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Storytelling as A Pedagogical Tool for Moral Development in Rural Children

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Storytelling is linked to improved moral scores in rural children; all four moral dimensions under study showed significant post-test gains.
- Age related to improvement; gender differences were not significant.
- Storytelling supported culturally relevant value learning and indicated the feasibility of storytelling as an extension strategy.

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Rural, Pre-adolescents, Extension pedagogy, Moral development, Age, Gender.

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ABSTRACT

The research carried out in 2025, examined the effectiveness of storytelling as an educational intervention for enhancing moral values among rural children. A pre-intervention-to-post-intervention assessment design was used. The sample included 60 students aged 10 to 12 years studying in rural primary schools in Bhaniyana village, Jaisalmer district, Rajasthan. The Moral Values Scale developed by Gupta and Singh (2016) was administered before and after a six-week storytelling programme. The programme consisted of twelve sessions based on culturally relevant moral stories highlighting honesty, empathy, fairness, cooperation, and responsibility. Each session included story narration followed by structured discussion and reflection activities that encouraged children to connect moral ideas with real-life experiences. The findings showed a significant increase in mean scores across all moral dimensions lying, dishonesty, stealing, and cheating after the intervention. Repeated measures ANOVA indicated significant effects of intervention and age, while gender differences were statistically nonsignificant. Correlation analysis revealed a positive association between age and moral value enhancement. The study suggests that story narration may function as an effective and culturally responsive strategy for moral education and could be integrated into rural extension and educational initiatives aimed at promoting value-based learning and holistic development.

INTRODUCTION

Moral values constitute the foundation of children's character formation, interpersonal sensitivity, and responsible citizenship. Their development during the pre-teen years is particularly crucial, as this period marks a transition from externally guided behaviour to more autonomous moral reasoning (Turiel & Banas, 2020). In rural India, moral development is increasingly influenced by socio-cultural shifts, disparities in educational quality, and exposure to digital media. While value-based learning forms a core expectation of India's educational vision as articulated in the National Education Policy 2020 (GoI, 2020) rural schools often face challenges in translating these ideals into practice due to limited pedagogical innovation, teacher preparedness gaps, and sociocultural diversities in value transmission (Sarangapani et al., 2023; NCERT, 2012; Arya & Vig, 2023). Traditional character-education frameworks emphasise respect, responsibility, and prosocial engagement but require innovative methods for contemporary learners (Lickona, 2009).

Storytelling has long been recognised as a culturally grounded and pedagogically effective strategy for shaping children's moral

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understanding. Developmental and educational research shows that narratives foster empathy, perspective-taking, and reflective reasoning, enabling children to internalise abstract moral concepts through engagement with relatable scenarios (Gasser et al., 2022). Evidence from diverse contexts indicates that storytelling promotes honesty, prosocial behaviour, and ethical reflection, particularly when children identify with characters and interpret situational dilemmas (Ding et al., 2023; Adnyani & Landrawan, 2022; Ibrahim et al., 2025). In India, folk tales, puppet shows, and traditional narratives have historically functioned as conduits of value transmission, and their relevance in contemporary pedagogy has been reaffirmed (Dey, 2015; Halimah et al., 2020; Kumari, 2025).

Beyond moral cognition, storytelling-based approaches contribute to socio-emotional and life-skill development. Research demonstrates improvements in empathy, cooperation, resilience, and emotional regulation through narrative engagement (Ramamurthy et al., 2024; Chan et al., 2021; Zuffianò et al., 2023). Neuroscientific findings show that storytelling activates neural pathways associated with attention, emotional attuning, and perspective-taking (Yabe et al., 2018). Such evidence positions storytelling as an adaptable, low-cost, and psychologically meaningful pedagogical tool, particularly suited for resource-constrained rural schools (Rahiem et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2021).

