

# The Use of Stories as Moral Education for Young Children

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**Abstract**—There are a number of ways that one might morally educate a child. One can demonstrate various virtues and encourage the child to copy his or her own behavior. One can issue a series of imperatives and punish if failure to abide by them. Moreover, one might tell the child stories with moral lessons in order to elicit favorable behavior and to discourage unfavorable behavior. In this research, we study how kindergarten teachers can better serve more appropriate aims of moral education by using stories. The main findings of this study are as follows: first, moral education is considered complementary material in kindergarten in Indonesia. There are few teachers who use stories as moral education in kindergarten. Second, teachers play an important role in helping children understand the story and capture the message of the story. Teachers are therefore challenged to explore the content of stories and help children connect the story with their daily lives. Third, the ways in which teachers see morality affects the way they convey moral values in a story.

**Index Terms**—Moral education, stories, young children

## I. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is a crucial stage in terms of a child's physical, intellectual, emotional and social development. Mental and physical abilities progress at an astounding rate and a very high proportion of learning takes place from birth to age six years old. Neuroscience research shows that the human brain develops fastest within the first years. By the time a child reaches four years old, their intelligence has developed to 50 percent of its future maximum, and by the age of eight, it has increased to 80 percent. Hence, early childhood is also called the golden age as it is during this stage of development that most of the brain cell tissue that controls human activities and qualities is formed. Optimal brain development can be stimulated by ensuring the child receives sufficient nutrition, health care and education that stimulates creativity. We believe that child moral concept and behaviour also develop at an early age. That's why it is important to pay much attention to children's education from an early age, including their moral education.

The objective of early childhood education is to establish a foundation for the development of a child's character, behaviour, knowledge, skills and creativity to spur further development and growth. There are six aspects of development that are focused on in kindergarten education: Moral and Religious Values; Social and Emotional

Development and Independence; Language ability; Cognitive ability; Physical/Motor ability; and Artistic ability.

## II. MORAL EDUCATION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN IN INDONESIA

The model of moral education suggested by the curriculum and commonly practiced in many kindergartens incorporates the habituation model for behavioral formation. The purpose of the program is to prepare the establishment of the behavior of children as early as possible in developing the attitudes and behavior based on moral values of religion and Pancasila. Pancasila is the official philosophical foundation of the Indonesian state. It comprises five principles held to be inseparable and interrelated: belief in the one and only God; just and civilized humanity; the unity of Indonesia; democracy guided by the inner wisdom in the unanimity arising out of deliberations amongst representatives; and social justice for all of the people of Indonesia.

The competencies and learning outcomes to be achieved on the development aspects of moral and religious values is the ability to worship, know and believe in God's creation and love of others. The scope of the study based on the curriculum as follows. Educating children to live in order; to educate children to socialize with others; to inculcate attitudes of tolerance; to stimulate courage, gratitude and responsibility; to exercise emotional control, and train children to be able to fend for themselves.

In Indonesia, Moral education is integrated with religious education and citizenship education (they are not taught separately). So, people tend to equate religious education with moral education and/or citizenship education. Values are introduced mainly in these two subjects. These two subjects emphasize the habituation and the introduction of regulations based on religious as well as state law. Children learn to be good citizens and religious but they do not learn how to question the reasons for their actions and why they should do them. They know they should be good because this is mentioned in a holy book or in Pancasila. Then the measure of success of moral education becomes ambiguous, that is success measured by whether the student's attitude is good or bad according to the rules of religion and state. Children memorize rules without critically thinking about them. Children do not learn to think about the consequences of doing, and they cannot act independently. So such morality consists only of black and white conceptions. Children do not learn that there is anything but right or wrong. This is the gap that has become our focus of research. To see how stories are used/could be used to educate children learn more than just to be persons of morality, but also responsible for their own actions (know what to do, how to do it, and also why).

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In our opinion, children need to learn about reasons and children's stories might be one of effective ways to introduce values to young children and create space for children to exercise their reasoning. Through examples in the stories they are able to reflect on their lives. The stories vary in form: from fairytales to stories from the holybooks, stories of Indonesia to stories from overseas, and from written stories to oral stories.

