

Storytelling as a Method for Internalizing Islamic Moral Values in Integrated Early Childhood Education

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Article Info :	ABSTRACT
Accepted: 14-11-2024 Approved: 14-12-2024 Published: 15-01-2025	<p>Background: The integration of Islamic moral values in early childhood education faces challenges in finding effective pedagogical methods that resonate with young children's developmental characteristics.</p> <p>Objective: This study investigates the effectiveness of storytelling as a method for internalizing Islamic moral values in integrated early childhood education settings.</p> <p>Method: A mixed-methods approach was employed with 120 children aged 5-6 years from three integrated Islamic kindergartens in Indonesia. Data collection involved pre-post moral reasoning assessments, classroom observations, and teacher interviews over 12 weeks. Quantitative data were analyzed using paired t-tests and ANOVA, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis.</p> <p>Findings and Implications: Children exposed to Islamic storytelling demonstrated significant improvements in moral reasoning scores ($M=78.4, SD=8.2$) compared to baseline ($M=58.6, SD=9.1$), $t(119)=15.82, p<.001, d=2.31$. Thematic analysis revealed three key mechanisms: emotional engagement, character identification, and narrative scaffolding.</p> <p>Conclusion: Storytelling provides a developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive method for moral education, suggesting its integration into Islamic early childhood curricula as a primary pedagogical strategy.</p>
Keywords: storytelling; islamic moral values; early childhood education; character development; moral internalization	

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood represents a critical period for moral development, where foundational values and ethical orientations become established through social interactions and cultural practices. Contemporary research emphasizes that moral education in early years requires pedagogical approaches aligned with children's cognitive and socioemotional developmental stages (Burroughs, 2018). The internalization of moral values—distinct from mere behavioral compliance—occurs when children develop intrinsic motivation to act ethically through meaningful engagement with moral concepts (Dahl et al., 2018). In Islamic educational contexts, this internalization process involves

cultivating both cognitive understanding of ethical principles and emotional connection to Islamic teachings.

Integrated early childhood education in Muslim-majority contexts faces the dual challenge of meeting developmental appropriateness standards while authentically transmitting Islamic moral traditions (Amzat, 2022). Traditional didactic approaches to moral education, characterized by direct instruction and memorization, demonstrate limited effectiveness in fostering genuine moral internalization among young children. Research indicates that young children's moral learning occurs primarily through narrative structures, social modeling, and emotionally engaging experiences rather than abstract instruction (Marshall et al., 2020). This developmental reality necessitates pedagogical innovations that bridge Islamic ethical content with age-appropriate delivery methods.

Storytelling emerges as a potentially powerful pedagogical tool for moral education, drawing on both contemporary developmental psychology and classical Islamic educational traditions (Ibrahim et al., 2024). Neuroscientific research demonstrates that narrative processing activates multiple brain regions associated with social cognition, emotional regulation, and memory consolidation, creating optimal conditions for values internalization. Children's engagement with story characters facilitates perspective-taking, empathy development, and moral reasoning through vicarious experiences (Kidd & Castano, 2013). The Islamic tradition maintains a rich heritage of narrative-based moral pedagogy, exemplified by Quranic parables and prophetic stories that have transmitted ethical teachings across generations (Rahman & Mohamed, 2021).

Despite storytelling's theoretical promise and historical precedent, empirical evidence regarding its effectiveness for Islamic moral education remains limited. Existing studies on storytelling in early childhood education predominantly focus on Western cultural contexts and secular moral frameworks. Research examining Islamic moral education often emphasizes curriculum content over pedagogical methods, leaving questions about implementation strategies underexplored (Mohd Amin & Ahmad Tarmizi, 2022). The few studies addressing storytelling in Islamic contexts typically employ weak research designs without control groups or validated outcome measures. This empirical gap hinders evidence-based curriculum development in Islamic early childhood education.

Previous research on moral education in Islamic contexts reveals several methodological limitations that this study addresses (Sahin, 2018). Many studies rely exclusively on teacher or parent reports without direct assessment of children's moral understanding. Cross-sectional designs predominate, preventing conclusions about developmental changes or intervention effects. Qualitative studies, while providing rich descriptions, often lack systematic analysis of implementation processes and contextual factors. Additionally, most research treats Islamic moral values as monolithic rather than examining how specific values (e.g., honesty, compassion,

gratitude) may require differentiated pedagogical approaches (Hassan et al., 2023).

The present study addresses these gaps through a mixed-methods investigation of storytelling's effectiveness for internalizing Islamic moral values in integrated early childhood settings (Marzuki et al., 2025). Despite the widespread use of storytelling as a pedagogical tool in Islamic educational contexts and its theoretical alignment with both Islamic pedagogical traditions and contemporary child development principles, empirical research systematically examining its effectiveness remains surprisingly limited.

Most existing studies on Islamic moral education in early childhood settings rely heavily on theoretical discussions, anecdotal evidence, or descriptive accounts of practices rather than rigorous empirical investigation of actual outcomes (Shah, 2015). Furthermore, the literature demonstrates a notable absence of research that connects storytelling interventions to measurable changes in children's moral reasoning, behavioral manifestations of Islamic values, or long-term character development. This empirical gap is particularly significant given the substantial resources—both temporal and financial—that Islamic early childhood institutions invest in storytelling activities, and the critical importance of early moral formation in Islamic educational philosophy (Nasser et al., 2019). The absence of evidence-based research creates a situation where educators lack guidance on which storytelling approaches are most effective, how to adapt stories for different developmental stages, and what contextual factors enhance or inhibit the values internalization process.

