

Humanitarian Narrative as Tools for Moral Development and Global Citizenship in Preschool Education.

Nurul Khairani Ismail^{1*}, Ding Yumo², Nur Izzati Khairuddin³, Diani Mardiana Mat Zain⁴

¹ Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia.

² Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia.

³ Faculty of Education and Liberal Arts, INTI International University, Malaysia.

⁴ Permata Insan College, Islamic Science University of Malaysia, Malaysia.

Corresponding Author

Nurul Khairani Ismail

Email: nkhkhairani@ukm.edu.my

Abstract

This paper will provide a narrative review of humanitarian narrative as a means of moral development and global citizenship in preschool education. Values like honesty, kindness, and respect have always been expressed in traditional tales like myths, folktales and animal fables, but these media tend to simplify morality in dichotomous terms of good and bad. In comparison, humanitarian stories focus on universal principles of compassion, fairness, resilience, and collaboration, thereby prompting children to expand their moral interests beyond their immediate cultural frames. Three dimensions are illuminated: the first are the psychological and developmental factors, including empathy, sentimentalism, neurological readiness, and cultural context, which determine how young children approach humanitarian stories; the second is the differences in the form and delivery of the traditional and humanitarian narrative, its focus, and impact; and the third is the primary attributes of humanitarian stories, including empathetic identification, overt traits of morality, and emotional mobilization, and perspective-taking. The results indicate that humanitarian stories offer more ground to a higher-order moral reasoning and world consciousness, but their usefulness requires developmentally appropriate adaptation and teacher scaffolding. By teaching humanitarian principles in early childhood, these stories can foster empathy, justice, and accountability, thereby aligning early childhood education with UNESCO's vision for Global Citizenship Education and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Keywords: Humanitarian Narrative; Moral Development; Preschool Education; Global Citizenship; General Review.

INTRODUCTION

Storytelling tradition has long been the mother of children's moral development, whether in ancient fables or in present-day picture books. The power of stories is that they capture children's imagination, inspire sympathy, and offer symbolic points of access to complex moral ideas (Nguyen, 2022; Schatt & Ryan, 2021). Traditional children's literature usually focuses on micro-level conflicts, such as sharing toys, apologising for wrongdoing, or being kind to friends, thus laying the groundwork for honesty, fairness, and cooperation (Yao & Enright, 2018). However, researchers tend to state that the moral imagination of children should not be limited to the classroom and family only, but should also involve humanitarian consciousness and global citizenship (Nussbaum, 2010; Silva & Lourenço, 2023; UNESCO, 2025). Exposure to stories that emphasise justice, strength, peace, and unity at an early age enables children to place their individual lives within larger moral environments that transcend cultural or geographical boundaries (Ramamurthy et al., 2023).

Global Citizenship in preschool education is seen as ensuring that young children develop a sense of belonging to a common humanity, values, attitudes, and skills that foster fairness, empathy, and harmonious coexistence (Silva & Lourenço, 2023; UNESCO, 2025). Although a preschooler is too young to understand abstract politics or civic principles, they can play a significant role in becoming a global citizen through developmentally relevant actions, namely equitable sharing of resources, compassionate attitude towards peers, taking slower but respectful attitudes towards differences, peaceful conflict resolution, and acknowledging that everyone, regardless of cultural and nationality background, should be treated with dignity and treated fairly (Ramamurthy et al., 2023).

Humanitarian storytelling grounded in narratives arising from genuine struggles, displacement, and resilience is increasingly recognised as an effective tool for fostering global consciousness in early childhood education (Silva & Lourenço, 2023). In contrast to classical animal fables or domestic stories, humanistic tales provoke children to struggle with moral issues on a societal and global scale. They do not just impart what is right or wrong in everyday stories but go a notch higher to sympathise with the community's facing injustice and loss. In Palestine, as an example, the experiences of children of resilience and identity, either through oral culture, picture books, or

metaphorical images of survival and personal growth, including the olive tree or the seed, can be used as cultural sources of survival and moral growth (Espín Ocampo, 2020; Gultekin, 2025; Osmer & Salazar-Newton, 2014). Such stories enable preschoolers to explore symbolically, though in accessible, developmentally necessary ways, peace, justice, and belonging.

