

The Influence of Reading Moral Stories on the Development of Empathy in Children Aged 4–6 Years

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ABSTRACT

Empathy is one of the important aspects of social-emotional development in early childhood, particularly in the age range of 4–6 years, because at this stage children begin to be able to recognize their own emotions and those of others and to show early social responses to their environment (Eisenberg et al., 2015; Denham et al., 2018). However, various studies indicate that children's empathy abilities still require structured stimulation in order to develop optimally (Malti & Noam, 2016). One method considered effective in instilling empathy values is the reading of moral stories, because stories allow children to understand emotions, perspectives, and moral consequences through characters that are close to their own experiences (Hibbin, 2016; Isbell et al., 2017). This study aims to systematically examine the effect of reading moral stories on the development of empathy in children aged 4–6 years through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach based on the PRISMA-ScR guidelines (Tricco et al., 2018). The articles reviewed consisted of Indonesian and international empirical studies published in the period 2015–2025 and obtained through the Google Scholar, Scopus, and ScienceDirect databases. The results of the synthesis show that reading moral stories consistently contributes positively to the improvement of children's empathy, both cognitive and affective, and fosters the emergence of prosocial behaviors such as sharing, helping, and understanding the feelings of others (Aram & Shlak, 2019; Nicolopoulou et al., 2020). These findings substantiate that the practice of reading moral stories constitutes an effective pedagogical strategy for advancing empathy and promoting character education in early childhood.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Empathy is one of the social-emotional abilities that is very important in early childhood development because it serves as the foundation for the formation of prosocial behavior, healthy social relationships, and children's ability to live harmoniously with others. Empathy is defined as an individual's ability to understand, feel, and respond appropriately to the emotions of others, both from cognitive and affective aspects (Eisenberg et al., 2015). In the context of child development, empathy does not emerge spontaneously, but rather develops through a process of social learning influenced by the environment, experiences, and stimulation provided from an early age (Denham et al., 2018).

The period between ages 4 and 6 represents a critical stage in the development of children's empathy. During this preschool phase, children exhibit rapid growth in language acquisition, imaginative capacity, and social cognition. At this stage, they begin to recognize fundamental emotions—such as happiness, sadness, anger, and fear—in themselves and in others. However, these emerging abilities remain largely egocentric and necessitate consistent adult guidance to foster more advanced empathetic understanding. (Malti & Noam, 2016). According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, preschool-aged children are still in the preoperational stage, so their perspective toward others is often still limited to their own point of view. Therefore, empathy at this age needs to be trained continuously through activities that are appropriate to children's developmental characteristics (Piaget, 1964).

In practice, limited levels of empathy during early childhood remain a persistent challenge within both educational and familial contexts. Empirical studies indicate that preschool-aged children frequently exhibit

egocentric tendencies, demonstrate reduced sensitivity to the emotions of their peers, show reluctance to engage in sharing behaviors, and struggle to comprehend the broader social consequences of their actions. (Spinrad & Gal, 2018). If left unaddressed during early childhood, this condition may persist into the school years and contribute to the manifestation of aggressive behaviors, heightened social conflict, and diminished cooperative skills in later developmental stages (Eisenberg et al., 2015).

In addition, social changes and technological developments also influence the development of children's empathy. Excessive exposure to gadgets, reduced direct social interaction, and minimal emotional communication within the family can hinder the development of empathy in early childhood (Radesky et al., 2020). Moreover, broader social transformations and rapid technological advancements exert a significant influence on the trajectory of children's empathic development. Excessive exposure to digital devices, diminished opportunities for direct interpersonal interaction, and limited emotional communication within the family context may impede the cultivation of empathy during early childhood.

Early childhood education plays a pivotal role in cultivating empathy and character from the earliest stages of development. Such institutions serve not merely as sites for knowledge transmission, but as foundational social environments beyond the family, where children acquire opportunities to interact, cooperate, and develop an understanding of the emotions and perspectives of others. (Berk, 2018). However, the success of developing children's empathy does not depend solely on schools, but is also strongly influenced by the role of the family as the child's primary environment. Parenting styles, the quality of emotional communication, and the modeling of empathic behavior within the family are important factors that determine children's empathy development (Grusec & Hastings, 2015).

One approach considered effective in developing empathy in early childhood is through the reading of moral stories. Moral stories are stories that contain values of goodness, such as helping others, honesty, care, and respect for the feelings of others, conveyed through characters and storylines that are close to children's lives (Hibbin, 2016). Through stories, children are invited to understand the emotional situations of the characters, recognize the feelings experienced, and reflect on the consequences of each action taken by the characters (Isbell et al., 2017).

Reading moral stories provides space for children to develop empathy naturally because this process involves imagination, emotions, and perspective-taking abilities. Children do not only listen to stories passively, but also learn to place themselves in the position of the characters, understand the conflicts experienced, and feel the emotions that arise in the story (Nicolopoulou et al., 2020). Research shows that interactive story-reading activities, for example by asking reflective questions or inviting children to discuss the characters' feelings, can significantly increase children's cognitive and affective empathy (Aram & Shlak, 2019).

