



The Effectiveness of Interactive Storytelling in Enhancing Children's Empathy as a Preventive Measure Against Bullying

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ABSTRACT

Background: Bullying in children is frequently associated with a lack of awareness and difficulties in managing emotions, particularly empathy. Interactive storytelling is considered a promising approach to help children link narrative experiences with their own emotional understanding. **Objective:** This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of interactive storytelling in enhancing empathy among elementary school children. **Methods:** A quasi-experimental design with pre-test and post-test control groups was applied to 140 students, divided equally into intervention and control groups. Empathy was measured using the 20-item Perth Empathy Scale (PES). The intervention consisted of four sessions, including pre-test and introductory materials on empathy and bullying, storytelling of positive empathetic experiences, activities to foster empathy for bullying prevention, and post-test. Data were analyzed using the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test and the Mann-Whitney Test. **Results:** The intervention group showed a significant improvement in empathy scores, increasing from 49.41 ($\pm$ SD 5.115) at pre-test to 65.27 ($\pm$ SD 2.028) at post-test. There was a significant effect of interactive storytelling on empathy ($Z = -7.273$, $p < 0.001$). **Conclusion:** Interactive storytelling effectively improves empathy in elementary school children and can be implemented as a preventive strategy to reduce bullying behaviors. **Suggestion:** Teachers are encouraged to integrate interactive storytelling into classroom practices to strengthen students' empathetic skills and promote positive social interactions.

Keywords: Bullying; Empathy; Interactive storytelling; Prevention

ABSTRAK

Latar Belakang: Perundungan pada anak-anak sering dikaitkan dengan kurangnya kesadaran dan kesulitan dalam mengelola emosi, khususnya empati. Bercerita interaktif dianggap sebagai pendekatan yang menjanjikan untuk membantu anak-anak menghubungkan pengalaman naratif dengan pemahaman emosional mereka sendiri. Tujuan: Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengevaluasi efektivitas bercerita interaktif dalam meningkatkan empati di kalangan anak-anak sekolah dasar. Metode: Desain kuasi-eksperimental dengan kelompok kontrol pra-uji dan pasca-uji diterapkan pada 140 siswa, yang dibagi rata menjadi kelompok intervensi dan kontrol. Empati diukur menggunakan Skala Empati Perth (PES) 20 item. Intervensi terdiri dari empat sesi, termasuk pra-uji dan materi pengantar tentang empati dan perundungan, bercerita tentang pengalaman empati positif, aktivitas untuk menumbuhkan empati untuk pencegahan perundungan, dan pasca-uji. Data dianalisis menggunakan Uji Peringkat Bertanda Wilcoxon dan Uji Mann-Whitney. Hasil: Kelompok intervensi menunjukkan peningkatan signifikan dalam skor empati, meningkat dari 49,41 ($\pm$ SD 5,115) pada pra-uji menjadi 65,27 ($\pm$ SD 2,028) pada pasca-uji. Terdapat pengaruh signifikan dari bercerita interaktif terhadap empati ($Z = -7,273$, $p < 0,001$). Kesimpulan: Bercerita

interaktif efektif meningkatkan empati pada anak-anak sekolah dasar dan dapat diimplementasikan sebagai strategi pencegahan untuk mengurangi perilaku perundungan. Saran: Guru didorong untuk mengintegrasikan bercerita interaktif ke dalam praktik kelas untuk memperkuat keterampilan empati siswa dan mempromosikan interaksi sosial yang positif.

Kata kunci: Perundungan; Empati; Bercerita interaktif; Pencegahan

Introduction

Bullying is defined as an intentional aggressive act, often characterized by the persistent and prolonged misuse of power by an individual or group, which results in physical or emotional harm to the victim (Agustanadea et al., 2019). In the school context, bullying is marked by repetitive behavior, actions that cause stress for the victim, and deliberate acts intended to harm others (Yuniarsanti et al., 2020). Indonesia ranks fifth among 78 countries in terms of the percentage of students experiencing bullying, with a prevalence rate of 41.1%, according to data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Jayani, 2019). Similarly, the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), as cited in Yuniliza (2020), reported that 84% of students in Indonesia have experienced bullying at school—a figure higher than that of other Asian countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia, Nepal, and Pakistan.

Statistical data from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) further indicate a rising trend in reported cases of violence and bullying. Between 2016 and 2020, KPAI received complaints from 480 children who had been bullied in schools, in addition to 361 other reported bullying cases, alongside numerous unreported cases of child violence (Pahlevi, 2022). The consequences of bullying for victims are severe, including feelings of loneliness, heightened anxiety, sleep disturbances, and engagement in risky behaviors such as smoking, alcohol consumption, and, in extreme cases, suicidal behavior (Elledge et al., 2019).