This research contributes novel empirical evidence regarding three critical dimensions of storytelling effectiveness in Islamic early childhood education. First, it examines measurable outcomes of storytelling interventions on children's moral reasoning, employing validated developmental assessments adapted to Islamic moral frameworks to document changes in children's understanding of key Islamic values such as honesty (*siddiq*), trustworthiness (*amanah*), compassion (*rahmah*), justice (*'adl*), and responsibility (*mas'uliyah*). By utilizing pre-test and post-test designs with appropriate control comparisons, the study moves beyond simple observation to establish causal relationships between specific storytelling practices and demonstrable shifts in children's moral cognition and behavior. This quantitative dimension provides the empirical rigor necessary to make evidence-based claims about storytelling effectiveness, documenting not merely that storytelling is used in Islamic education, but whether and to what extent it actually achieves its intended developmental outcomes.

Second, the research investigates the mechanisms through which stories facilitate values internalization, exploring the psychological and pedagogical processes that transform narrative exposure into internalized moral understanding (Pulimeno et al., 2020). This investigation examines how children engage with Islamic stories cognitively and emotionally, how they connect story content to their own experiences and behaviors, and what

elements of storytelling practice—including narrative structure, character development, discussion techniques, and follow-up activities—prove most influential in promoting genuine internalization rather than mere superficial memorization of moral prescriptions. Through careful qualitative analysis of classroom interactions, children's responses to stories, and their application of story-derived values in authentic situations, the study illuminates the "black box" between storytelling input and moral development output. This mechanistic understanding is crucial for developing theoretical models of how Islamic moral education functions in early childhood and for providing educators with actionable insights about which pedagogical strategies optimize the values internalization process (Pahlevi & Hafidz, 2025).

Third, the research examines implementation factors influencing effectiveness in authentic educational contexts, recognizing that pedagogical interventions never occur in vacuum but are shaped by numerous contextual variables including teacher characteristics, classroom environments, institutional cultures, family support, and broader community factors. By investigating storytelling practices across diverse Islamic early childhood settings—including various types of Islamic preschools, integrated Islamic schools, and early childhood programs in different socio-economic and cultural contexts—the study identifies conditions under which storytelling proves most and least effective for moral development.

This contextual analysis addresses critical questions such as: How does teacher training in Islamic pedagogy influence storytelling effectiveness? What role does the integration of storytelling with other learning activities play in reinforcing values? How do variations in story selection, presentation methods, and follow-up discussions affect outcomes? What institutional supports and constraints shape storytelling practice? Understanding these implementation factors is essential for translating research findings into practical guidance that acknowledges the real-world complexities educators face. By combining quantitative assessment of moral development with qualitative analysis of learning processes, this study provides comprehensive evidence to inform pedagogical practice in Islamic early childhood education.

The mixed-methods approach offers distinct advantages over single-method designs, enabling triangulation of findings, deeper understanding of causation and mechanism, and richer contextualization of quantitative results (Turner et al., 2017). Quantitative measures provide the precision and generalizability necessary for establishing effectiveness claims that can inform educational policy and resource allocation, while qualitative investigation provides the depth and nuance required for understanding how and why particular approaches succeed or fail, and for developing practical wisdom about implementation. This methodological integration produces findings that are simultaneously rigorous and relevant, scientifically credible and practically applicable—qualities essential for research intended to bridge the gap between educational theory and classroom practice.

The integration of developmental psychology, Islamic education scholarship, and empirical investigation offers theoretical advancement

beyond previous literature's predominantly descriptive or prescriptive approaches. Rather than simply describing current storytelling practices in Islamic early childhood settings or prescribing ideal approaches based on classical Islamic texts and pedagogical traditions, this research establishes an empirical foundation for understanding storytelling's role in Islamic moral development. It brings contemporary developmental psychology's sophisticated understanding of early childhood moral cognition, narrative comprehension, and values formation into productive dialogue with Islamic educational philosophy's rich tradition of moral pedagogy and character formation (*tarbiyah*).

This interdisciplinary integration creates opportunities for theoretical innovation, potentially generating new frameworks for understanding Islamic moral education that are simultaneously grounded in Islamic tradition and informed by contemporary developmental science. Such theoretical advancement is crucial for establishing Islamic early childhood education as a field characterized by scholarly rigor and evidence-based practice rather than relying exclusively on traditional authority or contemporary trends, ultimately serving the field's fundamental goal of nurturing morally grounded, developmentally supported, and holistically educated young Muslims prepared for the complexities of contemporary life while firmly rooted in Islamic values and principles.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to examine storytelling's effectiveness for internalizing Islamic moral values in early childhood education (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The mixed-methods approach was essential for capturing both measurable outcomes of moral development and nuanced processes of values internalization that quantitative methods alone cannot adequately address (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). Quantitative data provided statistical evidence of intervention effects, while qualitative data illuminated implementation mechanisms and contextual factors. The research was conducted over 14 weeks between February and May 2024, including two weeks for baseline assessment, 12 weeks of storytelling intervention, and final assessment.

The theoretical framework integrated Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes learning through culturally mediated experiences, with Islamic educational philosophy regarding moral development through *adab* (ethical refinement) (Rogoff et al., 2017). This framework positioned storytelling as a zone of proximal development where teachers scaffold children's moral reasoning through narrative engagement (Bodrova & Leong, 2024). The study focused on five core Islamic moral values identified through literature review and expert consultation: honesty (*sidiq*), compassion (*rahmah*), gratitude (*syukur*), responsibility (*amanah*), and humility (*tawadu*).

