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Storytelling and character formation: an islamic-integrated approach to enhancing narrative writing in elementary education

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Keywords:	Abstract
storytelling; islamic education; narrative writing; character development; elementary school; literacy instruction	<i>This study investigates the effectiveness of storytelling-based narrative writing instruction infused with Islamic moral values in improving elementary students' writing performance and character development. While storytelling has been widely recognised as a culturally grounded pedagogical tool, limited empirical research has examined its dual cognitive and moral impact within an Islamic educational framework. Employing a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control group design, the study involved 60 fifth-grade students in Central Java, Indonesia, who were assigned to an experimental group (storytelling-based instruction) or a control group (conventional writing instruction). Data were collected through a narrative writing test and a validated character questionnaire assessing responsibility, honesty, cooperation, and cultural appreciation. Results from independent-samples t-tests revealed that students in the storytelling group achieved significantly higher narrative writing scores than the control group ($t(58) = 7.38, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.90$), indicating substantial gains in coherence, structure, language use, and creativity. Character development also improved markedly in the experimental group, shifting from "fair" to "good" across all four dimensions, whereas improvements in the control group remained modest. The integration of Islamic moral narratives—reflecting values such as amanah, şidq, and ta'āwun—enhanced students' moral reflection and value internalisation, supporting the Islamic pedagogical tradition of using stories as tools for holistic education. These findings highlight the effectiveness of Islamic-integrated storytelling as a dual-purpose instructional strategy that strengthens literacy while fostering students' moral character. The study offers implications for literacy instruction, curriculum development, and</i>

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character education in culturally and religiously aligned learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Writing is widely regarded as a foundational competency in language learning, enabling students to communicate ideas, construct meaning, and develop higher-order thinking skills. Among its various genres, narrative writing holds a unique pedagogical role because it encourages learners to organize experiences, express emotions, and build coherent storylines (Qatrinada & Apoko, 2024); (Medupin, 2024). Scholars have further emphasized that narrative writing contributes not only to linguistic proficiency but also to students' cognitive, social, and emotional development (Cahyani et al., 2023). Despite its importance, many elementary students continue to struggle with generating engaging narratives due to limited vocabulary, lack of exposure to narrative models, and low intrinsic motivation (Nurnaningrum et al., 2025).

Storytelling has been widely proposed as an effective instructional strategy to address these challenges. Defined as the art of orally conveying stories with expression, tone, and thematic coherence (Scionti et al., 2023); (Ghafar, 2024), storytelling provides learners with narrative scaffolding and meaningful contexts for writing (Chasanah et al., 2023). Empirical studies show that storytelling enhances vocabulary, strengthens understanding of narrative structure, and boosts writing fluency (Burhan & Hasan, 2024). More importantly, storytelling functions as a medium for transmitting cultural knowledge and moral values (Benabbes & AbdulHaleem Abu Taleb, 2024), making it particularly relevant in educational contexts that prioritize both literacy and character formation.

In Indonesia, character education has been institutionalized as a national priority, requiring schools to embed values such as honesty, responsibility, cooperation, and cultural appreciation in daily learning practices. However, the integration of character education into literacy instruction remains inconsistent and often lacks a strong cultural or philosophical foundation. This gap presents opportunities to explore approaches that combine literacy development with moral cultivation in ways that are authentic to local social and cultural identities.

In this regard, Islamic educational philosophy offers a relevant and enriching perspective. Islamic teachings emphasize the transformative power of stories (*qashash*) as tools for moral formation, spiritual reflection, and intellectual growth (Siregar et al., 2024). The Qur'an itself employs narratives as a pedagogical device, presenting stories of prophets and communities to cultivate virtues such as honesty (*sidq*), responsibility (*amanah*), cooperation (*ta'āwun*), and justice. Surah Yusuf, for example, is described as the "best of stories" (*aḥsan al-qashaṣ*) because of its moral clarity, emotional depth, and narrative

coherence, qualities that align with the learning objectives of narrative writing instruction. Moreover, Islamic scholars throughout history have emphasized storytelling as foundational to children's character education, viewing stories as tools to nurture empathy, discipline, and moral reasoning from an early age.