According to Marlina et al. (2020), empathy is the feeling possessed by an individual to help others and the ability to perceive problems from another person's perspective. The benefits of demonstrating

empathy include reducing selfish behavior, enhancing self-evaluation skills, and fostering positive self-control in one's actions (Rahmah et al., 2021). However, a phenomenon of low empathy that led to bullying was reported in Pangalengan, Bandung Regency, where a group of adolescents physically assaulted and bullied an elderly individual (Beritakotabandung, 2022). A similar case reflecting a lack of empathy and inability to regulate emotions occurred in Ciburuy Village, Bandung Regency, where a woman was assaulted by her partner during a disagreement, as the perpetrator insisted that the victim comply with his demands (Suarajabar, 2023). Furthermore, in another incident in Bandung Regency, two adolescents exhibited disrespectful behavior toward a woman in public by verbally harassing her with offensive language (Nugraha, 2022).

Research conducted by Fatimatuzzahro, Suseno, and Irwanto (2018) revealed that empathy can effectively reduce the tendency toward bullying behavior. Furthermore, empathy plays an important role in increasing knowledge and decreasing violent tendencies among students (Lika, 2019). Mulyawati et al. (2022) also demonstrated a positive association between empathy and students' prosocial behavior. According to Husni (2018), individuals should possess several social skills such as self-control, empathy, assertiveness, and cooperativeness. In line with this, Arofah et al. (2018) emphasized that enhancing empathy in children serves as a preventive effort against bullying behavior. A previous study found that using interactive storytelling based on local wisdom significantly enhanced the empathy skills among preschool children (Dana & Tirtayani, 2023). Similarly, a quasi-experimental study combining storytelling with roleplaying media demonstrated meaningful

improvements in social empathy among kindergarten students (Suryani, Pranoto & Astuti, 2020). According to Hagarayu (2021), highlighted that the activities of storytelling can increase the empathy of children aged 5-6 years. Behavioral aspects of empathy that appears after getting action in the form of storytelling activity that is able to accept the other person's perspective, sensitive to the feelings of others and willing to listen to others.

Bullying prevention strategies need to be implemented as early as possible, particularly among children. The interactive storytelling intervention is designed to enhance children's empathy through narratives prepared by the researchers. During the storytelling sessions, researchers interact directly with the children and encourage them to participate by providing comments or engaging in discussions. The strength of this study lies in the interactive nature of the storytelling, which ensures that children are not passively listening but actively involved in the process. The stories are presented using simple, age-appropriate language that is easy to understand and memorable for children.

Methods

Research Design

This study was a quasi-experimental design and conducted at a public elementary school in Bandung City, Indonesia.

Population and Sample

The study population consisted of second- and third-grade students in the 2024–2025 academic year. The sample size was calculated using G*Power Software Version 3.1 with f-tests, ANCOVA: fixed effects, main effect and interaction, assuming $\alpha = 0.05$, effect size $f = 0.5$ (Cohen, 1988), and power level = 0.80, with an additional 10–15% attrition rate. The total sample consisted of 140 students, who were then divided into two groups: 70 in the intervention group and 70 in the control group.

Instrument

The Perth Empathy Scale (PES) is a 20-item self-report questionnaire designed to assess individuals' empathy abilities (Brett, 2023). This instrument evaluates both cognitive empathy (the capacity to recognize and understand others' emotions) and affective empathy (the ability to vicariously experience others' emotions). The PES consists of four subscales: Negative-Cognitive Empathy (NCE), Positive-Cognitive Empathy (PCE), Negative-Affective Empathy (NAE), Positive-Affective Empathy (PAE), each subscales comprising five items. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *Almost never* (1), *Sometimes* (2), *About half the time* (3), *Most of the time* (4), to *Almost always* (5), with higher scores indicating greater levels of empathy.

The instrument has shown strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients reported between 0.78 and 0.88 across its subscales (Garton & Gringart, 2005; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006). In addition, confirmatory factor analysis has supported the construct validity of the scale, distinguishing effectively between cognitive and affective dimensions of empathy (Pérez-Albéniz et al., 2018). The PES has also been widely used in child and adolescent populations, demonstrating adequate reliability and validity across different cultural contexts (Del Rey et al., 2020).