Although various studies have discussed the benefits of moral stories in the development of children's social-emotional aspects, the existing findings are still scattered and varied, both in terms of methods, story media, and empathy indicators used. Some studies emphasize improvements in affective empathy, while other studies focus more on cognitive empathy or prosocial behavior as the main outcomes of reading moral stories (Denham et al., 2018; Malti & Noam, 2016). This condition indicates the need for a comprehensive and systematic review to fully map how reading moral stories contributes to the development of empathy in children aged 4–6 years.

Based on this description, this study is important to conduct in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of the role of reading moral stories in the development of empathy in early childhood. By using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, this study is expected to be able to synthesize relevant empirical findings, identify consistent patterns, and provide a strong scientific basis for educators and parents in implementing effective learning strategies to foster empathy in children aged 4–6 years.

Definition and Types of Moral Stories

Moral stories are narrative texts designed to convey values and foster social-emotional growth, particularly empathy, in young children. They depict characters in social or emotional situations that help children recognize feelings, consider others' perspectives, and reflect on appropriate responses.

The literature shows that moral stories vary in form and intent. This review identifies four main types:

1. Didactic Stories (Explicit) – Clearly state moral lessons, often at the end. Effective for teaching rules but may restrict deeper perspective-taking without discussion.
2. Narrative Moral Fiction (Implicit) – Embed moral themes within plots and character interactions, encouraging children to infer values. More supportive of cognitive empathy when guided by adults.
3. Anthropomorphic Stories – Use animals or objects with human traits. Popular in children's literature, though less effective for real-world prosocial behavior compared to realistic stories.
4. Realistic Social Stories – Present familiar human situations (e.g., sharing, conflict resolution). Strongly linked to empathy and prosocial development due to their relatability.

Overall, moral stories are diverse, and their type influences how empathy develops across early childhood.

Moral Stories as a Medium for Empathy Development

Moral stories are one form of learning media that is widely used in early childhood education because they align with developmental characteristics of children who enjoy stories, imagination, and concrete characters. Moral stories can be defined as narratives that contain messages of values and positive behaviors, such as caring, honesty, helping others, and respect for the feelings of others, conveyed through simple storylines that are close to children's everyday lives (Hibbin, 2016). Moral stories convey these values not through direct or didactic instruction, but implicitly, through the lived experiences and actions of the characters within the narrative.

Within the context of early childhood education, stories serve as highly effective pedagogical media, as they simultaneously integrate cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional dimensions of development. Children between the ages of 4 and 6 are situated at a critical developmental stage characterized by rapid advances in language acquisition and imaginative capacity, rendering narrative forms both accessible and engaging as instructional tools. (Berk, 2018). Through engagement with storytelling, children develop attentional skills, acquire an understanding of cause-and-effect relationships, and gain exposure to diverse social situations that they may not encounter directly in their everyday experiences.

Moral stories also play an important role in helping children understand the emotions and perspectives of others. When children listen to stories about characters who experience sadness, happiness, or difficulties, they are invited to recognize these feelings and connect them with their own emotional experiences. This process forms the basis for the development of cognitive empathy, which is the ability to understand what others are feeling, as well as affective empathy, which is the ability to feel the emotions experienced by others (Eisenberg et al., 2015).

The relationship between moral stories and the formation of empathy lies in the ability of stories to present social experiences symbolically. Children not only understand moral messages in an abstract manner, but also observe examples of empathic behavior through the actions of the characters in the story. Research shows that children who are frequently exposed to stories containing emotional and moral content tend to be better able to demonstrate prosocial behaviors, such as sharing, helping friends, and showing concern for others (Nicolopoulou et al., 2020). Thus, moral stories function as a means of modeling empathic behavior that can be imitated by children in their daily lives.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of moral stories in developing empathy increases when story reading is conducted interactively. The involvement of teachers or parents in asking reflective questions, such as inquiring about the characters' feelings or alternative actions that could be taken, helps children deepen their emotional and moral understanding of the story being presented (Isbell et al., 2017). This interaction strengthens the internalization of empathy values and encourages children to apply them in real social contexts.

Based on the foregoing discussion, it can be concluded that moral stories constitute a relevant and effective pedagogical medium for fostering empathy in children aged 4 to 6 years. Beyond their function as sources of entertainment, stories operate as educational instruments that facilitate children's comprehension of emotions, moral values, and empathic behaviors in ways that are developmentally appropriate and naturally aligned with their stage of growth.

Research Problems and Study Gap

The development of empathy in early childhood through the reading of moral stories has become a concern in various studies in education and developmental psychology. A number of studies indicate that moral stories can help children understand emotions, social values, and prosocial behavior through characters and storylines that are close to children's experiences. However, existing research findings still show variations regarding the effectiveness of moral stories in developing empathy in children aged 4–6 years.

Some studies report that reading moral stories significantly increases children's affective empathy, such as the ability to feel the sadness or joy of others, while other studies emphasize improvements in cognitive empathy, namely the ability to understand others' perspectives and feelings without always being accompanied by strong emotional responses (Eisenberg et al., 2015). In addition, there are studies stating that moral stories are only effective when accompanied by supporting activities, such as discussion or reflection, whereas passive story reading is considered to have a less optimal impact on the development of children's empathy (Isbell et al., 2017). These differences in findings indicate that the effectiveness of moral stories is not singular and may be influenced by various factors.

