



Children's Enjoyment and Recognition of Character Strengths in Bawang Merah Bawang Putih: Implications for Character Education

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Abstract

Children's character education is often taught through monotonous methods. Narratives and folktales have been widely used as educational media to introduce moral values and positive character strengths to children. Folklore is a narrative that has been verbally transmitted through the generations. This method was used to teach children about moral concepts in an interesting way, such as the story of *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*. However, empirical evidence regarding children's recognition of character strengths represented in the *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* folktale remains limited. Thus, this study aimed to examine children's enjoyment of a theatrical performance of *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* and their recognition of the character strengths represented in the story. Using a one-group post-test design, involved children aged 10 to 12 from schools in Indonesia. After watching a narrative of *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*, the children completed questionnaires measuring enjoyment using scales from Oliver and Bartsch and the Values in Action – Youth from Park and Peterson to assess character strengths. Data were analyzed using a one-sample t-test and a within-subjects ANOVA. The results indicated that the 38 students reported enjoyment of the theatrical performance and recognized several positive character strengths represented in the story, including perseverance, forgiveness, zest, bravery, humility, honesty, and prudence. These findings suggest that a theatrical performance of *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* may serve as an engaging medium for introducing and facilitating children's recognition of positive character strengths. However, the findings should not be interpreted as evidence of character internalization or behavioral development.

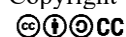
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INTRODUCTION

Character education is important during childhood because this developmental period provides a foundation for learning moral and social values (Hakim, 2016; Pala, 2011). Children are introduced to values such as kindness, courage, honesty, responsibility, and humanity through their interactions with parents, teachers, and their social environment. Character education can therefore be understood as a systematic educational effort to help children recognize, understand, and apply socially valued moral principles (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Birhan et al., 2021). In the context of elementary education, an important initial process is helping children recognize positive qualities and understand how these qualities are represented through everyday actions and social interactions.

Moral learning during childhood does not necessarily occur only through direct instruction. Children can also learn about socially valued behaviors by observing examples, interpreting the consequences of actions, and discussing moral situations presented in educational activities. Previous studies suggest that exposure to moral values can support children's prosocial understanding and social interaction (Amollo & Lilian, 2017; Joosten et al., 2015). Therefore, rather than emphasizing the broad social consequences of inadequate character education, the present study focuses on a more immediate educational process: how children engage with a moral narrative and recognize the positive character strengths represented within it.

Character education can be delivered in both formal and informal settings. In schools, moral learning is commonly incorporated into classroom instruction alongside academic learning (Birhan et al., 2021). One common approach is the didactic method, in which teachers directly explain learning materials and expected values to students (Austin, 2013). Although direct instruction is useful for communicating information efficiently, students may become passive recipients when learning relies predominantly on teacher-centered explanations (Roopa et al., 2013). This has encouraged interest in complementary approaches that allow children to engage more actively with moral content. One such approach is the use of narrative.

Narratives provide moral information through characters, actions, conflicts, and consequences rather than solely through direct explanation. From the perspective of narrative persuasion, messages embedded in stories may attract attention and reduce resistance because audiences engage with characters and events as part of a coherent story (Slater & Rouner, 2002; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Narratives communicate intended messages through characters and events, allowing audiences to become cognitively and emotionally involved in the story and thereby increasing their attention to the values, events, and characters represented in the narrative (Green & Brock, 2000).

Previous studies found that narrative is believed as one of the effective methods for persuading people because it can increase attention by inviting audiences into story actions to feel a real experience of the story (Shen, Sheer & Li, 2015; Kreuter et. al, 2007). A previous study found that the use of narrative in teaching English has increased vocabulary knowledge and learning motivation rate in children (Kalantari & Hashemian, 2015). Likewise, Fridin (2013) showed that narratives used with a social assistive robot in a kindergarten have enhanced enjoyment and promoted emotional involvement in children's learning process. Narrative method in learning could enhance memory, interest, and understanding (Norris et al., 2005).

