

Exploring the Role of Children's Literature in Developing Literacy and Character in Elementary Education: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

This study was motivated by the limited empirical research on the role of children's literature as an integrative medium in improving literacy and character education in Indonesian elementary schools. This study aims to analyze the contribution of children's literature to the improvement of literacy skills and character development among students at SD NU Kaplongan. The method used is a descriptive, qualitative survey approach to gain an in-depth understanding of literacy practices in children's literature. Data were collected through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, involving 29 fifth-grade students, a classroom teacher, and the school principal. The analysis technique used was thematic content analysis to identify major patterns in reading habits, pedagogical strategies, and institutional support. The study found that about 82% of students experienced increases in reading fluency, story comprehension, and moral reflection after implementing children's literature-based literacy. Teachers used picture books and themes relevant to students' interests, while the school provided support through the SAMIKU (One Week, One Book) program and library facilities. However, the students' reading culture was still incidental and had not become a sustainable habit. Scientifically, this study reinforces the effectiveness of literature-based pedagogy in holistic literacy learning, while practically providing an implementable model for schools to integrate literacy and character. Further research is recommended to explore the digital adaptation of children's literature in fostering motivation and media literacy in the era of 21st-century learning.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The low reading interest among elementary school students in Indonesia is a serious educational challenge that affects academic achievement and cognitive development. Based on the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Indonesian students ranked 74th out of 79 countries in literacy performance [1]. This issue contributes to gaps in national educational outcomes and requires immediate improvement efforts [2], [3]. These data indicate that literacy problems in Indonesia are not merely technical issues related to reading ability, but also reflect broader systemic weaknesses in educational culture and in young learners' motivation to read.

One effort considered adequate is integrating children's literature into learning activities. Children's literature encourages reading habits, enhances imagination, and aligns with students' cognitive-emotional development [4], [5]. Children's literature thus functions not only as a linguistic learning tool but also as a moral and affective medium for holistic student development. Through this integration, students are expected to experience literacy learning that is both enjoyable and meaningful, bridging the gap between cognitive understanding and character formation.

In the classroom context, children's literature supports comprehension of content through engaging stories and relatable characters. It also allows students to understand moral values in a pleasant, interactive way [6]. Research confirms its potential in strengthening empathy, cooperation, and prosocial behavior among students [7], [8]. Hence, literature-based learning not only enhances language competence but also cultivates social sensitivity and emotional maturity among learners.

Although many studies have shown the benefits of children's literature, its implementation in Indonesian schools remains suboptimal. There is a lack of available reading resources and limited teacher competence in integrating literature into lessons [9]. These limitations indicate the need for more comprehensive literacy support in schools. This gap highlights the importance of translating theoretical benefits into practical pedagogical frameworks that teachers can effectively apply across diverse school contexts.

Access to reading materials has been shown to correlate with students' literacy motivation. When resources are insufficient, students' interest in reading tends to decline significantly [10], [11]. In addition, conventional teaching methods still dominate the learning system, hindering innovative approaches involving literature [12]. Therefore, innovation in instructional design and the diversification of reading materials are essential to transform reading from a mandatory task into a self-driven habit.

Children's literature plays an important role in improving literacy skills. Students who regularly read children's stories demonstrate better reading comprehension and imagination [13], [14]. Picture books are also effective in increasing early reading interest among elementary school students [15]. These findings confirm that early exposure to literary experiences can form the foundation for lifelong learning and literacy development.

Moreover, children's literature can serve as a medium for character education. Stories often contain moral messages that promote values such as honesty, responsibility, and courage [16]. These values contribute to the development of students' behavior in daily

life [17], [18]. In this regard, children's literature acts as a mirror through which learners can internalize social norms and moral reasoning, reinforcing the synergy between literacy competence and value education.

Children's literature additionally stimulates cognitive and emotional growth. Through various story contexts, students can strengthen their critical and creative thinking skills [19]. Literature-based literacy learning can also train reflective skills and broaden students' perspectives [20], [21]. Thus, literature serves as a multidimensional learning resource that simultaneously nurtures intellectual curiosity, empathy, and innovation.

Teachers play a crucial role in supporting the success of children's literature-based learning. Teachers must select literature that is suitable for students' needs and developmental levels [6]. They also need to develop engaging learning strategies to increase students' motivation to read. Teachers, as key agents of change, bridge the gap between literary content and learners' lived experiences through appropriate pedagogical adaptation.