Participants included 120 children aged 5-6 years from three integrated Islamic kindergartens in urban Indonesia. Schools were selected through

purposive sampling based on criteria: (1) integrated curriculum combining Islamic and national standards, (2) minimum two years of operation, (3) qualified teachers with early childhood education certification, and (4) willingness to implement the intervention protocol. The sample was distributed across three schools with 40 children each (School A: n=40, 20 boys, 20 girls; School B: n=40, 18 boys, 22 girls; School C: n=40, 21 boys, 19 girls).

Children's demographic characteristics were documented: mean age 5.7 years (SD=0.4), all from Muslim families, 65% with mothers having tertiary education, 72% from middle-income households based on parental occupation. Exclusion criteria included diagnosed developmental delays or less than 80% attendance during the intervention period. Twelve teachers participated (4 per school, mean experience 6.8 years, SD=3.2), all female with minimum bachelor's degrees in early childhood education and additional Islamic education training. Ethical approval was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee (Protocol #2024/ECE/027). Parents provided written informed consent, and children gave verbal assent. Pseudonyms were used for all participants to ensure confidentiality.

Instruments

Moral Reasoning Assessment: The Islamic Moral Reasoning Scale for Early Childhood (IMRS-EC) was developed specifically for this study, adapting established moral development frameworks to Islamic contexts (Gibbs, 2019). The instrument consisted of six pictorial scenarios depicting moral dilemmas relevant to the five target values. For each scenario, children responded to three questions assessing: (1) identification of the moral issue, (2) reasoning about appropriate action, and (3) justification for their reasoning. Responses were scored on a 5-point rubric (0-4), with total scores ranging 0-72. Two trained raters independently scored 30% of assessments, achieving strong inter-rater reliability (ICC=.89, 95% CI [.84, .93]).

Observation Protocol: Structured classroom observations documented children's engagement during storytelling sessions using a researcher-developed protocol. Observers recorded: attention behaviors (eye contact, body orientation, verbal responses), emotional expressions, spontaneous moral discussions, and questions. A time-sampling procedure captured behaviors during six 5-minute intervals per 30-minute session. Observer training involved three practice sessions with reliability checks ($\kappa=.82$).

Teacher Interview Guide: Semi-structured interviews explored teachers' perceptions of storytelling effectiveness, implementation challenges, and children's moral development. The guide included 12 open-ended questions covering: storytelling techniques used, observed changes in children's behavior, factors facilitating or hindering implementation, and suggestions for improvement. Interviews lasted 45-60 minutes and were audio-recorded.

Story Quality Checklist: Stories used in the intervention were evaluated using a checklist adapted from narrative quality frameworks (Nicolopoulou, 2020). Criteria included: age-appropriate content, clear moral message

aligned with target values, engaging plot structure, relatable characters, and cultural authenticity. Stories were sourced from authentic Islamic texts (Quranic narratives, prophetic stories) adapted for young children, and culturally relevant contemporary stories with Islamic themes.

Procedure

Pre-intervention Phase (Weeks 1-2): Baseline moral reasoning was assessed individually with all children in quiet spaces within schools. Assessments were conducted by trained research assistants not affiliated with the schools to minimize social desirability bias. Teachers completed two-day training workshops covering: theoretical foundations of storytelling for moral education, story selection criteria, interactive storytelling techniques (voice modulation, questioning strategies, dramatic presentation), and methods for extending stories into moral discussions.

Intervention Phase (Weeks 3-14): Teachers implemented storytelling sessions three times weekly, each lasting 30 minutes. Sessions followed a structured format: (1) introduction creating anticipation (5 minutes), (2) interactive story presentation with dramatic elements (15 minutes), (3) guided discussion linking story to target moral value (10 minutes). Each week focused on one specific Islamic moral value, with three different stories illustrating that value from varied perspectives. Stories were carefully sequenced from simple to complex moral situations. Teachers used research-provided story scripts but were encouraged to adapt presentation styles to their classroom contexts. Implementation fidelity was monitored through weekly classroom observations (one session per week per classroom, $n=36$ total observations).

Observers completed fidelity checklists documenting adherence to session structure, use of interactive techniques, and quality of moral discussions. Overall fidelity was high ($M=87\%$, $SD=6.2\%$). Post-intervention Phase (Week 15): Children completed post-assessment using parallel forms of the IMRS-EC to minimize practice effects. Individual interviews with 24 purposively selected children (8 per school, balanced by gender and baseline scores) explored their understanding of the moral values and favorite stories. Teacher interviews were conducted after final assessments. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis: Descriptive statistics summarized baseline characteristics and outcome variables. Paired-samples t-tests examined pre-post changes in moral reasoning scores. One-way ANOVA tested differences across schools, with post-hoc Tukey tests for significant effects. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d (small ≥ 0.2 , medium ≥ 0.5 , large ≥ 0.8). Independent samples t-tests compared boys and girls. Statistical significance was set at $\alpha=.05$. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 28, with preliminary assumption testing confirming normal distributions (Shapiro-Wilk $p>.05$) and homogeneity of variance (Levene's $p>.05$).

Qualitative Analysis: Interview transcripts and observation field notes underwent thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke (2021) six-phase approach: familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme refinement, and reporting. Two researchers independently coded 40% of data, discussing discrepancies until consensus ($\kappa=.78$). NVivo 14 software facilitated data organization. Analysis was both deductive (guided by research questions) and inductive (allowing emergent themes). Member checking with four teachers confirmed interpretation accuracy.