Clark (2008) explained that learning through narrative can engage and transport people into an experience and imagination of the storylines. These processes make them comprehend the fundamentals of narrative character. Shaffer et al (2018) stated that stories are more likely to be



deeply engaging if they have recognizable characters, a reasonable plot, and plausibility. Furthermore, readers of stories are more likely to become immersed if they are familiar with the story's subject. Green & Brock (2000) explained that narratives are particularly effective when people are drawn into or totally absorbed in the story. Narratives may facilitate attention to and understanding of moral content by presenting values through concrete characters, actions, and consequences (Shaffer et al., 2018). When children become engaged with a story, they may also experience enjoyment, which can support sustained attention to the narrative and its moral content. In the present study, enjoyment is therefore considered an immediate response to children's engagement with the narrative, rather than evidence of character internalization, behavioral change, or character development.

Thompson (2011) explained that storytelling as a narrative method was used to teach children about moral concepts like right and wrong as well as honesty. Stories are very important for children to learn. Stories are also a great tool because they provide ideal opportunities to present information without telling students what they are learning (Ellis & Brewster, 2014; Esteban & Gómez, 2019). While students listen, read, and repeat, they are learning aspects of culture that they can discuss later and compare to their own lifestyle (Ellis & Brewster, 2014; Esteban & Gómez, 2019). According to Dahlstrom (2014) and Hinyard and Kreuter (2007), narrative is any story that has a connected structure of beginning, middle, and ending. The narrative also has the element of characters and events as well as scenes. Since narrative has an element of character (about a person or people), teachers and parents are utilizing stories for character education in children.

Character education process can also be understood through social learning theory (Bandura, 1986). When children observe narrative characters performing particular actions and experiencing their consequences, those characters can provide concrete behavioral examples through which children interpret positive and negative qualities. Thus, a narrative may make abstract moral qualities more visible by representing them in observable actions. Positive education (Littman-Ovadia et al., 2021) provides the broader educational rationale for drawing children's attention to positive human qualities, whereas the Values in Action (VIA) character-strength framework (Park & Peterson, 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) provides a systematic conceptual structure for identifying and classifying those qualities. Taken together, these perspectives suggest a coherent process: children engage with a narrative, observe and interpret the actions of its characters, and may subsequently recognize the positive character strengths represented in those actions.

Narratives have also been widely used to introduce children to cultural and moral values. Folklore is particularly relevant because it represents stories, traditions, and values that have been transmitted across generations (Michalopoulos & Xue, 2021; Nanda et al., 2021). Because folklore is embedded within a cultural context familiar to children, its characters and moral situations may provide meaningful examples through which children interpret socially valued behaviors. Previous studies have identified moral and character-related values in folktales from different cultural settings, including honesty, kindness, hope, responsibility, hard work, and social care (Talwar et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2014; Walker & Lombrozo, 2016; Nanda et al., 2021). For example, in America, there are several narratives/stories that are popular and used for character education, i.e., stories titled George Washington and Cherry Tree that emphasized honesty, Henry the Hero that emphasized kindness, and Mr. Muffet's Apple Tree that emphasized hope (Talwar et al., 2107; Lee et al., 2014; Walker & Lambrozo, 2016). Moreover, the local legends of China describe the old Chinese way of life, including the language, beliefs, and customs. The narrative story in Africa



focuses on the people, daily life, cultural values, and traditions. Folklore known as Liangmai, which emphasizes love, heroes, and justice, is well-known in India (Santosa et al., 2022).

In Indonesia, one of the most widely recognized traditional folktales is *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*. The story has been transmitted across generations and has been used as a medium for introducing moral values to children (Nurrohman et al., 2022; Rahayu & Sudarwati, 2020). The narrative presents contrasting characters whose actions lead to different consequences, thereby providing children with observable examples of socially valued and less desirable behaviors. Previous qualitative studies have identified several moral qualities in the story, including hard work, discipline, responsibility, social care, and curiosity (Rahmadewi & Supriyadi, 2022).

The structure of *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* makes the narrative conceptually suitable for interpretation through the VIA character-strength framework (Park & Peterson, 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The story communicates moral meanings through characters' actions, choices, conflicts, and consequences, providing a culturally familiar context in which children can observe and interpret socially valued and less desirable behaviors. The VIA classification offers a systematic framework for examining these qualities by organizing positive human characteristics into 24-character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Park & Peterson, 2006).

Rather than assuming a priori that the folktale contains a fixed set of VIA strengths, the present study used the VIA framework as a conceptual lens to examine which strengths children recognized in the theatrical narrative. Although the VIA framework comprises 24 character strengths, this study focused on eight strengths—perseverance, forgiveness, bravery, humility, honesty, prudence, zest, and self-regulation—because these were the domains assessed in relation to the characters' actions and responses. Accordingly, the study does not claim that these strengths are objectively or exclusively embedded in the story; instead, it examines the extent to which children recognized them after viewing the performance.