Incorporation of global citizenship during early childhood is important in a number of reasons. First, it establishes moral grounds so that compassion, fairness, and justice are projected outside the self and care about people far away (Broadfoot & Pascal, 2021). Second, it fosters compassion and unity and makes children perceive displacement, inequality, and conflict as collective human issues (Salmon & Melliou, 2021). Third, it creates peace resilience through the development of dialogue, cooperation, and care as opposed to exclusion and aggression (Barham et al., 2025; Silva & Lourenço, 2023; Shabalala, 2025; UNESCO, 2025). Fourth, it also correlates with the Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), which integrate peace and justice into early learning (Rad et al., 2022). Lastly, it positions children as change agents for the future, as they transform preschool classrooms into seedbeds of empathy, justice, and peace that would later support more accepting and caring societies (Shabalala, 2025).

Hence, rather than functioning as a conventional literature review, this paper positions itself as a state-of-the-art conceptual synthesis that compares conventional and humanitarian narratives in early childhood education. Drawing from developmental psychology and global citizenship education, the paper reconceptualises humanitarian storytelling as a pedagogical and moral framework that may support empathy, justice-oriented thinking, and global citizenship formation among preschool children. In doing so, the paper proposes a preliminary conceptual framework explaining the psychological and pedagogical processes through which humanitarian narratives contribute to children's moral development and global citizenship.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this review draws on developmental psychology and philosophical education to demonstrate how storytelling can enhance moral development and global citizenship in preschool education. More precisely, it is guided by the Sociocultural Theory of learning developed by Vygotsky (1978), which views learning as a process mediated through social means, and by the Capabilities Approach to education by Nussbaum (2010), which views education as the extended development of human capabilities. Collectively, these views provide a multidimensional perspective on how literature-based approaches such as storytelling, dramatization, and humanitarian accounts can help develop early moral thinking and train children in justifiable participation in the global community.

Vygotsky (1978) pointed out that the development of children is based on socialisation and culture. The high mental capabilities as well as moral reasoning are first acquired during communication with other people and subsequently internalized as personal skills. In this light, storytelling in ECCE is not a mere form of entertainment but a cultural practice through which values, norms, and collective identities are passed on. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) exemplifies how stories can present a dilemma that a child cannot solve on his/her own, but the teacher can scaffold with probing questions, dramatization, or guided discussions to help the child gain a deeper grasp of fairness, empathy, or justice. That way, children will go beyond the simplification of good and bad and struggle to make more intricate moral judgments.

The Capabilities Approach by Nussbaum (2010) adds value to this perspective by offering a logical explanation of why these values are significant to human flourishing and to the responsibility to the world. Three of her ten central capabilities are particularly applicable to ECCE: emotions, affiliation and practical reason. One develops them through storytelling and humanitarian narratives through promoting empathy and compassion (emotions), understanding human dignity and respect in difference and dissimilarity (affiliation), and evaluating fairness and justice (practical reason). Indicatively, the story of Palestine children calls upon preschoolers to consider how other children in need live so that they can extend their moral care in the classroom. In this case, storytelling is not only a means of cultural transmission but also a way to expand children's moral imagination.

Notably, the Capabilities Approach views children as moral agents rather than recipients of knowledge. Ecce interventions in storytelling, therefore, need to focus on involvement through drawing, dramatization, and discussion, to ensure that children learn moral reasoning in a manner that affirms personal dignity and collective justice. Through empathy, imagination, and reflective judgment, teachers lay the foundation for responsible world citizenship at the earliest stages.

Literature Approaches to Promoting the Moral Growth of Children

Literature-based approaches, such as storytelling, dramatization and social stories, have been traditionally accepted as effective means to promote the moral aspect of children within early childhood education (Rahiem et al., 2020). These strategies are premised on developmental theories that focus on the way young children can most effectively learn by engaging in concrete, interesting, and imaginative experiences (Nesbitt et al., 2023). In

contrast to abstract moral teaching, literature offers familiar stories and figures and prompts children to think about moral principles such as honesty, fairness, empathy, and responsibility. Nonetheless, as generally accepted to be effective, these approaches should be utilised critically so as not to become a weakness in developmental adequacy and cultural relevance for the preschool learner (Arabacı & Aydoğan, 2025).