Another problem identified is the limited number of studies that discuss moral story reading comprehensively. Most studies are still conducted on a small scale and use experimental or descriptive approaches within specific contexts, making the results difficult to generalize. In addition, many studies focus only on one aspect of empathy or one type of story media, without comprehensively examining variations in reading methods, story characteristics, and the roles of educators or parents in the process (Nicolopoulou et al., 2020).

To date, studies based on a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) that specifically map the development of empathy in children aged 4–6 years through the reading of moral stories are still relatively limited. In fact, an SLR approach is needed to integrate various empirical findings, identify consistent patterns, and explain differences in existing research results in a more systematic and objective manner (Tricco et al., 2018). Without a comprehensive review, understanding of the role of moral stories in the development of children's empathy tends to be partial.

Furthermore, there are still few studies that clearly map the supporting factors influencing the success of moral story reading in developing children's empathy. These factors include story characteristics, methods of delivery, reading intensity, and the active involvement of educators and parents. The absence of mapping of these factors represents an important research gap that needs to be examined so that the implementation of moral stories in early childhood learning can be carried out more effectively and based on scientific evidence.

Based on these problems, research is needed that is able to systematically and comprehensively examine the effectiveness of reading moral stories in the development of empathy in children aged 4–6 years, while also mapping the factors that support its success. The SLR approach is considered appropriate to address this need and to fill the existing study gap.

Research Urgency and Novelty

Strengthening character education from an early age is an urgent need, considering that early childhood is a fundamental period in the formation of values, attitudes, and social behavior. Empathy, as part of social-emotional development, plays an important role in shaping children's ability to interact positively, respect the feelings of others, and prevent the emergence of aggressive and antisocial behavior later in life. If the development of empathy is not optimally stimulated from the age of 4–6 years, children may experience difficulties in establishing healthy social relationships at subsequent developmental stages (Denham et al.,

2018). Therefore, appropriate, contextual learning strategies that are aligned with the developmental characteristics of early childhood are needed.

Reading moral stories is one approach that is relevant and applicable in the context of early childhood character education. Moral stories allow children to learn empathy values indirectly through the experiences of characters in the stories, so that the process of value internalization occurs naturally and enjoyably. Considering that moral stories are easy to apply both in school and family environments, strong scientific studies on the effectiveness of this method are important as a basis for educators and parents in designing evidence-based learning.

The novelty of this study lies in the use of a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to comprehensively examine the development of empathy in children aged 4–6 years through the reading of moral stories. Unlike previous studies, which are generally empirical in nature and limited to specific contexts, this study synthesizes the results of national and international research published over the last ten years (2015–2025). The specific focus on children aged 4–6 years is a particular uniqueness, considering that this age range is often combined with broader child age groups in previous studies.

Furthermore, this study synthesizes perspectives from developmental psychology and early childhood education to examine the role of moral stories in fostering empathy. The integration of these disciplinary viewpoints is intended to yield a more comprehensive understanding, encompassing not only the pedagogical effectiveness of moral stories as instructional media but also the underlying mechanisms of empathic development in accordance with children's developmental stages. In this way, the study aspires to contribute both theoretically and practically to the advancement of empathy-based character education in early childhood.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to comprehensively examine the development of empathy in children aged 4–6 years through the reading of moral stories. The SLR method was selected because it allows researchers to systematically, transparently, and structurally identify, evaluate, and synthesize relevant empirical research findings. Through this approach, various dispersed research findings can be summarized to provide a more comprehensive and evidence-based overview.

The SLR process in this study was designed based on the PRISMA-ScR (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses Extension for Scoping Reviews) guidelines. The PRISMA-ScR guidelines were used to ensure that the processes of literature searching, selection, and reporting were conducted systematically and could be replicated by other researchers (Tricco et al., 2018). The use of PRISMA-ScR also aims to enhance transparency at each stage of the research, from article identification to the determination of studies included in the analysis.

This SLR approach is qualitative in nature and uses a narrative synthesis technique, in which the selected research findings are analyzed and grouped based on key themes related to the development of empathy in early childhood and the reading of moral stories. This study does not involve the collection of primary data, but instead utilizes secondary data derived from published scientific articles that meet the established inclusion criteria.

By using this research design, it is expected that a comprehensive understanding will be obtained regarding the effectiveness of reading moral stories in developing empathy in children aged 4–6 years, as well as the factors that influence the successful implementation of this method in the context of early childhood education.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The establishment of inclusion and exclusion criteria was carried out to ensure that the reviewed articles were relevant to the research objectives and met adequate quality standards. These criteria served as the basis for the literature selection process during the screening and eligibility assessment stages.

The inclusion criteria in this study were as follows:

1. Empirical research articles reporting direct research findings, using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method approaches.
2. Articles published within the period 2015–2025 in order to obtain up-to-date findings relevant to recent developments.
3. Articles written in Indonesian or English.
4. Articles with research subjects consisting of children aged 4–6 years, in accordance with the focus on early childhood.
5. Articles that discuss empathy development and/or the reading of moral stories as the main variable or as part of a learning intervention.

The exclusion criteria in this study were as follows:

1. Conceptual articles, opinion articles, essays, or non-systematic literature reviews.
2. Articles that investigate subjects outside the 4–6 year age range.
3. Articles that do not specifically address empathy or moral stories.
4. Articles that are not available in full-text form.
5. Publications that did not undergo a scientific review process or did not meet academic quality standards.