Integrating this Islamic perspective into contemporary storytelling pedagogy offers a novel contribution to the field. While existing studies acknowledge storytelling's potential to support character development, few explicitly ground this process in Islamic educational values or demonstrate how Islamic narrative traditions can enhance students' moral understanding within formal schooling. Such integration is particularly relevant in Muslim-majority contexts like Indonesia, where educational practice is often expected to reflect moral and religious foundations alongside academic goals.

Despite the growing evidence supporting storytelling for literacy and socio-emotional development, empirical research examining its dual impact on both narrative writing proficiency and character formation particularly through an Islamic pedagogical lens, remains limited. Most previous studies have either focused on literacy outcomes alone or discussed character implications only at a conceptual level, without rigorous quantitative analysis in elementary school settings.

The Problem of The Study

Given this background, the present study seeks to address these gaps by examining how storytelling-based narrative writing instruction influences elementary students' writing performance and character development. This study also introduces a novel dimension by situating storytelling within an Islamic educational framework—highlighting how moral messages embedded in stories align with Qur'anic principles and Islamic values. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions: (1) To what extent does storytelling-based instruction improve elementary students' narrative writing skills compared to conventional instruction? (2) To what extent does storytelling-based instruction enhance students' character values—responsibility, honesty, cooperation, and cultural appreciation? (3) How do improvements in narrative writing and character values reflect the holistic impact of storytelling when informed by Islamic educational principles?

Research's State of the Art

This research offers several contributions. Theoretically, it advances sociocultural learning theory by illustrating how storytelling functions as both a cognitive tool and a medium for Islamic moral education.

Novelty, Research Gap, & Objective

It also expands the literature by linking narrative writing instruction with value formation through an Islamic pedagogical lens—an area that is largely underexplored. Practically, the study provides teachers with a culturally and religiously grounded instructional model that

integrates literacy and character education. For policymakers, the findings offer evidence-based support for embedding Islamic values into literacy curricula in ways that are developmentally appropriate and pedagogically effective.

Through this integrated approach, the study positions storytelling not only as a strategy for improving literacy but also as a meaningful avenue for nurturing students' moral and spiritual character—reflecting the holistic vision of education emphasized in both national Indonesian policy and Islamic educational tradition.

METHOD

Type and Design

This study employed a quantitative approach using a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control group design. The design was selected because random assignment at the individual level was not feasible within the school context, while still allowing for causal inferences regarding the effect of storytelling-based instruction. The independent variable was the instructional method (storytelling-based narrative writing vs. conventional instruction), whereas the dependent variables were students' narrative writing performance and their character development.

To ensure alignment with the study's theoretical foundation, the storytelling treatment incorporated narratives containing moral values consistent with Islamic teachings, such as honesty (*sidq*), responsibility (*amanah*), cooperation (*ta'āwun*), and cultural appreciation (Akasyah & Puadah, 2025). These values were not taught explicitly but embedded in the stories, mirroring the Qur'anic model of moral education through narrative reflection. This alignment strengthened the coherence between the pedagogical treatment and the broader philosophical goals identified in the Introduction.

Data and Data Sources

Data Sources

The primary data for this study were obtained directly from the participants and domain experts involved in the experiment:

1. Fifth-Grade Elementary Students: The main population comprised 60 fifth-grade students (aged 10–11 years) enrolled at a public elementary school in Central Java, Indonesia. The participants were divided into two intact classes:
2. Experimental Group ($n = 30$): Students receiving storytelling-based narrative writing instruction integrated with Islamic moral values.
3. Control Group ($n = 30$): Students receiving conventional narrative writing instruction.
4. Literacy Education Experts: Two experts in literacy education who reviewed and established the content validity of the writing assessment rubric and provided evaluations for inter-rater reliability.

Collected Data

The study gathered two main types of quantitative data through a pretest–posttest design:

1. Narrative Writing Performance Data:

Description: Pretest and posttest scores measuring students' ability to produce narrative texts.

