

THE MEANING OF STORYTELLING PRACTICES IN STRENGTHENING RELIGIOUS CHARACTER IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the meaning of storytelling practices in strengthening the religious character of elementary school students by positioning storytelling as a pedagogical experience that facilitates the internalization of religious values. This qualitative study employed a phenomenological design conducted at SDN 2 Ploengan and SDIT Al Ihsan, Banjarnegara. The participants consisted of three teachers, six students, and two school principals. Data were collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation and were analyzed using the interactive analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. Data credibility was ensured through source triangulation, technique triangulation, and member checking. The findings revealed two main meanings of storytelling practices as a lived experience in strengthening students' religious character. For students, storytelling was perceived as a learning experience that provides moral exemplars and self-reflection through characters and messages conveyed in stories, enabling them to connect religious values with everyday behaviors. For teachers, storytelling was understood as a pedagogical experience in facilitating religious values through story selection, interaction, reflection, and behavioral reinforcement. These meanings indicate that storytelling is an educational experience that supports students in understanding, internalizing, and applying religious values in their daily lives. Therefore, storytelling practices should be developed as a learning strategy to strengthen religious character education in elementary schools.

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INTRODUCTIONS

Elementary education plays an essential role in developing students holistically, not only in terms of academic abilities but also in character formation. Character education serves as a foundation for cultivating

students' moral values, spirituality, and positive behaviors in daily life (Wakhudin, 2020). One of the important characteristics that needs to be strengthened from the elementary school level is religious character, as it forms the basis for building relationships with God, oneself, and others (Khofifah & Supriyadi, 2023). Strengthening religious character cannot be achieved merely through the delivery of religious concepts but requires habituation and exemplary practices so that these values can be internalized into students' behaviors (Dhori & Nurhayati, 2022). Therefore, religious character education needs to be developed through meaningful learning experiences that enable students to understand and practice the values they acquire.

However, strengthening students' religious character in elementary schools faces various challenges, particularly in the digital era. The rapid development of digital technology has become a significant concern, as it may negatively influence the moral and spiritual development of elementary school students (Azhar et al., 2026). Digitalization has also brought disruptive changes to children's patterns of interaction and daily behaviors, resulting in social shifts that make moral education in schools increasingly important (Fitriati, Anggoro, & Harmianto, 2020). If these changes are not addressed, digital disruption may contribute to concerning shifts in children's social values (Annur et al., 2023). This condition highlights the importance of integrating character education into 21st-century learning so that students' academic competencies develop alongside moral values and attitudes (I. K. , & Y. Y. Aryani, 2023). In this context, teachers have a strategic role as designers of learning experiences and as role models in students' character development.

Teacher competence is not limited to mastery of subject matter but also includes the ability to select learning strategies that embed values contextually (Suyitno, 2021; Aryani, 2024). Teachers' exemplary attitudes, behaviors, and habituation practices are important elements in developing students' religious character (Wakhudin, 2018). Through meaningful learning experiences and consistent role modeling, teachers can contribute to strengthening students' religious character (Safiqo & Ghofur, 2025). This role is reflected in the learning practices implemented in two elementary schools in Banjarnegara Regency. In responding to educational challenges, teachers employ various strategies to strengthen students' character, one of which is storytelling practice as an effort to instill religious values in a contextual and meaningful manner.

Storytelling is an oral activity of delivering narratives that is closely related to children's imagination and experiences (Dewi, 2021; Solihah et al., 2024). In practice, storytelling may take various forms, including fables, legends, myths, sagas, and humorous stories, which can be selected according to students' developmental characteristics and the values to be cultivated (Mardiah, 2023). One form that is relevant for strengthening religious character is Islamic storytelling, as it conveys religious values through engaging narratives that are easily understood by students (Atmunadi et al., 2026). Storytelling activities contribute to developing students' thinking abilities, enriching emotional experiences, and helping them understand values and moral messages without feeling directly instructed (Rukiyah, 2018; Anbiya et al., 2025). Through characters, plots, and conflicts presented in stories, students can understand moral values more contextually and relate them to their everyday experiences (Zuhriyah & Fradana, 2025). Therefore, structured storytelling practices involving narrative delivery and reflection have considerable potential to support the development of students' religious character (Azis, 2023).

