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THE BOARDING LITERACY CYCLE IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN'S READING PRACTICES IN AN ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOL

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Abstract
This study explores elementary school children's reading practices in an Islamic boarding school and conceptualizes them as a boarding literacy cycle. The concept refers to the circulation of children's reading practices across classrooms, libraries, dormitories, peer networks, family support, and adult guidance within a residential educational environment. It is used to explain how reading is initiated, sustained, mediated, and sometimes interrupted across the integrated learning and living spaces of the boarding school. Using a qualitative case study design, data were generated through semi-structured interviews, shared-reading activities, focus group discussions, observations, and field notes involving six elementary school children and one supervising ustaz at Yayasan Al Ashriyyah Nurul Iman Islamic Boarding School, Parung, Bogor. The findings show that children understood reading as a school task, entertainment, curiosity, knowledge acquisition, and a way to learn values from story characters. Their reading preferences were shaped by comics, illustrated books, and character-based stories, while access to recreational reading materials remained limited. Peer interaction supported questioning and shared understanding, but also created embarrassment and pressure in public reading situations. As a small, single-site case study, the findings are not intended for broad generalization, but offer contextual insight into how children's reading practices are organized within a residential Islamic educational environment.

Keywords: children literacy; boarding literacy cycle; Islamic boarding school education; visual-narrative reading materials; child literacy support

INTRODUCTION

Recent scholarship on children's reading indicates that reading ability should not be reduced to fluent word recognition or literal comprehension. Children's engagement with reading is shaped by the suitability of reading materials, the visual form of stories, adult support, peer interaction, and the learning environment. Children tend to engage more actively when texts are close to their experiences, visually appealing, and provide opportunities for response and interaction (Scherer, 2022; Komari et al., 2024; McGeown et al., 2025). Reading should therefore be understood as a learning experience involving cognitive, social, and affective dimensions.

This understanding is supported by a meaning-making perspective that views children as active readers rather than passive recipients of textual meaning. Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional reading theory explains that meaning emerges through the interaction between reader and text, while recent studies show that children engage more deeply when reading materials are close to their lived experiences, visually appealing, and open to personal response (Woodruff & Griffin, 2017; Alqahtani, 2024; McGeown et al., 2025). At the elementary level, this process is closely related to the form of reading materials because concrete, illustrated, and narratively structured texts help children imagine characters, events, and values in developmentally accessible ways. This view is consistent with Piaget's (1952) emphasis on children's concrete cognitive development and with recent studies on picturebooks and visual-narrative materials that highlight the role of illustrated stories, simple language, attractive visual elements, and age-appropriate materials in supporting children's engagement with reading (Indarini & Rahmadani, 2024; Komari et al., 2024; Pantino et al., 2026).

Reading is also shaped by social and affective interaction. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural perspective explains that children's understanding develops through interaction and guided participation, including asking questions, retelling stories, listening to others, and receiving support from peers or adults. Recent studies on storytelling, interactive read-alouds, shared reading, and peer-based reading activities similarly show that social interaction can help children process texts and communicate meaning more actively (Afdal et al., 2023; Istihari, 2024; Apriliyana & Utama, 2025; Yafele, 2025). However, interaction does not always function as support because children's confidence, courage, embarrassment, and sense of acceptance also shape their willingness to read or retell stories in front of others (Erikson, 1963; Herdiana & Munir, 2023; Wae & Herwin, 2024; Schapira & Grazzani, 2025). Thus, children's reading needs to be viewed not only as a cognitive process, but also as a social and emotional experience.

School libraries and reading spaces are part of the literacy environment that makes such reading experiences possible. Their role is not limited to providing collections; they also create access, atmosphere, and opportunities for students to interact with reading materials beyond formal classroom instruction. Fraser's (1998) perspective on learning environments helps explain how physical, social, and psychological conditions influence children's participation, while recent studies show that reading interest is shaped by collections, reading spaces, school library services, family support, and the wider learning atmosphere (Anggraini et al., 2025; Khofifah & Ramadan, 2021; Sa'adiah et al., 2025). Sa'adiah et al. (2025) show that school libraries can support reading interest when library services are connected with physical literacy spaces, such as reading gardens and classroom reading corners. Pantino et al. (2026) further show that children's literacy services are strengthened when reading spaces provide illustrated

storybooks, simple language, attractive visual elements, and opportunities for participatory interaction with texts. These studies suggest that children's reading practices need to be examined through the relationship between materials, spaces, access, interaction, and support systems.

