

EMPATHY AND INCLUSIVITY AND INDONESIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: STUDY OF THE MORAL VALUES OF THE BOOK MERPATI OF ARUL

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Abstract. The children's storybook *Merpati untuk Arul* (*A Dove for Arul*) by Wartono (2022) presents a touching narrative about empathy, friendship, and acceptance of differences through a simple yet emotionally engaging storyline. This study aims to explore the character education values and moral messages embedded in the story, as well as its relevance to the development of socio-emotional literacy in early childhood. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach with content analysis, both textual and visual elements were examined. The findings indicate that the characters Ibal and Arul reflect universal human virtues such as empathy, solidarity, sincerity, and perseverance in overcoming limitations. Arul, a child with Down syndrome, is portrayed as joyful and determined, while Ibal represents compassion and respect for diversity. The story serves as an effective tool for inclusive literacy education that fosters social awareness, tolerance, and positive character formation from an early age. Through expressive illustrations and accessible language, *Merpati untuk Arul* enriches Indonesian children's literature and aligns with 21st-century educational goals centered on empathy and humanistic values.

Keywords: Children's Literature, Inclusive Education, Character Education, Empathy, Early Childhood

INTRODUCTION

Children's literature plays a crucial role in shaping empathy, moral awareness, and inclusive attitudes in early childhood education. Through stories, children are introduced to human values such as kindness, compassion, and respect for diversity, which are essential foundations of character formation (Zahro et al., 2024). In the digital era, however, children's reading habits have shifted from printed books to instant entertainment media, resulting in decreased exposure to narratives that nurture emotional intelligence and empathy (Retnaningrum & Hazhari, 2024). Therefore, the presence of meaningful and humanistic children's stories is urgently needed to help young readers internalize moral and social-emotional literacy from an early age.

Inclusive education emphasizes the importance of recognizing and appreciating individual differences. It provides equitable learning opportunities for all children, including those with disabilities, by fostering social interactions that build mutual understanding and acceptance (Hastuti & Musslifah, 2023). Children's literature can serve as an effective medium for inclusive education by presenting stories that portray diverse characters and experiences (Lestari & Utami, 2023). Such stories allow children to develop empathy toward others who may be different from them and to view diversity as a natural and valuable aspect of life.

The storybook *Merpati untuk Arul* (*A Dove for Arul*) by Wartono (2022) exemplifies these values. It narrates the friendship between Ibal and Arul—a child with Down syndrome—who learn to support and care for each other. Through this narrative, young readers are encouraged to understand the essence of empathy, sincerity, and respect for difference. (Al Baqi et al., 2024) highlight, inclusive storytelling enhances children's language and social skills by providing real-life contexts

that promote cooperation and tolerance. Despite many previous studies on children's literature and character education, few have examined *Merpati untuk Arul* in terms of its humanistic values and contribution to inclusive literacy development.

Based on this background, the research seeks to answer the following question: *How do moral and character education values represented in Wartono's Merpati untuk Arul contribute to inclusive and socio-emotional literacy among young children?* The purpose of this study is to analyze the moral and character values contained in the story and examine their relevance to inclusive early childhood education. The findings are expected to enrich theoretical discussions on inclusive children's literature and provide practical implications for character-based literacy education in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method to analyze moral and character values in Wartono's (2022) children's storybook *Merpati untuk Arul*. The qualitative approach was chosen because it enables an in-depth interpretation of texts and illustrations to reveal messages, meanings, and values contained in children's literature (Aslan, 2024). This approach focuses on understanding phenomena naturally and contextually, aligning with the interpretive paradigm commonly used in character education and inclusive literary studies.

The conceptual framework of this research is based on character education and inclusivity in early childhood literature. Character education emphasizes the development of empathy, moral reasoning, and responsibility through narrative exposure (Sunaryo & Fauziati, 2023). Meanwhile, inclusive literary representation provides opportunities for children to understand diversity, disabilities, and equality through storytelling (Reigel et al., 2023). These theoretical concepts were used to examine how *Merpati untuk Arul* portrays empathy and inclusivity through the actions and relationships of its main characters, Ibal and Arul.

The data source consisted of both textual and visual elements of the book. The data collection technique used was content analysis, focusing on identifying and interpreting moral and inclusive values expressed through dialogue, illustration, and narrative flow. The steps of analysis followed Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which includes: (1) Data reduction, by selecting and categorizing textual and visual elements that reflect empathy, friendship, and acceptance of differences; (2) Data display, by organizing findings into thematic tables for interpretation; and (3) Conclusion drawing and verification, by synthesizing how these values contribute to social-emotional and inclusive literacy in early childhood education.

The trustworthiness of data was ensured through theoretical triangulation, comparing the interpretation results with findings from previous studies on character education, empathy, and inclusive storytelling. The research process emphasized the integration between literary appreciation and educational perspective, aiming to show how children's stories can become meaningful learning media for moral and inclusive education in the 21st century.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

This study explores the moral and inclusive values reflected in Wartono's (2022) children's book *Merpati untuk Arul* through text and illustration analysis. The findings reveal that the story presents multiple dimensions of moral and character education consistent with the principles of inclusive learning and empathy development in early childhood.