There are researchers and educators that advocate the use of literature to help meet moral education goals. Stories are recognized as having the potential to contribute significantly to the moral education of children and adults. Stories are effective in providing role models, opportunities to discuss moral dilemmas, and have the potential to contribute significantly to the moral education of children and adults. Moreover, there are also many popular books that promote the use of literature as a tool for both educators and parents interested in teaching moral lessons (see, Bennet, 1995; Coles, 1989; Kilpatrick, Wolfe, & Wolfe, 1994). Through story reading or storytelling activities, children become familiar not only with a variety of examples of good and bad deeds, regulations and punishments, but also learn the reasons for taking action, problem solving, weighing action before taking it, and they also learn empathy. Stories, through the characters and events depicted within, provide children with the chance to learn new ideas and concepts. Children learn without being afraid. They can draw their own lessons from a story. Moreover, stories are fun for students and also for teachers.

### **III. STORIES, STORYTELLING AND ORAL CULTURE**

Indonesia is an oral community. For centuries stories have been passed down orally from one generation to the next. We have an abundance of stories throughout the archipelago. Most stories are anonymous. There are more than 300 hundred ethnic groups in Indonesia. Each ethnic group has its own stories and mode of storytelling (Bunanta, 2003). Bunanta compiled stories across the archipelago in her book "Indonesian Folktales". She re-told the stories that have been known for ages but had never been translated into English or had never been written in any language. Most of the stories are about local kingdoms, the origin of gods, humans and the universe, or folktales and religious stories. Storytelling is a way of passing on a culture's history, a way of teaching values to young and old generations, and it is a form of entertainment. "These tales are intended to teach religion, to disseminate local customs, traditions, and morals; and to introduce their folk heroes and history to the community and the younger generation. In many cases storytelling is used in ceremonies such as those for pregnancy, circumcision and marriage. And of course another function is to entertain" (Bunanta, 2003, p. 12). Stories are presented in creative ways. The stories can be recited or sung by a storyteller, accompanied by music and sometimes also dance. Presentations can last for hours, and can even carry on over several nights.

Nowadays, Storytelling might not be the only form of entertainment people have in their community. However, storytelling still takes place in some homes today. It takes the

form of bedtime stories or reading aloud. Schools use storytelling as a pedagogic tool. In kindergarten, stories and storytelling are used for learning languages, especially in reading and writing. Stories are routinely read in the classroom. Stories have the potential to function as a vehicle of moral education for young children. Children learn their own religious, social and cultural values and also about others' values. They question it, think about it, and choose what to act. They learn how to be responsible moral persons who not only do good things but know why and how to act.

### **IV. MORAL EDUCATION AND ISLAMIC VALUES**

The majority of kindergartens in Indonesia are private. According to statistics from the ministry of education in 2009/2010, there are 67,550 kindergartens across Indonesia. From that number there are only 1,616 (2.4 percent) public kindergartens. The rest, 97.6 percent, are private. This happens because early childhood education is not part of the mandatory basic education program; so its provision and control have largely been taken care of by the private sector. Private kindergartens are mostly communal/organisation (affiliated to religion) and few are independent. Therefore, most private kindergartens are faith-based schools and because Islam is the majority religion, that is why most kindergartens are Islamic Kindergartens.

Islamic values can be inspirational, and therefore are becoming the spirit of education in Islamic Education. Moreover, Moral Education practiced in these schools relies on Islamic Values. We agree that religious education and religious values have the power to inspire and teach children about morals. We believe religion encourages positive moral development. Rossano (2008) argued that one way of testing this hypothesis was to identify moral experts/exemplars and see if religious people dominated their ranks. Anecdotally, the most commonly cited moral paragons are often religious—Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Albert Schweitzer, and so on. In Muslim Society, if people are asked to identify moral exemplars, the number one answer will be Prophet Muhammad, followed by his wife, son, sahabat, and other prophets.