This environmental view becomes particularly important when reading practices are situated within a residential Islamic educational setting. Elementary school children in an Islamic boarding school encounter texts not only through classroom lessons, but also through dormitory life, peer interactions, guidance from teachers or ustaz, and reading materials available in their surroundings. Reading consequently becomes embedded in children's lived environment rather than being confined to formal instruction. In this context, the Islamic boarding school is not merely a research site, but an educational ecosystem that shapes how children select, understand, share, and respond to texts.

Yayasan Al Ashriyyah Nurul Iman Islamic Boarding School in Parung, Bogor, provides a relevant context for examining this issue. The institution integrates formal education, communal living, the habituation of religious values, and intensive social interaction. In such a setting, reading concerns not only academic skills but also children's everyday encounters with texts within a shared way of life. This makes the Islamic boarding school a distinctive context for understanding how elementary school children's reading practices are formed across learning and living spaces.

Previous research has addressed children's reading through several lines of inquiry, including reading interest, picture storybooks, storytelling, interactive read-alouds, teacher assistance, school library services, reading spaces, and socially situated reading practices. However, these strands have often been discussed separately in relation to reading media, instructional strategies, children's experiences, or environmental support. Literacy research in Islamic boarding schools has also tended to focus on literacy culture, religious literacy, or institutional practices, while the everyday reading experiences of elementary school children have rarely been placed at the center of analysis (Umar, 2023; Mudore & Rachmat, 2025). This gap indicates the need for an integrated investigation that links children's meaning-making, social interaction, reading spaces, and literacy support within the residential life of an Islamic boarding school.

To address this gap, this study introduces the concept of the boarding literacy cycle. The concept refers to the circulation of children's reading practices across classrooms, libraries, dormitories, peer networks, family support, and guidance from teachers or ustaz. It differs from the broader notion of literacy ecology by focusing specifically on the residential circulation of reading practices within an Islamic boarding school. It also differs from socially situated reading practices by foregrounding the cyclical movement of texts, meanings, and support across institutional, communal, familial, and mentoring spaces. Thus, the boarding literacy cycle is not proposed merely as a new label for literacy ecology, socially situated reading, or literacy environment, but as a descriptive-analytical model for explaining how children's reading is initiated, sustained, mediated, constrained, and reorganized across the integrated learning and living spaces of an Islamic boarding school.

This study aims to explore the reading practices of elementary school children at Yayasan Al Ashriyyah Nurul Iman Islamic Boarding School in Parung, Bogor. Specifically, it examines how children understand reading, how they access and make sense of reading materials, how peer and adult interactions shape their reading experiences, and how literacy supports and barriers emerge in their daily learning. Through this focus, the study seeks to

contribute to children's literacy scholarship by showing how reading practices are formed within the integrated educational, residential, social, and mentoring environment of an Islamic boarding school.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach with a case study design. This approach was selected because the study aimed to understand elementary school children's meanings, experiences, and reading practices within their natural educational setting. Qualitative research enables researchers to examine participants' experiences in relation to the social context in which they occur (Creswell & Poth, 2018), while a case study design is appropriate for investigating a contemporary phenomenon within a bounded real-life context (Yin, 2018). In this study, the Islamic boarding school was not treated merely as a location, but as an educational ecosystem that shaped children's reading practices through classrooms, dormitories, library access, peer interaction, and guidance from teachers or ustaz.

The study was conducted at Yayasan Al Ashriyyah Nurul Iman Islamic Boarding School in Parung, Bogor, from April to May 2026. The participants consisted of six elementary school children and one supervising ustaz. The child participants were aged 10–12 years, enrolled in grades 5–6 of elementary school, and consisted of three boys and three girls. They were selected purposively with the assistance of the foundation because they lived in the boarding school, had direct experience with reading activities in the institution, were able to communicate their reading experiences, and were considered psychologically ready to participate based on the foundation's prior observation and student guidance procedures. The supervising ustaz was involved because he was familiar with children's learning routines, reading activities, and literacy support in the boarding school.

Table 1. Research Participants

No.	Participant	Participant Group	Data Contribution	Data Source
1	Ikhsan	Elementary school child	Reading interests, reading choices, and reading habits	Interview and shared-reading activity
2	Damar		Illustrated books, comics, and character-based meaning-making	
3	Nadhif		Reading spaces, dormitory reading, and retelling experiences	
4	Salsa		Reading for assignments and learning needs	
5	Zakia		Individual reading, peer reading, and reciprocal questioning	
6	Zahra		Reading for learning and the need for quiet conditions	
7	Ustaz Yusuf	Supervising *ustaz*	Adult guidance, literacy support, and reading-material availability	In-depth interview and contextual verification

Source: Processed by the author, 2026

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, shared-reading activities, focus group discussions, observations, and field notes. The interviews with child participants lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes and explored children's meanings of reading, preferred

reading materials, reading locations, peer interaction, and adult support. The interview with the ustaz provided contextual information about children's reading habits, available reading materials, and forms of guidance in the boarding school. One gender-based focus group discussion was conducted for approximately 30 minutes because the boarding school separates boys' and girls' residential areas. Observation was conducted for one full day in April 2026 to record children's reading activities, learning environment, peer interaction, adult guidance, reading spaces, and observable literacy supports and barriers.