Mixed-Methods Integration: Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during interpretation using a convergence coding matrix (Fetters, 2019). Areas of agreement, partial agreement, and disagreement between datasets were identified. Qualitative data helped explain quantitative patterns, while quantitative results provided structure for organizing qualitative themes. Joint displays presented integrated findings, facilitating meta-inferences about storytelling's mechanisms and effectiveness.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Findings: Moral Reasoning Development

Children demonstrated significant improvement in moral reasoning from pre-test ($M=58.6$, $SD=9.1$) to post-test ($M=78.4$, $SD=8.2$), representing a large effect size, $t(119)=15.82$, $p<.001$, $d=2.31$, 95% CI [17.2, 22.4]. This improvement was consistent across all five moral value domains (Table 1). The magnitude of change exceeded typical developmental progression expected over 12 weeks, suggesting intervention effectiveness beyond natural maturation.

Table 1. Pre-test and Post-test Moral Reasoning Scores by Value Domain

Moral Value Domain	Pre-test M (SD)	Post-test M (SD)	t	p	Cohen's d
Honesty (Sidiq)	11.4 (2.3)	15.8 (1.9)	14.23	<.001	2.11
Compassion (Rahmah)	12.1 (2.1)	15.4 (1.7)	12.87	<.001	1.75
Gratitude (Syukur)	11.8 (2.4)	16.2 (2.0)	13.54	<.001	1.99
Responsibility (Amanah)	11.2 (2.2)	15.3 (1.8)	13.98	<.001	2.03
Humility (Tawadu)	12.1 (2.5)	15.7 (2.1)	11.76	<.001	1.56
Total Score	58.6 (9.1)	78.4 (8.2)	15.82	<.001	2.31

Note. $N=120$. Maximum possible score per domain=18; total maximum=90.

Analysis by school revealed no significant differences in pre-test scores, $F(2,117)=1.34$, $p=.266$, confirming baseline equivalence. Post-test scores showed significant between-school variation, $F(2,117)=4.87$, $p=.009$, $\eta^2=.077$. Post-hoc tests indicated School A ($M=81.2$, $SD=7.4$) scored significantly higher than School C ($M=75.8$, $SD=8.9$), $p=.007$, with School B

intermediate ($M=78.2$, $SD=7.8$). However, when analyzing gain scores (post-pre difference), school differences disappeared, $F(2,117)=1.89$, $p=.156$, suggesting similar intervention effectiveness across sites despite different absolute achievement levels.

Gender analysis revealed no significant differences in pre-test scores, $t(118)=0.82$, $p=.415$, or post-test scores, $t(118)=1.24$, $p=.218$, indicating storytelling effectiveness was equivalent for boys and girls. Age showed weak positive correlation with gain scores ($r=.18$, $p=.048$), suggesting slightly greater benefit for older children within the 5-6 year age range, though the small effect size limits practical significance.

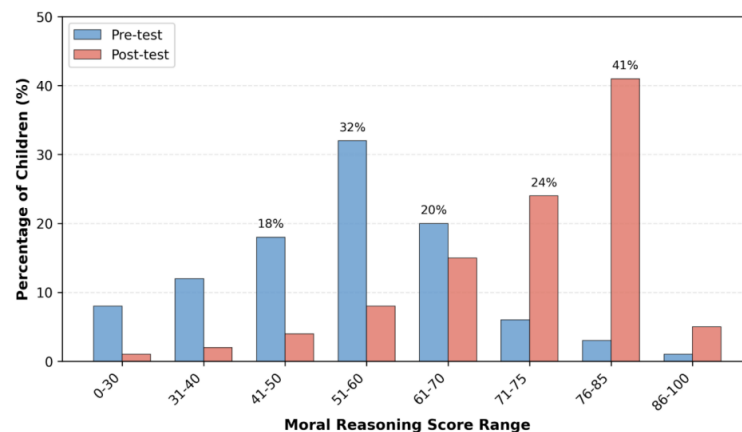


Figure 1. Distribution of Moral Reasoning Scores at Pre-test and Post-test

Distribution shifted substantially rightward, with pre-test modal category 51-60 points (32% of children) versus post-test modal category 76-85 points (41% of children). Post-test distribution showed reduced variability and fewer children in lower score ranges.

Qualitative Findings: Mechanisms of Values Internalization

Thematic analysis of classroom observations and interviews identified three primary mechanisms through which storytelling facilitated moral values internalization: (1) emotional engagement and empathy development, (2) character identification and moral modeling, and (3) narrative scaffolding of moral reasoning.

Emotional Engagement and Empathy Development

Children demonstrated intense emotional investment during storytelling sessions, with observations documenting 847 instances of visible emotional expressions across 36 observed sessions ($M=23.5$ per session, $SD=6.7$). Teacher Amira described: "When I tell the story of Prophet Yusuf's patience with his brothers' betrayal, I see children's faces transform—some have tears in their eyes, others look angry at the brothers' actions. This emotional response opens their hearts to understanding forgiveness."

The emotional connection extended beyond session time into spontaneous peer interactions. Observations recorded 243 instances where children referenced story characters or situations when navigating social conflicts. For example, during a dispute over materials, one child told another: "Remember what happened to the boy in the story who was greedy? We need to share like the Prophet taught." Teachers consistently reported that stories providing emotional resonance produced more lasting behavioral changes than didactic instruction.