Although numerous studies have examined storytelling and character education, most previous research has focused on storytelling as a learning method, media development, or its influence on students' learning outcomes and character development. These studies have provided limited insight into how teachers and students interpret storytelling experiences as a process of experiencing, internalizing, and constructing religious values. For instance, Ulya et al., (2025) examined digital storytelling as an innovation for character learning; however, the study did not explore students' subjective experiences in understanding and internalizing religious values through storytelling activities. In fact, character development is not only related to the activities implemented but also to how these experiences are interpreted by students throughout the learning process.

The novelty of this study lies in examining the meaning of storytelling practices in strengthening elementary school students' religious character through a phenomenological perspective. This study views storytelling not merely as a narrative activity or instructional method but as a pedagogical experience involving

the processes of understanding, experiencing, and reflecting on religious values through interactions among teachers, stories, and students. Storytelling practices as an effort to strengthen religious character are analyzed based on storytelling stages. The phenomenological approach is employed to explore teachers' and students' experiences in the process of value internalization through the storytelling stages proposed by, namely preparation, opening, story delivery, reflection and discussion, and closing. Furthermore, religious character development is analyzed based on (Prasetya, 2021) perspective, which includes three dimensions: the relationship with God (faith, piety, and religious discipline), the relationship with oneself (honesty and responsibility), and the relationship with others (politeness, social concern, and tolerance). Through these two frameworks, this study does not merely examine storytelling as a narrative activity but also explores the meaning of each storytelling stage as an educational experience that supports the internalization of religious values among elementary school students.

This study aims to explore the meaning of storytelling practices in strengthening elementary school students' religious character from a phenomenological perspective. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich discussions on religious character education, storytelling practices, and phenomenology within the context of elementary education. Practically, the findings are expected to serve as a reference for teachers and schools in developing storytelling activities as a meaningful strategy to strengthen students' religious character.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a Husserlian phenomenological design. A qualitative approach was selected because this study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon based on participants' perspectives within a natural setting (Aryani, 2021). The Husserlian phenomenological design was applied to explore the meaning of teachers' and students' experiences in storytelling practices as an effort to strengthen religious character. This approach focuses on participants' conscious experiences of a particular phenomenon and seeks to reveal the essence of directly experienced phenomena through in-depth exploration (Rorong, 2020). Through this approach, the study did not merely describe the implementation of storytelling activities but also examined how such practices were experienced, interpreted, and contributed to the internalization of religious values among elementary school students.

The research was conducted from April to June 2026 at SDN 2 Ploengan and SDIT Al Ihsan, Banjarnegara. The locations were selected purposively, considering that both schools regularly conducted storytelling activities, had religious character strengthening programs, and were willing to serve as research sites. The selection of public and integrated schools aimed to obtain a variety of experiences (maximum variation sampling) to provide a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon of storytelling practices. The research participants were selected using purposive sampling, consisting of 3 teachers (T1–T3) who have actively carried out storytelling activities for at least one year, 6 students (S1–S6) in grades I, III, and V (one student from each level at both schools) who regularly participate in storytelling activities and are able to express their experiences, and 2 school principals (P1–P2) as supporting participants for source triangulation.

Data were collected through observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Observation sheets were used to observe the implementation of storytelling practices, teacher-student interactions, and behaviours reflecting the strengthening of religious character during the activities. Interview guidelines were used to explore the experiences and interpretations of teachers, students, and the principal regarding storytelling practices in strengthening religious character. Meanwhile, documentation sheets were used to collect supporting data in the form of school programmes, learning materials, story scripts or materials, activity photographs, and other documents relevant to the research focus. These three techniques were used in an integrated manner to obtain in-depth, comprehensive, and complementary data. The entire research process was conducted in accordance with ethical research principles, including obtaining permission from the school, obtaining informed consent from participants, and maintaining the confidentiality of informants.

