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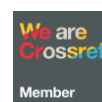
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Stories of strength: a systematic review of the use of narratives in character education of children

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ABSTRACT

Character education has a significant role in instilling positive character strengths that help to shape a positive mind, a positive attitude, and positive behavior in children. Next to the commonly used didactic approaches, narrative interventions can be used to 'package' key moral messages about character strength in entertaining storylines. Unfortunately, empirical studies on the effectiveness of narrative methods for teaching character education to children is scattered across different disciplines. This review aimed to comprehensively describe the published studies, and identify the main elements used for children's character education in the narratives. Eight databases of studies published between January 1980 and March 2018 were searched for narrative interventions that focused on character education aimed at children. The searches yielded seven studies with a great variety in outcome measures. Findings consistently suggest that narratives with positive approaches can generate honesty and kindness effectively in children. Employing a positively framed story, giving instructions, and encouraging children to explain the key story events half way and at the end of the story can especially produce preferable results in adopting the character strengths.

Keywords:

Narrative
Storytelling
Moral
Character
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Introduction

Character can be defined as a moral dimension of personality that differentiates one individual from another (Narváez & Lapsley, 2009). Specifically, within character, there are strengths that comprise virtue classes or components of personality that are morally valued. Previous scholars have presented six virtue classes with 24 character strengths (Park & Peterson, 2009; Peterson, 2004). The first is the virtue of wisdom. This is defined by five character strengths, i.e. creativity, curiosity, perspective, judgement, and love of learning. The second is the virtue of courage, which is defined by four character strengths; perseverance, bravery, honesty, and zest. The next is the virtue of humanity, defined by three character strengths; social intelligence, kindness, and love. Subsequently, it is the virtue of justice, which is defined by three character strengths; leadership, fairness, and teamwork. The fifth is the virtue of temperance, which has four character strengths; forgiveness, self-regulation, prudence, and humility. Finally, it is the virtue of transcendence, which has five character strengths; spirituality, appreciation of beauty, hope, gratitude, and humor.

Shaping a character is a long-term process. Children, from a young age, learn appropriate and inappropriate behaviors from parents, teachers, and the environment (Pala, 2011). Notably, school

has a major role in character education as it is where children spend a substantial amount of time. For example, each year children spend 6,5 to 8 hours per day for 180 days at school in the US, 200 days in The Netherlands, and 220 days in South Korea (Lim, 2018). Previous research has shown that character education at school may positively influence childrens' academic achievement (Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2003) and can help children succeed both individually and in society by developing important human qualities (Pala, 2011). There is also evidence that character education is related to more positive educational outcomes and to higher behavior levels of self-discipline, integrity, love, and compassion in children (Jeynes, 2019). These findings suggest that character education has a significant role in instilling positive character strengths that help to shape a positive mind, a positive attitude, and positive behavior in children.

The most commonly used approach to teach character education at school is the didactic method. This is a teaching method where teachers impart information on a specific subject directly to children in a unidirectional way (Volkmar, 2021). This approach has its downsides, for example, boredom by learners, which may lead to difficulties in memorization, note taking, and comprehension. Therefore, an alternative teaching approach such as a narrative method is a possibility to overcome these drawbacks.

The present study reviews the empirical evidence in support of the use of narratives as an alternative method for character education that may help overcome these downsides. A narrative is defined as "any cohesive and coherent story with an identifiable beginning, middle, and end that provides information about scenes, characters, and conflict" (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007). Narratives can increase attention by inviting audiences into story actions to feel the real-life experiences of the protagonist (Shen, Sheer, & Li, 2015). The entertaining qualities of narratives make them particularly suited to engage audiences that are not necessarily or naturally motivated to process an educational message (Kreuter et al., 2007; H. Lee, Fawcett, & DeMarco, 2016), such as children in school.

