (online)

participants referenced focused on two main characters, Nisa and Lily, of different religious and ethnic backgrounds and who share a special food called *Cap Go Meh*, traditionally served only on special days. Especially relevant is the participants' text-to-life theme of responses that focused on the participants' thinking about diversity.

The participants made text-to-life personal connection focusing on the interreligious and inter-ethnic friendship between Nisa and Lily. The story reminded the participants of their own friendships, especially during special events (i.e., religious and cultural celebrations). This text-to-life personal connection to *Cap Go Meh* seemed to motivate their reflection on the issue of diversity. For example, speaking of interreligious and inter-ethnic friendships, one preservice teacher recalled her experience of joining a friend of Chinese descent in celebrating 'Imlek,' a Chinese New Year. She said:

> *Speaking about Imlek, it reminds me of an experience of me celebrating imlek (Chinese New Year) with a friend whose ethnicity is Tionghoa (Indonesian term for Chinese descent). There I participated in all the tradition such as new cloth shopping, cooking Imlek food, including playing with some firecrackers. It was so much fun.*

Another preservice teacher felt appreciative having friends of different faiths—which she appeared to credit to her attendance in public schools. The preservice teacher recalled an experience of being invited to her Christian friend's Christmas celebration, and in return, she also invited the Christian friend over during an end of Ramadhan celebration (Ied). She said:

> *I have similarities with Lily and Nisa for I spent my primary and secondary education in public schools and I always met classmates of different religions, either Hindu, Budha, Protestant, and Catholic. I befriended them well, like Nisa and Lily did in the story. I think having a friend of different religious background is great. A lot of time they like to share what they celebrate to me. My protestant friend for instance, she liked to take me to her house after Christmas. Her house had plenty of food like what Muslims have during Idul Fitri. In turn, I sometime invited her to come over for Ied Fitri.*

The participants began to view the story from the perspective of diversity. As shown in the comments below, the participants' connection to the story appears to allow them to be reflective about Indonesia's diversity, especially the role of food like Cap Go Meh in uniting people. One preservice teacher admitted:

> *What impressed me is that the story tells of two children of different backgrounds (cultures and religions), yet they become friends. And they have similarities in which during celebrations they serve Cap Go Meh. This impressed me considering Indonesia consists of many cultures. And the story of Cap Go Meh can unite these children of different ethnicity and religious backgrounds.*

Echoing the sentiment, another preservice teacher connected to the story and specifically noted Indonesia's commitment to diversity and official term "Unity in Diversity." She recalled:

> *The friendship between Nisa and Lily impressed me because, despite, their different backgrounds (religions and cultures), yet they still respect to one another. This is evident during Ied Fitri when Nisa invited Lily to enjoy food at her house. The friendship between Nisa and Lily reminded me of Indonesia's famous slogan 'Unity in Diversity' (Bhinneka Tunggal Ika), despite our differences, we are united.*

Overall, the theme of connecting to life shows a personal connection Indonesian preservice teachers made to the story of *Cap Go Meh* highlights their thinking about diversity through many contexts, one that is close and personal and involves having friendships with others from different religions, and one with the broader context of Indonesia's constitutional commitment to diversity.

A range of responses to *Cap Go Meh* includes connecting the story to self (Sipe, 2008)—that is, mirroring to self and having friends of different faiths. The story mirrored their experiences as children with traditions of food sharing and delivery to relatives and neighbors. Preservice teachers especially could relate to Nisa's character who is depicted wearing a headscarf, a fashion typically associated with Muslim women. The female participants in this study who also wear head scarves perhaps feel connected to the story as they share Nisa's Islamic attire. Like Nisa, they have a similar food sharing tradition during special events. It is also interesting that a discussion about the mixed culture of Cap Go Meh cuisine in the book triggered the preservice teachers' reflection about coexisting with people of different religions and cultures. Nisa and Lily's friendship in *Cap Go Meh* brought to the fore their personal experiences with interreligious friendship, albeit those were experiences that occurred in the past (in the secondary school) and occurred only with those who went to public schools where the opportunity exists to meet students of different religious and ethnic backgrounds.