Procedure Intervention

The intervention was delivered over four sessions conducted in classroom settings. In the first session, a pre-test was administered using the Perth Empathy Scale (PES), followed by the provision of instructional materials on empathy and bullying. The second session encouraged students to share positive personal experiences related to empathetic behavior, enabling them to connect narratives with their own emotions and actions. The third session emphasized the development of empathetic skills as a preventive strategy against bullying through interactive storytelling and guided discussions. In the fourth session, a post-test was administered to evaluate changes in

empathy levels. Each session was facilitated by the researcher, lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, and was designed to be interactive. During the sessions, students were encouraged to actively participate by responding to questions, commenting on

stories, and engaging in group discussions. The interactive nature of the storytelling ensured that students were not passive listeners, but active participants in the learning process.

Table 1. Procedure Intervention

Session	Thema/topic	Activities
Session 1	1. <i>Pre test</i> 2. Health Education	1. <i>Pre test</i> 2. Delivering health education on bullying and empathy.
Session 2	Providing stories with empathy-based themes.	1. The researcher delivered stories in the classroom using PowerPoint presentations. 2. The participants listened attentively to the researcher. 3. The participants were asked to provide comments on the stories presented. 4. The researcher encouraged the children to explain why individuals should engage in kind behavior.
Session 3	Fostering Empathic Skills to Prevent Bullying	1. The session begins with a discussion on situations where empathy can play a role in daily life, such as helping a friend, showing kindness, or respecting differences. 2. The researcher then provides short interactive stories that highlight the importance of understanding others' feelings. 3. After listening to the stories, participants are encouraged to reflect on how they would feel in similar situations and to share their thoughts with the group. 4. Through guided discussion and simple role-playing activities, the children practice recognizing emotions and responding in ways that demonstrate empathy and kindness. 5. This interactive process is designed to strengthen their ability to internalize empathetic behavior as a means of preventing bullying.
Session 4	Post-Test Administration	Two weeks after the completion of the intervention sessions, the researcher administers the post-test using the Perth Empathy Scale (PES) questionnaire.

The control group does not receive the interactive storytelling intervention. Instead, they only participate in the pre-test and post-test assessments using the Perth Empathy

Scale (PES). To maintain ethical standards, after the completion of the post-test, the control group is provided with a health

education session focused on bullying prevention.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using univariate analysis to examine frequency distribution, mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum values. The Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test was used to compare pre-test and post-test empathy scores within each group, while the Mann–Whitney U Test was employed to compare differences in empathy

scores between the intervention and control groups. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Health Research Ethics Committee (Komite Etik Penelitian Kesehatan, KEPK) of STIKep PPNI Jawa Barat with approval number III/093/KEPK-SLE/STIKep/PPNI/JABAR/VII/2025.

Results

Table 2. Respondents' Demographic Data (N=140)

Characteristics	Intervention Group (N=70) F (%)	Control Group (N=70) F (%)
Gender		
Male	36 (51.4%)	30 (42.9%)
Female	34 (48.6%)	40 (57.1%)
Age		
Mean ($\pm$ SD)	8.76 ($\pm$ 0.624)	8.90 ($\pm$ 0.515)
Min-Max	7-10	8-10
Grade		
Second Grade (A)	24 (34.3%)	0
Second Grade (B)	20 (28.6%)	0
Second Grade (C)	0	22 (31.4%)
Third Grade (A)	0	25 (35.7%)
Third Grade (B)	0	23 (32.9%)
Third Grade (C)	26 (37.1%)	0

Based on table 2, showed that in the intervention group, students were distributed across classes IIA (34.3%), IIB (28.6%), and IIIC (37.1%), while in the control group, students came from classes IIC (31.4%), IIIA (35.7%), and IIIB (32.9%). Regarding gender, the majority of respondents in the intervention group were

male (51.4%), whereas in the control group, females were more dominant (57.1%). The mean age of respondents in the intervention group was 8 years ($\pm$ SD 0.624), and in the control group was also 8 years ($\pm$ SD 0.515). The youngest respondents were 7 years old, while the oldest were 10 years old.

Table 3. Empathy Levels in the Intervention and Control Groups (N=140)

	Intervention Group (n=70)		Control Group (n=70)	
	Pre test	Post test	Pre test	Post test
Mean ($\pm$ SD)	49.41 ($\pm$ SD 5.115)	65.27 ($\pm$ SD 2.028)	50.40 ($\pm$ SD 3.246)	52.17 ($\pm$ SD 3.522)
Min-Max	36-67	59-70	44--57	44-59

In the intervention group, the total mean score at pre-test tended to be closer to the minimum value, with 49.41 ($\pm$ SD 5.115). Following the intervention, a substantial improvement was observed, as the mean score increased to 65.27 ($\pm$ SD 2.028), with a

minimum–maximum range of 59–70. Meanwhile, in the control group, the total mean score at pre-test was 50.40 ($\pm$ SD 3.246), which was also close to the minimum value, with a minimum–maximum range of 44–57.