Currently, there is empirical evidence that narratives can persuade children to change unhealthy habits and adopt healthy lifestyles for example, to reduce obesity (Griffith, Griffith, Cobb, & Oge, 2016), encourage vegetable consumption (de Droog, Van Nee, Govers & Buijzen, 2017), and improve tooth brushing intention (Das, den Elzen, Broers, & Hoppener, 2018). However, the empirical evidence of the effectiveness of narratives to teach character strengths and moral reasoning to children is scattered across different disciplines. The main objective of this study therefore was to provide an overview of existing literature from different disciplines that addresses the use of narratives as a method of teaching different character strengths to children. This study also intended to identify key elements which can persuade children to adopt character strengths in the narrative. The key research question is whether narrative approaches can be used in character education of children.

Methods

Search strategy

The targeted articles eligible for this study were those published from January 1, 1980 to March 31, 2018 and in the English language. We used as a search strategy a combination of specific terms/keywords as follows: [narrative or storytelling or theatre] AND [children] AND [character or moral or behavior or attitude or development or act or emotion or response or cognitive or social competence or virtue or theory of mind or value or belief or believe or personality or traits].

Both systematic and hand/ traditional searches were carefully conducted to find relevant published studies. Initially, search queries were entered in seven electronic databases i.e. ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center), PsycINFO, Communication Abstracts, MLA International Bibliography (Modern Language Association), International Index to the Performing Arts, PubMed and Web of Science. A hand search was conducted in one additional database, owned by a university (anonymous). The hand search was done by searching through the resulting studies from the seven electronic databases, page by page, and citations/ reference list relevant to the review.

Study inclusion and exclusion criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were based on the intervention approach, participants, keywords, and report data. A study was eligible for inclusion if it involved a narrative, a story, or a theater performance as an intervention approach. Secondly, a study had to include participant groups ranging from toddlers (2 - 4 years), early school-age (5 - 7 years), to middle school-age children (8 - 12 years). Thirdly, it was included if it was about or related to specific terms/ keywords used as mentioned above. Fourthly, only studies that included original reports of primary data were included, which means that letters, editorials, systematic reviews/ meta-analysis and non-human data were excluded. Finally, studies of moral or character education through educational television were past the extent of this paper because in most cases, these television programs do not consist only of a narrative. For instance, *Sesame Street* is a fragmented program which applies fast-paced and overlapping scenes (Newman, 2010). Similarly, Tulodziecki and Grafe (2012) argue that educational television programs or films have a particular theme as well as didactic structure.

Data extraction

A structured table of data extraction was created to summarize information about the included articles with regard to author(s), year of publication, country of origin, study design, participant characteristics (sample size and age), interventions (frequency, duration, content and techniques used) and main outcomes. Based on the heterogeneity of this data, a narrative summary was used to present the selected studies.

Search

The database search and study selection are shown in Figure 1. The systematic search initially generated 11,391 eligible articles from the seven databases. However, 11,382 studies were excluded after title and abstract reviews because they were unrelated to the topic on narratives. This left nine articles for further consideration. Subsequently, five studies were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria in terms of report data, leaving four remaining studies. Next, utilizing the hand search method, five articles were identified as potential studies based on the reference lists of which three papers met the inclusion criteria. Overall, a total of seven studies were included in this systematic review. The fact that only few studies were included in the present review is primarily due to many studies having irrelevant topics, being unrelated to character or moral issues, or not being original reports of primary data.

