



Read-Aloud Moral Stories As A Meaningful Learning Strategy In Developing Empathy In Students Of State Elementary School 036 Ujungberung

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ABSTRACT

This research is based on the diminishing sense of empathy and social care among primary school students which tend to make them do bully acts and cause them have insensible feeling to their surroundings. Even as the strong urge to teach (strengthening Character Education Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter/PPK) and the Pancasila Student Profile has been challenging teachers to increase efficiency of learning, there is a need to expand affective domain objectives. This research is intended to investigate how the read-aloud technique of moral stories in meaningful learning is carried out to improve student empathy at SDN 036 Ujungberung, Bandung City. The research design is based on a qualitative methodology. Data were collected via participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Analysis was conducted using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman and Saldana that encompasses a series of steps: data collection, data condensation, data display and conclusion drawing. The Transformative Social and Emotional Learning (T-SEL) framework, which focuses the importance of cultivating student empathy, through pillars of identity, agency, belonging, collaborative engagement and critical reasoning. The findings suggest that the read-aloud activity of moral stories offers the students chances of both perspective-taking and emotional mirroring. In learning, students can reflect on their own values and life experiences through mirroring with characters in the stories. These results are consistent with the hypothesis that read-aloud may enhance prosocial behaviour and the internalization of empathy values in elementary school children.

Keywords: Read-Aloud, Moral Stories, Meaningful Learning, Empathy, Transformative Social and Emotional Learning (T-SEL).

INTRODUCTION

The lack of empathy among students in 2025 has reached a stage often referred to as an empathy crisis, directly impacting school climate and the quality of social interactions. Approximately 25% of the highest bullying rates occurred among elementary school children, with 21,241 children becoming victims in 2023, and the trend is increasing through 2025. The FSGI (Federation of Indonesian Teachers' Unions) recorded 60 cases of school violence in 2025, including bullying, which accounted for 6.67% of the total. Victims often experience psychological impacts and even retaliation, such as the tendency of perpetrators to interpret teasing as "joking" without considering the emotional impact. The Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) reported a spike in national bullying cases, from 285 in 2023 to 573 in 2024, contributing to a negative school climate (Yulianti, 2025). Furthermore, students exhibit apathy toward their social environment, view others instrumentally, and exhibit aggressive and manipulative behavior due to their poor ability to manage emotions and understand others' perspectives.

Academic pressure in the digital age, coupled with excessive exposure to technology without emotional support, exacerbates emotional exhaustion and reduces students' social sensitivity. This condition is exacerbated by the lack of empathetic role models in the family environment, which encourages students to seek attention through negative behavior at school (Tetrawan et al., 2024). This situation emphasizes the urgency of integrating empathy education into the curriculum, through approaches such as read-aloud, circle time, and restorative discipline, to create a safe and inclusive learning environment. Various scientific studies have shown that read-aloud methods or interactive storytelling are effective in increasing children's empathy. The following are some examples of research related to "The Effectiveness of Storytelling in Enhancing Empathy" (2024). This research shows that storytelling provides a safe space for children to explore complex emotions.

By engaging with fictional narratives, children learn to put themselves in the shoes of characters, which directly promotes the development of empathy through understanding different perspectives. Then, "The Impact of Folklore-Based Storytelling on Empathy" (2024): In a quantitative experiment with kindergarten children, a significant increase in empathy scores was found after storytelling using folklore (Tetrawan et al., 2024). The average empathy score increased from 15.50 to 28.70, demonstrating that relevant narratives can trigger empathic responses and foster social-emotional skills. Furthermore, a 2025 National Literacy Trust Survey of over 76,000 children and adolescents showed that 1 in 3 respondents read specifically to help them understand others' perspectives (32.8%) or learn about different cultures (32.4%), further strengthening the link between reading and social curiosity.

Overall, these studies confirm that reading aloud is not just a literacy activity,

but a character development tool that helps children recognize emotions such as sadness, happiness, and fear through story characters. Wiratman (in Pujiati et al., 2022) stated that elementary school education itself is a foundation that forms students' foundations for developing good habits. One good habit that can be instilled is reading picture books aloud to children, which can become a habit that helps them develop a love of reading. Research by Setiani indicates that the use of picture storybooks as a learning medium can improve students' reading skills in Indonesian language lessons for second-grade students at SDN 84, Bengkulu City (Setiani, 2019).