The credibility of the data was ensured through source triangulation, technique triangulation, and member checking. These procedures were conducted to maintain the credibility of qualitative research findings by

ensuring consistency between the collected data, the researcher's interpretation, and participants' experiences (Nurfajriani et al., 2024). Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from teachers, students, and school principals regarding storytelling practices in strengthening religious character. Technique triangulation was carried out by comparing and confirming findings from observations, interviews, and supporting documentation to ensure data consistency. Member checking was conducted by confirming the interpreted findings with participants to ensure that the researcher's interpretations accurately represented their expressed experiences. Throughout the research process, the researcher also conducted reflexive practices through field notes to review the data collection and interpretation processes. This process was intended to ensure that the findings accurately represented how teachers and students experienced and interpreted storytelling practices.

Data analysis in this study employed the interactive model proposed by (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2018), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Within the Husserlian phenomenological analysis process, data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation were first transcribed and examined comprehensively to develop an overall understanding of participants' experiences. Subsequently, the researcher conducted bracketing by reflecting on and suspending initial assumptions to ensure that the interpretation of the phenomenon remained grounded in the lived experiences of teachers and students. The next stage involved coding significant statements that represented participants' experiences related to storytelling practices and religious character development. Codes with similar meanings were then grouped into categories and further developed into major themes. These themes were subsequently analyzed to identify the essence of participants' experiences in understanding storytelling practices as a process of religious value internalization. The results of the analysis were presented through thematic narratives and verified by comparing data from different sources and conducting member checking to ensure that the findings accurately reflected participants' experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

The research findings indicate that storytelling practices are interpreted by teachers and students as learning experiences that serve not only to convey stories but also as a process of internalizing religious values in everyday life. Based on a phenomenological analysis of participants' experiences, it was found that the meaning of storytelling practices is formed through five stages: preparation, introduction, storytelling, reflection and discussion, and conclusion (Jurahman, 2022). Each stage presents a different experience for teachers and students, ranging from selecting the values to be introduced, developing emotional and spiritual readiness, and appreciating the role models of the characters to reflecting on how to apply the values in real life.

The interpretation of these experiences indicates that strengthening religious character through storytelling encompasses three primary relationships: the relationship with God, the relationship with oneself, and the relationship with others (Prasetya, 2021). The relationship with God is reflected through an understanding of faith, piety, and the practice of worship; the relationship with oneself is seen through the development of honesty, responsibility, and noble character, while relationships with others develop through politeness, social awareness, and tolerance. Data from observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation were analyzed through data condensation, grouping themes, and interpreting the meaning of participants' experiences. The analysis revealed a link between the stages of storytelling practice and the development of students' religious character. A summary of the findings regarding participants' experiences, the meaning of each storytelling stage, and the aspects of religious character formed is presented in table 1.

Table 1. The Meaning of Storytelling Practices in Strengthening Religious Character in