Despite the educational use of *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*, empirical evidence regarding how children respond to its theatrical presentation and which positive character strengths they recognize in the narrative remains limited. Previous studies have primarily examined the moral content of Indonesian folktales qualitatively or have classified values using locally developed categories. Consequently, less is known about children's immediate perceptions of character strengths when an Indonesian folktale is presented through narrative theatre and examined using a standardized character-strength framework.

The novelty of the present study therefore lies in the combination of four elements: (1) the use of a quantitative, exploratory design to examine children's immediate responses to a narrative; (2) the application of the VIA-Youth framework to organize the character strengths recognized by children; (3) the use of theatrical performance as the mode of presenting the narrative; and (4) the examination of a culturally familiar Indonesian folktale as a resource for character education. Rather than testing whether the performance develops or internalizes character strengths, the study focuses specifically on children's enjoyment of the theatrical narrative and their recognition of the character strengths represented in the story.

Thus, this study aimed to examine (1) children's enjoyment after viewing a theatrical performance of *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* and (2) the character strengths they recognized in the narrative based on the VIA framework. The study also explored which character strengths were more salient to children following the performance. Given the one-group post-test design, the

findings are interpreted as immediate, perception-based responses and not as evidence of character formation, internalization, behavioral change, or causal educational effectiveness.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed an exploratory one-group post-test design to examine children's immediate responses after viewing a theatrical performance of *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*. Specifically, the study assessed children's enjoyment of the performance and their recognition of the character strengths represented in the narrative. Because the study did not include a pretest, comparison group, or longitudinal follow-up, it was not designed to assess changes in character strengths, character internalization, behavioral development, or the causal effectiveness of the theatrical performance. Accordingly, the findings were interpreted as immediate, perception-based responses following exposure to the narrative.

Participants

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling from public and private elementary schools in Jakarta, Indonesia. The participants were boys and girls aged 10–12 years who were able to participate in regular school activities and to read and complete the study questionnaires. Participation was voluntary, and agreement was obtained from the children, with informed consent provided by their parents or legal guardians. Children with severe hearing or communication difficulties that could substantially interfere with their ability to access the theatrical performance or complete the study measures were excluded.

Measures

The measures were completed online after the children were shown the theatre performance of *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* for 17 minutes and 55 seconds. Two measures were given to the children, i.e., enjoyment and character strengths. First, the enjoyment measures to what extent the children like the narrative theatre. This measurement uses six items' scales developed by Oliver and Bartsch (2010). All items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and Cronbach's alpha of the enjoyment scale was .724.

Second, we assessed children's recognition of character strengths in the theatrical narrative using 32 items adapted from the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-Youth; Park & Peterson, 2006). The VIA-Youth was developed for children and adolescents aged 10–17 years and uses age-relevant situations and relatively simple language to support comprehension among younger respondents (Ray et al., 2022). In the present study, we did not administer the full VIA-Youth. Instead, we selected 32 items to represent eight-character strengths relevant to the narrative: perseverance, forgiveness, bravery, humility, honesty, prudence, zest, and self-regulation. These items assessed children's recognition of strengths represented in the narrative rather than generating a comprehensive profile of their personal character strengths.

Participants rated responses on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The adapted 32-item measure demonstrated good internal consistency in the present sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .874$), providing adequate reliability for the exploratory analyses conducted in this study. The age range of the participants was also consistent with the intended age range of the VIA-Youth. However, because evidence for cross-cultural and



linguistic equivalence of VIA-Youth adaptations remains limited, particularly in non-Western contexts, the present study does not claim full psychometric equivalence between the adapted Indonesian items and the original VIA-Youth (Ray et al., 2022). We reviewed the Indonesian wording for clarity and comprehensibility before administration. However, we did not conduct a formal forward-backward translation procedure; we acknowledge this limitation when interpreting the findings.

Narrative Stimulus

The theatrical performance of *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* served as the narrative stimulus in this study to examine children's recognition of character strengths. The study did not assume a priori that the narrative contained a predetermined set of VIA character strengths. Instead, the extent to which specific character strengths were recognized was treated as an empirical outcome based on participants' responses to the VIA-based measure.