The data were analyzed thematically through data organization, repeated reading, coding, categorization, and theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), the analysis involved data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Coding was conducted by several researchers and focused on four analytical concerns: meanings attributed to reading, children's engagement with texts, social dynamics, and literacy supports and barriers. Initial codes were discussed collectively to refine categories and develop themes. Interpretive agreement was managed by rechecking relevant excerpts, comparing them with observation and field-note data, and ensuring that the final themes remained grounded in the data and research focus.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through source and methodological triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from children and the supervising ustaz, while methodological triangulation was conducted by comparing evidence from interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and field notes. This process was used to examine the phenomenon from more than one perspective and to ensure that the themes were not based on isolated statements (Flick, 2018).

The study followed ethical principles because the main participants were minors. Institutional permission was obtained from the Islamic boarding school, and participant selection was coordinated through the foundation in accordance with its student guardianship and activity-participation procedures. Because the children lived in a scholarship-based boarding system, participation in positive educational activities was regulated through the institutional relationship between the foundation and the students' parents or guardians. Before the interviews and reading activities began, the researchers explained the purpose of the study in accessible language and obtained the children's verbal assent. Children were informed that they could answer according to their comfort, decline particular questions, or stop participating if they felt uncomfortable. Identifying information, including full names, classes, addresses, and family details, is omitted from the manuscript.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The reading practices of elementary school children at Yayasan Al Ashriyyah Nurul Iman Islamic Boarding School were not limited to classroom activities. Reading appeared in assignments, classroom learning, dormitory life, library activities, peer interaction, family support, and guidance from teachers or ustaz. This pattern shows that reading in the Islamic boarding school was embedded in children's residential routines and social relationships, not merely in formal instruction. Table 2 presents the main findings.

Table 2. Summary of Findings on Children's Reading Practices in the Islamic Boarding School

Analytical Focus	Main Finding	Data Sources
Meanings of reading	Children understood reading as a school task, entertainment, curiosity, knowledge, and a way to learn values from stories.	Interviews and shared-reading activities

Analytical Focus	Main Finding	Data Sources
Access and reading choices	Children preferred comics, illustrated books, and character-based stories, but recreational reading materials were limited.	Interviews, observations, and focus group discussions
Boarding literacy cycle	Reading moved across classrooms, libraries, dormitories, peers, families, and adult guidance.	Interviews with children and the *ustaz*
Comprehension practices	Children reread texts, asked others, answered questions, and retold stories.	Interviews, shared-reading activities, and focus group discussions
Social dynamics	Peers helped children read and ask questions, but could also create embarrassment and pressure.	Interviews, observations, and field notes
Literacy supports and barriers	Support came from teachers, the *ustaz*, peers, family, and reading spaces; barriers included limited books, noise, discomfort, and emotional pressure.	Interviews, observations, and field notes

To make the analytical process more transparent, the findings are further organized through an analytical mapping that links empirical data, codes, categories, themes, and their contribution to the boarding literacy cycle. This mapping shows how children's statements, observation notes, shared-reading activities, and contextual information from the supervising ustaz were condensed into broader analytical themes. The adult perspective in this section is used mainly for contextual verification because it was represented by one supervising ustaz, not by all adult actors in the boarding school. Therefore, claims about institutional support are interpreted cautiously and are grounded primarily in the children's accounts, supported by contextual information from the ustaz.

Table 3. Analytical Mapping of Children's Reading Practices in the Boarding Literacy Cycle

Empirical Focus	Codes	Categories	Themes	Link to the Boarding Literacy Cycle
Children's meanings of reading	Reading because of assignments; reading for knowledge; reading for enjoyment; learning values from characters	Task-oriented and meaning-oriented reading	Reading as obligation, interest, and meaning-making	Classroom demands and personal interests initiate children's engagement with texts.
Reading-material preferences	Comics; illustrated books; character-based stories; simple language; curiosity about story continuation	Visual-narrative engagement	Reading through accessible and attractive materials	Visual and narrative materials sustain children's attention, imagination, and motivation to read.
Reading spaces and access	Classroom books; library use; dormitory reading; personal books; family-brought books	Spatial and material access	Reading across learning and living spaces	Reading moves across institutional, residential, peer, and family-linked spaces.
Peer interaction	Borrowing books; asking friends; reading together; feeling safer with peers; embarrassment in public reading	Peer-mediated reading	Peer support and peer pressure	Peer networks circulate books and meaning, but also create affective constraints.
Adult guidance	Asking the *ustaz*; teacher encouragement; guided library use; support during retelling	Mentored reading	Adult-supported comprehension and confidence	Teachers and *ustaz* help children interpret texts, regulate reading activities, and maintain confidence.
Literacy barriers	Limited recreational books; noise; discomfort; nervousness; limited suitable materials	Material, spatial, and affective constraints	Interrupted reading participation	The cycle is not always smooth because access, space, and emotional conditions can limit reading.