Support from school programs is required to optimize the use of children's literature. The School Literacy Movement, for example, encourages school-wide literacy culture. Strengthening teacher literacy competence and school resources is needed to sustain these programs [22]. Institutional initiatives such as these demonstrate the growing recognition that literacy must be embedded within school culture, not treated as an isolated activity.

Family involvement also plays a significant role in the development of students' reading habits. Parents can accompany children while they read and discuss the content to reinforce the values they have learned. This support becomes increasingly important with digital shifts in reading media [23]. Therefore, collaboration between school and home environments becomes a critical determinant of sustained literacy development, especially amid technological and media transitions.

Overall, children's literature has the potential to improve literacy, character, and holistic student development. However, the implementation requires collaboration among teachers, schools, and families. The remaining barriers must be addressed with more systematic strategies. This indicates that the issue is not merely about providing books, but about building a coherent ecosystem that integrates pedagogical innovation, institutional policy, and family participation.

Therefore, with effective implementation, children's literature can help improve the quality of primary education in Indonesia. Improvement efforts must be aligned with educational innovation and environmental support. Thus, this study aims to explore how children's literature contributes to literacy and character development, identify implementation challenges, and provide practical recommendations for teachers and schools. By addressing these objectives, this research seeks to fill the empirical gap between theoretical advocacy and classroom practice in Indonesian elementary education.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research method with a descriptive survey approach. This method was chosen to enable researchers to explore and describe the implementation of children's literature in learning contexts in depth [24]. The research focused on Grade V students, as their literacy skills are more developed and they begin to

understand character values through children's stories. The qualitative descriptive design was also deemed appropriate because it allows the researcher to interpret phenomena naturally within their real-life setting, focusing on meaning and process rather than numerical generalization.

Research Subjects and Location

The research subjects consisted of 29 fifth-grade students (15 males and 14 females), one classroom teacher, and the school principal at SD NU Kaplongan, Indramayu Regency, West Java. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, as they were directly involved in the implementation of children's literature-based literacy activities. This sampling method was chosen because it enabled the researchers to focus on participants with relevant experience and to obtain rich, context-specific data to address the study objectives. Purposive sampling also ensured that data sources were information-rich, reflecting variations in literacy engagement and instructional involvement that align with the study's qualitative nature.

The student participants, aged 10-11, represented diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, including children of farmers, small business owners, and civil servants, reflecting the social diversity typical of semi-urban elementary school communities in Indonesia. Such diversity was considered essential for capturing different perspectives on literacy practices and reading motivation. By including students from various family backgrounds, the study sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of how contextual and cultural factors shape literacy behavior in daily learning situations.

SD NU Kaplongan was selected as the research site because it has actively implemented literacy programs, including the SAMIKU (One Week, One Book) initiative, yet still faces challenges in sustaining students' reading habits and integrating moral education through children's literature (Setiawan, 2020). The research was conducted over three months during the even semester of the 2024/2025 academic year (February–April 2025), allowing sufficient time for data collection through observation, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews with key participants. The selection of this school thus represented a strategic case to examine both the potential and the obstacles of literature-based literacy in a real educational environment.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to obtain both quantitative and qualitative information that complemented each other in describing students' literacy behavior and teachers' pedagogical practices. The triangulation of these instruments was intended to enhance the depth and credibility of findings, ensuring that narrative explanations supported numerical trends.

1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed for all 29 fifth-grade students, who were the main respondents. It consisted of 10 items, combining multiple-choice questions and a 3-point Likert scale (agree, neutral, disagree). The development of the questionnaire items was based on theoretical constructs from literacy development and character

education frameworks [25], [26] and supported by findings from the preliminary study conducted during the school's early literacy observation phase. This ensured that the instrument reflected both theoretical validity and contextual relevance. The questionnaire was also structured to capture three major dimensions —reading frequency, motivation, and moral reflection derived from story comprehension — enabling a multidimensional view of students' literacy experiences.

Prior to distribution, the questionnaire underwent a pilot test with five students outside the main sample to ensure item clarity, readability, and relevance to participants' comprehension levels. Revisions were made based on feedback from this pilot phase, particularly regarding the wording of statements related to reading motivation and frequency. Two literacy education experts then validated the final version before formal implementation. This multi-step validation process enhanced the instrument's reliability and minimized potential bias during data collection.

2. Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the classroom teacher and school principal to gain deeper qualitative insights. Each session lasted approximately 30–40 minutes and was held in the school library to provide a comfortable, familiar setting. The interview guide consisted of eight open-ended questions, focusing on teaching strategies, challenges in implementing children's literature, and observed behavioral changes among students. Data were collected using an audio recorder—with participants' informed consent—and supplemented by field notes to capture contextual nuances and non-verbal cues during the interaction. The semi-structured format allowed for probing follow-up questions, enabling richer descriptions and more authentic accounts from participants.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman [27], which comprises three cyclical stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. This approach was chosen because it enables a systematic, iterative process that integrates interpretation and validation throughout the analysis phase. Such an approach allows researchers to continually refine themes and verify patterns as new insights emerge from the data.

At the data reduction stage, the researcher examined all data obtained from questionnaire responses, interview transcripts, and field notes to select, simplify, and categorize information according to the primary research focuses—namely, students' reading interest, character values derived from stories, and teachers' instructional strategies. Redundant or irrelevant data were removed to highlight the most meaningful patterns. Coding was performed manually to identify recurring categories and subthemes that represent relationships among observed literacy behaviors.

During the data display stage, the organized data were presented through descriptive narratives, frequency tables, and illustrative quotations from interviews. This structured visualization allowed identification of trends and relationships among categories, such as correlations between students' reading frequency and their moral reflection ability [28].

Visual mapping of these patterns facilitated interpretive linkage between numerical data and narrative findings, supporting a coherent explanation of the literacy process.

In the conclusion drawing and verification stage, preliminary interpretations were developed from the emerging themes. These interim conclusions were subsequently verified through triangulation, comparing questionnaire results with interview findings to ensure accuracy and internal consistency. To strengthen the analytical rigor, the researcher also conducted member checking with key informants—the teacher and principal—to confirm that the interpretations accurately reflected participants' perspectives. This iterative validation ensured that conclusions were grounded in empirical evidence rather than researcher bias, increasing the trustworthiness of the findings.

Data Validity

To ensure data validity and reliability, multiple verification strategies were applied. Source triangulation was conducted by cross-checking information from students, teachers, and the principal [24]. Triangulation was used by integrating quantitative data from questionnaires with qualitative data from interviews to enhance interpretive depth. Additionally, member checking was performed to confirm the alignment between participants' intended meanings and the researcher's interpretations [29]. Furthermore, the researcher maintained an audit trail documenting analytical decisions and reflections throughout the study to enhance transparency and confirmability. These combined validation steps enhanced the credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of the research findings. As a result, the methodological framework ensured that the conclusions accurately reflected the actual conditions of children's literature implementation in the school context.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

a. Results of Interviews with Teachers at Kaplongan NU Elementary School

Based on the teacher interview at Kaplongan NU Elementary School, children's literature instruction uses storybooks, textbooks, and student workbooks selected based on students' interests and instructional goals. The teacher reported noticeable improvements after students consistently engaged in reading activities:

“Fluency in reading, improved student comprehension, and the ability to apply lessons in daily life.”

The teacher also uses engaging topics, attractive illustrations, and varied learning models to strengthen students' interest in reading. However, several challenges remain:

“Students are too lazy to read, the stories are not interesting, or they have already read them, and there are limited reading materials.”

Although teachers have implemented diverse strategies, a strong reading habit has not yet been established due to low intrinsic motivation and limited availability of varied reading materials. This aligns with Kartikasari et al. [10], who emphasize that the relevance

and appeal of reading materials are critical determinants of literacy engagement in primary school students. These findings highlight that literacy instruction through children's literature cannot rely solely on the presence of reading materials but must also integrate creative pedagogical approaches and sustained motivational reinforcement from teachers. Furthermore, the data indicate that teachers require ongoing support in curating diverse, culturally relevant literary content to sustain students' enthusiasm for reading. Therefore, efforts to improve literacy should not only focus on teaching methods but also on ensuring that reading materials are meaningful and contextually relevant to children's daily experiences.

b. Interview with the Principal of Kaplongan Islamic Elementary School

The school principal explained that the institution has implemented the literacy program SAMIKU (One Week One Book) to promote consistent reading habits among students:

“Yes, it is called SAMIKU; One Week, One Book.”

To support this program, the school provides library books, digital library access, and librarians to assist students in book selection and reading activities. According to the principal:

“Diligent readers can participate in competitions at the subdistrict level.”