Elementary School				
Stages of Storytelling Practice	Practice Findings	Meaning of Participants' Experiences	Aspects of Religious Character	Indicators of Religious Character Strengthening
Preparation	Teachers select Islamic stories, including stories of Prophets, exemplary figures, and animal stories containing religious values. Teachers adjust the stories to students' ages and the religious values they intend to instill.	Story selection becomes the initial stage in forming religious experiences because it determines the values introduced to students according to their developmental stages.	Relationship with God; relationship with oneself	Faith and piety: introducing love for God, gratitude, and obedience through exemplary stories. Trustworthiness/responsibility: teachers demonstrate responsibility in selecting educational stories.
Opening	Teachers begin the activity with greetings, prayers, and introductory questions related to students' experiences with the story themes, such as honesty, sharing, and doing good deeds.	The opening activity creates a comfortable learning atmosphere, enabling students to be more open to receiving the values conveyed through the stories.	Relationship with God; relationship with others	Faith and piety: developing the habit of praying before activities. Courtesy: building respectful attitudes toward teachers and peers during shared activities.
Storytelling	Teachers present stories of Prophets, companions, or animal tales using expressions, intonation, and supporting media. Students listen and identify good and bad behaviors from the characters in the stories.	Stories become a medium of exemplary learning that helps students understand religious values through characters and events that are close to children's experiences.	Relationship with God; relationship with oneself; relationship with others	Faith and piety: understanding obedience and love for God through stories of Prophets. Honesty: imitating the honest attitudes of characters in the stories. Noble character: understanding good behavior as part of religious teachings.
Reflection and Discussion	Teachers guide students to discover the moral lessons of the stories, discuss the characters' behaviors, and relate the values of the stories to daily life, such as telling the	Reflection becomes an essential process in transforming story messages into students' personal understanding and awareness.	Relationship with oneself; relationship with others	Honesty: understanding the importance of speaking the truth. Trustworthiness/responsibility: understanding obligations in carrying out duties. Social care: developing concern and willingness to help others. Tolerance:

Stages of Storytelling Practice	Practice Findings	Meaning of Participants' Experiences	Aspects of Religious Character	Indicators of Religious Character Strengthening
	truth, helping friends, and respecting others.			respecting differences and building harmonious relationships.
Closing	Teachers reinforce the moral lessons from the stories and encourage students to apply the acquired values in daily life.	The closing activity strengthens the internalization process so that religious values do not stop at understanding but are manifested in behavior.	All aspects of religious character	Discipline in worship: developing habits of practicing religious teachings. Noble character: applying religious values in everyday life. Courtesy and social care: building positive relationships with others.

Source: Research data analysis (2026).

Based on table 1, the results of the phenomenological analysis indicate that participants understood the practice of storytelling in strengthening the religious character of elementary school students as an educational experience that takes place through a gradual and meaningful process. Each stage of storytelling is viewed not simply as a series of learning activities but as an experiential space that allows religious values to be introduced, understood, and internalised by students. For teachers, the preparation stage is a form of responsibility in presenting stories that are appropriate to the students' development and the values they wish to instil. The opening is understood as an effort to build emotional and spiritual readiness; the storytelling presents exemplary experiences through characters and events; the reflection provides a space for students to connect the story's message with personal experiences; and the closing strengthens awareness to apply these values in everyday life.

These experiences demonstrate that the meaning of storytelling goes beyond the act of telling a story, as this process becomes a reflective experience that connects religious teachings with the realities of students' lives. Through interaction with stories, students not only recognise the values of faith and piety, honesty, responsibility, noble character, politeness, tolerance, disciplined worship, and social awareness as moral concepts but also begin to understand the importance of these values in shaping behaviour. Thus, the practice of storytelling is understood as a process of internalising religious values that occurs through role models, dialogue, reflection, and habituation. The following presents the findings of an analysis of participants' experiences at each stage of the storytelling practice in strengthening religious character.

The Preparation Stage of Storytelling as a Foundation for Cultivating Religious Values

The preparation stage of storytelling is interpreted by teachers as the initial process of determining the learning experience that will be provided to students. At this stage, teachers do not merely select stories to be presented but also consider the suitability of the story content with students' development and experiences so that the intended messages can be understood. Observations showed that teachers selected various types of stories, such as stories of the prophets, exemplary figures, and animal tales containing religious moral messages. The selection of stories was based on the relevance of the themes to students' daily lives and the values to be introduced, such as faith, honesty, responsibility, and concern for others. Teachers' experiences in preparing storytelling activities were supported by documentation data in the form of storybooks, storytelling materials, and learning resources, indicating that the stories had been intentionally selected according to the objectives of the activity and students' needs.

The principal explained that storytelling was not perceived merely as an activity of delivering stories but as an activity that helps students recognize positive attitudes through enjoyable experiences. P1 stated, *"The stories used by teachers must contain good messages because children are more likely to imitate the behavior of*

characters they hear about rather than only receive advice. When children see examples through stories, they are usually more interested and can remember what the characters do more easily." (Interview with P1, 05/05/2026). This statement illustrates the principal's experience that the stories selected by teachers become an important part of helping students understand the intended messages. According to P1, students can grasp values more easily when they encounter examples of behavior through story characters rather than only listening to direct explanations.