Meaningful learning requires the full involvement of students, not only in the cognitive aspect but also in the affective and reflective dimensions. This type of learning is often referred to as in-depth learning, which enables students to understand the rationale behind knowledge, relate it to life experiences, and internalize it in attitudes and actions. In the context of character education, in-depth learning is a prerequisite for moral values not to remain normative knowledge but to develop into a lasting internal awareness. However, the practice of teaching values and character in elementary schools is often declarative. The values of empathy, caring, and responsibility are often conveyed through messages. Direct moral values, rules of conduct, or advice are not accompanied by learning experiences that allow students to understand, reflect on, and interpret these values personally. As a result, value learning risks becoming superficial, easily forgotten, and lacking impact on real character formation.

Learning at the elementary school level is a fundamental phase in shaping ways of thinking, behaving, and The lack of empathy among students in 2025 has reached a stage often referred to as an empathy crisis, directly impacting school climate and the quality of social interactions. Approximately 25% of the highest bullying rates occurred among elementary school children, with 21,241 children becoming victims in 2023, and the trend is increasing through 2025. The FSGI (Federation of Indonesian Teachers' Unions) recorded 60 cases of school violence in 2025, including bullying, which accounted for 6.67% of the total. Victims often experience psychological impacts and even retaliation, such as the tendency of perpetrators to interpret teasing as "joking" without considering the emotional impact. The Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) reported a spike in national bullying cases, from 285 in 2023 to 573 in 2024, contributing to a negative school climate (Yulianti, 2025). Furthermore, students exhibit apathy toward their social environment, view others instrumentally, and exhibit aggressive and manipulative behavior due to their poor ability to manage emotions and understand others' perspectives.

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these values personally. As a result, value learning risks becoming superficial, easily forgotten, and lacking impact on real character formation.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. The researcher chose a qualitative approach because it aimed to explore and understand the subjective meanings constructed by students regarding the value of empathy (Creswell, 2016). In accordance with the characteristics of a case study, this research focuses on a "bounded system," namely the learning process using the Read-Aloud strategy in one specific elementary school class (grades 3/4) to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study. In this study, the researcher acted as the key instrument. The researcher was directly involved in the data collection process in the field through naturalistic observations during the read-aloud sessions. This was done to authentically capture the emotional nuances and social interactions of students. Data in this study were collected through multiple sources of data to ensure depth of information, including: Participatory Observation, In-depth Interviews, and Documentation.

The data analysis technique follows the "Spiral Data Analysis" model developed by Creswell (2014), which consists of several stages: organizing data, reading and memoing, coding, and interpretation. This study employed triangulation of sources and methods. Data from observations of student behavior were compared with data from interviews and student work to ensure consistency in findings regarding their empathy development.

The data in this study were derived from interviews, observations, and documentation studies, using informants from third-grade students at SD 036 Ujung Berung, Bandung City. This criterion was determined based on the fact that when a child is in third or fourth grade (around 9-10 years old), it is often referred to as the "golden transition period" in a child's social development. At this age, children begin to abandon self-centered (egocentric) thinking and become aware of the broader social world. This is why cultivating empathy is crucial at this age.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Research findings indicate that moral story read-alouds play a significant role in facilitating meaningful learning that simultaneously addresses students' cognitive, affective, and social dimensions. This process aligns with Ausubel's theory of meaningful learning, which emphasizes the importance of connecting new information with students' existing cognitive structures. Through moral stories that are close to students' lived experiences, information is not received verbally but is instead interpreted through personal reflection and social interaction.

Students' cognitive engagement, evident in their ability to predict the plot, analyze moral conflicts, and make emotional inferences, demonstrates that read-alouds are not merely passive listening activities but rather higher-order thinking

processes. Students understand not only what happens in the story, but also why an event occurs and how it impacts the feelings of other characters. These findings reinforce the view that narrative literacy can be a vehicle for the simultaneous development of moral reasoning and empathy.