Evaluated Dimensions: Content, structure, language use, and creativity.

2. Character Development Data:

Description: Pretest and posttest scores measuring students' moral character internalization, collected via a 4-point Likert scale questionnaire (1 = poor, 4 = excellent).

Evaluated Dimensions: Four core values aligned with Islamic moral education—responsibility (*amanah*), honesty (*ʿsidq*), cooperation (*ta'āwun*), and cultural appreciation.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were gathered using two primary validated instruments:

1. Narrative Writing Test:

Used to evaluate writing performance across four dimensions (content, structure, language use, creativity).

Content validity was verified by two literacy experts, and inter-rater reliability yielded a Cronbach's α of 0.87, indicating high internal consistency.

2. Character Development Questionnaire:

Used to assess the four core character dimensions before and after the intervention.

Validated through expert judgment, achieving a reliability coefficient of Cronbach's α = 0.83.

Population and Sample

The population of this study consisted of all fifth-grade students (ages 10–11) enrolled in a public elementary school in Central Java, Indonesia. Using simple random sampling at the class level, two intact classes were selected and assigned as the experimental group ($n = 30$) and the control group ($n = 30$), yielding a total sample of 60 students (Abo et al., [2025](#)). Baseline characteristics such as gender distribution, prior academic performance, and initial writing ability were examined to ensure equivalence between groups at the pretest stage.

The school setting was appropriate for the study because character education, including religious and cultural values, is formally integrated into the Indonesian curriculum, allowing Islamic value-infused storytelling to be implemented in a natural and contextually relevant manner.

Data Collection Technique

1. Narrative Writing Test

Students' writing performance was assessed using a narrative writing test designed to evaluate four dimensions: content, structure, language use, and creativity (D'Souza, [2021](#)). The scoring rubric was reviewed by two literacy education experts for content validity. Inter-rater reliability, calculated using Cronbach's α , yielded 0.87, indicating high internal consistency (Fadillah & Tarigan, [2022](#)).

2. Character Development Questionnaire

To measure students' character development, a questionnaire was constructed based on the four core values examined in the study—responsibility, honesty, cooperation, and cultural appreciation. These dimensions also reflect key values emphasized in Islamic moral education and manifested in classical Islamic narratives. Items used a four-point Likert scale (1 = poor, 4 = excellent). Content validity was established through expert judgment, and reliability testing indicated Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$ (Charrier et al., [2025](#)).

3. Procedure

The study was carried out in three phases: pretest, treatment, and posttest.

4. Pretest Phase

Both groups completed the narrative writing test and character questionnaire prior to the intervention to establish baseline comparability.

5. Treatment Phase

Experimental group, Students received six sessions of storytelling-based narrative writing instruction (45 minutes each). Teachers orally narrated culturally relevant folktales and Islamic-value-based stories that embodied virtues such as *amanah*, *şidq*, and *ta'āwun*. After listening sessions, students engaged in guided writing tasks, producing narratives inspired by the stories and discussing the embedded moral lessons through reflective questioning. The instructional design followed principles drawn from Islamic pedagogy, in which stories (*qashash*) serve as tools for moral reasoning, emotional engagement, and behavioral modelling.

Control group. Students were taught through conventional narrative writing instruction, relying on teacher explanation, textbook-based examples, and independent writing exercises without storytelling or moral-value integration.

6. Posttest Phase

Following the treatment period, both groups completed the same narrative writing test and character questionnaire. Comparisons between pretest and posttest results allowed examination of both literacy gains and character development.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using independent-samples *t*-tests to compare posttest mean scores between groups. Paired-samples comparisons were also conducted to assess within-group improvements. Cohen's *d* was calculated to determine effect sizes and to gauge the magnitude of differences in both narrative writing performance and character outcomes (Pellas, 2023). Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 26, with a significance threshold of $\alpha = 0.05$. This analytical framework aligns with the study's purpose of examining how storytelling, particularly narratives infused with Islamic values, produces holistic improvements across cognitive (writing) and moral (character) domains.