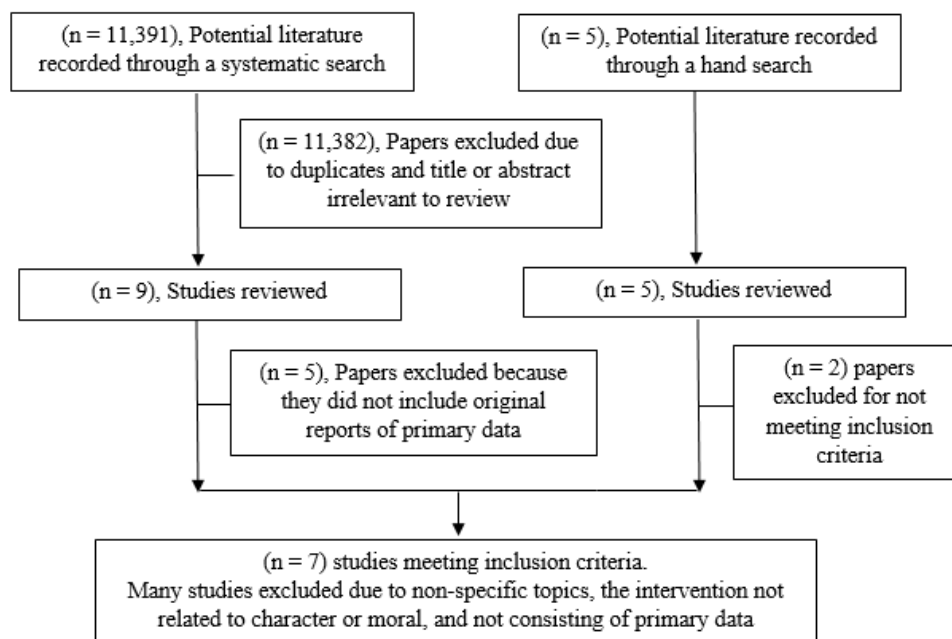


Figure 1. Flowchart of the selection process of the included studies

Overview of studies

Appendix A displays a summary of the seven included studies. Two studies were conducted in the United (Dore, Smith, & Lillard, 2017; Walker & Lombrozo, 2017); three in Canada (K. Lee et al., 2014; Talwar, Yachison, & Leduc, 2016); one in Turkey (Pekdogan, 2016)); and one in China (Du et al., 2018). There were six experimental studies and one quasi-experimental study with varying numbers of experimental groups. There were two experiments conducted within one study in (Dore, et al., 2017; K. Lee, et al., 2014; Walker & Lombrozo, 2017), resulting in a total of 10 experiments reported in the seven studies.

Participant characteristics

Participants in the seven included studies were healthy children recruited from schools, local families, university databases, magazines advertisements, museums, and communities. They were 1,515 children in total, and the number of participants per experimental condition ranged from 60 to 322. The age of the participants varied between 3 and 10 years old, and they included both boys and girls.

Interventions

The implementation of narrative interventions can be classified in three categories based on technique and character strengths; duration, session and frequency; and specific interventions. Technique and character strengths. The intervention techniques were of three different types; in one study, children listened to a narrative from an audio player; in five studies, children listened to an adult reading a narrative text/ book; and in one study, children listened to an adult telling a narrative without reading any text (reciting the story from memory). The character strengths in the narratives varied across studies; there were three studies about honesty (K. Lee, et al., 2014; Talwar, et al., 2016) and two about kindness (Du, et al., 2018; Walker & Lombrozo, 2017). In addition to kindness, Walker and Lombrozo (2017) study included three other character strengths, namely love, hope, and teamwork. In one study, narratives were about curiosity and appreciation of beauty and excellence (Dore et al., 2017) while another one was about social intelligence/ skills (Pekdogan, 2016). In sum, the studies incorporated eight different character strengths in total, with the majority focused on honesty.

Duration, session and frequency. One study (Dore et al., 2017) mentioned that the listening duration of the audio recording was 2,5 minutes, whereas Lee et al. (2014) reported a duration of 10 minutes for the character or moral-story listening activity. In contrast, Pekdogan (2016) stated that the duration of a narrative-based training program was 40 minutes, which combined the storytelling with art, language learning music, playing, music, reading, and writing activities. Du and Hao (2018) reported 8 minutes duration for the narrative listening. Three studies from Talwar et al. (2015), (Talwar, et al., 2016; Walker & Lombrozo, 2017) did not mention the duration of the narratives. Across these seven studies, only (Pekdogan, 2016) exposed children to more than one narrative based intervention per week resulting in two sessions weekly; thus ten sessions in total.

Specific interventions. Dore et al. (2017); study two) implemented an additional treatment called the *perspective-taking* versus *objective* condition, in the intervention by giving instructions before the narrative intervention. In the perspective-taking condition, children were instructed to take a character's perspective or viewpoint in a narrative and to feel and think as if they were the same character in the narrative. In the objective condition, children were instructed to think of themselves as the audience i.e. someone who has just heard about a person and an event in the narrative.