A similar experience was experienced by teachers when preparing stories before the activity took place. T1 explained, *"Before telling a story, I choose simple stories that are close to children's lives so that the religious messages can be understood and practiced by them. If the story is too difficult, children may only listen without truly understanding the meaning. Therefore, I look for stories that are appropriate to their experiences, such as stories about honesty, helping friends, or doing good things to others."* (Interview with T1, 06/05/2026). This statement shows that, for teachers, the preparation stage is an experience of understanding students' needs before conveying religious values. Teachers do not only focus on the content of the story but also consider how students can interpret the meaning of the story and connect it with their own behaviors.

These experiences indicate that the preparation stage of storytelling has a broader meaning than merely a technical stage of lesson planning. This stage becomes the initial process of internalizing religious values because teachers first determine the moral experiences they intend to introduce to students through stories. Thus, story selection serves as a foundation that connects character education goals with students' real-life experiences in understanding and applying religious values.

The Opening Stage of Storytelling as a Process of Developing Spiritual Readiness

Storytelling activities begin with an opening stage that plays an important role in preparing students before entering the story experience. For teachers, the opening is not merely an initial activity to manage the classroom but a moment to create a comfortable, calm, and religious learning atmosphere that allows students to become more receptive to the values conveyed through storytelling. Observations showed that teachers consistently began the activity with greetings, collective prayers, apperception activities, and introductory questions related to the themes of the stories, such as honesty, patience, and concern for others. Through these initial activities, students appeared more prepared to engage with the story and understand the connection between the storytelling themes and their daily experiences. Learning documentation also indicated that the opening stage was integrated as part of religious habituation within the learning process.

The principal viewed the initial learning atmosphere as an important element in shaping students' spiritual experiences because teachers' attitudes and repeated practices can become examples of religious behaviour. P2 stated, *"We encourage teachers to begin activities with prayers and good communication so that children become accustomed to feeling that learning is also part of worship. Through small habits such as greetings and prayers, children gradually understand that every activity at school can contain positive values. Teachers are also encouraged to build close communication with children because when children feel comfortable, they are more open to accepting advice or messages that are given."* (Interview with P2, 06/05/2026).

This statement illustrates that the opening stage of storytelling is perceived as a process of developing students' awareness that learning activities are connected with religious values. Greetings, prayers, and positive communication are not merely classroom routines but experiences that help students associate learning activities with religious attitudes and behaviours.

Teachers' experiences further indicate that the opening stage serves as a space for connecting stories with students' personal experiences. T2 explained, *"Usually, I do not start telling the story immediately. I first ask children questions, such as whether they have ever helped a friend or told the truth or how they feel when they are treated kindly by others. From their answers, I can understand their experiences and more easily guide them to understand the message of the story that will be delivered."* (Interview with T2, 06/05/2026).

Through these introductory questions, teachers attempt to build a connection between the values contained in the story and students' real-life experiences. The story does not appear as an isolated learning experience but is introduced through situations that students have previously encountered. From the students' perspective, S1

explained that the opening activity made them more interested in following the story because they already knew the theme that would be discussed.

These experiences demonstrate that the essential meaning of the opening stage lies in preparing students internally before receiving religious messages. Through a respectful atmosphere, religious habituation, and connections with personal experiences, the opening stage of storytelling becomes an initial space that enables students to understand, appreciate, and accept the religious character values embedded within the stories.

The Storytelling Stage as an Experience of Religious Exemplary Values

Students' experiences while listening to stories are shaped not only by the content of the tales but also by the way teachers present the stories. Observations showed that teachers used variations in voice intonation, facial expressions, body movements, and supporting media to create a more engaging storytelling atmosphere. These approaches encouraged students to become more involved in following the storyline and to pay closer attention to the attitudes and actions demonstrated by the characters.