One of the most ancient and significant forms of moral education is storytelling. Children are exposed to stories of what is acceptable due to fables, folktales, and picture books and develop empathy and prosocial thinking (Pulimeno et al., 2020). However, the morality in traditional stories is usually reduced to a set of opposites, right versus wrong, which narrows down the children to more complicated moral issues. Modern humanitarian stories, like *Seed of Palestine*, enhance moral education, and they present the elements of resilience, justice, and empathy towards the world (Nikolajeva, 2016). The difficulty for teachers is how to describe such complicated stories, which are developmentally adequate and significant to young children, without overloading them. Along with storytelling, dramatization and systematic narratives offer more dynamic and participatory ways to moral learning. Role-play, puppet theatre, and dramatization help children assume various roles and be fair and compassionate, as abstract values are applied to real-life scenarios (Heathcote & Herbert, 1985). These methods enhance socio-emotional knowledge when well managed. Still, when teacher scaffolding is not implemented, role-play can easily reinforce stereotypes or even degenerate into a game devoid of moral consideration (Baldwin & Fleming, 2003). In the same manner, social stories and inclusive stories help children understand particular behaviours and their effects in straightforward, uncomplicated ways, and expand their moral scope by encompassing diversity, fairness, and environmental justice (Yee et al., 2025). To be most effective, teachers should incorporate these stories into classroom activities which facilitate empathy, dialogue and perspective-taking.

Global Citizenship in Early Childhood Education

The concept of global citizenship is based on the understanding that all humans are members of a larger human community that goes beyond national, cultural, and religious borders (UNESCO, 2025). It has an impact on the human values of common humanity, empathy, diversity, justice, peace, sustainability, and responsibility to solve universal problems (Oxley & Morris, 2013). Global citizenship is based on the beliefs and moral values of being a universal good, unlike traditional citizenship, which is anchored in rights and obligations in a nation-state. It equips individuals to think critically about inequality, conflict, and environmental matters and promotes them to be compassionate and responsible (UNESCO, 2025).

Global citizenship in the context of early childhood care and education (ECCE) is not concerned with imparting to small children's complex matters in politics or other social matters around the world. Rather, it focuses on the basis of empathy, justice, collaboration, inclusiveness of diversity, and environmental protection (UNESCO, 2014). Developmentally appropriate practices introduced to preschoolers to teach the idea of global citizenship include storytelling, role-play, collaborative play, cultural celebrations, and environmentally friendly actions such as recycling and planting seeds (Kahriman-Pamuk & Pramling Samuelsson, 2024). These experiences give children the idea that whatever they do has an impact on others and that kindness, respect, and responsibility are what allow them to relate to the rest of the world. The ECCE fosters global citizenship dispositions and attitudes that eventually result in caring, inclusive, and responsible citizens later in life. Teachers can sow the seeds of peace, empathy, and sustainability by incorporating humanitarian narratives, inclusive stories, and social justice themes into early learning, which will put ECCE into alignment with the UNESCO vision of education as a source of global responsibility (UNESCO, 2025).

Methodology

The general review (GR) approach is described as methodologically flexible and interpretive in literature synthesis (Skelly et al., 2019). It does not follow strict procedural guidelines but focuses on critical reading, conceptual synthesis and thematic organisation. It is done by identifying the applicable studies on the basis of their theoretical and conceptual relevance as well as their contextual relevance, in which researchers rely on their expertise to relate ideas among the various sources. In such a way, a general review creates a coherent story, which captures the development of ideas in a field and allows exploring various points of view, connecting theories, and highlighting the patterns or inconsistencies in the existing knowledge base (Grant & Booth, 2009; Koretz & Lipman, 2017; Skelly et al., 2019).

The current researcher uses a general review design since the correspondents of the humanitarian stories in preschool moral education and global citizenship are a relatively new and understudied sphere. In contrast to a systematic review, which requires an existing body of empirical research, the general review is flexible and can bring together the insights of fragmented yet conceptually relevant literatures, such as moral psychology, storytelling traditions, humanitarian education, and global citizenship frameworks. Critically bridging these disciplines, the review not only reveals gaps in conceptual frameworks but also develops a new model for applying the concept of humanitarian storytelling to the moral growth of children, not only in immediate social contexts but also in resilience, justice, and solidarity. This interpretive and exploratory quality is what makes the general

review particularly appropriate for introducing new ideas in education, which preconditions the creation of the module and intervention, and provides a clear background for the scholarly reflection and related future research (Grant & Booth, 2009; Koretz & Lipman, 2017; Skelly et al., 2019).

This review followed a structured literature identification and screening process to enhance methodological transparency. Eligible literature was identified through queries in key academic databases, including Web of Science, Scopus, and ERIC, selected for their extensive coverage of peer-reviewed research in education and related interdisciplinary fields. Publications peer-reviewed between 2010 and 2025 were included, using a combination of search terms including *"humanitarian narrative"*, *"humanitarian education"*, *"ethics education"*, *"empathy"*, *"social justice education"*, and *"global citizenship education."* Boolean operators (AND/OR) were employed to identify conceptually related literature across different research streams. Upon identifying relevant literature, thematic synthesis was conducted to analyse the included studies, focusing on identifying recurring concepts, theoretical connections, and unresolved contradictions in the existing research. This process provided the basis for constructing the conceptual framework proposed in this paper.