The stimulus consisted of a 17-minute-and-55-second recorded theatrical performance presented in Bahasa Indonesia. The script was adapted from the folktale *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* (Faza, 2016) and featured five actors portraying the main characters: Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih, Father, Mother, and Grandmother. The performance was set in a village environment and retained the central storyline, character relationships, conflicts, and consequences of the adapted folktale. These narrative elements provided behavioral and contextual cues through which participants could interpret the characters' actions and recognize the strengths represented in the story.

Accordingly, the theatrical narrative was not pre-classified by an expert panel as containing a fixed set of character strengths before data collection. Rather, the VIA framework was used as the conceptual basis for assessing participants' post-viewing recognition of character strengths. This approach allowed the study to examine children's perceptions of the strengths represented in the performance without presupposing that particular strengths were objectively present in the stimulus.

Procedure

The recruitment process for participants consisted of a personal promotion presented in classes. Flyers were placed on school notice boards within two weeks and one week prior to the study's implementation. Children interested in the study were invited to an interview by a research assistant for inclusion and exclusion criteria. The children who met the criteria were given written information about the study, including informed consent for their parents or school principal. Three days after the screening process, the participants were shown an online theatre performance of *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* presented by students majoring in performing arts communication from a university in Jakarta, Indonesia. The narrative content describes specific characters, including the protagonist and antagonists. The narrative titled *Bawang Merah* (Shallot) *Bawang Putih* (Garlic) by Faza (2016) was shown for 17 minutes and 55 seconds, with guidance from the researcher and research assistants. The participants completed a self-report questionnaire after viewing the theatre performance. This study has received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee (Hasanuddin University), with approval number: 1287/UN4.14.1/TP.02.02/2021.



Data analysis

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and 95% confidence intervals, were calculated to summarize participants' enjoyment and character-strength recognition scores. A one-sample *t*-test was conducted to determine whether the mean scores for enjoyment, overall character-strength recognition, and each character-strength dimension were significantly greater than the neutral midpoint of 3 on the five-point Likert scale. This reference value was selected because it represents a neutral response and therefore provides a meaningful benchmark for evaluating whether participants' post-viewing ratings reflected positive enjoyment and recognition of character strengths. Cohen's *d* was reported to indicate the magnitude of the differences from the neutral midpoint, and the findings were interpreted using both inferential and descriptive statistics rather than statistical significance alone. In addition, one-way ANOVAs were conducted to explore whether enjoyment scores differed by gender and age.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the participants. We recruited 38 children aged 10–12 years using convenience sampling from public and private elementary schools in Jakarta, Indonesia. The sample included 23 boys (60.5%) and 15 girls (39.5%). Most participants were 11 years old ($n = 18$, 47.4%) or 12 years old ($n = 18$, 47.4%), whereas two participants were 10 years old (5.3%). Given the small, non-probability sample drawn from elementary schools in a single urban area, the demographic characteristics are presented descriptively, and the findings should not be generalized beyond the study sample.

Table 1

Demographic characteristics

Category	N=38	Frequency	Percentage	<i>p</i>
Gender	Boy	23	60,5	.424
	Girl	15	39,5	
Age	10	2	5,3	.414
	11	18	47,4	
	12	18	47,4	

The normality of the data was assessed using the Shapiro–Wilk test before conducting the planned parametric analyses. The results showed no significant deviation from normality for either Enjoyment ($W = .945$, $p = .063$) or Character Strength ($W = .984$, $p = .851$), as both *p*-values were greater than .05. These findings indicated that the normality assumption was adequately met, supporting the use of parametric statistical tests in the subsequent analyses.

Table 2

Result of one-sample analysis of Enjoyment and Character strength identification

Variable	Mean	SD	95% Confidence Interval Mean		Minimum	Maximum	<i>d</i> 's
			Lower	Upper			
Enjoyment	4.346	0.3784	4.222	4.471	3.500	5.000	3.56
Character Strength	4.184	0.3919	4.055	4.313	3.250	5.000	3.02



Variable	Mean	SD	95% Confidence Interval		Minimum	Maximum	<i>d</i> 's
			Lower	Upper			
Zest	4.368	0.4923	4.207	4.530	3.250	5.000	2.78
Humility	4.112	0.5716	3.924	4.300	3.000	5.000	1.95
Honesty	4.092	0.5180	3.922	4.262	3.000	5.000	2.10
Forgiveness	4.342	0.5968	4.146	4.538	2.500	5.000	2.25
Bravery	4.158	0.7199	3.921	4.395	2.250	5.000	1.61
Prudence	4.059	0.5015	3.894	4.224	3.250	5.000	2.11
Self-regulations	3.914	0.5673	3.728	4.101	3.000	5.000	1.61
Perseverance	4.428	0.4860	4.268	4.587	2.750	5.000	2.92