The findings indicate that the student teachers were able to establish a connection with the story, which is consistent with Sipe's (2008) classification of readers making personal connections with a text. By connecting the story with their own experiences, the student teachers were able to relate the story to their own experiences, which allowed them to engage with the story on a deeper level and derive more meaning from it. Additionally, the study showed that when the participants made a connection with others, they also acknowledged their differences (Singer & Smith, 2003) and the diverse living contexts in Indonesia.

The above findings from the Indonesian preservice teachers' responses to *Cap Go Meh* show the connection they made to the story. The story about interreligious friendship reminded them of their own experience of having friends of different faiths. Further, the interreligious story enabled the preservice teachers to be reflective about a larger context—that is, Indonesia as a diverse country whose commitment to diversity is constitutionally stated.

Extending the Story

The second theme, extending the story, occurs when the preservice teachers offered a narrative beyond what is written in *Cap Go Meh*. In the story, verbal tension ensued between Nisa and Lily as they disagreed about the origin of Cap Go Meh food. While the story finally showed that Nisa and Lilly resolved their disagreement, it is not clear how the two children were able to resolve the verbal tension between them. In responding to this part of the story, many of the research participants' story extensions included a desire for adults to have more roles in the story. One suggestion was to have *adult's intervention* when verbal tensions between Nisa and Lily arose. In particular, they suggested adults provide a tool for children so that they are able to resolve the tension. As one preservice teacher argued:

> *If I had a chance to add the story, I would probably add a part when Lily and Nisa are debating, Lily's mother overheard their debate. Later Nisa's mother had them to watch a cartoon about the history of Cap Go Meh. Cap Go Meh is a food that neither it belongs to Chinese nor natives. Rather Cap Go Meh is a marriage between Chinese and local.*

In this comment, the participant suggested adults employ an imaginary children's television show that would explain that *Cap Go Meh* food belongs inclusively to many cultures. The television show would serve as a tool to educate Nisa and Lily. It appears the emphasis of this suggestion is to provide children with indirect teaching so that they are able to resolve their conflict. This emphasis on giving less direct teaching echoed another preservice teacher's suggestion about the need of adults to *cultivate children with teaching about tolerance*. She commented:

> *In the middle of their heated debate about Cap Go Meh, there will be a flashback where they recalled some advice from a teacher about being tolerant living side by side harmoniously with others of different*

ethnicities, religions, etc. So, they had to figure out by drawing from the teacher's advice. Later, Nisa and Lily would realize that Indonesia has indeed many cultures therefore they have respect to one another.

Yet, several responses insisted on making clear in the book how Nisa and Lily are finally able to sort out their problem as it lacked an explanation in the story. One preservice teacher said:

The way they resolved the tension was rather abrupt because it was clear that both Nisa and Lily were in conflict in claiming the origin of Cap Go Meh. If I could add a story, there will be a story about acculturation of cultures, and also a part that explained about how Nisa and Lily could resolve their tension. It would be a good lesson for other children/readers.

Many preservice teachers seemed bothered because the story arguably offered little explanation about how the characters eventually resolved the tensions. One preservice teacher asserted: "*It's important in the story that they made clear how these children are able to sort out their differences about Cap Go Meh*." Here the participants emphasized the importance of clarifying how children would resolve their own problems so that young readers would have an authentic lesson on dealing with conflict on their own.

In the second theme of story extension, the participants' attempts to extend the story of *Cap Go Meh* revealed their main interest in the role of adults (parents) in the story. Responding to the part of the story where Nisa and Lily argued over the origin of *Cap Go Meh* food and each claimed it as their own traditional food, the Indonesian preservice teachers' suggestions show their desire to have more adult involvement (when the verbal tension ensued between Nisa and Lily). Meanwhile, there are suggestions to extend the story to explain how the children's characters in Cap Go Meh could finally resolve the tension independently without necessarily involving adults.