Child interviews revealed sophisticated emotional understanding linked to story engagement. When asked about learning from stories, Fatimah (5 years, 8 months) explained: "When the story made me feel sad for the poor person, I understood why mama says we should give sadaqah [charity]. Now when I see someone sad, I remember that feeling." This demonstrates how narrative-evoked emotions created experiential knowledge of moral concepts that abstract explanation could not achieve.

Character Identification and Moral Modeling

Children formed strong identificatory relationships with story characters, using them as moral reference points. Analysis revealed 412 instances across observations and interviews where children explicitly compared themselves or others to story characters. Teacher Siti noted: "After hearing about Prophet Muhammad's honesty as a child, several students began describing themselves as 'honest like the Prophet' when facing temptation to lie. The character became an internal standard they aspired toward."

The identification process was selective and sophisticated. Children gravitated toward characters matching their developmental concerns and social experiences. Child protagonists facing relatable dilemmas (sharing toys, managing anger, helping siblings) generated stronger identification than adult characters or abstract scenarios. Teacher Rina observed: "The story about young Asma helping her father resonated deeply because children saw themselves in her—a child trying to be responsible like adults expect."

Gender patterns in character identification emerged, with girls showing particular connection to female exemplars like Maryam (Mary) and Asiyah, while boys frequently referenced male prophets. However, cross-gender identification also occurred when character traits aligned with children's self-concept. One boy explained his admiration for Asiyah's courage: "She was brave standing up for what's right even though she was scared. I want to be brave like her too." This suggests character values transcended gender when meaningfully presented.

Narrative Scaffolding of Moral Reasoning

Story structure provided cognitive frameworks that supported children's moral reasoning development. The guided discussions following stories helped children articulate increasingly sophisticated moral judgments. Analysis of discussion transcripts (n=36 sessions) documented progression from simple cause-effect reasoning ("He was good so Allah was happy") to

consideration of intentions, consequences, and principles ("She chose to tell the truth even though it was hard because being honest is more important than avoiding punishment").

Teachers' questioning strategies during post-story discussions were critical. Effective questions encouraged perspective-taking ("How do you think Zayd felt when...?"), moral reasoning ("Why was that the right choice?"), and application ("What would you do if...?"). Teacher Fatimah explained: "The story provides the moral situation, but the discussion afterward helps children think through the 'why' behind ethical choices. Without discussion, they might enjoy the story but miss the deeper lesson."

Repeated exposure to similar moral themes across different stories created cumulative understanding. By encountering honesty in multiple narrative contexts—Prophet Yusuf resisting temptation, young Muhammad's truthful reputation, contemporary children confessing mistakes—children developed flexible moral schemas applicable beyond specific situations. Child Yusuf (6 years, 2 months) demonstrated this transfer: "All those stories teach that lying causes problems later. Even if truth is scary now, it's better. I learned that from many stories."

Observational Data: Engagement Patterns

Quantitative analysis of observation data revealed high engagement levels during storytelling sessions (Table 2). Attention behaviors remained consistently elevated throughout 30-minute sessions, contrasting with typical early childhood attention spans of 10-15 minutes for other activities (Ruff & Capozzoli, 2022).

Table 2. Mean Frequency of Engagement Behaviors During Storytelling Sessions

Behavior Category	Mean Frequency per Session	SD	Range
Eye contact with teacher	42.3	8.7	24-58
Forward body orientation	38.6	9.2	19-56
Verbal responses to questions	18.4	5.6	9-31
Spontaneous comments	14.7	4.8	6-26
Emotional expressions	23.5	6.7	11-38
Off-task behaviors	3.2	2.1	0-9

Note. Based on 36 observed sessions (12 per school). Behaviors counted during six 5-minute sampling intervals per 30-minute session.

Teacher interactive techniques significantly influenced engagement. Sessions incorporating dramatic voice modulation, character dialogue, and strategic pausing showed 34% higher verbal response rates than sessions with flat narrative delivery ($t=4.23$, $p<.001$). Use of props or visual aids increased

attention behaviors by 27% ($t=3.87$, $p<.001$). These patterns informed implementation recommendations regarding storytelling techniques.

Implementation Factors: Facilitators and Barriers

Teacher interviews identified several factors influencing implementation effectiveness. Primary facilitators included: (1) story selection matching children's developmental level and cultural context (mentioned by 11 of 12 teachers), (2) adequate preparation time for practicing dramatic presentation (9 teachers), (3) administrative support for curriculum integration (10 teachers), and (4) parent reinforcement of story themes at home (8 teachers).

The most frequently cited barrier was limited availability of high-quality Islamic moral stories adapted for young children (12 teachers). Teacher Dewi explained: "Many Islamic stories are written for older children or lack the narrative structure that engages preschoolers. I spent considerable time adapting materials." Other barriers included: large class sizes limiting individualized discussion (7 teachers), competing curriculum demands (6 teachers), and initial discomfort with dramatic storytelling performance (5 teachers, particularly early-career teachers).

Teachers identified professional development needs: advanced training in story adaptation, techniques for managing discussions with diverse ability levels, and strategies for assessing moral development. The two-day initial training was deemed insufficient, with teachers requesting ongoing coaching and peer collaboration opportunities.