Rossano (2008) added that a second test of the religion/moral expertise hypothesis can be done by reviewing the current literature on religion and moral behavior. The link between religion and morality is reflected in the many passages in the Qur'an. Muslims believe that moral behaviour presupposes faith and that faith is genuine only if it results in moral behaviour (Ashraf 1988 as cited by Halstead, 2007). Some Muslims view the concepts of moral duty and religious duty as inseparable. When they face a moral dilemma, they will look for moral answers in religion. Many Muslims find it difficult to talk about morality outside the context of religion.

According to Hamid Reza Alavi (2007), citing Al-Ghazali—one of the most influential philosophers and thinkers in education who wrote books on moral education—one-quarter of the Holy Qur'an relates to morality: 783 verses concern pure morality and 748 verses are about applied morality. On this basis, Al-Ghazali claims that morality is extremely important in Islamic teaching. Al-Ghazali identifies three

forms of morality: philosophical morality, morality based on religious prescription and mystical morality. Philosophical morality includes moral virtues like wisdom, courage, chastity, justice and good manners that feature in classical philosophical texts. Religious morality refers to those virtues directly prescribed by religion, which involve obedience to divine commandments and can only be attained through divine bounty and grace. Mystical morality arises from the desire to connect one's heart to the celestial or heavenly world. Its central aspiration is a closer relationship with God and the mystic or spiritual devotee acts out of a desire to please Him, rather than out of fear of punishment for immoral behaviour.

Read! (Iqra) is the first word of the Qur'an. Iqra is a very comprehensive word. This word was mentioned in the Qur'an three times. From here we understand, Islam requested the followers to read then to know then to follow. So Islamic Moral Education should consider this. Not just to preach children to do things, but to assist them to read, to know and then to follow the moral values. Moreover, Educating morality through stories has been used for ages in the Muslim world. Many hadiths, the oral record of the Prophet's life, were passed down from one generation to the next precisely because of their strong stories that appealed to the human heart. Muslims believe that storytelling is a way to inspire faith and love of God and the Prophet. Stories from the Qur'an, the story of the prophets, and stories of everyday life of Muslim children are the most commonly owned stories among families and kindergartens. From the data we obtained from the two best-selling publishers in Indonesia, Gramedia and Mizan, Islamic children's books are in the top 10 most popular books. Examples are: A Collection of Islamic Tales from the Three Continents, 365 Stories from The Quran, the Amazing Fables for Muslim Kids, and the Amazing Stories for Muslim kids. From our visits to 20 kindergartens, we also found that most books owned are Islamic story books.

## V. STORYTELLING IN ISLAMIC SCHOOL

We began our research by visiting twenty schools. We wanted to know how books are seen and used by the early childhood educators. We wanted to find out if they were teachers who had used stories for moral education. We went to several kindergartens in South Tangerang (suburb area, located to the southwest of Jakarta). All kindergartens we visited were private Islamic kindergartens.

We found one kindergaten that did not have any story books. Most of the schools had fewer than ten books, and 32 percent of the 20 schools had more than 100 books. Most of books were bought by the school or donated. 33 percent of the twenty schools bought their own books, while only 17 percent had received books from the government office/parents/alumni.

The majority of the schools, 75 percent of them, selected books because of their content. 13 percent said they had selected the books based on content and graphics, 6 percent said they had purchased their books based on recommendations and the remaining 6 percentsaid they had purchased books based on the need of students. Thirty

percent of the books were selected together by the headmaster, foundation, teachers and students. Twenty percent of the books were selected by the headmaster only. Eleven percent were selected by the teachers while 11 percent were selected by the headmaster, the foundation and the teachers. Only Five percent of the bookswere selected by the foundation only.

How were these books used in these kindergartens? 47 percent said that they integrated storytelling and story reading activities with other school subjects such as sciences and religious education. 23 percent said they used the stories to close out the activity of the day before the children went home. The remaining 12percent integrated story telling and reading with other school subjects and regularly used such activities to begin or end the day at school.