In Enciso's (1996) research, students were found to extend the story they read by using their imagination and personal experiences to create additional narratives. They would put themselves in the shoes of the characters, imagine different scenarios and guess their thoughts and actions. Additionally, they would relate the events and themes in the story to their own lives and the perspectives of their friends. This allowed them to deepen their engagement with the text and expand the story beyond what was explicitly written.

The extensions to the story extensions offered by the participants in this study showed how preservice teachers envisioned (Sipe, 2008) the resolution of the story's tensions, including the potential role of parents in helping child characters resolve those tensions. The extensions are in response to what appeared to be missing in *Cap Go Meh*, namely how characters Nisa and Lily eventually resolved the verbal tension. Some comments suggest the need for books like *Cap Go Meh* to provide young readers with tools to manage conflicts on their own. From the participants' perspective, it seemed the book skipped a plot point showing how Nisa and Lily agreed and made peace with one another. In that sense, *Cap Go Meh* appeared to miss the opportunity for the children's characters to enact their agency for living in the world individually and with others (Vaughn et al, 2021). The participants' perspectives appear to confirm the understanding of the importance of pedagogical strategies in mediating students' comprehension of diversity in everyday life.

Resisting to the Story: Invoking Religious Belief

As earlier mentioned, the following data is not counted as a theme as it came from a single participant. Yet, we argue this data is important as it posed a different kind of response that potentially extends our understanding about literary experiences with sensitive issues such as religion (Dávila, 2015). The response came from one female participant named Molla (pseudonym) who posted her comment on the last thread of a discussion after most participants had finished discussing and commenting to one another. To analyze Molla's response, we still rely on the same framework highlighting a reader's lived experiences (Sipe, 2008) influenced by

cultures (Enciso, 1996) including religious beliefs (Choi & Sach, 2016). These combined are part of a reader's attempt to exercise an identity. Molla began her response focused on an illustration of *Cap Go Meh*, especially the part where Nisa and Lily had a disagreement. She commented:

> *What I observe in this story, when Nisa explains what her religious version of Lontong Cap Gomeh is, Lily appeared to be impatient to interject. I see her says "… but ..." when Nisa is explaining. In the opposite, when Lily was sharing her opinion, Nisa enjoyed listening and looked happy. Unlike Lily who couldn't wait to interrupt, Nisa patiently allowed Lily to finish her story before she shared hers.*

Molla's response to the story illustration indicates her initial approach to *Cap Go Meh* is through an analytical perspective that occurs where a reader focuses on the textual aspect of a story (Sipe, 2008). In Molla's case, she focused on the book illustrations. Molla observed the detailed illustrations of both Nisa and Lily and then matched them with the text narrative. Molla's analytical response appeared to show her favorable reading of Nisa. The character of Nisa in Molla's view is more agreeable than the character of Lily. Molla viewed Lily as an impatient character who is quick to interject—by pointing out the illustration of Lily's expression as being impatient with Nisa. This less favorable view of Lily is in contrast with Molla's judgement about Nisa who is described patiently and contentedly listening when Lily talked about her version of Cap Go Meh. In other words, Molla judges Nisa, a Muslim character, more favorably than she does Lily who is a non-Muslim.

In her following comments, Molla began connecting the story to her own life by inserting experiences of befriending people of different faiths. She recalled: "*regarding the differences in understanding between Muslims and non-Muslim religions, this reminds me of old friends from secondary school a Hindu and two Protestants*." Here, Molla conveyed that in her secondary education she had classmates of different religions (Christian and Hindu). That statement seems to imply that Molla had experienced 'friendship' with people of different religions in the past, and she posits that she knows what it means to have friends of different religions.