The rapid penetration of digital devices in rural India introduces additional challenges for children's learning and moral development. Unsupervised gadget exposure reduces motivation, attention spans, and socio-emotional sensitivity (Monika & Dube, 2025; Yadav & Dube, 2025). In this context, pedagogical approaches that push towards the revival of interpersonal interaction, reflective thinking, and ethical dialogue become increasingly necessary. Storytelling offers a medium that counters these trends while reinforcing experiential, participatory, and learner-centred methods aligned with extension education principles (Thebar & Upadhyay, 2023; Thebar & Upadhyay, 2024; Sarangapani et al., 2023). Accordingly, the study was undertaken to assess the effectiveness of a storytelling-based intervention in enhancing moral values among rural pre-teen schoolchildren aged 10 to 12 years, providing a culturally grounded and developmentally appropriate approach to moral education in contemporary rural classrooms.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a single-group pre–post intervention design to examine storytelling as an educational intervention associated with moral value development among rural children. The study was carried out in 2025 in rural primary schools of Jaisalmer district, Rajasthan. The site was purposively selected to represent the cultural and socio-economic characteristics of rural areas. A multistage random sampling procedure was used. At Stage 1, seven rural primary schools out of 17 were selected to represent the study area. At Stage 2, students were randomly selected within each school. A total of 60 children aged 10–12 years studying in classes V–VII were included, with equal numbers of boys and girls intentionally balanced. Institutional permission was obtained from school authorities, and informed written parental consent was secured prior to participation. The study adhered to standard ethical guidelines for research involving children. Ethical approval was given by the Ethics Committee (H.Sc./EC/034/23-04-2025).

The storytelling intervention was designed to promote moral development through culturally relevant stories in the local language, emphasising honesty, empathy, fairness, cooperation, and responsibility. The storytelling content was derived from the standardised moral dilemma statements in the Moral Values Scale (MVS) developed by Gupta and Singh (2016), which were transformed into culturally appropriate local narratives to ensure alignment between the intervention and the measured constructs. The intervention was implemented over six weeks and comprised 12 sessions of approximately 40 minutes each. Each session involved narration of a moral story followed by group discussion, reflection, and activity-based engagement to help children relate story-based morals to everyday experiences. All intervention sessions were personally delivered by the researcher following a standardised session plan to maintain implementation fidelity across schools. The approach aimed to combine cognitive understanding with emotional engagement for meaningful value internalisation.

Data were collected before and after the intervention using the Moral Values Scale (MVS) developed by Gupta and Singh (2016). The scale measures moral values across four dimensions lying, dishonesty, stealing, and cheating as well as total moral value scores. Higher scores indicated lower engagement in negative behaviours and therefore reflected stronger moral functioning. The instrument has been widely used in Indian educational contexts and has demonstrated acceptable reliability and validity.

The collected data were analysed using JASP software (Version 0.18). Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, and percentage, were used to describe participant characteristics and moral value levels. To evaluate intervention outcomes, paired-samples t-tests were performed to compare pre-intervention and post-intervention mean scores, while repeated measures ANOVA examined the effects of time, age, and gender on moral values. Correlation analysis was conducted to explore associations between age and moral value dimensions. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the percentage distribution of participants by age and gender across levels of moral values in pre-test and post-test conditions. The data show that all age groups displayed reductions in the lower moral value categories and corresponding increases in the higher categories. Among ten-year-olds, the percentage in the low category decreased from 25% to 5%, and in the high category increased from 15% to 30%. Similar changes occurred in eleven-year-olds, where the high category rose from 15% to 35%, and in twelve-year-olds from 15% to 45%. Gender-wise, boys showed increases in moderate and high levels from 40% and 3.3% to 60% and 23.3%, respectively, while girls' high category increased from 6.7% to 33.3%. The total group values indicate that participants shifted from lower to higher moral value levels after the storytelling intervention.

Table 2 presents the contrast of pre- post intervention mean scores of participants on the four moral dimensions and total moral values. The data indicate increases in all post-test means compared

Table 1. Percentage distribution of participants based on age, gender, and level of moral values