The first finding concerns the meanings children attached to reading. Reading was associated with school obligations, but it was also connected to enjoyment, curiosity, knowledge, and value reflection. Zahra described reading as part of assignments and learning needs, whereas Damar connected reading comics with relief from boredom.

> *["Usually when the teacher gives us an assignment or when I need to study."] (Zahra, interview, May 2026). ["Comics help relieve boredom."] (Damar, interview, May 2026).*

These accounts were coded as task-oriented reading and reading for enjoyment. They show that children's reading was activated both by institutional demands and by personal motivation.

Reading was also understood as a way to gain knowledge and take values from stories. Zakia associated reading with knowing more, while Damar explained that children could learn from story characters.

> *["Reading is good because it helps us learn things."] (Zakia, interview, May 2026).*
> *["Yes, we can learn from the characters."] (Damar, interview, May 2026).*

When discussing Naruto, Damar identified the character's perseverance as a positive trait. These responses were categorized as meaning-oriented reading because popular stories functioned not only as entertainment, but also as a medium for simple value reflection.

The second finding concerns the relationship between children's reading preferences and the available collection. Children showed interest in comics, illustrated books, and character-centered stories. However, the reading materials available in the Islamic boarding school were more strongly oriented toward religious texts, stories of the Prophets, and educational materials. Ustaz Yusuf explained:

> *["In the boarding school, certain kinds of books are generally unavailable; the collection is oriented more toward religious texts and accounts of the Prophets. Fictional storybooks such as the one brought here today are rare because this is an Islamic boarding school."] (Ustaz Yusuf, interview, May 2026)*

This statement was coded as limited recreational collection and categorized as a material constraint. The issue was not only the number of available books, but also the suitability of reading materials for elementary school children whose engagement was strongly supported by visual and narrative forms.

Children's preference for visual materials appeared clearly in their responses. Ikhsan stated,

> *["Books are more enjoyable when they have pictures."] (Ikhsan, interview, May 2026).*

Damar also explained that pictures helped children imagine the characters and follow the story. During shared reading, children responded positively to books that combined illustrations and narrative continuity: "Bukunya bagus. Seru karena gambarnya. Ceritanya bagus, tetapi kurang karena masih penasaran dengan episode lanjutannya." ["The book is good. The pictures make it enjoyable. The story is good, but it feels incomplete because I am still curious about the next episode."] (Reading-group discussion, May 2026). These responses were coded as visual-

narrative engagement. They indicate that illustrations supported comprehension, imagination, and sustained curiosity.

The third finding concerns the boarding literacy cycle. Children's reading spaces were not limited to the classroom or library, but extended to the dormitory. Nadhif mentioned books in the classroom, while Damar identified the dormitory room as a place for reading comics.

> *["In the classroom. There are books on the desks, and the cupboard contains books."] (Nadhif, interview, May 2026). ["I read comics in my room, in the dormitory."] (Damar, interview, May 2026).*

These accounts were coded as classroom reading and dormitory reading. They show that reading moved from formal learning spaces into children's everyday residential environment.

The dormitory also functioned as an informal literacy space because children could keep and read personal books there. Ustaz Yusuf explained:

> *["Children usually keep the books they bring and read them in the dormitory. There are no book inspections, and the school does not screen the books before the children receive them. The books are considered safe. Children who enjoy reading sometimes keep their own collections in the dormitory."] (Ustaz Yusuf, interview, May 2026)*

This account was categorized as residential literacy access. It confirms that reading in the boarding school continued beyond scheduled lessons and could become more informal and self-directed through personal books.

Children's access to reading materials also came from peers and families. Nadhif explained,

> *["Sometimes a friend brings a book from home, and I borrow it."] (Nadhif, interview, May 2026).*

Ustaz Yusuf added that children could ask their parents to bring books when they returned home or received family visits. These findings were coded as peer borrowing and family-linked access. They show that access to reading was relational: when institutional collections were limited, peers and families became important channels for expanding children's reading opportunities.

The library remained important, but access to it was often mediated by teachers. Ustaz Yusuf explained that subject teachers sometimes brought children to the library when they saw that a class rarely read or when a shared-reading activity was needed. This finding was categorized as adult-mediated access. It indicates that the library did not operate only as a physical facility; its use also depended on teacher initiative and learning arrangements.

