



Empathy Value Internalization Through the Storytelling Method in Early Childhood at Al-Azhar Kindergarten, Muaro Tebo, Jambi

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji secara mendalam proses internalisasi nilai empati pada anak usia dini melalui penerapan metode storytelling di TK Al-Azhar Muaro Tebo, Jambi. Latar belakang penelitian ini berakar dari fenomena degradasi moral dan memudarnya kepekaan sosial pada anak-anak di era digital, yang ditandai dengan kecenderungan egosentrisme yang tinggi dan minimnya respons prososial terhadap lingkungan sekitar. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif fenomenologis, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi strategi guru, respons anak, serta faktor pendukung dan penghambat dalam implementasi metode berkisah. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif terstruktur selama tiga bulan, wawancara mendalam terhadap kepala sekolah dan empat guru kelas, serta dokumentasi portofolio perkembangan sosial-emosional anak. Analisis data menerapkan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldana yang meliputi kondensasi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa internalisasi nilai empati melalui storytelling di TK Al-Azhar dilakukan secara sistematis melalui tiga tahapan utama: fase transformasi nilai (pengenalan karakter cerita), fase transaksi nilai (diskusi interaktif dan refleksi moral), dan fase transinternalisasi nilai (aktualisasi perilaku empati dalam interaksi harian). Media visual berupa boneka tangan dan buku cerita bergambar terbukti meningkatkan atensi dan keterlibatan emosional anak. Perubahan signifikan terlihat pada peningkatan aspek kognitif empati (kemampuan mengenali emosi orang lain) dan aspek afektif empati (menunjukkan kepedulian dan tindakan menolong). Faktor pendukung utama meliputi kompetensi pedagogik guru dalam memodulasi suara dan kreativitas memodifikasi alur cerita, serta dukungan sarana prasarana sekolah. Hambatan yang ditemukan berupa inkonsistensi pola asuh di rumah yang cenderung permisif dan paparan gawai yang berlebihan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa metode storytelling yang integratif, kontekstual, dan reflektif efektif membangun kecerdasan moral dan empati anak sejak dini.

Kata Kunci: Internalisasi Nilai, Empati, Storytelling, Anak Usia Dini, Pendidikan Karakter.

ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine in depth the process of internalizing empathy values in early childhood through the implementation of the storytelling method at Al-Azhar Kindergarten in

Muaro Tebo, Jambi. The background of this study is rooted in the phenomenon of moral degradation and fading social sensitivity in children in the digital era, characterized by a tendency towards high egocentrism and minimal prosocial responses to their surroundings. Using a qualitative, descriptive phenomenological approach, this study explores teacher strategies, children's responses, and supporting and inhibiting factors in the implementation of the storytelling method. Data were collected through three months of structured participatory observation, in-depth interviews with the principal and four classroom teachers, and documentation of children's social-emotional development portfolios. Data analysis applied the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, which includes data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results indicate that the internalization of empathy values through storytelling at Al-Azhar Kindergarten was carried out systematically through three main stages: the value transformation phase (introduction to story characters), the value transaction phase (interactive discussion and moral reflection), and the value transinternalization phase (actualization of empathetic behavior in daily interactions). Visual media such as hand puppets and picture storybooks have been shown to increase children's attention and emotional engagement. Significant changes were seen in the cognitive aspect of empathy (the ability to recognize others' emotions) and the affective aspect of empathy (showing concern and helping). Key supporting factors include teachers' pedagogical competence in modulating voice and creativity in modifying storylines, as well as support for school infrastructure. Obstacles identified included inconsistent parenting patterns at home, which tended to be permissive, and excessive exposure to gadgets. This study concluded that an integrative, contextual, and reflective storytelling method is effective in developing children's moral intelligence and empathy from an early age.