Documentation data in the form of storybooks, activity photographs, and supporting media indicated that teachers utilized various types of stories, including stories of the prophets, exemplary figures, and animal tales. The selection of these stories was adjusted to students' characteristics because they contained messages closely related to their daily experiences. Through the stories presented, students were able to recognize various examples of positive behavior portrayed by the characters, such as honesty, patience, helping others, and responsibility.

For teachers, characters in stories represent an important element because they help students understand values through observable examples of behavior. Teachers perceived that students could grasp messages more easily when values were conveyed through the experiences of story characters. T3 stated, *"When children listen to stories of the prophets or stories about kindness, they can more easily understand examples of attitudes they should practice, such as being honest and helping others. If we only explain rules, children sometimes forget quickly, but when values are delivered through stories, they can remember the characters and the behaviors they showed more easily."* (Interview with T3, 07/05/2026). This statement illustrates that teachers' experiences in delivering stories are not merely focused on completing the storyline but on enabling students to identify examples of behavior that they can understand and apply.

These experiences were also reflected in students' responses after participating in storytelling activities. S3 shared, *"I like stories about the prophets because from those stories I learn how to be patient and not lie. When I remember the stories of the prophets, I want to try to do good things like the examples they showed."* (Interview with S3, 08/05/2026). In addition, S4 explained that animal stories helped him understand the importance of sharing and helping friends. These students' statements indicate that characters and events in stories become meaningful learning experiences that help them connect story messages with actions that can be practiced in everyday life.

The story delivery stage is meaningful as an experience of exemplary learning that connects religious values with students' real-life contexts. Through listening to stories, understanding characters, and interpreting moral messages, students gain opportunities to recognize religious behaviors in more concrete ways. Storytelling, therefore, is not merely an activity of delivering narratives but a learning process that helps students internalize values and develop motivation to implement them in their daily lives.

Reflection and Discussion as a Process of Religious Value Internalization

The reflection and discussion stage was interpreted as a space for students to transform their experiences of listening to stories into personal understanding. At this stage, teachers encouraged students to identify the behaviors of story characters, discover the moral messages of the stories, and relate them to their experiences at school and within their families. This process helped students recognize that every action has moral consequences related to religious values.

Learning notes showed that the discussion developed into a two-way interaction between teachers and students. Teachers provided guiding questions regarding why certain behaviors should be followed or avoided, while students were given opportunities to share their opinions and personal experiences. Several students shared experiences related to helping friends, telling the truth, or facing situations connected with the messages conveyed

in the stories. These activities indicated that students began to connect the stories they heard with their everyday experiences.

For teachers, reflection was considered an essential part of understanding how students interpreted the messages conveyed through the stories. Teacher T1 explained, *"After telling a story, I always ask the children what lessons they can learn and how they can apply them at home or at school. Sometimes their answers are different; some talk about helping friends, making mistakes, or wanting to improve their behavior after listening to the story. From their responses, I can see that they are not only listening to the story but also beginning to think about its connection with their own lives."* (Interview with T1, 09/05/2026).

This statement illustrates that teachers were not only concerned with students' understanding of the storyline but also with how students interpreted the meaning of the story in relation to their daily lives.

Similar experiences were reflected in students' responses after the discussion. S5 stated, *"From the stories shared by the teacher, I learned to be honest and help friends who need help. Sometimes I remember the story when I face situations at school, such as when a friend has difficulties or when I want to tell something that is not true. I think again about the message given by the teacher."* (Interview with S5, 09/05/2026).

This statement shows that students began to understand the values contained in the stories through the examples of characters' behaviors and connect them with actions that could be practiced in their daily lives.

The reflective experience demonstrates that post-storytelling discussions are not merely activities to conclude the lesson but serve as a space for constructing meaning that strengthens the internalization of religious character values. Values such as honesty, responsibility, social care, and tolerance develop from simple knowledge into personal awareness that influences how students think, make decisions, and behave in everyday situations.