Talwar et al. (Talwar, et al., 2016) used three specific conditions of narrative; *negative*, *positive*, and *neutral*. While the negative narrative condition emphasized negative consequences of dishonesty, the positive narrative condition emphasized positive consequences of honesty, and the neutral narrative condition emphasized a message unrelated to honesty. Similarly, Lee et al. (2014) examined the negative, positive and neutral conditions of narratives and added a dire negative condition where dishonesty had dreadful consequences.

Talwar et al. (2017) used a positive condition of a narrative to emphasize the benefits of honesty and the neutral condition of narratives to emphasize a topic that was unrelated to honesty. The study manipulated the intervention with coaching i.e. efforts to encourage and rehearse lie-telling in children. Children received coaching prior to the intervention with frequency levels ranging from light to heavy coaching i.e. in the light coaching, an adult who did a mistake by damaging a toy requested the child to keep a secret about the damaged toy. Then, the adult provided two practice questions, the questions were "if someone asks you, what happened in this room? what are you going to say?" and "if someone asks you, did you know about the toy? what are you going to say?" and repeated the first request after each question. While in the heavy coaching, an adult provided three practice questions, the two questions were similar with questions in the light coaching and another question was "if someone asks you, did you play with the toy? what are you going to say?" and repeated the first request after each question as well. The adult also suggested an answer to help the child in maintaining the secret i.e. I played the coin tossing game instead of played with the toy".

Walker & Lombrozo (2017; study one) assigned children to an *explain* or a *report* condition. While the children were listening to a narrative, the experimenter interrupted with one question midway and another question at the end of a narrative. For example, in the *explain* condition, the questions were "Can you tell me: why was Mr. Muffet sad?" and "Can you tell me: why was Mr. Muffet happy at the end of the story?". In the *report* condition, the questions were "Can you remind me: was Mr. Muffet sad?" and "Can you remind me: was Mr. Muffet happy at the end of the story?". In study 2, Walker and Lombrozo (2017) added one group condition called pedagogy (direct instruction). The questions were the same as the *explain* and *report* conditions but the experimenter gave direct instruction/ description in the pedagogy condition, for example: "Mr. Muffet was sad because his apple tree was not growing." and "Mr. Muffet was so happy because finally the apple tree is growing after waiting a bit longer time."

Du and Hao (Du, et al., 2018) investigated four types of narratives on helping intention and behavior. These were narratives emphasizing actors/ main characters with positive emotions toward helping behavior (N-APH); narratives emphasizing observers/ another character with positive emotions toward helping behavior (N-OPH); narratives emphasizing actors/ main characters with negative emotions toward non-helping behavior (N-ANNH); and narratives emphasizing observers/ another character with negative emotions toward non-helping behavior (N-ONNH). As an example, N-APH was a narrative about a child who found a penguin that had gotten lost. The child helped the penguin to return to the South Pole. When they landed at the South Pole, the child felt happy. On the other hand, N-ANNH was also a narrative about a child who found a penguin that had gotten lost but he did not helped the penguin. At the point when the child was lost, no body helped him. The child remember that he did not help the penguin and felt sorrow.

Outcome measures

Three of the identified studies used similar outcome measures of story comprehension or story understanding (Du, et al., 2018; Talwar, et al., 2016; Walker & Lombrozo, 2017). Talwar et al. (2016) conducted an interview after the children listened to 10 short stories. Walker and Lombrozo (2017) used vignette selection, theme selection, and open response. Du and Hao (2018) used an interview that focused on character, setting, initiating event, problem, and outcome resolution.