Results and Discussions

Psychological and Pedagogical Mechanisms of Humanitarian Narratives

The success of humanitarian narratives lies in the fact that it is several psychological processes that set it apart from conventional storytelling. Empathy is established as a backbone of moral growth, and humanitarian stories are critical in cultivating empathy. Such stories create a moral duty and altruistic intentions by inviting children to experience the feelings and emotions of others (Lozada et al., 2014). They also emphasise moral characteristics like courage, nurturing, and fairness, which enhance moral identity. These characteristics gain particular acuity when simulated by caregivers or figures of authority, which proves that the role models socially support moral development (Reimer et al., 2012).

Humanitarian messages tend to follow powerfully impactful pictures and plain story tricks to stir up moral outrage. According to Kurasawa (2013), this humanitarian sentimentalism employs personification (a named child), massification (large numbers), rescuing (a helper), and nurturing (nurturing moments) to emotionally arouse empathy quickly. This can be useful in preschool, where the scenes provided there are clear and tangible, and children can assimilate and use them to rehearse sharing, comforting others, and being fair. Nevertheless, there are dangers associated with this strategy. Rapid, high emotional responses can be short lived and cannot result in a concern of justice being permanent (Kurasawa, 2013). Paying excessive attention to victims may lead to compassion fatigue and conceal the agency and rights of children. Humanitarian stories, therefore, require age-appropriate design and teacher guidance to transform emotional engagement into critical understanding and positive action. Easy contexts and guided questions (i.e. What made this unfair?), and small, achievable actions (class charters, helping routines) should be added by teachers. Yet, limited supervision, weak programme evaluation, and ineffective school leadership may constrain teachers' ability to consistently enact these reflective practices (Nalliah et al., 2025; Taddese et al., 2025). Through brief debriefings, introductory media-literacy discussions, and family involvement, emotional responses can be transformed into more stable, justice-oriented forms of empathy (Kurasawa, 2013).

Developmentally, the transition between 3 and 7 years of age is rich with neurological- and cognitive-based developments (synaptic pruning and myelination), which offer humanitarian storytelling the opportunity to scaffold characteristics of empathy, impulse control, and sensitivity to fairness (Brink et al., 2011; Toronata Tambun et al., 2025). Early interventions which incorporate humanitarian narratives may hence reinforce ethical reflexes and prosocial responsiveness. These effects are greatly influenced by cultural context, though. Political violence may also destabilise the moral universe of children in conflict zones and make it difficult to draw the line between good and evil (Bruning, 2018). Storytelling in these situations serves as moral education and therapeutic intervention, assisting children in rebuilding meaning, memory, and hope.

A synthesis of existing research indicates consistent evidence regarding the role of humanitarian narratives in promoting children's moral development, notably that emotional engagement and perspective-taking are the key psychological processes driving such effects. Yet studies remain inconclusive on the extent to which this emotional engagement translates into long-term and stable moral behavior, while there remains insufficient empirical support for its long-term effects and concrete behavioral changes.

Reconceptualising Moral Storytelling: From Conventional to Humanitarian Narratives

Traditional and humanitarian narratives share the common goal of fostering children's moral development; however, they differ in their forms, pedagogical approaches, theoretical foundations, and intended moral outcomes, as summarised in Table 1. Traditional narratives, including myths, legends, animal tales, puppet

stories, and folk songs, have long served as cultural tools for transmitting moral values across generations (Rahiem et al., 2020; Sai et al., 2025). Grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, these narratives enable children to internalise socially valued beliefs, norms, and behaviours through interactions with more knowledgeable others. Consequently, traditional narratives primarily promote culturally embedded virtues such as honesty, kindness, friendship, and respect, making them highly relevant and developmentally appropriate for preschool children. Their delivery through oral storytelling, dramatization, costumes, props, and role-play allows teachers to scaffold children's moral understanding within the Zone of Proximal Development (Betawi, 2023). Nevertheless, traditional narratives frequently simplify morality into clear distinctions between good and evil, providing limited opportunities for children to engage with more complex ethical dilemmas (Sai et al., 2025).