Level of Moral Values	Age 10 (Pre → Post) (N = 20)	Age 11 (Pre → Post) (N = 20)	Age 12 (Pre → Post) (N = 20)	Boys (Pre → Post) (N = 30)	Girls (Pre → Post) (N = 30)	Total (Pre → Post) (N = 60)
Extremely Low	10 → 5	5 → 0	5 → 0	6.7 → 0	13.3 → 13.3	10 → 6.7
Very Low	5 → 0	10 → 5	5 → 0	13.3 → 6.7	0 → 0	6.7 → 3.3
Low	25 → 5	25 → 5	20 → 0	36.7 → 3.3	26.7 → 0	31.7 → 1.7
Moderate	40 → 45	40 → 40	40 → 35	40 → 60	53 → 43	46.7 → 51.7
High	15 → 30	15 → 35	15 → 45	3.3 → 23.3	6.7 → 33.3	5 → 28.3
Very High	5 → 15	5 → 15	5 → 15	0 → 6.7	0 → 10	0 → 8.3
Extremely High	0 → 0	0 → 0	0 → 0	0 → 0	0 → 0	0 → 0

1. The level of Moral Values is defined based on the score of the participant on the moral value scale (MVS), 2. Values before the arrow show pre-test percentage proportions; values after the arrow show post-test percentage proportions, 3. The arrow (→) indicates the change from pre-test to post-test percentages, 4. Percentages were calculated separately for each subgroup based on their respective N values, 5. N represents the number of participants in each subgroup (Age groups: N = 20; Gender groups: N = 30; Total: N = 60).

Table 2. Comparison of pre-test and post-test moral values scores of participants

Moral Dimension	Pre-Test (Mean ± SD[4])	Post-Test (Mean ± SD)	[3]*t*	[2]*p value*
Lying	3.00 ± 1.50	4.47 ± 1.73	10.67	< .001***
Dishonesty	3.05 ± 1.31	4.37 ± 1.55	9.43	< .001***
Stealing	4.93 ± 1.66	5.75 ± 1.68	7.41	< .001***
Cheating	3.23 ± 1.42	4.63 ± 1.80	10.55	< .001***
Total Moral Values	14.22 ± 5.03	19.22 ± 6.21	12.99	< .001***

1.*** denotes a statistically significant result with p < .001, 2. p-value indicates the statistical significance of the difference between pre- and post-test scores, 3. t represents the t-value from the paired-sample t-test comparing pre- and post-test scores, 4. SD refers to the standard deviation, indicating how much individual scores vary from the mean.

to pre-test means. For lying, the mean rose from 3.00 to 4.47 (t (59) = 10.67, $p < .001$), and for dishonesty, from 3.05 to 4.37 (t (59) = 9.43, $p < .001$). Similarly, mean scores for stealing increased from 4.93 to 5.75 (t (59) = 7.41, $p < .001$), and for cheating, from 3.23 to 4.63 (t (59) = 10.55, $p < .001$). The total moral values improved from 14.22 to 19.22 (t (59) = 12.99, $p < .001$). All differences were statistically significant, confirming measurable change between pre- and post-assessments.

Table 3 presents the repeated measures ANOVA results describing the effects of time, age, and gender on moral value dimensions. The main effect of time (pre–post) was significant across all dimensions, with p < .001, indicating consistent change between pre- and post-test assessments for lying, dishonesty, stealing, cheating, and total moral values. The main effect of age was significant for stealing (F = 4.48, p = .016) and total moral values (F = 3.42, p = .040), while age effects were not significant for lying (p = .16) and dishonesty (p = .13), and were marginal for cheating (F = 3.10, p = .051). The gender effect was not significant for any dimension, indicating no overall gender differences in moral value scores. The time × age interaction was significant only for lying (F = 3.23, p = .04), whereas no significant time × age interactions were observed for the remaining dimensions. The time × gender interaction was not significant for any dimension, suggesting that changes over time were similar for boys and girls. Overall, the findings indicate that moral values improved significantly over time, with age influencing specific dimensions, while gender did not considerably affect moral value outcomes.

Table 4 presents the comparison of post-test moral value scores by gender and age. Mean scores for girls were slightly higher than those for boys across all moral dimensions, though none of these gender differences were statistically significant at the .05 level. One-way ANOVA results for age showed substantial differences

Table 3. Repeated measures ANOVA for main and interaction effects of time, age, and gender

Effect	Lying		Dishonesty		Stealing		Cheating		Total Moral Values	
	F	p value	F	p value	F	p value	F	p value	F	p value
[3]Time (Pre–Post)	114***	< .001	85***	< .001	50***	< .001	115***	< .001	167.20***	< .001
Age	1.8	0.16	2.16	.13	4.48	.016*	3.1	.051	3.42*	.040
Gender	0.22	0.63	0.64	.42	.04	.83	0.09	0.76	0.23	.63
[4]Time × Age	3.23	.04*	1.02	.36	0.2	.81	2.14	.12	1.85	.167
[4]Time × Gender	0.15	0.6	.41	.52	.65	.42	3.18	.08	1.49	.228