From the visit to those twenty schools, we found out that there were few teachers who used stories in moral education. There was even one kindergarten that held regular (three times a week) story reading/story telling activities. They said the purpose of such activities was to inspire children to do good deeds, have good behavior, and know what was right and what was wrong. We came to that kindergarten to study more about how the teachers used stories for moral education. The story reading/telling activities at this school became our case study. As a routine activity,the teachers read stories from the books but when there was a special ocassion (such as a religious/state holiday) they stage a special performance, for instance by inviting a professional storyteller to tell a story to the children with a theme related to the ocassion. We came to one occassion on mother's day, when the storyteller read a story about a mother's sacrifice for her children. We compared how the children reacted to story when it was read aloud. We found that the children were more enthusiastic about storytelling, especially when the reader used puppets to depict the actions of the story. We also observed three story reading activities by one teacher. From this we saw that teachers play an important role in helping children understand a story and capturing its message. Teachers are therefore challenged to explore the content of stories and help children connect the story with their daily lives.Children were sometimes seen to be more interested when they looked at the pictures in the books, than when they listened to the story. Teachers need to reach them and to explore new ways to hold the children's attention during the story reading and retain the message from the story. Discussions before, during and after storytelling/reading activities helped children understand the message of the story.

We also saw that the ways in which teachers viewed morality affected the way they conveyed moral values in a story. Muslim Teachers tend to highlight Islamic values in their teaching. When they are talking about good and bad, most of the time their references are taken from the Quran and Hadits. This is also reflected in the way or in what book/stories they bring to class. Here are the twelve stories that they teachers chose in one month (March 2012, the period of our visits to the school): 1) The Story of Prophet Muhammad, 2) I love you too (the story of a mother who loves her children), 3) Stories from The Qur'an, 4) The Prophet's Best Friends for Young Children, 5) Thank God for Creating the Sun, 6) I am an Honest Kid, 7) I love school,

8) Swallowed by the Whale (Stories of Prophet Yunus/Jonah), 9) Eating Snacks From the Street (stomachache due to dirty food), 10) The Sea is Salty (Learning about Science), 11) Crying Rocks (The Story of the Prodigal Son), and 12) My Little Brother and I.

Half of the selections were stories with Islamic Values (no. 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8), one story is a legend (an ancient tale from Indonesia, no.11), and the rest are from popular (recently published) storybooks written by Indonesian writers. Book selection is very important as this can determine which values the children are introduced to. We also can see what values teachers take from the books they choose. Moreover, they also had a tendency to guide children's understanding by focusing on the moral message of the story.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The model of moral education suggested by the curriculum and commonly practiced in many kindergartens is moral education that is integrated with Religious Education and/or with Citizenship Education (Pancasila). Pancasila and Religion are important parts of Indonesia. These two influences are becoming a way of life of the people in Indonesia. So when we talk about moral values, we should consider the values from these two sources. Because of this, the success of moral education is measured by whether the student's attitude is good or bad according to the rules of religion and state.

However, we think children need to learn about reasons and children's stories might be an effective way to introduce values to young children and create space for children to exercise reasoning. The values of Islam, as the majority religion in Indonesia, have become the most commonly used moral values in kindergarten since most kindergartens in Indonesia are private and run by Islamic foundations/organizations or Muslim individuals. In this research we do not debate whether or not to separate religion from morality, but we see that religion might also support the moral development of children. We see that integrating moral education with religious education can be effective given a creative delivery approach. What we mean here, is that it is not only important to teach children about right and wrong according to the Qur'an, but also to promote a focus on the reasons why we must do right, and not wrong.

Our findings in this study: first, moral education is considered a complementary topic in kindergarten in Indonesia. There are few teachers who use stories as moral education in kindergarten. Second, teachers play an important role in helping children understand stories and capturing a story's message. Teachers therefore should be encouraged to explore the content of stories and help children connect their own experiences and lives to the story. Third, the ways in which teachers see morality affects the way they convey moral values in a story.

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