In comparison, humanitarian narratives broaden children's moral learning beyond culturally specific values by emphasising universal principles such as empathy, courage, cooperation, justice, and social responsibility (Juutinen & Viljamaa, 2016). Their pedagogical orientation is supported by both Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, through collaborative meaning-making and reflective dialogue, and Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach, which emphasises empathy, affiliation, practical reason, and respect for human dignity as essential educational capabilities. Accordingly, humanitarian narratives are commonly delivered through reflective discussions, interactive activities, and visual supports that encourage children to participate actively in constructing moral understanding rather than passively receiving moral lessons (Zdanevych et al., 2020). Although these narratives promote prosocial values and moral integrity by positioning children within broader social and cultural identities (Shih, 2021), their interpretation remains influenced by cultural, historical, and social contexts. Consequently, humanitarian narratives may become emotionally demanding or conceptually abstract for preschool learners unless they are carefully adapted to children's developmental characteristics and supported through appropriate teacher scaffolding (Zdanevych et al., 2020).

Both narrative approaches contribute meaningfully to preschool moral education, albeit through different pedagogical pathways. Traditional narratives reinforce culturally appropriate moral behaviours through familiar contexts and culturally relevant experiences (Betawi, 2023; Sai et al., 2025), whereas humanitarian narratives encourage children to extend their moral concern beyond their immediate environment by developing empathy, perspective-taking, and shared responsibility toward others (Juutinen & Viljamaa, 2016). As synthesised in Table 1, the principal distinction lies not merely in the content of the narratives but also in their theoretical foundations and educational purposes. Traditional narratives primarily facilitate the transmission of culturally embedded moral values, whereas humanitarian narratives broaden children's moral horizon towards global citizenship and a shared sense of common humanity.

Table 1

Traditional vs. Humanitarian Narratives in Teaching Moral Values

Aspect	Traditional Narratives	Theoretical Support	Humanitarian Narratives	Theoretical Support
Forms	Myths, legends, folktales, animal tales, puppet stories, and folk songs that transmit cultural values and social norms (Rahiem et al., 2020; Sai et al., 2025).	Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) - traditional stories function as cultural tools through which children internalise shared beliefs, values, and social norms.	Stories centred on empathy, courage, resilience, cooperation, justice, and global responsibility (Juutinen & Viljamaa, 2016).	Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum, 2010) - narratives extend children's moral understanding beyond local culture toward common humanity and global responsibility.
Delivery	Oral storytelling, dramatization, puppetry, costumes, songs, and role-play supported by teacher guidance (Betawi, 2023).	Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) - teachers scaffold children's understanding through guided interaction and discussion.	Reflective dialogue, inquiry-based discussion, visual supports, collaborative learning, and interactive storytelling	Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) and Social Constructivism - reflective dialogue enables children to co-construct moral meaning through teacher scaffolding.

			(Zdanevych et al., 2020).	
Focus of Values	Honesty, kindness, friendship, respect, responsibility, and cultural wisdom rooted in local traditions (Sai et al., 2025).	Cognitive Development Theory (Piaget, 1932) and Moral Development Theory (Kohlberg, 1981) - moral values are progressively internalised through age-appropriate experiences.	Empathy, fairness, justice, compassion, social responsibility, peace, and global citizenship (Shih, 2021).	Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum, 2010) - emphasises emotions, affiliation, practical reason, dignity, and human flourishing as foundations of moral education.
Learner Engagement	Familiar narratives, repetition, songs, and dramatization sustain children's attention and participation (Betawi, 2023).	Narrative Theory and Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) – children learn by observing characters and modelling socially desirable behaviours.	Emotional engagement through perspective-taking, reflection, humanitarian dilemmas, and moral dialogue (Engelen et al., 2018).	Narrative Transportation Theory (Green & Brock, 2000) and Empathy Theory (Hoffman, 2000) - emotional immersion strengthens empathic understanding and moral reflection.
Educational Effectiveness	Reinforces culturally appropriate moral behaviours such as honesty, cooperation, and respect within children's immediate social environment (Sai et al., 2025).	Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) - repeated exposure to positive role models promotes observational learning and behaviour acquisition.	Develops empathy, perspective-taking, moral identity, prosocial responsibility, and global citizenship dispositions (Reimer et al., 2012; Juutinen & Viljamaa, 2016).	Moral Identity Theory (Aquino & Reed, 2002) and Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum, 2010) - humanitarian narratives encourage children to integrate moral values into their emerging self-concept while fostering ethical responsibility toward others.
Limitations	Moral conflicts are often simplified into clear distinctions between right and wrong, offering limited opportunities to explore complex ethical dilemmas (Sai et al., 2025).	Cognitive Development Theory (Piaget, 1932) - children's moral understanding may remain rule-based when narratives lack opportunities for deeper reasoning.	Humanitarian narratives may become emotionally overwhelming or developmentally inappropriate without careful teacher mediation and contextual adaptation (Zdanevych et al., 2020).	Developmental Psychology and Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) - effective learning depends on developmentally appropriate scaffolding and emotional support to transform empathy into meaningful moral reasoning.