The fourth finding concerns children's comprehension practices. Children used simple strategies when they encountered difficulty, such as rereading, asking peers, or asking the ustaz. Nadhif stated,

> *["I stop, read it again, and then I can continue."] (Nadhif, interview, May 2026).*

Damar also described asking the ustaz when he did not understand something in the text. These responses were coded as rereading and seeking help. They show that children's comprehension was built through both independent effort and social support.

The fifth finding concerns the social dynamics of reading. Children experienced both the benefits and pressures of reading in a communal environment. Zahra preferred reading alone

because it was calmer, while Zakia valued reading with peers because it allowed children to ask one another questions.

> *["It is better to read alone because it is quieter."] (Zahra, interview, May 2026). ["When I read alone, I can focus; when I read with friends, we can ask one another questions."] (Zakia, interview, May 2026).*

These accounts were coded as solitary reading and peer-supported reading. They show that solitary reading supported concentration, whereas peer reading supported questioning and shared understanding.

Peer relations also had an ambivalent role. Damar felt safer when reading with a friend, but Nadhif described embarrassment when he had to participate in front of others.

> *["I am not afraid of being bothered because we are together. If someone bothers us, there are two of us."] (Damar, interview, May 2026). "Malu doang. Malu tiba-tiba pergi." ["I was just embarrassed. I became embarrassed and suddenly left."] (Nadhif, interview, May 2026).*

These contrasting accounts were categorized as peer support and peer pressure. They show that peer interaction could expand confidence and access, but could also intensify embarrassment when reading became a public activity.

Ustaz Yusuf confirmed that peer pressure could affect children's confidence when reading or retelling stories in front of others.

> *["When children read in public, nervousness is a common difficulty. A child may suddenly fall silent while telling a story or speaking. Hearing friends behind them can disrupt their concentration even more."] (Ustaz Yusuf, interview, May 2026)*

This account was coded as affective pressure in communal reading. It shows that reading confidence depended not only on comprehension, but also on the emotional climate of the group. The sixth finding concerns literacy support and barriers. Teachers and ustaz supported children not only by correcting their understanding, but also by maintaining their confidence. Ustaz Yusuf stated,

> *["The teacher usually encourages the child, says that it is all right, and asks the child to continue. This is done so that the child does not lose confidence."] (Ustaz Yusuf, interview, May 2026).*

This statement was categorized as adult-supported confidence. It shows that adult guidance had both cognitive and affective functions.

Children's expectations of the library reflected the support they considered important. Damar wanted more comics, more books, and better facilities:

> *["I would like the library to have comics, air conditioning, and more books."] (Damar, interview, May 2026). Salsa and Zahra also emphasized the need for a quiet reading atmosphere. ["When it is not noisy."] (Salsa, interview, May 2026). ["When it is quiet."] (Zahra, interview, May 2026).*

These responses were coded as material needs and spatial comfort. They indicate that literacy support involved not only book availability, but also comfort, quietness, and the suitability of reading materials.

Overall, the findings show that children's reading practices in the Islamic boarding school were shaped by academic demands, personal interests, material availability, dormitory life, peer relations, family-linked access, and guidance from teachers or ustaz. The boarding literacy cycle was developed from the repeated connection among these empirical patterns, rather than from a single quotation or one institutional account. Classroom tasks initiated reading, visual-narrative materials sustained interest, dormitory life extended reading beyond formal instruction, peers mediated access and meaning, families supported book circulation, and teachers or ustaz provided guidance. At the same time, the cycle was interrupted by limited recreational materials, noise, discomfort, embarrassment, and nervousness. Because the adult perspective was limited to one supervising ustaz, the findings on adult and institutional support are treated as contextual verification rather than a comprehensive representation of all adult roles in the boarding school.

DISCUSSION

Reading practices among elementary school children in the Islamic boarding school need to be understood through the integration of school life and residential life. In non-residential schools, reading is commonly organized around classroom activities, library services, homework, and family support outside school hours. In the Islamic boarding school examined in this study, these boundaries were less separate because children learned, lived, interacted with peers, received adult guidance, and accessed reading materials within the same institutional environment. This condition made reading part of a continuous daily experience rather than an activity limited to formal instruction. The pesantren context is therefore not only a setting where reading takes place, but an environment that reorganizes when, where, with whom, and under what conditions children encounter texts.