RESULTS

Narrative Writing Performance

The results of the independent-samples *t*-test showed a significant difference in posttest narrative writing scores between the experimental group ($M = 85.3, SD = 6.8$) and the control group ($M = 72.1, SD = 7.5$) with $t(58) = 7.38, p < .001$, and Cohen's $d = 1.90$ (very large effect). This indicates that students who received storytelling-based instruction demonstrated substantially higher performance in narrative writing compared to those taught through conventional methods.

Table 1. Narrative Writing Scores

Group	Pretest ($M \pm SD$)	Posttest ($M \pm SD$)	Gain	$t(58)$	p	Cohen's d
Experiment	65.2 $\pm$ 7.1	85.3 $\pm$ 6.8	+20.1	7.38	<.001	1.90
Control	64.4 $\pm$ 6.9	72.1 $\pm$ 7.5	+7.7			

The results demonstrate that storytelling not only increased students' narrative scores significantly but also generated an effect size nearly twice the threshold for a large effect. This suggests that storytelling had a transformative impact on students' ability to generate coherent, structured, and creative narratives, far beyond the gains achieved through conventional instruction.

Character Development

The character questionnaire results revealed improvements in all four dimensions—responsibility, honesty, cooperation, and cultural appreciation in both groups. However, the experimental group's gains were significantly greater.

Table 2. Character Development Results

Dimension	Pretest (Exp)	Posttest (Exp)	Pretest (Ctrl)	Posttest (Ctrl)
Responsibility	2.3 (Fair)	3.5 (Good)	2.4 (Fair)	2.8 (Fair–Good)
Honesty	2.4 (Fair)	3.4 (Good)	2.3 (Fair)	2.7 (Fair–Good)
Cooperation	2.2 (Fair)	3.6 (Good)	2.3 (Fair)	2.9 (Fair–Good)

Dimension	Pretest (Exp)	Posttest (Exp)	Pretest (Ctrl)	Posttest (Ctrl)
Cultural Appreciation	1.9 (Poor)	3.3 (Good)	2.0 (Poor)	2.6 (Fair)

Across all dimensions, the experimental group moved from “fair” to “good”, while the control group only showed marginal progress, remaining largely within the “fair” category. The most notable improvement occurred in cultural appreciation, where storytelling based on local folktales significantly strengthened students’ recognition and valuing of cultural identity.

The findings highlight the dual role of storytelling: (1) it enriches students’ literacy skills, and (2) it embeds moral and cultural values in meaningful ways. The narrative content of folktales appears particularly effective in encouraging responsibility, honesty, and cooperation, while also fostering a deeper appreciation of cultural heritage.

Integrated Impact

A combined analysis of narrative writing and character outcomes illustrates the holistic effect of storytelling-based instruction. Students who improved in narrative coherence and creativity also tended to show stronger scores in responsibility and cooperation. This suggests a potential synergy between cognitive (writing) and affective (character) domains: as students engaged more deeply in crafting stories inspired by oral storytelling, they simultaneously internalized the moral values embedded in the narratives.

Storytelling produced significant and substantial improvements in students’ narrative writing skills, with a very large effect size (Cohen’s $d = 1.90$). Character development improved significantly in the experimental group, particularly in responsibility, cooperation, and cultural appreciation. The integrated effects suggest that storytelling serves as a culturally grounded pedagogy that simultaneously promotes literacy and character formation.

This quasi-experimental study found that a storytelling-based narrative writing intervention produced large and statistically significant gains in elementary students’ narrative writing performance ($t(58) = 7.38, p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 1.90$). Students in the storytelling condition also showed substantially greater improvement across four character dimensions (responsibility, honesty, cooperation, cultural appreciation) than their peers who received conventional instruction. These results indicate a robust educational effect that spans both cognitive (writing) and affective (character) domains.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study demonstrate that storytelling-based narrative writing instruction produced substantial improvements in both students’ writing performance and

their character development. These results address the three research questions posed in the study and align with prior research while offering new insights through the integration of Islamic educational principles.