Despite sharing many similarities with existing approaches such as moral stories, peace education, social justice literature, and empathy-based narratives, humanitarian narratives should not be viewed as mere rebrandings of these established concepts. These frameworks typically emphasize specific dimensions of moral education: moral stories prioritize the transmission of virtues and socially expected behaviors; empathy-based narratives stress emotional understanding of others' experiences; peace education focuses on conflict prevention and reconciliation; while social justice literature centers on exploring structural inequalities and critical awareness

(Atha, 2025; Liang et al., 2025; Page, 2010). These perspectives risk isolating emotional, cognitive, or social dimensions. Therefore, this paper conceptualizes humanitarian narratives as a distinct form of educational narrative characterized by three interconnected dimensions, which are the cognitive awareness of human vulnerability and suffering, the construction of a shared humanity, and the emphasis on ethical responsibility and action.

Toward a Conceptual Framework of Humanitarian Moral Development

Humanitarian narratives extend children's moral development beyond the transmission of conventional moral lessons by promoting empathy, moral identity, reflective judgement, and global responsibility. As synthesised in Table 2, these narratives operate through several interrelated psychological and pedagogical mechanisms that collectively support higher-order moral development. One of their most significant strengths is empathetic identification, whereby children are encouraged to recognise their shared humanity and common vulnerability with others (Engelen et al., 2018; Reimer et al., 2012). Consistent with Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach, this process develops children's capacities for emotions and affiliation by enabling them to understand the experiences of others while recognising their inherent dignity. Immersive humanitarian media, including virtual reality (VR), have similarly been shown to enhance empathy towards victims, increase emotional engagement, and encourage prosocial intentions (Reimer et al., 2012). Because humanitarian narratives are grounded in shared human experiences, they encourage children to internalise values such as compassion, justice, and care in ways that extend beyond the conventional moral binaries commonly found in traditional stories.

Another distinctive characteristic of humanitarian narratives is their emphasis on explicit moral traits. By highlighting qualities such as courage, fairness, caring, and justice, these narratives provide children with meaningful behavioural models that contribute to the development of moral identity (Reimer et al., 2012; Seu, 2015). This emphasis aligns with Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach, particularly through the development of practical reason and affiliation, as children learn not only what constitutes morally appropriate behaviour but also why such behaviours contribute to individual and collective well-being. Unlike traditional narratives that frequently simplify morality into rigid distinctions between good and evil, humanitarian stories present moral values as lived experiences that can be practised and enacted in authentic social contexts (Gao, 2024; Harrison, 2016).

Beyond empathy and moral identity, humanitarian narratives engage children emotionally through emotional mobilisation, encouraging feelings of compassion, responsibility, guilt, and concern that may stimulate both moral reflection and prosocial action (Mackey, 2018). These emotional responses are strengthened through narrative techniques such as characterisation, repetition, and emotionally engaging storylines, making humanitarian messages more memorable and meaningful. From the perspective of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, these emotional experiences acquire educational value when teachers scaffold children's understanding through questioning, discussion, and reflection, enabling emotional engagement to develop into deeper moral understanding rather than remaining a temporary emotional response.

Humanitarian narratives also encourage complex moral reflection by presenting ethical dilemmas that require children to think beyond simple right-versus-wrong judgements (Harris & Walton, 2009). Rather than prescribing fixed moral rules, these stories invite children to consider fairness, justice, and responsibility within realistic humanitarian contexts. Such reflective thinking corresponds closely with Nussbaum's concept of practical reason, as children are encouraged to evaluate ethical situations from multiple perspectives and develop increasingly sophisticated moral judgements. This complexity subsequently promotes perspective-taking and higher-order moral reasoning, preparing children to respond thoughtfully to challenging social situations (Ismail et al., 2025; Yaccob et al., 2022).