Two studies measured memory effects using free recall, open ended memory, and true/ false questions about a story (Dore et al., 2017; Walker & Lombrozo, 2017). In contrast, Lee et al. (2014), Talwar et al. (2015), and Talwar et al. (2017) applied interviews to measure children's truth and lie telling with open ended and direct questions. Two other studies measured children's behavior by assigning special tasks; a toy-choice task, an analytical reasoning task, and a donating behavior task (Dore et al., 2017; Du & Hao, 2018). One study measured perspective taking and narrative engagement with the narrative transportation scale, perceived similarity, wishful identification, and a direct measure of identification (Dore et al., 2017).

Only one study (Pekdogan, 2016) measured a long-term effect of the intervention, by implementing the follow-up data known as a retention test, in four weeks after the intervention. The study re-administered the Social Skills Evaluation Scale (SSES) that comprises Interpersonal Skills (IS), Anger Management and Adjustability Skills (AMAS), Coping with Peer Pressure Skills (CWPPS), Self-Control Skills (SCS), Verbal Expression Skills (VES), Accepting Consequences Skills (ACS), Listening Skills (LS), Goal Setting Skills (GAA), and Task Accomplishment Skills (TAS). These social skills are also known as social intelligence in character strengths.

Results

All studies' findings support the premise that narratives can play a positive role in the character education of children, but with varying effect sizes. Transformation of the effect sizes conducted by using calculation of effect sizes from Lenhard and Lenhard (2016). A comparison of effect sizes of all studies is presented in Table 1, (Appendix B). Below, the studies' findings are grouped into four for different character strengths namely, *curiosity and appreciation of beauty and excellence*; *honesty*; *social intelligence*; *love, kindness, hope, and teamwork*.

Curiosity and appreciation of beauty and excellence

Dore et al. (2017) assessed two character strengths: curiosity and appreciation of beauty. The narrative intervention involved listening to audio recordings about the daily life of a professor, who represented curiosity (exploration and discovery) and the daily life of a cheerleader, who represented an appreciation of beauty (notice and appreciate beauty in all domains of life). This study showed that children adopted characters' traits at the implicit or behavioral level of measurement. Children who heard the narration about the professor preferred to play with an analytical toy. In contrast, children who heard the cheerleader narrative spent less time playing with the analytical toy. The effect size of the r^2 coefficient was small ($r^2 = .07$).

Dore et al. (2017; study 2) conducted an intervention by giving children instructions to focus on the character's perspective in the narrative and to be more objective (not influenced by the narrative/ being self-focused) when listening to the narrative. Children who heard the professor narrative spent more time playing with the analytical toy compared with children who heard the cheerleader narrative with a large effect size ($r^2 = .74$).

Honesty

Three studies investigated honesty (Talwar et al., 2015, 2017; Lee et al., 2014). Talwar et al. (2015) reported that a narrative about positive consequences of honesty to children can promote honest behavior and reduce their tendency to lie. Children in the positive consequences of honesty condition were more honest when directly questioned, compared with children in the neutral narrative condition, with a moderate effect size ($d = .41$). In contrast, the narrative about negative consequences of dishonesty did not promote truth-telling, compared with the neutral narrative condition ($d = .08$). Moreover, according to Talwar et al. (2017), children in the positive narrative condition about benefits of truth-telling showed lower lie scores in direct questions, compared with the neutral narrative condition ($d = .40$). However, the positive narrative condition did not promote honesty in children after they had received heavy coaching to lie compared with the no coaching ($d = .73$).

Lee et al. (2014) reported that only a narrative with positive consequences of honesty yielded a positive effect on children's honesty. Specifically, in their study one, a neutral narrative condition compared to a narrative with positive consequences condition yielded a medium effect size ($d = .63$). The children were three times less likely to lie about their transgression after listening to a narrative with positive consequences of honesty compared with children who heard a neutral narrative. In study two, the positive consequences narrative was modified into a negative consequences narrative. This modified narrative was ineffective in promoting honesty among the children.