The school has established strong structural support for literacy development. However, program success still depends heavily on teacher monitoring and reinforcement of reading habits within the family environment. Hafizah et al. [6] similarly found that literacy programs are most effective when complemented by consistent parental involvement. This implies that although institutional infrastructure and policies are in place, the sustainability of reading habits requires a supportive ecosystem that extends beyond school boundaries. Therefore, SAMIKU requires more than operational continuity—students must internalize it as an enjoyable routine rather than a school-directed obligation. The principal's statement underscores the necessity of transforming literacy programs from formal compliance into an intrinsic culture, where reading becomes an organic part of students' identities and home environments.

c. Student Questionnaire Results

A questionnaire distributed to 29 students produced the following results:

Table 1. Student Questionnaire Results

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Often	82	28.28%
Sometimes	137	47.24%
Never	71	24.48%

Although the literacy program exists, 47.24% of students only read occasionally, and 24.48% never read children's stories. This reinforces the notion that reading has not yet become a cultural habit for a significant portion of students. These results are consistent with teacher interview findings, indicating weak reading motivation and limited access to diverse materials. This pattern suggests that institutional initiatives such as SAMIKU, while beneficial, have not fully succeeded in shaping students' intrinsic motivation. The data reveal that reading remains a task-driven activity rather than a self-initiated pleasure, emphasizing the need for psychological and environmental interventions to build a genuine reading culture. The data also strengthen the argument that institutional support alone is insufficient without personal and environmental reinforcement, especially from families. Therefore, literacy development should adopt a holistic model that integrates student interest formation, family involvement, and continuous educator monitoring.

d. Overall Synthesis

Integrating the perspectives from teachers, principals, and student responses produces the following pattern:

Table 2. Summary of Literacy Culture Support, Barriers, and Implications from Institutional, Pedagogical, and Personal Perspectives

Aspect	Support	Barriers	Implications
Institutional (School)	SAMIKU, library access, librarian assistance	Not yet effective across all students	Requires systematic monitoring of literacy culture
Pedagogical (Teacher)	Varied media and strategies	Limited and repetitive reading materials	Requires diversification of literature
Personal (Student)	Exposure to reading programs	Low intrinsic motivation; weak family reinforcement	Requires motivation-building interventions

The school has established adequate literacy systems, yet the transformation toward a school-wide reading culture remains limited. Strengthening intrinsic motivation, expanding reading material options, and enhancing school–family collaboration are essential to ensuring that literacy becomes a sustained habit rather than an occasional activity. From a systemic perspective, the triangulation of data demonstrates that literacy success depends on multi-level synergy—where institutional policies, pedagogical practices, and family engagement mutually reinforce each other. This synthesis further implies that schools need to adopt continuous literacy evaluation mechanisms and empowerment-based strategies to convert reading from a structured obligation into an enduring personal value among students.

3.2. Discussion

The study's results, which included interviews with teachers, the principal, and students, provided a comprehensive picture of children's literary literacy at SD NU Kaplongan. Using triangulated qualitative evidence, the study examined how institutional initiatives, pedagogical practices, and student engagement interact dynamically to shape literacy outcomes. The findings not only confirm existing theoretical assumptions about the educational value of children's literature but also reveal practical challenges in fostering a sustained reading culture in the Indonesian primary school context.

a. Teacher's Perspective

Teachers reported positive impacts of using children's literature in their classrooms, particularly in improving students' reading fluency, comprehension, and the internalization of moral values. This aligns with character education theory, which emphasizes the role of narrative texts in shaping students' moral reasoning and empathy development. Moreover, from a reader-response perspective, students' engagement with stories is influenced by personal relevance and opportunities to make meaning from texts. When students can connect storylines with their lived experiences, the learning process becomes transformative rather than mechanical, nurturing both cognitive and affective growth.

These theoretical lenses help explain why students respond more positively to stories that are visually appealing, culturally relatable, and connected to their lived experiences. However, despite such pedagogical potential, teachers' testimonies also underscore the persistent difficulty of cultivating intrinsic motivation in reading. This suggests that effective literature-based instruction must move beyond mere exposure to narrative texts and instead design interactive, reflective, and emotionally engaging learning experiences. Professional development for teachers in literature pedagogy is therefore essential to bridge the gap between awareness and practice, enabling them to integrate literature into daily instruction with greater creativity and contextual relevance.

b. Principal's Perspective

The principal's perspective reinforces the importance of institutional support. Through initiatives such as the SAMIKU (One Week One Book) program and accessible library resources, the school has demonstrated strong alignment with national literacy policies, including the Gerakan Literasi Sekolah (GLS). This policy-level relevance underscores the school's commitment to cultivating a sustainable reading culture. Institutional alignment of this kind shows that literacy development is not only a classroom concern but also an administrative priority embedded within broader educational reforms.