The effectiveness of humanitarian narratives is further strengthened by their cultural resonance and capacity to develop perspective-taking and narrative competence. Stories grounded in children's social and cultural experiences are more likely to generate empathy because they connect humanitarian values with familiar contexts (Meyer, 2007). Consistent with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, culturally meaningful narratives facilitate children's understanding through socially mediated learning experiences. Likewise, personal stories portraying conflict, resilience, and reconciliation enable children to explore others' thoughts, emotions, and moral decisions while strengthening narrative competence and perspective-taking (Gruenewald & Witteborn, 2022). Collectively, these interconnected mechanisms demonstrate that humanitarian narratives function not merely as storytelling tools but as pedagogical resources that foster empathy, reflective judgement, moral identity, and global citizenship among preschool children. The key features underpinning these processes are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Key Features of Humanitarian Narratives in Moral Development

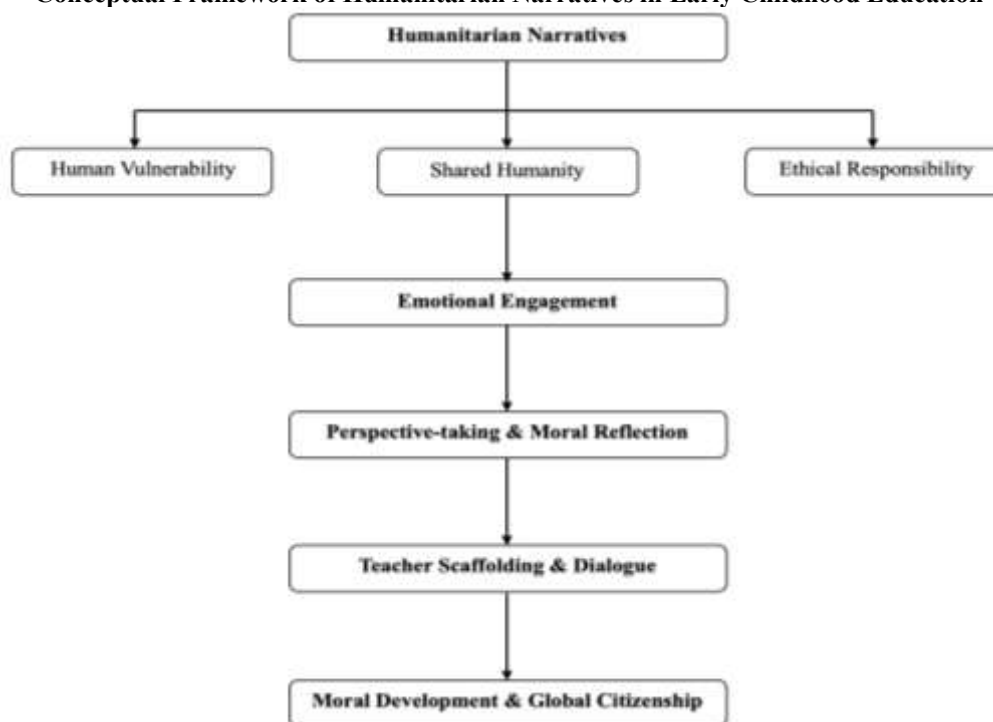
Key Feature	Psychological / Pedagogical Mechanism	Theoretical Support	Example	Key References
Empathetic Identification	Encourages children to recognise shared vulnerability and common humanity, nurturing compassion, empathy, and altruism towards others.	Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum, 2010) – develops the capabilities of emotions and affiliation, enabling children to empathise with others and recognise shared human dignity.	VR films that immerse viewers in victims' experiences to foster empathy.	Engelen et al., 2018; Reimer et al., 2013
Emphasis on Moral Traits	Highlights bravery, caring, fairness, and justice as central characteristics of moral identity and prosocial behaviour.	Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum, 2010) – promotes moral growth through the development of practical reason, affiliation, and respect for human dignity.	Caregivers reinforcing bravery or fairness during storytelling.	Gao, 2024; Harrison, 2016; Reimer et al., 2013; Seu, 2015
Emotional Mobilization	Activates emotions such as guilt, fear, responsibility, and compassion to stimulate moral reflection and prosocial action.	Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) – emotional understanding is strengthened through guided social interaction and teacher scaffolding during storytelling and discussion.	Characterisation, narrative transportation, and repetition in humanitarian stories.	Mackey, 2018
Complex Moral Reflection	Moves beyond binary morality (good versus evil) to engage children in reasoning about fairness, justice, and ethical dilemmas.	Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum, 2010) – develops practical reason, enabling children to evaluate ethical issues and make reflective moral judgements.	Stories addressing displacement, conflict, and inequality.	Harris & Walton, 2009
Cultural Resonance	Connects humanitarian values with children's cultural experiences and lived realities, making complex issues more meaningful and understandable.	Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) – learning is mediated through culturally meaningful narratives and social interaction within children's own contexts.	Stories about vulnerable children that evoke empathy due to associations with innocence and fragility.	Meyer, 2007