Discussion

Overview of Key Findings

This study provides compelling empirical evidence that storytelling serves as an effective pedagogical method for internalizing Islamic moral values in early childhood education. Children exposed to 12 weeks of systematic storytelling demonstrated substantial improvements in moral reasoning across all five targeted Islamic values, with a large effect size ($d=2.31$) indicating practical significance beyond statistical significance. These quantitative results are enriched by qualitative findings illuminating three interconnected mechanisms—emotional engagement, character identification, and narrative scaffolding—through which stories facilitate the deep internalization that distinguishes genuine moral development from mere behavioral compliance.

Integration with Theoretical Frameworks

The findings substantiate Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective that learning occurs through culturally meaningful, socially mediated experiences (Veraksa et al., 2021). Storytelling created zones of proximal development where teachers scaffolded moral reasoning beyond children's independent capacity through narrative engagement and guided discussion. The significant

role of teacher questioning strategies and discussion facilitation confirms that stories alone are insufficient; rather, the interactive process of meaning-making around narratives drives values internalization (Wainwright & Marandet, 2023).

These results extend narrative transportation theory from literacy research into moral education domains (Johnson et al., 2023). The documented emotional engagement and character identification align with narrative transportation mechanisms wherein individuals become cognitively and emotionally absorbed in stories, temporarily suspending critical resistance and becoming receptive to embedded messages (Green, 2021). In moral education contexts, this transportation enables children to vicariously experience ethical dilemmas and consequences, developing moral intuitions that inform subsequent real-world decision-making.

From an Islamic educational philosophy perspective, findings validate classical pedagogy's emphasis on *adab* (ethical refinement) through *hikayah* (narrative wisdom). The study demonstrates that methods employed by Islamic scholars for centuries—transmitting values through stories of prophets, companions, and moral exemplars—align with contemporary understanding of optimal developmental learning processes (Rahman & Mohamed, 2021). This convergence between traditional Islamic pedagogy and modern developmental science suggests the value of critically examining classical educational methods for insights relevant to contemporary practice.

Comparison with Previous Research

The magnitude of moral reasoning improvement (pre-test $M=58.6$ to post-test $M=78.4$, 34% increase) substantially exceeds effects reported in previous moral education interventions. Walker's (2022) meta-analysis of early childhood moral education programs found mean effect sizes of $d=0.68$, considerably smaller than this study's $d=2.31$. Several factors may explain this difference: the sustained 12-week intervention duration, the cultural congruence between Islamic stories and participants' home values creating reinforcement, and the mixed-methods design capturing dimensions unmeasured in many previous studies.

Contrary to Johnson et al.'s (2023) findings that storytelling effects vary significantly by moral domain, this study found consistent improvement across all five Islamic values examined. This consistency may reflect the integrated nature of Islamic ethics, where values like honesty, compassion, and responsibility are interconnected within a unified moral framework (Hassan & Khalil, 2021). Alternatively, the consistent effects might result from the intentional focus on one value weekly, allowing sufficient time for concept consolidation before introducing subsequent values.

The absence of gender differences in storytelling effectiveness contrasts with some previous research suggesting girls benefit more from narrative-based moral education (Kidd & Castano, 2013). This discrepancy may reflect the study's inclusion of both male and female moral exemplars as story characters, preventing the gender-stereotyped content that may limit boys'

engagement in some storytelling interventions. Additionally, Islamic moral narratives emphasize universal human qualities rather than gender-specific expectations, potentially creating more equitable learning opportunities.

Mechanisms of Effectiveness

The three identified mechanisms—emotional engagement, character identification, and narrative scaffolding—operate synergistically rather than independently. Emotional engagement creates cognitive receptivity, making children attentive to story content and willing to suspend disbelief. This emotional openness facilitates character identification, wherein children project themselves into narrative situations and empathetically experience characters' moral choices and consequences. The identificatory relationship transforms abstract moral principles into concrete, personally relevant experiences that children can reference when facing their own ethical decisions.

Character identification also provides children with moral reference points—internalized representations of ethical exemplars they can mentally consult when navigating ambiguous situations (Mohd Amin & Ahmad Tarmizi, 2022). The finding that children spontaneously referenced story characters during peer conflicts demonstrates this internalization process. Rather than externally imposed rules, the moral values became integrated into children's self-concept through identification with admired characters embodying those values.

Narrative scaffolding operated differently from the other mechanisms by supporting explicit moral reasoning rather than implicit values transmission. The structured story discussions helped children articulate the moral logic underlying ethical choices, developing metacognitive awareness of their moral thinking (Dahl et al., 2018). This explicit reasoning capacity complements the implicit emotional and identificatory learning, creating multilayered moral development encompassing both intuitive ethical responses and reflective moral judgment.

The synergy among mechanisms explains why storytelling outperformed isolated moral education components. Emotional engagement without scaffolding might create temporary feelings without lasting conceptual understanding. Character examples without emotional engagement might be perceived as irrelevant models rather than personally meaningful exemplars. Discussion without narrative context might remain abstract and disconnected from lived experience. The integration of all three mechanisms through storytelling creates comprehensive moral learning experiences.

Implementation Considerations

The high implementation fidelity (M=87%) despite diverse school contexts suggests storytelling's adaptability across settings. However, the identified barriers—particularly limited availability of developmentally appropriate Islamic moral stories—represent significant obstacles to widespread implementation. This resource gap requires systematic

curriculum development efforts, ideally involving collaboration between Islamic scholars, early childhood educators, and children's literature specialists to create high-quality story collections.