1.1 Friendship and Solidarity

The story highlights the importance of friendship that transcends physical and social differences. The characters Ibal and Arul demonstrate compassion, mutual support, and equality. Such portrayal

aligns with (Aslan, 2024), who emphasizes that storytelling helps children internalize prosocial behavior and moral understanding.

In one scene, Ibal continues to play with Arul despite his limitations. This moment promotes solidarity and shared happiness, reflecting how friendship nurtures empathy in early learners (Sunaryo & Fauziati, 2023).

"Ibal smiled and waited patiently as Arul tried again to catch the dove. His joy was Arul's joy." (Wartono, 2022:14)

This simple dialogue expresses moral sensitivity and emotional connection between peers, illustrating empathy as a lived value in daily life.

1.2 Empathy and Compassion

Another significant finding is the strong portrayal of empathy and compassion. The story teaches children to understand others' feelings and to respond with kindness, which is an essential element of social-emotional literacy (Reigel et al., 2023).

Arul, a child with Down syndrome, is depicted as optimistic, cheerful, and determined, while Ibal shows concern and acceptance. Such inclusive representation normalizes disability and encourages young readers to appreciate diversity (Zahro et al., 2024).

"Arul could not catch the bird, but Ibal brought him one, saying, 'Now you have your own dove, Arul.' Arul's eyes sparkled, and the dove flew gently to his hand." (Wartono, 2022:18)

This passage illustrates empathy in action, showing that helping others is not an act of pity but a genuine expression of shared humanity.

1.3 Acceptance of Differences and Inclusion

The narrative also reflects inclusive education principles by showing acceptance of differences. Friendship between Ibal and Arul mirrors real social inclusion, where equality and mutual respect replace stigma. (Zahro et al., 2024) argue that inclusive children's literature provides a powerful tool to teach social awareness and tolerance from an early age.

Visual elements in *Merpati untuk Arul* strengthen these values — colorful illustrations show both children engaged in the same joyful activities, symbolizing unity and belonging. This aligns with (Reigel et al., 2023), who found that visual depictions of disability in children's books can reduce bias and foster inclusive mindsets.

1.4 Perseverance and Character Strength

The theme of perseverance is another important moral value in the story. Arul's repeated attempts to catch the dove, despite several failures, reflect determination and optimism. Such a portrayal represents the process of character formation emphasized by (Badeni & Saparahayuningsih, 2023), who explain that perseverance and self-efficacy are key outcomes of character education practices in schools.

"Though Arul failed again, he laughed and said, 'Next time, I will fly higher than the dove.'" (Wartono, 2022:20)

This message resonates with the modern goal of character education — to build resilience, empathy, and moral strength in young learners.

1.5 Summary of Analysis

Overall, the analysis reveals that *Merpati untuk Arul* conveys four major moral and inclusive values: (1) friendship and solidarity, (2) empathy and compassion, (3) acceptance of differences, and (4) perseverance. These findings correspond to the research purpose, showing that the story contributes significantly to the development of inclusive and socio-emotional literacy in early childhood education. The integration of text and illustration effectively supports moral formation and inclusivity awareness in line with current character education strategies (Badeni & Saparahayuningsih, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that Wartono's (2022) *Merpati untuk Arul* successfully integrates moral and inclusive values that contribute to the development of socio-emotional and character literacy in early childhood. The story demonstrates that empathy, friendship, perseverance, and acceptance of differences are not merely moral ideals but can be effectively internalized through meaningful narrative experiences. The moral values reflected in the relationship between Ibal and Arul emphasize the humanistic foundation of early education — that every child, regardless of ability, deserves respect, understanding, and opportunities to grow together. The study confirms that children's literature can function as an inclusive pedagogical medium that nurtures empathy, compassion, and tolerance from an early age. These results fulfill the research objective to identify and analyze moral and character education values and to explain their relevance to inclusive literacy development in early childhood. The final analysis concludes that *Merpati untuk Arul* serves as a model for inclusive children's literature that aligns with 21st-century character education goals. It demonstrates how storytelling can shape children's emotional intelligence, moral reasoning, and social awareness through authentic experiences of diversity and friendship.

Recommendations emerging from this study include:

1. Educators and parents should integrate inclusive storybooks like *Merpati untuk Arul* into classroom and home reading programs to strengthen empathy-based learning.
2. Future researchers are encouraged to expand this study by examining other children's literature that portrays diversity, gender equality, or environmental awareness to enrich inclusive literacy studies.
3. Policy makers in education and publishing should promote the production of local children's books that represent diverse identities and moral values to support holistic character development.

Thus, the research highlights that children's stories, when designed with empathy and inclusivity, can become transformative tools for building compassionate, tolerant, and morally aware generations.

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