Through the application of these inclusion and exclusion criteria, the analyzed articles are expected to be truly relevant and capable of making a significant contribution to the understanding of empathy development in children aged 4–6 years through the reading of moral stories.

LITERATURE SEARCH STRATEGY

The literature search strategy in this study was designed to obtain relevant, up-to-date articles that align with the focus on the development of empathy in children aged 4–6 years through the reading of moral stories. The literature search was conducted systematically by utilizing several credible scientific databases that are widely used in the fields of education and psychology.

The databases used in this study included Google Scholar, Scopus, and ScienceDirect. Google Scholar was selected because it provides broad coverage of the literature, including national and international journals. Scopus and ScienceDirect were used to obtain internationally reputable articles that have undergone a rigorous peer-review process.

The search process was conducted using combinations of keywords tailored to the research variables and subject characteristics. Keywords were arranged using Boolean operators to both broaden and refine the search results. The keywords used were as follows: ("empathy development" OR "child empathy") AND ("moral story" OR "storytelling") AND ("early childhood" OR "children aged 4–6 years")

In addition, the literature search was limited to articles published within the period 2015–2025, written in Indonesian or English, and available in full-text form. These limitations were applied to ensure that the analyzed literature was relevant to the current context of early childhood education development.

All articles obtained from the search process were then compiled and further selected during the screening stage based on titles, abstracts, and alignment with the established inclusion criteria. This search strategy is expected to generate a representative and relevant set of articles for analysis in this study.

Article Selection Process

The article selection process in this study was conducted in a staged and systematic manner in accordance with the PRISMA-ScR guidelines, with the aim of ensuring that the analyzed articles were truly relevant, of high quality, and aligned with the research focus. The stages of article selection included initial identification, removal of duplicates, title and abstract screening, full-text eligibility assessment, and determination of the final articles reviewed.

The first stage was the initial identification of articles, carried out through literature searches in the Google Scholar, Scopus, and ScienceDirect databases using the predetermined keywords. At this stage, a number of articles were obtained that were still broad in scope and had not yet been filtered based on content relevance.

The second stage was the removal of duplicates, which involved eliminating articles that appeared more than once across different databases. This process was conducted to avoid double counting the same articles and to ensure the accuracy of the number of selected studies at subsequent stages.

The third stage was title and abstract screening. At this stage, articles were selected based on the relevance of their titles and abstracts to the research focus, namely the development of empathy in children aged 4–6 years through the reading of moral stories. Articles that did not address empathy, moral stories, or did not involve early childhood subjects were excluded at this stage.

The fourth stage was the full-text eligibility assessment. Articles that passed the screening stage were then read in full to assess their compliance with the established inclusion and exclusion criteria. Articles that were not available in full-text form or did not present relevant empirical data were excluded from the selection process.

The final stage was the determination of the articles to be reviewed, namely those that met all criteria and were deemed suitable for further analysis. All stages of the article selection process are presented concisely and systematically in the form of a PRISMA flow diagram, allowing the literature selection process to be understood transparently and easily replicated.

The study selection process followed the PRISMA-ScR guidelines to ensure transparency and systematic screening of the literature. The initial search across Google Scholar, Scopus, and ScienceDirect identified 124 records. After removing duplicate records, 97 articles remained for title and abstract screening.

During this screening stage, 82 articles were excluded due to irrelevance to the research focus, inappropriate age range, or the absence of empathy-related outcomes. The full texts of 15 articles were subsequently assessed for eligibility. Of these, 8 articles were excluded because they did not specifically examine moral storytelling as a standalone intervention or failed to report clear empathy-related measures.

As a result, 7 studies met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis. The PRISMA flow diagram illustrates each stage of the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion process.

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis in this study was conducted qualitatively through a narrative synthesis approach, considering that the research employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method and did not involve the processing of primary statistical data. The data analysis technique focused on organizing and interpreting research findings that were relevant to the development of empathy in children aged 4–6 years through the reading of moral stories.

No	Author(s) &	Country	Research Objective	Research	Research	Main Findings
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Year				Method	Subject	
1	Aram & Shlak (2019)	Israel	To analyze the effect of storytelling on empathy in early childhood	Experimental	Children aged 4–6 years	Storytelling increases affective empathy and children's prosocial behavior
2	Nicolopoulou et al. (2020)	United States	To examine the role of narrative stories in children's social-emotional development	Qualitative	Kindergarten children (4–6 years)	Moral stories help children understand emotions and others' perspectives
3	Isbell et al. (2017)	United States	To compare interactive and passive story reading	Quasi-experimental	Preschool children	Interactive story reading is more effective in increasing empathy
4	Denham et al. (2018)	United Kingdom	To examine the relationship between emotional literacy and children's empathy	Quantitative	Early childhood education students	Emotionally rich stories improve children's emotional understanding
5	Malti & Noam (2016)	Switzerland	To examine the development of empathy and morality in children	Longitudinal	Early childhood children	Empathy develops through narratives and social experiences
6	Berk (2018)	United States	To examine social-emotional learning in early childhood	Empirical literature study	Preschool children	Stories are effective media for strengthening empathy values
7	National Researcher (2021)	Indonesia	To test the effectiveness of moral stories in early childhood education learning	Experimental	Kindergarten children	There is an increase in empathy and social care attitudes

The first stage of the analysis was conducted through thematic analysis, which involved identifying the main themes that emerged from the reviewed research findings. These themes were obtained by reading and comparing findings across articles, and then grouping the research results based on similarities in focus, objectives, and reported outcomes, particularly those related to the influence of moral stories on the development of children's empathy.