Note: $p < 0.05$

A one-sample *t*-test was conducted to examine whether participants' ratings were significantly greater than the neutral midpoint of 3 on the five-point Likert scale. The value of 3 represents a neutral response and was therefore used as a theoretically meaningful benchmark for evaluating whether participants reported positive responses after viewing the theatrical narrative. Participants reported enjoyment significantly above the neutral midpoint ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.38$), $t(37) = 21.93$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 3.56$, 95% CI [4.22, 4.47]. The overall character-strength recognition score was also significantly above the neutral midpoint ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.39$), $t(37) = 18.63$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.02$, 95% CI [4.05, 4.31]. These results indicate that participants generally enjoyed the theatrical performance and recognized the positive character strengths represented in the narrative at levels clearly above a neutral response.

All eight character-strength dimensions were rated significantly above the neutral midpoint of 3 (all $p < .001$), with large standardized differences from the reference value (Cohen's $ds = 1.61$ – 2.94). Descriptively, perseverance showed the highest recognition score ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 0.49$, 95% CI [4.27, 4.59], $d = 2.94$), followed by zest ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 0.49$, 95% CI [4.20, 4.53], $d = 2.78$) and forgiveness ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 0.60$, 95% CI [4.15, 4.54], $d = 2.25$). Self-regulation had the lowest mean recognition score ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.57$, 95% CI [3.73, 4.10], $d = 1.61$), although it remained significantly above the neutral midpoint. These descriptive patterns suggest that perseverance, zest, and forgiveness were particularly salient to participants, whereas self-regulation was relatively less salient. Because no inferential comparison between the individual strengths was conducted, differences among the mean scores are interpreted descriptively rather than as statistically significant differences between strengths.

These findings suggest that the strong recognition of perseverance may relate to how this strength is shown through Bawang Putih's actions in the narrative. Throughout the story, Bawang Putih continues to carry out her responsibilities and face difficulties despite repeated hardship and unfair treatment. This persistence appears in visible, repeated actions, providing clear behavioral cues that children can use to recognize perseverance. Zest may similarly be reflected in Bawang Putih's continued active engagement with her responsibilities despite adversity, whereas forgiveness can be recognized through her non-retaliatory responses to mistreatment.

The other character-strength dimensions were also recognized at levels significantly above the neutral midpoint of 3. Bravery had a mean score of 4.16 ($SD = 0.72$), $t(37) = 9.91$, $p < .001$,

95% CI [3.92, 4.40], indicating that participants clearly recognized courageous behavior represented in the narrative. Humility ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.57$), $t(37) = 11.99$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [3.92, 4.30], Honesty ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 0.52$), $t(37) = 13.00$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [3.92, 4.26], and Prudence ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.50$), $t(37) = 13.02$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [3.89, 4.22], were likewise recognized above the neutral midpoint. These findings suggest that participants perceived narrative cues related to courage, modesty, truthfulness, and careful decision-making in the actions and responses of the characters. Compared with perseverance, zest, and forgiveness, however, these strengths showed somewhat lower mean recognition scores, which may indicate that they were less visually or narratively salient in the theatrical performance.

Although self-regulation had the lowest mean recognition score among the eight character-strength dimensions ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.57$), it remained significantly above the neutral midpoint of 3, $t(37) = 9.94$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [3.73, 4.10]. This suggests participants could recognize self-regulation in the narrative, although it was less salient than the other strengths. One possible explanation is that self-regulation involves more internal processes, such as controlling emotional reactions, regulating impulses, and managing behavior, which may be less directly observable than overt, repeated actions reflecting perseverance or zest. In a short theatrical performance, these internal processes may therefore be less immediately visible to children. The relatively lower score for self-regulation may thus reflect differences in the visibility and narrative emphasis of particular strengths rather than their absence or educational importance. From a pedagogical perspective, this finding suggests that less observable strengths such as self-regulation may require more explicit narrative cues, reflection, or guided discussion to help children recognize and interpret them.