Table 4. Empathy Domains in the Intervention and Control Groups (N=140)

Domain	Control Group (N=70)		Intervention Group (N=70)	
	Pretest Mean ($\pm$ SD) Range	Post-test Mean ($\pm$ SD) Range	Pretest Mean ($\pm$ SD) Range	Post-test Mean ($\pm$ SD) Range
Negative-Cognitive Empathy (NCE)	8.90 ($\pm$ 1.168) 6 - 12	9.26 ($\pm$ 1.099) 6 - 11	8.84 ($\pm$ 1.807) 6 - 16	10.38 ($\pm$ 0.853) 9 - 13
Positive-Cognitive Empathy (PCE)	17.99 ($\pm$ 1.000) 16 - 20	18.54 ($\pm$ 1.188) 14 - 20	17.63 ($\pm$ 1.754) 10 - 21	23.96 ($\pm$ 1.055) 20 - 25
Negative-Affective Empathy (NAE)	6.30 ($\pm$ 0.998) 5 - 9	6.41 ($\pm$ 1.148) 5 - 9	6.67 ($\pm$ 1.863) 5 - 16	6.69 ($\pm$ 0.843) 5 - 9
Positive-Affective Empathy (PAE)	17.21 ($\pm$ 1.339) 15 - 20	17.96 ($\pm$ 1.345) 14 - 20	16.27 ($\pm$ 2.232) 10 - 21	24.27 ($\pm$ 0.815) 22 - 25

Based on Table 4, the pre-test scores in both the intervention and control groups for the Negative Cognitive Empathy (NCE) domain tended to approach the minimum values. The mean score in the control group was 8.90 ($\pm$ 1.168) with a minimum–maximum range of 6–12, while in the intervention group it was 8.84 ($\pm$ 1.807) with a range of 6–16. For the Positive Cognitive Empathy (PCE) domain, the mean pre-test score in the control group also tended to be closer to the minimum value at 17.99 ($\pm$ 1.000) (min–max: 16–20). In contrast, the intervention group showed scores closer to the maximum, with a mean of 17.63 ($\pm$ 1.754)

(min–max: 10–21). Similarly, the Positive Affective Empathy (PAE) domain showed mean pre-test scores in the control group that were closer to the minimum value, at 17.21 ($\pm$ 1.339) (min–max: 15–20). Meanwhile, the intervention group recorded higher scores closer to the maximum, with a mean of 16.27 ($\pm$ 2.232) (min–max: 10–21). A significant improvement was observed in the intervention group, particularly in the PCE and PAE domains, from pre-test to post-test. In contrast, the control group showed no meaningful changes across all domains between the pre-test and post-test assessments.

Table 5. Differences in Empathy Scores Before and After the Intervention (N = 140)

Group	Pre-test Mean $\pm$ SD	Post-test Mean $\pm$ SD	Within-Group Test (Wilcoxon Z)	p-value	Between-Group Comparison (Mann–Whitney U, Z)	p-value
Intervention (n=70)	49.41 (SD $\pm$ 5.115)	65.27 (SD $\pm$ 2.028)	-7.273	0.000*		
Control (n=70)	50.40 (SD $\pm$ 3.246)	52.17 ($\pm$ SD 3.522)	-3.457	0.001	-7.273	0.000*

The Mann–Whitney U Test further confirmed a significant difference between the two groups after the intervention ($Z = -7.273$; $p = 0.000$), indicating that the interactive storytelling intervention had a greater effect on improving children's empathy compared to the control group.

Discussion

The findings of this study showed that the relatively low mean empathy scores at the pre-test stage indicate that most respondents had not yet fully developed the ability to recognize basic positive and negative emotions in others, nor the capacity to respond empathically. This result is consistent with the study by Bottaccioli et al. (2023), which highlighted that empathy and emotional comprehension in elementary school children are often not optimal. Developmentally, middle childhood (approximately ages 6–12) is a transitional period in which empathy skills and emotional regulation begin to emerge but still vary widely across children. The low pre-test empathy scores in this study suggest that children still face limitations in identifying both positive and negative emotional expressions and in placing themselves in others' perspectives. This aligns with the literature indicating that empathy competence in early elementary school children requires stimulation through contextual and meaningful learning experiences (Denham et al., 2011). Similarly, Yavuz et al. (2024) reported that the ability to recognize emotions correlates positively with empathy and sympathy, and continues to develop throughout childhood, although the pace and maturity of this development differ among individuals.