1 F represents the F-statistic from the repeated measures ANOVA, 2 p-value shows the statistical significance of each effect with *** as p <.001; and * as p < .05, 3 Time refers to the within-subject factor comparing pre-test vs. post-test scores, 4 Time × Age and Time × Gender indicate interaction effects, showing whether changes over time differ across age groups or genders.

Table 4. Cross-sectional comparison of post-intervention moral value scores by gender and age

Moral Dimension	Boys (Mean ± SD)	Girls (Mean±SD)	t	p-value	Age 10 (Mean ± SD)	Age 11 (Mean±SD)	Age 12 (Mean±SD)	F	p-value
Lying	4.46 ± 1.59	4.46 ± 1.9	.001	1.0	3.8 ± 1.67	4.45 ± 1.39	5.15 ± 1.9	3.27*	.045
Dishonesty	4.33 ± 1.44	4.4 ± 1.67	0.16	.87	3.8 ± 1.67	4.4 ± 1.35	4.9 ± 1.48	2.6	.078
Stealing	5.83 ± 1.23	5.67 ± 2	0.38	0.7	4.9 ± 2	6 ± 1.12	6.3 ± 1.49	3.89*	.026
Cheating	4.76 ± 1.65	4.5 ± 1.96	.57	.57	3.85 ± 1.95	4.65 ± 1.4	5.4 ± 1.72	4.0*	.022
Total Moral Values	19.4± 5.33	19.0 ± 7	.23	.82	16.4 ± 6.74	19.5 ± 4.76	21.75 ± 6.0	4.13*	.021

SD is the standard deviation, * Denotes statistical significance with; p <.05

for lying ($F = 3.26$, $p = .046$), stealing ($F = 4.12$, $p = .021$), cheating ($F = 3.69$, $p = .032$), and total moral values ($F = 4.58$, $p = .015$). Differences in dishonesty were not significant ($F = 3.04$, $p = .056$). The data indicate that moral value scores tended to increase with age, while gender did not account for major variation in outcomes.

Table 5 presents the correlations among age, total moral value scores, and the four post-test moral dimensions. Age showed a positive relationship with total moral values at both the pre-test ($r = 0.28$, $p = .016$) and post-test ($r = 0.36$, $p = .003$) levels. The total pre- and post-test scores were highly correlated ($r = 0.88$, $p < .001$), indicating stability between assessments. High positive correlations were found among all post-test moral dimensions, with coefficients ranging from 0.72 to 0.84, all significant at $p < .001$. These values indicate that improvements in each moral aspect were associated with a concurrent rise in the others.

Table 5. Correlations among age, total moral scores, pre- and post-test moral dimensions

Variable Pair	Pearson's '*r*'	p-value
Age – Total Pre	0.278*	.016
Age – Total Post	0.355**	.003
Total Pre – Total Post	0.880***	< .001
Cheating Post – Dishonesty Post	0.721***	< .001
Cheating Post – Stealing Post	0.834***	< .001
Cheating Post – Lying Post	0.799***	< .001
Dishonesty Post – Stealing Post	0.737***	< .001
Dishonesty Post – Lying Post	0.838***	< .001
Stealing Post – Lying Post	0.796***	< .001

*p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001, All correlations are one-tailed for positive association

DISCUSSION

The study suggests that storytelling was associated with improvements in children's understanding of honesty, fairness, empathy, and responsible behaviour, indicating a shift toward prosocial orientations. Story-based sessions appeared to engage learners emotionally and cognitively, enabling them to internalise values rather than merely recall them. These outcomes align with evidence indicating that experiential and participatory learning environments support moral development more effectively than purely didactic instruction (Lickona, 2009; Chan et al., 2021; Kaßecker et al., 2025). The narrative format made abstract values more accessible and relatable, supporting the view that moral learning deepens when children interpret lived situations rather than receive prescriptive lessons (Gasser et al., 2022).