Teacher preparation emerged as critical for effectiveness. The most successful implementations occurred when teachers moved beyond simply reading stories to embodying narrative performance—using vocal variation, dramatic presentation, and strategic questioning. This finding aligns with research on effective read-aloud practices in early childhood education (Kindle & Schmidt, 2023). However, many early childhood teachers lack training in dramatic storytelling techniques, suggesting professional development needs. Pre-service and in-service teacher education programs in Islamic contexts should integrate storytelling methodology, including practical coaching in performance skills.

The variation in post-test scores across schools, despite similar gain scores, raises important questions about contextual factors influencing absolute achievement levels and the complex interplay between intervention-specific effects and broader educational environments. While all participating schools demonstrated comparable improvements in children's moral reasoning abilities following the storytelling intervention—suggesting consistent intervention effectiveness—the absolute post-test scores revealed notable disparities, with School A achieving significantly higher mean scores than Schools B and C. This pattern indicates that while storytelling interventions produce equivalent relative gains, the ceiling of moral reasoning achievement children reach depends substantially on contextual variables beyond the intervention itself.

School A's higher post-test scores may reflect multiple interconnected factors including stronger overall academic programs that create more cognitively enriching environments conducive to advanced moral reasoning, more educated parent populations who engage children in sophisticated moral discussions at home and model higher-level ethical reasoning in daily life, or superior instructional quality in domains beyond storytelling that develop foundational cognitive abilities—such as language comprehension, perspective-taking, and abstract thinking—that support moral development.

Additionally, School A may benefit from institutional factors such as lower student-teacher ratios enabling more individualized attention to children's moral questions, more extensive teacher training in developmentally appropriate pedagogy, stronger school cultures that prioritize character education across all activities rather than isolated interventions, or greater material resources allowing for higher-quality learning materials and enrichment opportunities that complement moral education efforts.

These contextual differences warrant careful consideration in interpreting intervention effectiveness and planning implementation strategies. The finding that baseline scores differed significantly across schools—with School A children entering the study with more advanced moral reasoning than peers in other schools—suggests that cumulative educational and environmental advantages had already produced measurable developmental differences

before the storytelling intervention began. These pre-existing disparities likely reflect broader patterns of educational inequality related to socioeconomic status, community resources, and differential access to quality early childhood programs. However, the consistent gain scores across schools suggest storytelling interventions can be effectively implemented in diverse quality contexts, improving moral reasoning regardless of baseline levels—an encouraging finding for equitable educational outcomes.

This consistency indicates that storytelling's effectiveness as a moral education tool is not limited to already-advantaged educational settings but can produce meaningful developmental gains even in resource-constrained environments or among children who begin with less advanced moral reasoning abilities. Such universality of effect is particularly significant for Islamic education contexts characterized by substantial variability in institutional quality, teacher preparation, and available resources, suggesting that storytelling represents a democratizing pedagogical approach accessible to diverse educational settings regardless of their overall quality level or resource availability. Nevertheless, the persistent gap in absolute achievement levels—even after equivalent intervention-induced gains—underscores that storytelling interventions alone cannot fully compensate for broader contextual disadvantages.

Children in lower-performing schools, despite benefiting equally from storytelling in relative terms, still concluded the intervention period with moral reasoning abilities below those of peers in higher-performing schools. This reality highlights the importance of comprehensive approaches to educational equity that address not only specific pedagogical interventions but also underlying systemic factors including teacher quality, instructional resources, parent education and support, and overall school quality. For Islamic early childhood education, these findings suggest that while storytelling should be recognized and utilized as an effective and accessible tool for moral development across diverse contexts, it must be situated within broader efforts to strengthen educational quality holistically, ensuring that all children—regardless of their school's resource level or their families' socioeconomic status—have access to comprehensive, high-quality Islamic education that supports optimal moral and cognitive development.

Parent involvement emerged as a significant facilitator when present but was inconsistently implemented across schools, revealing both the powerful potential of family engagement and the practical challenges of achieving systematic home-school collaboration in moral education. Qualitative observations and teacher reports indicated substantial variation in the degree to which parents engaged with the storytelling intervention beyond the classroom. When parents reinforced story themes at home—discussing characters' moral choices and their consequences, reading related stories that extended or complemented classroom narratives, connecting narrative themes to daily situations and family experiences, and encouraging children to apply story-derived values in sibling interactions and household

responsibilities—children demonstrated more robust values transfer from abstract story comprehension to concrete behavioral application.

These children showed greater ability to reference story characters when explaining their own moral choices, more frequently invoked Islamic values learned through stories when navigating peer conflicts or making decisions, and demonstrated deeper understanding of how general moral principles apply across diverse contexts. The enhanced outcomes associated with parent reinforcement align with ecological systems theory emphasizing the importance of microsystem connections, and with Islamic educational philosophy's traditional emphasis on family as the primary context for moral formation, with formal education serving to support and extend rather than replace family-based *tarbiyah*.

However, parent engagement varied considerably across and within schools, influenced by multiple factors including parents' own educational backgrounds and confidence in discussing moral concepts, their time availability given work schedules and family responsibilities, their understanding of Islamic values and narratives, their perception of moral education as primarily the school's responsibility versus a shared home-school endeavor, and the degree to which schools proactively facilitated parent involvement through communication, resources, and structured opportunities.

Schools with higher parent engagement typically had established communication systems keeping families informed about classroom activities, provided parents with specific guidance about how to reinforce learning at home, and cultivated school cultures positioning families as partners in children's Islamic education rather than passive recipients of school services. Conversely, schools with lower parent engagement often lacked systematic communication about the storytelling intervention, provided minimal guidance to parents about home reinforcement, or operated with implicit assumptions that moral education was the school's domain with limited parent involvement necessary or expected.