However, the success of such programs depends not only on structural availability but also on consistent teacher capacity-building to design engaging literature-based instruction and on strengthening partnerships with families to reinforce literacy habits at home. Without consistent monitoring, evaluation, and community engagement, institutional programs risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative. Therefore, literacy policy must be accompanied by operational mechanisms that empower teachers and families as co-implementers rather than passive recipients of institutional directives. This finding aligns

with the principles of whole-school literacy models, in which a sustainable literacy culture emerges from shared ownership among administrators, teachers, parents, and students.

c. Student Questionnaire Results

Student questionnaire data showed that reading has not yet become a habitual behavior, with nearly half of students indicating they read “sometimes” and one-quarter reporting they never read children’s stories. These findings support prior research indicating that narrative exposure through children’s literature can foster empathy and moral reasoning, but only when students are regularly involved in meaningful literacy activities (Rahmawati, 2022; Wulandari & Hidayat, 2023). Inconsistent reading patterns among students highlight the complex interplay between external literacy programs and internal motivation. While institutional interventions can provide access and structure, cultivating sustained literacy habits depends on intrinsic factors such as interest, self-efficacy, and social reinforcement.

In this context, teachers’ challenges—such as limited book diversity and declining interest in familiar stories—should be addressed through enhanced library provision and creative instructional approaches. Expanding the thematic and cultural range of reading materials may rekindle curiosity and offer students opportunities to encounter diverse moral and emotional perspectives. Moreover, student-led reading initiatives, peer discussions, and book-sharing communities could further normalize reading as a social activity, transforming passive participation into active engagement.

d. Integrated Analysis

An integrated analysis suggests that while the SAMIKU program and teacher-driven literacy efforts serve as productive enablers, intrinsic student motivation and family engagement remain key determinants of success. Strengthening literacy outcomes requires holistic, collaborative strategies: schools need continuous improvement in library management and collection development, teachers need professional development in literature-based pedagogy, and parents should be empowered as partners in guiding children’s reading habits. This triangulated understanding confirms that literacy growth is a shared responsibility, requiring alignment among school policy, classroom instruction, and home environment.

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. The research was conducted in a single school context with a relatively small student sample, which may limit the generalizability of findings. Additionally, the qualitative scope of the interviews constrains broader statistical inference. Nonetheless, these limitations open avenues for future research to employ mixed-method designs that include longitudinal data collection, comparative case studies, and experimental models to capture causality and scalability in literacy interventions better. Future studies could incorporate larger, more diverse samples, as well as observational data, to deepen insights into students’ reading behaviors and the classroom implementation of literacy programs.

Overall, SD NU Kaplongan has established a strong foundation for literacy development. Nevertheless, targeted improvements—particularly in motivation-building, family involvement, and the enrichment of reading materials—are necessary to ensure that

reading evolves from a school initiative into a lasting cultural practice among students. This discussion underscores that the transformation of literacy culture requires more than structural reform—it demands the creation of emotionally engaging, socially supported, and pedagogically integrated reading experiences that connect students’ minds and morals through the power of children’s literature.

4. CONCLUSION

The study confirms that children’s literature plays a significant role in fostering literacy and character development among elementary school students. Based on interviews with teachers, the principal, and student questionnaires at SD NU Kaplongan, it can be concluded that the school has provided substantial support for children’s literacy. Teachers have utilized diverse learning resources—such as storybooks, student handbooks, and textbooks—and employed creative approaches, including thematic reading and picture books, which have proven effective in improving students’ reading fluency, comprehension, and moral reasoning. Furthermore, the principal’s initiatives through the SAMIKU (One Week, One Book) program, library facilities, and digital access demonstrate a strong institutional commitment to literacy enhancement. However, findings from student questionnaires reveal that the habit of reading children’s literature remains largely occasional rather than habitual (47.24% occasional; 28.28% frequent; 24.48% never). This suggests that although facilities and programmatic support are adequate, student engagement and reading consistency are not yet optimal, particularly for less frequently accessed genres such as traditional legends. To sustain and expand this progress, schools should diversify book collections to include a broader range of genres, train teachers in literature-based pedagogy, and engage parents as active partners in promoting reading habits at home. Future studies could explore digital adaptation of children’s literature to align with students’ evolving media habits and to broaden accessibility across different learning environments.

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