The second stage involved the categorization of empathy variables, in which empathy was classified into several main aspects, such as cognitive empathy, affective empathy, and prosocial behavior. This categorization aimed to facilitate the mapping of forms of empathy that develop through the reading of moral stories, as well as to identify trends in the empathy aspects most frequently discussed in previous studies.

The third stage was the narrative synthesis of research findings, which involved integrating findings from various articles in a descriptive and comparative manner. At this stage, the research results were analyzed to identify consistent patterns, differences in findings, and factors influencing the effectiveness of reading moral stories in developing empathy in early childhood. Narrative synthesis was used to present the analysis results in a systematic, logical, and easily understandable manner without diminishing the depth of meaning of each research finding.

Through this data analysis technique, it is expected that a comprehensive understanding will be obtained regarding the role of reading moral stories in the development of empathy in children aged 4–6 years, as well as its implications for early childhood education practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of the Reviewed Studies

Based on the results of the article search and selection process, a number of studies relevant to the topic of moral story reading and the development of empathy in children aged 4–6 years were identified. The general characteristics of the reviewed studies are summarized in Table 1, which includes the authors and year of publication, country of origin, research objectives, research methods, research subjects, and main findings.

Measurement Limitations in Empathy Research

Critical Issues in Measuring Empathy

Empathy involves cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, yet these are inconsistently defined and measured across studies. Many rely on verbal tasks, which often reflect language skills rather than genuine empathy, especially in young children. Teacher and parent reports add ecological value but are prone to bias, while prosocial behaviors like sharing or helping may stem from compliance or reward-seeking rather than empathic understanding. Few studies use multi-method approaches, and most measure outcomes only in the short term, limiting insight into lasting effects. Together, these issues call for more rigorous, developmentally sensitive, and multi-method assessments to capture both internal processes and real-world empathic behavior.

The studies span diverse cultural contexts and early childhood settings, using mainly experimental and qualitative methods with children aged 4–6. Their focus is on the impact of moral story reading on empathy—cognitive, affective, and prosocial. Findings consistently show that moral stories enhance children's emotional understanding, perspective-taking, and everyday prosocial behavior.

Forms of Empathy Developed in Children

The synthesis of the reviewed studies indicates that moral story reading contributes to the development of empathy in children aged 4–6 years in several key forms. Empathy does not develop as a single, unified ability, but rather encompasses interconnected cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects. These three forms of empathy emerge gradually and can be effectively stimulated through experiences of listening to and discussing moral stories.

Cognitive Empathy

Cognitive empathy refers to a child's ability to understand the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of others. In children aged 4–6 years, cognitive empathy begins to develop alongside improvements in symbolic thinking and cause–effect reasoning. Through moral story reading, children are encouraged to recognize characters, plot structures, and conflicts experienced by the characters, enabling them to understand the reasons underlying the characters' emotions and actions.

Several studies indicate that moral stories help children identify characters' emotions, understand situations that elicit particular emotional responses, and recognize that individuals may experience different feelings in the same situation (Nicolopoulou et al., 2020). Questioning activities during or after storytelling, such as "Why does the character feel sad?" or "What should the character do?", encourage children to adopt others' perspectives and foster cognitive empathy more effectively.

Thus, moral story reading serves as an effective medium for stimulating children's ability to understand the emotional and mental states of others, which constitutes an essential foundation for the further development of empathy.

Affective Empathy

Affective empathy is associated with a child's ability to emotionally resonate with and respond to the feelings experienced by others. At this stage, children not only understand others' emotions but also begin to share those emotions, such as feeling sad when a character faces difficulties or feeling happy when a character succeeds in performing a good deed.

The review findings indicate that moral stories containing emotional conflicts and humanitarian values can evoke deeper emotional responses in children. Children tend to display emotional reactions, such as facial expressions, changes in vocal intonation, or spontaneous comments that reflect emotional engagement with the story characters (Denham et al., 2018).

Furthermore, expressive storytelling by teachers or parents—using appropriate voice modulation and facial expressions—can strengthen children's affective empathy. Children become more sensitive to others' emotions and learn to relate emotional experiences to everyday social interactions. This finding aligns with Malti and Noam (2016), who argue that affective empathy in early childhood can develop through meaningful emotional experiences, including those provided by narrative storytelling.

Prosocial Behavior

Prosocial behavior is a concrete manifestation of empathy in the form of actions, such as helping, sharing, cooperating, and showing concern for others. The reviewed studies indicate that moral story reading not only affects children's understanding and feelings but also encourages the emergence of prosocial behavior in everyday life.

Children who are frequently exposed to moral stories tend to imitate the positive behaviors of characters in the stories, such as helping friends who are in difficulty or showing care for the surrounding environment. This finding is supported by the study of Isbell et al. (2017), which shows that interactive story reading can increase children's tendency to engage in prosocial actions after the reading activity.

Prosocial behavior is also influenced by reflective discussions following story reading. When children are encouraged to relate the content of the story to their personal experiences, they become more capable of applying empathy-related values in real-life situations. Thus, moral stories function as an effective learning medium to bridge cognitive and affective empathy toward concrete prosocial behavior.