However, Molla's following comments then turned to a tone indicating her exclusive stand with religious diversity where she recited religious texts:

> *In that regard (about religious diversity), I stick to the verses of Al-Kafirun and Al-Qasas: 56. Even though there are many out there who say that the verses are too extreme, it is their own business. But it is my belief that there a concept of trial in Islam in a judgment day where one is either rewarded for the good deeds or punishment for the sins that he/she has committed. I can only say for religious matters, thank you, O Allah, for the blessings of Islam.*

In responding to *Cap Go Meh*, Molla referred to Quranic verses that in Indonesia are frequently cited when discussing religious differences, especially among those who support less inclusive religious interpretations; an example would be as a justification from refraining to extend greetings during non-Islamic religious celebrations such as Christmas. As a note, Molla seemed to be aware of some of the controversies surrounding the verses' interpretations; she acknowledges, "*there are many out there who say that the verses are too extreme"*. Yet, Molla's recitation seemed to indicate where she stood on that matter, as she declared: "*It is their own business*." This suggests that Molla is inclined toward an exclusive interpretation of religious diversity. The following comment further clarified Molla's stand on religious diversity as she foretells of a judgment day where people will face God's trial and learn whether they will receive either God's reward or punishment ("*It is my belief that there a concept of trial in Islam in a judgment day where one is either rewarded for the good deeds or punishment for the sins that he/she has committed.*"). Molla seemed to suggest that she would only follow God's words through the Quranic verses that she quoted. Molla strongly embraced a belief that it is God's intention for her to be a devoted

Muslim, and matters related to religious diversity are not topics Molla would like to discuss as she would not acknowledge religions other than Islam.

Data from one participant named Molla revealed a different nature of response to the multicultural picture book *Cap Go Meh*. Molla's responses heavily referenced strong religious beliefs by quoting Quranic verses. This calls to mind a study by Juzwick and McKenzie (2015) that showed how being religious might affect readers' positions in reading and writing. Molla seemed to show what Singer and Smith (2003) found to be a state of "distancing" self from multicultural values contained in multicultural children's books. The present research's findings point to the critical role of multicultural children's literature such as *Cap Go Meh* as a springboard to examine issues that are at times sensitive to discuss openly, as in the case of religious diversity in Indonesia. Regarding literature responses to multicultural books, the present discussion is also relevant to an important finding about a "moment of pause" from Ginsberg and Glenn (2019) describing the shifting process of a reader's reading experiences with challenging topics (religions). Looking from this perspective, we argue that a strong response to a religious topic is one pause moment that, with the help of a teacher, could potentially lead to a reader's better literature experience that is more open and empathetic toward others. Overall, the study's finding answered the call to research the reading aspect of preservice teachers within the confines of teacher education research (Durriyah, 2019), specifically in reading multicultural children's literature.

Conclusion

Our purpose in this study was to examine the responses of Indonesian preservice teachers to a multicultural picture book *Cap Go Meh* whose theme and characters center on diverse religious and ethnic traditions, two issues that are sensitive to many Indonesians. The research posed a question: How do Indonesian Muslim preservice teachers respond to the multicultural children's picture book *Cap Go Meh*?

As we reflect on this study's findings, we are quite heartened with all the efforts to engage Indonesian preservice teachers with the multicultural children's book *Cap Go Meh* (by having a read aloud activity) and to facilitate their thoughtful responses regarding the book (by providing enough time and space to respond on a private Facebook group). We agree with Singer and Smith (2003) that responses to sensitive issues such as race or ethnicity, and religion (as in Indonesia's case) occur most likely in a context where there is encouragement from teachers. Living in a democratic country with a diverse population, educators in Indonesia could bring multicultural literature like *Cap Go Meh* into classrooms as a medium to discuss the lives and perspectives of others. Equally important is a teacher who can "encourage" and "provoke" by discussing issues deemed taboo (p. 22) as the issues of religion and diversity are in the context of Indonesia. Finally, we acknowledge the limitation of this case study to generalize our findings.

Acknowledgment

We thank Asep Rofiudin for his assistance during the research.

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