The participatory dialogue that develops during read-alouds demonstrates the creation of a safe learning environment, where students feel valued and free to express their views. Interactions between students, characterized by empathetic responses, agreements, or disagreements, reflect constructive social learning practices. This supports the principle of collaborative engagement within the Transformative Social and Emotional Learning (T-SEL) framework, which emphasizes the importance of equal relationships and reflective dialogue in developing social-emotional competencies.

The process of character identification and perspective-taking is central to the development of student empathy. When students are able to imagine themselves in a character's shoes and understand the motives behind their actions, a shift occurs from an egocentric perspective to a more mature social awareness. This aligns with the social developmental stage of elementary school children, where perspective-taking skills begin to develop significantly. These findings reinforce previous research suggesting that fictional narratives play a crucial role in developing the ability to understand others' perspectives.

The aspect of affective sharing indicates that the empathy that emerges is not solely cognitive but involves emotional resonance. Facial expressions, changes in voice intonation, and students' spontaneous reactions to the storyline indicate emotional mirroring. This is crucial because affective empathy is the foundation for the development of authentic social awareness. Without emotional involvement, moral values tend to remain merely normative knowledge that is easily forgotten.

Empathic concern is an important indicator that developing empathy has moved beyond understanding and feeling to prosocial action. Students' urge to help characters, propose altruistic solutions, and express discomfort with injustice indicates that moral values have begun to be internalized. Furthermore, the emergence of an intention to apply empathetic behavior in real life indicates the generalization of values from the story context to everyday social contexts. This finding confirms that read-alouds can bridge the process of internalizing values from the affective to the behavioral realm.

The social awareness developed through read-aloud activities demonstrates that students' empathy is contextual and social, not individualistic. Students are able to understand social norms, recognize injustice, and recognize the importance of environmental support in resolving moral issues. This aligns with the character education goals outlined in the Pancasila Student Profile, particularly in the dimensions of noble character, mutual cooperation, and global diversity.

The success of read-aloud activities in developing student empathy is also inseparable from the teacher's role as a facilitator of moral reflection. Teachers do

not act as one-way advisors, but rather as companions who stimulate questions, open dialogue, and help students interpret the meaning of the story based on their experiences. This approach enables students to independently develop an understanding of values, resulting in a deeper and more sustainable internalization of empathy. Compared to directly conveying moral messages, read-alouds provide a more contextual and non-patronizing learning experience, making them more easily accepted by elementary school students.

In the context of implementing the Independent Curriculum, this study's findings demonstrate that read-alouds align with the principles of learner-centered learning and the strengthening of the Pancasila Student Profile. The values of empathy, mutual cooperation, and noble character are not taught as abstract concepts, but are presented through narrative experiences that enable students to reflect on their feelings, take the perspective of others, and formulate prosocial actions. Thus, read-aloud activities serve as a bridge between reading literacy and character education, while also reinforcing socially conscious deep learning.

Overall, this discussion demonstrates that moral story read-alouds function as a transformative pedagogical strategy. This activity not only improves literacy skills but also fosters integrative empathy, encompassing understanding, feelings, and intention to act. In the context of an empathy crisis and the rise in bullying in elementary schools, read-alouds can be viewed as a relevant and applicable preventative approach to creating meaningful and socially conscious learning.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the implementation of the moral story read-aloud method at SDN 036 Ujungberung has proven effective as a meaningful learning strategy capable of mitigating the empathy crisis and bullying behavior at the elementary school level. Observations and interviews show that reading aloud provides a safe space for students to engage in perspective-taking and emotional resonance with the narrative characters. Through the five pillars of Transformative Social and Emotional Learning (T-SEL)—namely, identity, agency, belonging, collaborative engagement, and critical reasoning—students successfully internalized moral values not merely as normative knowledge, but as an internal awareness reflected in their own life experiences. This strategy successfully transformed the previously declarative and rigid pattern of values learning into an affective experience that taps into students' social sensitivity, thus encouraging prosocial behavior and better emotional management skills amidst the challenges of the digital era. Overall, read-aloud functions not merely as a mechanical literacy tool, but transforms into a humanitarian literacy that forms the foundation of students' character during their golden transition period. Based on the research findings, it is recommended that elementary school education practitioners integrate the read-aloud method into their routine school agendas, such as during circle time sessions or the integration of the Pancasila

Student Profile curriculum, to create an inclusive and preventative school climate against violence.

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