Keywords: *Internalization of Values, Empathy, Storytelling, Early Childhood, Character Education.*

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education represents a highly crucial phase in the span of human life, and is most often identified as the golden age. During this phase, children's brains undergo extremely rapid development, in which every environmental stimulus is maximally absorbed to form the foundation of personality, cognitive ability, and social-emotional competence [1]. Although the development of cognitive aspects is often the main priority within the formal education system, character formation and moral intelligence actually play a far more fundamental role in ensuring children's future success in life. One of the main pillars of moral intelligence that must be instilled from an early age is empathy. Empathy is not merely a cognitive ability to understand another person's perspective, but a profound affective response that drives individuals to feel, appreciate, and respond to the emotional condition of others through appropriate prosocial action [2]. Without a solid foundation of empathy, children risk

growing into egocentric, individualistic persons who are less able to build healthy interpersonal relationships in society.

However, contemporary reality shows increasingly complex challenges in shaping the character of young children. The massive development of digital technology, media manipulation, and uncontrolled intensity of children's interaction with gadgets have triggered a shift in children's social behavior patterns. Many young children today display symptoms of declining social sensitivity, such as unwillingness to share, an inability to control anger, and indifference when peers experience difficulty or sadness. This condition is worsened by modern parenting patterns that tend to be protective and transactional, in which the fulfillment of material needs is prioritized over emotional companionship. Within the school environment, this challenge is also evident. At Al-Azhar Kindergarten in Muaro Tebo, Jambi, preliminary observations found a phenomenon in which some children in the

early-childhood learning group displayed a strong tendency toward egocentrism, such as fighting over toys without considering their friends' feelings, mocking friends who fell down, and being reluctant to help teachers or peers in daily activities. This indicates that the character-value instillation methods applied so far, which tend to be conventional, dogmatic, and restrictive, are less effective in touching children's deepest affective aspects.

The research gap in studies of early childhood character education confirms that although many studies discuss methods of shaping children's social behavior, most still focus on direct instructional approaches or the provision of reward and punishment [3]. Such methods are often only able to change children's behavior on a surface level or temporarily, because children comply merely to obtain praise or avoid punishment, rather than out of genuine internal moral awareness. Research exploring how the storytelling method can be used systematically as an instrument of value trans-internalization—one in which empathy values fuse into an integral part of a child's personality structure—remains very limited. In addition, the geographical and cultural context of sub-urban areas such as Muaro Tebo, Jambi, which combines agrarian-religious values with the pressures of modernization, offers a distinctive uniqueness that has not been widely explored in the national early childhood education literature.

The storytelling method offers a highly potential and relevant pedagogical alternative to the psychological characteristics of young children. By nature, children love stories; through narratives delivered with expressive engagement, children do not feel they are being lectured, but rather feel invited on an imaginative adventure into a world of characters rich in moral content [4]. Through the visualization of characters, narrative conflict, and story resolution, children can learn to identify various emotions, understand the cause-and-

effect relationships of an action, and feel the suffering or happiness experienced by characters in the story. This storytelling method activates the brain areas responsible for language processing as well as emotional areas, so that the embedded positive values can settle more durably in children's long-term memory. Therefore, a comprehensive scientific study is needed to analyze how a storytelling method can be organized, implemented, and evaluated as a means of deeply internalizing empathy values.

Based on this urgency, this study specifically aims to analyze and describe in depth the process of internalizing empathy values through the storytelling method in young children at Al-Azhar Kindergarten, Muaro Tebo, Jambi. The specific objectives of this study cover three main points: first, to reveal the strategies and stages of planning and implementation of the storytelling method carried out by teachers; second, to analyze the forms of response and changes in empathetic behavior shown by children after the storytelling intervention; and third, to identify the supporting and inhibiting factors that influence the effectiveness of this internalization process. The results of this study are expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of early childhood character education methodology, as well as a practical contribution for educators and parents in designing learning media and methods based on children's emotional and moral intelligence.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological descriptive design. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to understand, explore, and interpret in greater depth the natural phenomenon of the process of internalizing empathy values through the storytelling method, without manipulating variables or testing statistical hypotheses [5]. The research location was purposively