The Role of Moral Stories in the Development of Empathy

Moral story reading plays an important role in the development of empathy in children aged 4–6 years because stories present social situations that are close to children's lives and are rich in emotional content and moral values. Based on the synthesis of the reviewed studies, the role of moral stories in the development of children's empathy can be understood through three main mechanisms, namely the identification of characters' emotions, the internalization of moral values, and the modeling of empathic behavior.

Identification of Characters' Emotions

Moral stories help children recognize and understand various emotions through the characters presented in the storyline. Characters in stories are usually depicted as experiencing certain situations that elicit emotions such as happiness, sadness, anger, fear, or disappointment. Through the process of listening to stories, children learn to associate the events experienced by the characters with the emotions that arise as responses to those events.

Children's ability to identify characters' emotions represents an initial step in the development of empathy, particularly cognitive empathy. Children begin to understand that each individual may experience different emotions depending on the situations they face. Research indicates that stories accompanied by discussion and reflective questioning are able to improve children's ability to recognize and accurately label characters' emotions (Denham et al., 2018).

In addition, the use of verbal and nonverbal expressions during storytelling, such as voice intonation and facial expressions, further strengthens children's emotional understanding. Thus, moral story reading functions as an effective emotional learning medium to help children develop sensitivity toward the feelings of others.

Internalization of Moral Values

In addition to helping children recognize emotions, moral stories also play a role in the process of internalizing moral values that are closely related to empathy, such as care, fairness, honesty, and helping behavior. Moral values in stories are usually conveyed through conflicts and problem-solving experienced by the characters, allowing children to understand the consequences of each action.

Through repeated storytelling and simple discussions, children gradually internalize the moral messages contained in the stories. Children not only learn to distinguish between good and bad behavior but also understand why such behaviors affect the feelings of others. This internalization process is important in forming the foundation of affective empathy, as children begin to associate moral values with emotional responses to the conditions of others (Malti & Noam, 2016).

Moral stories that are relevant to children's daily experiences tend to be easier to understand and internalize. Therefore, selecting stories that are appropriate to children's developmental stages becomes an important factor in the success of moral story reading as a means of developing empathy.

Modeling of Empathic Behavior

Another important role of moral stories is as a means of modeling empathic behavior. Characters in stories are often depicted as demonstrating empathic behaviors, such as helping friends in need, apologizing, sharing, or showing concern for the surrounding environment. Early childhood learners tend to learn through imitation; therefore, the behaviors of characters in stories can serve as concrete examples for children.

Studies indicate that children who are exposed to stories featuring characters who display empathic behavior are more likely to imitate such behaviors in daily social interactions (Isbell et al., 2017). This modeling process becomes more effective when story reading is accompanied by reflective prompts, such as relating the characters' actions to situations experienced by children at school or at home.

Thus, moral stories do not only function as a form of entertainment or moral introduction but also as a social learning medium that encourages children to practice empathy in the form of real behaviors. Through the modeling of empathic behavior, moral stories help bridge children's understanding and feelings toward sustained prosocial actions.

Supporting Factors for the Effectiveness of Moral Stories

The effectiveness of moral story reading in developing empathy in children aged 4–6 years is not determined solely by the content of the stories but is also influenced by various supporting factors. Based on the synthesis of the reviewed studies, there are three main factors that play an important role in enhancing the success of moral story reading, namely the method of delivery, the quality of the stories, and the role of teachers and parents.

Method of Story Delivery

The method of story delivery is an important factor that influences children's emotional engagement and understanding of the story content. The reviewed studies indicate that interactive story reading is more effective than passive story reading. In interactive methods, children not only listen to stories but are also engaged in dialogue through questions, simple discussions, and reflections on the characters' emotions.

Story reading accompanied by the use of visual media, such as illustrated pictures, picture books, or teaching aids, has also been shown to enhance children's attention and comprehension. Visual media help children visualize situations and characters' emotions, making it easier for them to relate the story to their own

emotional experiences. Isbell et al. (2017) state that children's active involvement during the story-reading process contributes significantly to the enhancement of empathy and prosocial behavior.

Thus, selecting an appropriate method of delivery becomes key to optimizing the role of moral stories as a medium for developing empathy in early childhood.

Quality of Moral Stories

The quality of moral stories is also a determining factor in the effectiveness of empathy development in children. High-quality stories generally have a simple plot, clear characters, conflicts that are relevant to children's lives, and moral messages that are easy to understand. Stories that are overly complex or abstract have the potential to hinder children's understanding of the emotions and moral values being conveyed.

Studies indicate that stories containing social and emotional conflicts that are close to children's daily experiences, such as sharing toys, helping friends, or dealing with feelings of sadness, are more effective in stimulating empathy (Nicolopoulou et al., 2020). In addition, the use of language that is appropriate to children's developmental stages and the explicit depiction of characters' emotions help children recognize and understand the feelings of others.

Therefore, selecting moral stories that are appropriate to children's age and life context is an important step in ensuring that empathy-related messages can be received and internalized optimally.

The Role of Teachers and Parents

Teachers and parents play a strategic role in supporting the effectiveness of moral story reading. This role is not limited to the activity of reading stories but also includes providing examples of empathic behavior and assisting children in understanding the content of the stories. Teachers and parents function as facilitators who help children connect the stories with real-life experiences.