This distinction does not imply that reading in Islamic boarding schools is inherently better or weaker than reading in non-residential schools. Rather, it shows that the organization of reading is different. Elementary school children in this setting read as students and as santri. They encountered texts through assignments and library activities, but also through dormitory rooms, peer loans, books brought by families, and guidance from teachers or ustaz. The residential character of the institution therefore shaped not only where children read, but also how they accessed texts, negotiated meaning, experienced peer support or pressure, and sustained or interrupted their interest in reading. This is the first critical point of the study: the pesantren setting creates a literacy condition in which formal learning, communal living, discipline, values, and affective relations are intertwined.

The meanings attached to reading show that decoding was only one element of elementary school children's literacy experience. Reading appeared as a school obligation, but it also became entertainment, curiosity, knowledge, and a way to draw values from story characters. This pattern reflects the transactional nature of reading, in which meaning is formed through the encounter between text, children's experiences, emotions, and responses (Rosenblatt, 1978). However, the present findings also show that meaning-making in a boarding school is not only personal or textual. It is shaped by the routines, expectations, and social atmosphere of residential life. Children read not simply because they met texts, but because texts entered their daily lives through tasks, friends, dormitory rooms, family visits, and adult encouragement.

This finding challenges the assumption that recreational reading has weaker educational value than formal or religious reading. For elementary school children, comics and character-

based stories can become accessible media for identifying positive traits, avoiding undesirable behavior, and relating story content to simple moral reflection. In the context of an Islamic boarding school, these materials do not necessarily stand outside educational values. They may serve as a bridge between children's reading interests and the broader value orientation of the institution. The critical issue is therefore not whether recreational texts are compatible with pesantren values, but how the institution can select, mediate, and contextualize such materials so that they remain developmentally appropriate and educationally meaningful.

The gap between children's preferred reading materials and the available collection became a central issue. Elementary school children were attracted to comics, picturebooks, serial stories, and recognizable characters, while the available collection was more strongly oriented toward religious texts, stories of the Prophets, educational materials, and formal reading. This gap is not simply a matter of book quantity. It reflects a tension between institutional identity and children's developmental reading needs. The boarding school's value-oriented collection is understandable, but elementary school children also need texts that support imagination, visual engagement, narrative continuity, and affective attachment to reading.

This issue is closely related to the quality and suitability of children's reading collections. Pantino et al. (2026) show that children's literacy services are strengthened when collections include illustrated storybooks, simple language, attractive colors, and materials that correspond to children's developmental stages. Their study also notes that collections dominated by certain themes still need to be expanded so that children can encounter more varied reading formats and topics. This point is relevant to the present findings because the Islamic boarding school's collection already reflects its religious and educational identity, yet its support for children's reading engagement remains limited when visual-narrative materials are rare. In other words, the issue is not that pesantren collections should abandon religious orientation, but that such orientation needs to be translated into forms that children can access, enjoy, and understand.

For children at the elementary level, visual and narrative elements are not merely decorative. Pictures, characters, and storylines help them imagine meaning, follow events, and remain emotionally involved in the text. Piaget's view of cognitive development helps explain why concrete and visual experiences support children's comprehension (Piaget, 1952). Recent studies on picturebooks and visual narratives also show the role of illustrated texts in supporting reading interest, comprehension, and engagement (Azizah & Maharani, 2025; Berliani & Utama, 2025; Indarini & Rahmadani, 2024; Komari et al., 2024; Yundari et al., 2025). In the pesantren context, visual-narrative materials can function as a developmental bridge between children's reading needs and the institution's value-oriented educational environment.

The residential character of the institution shaped children's access to reading materials in a way that differs from non-residential schools. When recreational reading materials were limited in the formal collection, children used other routes, such as personal books, peer loans, and books brought by families during visits or after returning from home. Access to reading was therefore relational rather than purely institutional. The library remained important, but it was not the only source of reading experience. Books circulated through classrooms, dormitories, peers, families, and adult guidance. This pattern is important because it shows that literacy access in a boarding school is distributed across relationships and routines, not concentrated only in formal facilities.

This is where the boarding literacy cycle becomes analytically important. The cycle shows that elementary school children's reading practices were formed through the movement

of texts and support across classrooms, libraries, dormitories, peer networks, families, and adult mentors. Reading materials could enter the boarding school through institutional collections, personal books, peer borrowing, or family visits. At the same time, reading experiences were shaped by the social atmosphere of dormitory life, including companionship, embarrassment, noise, encouragement, and adult protection. Thus, the distinctiveness of reading in the Islamic boarding school lies not only in the presence of religious values, but in the way learning space and living space jointly organize children's literacy experience.

In this study, the boarding literacy cycle is positioned as a descriptive-analytical model rather than a general theory of children's reading. It is descriptive because it is grounded in empirical patterns found in one Islamic boarding school, where children's reading moved across classrooms, libraries, dormitories, peer networks, family-linked access, and adult mentoring. It is analytical because it helps explain how reading was initiated, sustained, mediated, and interrupted within an integrated learning and living environment. The concept is therefore not proposed as universally transferable to all boarding schools or Islamic educational institutions. Rather, it offers an analytical lens that may be examined further in comparable residential educational settings.