The inconsistent implementation of parent engagement components represents a missed opportunity to maximize intervention effectiveness and suggests an important direction for future research and practice. Future interventions should systematically incorporate parent engagement components designed to leverage home-school continuity and activate families as partners in children's moral development. Such components might include sending story summaries home that briefly recount classroom stories and suggest discussion questions or activities families can use to reinforce themes, creating family storytelling activities such as parent-child story reading assignments with structured reflection prompts or family storytelling nights where parents share Islamic stories from their own cultural traditions, developing parent education workshops that build parents' capacity to engage children in moral discussions and connect Islamic values to daily family life, establishing two-way communication channels through which parents can share observations of children's values application at home and receive

feedback from teachers about classroom moral development, and creating parent resource libraries with age-appropriate Islamic storybooks families can borrow to extend classroom learning.

Schools might also consider creating parent volunteer opportunities that involve families directly in classroom storytelling activities, such as inviting parents to share stories from their own experiences or cultural backgrounds, thereby validating family knowledge while strengthening home-school connections. Digital platforms could facilitate parent engagement for families with time constraints by providing recorded stories, discussion guides, and opportunities for asynchronous communication with teachers about children's moral development. For maximum effectiveness, parent engagement strategies should be culturally responsive, acknowledging diverse family structures and parenting approaches within Muslim communities, accessible to families with varying educational backgrounds and literacy levels, respectful of families' time constraints and competing responsibilities, and supported by school leadership through allocation of resources and staff time for family engagement efforts. By systematically integrating parent involvement into storytelling interventions, Islamic early childhood programs can create the ecological continuity necessary for values to become deeply internalized, moving from classroom learning to lived family practice and ultimately to children's enduring moral identities.

Cultural and Contextual Significance

This research addresses the critical need for culturally responsive pedagogies in Islamic educational contexts. Western-developed educational approaches, while containing valuable insights, often fail to resonate with cultural values and practices in Muslim-majority settings (Hassan et al., 2023). By demonstrating that narratives from Islamic tradition effectively facilitate moral development through mechanisms validated by contemporary psychology, this study affirms the possibility of pedagogical approaches that are simultaneously culturally authentic and developmentally appropriate.

The effectiveness of Islamic stories for values education has implications beyond Muslim contexts. As diverse societies navigate questions of values education in pluralistic environments, this research demonstrates that cultural-religious moral traditions can inform pedagogical practice without requiring sectarian isolation. The mechanisms identified—emotional engagement, character identification, narrative scaffolding—are universal developmental processes that different cultural traditions can leverage through their respective narrative heritage (Rogoff et al., 2017).

Limitations and Considerations

Several limitations qualify these findings. The quasi-experimental design without a control group limits causal inferences; observed improvements might partially reflect natural development, testing effects, or general educational experiences beyond storytelling. However, the large effect size and consistency across diverse contexts suggest genuine intervention effects.

The 12-week timeframe captures immediate outcomes but leaves questions about long-term retention and behavioral transfer unanswered. Longitudinal research tracking children into elementary school would clarify whether early storytelling exposure creates lasting moral foundations.

The study's focus on cognitive moral reasoning as the primary outcome may underrepresent other important dimensions of moral development, such as moral emotions, behavioral consistency, or moral identity formation (Walker, 2022). While observations documented some behavioral applications, systematic behavioral assessment would strengthen evidence of values internalization. Future research should employ multi-method assessment approaches capturing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral moral development dimensions.

Generalizability is limited to similar integrated Islamic kindergarten contexts in urban Indonesia. Rural settings, non-integrated Islamic schools, and Muslim-minority contexts may present different implementation dynamics. The relatively homogeneous sample in terms of socioeconomic status and parental education prevents conclusions about storytelling effectiveness across diverse economic contexts. Additionally, all participating teachers were female, reflecting Indonesian early childhood workforce demographics but limiting gender diversity in implementation.

The Hawthorne effect—participants altering behavior due to being observed—may have influenced results. Teachers' awareness of evaluation might have enhanced implementation effort beyond sustainable levels. The classroom observation presence might have increased children's attention and engagement. These potential biases suggest the need for replication studies with less intrusive assessment methods and longer-term follow-up to assess sustained implementation quality.

CONCLUSION

This study establishes storytelling as a highly effective, developmentally appropriate, and culturally responsive method for internalizing Islamic moral values in early childhood education. Children demonstrated substantial improvements in moral reasoning across honesty, compassion, gratitude, responsibility, and humility, with mechanisms of emotional engagement, character identification, and narrative scaffolding explaining storytelling's effectiveness. These findings address a critical gap in Islamic educational research by providing empirical evidence for a pedagogy that honors traditional wisdom while meeting contemporary developmental standards. The study's findings carry significant policy implications for Islamic early childhood education systems.

Educational policymakers should prioritize storytelling-based pedagogies in national curriculum frameworks for Islamic kindergartens, allocating dedicated time and resources for narrative-based moral education. Teacher preparation programs require curriculum modifications to include storytelling methodology, narrative selection criteria, and discussion facilitation techniques as core competencies for early childhood educators in

Islamic settings. Quality assurance frameworks should incorporate assessment of storytelling implementation as a key indicator of instructional effectiveness. Furthermore, government agencies and educational ministries should support the development of culturally appropriate, age-specific Islamic story collections through funding initiatives, collaborations with Islamic scholars and children's literature specialists, and quality certification processes.

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