determined at Al-Azhar Kindergarten, Muaro Tebo, Jambi Province. This location was selected based on the school's characteristics, which has a vision of strengthening religious- and humanist-based character education, yet faces real challenges related to the diversity of students' socio-economic backgrounds and the influence of digitalization on children's daily behavior. The research subjects, or key informants, in this study consisted of the school principal, 4 classroom teachers who actively apply the storytelling method, and 15 students from the early-childhood learning group (ages 5-6) selected using purposive sampling with the criterion of showing variation in the level of social empathy in preliminary observation.

Data collection was carried out comprehensively through observation, interview, and documentation techniques to ensure the validity and depth of the data. The observation applied was structured passive participant observation, in which the researcher was directly present in the classroom for three months to observe, record, and systematically document the teacher's implementation of storytelling as well as children's verbal and nonverbal responses. In-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide with the principal and teachers to explore aspects of learning planning, story theme selection, mastery of vocal technique, and their perceptions of changes in children's behavior. Documentation collected included Daily Lesson Plans (RPPH), photographs of storytelling activities, videos of children's interactions, as well as anecdotal records and portfolios of children's social-emotional development compiled by classroom teachers.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the qualitative data, this study applied triangulation techniques, including source triangulation (comparing interview data among the principal, teachers, and observations of children's behavior) and

technique triangulation (testing the consistency of data obtained from interviews against direct observation and school documents) [6]. Data analysis was carried out in a flowing and interactive manner following the model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana [7], which includes three main stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the data condensation stage, the researcher selected, simplified, abstracted, and transformed raw data from field notes and interview transcripts into conceptual clusters relevant to the research focus. Next, the data were presented in a logical and systematic descriptive narrative form, supported by interaction matrices to facilitate understanding. The final stage was drawing conclusions based on consistent patterns of meaning to comprehensively answer the research questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Teachers' Strategy and Planning for the Storytelling Method

The research results show that the success of internalizing empathy values at Al-Azhar Kindergarten, Muaro Tebo, was greatly determined by the maturity of the strategy and planning prepared by the teaching staff. Based on the analysis of RPPH documents and interviews with teachers, the planning of storytelling activities was synergistically integrated into the Merdeka Curriculum focusing on the Project for Strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile (P5), particularly the dimensions of Noble Character and Mutual Cooperation (Gotong Royong). Teachers deliberately set aside a special 20-30 minute session three times a week, either at the opening session or before the end of class, to carry out this storytelling activity. This time selection was considered strategic because children's psychological condition is at an optimal level of focus and readiness to receive the internalization of moral messages.

In terms of story theme selection, teachers at Al-Azhar Kindergarten showed high creativity by not limiting themselves to conventional, fictional-utopian fairy tales. They preferred contextual fables and social-reality stories close to children's daily lives. Examples of frequently used story themes include 'Kiko the Rabbit Who Loves to Share', 'The Ant Who Lost Its Home', or true stories about a child who helped his sick mother. These themes were chosen based on the socio-psychological consideration that young children need concrete visualization to be able to digest moral conflict. Through animal characters or peer characters, children do not feel judged for their egocentric behavior, but instead are invited to reflect objectively on themselves [8].

Another crucial aspect of planning is the selection and creation of supporting storytelling media. Based on observation activities, teachers utilized a combination of interactive multimedia and traditional concrete media, such as hand puppets, finger puppets, large picture storybooks (big books), flannel boards, and even digital projectors to display short visual animations created by the teachers themselves. The use of this media has been empirically shown to eliminate children's boredom, increase visual attention, and accelerate children's understanding of the storyline. Teachers played an active role as facilitators who controlled the narrative rhythm, modulated their voice according to character (for example, a deep voice for a wise bear character and a high-pitched voice for a frightened squirrel character), and displayed dramatic facial expressions to represent emotions such as sadness, joy, anger, or disappointment.