Social Intelligence

Pekdogan (2016) showed a significant effect on children's Social Skills Evaluation Scale with 9 sub categories from a story-based social skills training program. The effect size score of the experimental group compared with the control group for Interpersonal Skills (IS) was $\eta^2 = .603$, Anger Management and Adjustability Skills (AMAS) $\eta^2 = .764$, Coping with Peer Pressure Skills (CWPPS) $\eta^2 = .698$, Verbal Expression Skills (VES) $\eta^2 = .867$, Self-Control Skills (SCS) $\eta^2 = .807$, Goal Setting Skills (GSS) $\eta^2 = .911$, Listening Skills (LS) $\eta^2 = .857$, Task Accomplishment Skills (TAS) $\eta^2 = .838$, Accepting Consequences Skills (ACS) $\eta^2 = .779$ and over all of Social Skills Evaluation Scale was significant $\eta^2 = .966$. The study also conducted a retention test, four weeks after the intervention and confirmed the training program had a continued effect on the children, with the difference between post-test and retention test score being non-significant ($p > .05$).

Love, kindness, hope and teamwork

Walker and Lombrozo (2017; study one) reported a relatively large effect; children in the explanation condition group were more likely to extract the moral lesson from the narrative, compared with the report condition group ($d = .77$). Walker and Lombrozo (2017; study two) further investigated the explanation condition compared with a traditional pedagogical (direct instruction) condition and reported a relatively large difference between the explanation condition in comparison with the report and pedagogy conditions ($d = .66$ and $d = .60$); children recognized the moral lesson in the narrative better when it was explained, revealing that there was no significant effect between the report condition and the pedagogy condition ($d = .09$). Thus, study two confirmed that the explanation condition facilitated children's ability to abstract and recognize the moral of the story.

Du and Hao (2018) used a similar character strength, especially kindness by assigning children to one of five groups, i.e. four experimental groups and one control group that listened to moral narratives. The experimental groups emphasized the *actor's* positive emotion toward his helping behavior (N-APH); the *observer's* positive emotion toward helping behavior (N-OPH); the *actor's* negative emotion toward his non-helping behavior (N-ANNH); the *observer's* negative emotion toward helping behavior (N-ONNH); and a control group of non-moral narrative (NMN). The study assessed children's donation intention and donation behavior. The results of all the experimental groups compared with the control group expressed a significant effect of donation intention $\eta^2 = .169$. Furthermore, the score of donation intention of N-APH group was significantly higher compared to the N-OPH group ($p = .024$), N-ANNH group ($p = .008$), and N-ONNH group ($p = .001$). The moral narrative N-APH group facilitated children's helping intentions to a larger extent compared with other experimental groups.

For the donation behavior, only the N-ANNH group showed a substantial effect on donation behavior ($\eta^2 = .145$) compared with the control group. The scores of the N-APH group, N-OPH group, and N-ONNH group were equal compared to the NMS group. The moral narrative (N-ANNH) emphasizing the actor's negative emotion toward his non-helping behavior facilitated the children's helping behavior compared with other narrative conditions. The objective of the current review was to provide a systematic analysis of previous studies that examined the effect of narrative methods for character education to identify key elements of the narratives which can persuade pre-school as well as school-age children. Several major findings can be identified in this review. In this section we relate these findings to key theories and concepts from narrative persuasion, to explain how and when narratives may be effective to teach character strengths to children.

First, consistent evidence was found from four studies indicating that a narrative with a positive frame in which positive consequences of desirable behavior were shown, could influence children to be honest and increase their helping intention. Talwar et al. (2015, 2017) showed that a positive frame of moral story influenced children's behavior compared to the negative or neutral condition of stories. Additionally, a positively framed narrative influenced children to tell the truth. Lee et al. (2014) found that the positive frame story was more effective in promoting the positive character strength of honesty. Du and Hao (2018) demonstrated that positive emotion of the protagonist in a story could build children's helping intention or kindness motivation to others. These findings are in line with the Social Cognitive Theory, in which people learn through social modeling as a guidance of

knowledge, inspirations, motivation, new ways of thinking, and new examples of behavior (Bandura, 2001; 2003). The positive moral story may become a guideline about the importance of being honest and kind to others. The positive story that promotes the benefit of honesty can inspire and motivate children to adopt good behavior similar with the protagonist. In addition, the positively framed story could act as a reminder for children about kindness behavior which they may have already realized.