The observed patterns are consistent with mechanisms proposed in Bandura's social learning theory (1977), which emphasises modelling, imitation, and reinforcement. Story characters may function as behavioural models, allowing children to observe consequences and engage in vicarious reasoning. Contemporary research suggests that identification with protagonists can support ethical reflection and perspective-taking (Gasser et al., 2022; Ding et al., 2023). Neurocognitive studies using brain imaging methods further indicate that storytelling activates processes related to attention, emotion regulation, and perspective-taking (Yabe et al., 2018), which may help explain why narrative-based learning encourages affective engagement alongside reflective judgement. The improvements observed in this study may reflect similar integrative processes, particularly when narratives are culturally meaningful (Ibrahim et al., 2025).

The findings also converge with intervention literature suggesting that storytelling can support socio-emotional and moral competencies. Previous studies in primary contexts report gains in empathy, cooperation, and behavioural regulation following structured storytelling programmes (Rahiem et al., 2020), while narrative-based approaches have been linked to increased emotional resilience (Ramamurthy et al., 2024). Digital storytelling research similarly indicates benefits for engagement and perspective-taking when thoughtfully implemented (Rahiem, 2021). Such approaches are relatively low-cost and developmentally appropriate, which is particularly relevant for rural schools with limited pedagogical resources (Adnyani & Landrawan, 2022).

Within the Indian context, the use of local narratives may add cultural relevance and contextual depth. Indigenous storytelling traditions connect moral values with children's everyday realities and can strengthen a sense of belonging in multilingual classrooms (Dey, 2015; Kumari, 2025). Active participation observed during the intervention suggests that contextual storytelling may revitalise moral education in settings where textbook-driven instruction feels distant from lived experience. Developmental patterns were also consistent with prior research: older children tended to show more mature moral reasoning (Du et al., 2024; Kaßecker et al., 2025) while minimal gender differences align with evidence that socio-emotional interventions benefit boys and girls similarly when learning environments emphasise empathy and interaction (Wainryb, 2005; Eisenberg et al., 2015).

The study gains additional relevance in light of increasing digital exposure among young learners. Excessive unsupervised device use has been associated with reduced attention and socio-emotional sensitivity (Yadav & Dube, 2025; Monika & Dube, 2025).

Storytelling offers a counterbalance by encouraging reflective listening, imagination, and interpersonal dialogue. Educator presence remains central, as teacher warmth and responsive facilitation influence socio-emotional outcomes (Halimah et al., 2020; Arya & Vig, 2023). In this sense, storytelling may represent a culturally grounded and developmentally appropriate pedagogical tool aligned with contemporary educational frameworks such as NEP 2020 and UNICEF's Life Skills Framework (GoI, 2020; Zuffianò et al., 2023). These findings should be interpreted within the limitations of the study. The sample was drawn from a single rural village and involved a relatively small group of participants with short-term follow-up. Without a control group, improvements cannot be attributed exclusively to the intervention. The results, therefore, represent preliminary evidence and highlight the need for larger, controlled, and longitudinal research to confirm the observed patterns.

CONCLUSION

As a preliminary investigation, the study provides indicative evidence that storytelling may support moral value development among rural children in a culturally relevant way. Improvements across the four moral dimensions lying, dishonesty, stealing, and cheating suggest that participants engaged with and reflected on the moral themes presented, rather than demonstrating definitive behavioural change. Age-related variation was observed, with older children showing comparatively greater gains, while gender differences were statistically non-significant. These patterns indicate that storytelling may support inclusive moral learning across developmental stages, although the limited scale of the study requires cautious interpretation. Rooted in India's oral traditions, storytelling aligns with rural social contexts and represents a feasible, low-cost, and participatory strategy for value education. The exploratory findings highlight the potential of integrating narrative-based activities into school and extension settings to encourage moral reflection, empathy, and social awareness, warranting further research with larger and more diverse samples.

DECLARATIONS

Ethical approval and informed consent: Informed consent was sought from the parents of the selected school students and permission from the school administration was sought to conduct the study.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a personal conflict of interest. The authors declare that during the preparation of this work, thoroughly reviewed, revised and edited the content as needed. The authors take full responsibility for the final content of this publication.

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