Furthermore, to examine whether Enjoyment differed by gender, descriptive statistics and a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted. As shown in the descriptive statistics, male participants ($n = 23$) reported a slightly higher level of enjoyment ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 0.33$) than female participants ($n = 15$, $M = 4.24$, $SD = 0.44$). Although the mean score for males was marginally higher, both groups demonstrated high levels of enjoyment, with average scores exceeding 4.00 on the five-point Likert scale. However, the analysis revealed that gender did not have a significant effect on enjoyment, $F(1, 36) = 1.84$, $p = .183$ (Table 3).

Likewise, this study also analyses the differences in enjoyment across age groups. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine whether Enjoyment differed across age groups (10, 11, and 12 years). Descriptive statistics indicated that participants aged 10 years reported the highest mean enjoyment score ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.71$, $n = 2$), followed by those aged 12 years ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 0.42$, $n = 18$) and 11 years ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.30$, $n = 18$). Overall, all age groups demonstrated high levels of enjoyment, with mean scores above 4.20 on the five-point Likert scale. The results of the one-way ANOVA indicated that there was no statistically significant difference in enjoyment among the three age groups, $F(2, 35) = 0.77$, $p = .471$ (Table 3).

Table 3

Result of Analysis of Enjoyment Based on Gender and Age

Gender	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
Boy	23	4.413	0.3290	0.06861	0.07456
Girl	15	4.244	0.4358	0.1125	0.1027
Age					



Result of Analysis of Enjoyment Based on Gender and Age

Gender	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
10	2	4.500	0.7071	0.5000	0.1571
11	18	4.269	0.2978	0.07019	0.06977
12	18	4.407	0.4248	0.1001	0.09639

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate children's enjoyment of watching the narrative and to examine the character traits highlighted in the Indonesian folktale *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* when delivered to elementary school students. Four main findings are presented in this research. Firstly, the demographic analysis revealed an even distribution of participants by gender and age. Second, students reported high levels of enjoyment while watching the narrative theatre and perceived high overall character strengths embedded in the story. Third, among the measured character strengths, perseverance emerged as the most strongly perceived virtue, followed by forgiveness, zest, bravery, humility, honesty, and prudence, whereas self-regulation received the lowest score, although still relatively high. Fourth, enjoyment did not differ significantly according to gender or age, suggesting that the narrative theatre was similarly engaging across participant groups.

Collectively, these findings support the fundamental premise of positive education that meaningful learning experiences integrating emotions, cognition, and culture facilitate the development of positive character attributes (Seligman et al., 2009; Lavy, 2020; Waters & Loton, 2019). Furthermore, narrative theatre provides opportunities for children to observe moral dilemmas, empathize with story characters, and reflect upon the consequences of virtuous and non-virtuous behaviors, thereby strengthening character development through experiential learning rather than direct instruction (Niemic, 2018; Quinlan et al., 2021).

First, the demographic analysis showed that the participants were fairly evenly distributed across gender and age groups, with no statistically significant differences in the sample composition. Although demographic characteristics were not the main focus of the study, this balanced distribution strengthens the reliability of the findings by reducing the likelihood that the results were influenced by demographic bias. Previous research suggests that children's character strengths are shaped more strongly by factors such as educational experiences, family relationships, and school climate than by gender or age alone (Lavy, 2020; Wagner et al., 2020). Therefore, the absence of significant demographic differences provides greater confidence that the character strengths observed in this study were related to the narrative theatre experience rather than to the participants' personal characteristics.

Second, students reported a high level of enjoyment while watching the narrative theatre performance of *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*. The overall enjoyment score was significantly higher than the reference value, indicating that students viewed the performance as an engaging and enjoyable learning experience. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that arts-based learning can strengthen intrinsic motivation, emotional engagement, and classroom participation by allowing students to experience educational content actively rather than receive it passively (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Vázquez-Marín et al., 2024).



Emotional engagement can also promote deeper cognitive processing, improve memory retention, and increase students' willingness to participate in learning activities. These qualities make narrative theatre a valuable medium for moral and character education (Waters & Loton, 2019; Quinlan et al., 2021). The high enjoyment reported by the students is also consistent with Narrative Transportation Theory, which proposes that audiences experience greater enjoyment when they become cognitively and emotionally absorbed in a story (Kothgassner et al., 2022). The narrative theatre format used in this study may have deepened students' immersion by combining visual and auditory elements with direct interaction between the performers and the audience. By creating a more vivid and participatory experience, narrative theatre may offer a richer and more engaging learning environment than passive forms of storytelling.