However, Du and Hao (2018) also found that negative emotions of the actor toward his non-helping behavior in the story could build children's helping behavior compared to other story conditions. This finding is also consistent with the Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2003) about a motivational effect in which people can also learn from negative consequences of undesirable behavior in a story and motivate them to show positive behavior. In addition, the study supports evidence about persuasive effects and resistance (Hay, 1994; Knowles, 2004; Moyer-Gusé, 2008), in which a message which is perceived as a negative behavior can be rejected by viewers because it is not in accordance with the norms that they have learned since childhood. Furthermore, individuals may not agree with a narrative message because it is contrary to existing beliefs as well as attitudes, and may instead want to resist the message. Therefore, the moral narrative emphasizing negative emotion of the actor toward his non-helping behavior could create disagreement in children. This may occur because the children might already have existing knowledge about kindness to others and thus prefer to improve the situation by the helping behavior. These findings prove that both positive and negative role models can be effective in addressing honesty and helping intention and behavior. The results for positive role models are more strongly supported by four studies, whereas support for the effectiveness of a negative role model is from only one study.

Second, two studies used an additional manipulation by giving the intervention including instructions and explanations prior to the story, half way through the story, and at the end of story (Dore, et al., 2017; Walker & Lombrozo, 2017). When children were instructed to focus on the character's perspective, they adopted their character to the actor to a large extent. This finding is consistent with research on identification in which audience members who identify with a character take over attitudes and beliefs which are consistent with the character (Cohen, 2001). It also appears that the instruction increased the children's attention to the storyline and also facilitated the involvement with the character in the story. Likewise, Walker and Lombrozo (2017) instructed the children to explain key story events while listening to a narrative midway and at the end. This treatment has also generated a large effect in children's extraction of moral lessons in the narrative. Thus, providing instructions to focus on the character's perspective, as well as instructing children to explain the key story events within the story may produce significant effects on character strength adoption and helping intention through identification and narrative engagement.

Third, we observed a great variety of outcome measures used, with most of the studies implementing multiple outcome measures. Three studies measured story comprehension (Talwar et al., 2015; Walker & Lombrozo, 2017; Du & Hao, 2018), aiming at assessing children's understanding of story concepts and recognition of story lesson with distinctive purposes. Talwar et al. (2015) showed that children (age 4 years) with a higher moral understanding tend to lie by keeping a secret about a person who committed a transgression. This is congruent with a study from Hay (1994) about prosocial development in children, in which prosocial behavior is any intentional behavior to benefit others for maintaining good social relations. The study also explained that prosocial development begins in the first months of life and children at the age of 4 are in the pre-school years where their social cognition begins to develop and they gain the ability to respond inappropriately although socially acceptable. It seems possible that the children kept others' transgressions secret because they were empathetic and wanted to show kindness. The study by Walker and Lombrozo (2017) intended to investigate whether receiving instructions could facilitate 5 - 6 years-old children to explain the key story events demonstrating their understanding of the moral lesson in the story.

The investigation found that indeed the explanation of key story events can facilitate children's story understanding. This result is in line with an observation by Fitzgerald and Green (2017) that enhancing transportation into a narrative can increase the audiences' ability to retain messages from

the narrative. This consistency may be explained by the fact that the instructions given can encourage children to focus and be more attentive to the plot of the story including the character and thus, these two aspects can increase the transportation. [Du and Hao \(2018\)](#) measured story comprehension to ensure all children (age between 4 and 6 years) in the experimental and control groups understood the story. There is a possible explanation to measure the story comprehension because pre-school children might not yet be able to easily interpret the moral concept in the story. This is also reported by [Mares and Acosta \(2008\)](#) that young children under ten years simply did not interpret the moral lesson, instead, they tend to understand a salient message depending on specific storylines. [Newton and Harrison \(2005\)](#) discussed the Piaget's theory that explains that children between 2 - 7 years are in the pre-operational stage, which means they understand more visual objects rather than object concepts. Hence, the story comprehension measurement should be conducted to confirm whether the pre-school children understood the moral concept in the story in order to generate valid research outcomes.