Perspective-Taking & Narrative Competence	Enhances children's ability to understand others' emotions, intentions, and responses to conflict while supporting higher-order moral reasoning.	Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) – perspective-taking develops through dialogue, collaborative learning, and teacher-mediated interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development.	Personal narratives of conflict and resolution in humanitarian contexts.	Gruenewald & Witteborn, 2022
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Accordingly, in early childhood education, humanitarian storytelling can be regarded as a multifaceted pedagogical process rather than simply a literary activity. Drawing upon the synthesized literature in this paper, humanitarian narratives appear to function through interrelated psychological and educational mechanisms. Engaging narratives can stimulate children's empathy, compassion, and moral emotions, fostering recognition of humanity's shared vulnerability. Such emotional responses further facilitate children's ability to engage in perspective-taking, moral reflection, and the development of a prosocial identity. Yet this psychological engagement does not occur automatically. Instructors play a crucial role in scaffolding children's understanding of fairness, justice, and social responsibility in ways appropriate to their developmental stage through questioning, dramatic play, visual aids, and reflective dialogue. These processes collectively nurture broader moral and global citizenship, encompassing empathy, a spirit of cooperation, respect for diversity, and a justice-oriented mindset. By synthesizing the literature on humanitarian education, moral development, narrative studies, and global citizenship education, this paper reveals that the educational impact of humanitarian narratives does not stem solely from emotional arousal but unfolds through three interconnected processes. Such process does not occur automatically but depends on appropriate teacher guidance, children's developmental stages, and sensitive understanding of cultural and social contexts. Viewed in this light, humanitarian storytelling can be reconceptualized as a pedagogical framework that links emotional engagement, moral cognition, and the development of global citizenship, applicable to early childhood education, as illustrated in Figure 1. While preliminary evidence supports the interconnectedness, empirical research remains limited in its comprehensive examination. Thus, the proposed framework should be regarded as a conceptual synthesis rather than a fully established causal model.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of Humanitarian Narratives in Early Childhood Education



Recommendations and Moving Forward

Build upon the conceptual framework proposed, prospective research should explore how humanitarian narratives function across interrelated dimensions such as emotional engagement, moral reasoning, and ethical behavior. Rather than treating humanitarian narratives as a single point of intervention, such studies are encouraged to investigate how they evolve and interact dynamically, along with the influence of contextual and pedagogical factors. Future research ought to be facilitated through iterative design-based research that co-creates and optimises an instrument of Humanitarian Narrative Toolkit (lesson sequences, story banks, visual aids, discussion prompts and assessment rubrics) in a variety of Malaysian contexts. Strict assessment can be a quasi-experimental and longitudinal mixed-methods study aimed at testing the results of learners (empathy, moral reasoning, prosocial behaviour, classroom climate) and fidelity of implementation, with the moderating effect of teacher social-emotional competence. Comparative experiments must be conducted based on traditional versus humanitarian narratives on a head-to-head basis, and careful pilots of immersive media should determine the added value compared to picture books. Ethical guardrails, such as content thresholds, debrief procedures, referral pathways, and a social validity checklist (teacher, parent, child acceptability) are necessary in responsible adoption. Finally, short observation and child/teacher reports can be employed to observe a complete system to help ministries and providers evaluate impact, scale-up, and policy refinement and sustain GCED integration in ECCE. This should clearly explain the main conclusions of the article, highlighting its importance and relevance.

Conclusion

This review suggests that humanitarian narratives represent a valuable extension to traditional storytelling in fostering moral development and global citizenship among preschool children. While traditional narratives remain essential for transmitting local cultural values and foundational virtues such as honesty, kindness, and respect, humanitarian narratives broaden children's moral horizons by promoting empathy, justice, compassion, and shared human responsibility. Drawing on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach, this review further suggests that the educational value of humanitarian narratives lies in their ability to cultivate moral growth through interconnected psychological and pedagogical mechanisms, including empathetic identification, explicit moral traits, emotional mobilisation, complex moral reflection, cultural resonance, and perspective-taking. Nevertheless, these narratives must be developmentally appropriate and supported by effective teacher scaffolding to ensure that emotionally complex humanitarian issues are transformed into meaningful reflection rather than emotional overload. When thoughtfully integrated into early childhood education, humanitarian narratives have the potential to nurture compassionate, socially responsible, and ethically reflective children who are capable of engaging with both their local communities and the wider global society, thereby supporting UNESCO's vision of Global Citizenship Education and the broader aspirations of Education for Sustainable Development.

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