Although the children greatly enjoyed the narrative, they still had some difficulty understanding the characters' emotions, motivations, and perspectives. According to Shaffer et al. (2018), effective narrative communication is shaped by three closely connected elements: interest, involvement, and immersion. Interest relates to factors such as the credibility of the source, the realism of the story, and its entertainment value. Involvement refers to the audience's ability to empathize with, understand, and identify with the characters, while immersion describes the extent to which viewers feel mentally and emotionally absorbed in the story world. The findings suggest that the students were highly interested in the narrative theatre, which likely contributed to their enjoyment of the performance. However, the relatively short duration of the play may not have provided enough time for deeper emotional involvement and immersion to develop. Consequently, the students may have had fewer opportunities to fully understand the characters' feelings, motivations, and perspectives.

Fourth, the overall Character Strength score suggests that students were able to recognize a variety of positive virtues conveyed through the narrative. The character traits identified in the narrative theatre performance of *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* are generally consistent with the qualitative findings of Rahmadewi and Supriyadi (2022), who highlighted five key traits: hard work, discipline, responsibility, social care, and curiosity. Within the character strengths framework developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004), these traits are associated with the broader virtues of Courage, Temperance, Humanity, and Wisdom.

In the present study, the children most clearly recognized strengths related to Courage and Temperance, particularly perseverance, forgiveness, bravery, honesty, humility, prudence, and zest, all of which received high average scores. These findings provide quantitative support for earlier qualitative evidence and suggest that children are more likely to notice virtues that are clearly and visibly demonstrated by the main character during a theatrical performance. They may be less likely to recognize every virtue embedded more subtly within the story.

The differences between the virtues identified in the two studies may also reflect their different methodological approaches. Rahmadewi and Supriyadi (2022) conducted a qualitative analysis of the narrative text, whereas the present study examined children's perceptions after they watched a live theatrical performance. The findings also align with the positive psychology perspective that stories provide a meaningful context for developing character strengths. Through stories, children can observe the behaviour, motivations, choices, and consequences experienced by others (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Niemiec, 2018). Rather than simply memorizing moral rules, they develop moral understanding by interpreting characters' decisions and reflecting on the outcomes of those decisions.

This interpretation aligns with Lavy (2020), who found that character-strength interventions in educational settings can improve students' psychological well-being, academic engagement, and prosocial behaviour. Similarly, Wagner et al. (2020) reported that students with well-developed character strengths are more likely to show persistence, cooperation, and resilience at school.

Among the character strengths assessed, perseverance received the highest mean score, indicating that persistence and sustained effort were the qualities most clearly recognized by the students. This finding is especially meaningful because perseverance is central to the moral message conveyed through the character of *Bawang Putih*. Despite repeatedly experiencing unfair treatment, she remains patient, hardworking, and determined. Her eventual success comes not from immediate rewards, but from her continued effort and strong moral character.

From the perspective of social learning theory, observing positive role models can encourage children to develop similar patterns of behaviour (Bandura, 1986). Perseverance is also widely associated with academic achievement, resilience, and long-term success, as individuals who possess this strength are more likely to remain committed when facing challenges or setbacks (Wagner et al., 2020; Gander et al., 2022). It is therefore not surprising that perseverance emerged as the character strength most strongly perceived by students after watching the performance.

Forgiveness and zest also received high scores, suggesting that students clearly recognized themes of compassion, kindness, and positive emotional energy throughout the performance. The high score for forgiveness indicates that students valued empathy and reconciliation, even in situations involving conflict. Rather than encouraging revenge, *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* presents patience, kindness, and virtuous behaviour as the basis of moral justice. In this way, the story allows children to understand forgiveness as a constructive response to interpersonal conflict. This finding is consistent with Niemiec (2018), who argued that narratives can help children understand complex moral virtues by allowing them to observe meaningful and realistic social interactions.

The high score for zest suggests that students engaged with the performance enthusiastically and with positive energy. Previous research has shown that positive emotions can expand children's thinking and make them more receptive to learning, creativity, and social interaction (Fredrickson, 2001; Waters & Loton, 2019). Emotionally engaging stories may therefore do more than make learning enjoyable; they may also help children develop positive character strengths.