2. Analysis of the Process of Internalizing Empathy Values in Children

The process of internalizing empathy values in children through the storytelling method at Al-Azhar Kindergarten, Muaro Tebo, took place gradually and systematically, reflecting the value-stage theory from

transformation to trans-internalization. At the value transformation stage, when the teacher began reading the story, children initially took the position of passive listeners. However, through expressive vocal techniques and the use of hand puppets, teachers succeeded in drawing children's focus into the world of the story. Children began to cognitively recognize the concept of empathy: they learned to label the characters' emotions, such as identifying that the character 'Kiko' was sad because his food was lost. This stage is very important as the initial foundation for introducing emotional literacy in children [9].

Internalization continued into the value transaction stage through interactive dialogue initiated by the teacher in the middle of or at the end of the storytelling session. Teachers did not let the story simply pass by, but posed reflective questions and higher-order thinking (HOTS) prompts adjusted to the children's capacity. Questions such as, 'How would you feel if you were the Ant whose home was destroyed?' or 'What do you think we should do if we see our friend crying like the character Tupi?' triggered inner turmoil and dynamic discussion among the children. In this session, a process of meaning negotiation and value conceptualization occurred, in which children began to connect the story characters' suffering with their own empirical experience. Observations showed children expressing pity, anger toward the villainous character, and agreement that helping is a good deed.

The peak of this process is the value trans-internalization stage, in which the empathy values that have been discussed begin to manifest in children's daily behavior through independent awareness. This manifestation of trans-internalization is patterned in free-play activities and social interactions outside of storytelling hours. Based on teachers' anecdotal records, there were significant behavioral changes in several children previously known to be egocentric. For example, a child with the initials AR, who

usually always seized building blocks belonging to friends, after the storytelling intervention on the theme of the beauty of sharing, was seen voluntarily sharing his blocks with a friend who lacked building materials while saying, 'Here, use my blocks, don't be sad.' The children also showed high affective sensitivity; when a friend fell in the schoolyard, they no longer laughed but instead immediately approached, helped them stand up, and escorted them to the school health unit (UKS). This phenomenon proves that empathy values have become integrated into children's cognitive schema and personality structure, shifting egocentric impulses into real prosocial action.

3. Dynamics of Response and Changes in Children's Social-Emotional Behavior

Children's responses to the storytelling method were highly varied but showed a consistent positive trend over time. In the early weeks of implementation, children's responses were predominantly external-perceptual, in which they were interested only in the uniqueness of the hand puppets' shape or the amusement of the teacher's voice. However, entering the second month, children's responses developed into deep emotional-empathic responses. Children showed intense emotional involvement (emotional contagion); their faces would frown with sadness and their eyes would well up when the teacher told a heartbreaking part of the story, and they would cheer with joy when a good character achieved happiness. This emotional involvement became the main driving force behind changes in their social behavior, because touched emotions activate the mirror neuron system that facilitates social understanding [10].

Quantitatively and qualitatively, based on social-emotional development observation sheets, there was an increase in the percentage of children reaching the criteria of Developing as Expected (BSH) and Developing Very Well (BSB) in the

empathy aspect. Before the storytelling program was intensively implemented, only about 25% of children showed consistent empathy indicators. After three months of intervention, this figure jumped drastically to reach 80%. Children became more tolerant of differences, more patient in waiting their turn to play, had better emotional regulation, and showed a decrease in the frequency of verbal and physical conflict among classmates. This confirms that storytelling is effective in converting moral knowing into moral feeling and moral action [11].