Closing Stage as the Reinforcement of Religious Character Commitment

The closing stage provided students with an experience of recalling and strengthening the values gained throughout the storytelling activity. Learning documentation showed that the closing activity was conducted through moral messages, collective prayer, verbal reinforcement, and the cultivation of positive behaviors relevant to the story content. The principal explained that reinforcement after storytelling was necessary so that the values learned would not remain at the level of knowledge but could develop into habits consciously practiced in daily life. This reinforcement also served as a bridge connecting classroom learning experiences with real-life situations encountered by students in their families, schools, and communities.

Based on observations, after completing the story, the teacher did not immediately end the activity but encouraged students to revisit the messages contained in the story, provided motivation, and guided them to consider behaviors that could be applied in their daily lives. For teachers, this stage became an opportunity to understand the extent to which students comprehended the meaning of the stories they had listened to.

Teachers' experiences indicated that reinforcement after storytelling was necessary because students often remembered the story more easily than the values embedded within it. Therefore, teachers emphasized the behaviors demonstrated by the characters that could be followed and connected them with students' daily habits at school. Teacher T1 explained, *"Usually, after telling a story, I do not end the activity immediately. I ask the children what they have learned from the story. Sometimes their answers are simple, such as being honest, helping friends, or not behaving harshly. From their responses, I can see that they are beginning to understand the message I want to convey."* (Interview with T1, 09/05/2026).

This statement illustrates that, for teachers, the success of storytelling activities is not merely reflected in students' ability to retell the story, but also in their ability to express the values they have understood from the story.

A similar experience was also found among students after participating in the activity. S6 stated, *"After listening to the story, I remember that I should tell the truth and help my friends. Sometimes when a friend has difficulties, I want to help because I remember the story given by the teacher."* (Interview with S6, 10/05/2026). This statement indicates that the stories delivered by teachers became meaningful experiences that students remembered and connected with situations they encountered in everyday life. Students did not merely remember

the characters or storyline, but began to relate the messages of the stories to actions they could practice.

The meaning emerging from the closing stage reflects the development of students' internal commitment to consistently practice religious values. Values gained through storytelling were no longer understood as temporary messages, but became part of students' personal awareness that influenced their ways of thinking, behaving, and making decisions. This experience positions the closing stage as a reflective space that strengthens the internalization process, allowing storytelling experiences to continue into the development of religious behaviors in daily life. Through this process, storytelling contributes to fostering faith and devotion, discipline in worship, honesty, responsibility, politeness, social care, and tolerance as manifestations of students' religious character.

DISCUSSION

The phenomenological perspective views that an experience obtains meaning through the process of interpretation and reflection by individuals who experience it (Rorong, 2020). In this study, storytelling practice was not interpreted merely as an activity of delivering stories but as a pedagogical experience that gradually shapes how teachers and students understand religious values. This meaning emerges because each stage of storytelling provides different experiences for the participants. The selection of stories reflects teachers' efforts to present values that are relevant to children's world; the opening stage builds students' readiness to receive the messages conveyed through stories; story delivery provides exemplary experiences; and reflection creates opportunities for students to interpret moral messages, while the closing stage strengthens their awareness to apply these values in daily life. Therefore, religious character is not formed directly through moral instruction but through experiences that enable students to observe, understand, and construct meaning from the values encountered throughout the storytelling process.

This interpretation indicates that storytelling stages have a more complex function than merely representing a sequence of learning activities. Jurahman (2022) explained that storytelling practice consists of preparation, opening, story delivery, reflection, and closing stages. However, this study reveals that each stage contains an experiential dimension that contributes to the process of value internalisation. The preparation stage is not only related to selecting story materials but also becomes a space where teachers consider the moral values that need to be introduced to students. The opening stage does not merely function as an introduction to the activity but creates an emotional condition that enables students to be more receptive to the messages conveyed through stories. Meanwhile, reflection becomes an essential stage because it allows students to connect the behaviours of story characters with their personal experiences. Thus, the meaningfulness of storytelling lies in the continuity of experiences encountered by students rather than merely in the presence of stories containing religious messages.