1. Effects on Narrative Writing Performance

Consistent with earlier studies (e.g., Burhan & Hasan, [2024](#); Chasanah et al., [2023](#)), students in the experimental group showed significantly higher gains in narrative writing scores compared to those receiving conventional instruction. The very large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.90$) indicates that storytelling served as a powerful scaffold for students' cognitive processes during writing. Storytelling exposed learners to coherent narrative structures, enriched vocabulary, and emotionally engaging plots, which in turn strengthened their ability to produce well-organized narratives.

These results confirm Vygotsky's sociocultural view that stories function as mediational tools facilitating learners' cognitive development. Exposure to oral narratives allowed students to internalize narrative schemas at a deeper level, reducing cognitive load during writing tasks and enabling greater creativity and elaboration. From an Islamic pedagogical perspective, these gains are aligned with the instructional method embedded in the Qur'an itself. The Qur'an employs narrative sequences—such as those in Surah Yusuf—as models of well-structured storytelling containing orientation, conflict, climax, and resolution (*aḥsan al-qāṣaṣ*). These stories are not merely religious teachings but also examples of linguistic clarity, narrative coherence, and rhetorical beauty. By using storytelling as a pedagogical tool, the current study mirrors this Qur'anic narrative method, confirming its relevance and effectiveness for developing writing skills in modern educational settings.

2. Effects on Character Development

The results also indicate meaningful improvements in all four dimensions of character—responsibility, honesty, cooperation, and cultural appreciation—with the experimental group moving from “fair” to “good” categories. This aligns with research showing that storytelling cultivates empathy, moral reasoning, and prosocial behavior among young learners (Benabbes & Abu Taleb, [2024](#); Birhan et al., 2021). Storytelling offers children opportunities to experience moral dilemmas vicariously, reflect on characters' decisions, and internalize moral values through contextualized narrative scenarios.

The integration of Islamic values in the storytelling sessions appears to have strengthened character outcomes. Islamic narratives historically emphasize virtues such as *amanah* (responsibility), *ṣidq* (honesty), *ta'āwun* (cooperation), and respect for diverse communities, values embedded in classical stories of prophets, companions, and righteous figures. These values were reflected in the selected stories and later reinforced by reflective writing activities.

The findings support the argument that Islamic narrative pedagogy—long employed in traditional *ta'lim*—remains relevant in contemporary character education. Stories in the Qur'an and Hadith are used not through moral lecturing but through narrative modelling, offering examples of virtues enacted through lived experiences. The positive character outcomes in this study show that students responded to this narrative-moral alignment, suggesting that Islamic stories can effectively complement national character education objectives.

3. Integrated Cognitive and Moral Impact

A significant finding of the study is the synergy between improvements in narrative writing skills and character development. Students who demonstrated stronger writing skills also tended to show higher character development scores. This integrated effect supports the theoretical view that narrative learning activates not only cognitive but also affective and ethical dimensions.

Narrative writing asks students to adopt perspectives, organize moral events, and articulate internal conflicts—processes strongly associated with empathy and moral reasoning. Storytelling embeds values within plotlines, motivating students to reflect on moral choices and transfer these lessons into their own narratives.

From an Islamic perspective, this integrative impact aligns with the holistic aim of education (*tarbiyah*), which seeks to form well-rounded individuals whose intellectual development is harmonized with spiritual and moral growth. In Islamic educational thought, literacy and character are not separate domains; rather, language mastery is viewed as a pathway to cultivating ethical refinement and personal discipline (Abdalla, 2025). Thus, the dual gains observed in this study reflect an alignment between contemporary pedagogy and classical Islamic educational philosophy.

4. Interpretation in Light of Previous Research

The current findings corroborate prior research showing that storytelling enhances writing quality (Riani et al., 2021) and character outcomes (Saripudin et al., 2021). However, this study extends the literature by simultaneously measuring both domains using a quasi-experimental approach, providing stronger causal evidence. Moreover, the integration of Islamic moral content distinguishes this study from earlier work, offering a culturally grounded model of character-based literacy instruction.