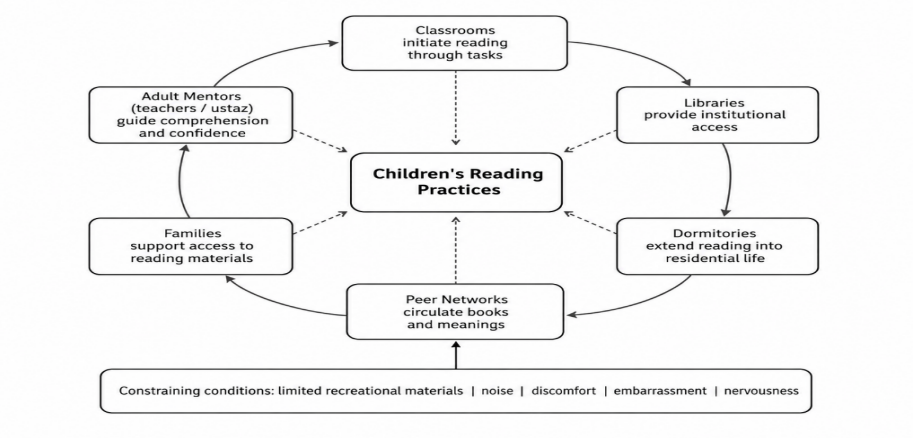


Figure 1. Authors' conceptualization based on the study findings (2026)

The proposed model places children's reading practices at the center and connects them with six interrelated elements: classrooms, libraries, dormitories, peer networks, families, and adult mentors. Classroom tasks may initiate children's engagement with texts, libraries provide institutional access, dormitories extend reading into residential life, peers circulate books and meanings, families support access to reading materials, and teachers or ustaz guide comprehension and confidence. These elements do not operate in a fixed linear order. Rather, they interact dynamically and shape how children encounter, select, understand, share, and respond to texts within the boarding school environment.

However, the findings also show that the boarding literacy cycle was not always continuous or evenly supported. Several patterns interrupted the cycle. First, the limited availability of recreational and visual-narrative materials restricted children's ability to sustain reading beyond formal or religious texts. Second, dormitory and peer environments did not always function as supportive literacy spaces because noise, embarrassment, and peer pressure could reduce children's willingness to read or retell stories. Third, library access depended partly on teacher initiative, indicating that institutional resources were not always independently accessible to children. These findings suggest that the boarding literacy cycle

should not be read as a smooth or ideal model of literacy support, but as a contested process shaped by both enabling and constraining conditions.

Children's comprehension practices also developed through both individual effort and social support. They reread when they did not understand, asked peers or the ustaz, answered questions, and retold what they had read. These practices show the emergence of basic information-literacy behavior in everyday form. Elementary school children recognized difficulties, sought help, used available resources, and checked their understanding through interaction. Such processes show that information literacy can develop through daily reading practices, even without being organized as a formal instructional procedure (Eisenberg & Berkowitz, 1990; Department for Education, 2012; Yundari et al., 2025; Alqahtani, 2024). In the boarding school, however, these practices were not merely individual strategies. They were enabled by the proximity of peers, the availability of adult mentors, and the continuity of interaction across classrooms and dormitories.

Peer interaction became important because elementary school children in the boarding school lived and learned in an intensive community. Peers helped them ask questions, feel safer, and share understanding during reading activities. This finding reflects the sociocultural view that learning develops through interaction with others (Vygotsky, 1978). Storytelling, shared reading, interactive read-alouds, and peer-based reading activities can support children in processing texts and expressing their understanding more actively (Afdal et al., 2023; Istihari, 2024; Apriliyana & Utama, 2025; Yafele, 2025). Yet the pesantren context adds a stronger communal dimension because peer relations are not limited to classroom encounters; they continue in dormitory routines, informal conversations, shared spaces, and everyday companionship.

However, the same social environment could also create pressure. Elementary school children could feel embarrassed, nervous, lose concentration, or withdraw when reading or retelling stories in front of peers. This ambivalence is important because it prevents shared reading from being viewed only as a positive collaborative activity. At this age, children's confidence is still strongly shaped by social acceptance and immediate peer responses. Reading therefore involves an affective dimension related to courage, psychological safety, and the child's sense of competence (Erikson, 1963; Herdiana & Munir, 2023; Wae & Herwin, 2024; Schapira & Grazzani, 2025). In the boarding school, this affective dimension becomes more intense because children repeatedly meet the same peers in both learning and living spaces.