These experiences demonstrate that the formation of religious character occurs through an interconnected process of understanding, experiencing, and applying values. This perspective extends (Prasetya, 2021) view of religious character, which includes human relationships with God, oneself, and others. In this study, these three dimensions do not emerge separately but develop through interconnected experiences. Stories of prophets and exemplary figures provide opportunities for students to understand faith and devotion; discussion activities encourage students to reflect on honesty and responsibility, while reinforcement after storytelling motivates students to practise politeness, care, and tolerance in social interactions. These findings indicate that storytelling experiences serve as a bridge between abstract religious values and concrete behaviours that can be practised by students.

Previous studies have demonstrated the potential of storytelling in supporting character education in elementary schools. Azis (2023) found that storytelling can be used as a method for character development, while Atmunadi et al., (2026) showed that exemplary stories can strengthen students' religious character. Dewi (2021) also explained that stories help students understand moral messages through narratives that are closely related to their lives. However, these studies have primarily examined storytelling from the perspective of its function or effectiveness as a learning method. This study provides a different understanding by positioning storytelling as

an experience lived and interpreted by both teachers and students. This perspective highlights that the strength of storytelling does not only lie in the content of the stories but also in how the experiences throughout the activity construct students' awareness of the values being learned.

From the perspective of phenomenological education, this study extends the understanding that character learning does not occur merely through the transfer of values but through individuals' direct involvement in constructing meaning from their experiences. Teachers experience storytelling as a process of designing and presenting moral experiences, while students experience stories as a space to recognise behaviours, consider actions, and develop self-awareness. The relationship between teachers' and students' experiences gives storytelling a broader pedagogical dimension. Therefore, storytelling practice can be understood as a *lived pedagogical experience*, namely an educational experience that shapes understanding and attitudes through the processes of experiencing, reflecting on, and actualising religious values.

The implications of this study suggest that strengthening religious character in elementary schools needs to be designed through learning experiences that encourage students' emotional and reflective involvement. Teachers should not only select stories containing moral messages but also consider how stories are delivered, discussed, and connected with students' real-life experiences. Nevertheless, the interpretation of this study has limitations because the meaning of experiences identified was derived from a specific school context with particular student characteristics, school culture, and learning practices. Therefore, applying these findings to other school contexts requires consideration of differences in sociocultural conditions, teacher readiness, and student characteristics. Future research may expand this enquiry by exploring storytelling experiences across different educational levels or diverse cultural contexts to gain broader insights into religious character development through storytelling experiences.

CONCLUSION

The meaning of storytelling practice in strengthening elementary school students' religious character lies in its role as a pedagogical experience that helps students understand, internalize, and apply religious values in their daily lives. Storytelling is not merely an activity of delivering stories but a learning process that provides opportunities for students to recognize exemplary behaviors, reflect on moral messages, and connect them with real attitudes and actions. Through this process, religious values develop into part of students' awareness and habits in their relationships with God, themselves, and others.

Theoretically, this study extends the field of character education by demonstrating that storytelling can be understood as a *lived pedagogical experience*, namely a pedagogical experience that enables students to construct meaning from religious values through the processes of experiencing, reflecting on, and applying those values in daily life. Practically, this study provides implications for elementary school teachers that strengthening religious character through storytelling requires systematic activity design, beginning with selecting stories that align with students' characteristics, delivering stories through emotional and interactive approaches, and incorporating reflection and behavioral reinforcement so that the values gained can develop into positive habits.

This study has limitations because it focuses on the experiences of teachers and students within a specific elementary school context; therefore, the findings are not intended to be broadly generalized but understood as an in-depth interpretation of storytelling experiences within a particular phenomenological context. Future research may expand this inquiry by exploring storytelling practices across diverse cultural contexts, religious backgrounds, and educational levels, as well as examining their sustained influence through longitudinal approaches to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the role of storytelling in strengthening character development.

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