Research in Islamic education has highlighted the role of narrative as a tool for moral cultivation, yet most studies remain theoretical or descriptive (Dulyapit & Ulfa, 2025). By empirically testing the effects of story-based value integration, this research bridges the gap between theory and practice, demonstrating that Islamic-inspired storytelling is not only culturally relevant but also pedagogically effective.

5. Implications for Holistic Education

The findings of this study reinforce the idea that literacy instruction can be a powerful medium for character education when designed intentionally. Storytelling emerges as a culturally responsive and religiously aligned strategy capable of advancing both academic and moral objectives simultaneously. This approach resonates with Indonesia's national emphasis on strengthening character education, while also acknowledging the cultural and religious heritage that shapes students' worldview (Hernawati et al., 2025).

For practitioners, this study suggests that incorporating Islamic moral narratives—without proselytizing, but through reflective storytelling—can enhance students' engagement and moral understanding. For curriculum designers, the results provide empirical support for designing literacy materials that integrate local cultural stories and Islamic ethical content in developmentally appropriate ways.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the effects of storytelling-based narrative writing instruction on elementary students' writing performance and character development, guided by three core research questions. The findings provide clear evidence that storytelling is an effective pedagogical approach for achieving both cognitive and moral learning outcomes, particularly when grounded in culturally relevant and Islamic narrative traditions.

First, the results showed that storytelling significantly enhanced students' narrative writing performance compared to conventional instruction. The experimental group achieved higher posttest scores and demonstrated improved coherence, structure, and creativity in their written work. These findings affirm that exposure to oral stories helps students internalize narrative patterns, enriches their vocabulary, and stimulates imagination—effects widely supported by prior research and consistent with the Qur'anic tradition of using narrative as a tool for teaching clarity, structure, and meaning.

Second, the study found that storytelling contributed substantially to students' character development across four dimensions: responsibility, honesty, cooperation, and cultural appreciation. Students in the storytelling group moved from "fair" to "good" categories in all areas, indicating meaningful growth in moral understanding and prosocial attitudes. These values parallel Islamic moral principles—*amanah* (responsibility), *şidq* (honesty), *ta'āwun* (cooperation), and respect for diverse cultures—which are frequently conveyed through Qur'anic stories and classical Islamic narratives. The study therefore reinforces the Islamic pedagogical principle that stories are powerful conduits for shaping ethical character and emotional intelligence.

Third, the integrated effects observed in this study suggest a synergistic relationship between improved narrative writing skills and strengthened character values. This finding

aligns with the holistic educational framework emphasized in both contemporary pedagogy and Islamic thought, where intellectual development (*ta'lim*) and moral cultivation (*tarbiyah*) are understood as interconnected rather than separate domains. By engaging with stories that model virtuous behavior and then expressing those narratives in writing, students simultaneously strengthened their cognitive abilities and internalized moral content.

Taken together, the results confirm that storytelling-based narrative writing instruction is not only academically beneficial but also culturally and religiously meaningful. In a predominantly Muslim context such as Indonesia, where character education is a national priority, integrating Islamic narrative values into literacy instruction offers a context-responsive and pedagogically effective approach. Such integration aligns with students' cultural identity, reinforces core moral values, and supports the development of well-rounded learners.

Implications and Future Directions

Educators should consider incorporating storytelling—especially stories drawn from local culture and Islamic tradition—into narrative writing instruction to foster both literacy skills and moral development. Curriculum designers are encouraged to embed value-based narratives in teaching materials, ensuring that literacy learning contributes to holistic character formation. Policymakers may also find this approach aligned with national initiatives for strengthening character education in schools.

Future studies should expand the sample size, include multiple school contexts, and employ longitudinal designs to examine the sustainability of character improvement. Comparative studies involving digital storytelling or Qur'anic story-based modules may further advance understanding of narrative pedagogy in Islamic educational settings.

In conclusion, this study provides strong empirical evidence that storytelling—when infused with Islamic moral values and culturally resonant narratives—serves as a powerful instructional tool for enhancing elementary students' narrative writing skills and character development. This dual impact reflects the enduring wisdom of Islamic narrative pedagogy and its relevance for modern educational practice aimed at nurturing students who are both literate and morally grounded.

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