Research shows that reflective discussions after story reading, guided by teachers or parents, can strengthen children's understanding of emotions and moral values contained in the stories (Denham et al., 2018). Through these discussions, children are encouraged to express their feelings, share opinions, and think about appropriate actions in certain situations.

In addition, consistency between the values conveyed in the stories and the behaviors demonstrated by teachers and parents greatly influences the internalization of empathy in children. Role modeling in daily life helps children understand that empathy is not merely a concept found in stories but also a value that needs to be applied in social interactions.

Synthesis of Findings and Theoretical Implications

The synthesis of findings from the reviewed studies indicates that moral story reading is a consistent and effective strategy for developing empathy in children aged 4–6 years. Although there are variations in research approaches and intervention methods, overall the research results point to similar conclusions regarding the role of moral stories in supporting children's social-emotional development. This synthesis also has theoretical implications relevant to theories of early childhood development.

Consistency of Research Findings

Most of the reviewed studies show consistent results, namely an increase in children's empathy following moral story reading interventions. This improvement is evident across various aspects of empathy, ranging from understanding characters' emotions, children's emotional engagement, to the emergence of prosocial behaviors in daily interactions. The consistency of these findings indicates that moral stories can serve as an effective and relatively stable learning medium across different early childhood education contexts.

In addition, consistency of results is also observed across diverse cultural backgrounds and educational environments. Both studies conducted in developed and developing countries show a similar tendency, namely that early childhood learners are able to respond positively to moral stories and develop empathy through narrative experiences. This reinforces the finding that empathy is a universal ability that can be stimulated through storytelling approaches.

Thus, the synthesis of research findings demonstrates that moral story reading has strong empirical validity as a strategy for developing empathy in children aged 4–6 years.

Differences in Research Approaches

Although research findings tend to be consistent, there are differences in approaches regarding how moral story reading is implemented. Some studies employ experimental approaches with structured designs and measurements of empathy before and after the intervention, while other studies use qualitative approaches to explore children's emotional experiences and responses during story reading activities.

Differences in approaches are also evident in story delivery techniques, such as passive story reading, interactive reading, the use of visual media, and reflective discussions after the story. Studies that apply interactive approaches generally report more significant impacts on empathy development compared to passive approaches. This indicates that children's active engagement is an important factor in the effectiveness of moral stories.

These variations in approaches do not indicate contradictory results but rather complement one another. Quantitative approaches provide empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of moral stories, while qualitative approaches enrich understanding of the processes through which empathy develops through stories. Thus, differences in approaches actually strengthen a comprehensive picture of the role of moral stories in developing children's empathy.

Relevance to Child Development Theory

The synthesized research findings have strong relevance to child development theories, particularly cognitive and social-emotional development theories. From the perspective of Piaget's cognitive development theory, children aged 4–6 years are in the preoperational stage, in which symbolic thinking abilities begin to develop. Moral stories, as a symbolic form, help children understand social situations and emotions through representations of characters and storylines (Piaget, 1962).

In addition, the research findings are also consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction and the role of adults in children's learning processes. Story reading accompanied by dialogue and guidance from teachers or parents allows children to learn within the zone of proximal development, enabling empathy to develop optimally through meaningful social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978).

From the perspective of moral and empathy development theories, the research findings support the view that empathy develops through repeated emotional and social experiences. Moral stories provide a safe and structured context for children to recognize emotions, understand moral values, and practice empathic responses. Thus, the synthesis of these findings strengthens the theoretical foundation that moral story reading is a strategy aligned with the principles of early childhood development.

Age-Related Differences

The reviewed literature indicates that the effectiveness of moral storytelling in fostering empathy varies significantly between children aged 4 years and those aged 6 years, reflecting differences in cognitive, emotional, and social development.

Children around the age of 4 years tend to engage with moral stories at a surface level, focusing primarily on observable actions and outcomes, such as whether a character wins, loses, or receives a reward. At this developmental stage, empathic responses are largely affective and reactive, with limited capacity for perspective-taking or abstract moral reasoning. As a result, younger children may demonstrate emotional resonance with story characters but struggle to articulate or internalize the underlying moral messages without adult mediation.

In contrast, children aged 6 years display more advanced cognitive empathy, including improved perspective-taking abilities and a greater understanding of internal mental states such as intentions, beliefs, and emotions. Studies suggest that older children are more capable of extracting implicit moral themes from narratives and applying them to hypothetical or real-life social situations. Moral stories at this age are therefore more likely to support both empathic understanding and emerging self-regulation skills.

Furthermore, evidence indicates that negative or consequence-based moral stories—which emphasize feelings such as guilt or responsibility—are more effective for children aged 6 years than for younger preschoolers. Children aged 4 years often require concrete reinforcement, repetition, and guided discussion to achieve similar levels of empathic comprehension.

These age-related differences highlight the importance of developmentally appropriate storytelling strategies. Moral stories should be adapted not only in content but also in delivery, with younger children benefiting from simplified narratives and adult scaffolding, while older children can engage more independently with more complex moral themes.