Teachers and ustaz had an important role in managing this affective dimension. Their support was not limited to correcting children's understanding of texts. They also encouraged children to continue when they felt unsure, embarrassed, or afraid of making mistakes. In this sense, adult guidance worked both cognitively and emotionally. It helped children understand what they read while also protecting their willingness to participate in reading activities.

However, the adult perspective in this study was limited to one supervising ustaz. His account was useful for contextual verification of children's reading routines, available reading materials, teacher mediation, and forms of adult guidance. Nevertheless, it should not be read as representing all adult actors in the Islamic boarding school, such as classroom teachers, dormitory supervisors, librarians, school leaders, or parents. Therefore, the analysis of adult guidance in this study is presented as a contextual account rather than a comprehensive representation of all adult roles in children's literacy practices.

Literacy support in the Islamic boarding school should therefore not be reduced to the issue of reading interest. Interest can grow when elementary school children have access to

suitable materials, comfortable spaces, quiet conditions, supportive peers, family involvement, and adults who make reading feel safe. Sa'adiah et al. (2025) show that school libraries can support reading interest when library services are connected with physical literacy spaces, such as reading gardens and classroom reading corners. In the present study, this argument is reflected in the way children's reading experiences were shaped by the circulation of reading materials and support across the library, classrooms, dormitories, peer networks, families, and adult mentors.

Reading barriers should therefore not be attributed only to children's motivation, because motivation itself is shaped by the environment that enables or limits reading. Collections, facilities, atmosphere, peer relations, family support, and adult guidance together determine whether reading becomes accessible, meaningful, and sustainable. In this sense, literacy support in an Islamic boarding school needs to be understood as an ecological condition in which physical, social, and psychological dimensions jointly shape children's participation in reading (Fraser, 1998; Anggraini et al., 2025; Khofifah & Ramadan, 2021). The critical implication is that pesantren literacy development cannot rely only on children's willingness to read; it must address the material, spatial, social, and emotional conditions that make reading possible or difficult.

The National Standards for School/Madrasah Libraries emphasize the importance of collections, services, facilities, and management in supporting school literacy (National Library of Indonesia, 2024). In an Islamic boarding school, these components remain essential, but they need to be connected with the wider residential ecosystem. Literacy support is not located only in the library. It is distributed across dormitory life, teacher initiative, peer communities, family involvement, and the daily routines of children as santri. Therefore, school library development in a pesantren context should not be understood only as improving a facility, but as connecting library services with the living spaces where children actually read.

Strengthening literacy in Islamic boarding schools therefore requires more than adding books to the collection. It requires connecting age-appropriate visual-narrative materials, comfortable reading spaces, teacher and ustaz guidance, peer support, and family participation into a coherent literacy environment for elementary school children. In this sense, literacy development in a boarding school depends on how well the institution links its value-oriented educational identity with children's developmental reading needs. The boarding literacy cycle helps make this relationship visible by showing that children's reading is not formed by one factor alone, but by the movement of texts, meanings, support, and constraints across the integrated learning and living environment of the pesantren.

CONCLUSION

Elementary school children's reading in the Islamic boarding school was formed through the movement of texts, meanings, and support across classrooms, libraries, dormitories, peer networks, families, and adult mentors. This movement is conceptualized in this study as the boarding literacy cycle, a descriptive-analytical model that helps explain how reading is initiated, sustained, mediated, and sometimes interrupted within an integrated learning and living environment. The concept highlights that children in a pesantren read not only as students completing school tasks, but also as santri whose reading experiences are shaped by residential routines, peer relations, family-linked access, adult guidance, and material constraints. At the same time, this interpretation should be read within the limits of the study: the findings are

drawn from a small case study in one Islamic boarding school involving six children and one supervising ustaz. For that reason, the model is not offered as a general representation of all boarding schools, but as an analytical lens that may be considered in comparable residential educational settings.

SUGGESTION

Based on the strongest evidence in this study, literacy development in Islamic boarding schools should prioritize three areas. First, the institution needs to improve access to age-appropriate visual-narrative materials, such as illustrated storybooks, educational comics, and character-based stories that remain consistent with the value orientation of the boarding school. This priority is supported by children's repeated preference for comics, illustrated books, and visually engaging stories. Second, reading spaces in libraries, classrooms, and dormitories should be made more comfortable and psychologically safe, because children identified quietness, comfort, embarrassment, and nervousness as factors affecting their willingness to read or retell stories. Third, teachers and ustaz should be involved as literacy mentors who support both comprehension and confidence, especially during shared reading, questioning, and retelling activities. These recommendations are not proposed as a broad literacy program for all boarding schools, but as evidence-based priorities drawn from the reading practices observed in the selected case

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