Fourth, a short term duration of the intervention is suggested based on four studies included in this review. Three studies found moderate as well as significant results by conducting a brief, single session intervention between 2.5 - 10 minutes ([Dore et al., 2017](#); [Lee et al., 2014](#); [Du & Hao, 2018](#)). It can be seen that these studies only assessed the immediate effect of a narrative. The brief duration of the intervention is consistent with [de Droog et al. \(2017\)](#) who concluded that an intervention of interactive storytelling should last about ten minutes for effectively promoting children's healthy consumption. On the contrary, [Pekdogan \(2016\)](#) implemented a relatively long intervention of about 30 to 40 minutes per session for 10 sessions, twice a week. The study indicated significant effects on children's social skills. As a follow-up, the study also re-administered a retention test after four weeks of the experiment and discovered that the children's retention as well as the intervention has a continued effect. Taken together, these findings indicate that interventions of shorter than ten minutes have relatively short-term effects whereas longer, more frequent interventions can have longer term effects.

Fifth, the control group condition across the studies can be classified into two types. There were four studies having control groups which were given a neutral story as an intervention ([Talwar et al., 2015](#); [Lee et al., 2014](#); [Talwar et al., 2017](#); [Du & Hao, 2018](#)). Another control group was one in which children continued their daily education with a teacher ([Pekdogan, 2016](#)). In contrast, two studies ([Walker & Lombrozo, 2017](#); [Dore et al., 2017](#)) did not have a control group in their studies. They compared experimental groups in which each group received a different condition of the intervention. [Walker and Lombrozo \(2017\)](#) compared the performance between instruction conditions (explanation, report and direct conditions). Similarly, [Dore et al. \(2017\)](#) compared two experimental groups in which one group listened to a professor's daily life story and one group listened to a cheerleader's daily life story. The majority of studies with control groups were given a neutral story intervention which did not relate to character strengths at all, whereas one control group did not obtain any intervention. This means that most of the studies showed effects of a story about character strengths compared to a neutral story, and thus it can be concluded that the inclusion of character strengths was responsible for the effects.

Suggestions for future research

The results from this review demonstrate that a longer duration and more sessions of intervention could be implemented to obtain a maximum effect. This should be coupled with a long-term follow-up or retention test to determine the effect's continuity. Another recommendation is to measure story comprehension and moral understanding for pre-school aged participants to confirm whether they understand the moral concept in the story. Although the majority of studies demonstrated that positively framed narratives could influence children's intention and behavior, one study mentioned that a negative emotion of an actor could also influence children's behavior, especially helping behavior. This finding should be considered for future research. Since the studies were dispersed across different disciplines and the majority used narratives in the form of books, audios and storytelling, further experimental investigations in divergent forms or contexts are needed to surpass

the limitation of existing studies, for example, implementing a narrative in a form of a live performance or narrative theater show. This would be prospective area for further studies to ascertain whether a narrative theatre is more favorable, entertaining, and transporting, thus able to achieve more effective outcomes.

Practical implications

The results of this review suggest that a narrative method can be effective for character education in children, which means that the method can also be applied in kindergarten and primary schools. The form of narrative can be presented in books, audio recorded, electronic texts and storytelling. In the implementation of narratives or storytelling for education, the use of positively framed narratives including a protagonist who expresses a positive emotion could be selected since they appear to be more effective as shown by this study. Lastly, the review has enriched the understanding of narratives used for character education as well as the resulting behavior changes in children.

Conclusion

The investigation of the effect of narrative methods used for character education of children has demonstrated that employing a positively framed story, giving instructions, and encouraging children to explain the key story events half way and at the end of the story can produce preferable results in adopting the character strengths. In order to obtain retention effects, studies with a longer duration and more intervention sessions should be considered. Lastly, since a large number of narratives were presented in the form of books, audios and storytelling, further studies that use a narrative in the divergent context i.e. a performing art/ narrative theatre is suggested.

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