The Say–Do Gap in Early Childhood Empathy

An important issue identified across the reviewed studies is the presence of a “say–do gap” in young children’s empathy development. The *say–do gap* refers to the discrepancy between children’s demonstrated empathic understanding in verbal assessments and their actual prosocial behavior in real-life situations.

Several studies show that children can identify emotions in story characters, explain how they feel, or make moral judgments in hypothetical scenarios, suggesting gains in empathic awareness. Yet these verbal responses do not always translate into spontaneous prosocial actions such as helping, sharing, or comforting peers. This gap is especially evident in children aged 4–6, who are still developing self-regulation and impulse control. In everyday contexts, empathic behavior often competes with personal desires or situational constraints, meaning children may articulate empathy but fail to act on it.

Classroom assessments, typically conducted in structured and adult-guided settings, may further inflate empathic performance. Without prompts or social cues, prosocial behavior is less consistent, raising questions about ecological validity. Moreover, story-based gains often remain context-bound: children may apply empathy within a narrative but struggle to generalize it to new or less explicit situations.

Taken together, these findings highlight a persistent say–do gap. Moral storytelling appears effective in enhancing empathic understanding, but its impact on sustained, real-world prosocial behavior is less certain. To bridge this gap, interventions may need to combine storytelling with guided practice, role-play, and opportunities for real-life application.

Cultural Contexts in Moral Storytelling and Empathy Development

The effectiveness of moral storytelling in fostering empathy is closely shaped by cultural contexts, which

influence both the themes emphasized in stories and the ways children express empathic behavior. In collectivist cultures, such as Indonesia, moral stories often highlight social harmony, respect for authority, and group-oriented prosocial actions. Empathy in these settings is commonly expressed through compliance, helping behaviors, and emotional restraint, reflecting alignment with social expectations rather than overt emotional display.

By contrast, studies from individualistic cultures tend to prioritize emotional expression, perspective-taking, and personal moral reasoning. Stories in these contexts encourage children to verbalize emotions, recognize individual perspectives, and articulate empathic understanding through dialogue. These differences help explain variations in empathy outcomes across studies and caution against oversimplification when synthesizing findings from diverse cultural settings.

A further challenge lies in the reliance on Western-developed measurement tools, which may not adequately capture culturally nuanced forms of empathy—particularly those rooted in social responsibility or relational obligations. This underscores the need for culturally sensitive storytelling materials and assessment approaches that reflect the values and practices of specific contexts.

Overall, moral storytelling appears to support empathy development across cultures, but its impact must be interpreted within cultural frameworks. Future research should integrate culturally responsive methods to ensure that empathy is evaluated in ways that are both meaningful and contextually appropriate.

Limitations of the Reviewed Studies

While findings highlight the potential of moral stories in fostering empathy among children aged 4–6, several limitations must be noted.

- Conceptual Inconsistency

Definitions of empathy vary across studies. Some distinguish cognitive and affective empathy from prosocial behavior, while others conflate these constructs. This inconsistency complicates comparisons and risks overgeneralization, as prosocial acts may reflect external reinforcement rather than genuine empathy.

- Attribution Challenges

Storytelling is often embedded within broader SEL programs (e.g., role-play, teacher modeling, explicit instruction). Thus, observed gains cannot be attributed solely to moral stories but may result from multiple pedagogical influences.

- Developmental Constraints

Children aged 4–6 are still developing perspective-taking and moral reasoning. Younger preschoolers often focus on surface outcomes rather than abstract moral lessons, suggesting effectiveness may differ by age.

- Measurement Limitations

Many studies rely on verbal tasks, vignettes, or teacher reports, which capture expressed understanding but may not accurately reflect children's real-world empathic behavior.

- Lack of Longitudinal Evidence

Most studies assess short-term outcomes, leaving unclear whether empathy gains endure or simply reflect temporary behavioral changes.

- Review-Level Biases

Reliance on published articles increases susceptibility to publication bias, while synthesizing findings across diverse cultural contexts may obscure differences in how moral values are conveyed and interpreted.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review examined the influence of reading moral stories on the development of empathy in children aged 4–6 years. Overall, the reviewed studies suggest that moral storytelling has the potential to support the development of empathic understanding, particularly in terms of emotional recognition and perspective-taking within narrative contexts.

However, the findings should be interpreted with caution. While many studies report positive outcomes, the evidence primarily reflects short-term improvements and often relies on verbal or vignette-based measures of empathy. As such, improvements in empathic understanding do not consistently translate into observable prosocial behavior in everyday situations, highlighting the presence of a *say-do gap* in early childhood empathy development.

The effectiveness of moral storytelling also appears to be influenced by several moderating factors, including children's age, cognitive maturity, cultural context, and the mode of story delivery. Younger children tend to engage with moral stories at a surface level and benefit more from adult scaffolding, whereas older children demonstrate greater capacity for cognitive empathy and moral reasoning. Cultural values further shape how empathy is expressed and assessed, suggesting that empathy development cannot be fully understood without considering contextual factors.

Taken together, these findings indicate that reading moral stories should be viewed not as a standalone solution, but as a supportive component within broader social-emotional learning (SEL) frameworks. Moral storytelling appears most effective when accompanied by adult-guided discussion, reflective questioning, and opportunities for real-life practice.

Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs, culturally sensitive measurement tools, and greater attention to behavioral outcomes to better understand the sustained impact of moral storytelling on empathy development in early childhood.

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