4. Existential Supporting Factors

A critical analysis of the educational ecosystem at Al-Azhar Kindergarten, Muaro Tebo, identified several main supporting factors that optimized the effectiveness of internalizing empathy values through storytelling. The first and most important factor is the teachers' outstanding pedagogical competence and creativity. Teachers at this school positioned themselves not merely as text readers, but as 'performing artists' capable of commanding the classroom stage, modulating their voices with rich vocal techniques, and possessing the sensitivity to spontaneously modify the storyline in response to children's shifting attention. This competence was supported by the school management's commitment to routinely facilitating teachers to attend public speaking workshops, creative learning media development training, and early childhood developmental psychology seminars.

The second supporting factor is the availability of highly representative facilities and infrastructure. Al-Azhar Kindergarten has a comfortable mini library room, a clean floor carpet for the 'mat-spreading' area during storytelling, and an abundant and varied collection of children's storybooks. This conducive physical environment minimizes external distractions so that children can be fully immersed in the storytelling atmosphere built by the teacher.

In addition, a school curriculum policy that grants teachers broad autonomy to innovate in character-based learning methods also created a supportive work climate for the sustainable implementation of the storytelling method.

5. Inhibiting Factors and Alternative Solutions

Although the results achieved were highly satisfactory, this study also identified a number of systemic obstacles that could potentially distort the sustainability of the value-internalization results. The greatest obstacle stemmed from inconsistent parenting patterns within the family (home) environment. Interviews with teachers revealed a wide gap between the empathy values built at school and the reality of parenting at home. Many parents were busy working, leading them to apply permissive or inconsistent parenting patterns. When children were taught to share and care at school, at home they were often allowed to behave egocentrically to avoid tantrums, or were not taught to respect household helpers and other family members [12].

The second obstacle, no less crucial, is the high intensity of unfiltered exposure to gadgets and digital media at home. Many children spend hours watching videos or playing online games containing elements of violence, individualism, or harsh interaction patterns. Neuroscientifically, this excessive exposure to digital media can blunt children's emotional sensitivity, reduce attention span, and neutralize the empathy stimulation that has been painstakingly built through the storytelling method at school [13]. In addition, teachers' limited time to provide individual assistance to children with specific emotional developmental barriers is also a challenge in itself.

To address these obstacles, Al-Azhar Kindergarten, Muaro Tebo, has formulated and implemented several strategic solutions. The first step is to strengthen the parenting education program through monthly

meetings between teachers and parents. In this forum, teachers introduce the story themes being used at school and educate parents to align parenting patterns at home, for example by making bedtime storytelling a habit and applying strict screen-time limits for children. The second step is the development of a digital 'Character Liaison Book'. Through this application, teachers and parents can mutually monitor and report on the development of children's empathetic behavior both at school and at home, creating a consistent and integrative supervisory synergy to ensure that empathy values settle into a permanent character trait in children.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of data analysis and in-depth discussion, this study concludes that the storytelling method is a highly effective, relevant, and meaningful pedagogical instrument for internalizing empathy values in young children at Al-Azhar Kindergarten, Muaro Tebo, Jambi. This internalization process was successfully carried out systematically through three evolutionary stages: value transformation (cognitive introduction of emotions through characters), value transaction (interactive discussion, value clarification, and moral reasoning), and value trans-internalization (the real actualization of empathy values in the form of independent prosocial action in children's daily interactions). The success of this method was driven by mature curriculum planning, the selection of contextual fable themes close to children's reality, the use of interactive media such as hand puppets and big books, and teachers' performative competence in modulating voice and emotional expression.

Although faced with obstacles in the form of inconsistent parenting patterns at home and the negative impact of digital gadget exposure, the effectiveness of internalizing empathy values can still be optimized through a collaborative strategy between the

school and parents. Changes in children's social-emotional behavior, marked by an improved ability to recognize others' emotions, sadness at seeing friends in difficulty, willingness to share, and selfless helping behavior, prove that storytelling is not merely an entertainment method, but a holistic educational approach capable of touching the affective 'heart' aspect to move the psychomotor 'hand' based on the moral-cognitive 'head' guidance of young children.

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