Favini, Virzì, Lunetti, and Cannito (2025) further emphasized that differences in emotional regulation and self-efficacy influence how emotions are expressed and modified, which in turn affects empathic capacity. In this study, empathy remained relatively low across all domains in the control group, while in the intervention

group, lower scores were observed mainly in the domains of Negative Cognitive Empathy (NCE) and Negative Affective Empathy (NAE). The relatively low empathy levels observed among students in this study may also be influenced by the quality of emotional socialization at home and school. In the Indonesian context, there is often greater emphasis on academic skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, compared to children's ability to manage their emotions. Prior evidence suggests that the quality of emotional discussions, modeling by teachers and parents, as well as the classroom climate, are significant predictors of children's emotional knowledge and school adjustment (Susanne, 2020).

The results of this study demonstrate that interactive storytelling is an effective strategy for enhancing empathy in primary school children, especially those in grades 2–3 who are navigating the early stages of socio-emotional development. At this age, children are learning to recognize and make sense of both their own emotions and those of others, while also beginning to cultivate perspective-taking skills. Through imagining the emotional states of characters and reflecting on the consequences of prosocial versus aggressive behavior, students practice empathic perspective-taking. This finding aligns with Ornaghi et al. (2014), who demonstrated that emotionally-focused story conversations improved both emotion comprehension and empathy in elementary students. This finding also resonates with Yudha et al. (2024), where fairy tales substantially enhanced cooperation, prosocial behaviors, and empathy in children. These converging lines of evidence reinforce the present study's findings—interactive storytelling offers meaningful, developmentally appropriate opportunities for children to practice empathy. As supported by the social-cognitive model (Eisenberg et al., 2010), the activity engages emotion recognition, emotional regulation, and perspective-taking in an integrated manner. It also supports preventive

strategies, as higher empathy is associated with reduced bullying behaviors and stronger prosocial engagement.

This study is supported by Naumann (2023), who reported an improvement in children's socio-emotional competencies after participating in a structured program that incorporated storytelling or digital narratives as a medium for teaching emotions. Compared to traditional lecture-based approaches or the direct delivery of information, interactive storytelling provides children with opportunities to imagine, engage in discussion, and connect the meaning of stories to real-life situations in school. Similarly, the SEE Learning program conducted by Min et al. (2024) and the *Empathy at School Project* (Bottaccioli et al., 2023) demonstrated that emotion-based learning integrated into the curriculum effectively enhances emotional literacy, empathy, and prosocial behavior.

In the context of bullying prevention, empathy functions as a protective factor. Children who are able to perceive and understand the suffering of others are less likely to engage in aggressive behavior and are more motivated to help (Zuffianò et al., 2018). Sahin (2012) also emphasized that empathy training significantly reduces bullying behaviors in elementary schools. Likewise, Palade and Pascal (2023) found that an empathy training program for third-grade students enhanced empathic skills and decreased verbal bullying, particularly when supported by a safe and inclusive classroom environment. Although these findings are promising, it should be noted that the enhancement of empathy through storytelling often requires repetition and continuous reinforcement. The long-term effects may diminish if they are not supported by a conducive school climate, the active role of teachers, and parental involvement. Future studies should employ a longitudinal design to examine the sustainability of storytelling interventions in fostering empathy and preventing bullying.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that interactive storytelling is an effective strategy to enhance empathy among elementary school students and can serve as a preventive measure against bullying behavior. By engaging children actively in narrative experiences, the intervention improved both cognitive and affective empathy, providing them with opportunities to better understand others' emotions and perspectives. Storytelling, therefore, holds promise as an accessible and contextually meaningful approach that teachers can integrate into classroom activities. Nevertheless, to ensure long-term impact, the method should be reinforced through sustained implementation, supported by schools, teachers, and parents. Future research employing longitudinal and multi-site designs is recommended to explore the durability and generalizability of the intervention's effects.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the intervention was conducted over only four sessions within a relatively short timeframe, which may limit the depth of the empathy-building process. Second, the study was carried out in a single public elementary school in Bandung, making it difficult to generalize the findings to broader populations or different cultural contexts.

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