Other character strengths, including bravery, humility, honesty, and prudence, also received consistently high scores. This suggests that students understood the story to convey several interconnected virtues rather than a single moral lesson. This finding aligns with the VIA Classification of Character Strengths, which views positive character as a combination of strengths that work together to support human flourishing (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Littman-Ovadia et al., 2021). Throughout the story, *Bawang Putih* demonstrates honesty in her interactions, humility in the face of hardship, bravery when confronting challenges, and prudence in making decisions. By observing these strengths together, children can develop a more nuanced understanding of moral decision-making and recognize that ethical behaviour often involves several virtues at once. This interpretation is consistent with research in positive education, which suggests that authentic stories can strengthen children's moral reasoning by presenting situations that require multiple character strengths simultaneously (Quinlan et al., 2021; Lavy, 2020).

Although self-regulation received the lowest mean score among the character strengths assessed, it remained well above the midpoint of the scale. This suggests that students still



recognized self-regulation as an important strength, although it may have been less immediately noticeable than more visible qualities such as perseverance and bravery. Unlike outward behaviours, self-regulation involves internal cognitive and emotional processes, which can be more difficult for children to identify after a single learning experience (Zimmerman, 2008).

Developmental research also shows that the executive functions underlying self-regulation continue to develop throughout late childhood and adolescence and require repeated opportunities for practice and reflection (Diamond, 2013). Narrative theatre may therefore be effective in introducing children to the importance of self-regulation, but developing this strength more fully may require additional activities, such as guided reflection, group discussion, role-play, and repeated behavioural practice (Niemiec, 2018; Lavy, 2020).

Finally, enjoyment scores did not differ significantly by gender or age in the present sample. Boys reported slightly higher enjoyment than girls, and mean scores also varied across age groups; however, interpret these differences cautiously. In particular, the 10-year-old group included only two participants, resulting in a highly unbalanced age distribution and limited statistical power for age-group comparisons. Therefore, the non-significant findings should not be interpreted as evidence that gender or age is unrelated to narrative enjoyment. Rather, these demographic analyses are considered exploratory and specific to the present sample. Future studies with larger and more balanced samples are needed to examine whether enjoyment of culturally familiar narratives varies systematically across gender and age groups.

Prior familiarity with *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* may have influenced participants' responses to the theatrical narrative. However, prior exposure to the folktale was not systematically assessed; therefore, its contribution to children's enjoyment and recognition of character strengths cannot be determined. Familiarity and prior knowledge may facilitate narrative comprehension by helping children connect story events with existing knowledge and interpret characters and contextual cues (Quinlan et al., 2021; Jing & Kirkorian, 2020). Accordingly, previous exposure to this culturally familiar folktale may have facilitated children's understanding of its plot and moral cues, although this possibility remains speculative in the present study. Future research should directly assess prior familiarity and examine its relationship with narrative enjoyment and character-strength recognition.

The findings therefore suggest that narrative theatre based on familiar folktales has broad appeal and may be used with diverse groups of students without major demographic adaptations. This interpretation also supports culturally responsive pedagogy, which emphasizes that learning materials connected to students' cultural backgrounds can increase engagement by helping them link prior experiences with new knowledge (Gay, 2018). Unlike unfamiliar stories that may require additional cultural explanation, local folktales such as *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* provide a meaningful context in which children can more naturally understand moral messages. Integrating local cultural heritage into character education may therefore help preserve cultural identity while also promoting the universal virtues emphasized in positive psychology.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the findings suggest that narrative theatre may serve as an engaging, culturally relevant educational medium to help elementary school students recognize positive character strengths. Through the combination of storytelling, visual performance, emotional engagement, and cultural familiarity, the theatrical presentation of *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* provided a context in which



children reported high enjoyment and recognized several positive character strengths. These findings contribute to the positive education literature by illustrating the potential of traditional Indonesian stories as culturally relevant resources for introducing and discussing character strengths in school settings (Lavy, 2020; Quinlan et al., 2021; Waters & Loton, 2019). However, given the one-group post-test design, interpret the findings as immediate post-viewing responses rather than evidence of character development, internalization, behavioral change, or causal educational effectiveness. Future studies should use stronger research designs, including pretest-posttest measurement, comparison or control groups, delayed follow-up assessments, and larger, more diverse samples. Teacher and parent observations, together with classroom-based behavioral indicators, should also be incorporated to determine whether character strengths recognized immediately after the performance are sustained over time and reflected in children's prosocial behavior.

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