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Students' Perceptions of the Importance of Storytelling in Strengthening 21st-Century Competencies and Lifelong Learning

Syaifullah[1]*, Wenny Noorahim[2]
[12]Prodi Pendidikan Guru Sekolah Dasar, Universitas Lambung Mangkurat, Kalimantan Selatan, Indonesia
*E-mail: syaifullah_fkip@ulm.ac.id

ABSTRACT
The development of 21st-century education demands that prospective teachers possess pedagogical competencies that go beyond mere subject-matter mastery; they must also be capable of fostering students' creativity, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and character. Storytelling is considered a highly relevant approach for achieving these goals. This study aims to analyze the perceptions of students in the Primary School Teacher Education (PGSD) program at Lambung Mangkurat University regarding the importance of storytelling in strengthening 21st-century competencies and its contribution to sustainable education. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, utilizing a survey method with open-ended questionnaires. The respondents consisted of 96 PGSD students, selected through purposive sampling. Data analysis involved data reduction, coding, categorization, presentation, and conclusion drawing, supported by theoretical triangulation. The findings indicate that the majority of students view storytelling as an effective instructional strategy for enhancing creativity, communication skills, critical thinking, language proficiency, and character development, while also reinforcing the local cultural values of South Kalimantan. Furthermore, the students perceive storytelling as a contribution to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—specifically Goal 4, which focuses on quality education—by facilitating inclusive, creative, and learner-centered instruction. These findings suggest that storytelling skills should be systematically integrated into the curriculum for prospective teachers as an essential component of professional competency development in the era of Society 5.0.

Keywords: students' perceptions, storytelling, 21st-century competencies, sustainable education

Persepsi Mahasiswa terhadap Pentingnya Mendongeng dalam Penguatan Kompetensi Abad ke-21 dan Pendidikan Berkelanjutan

ABSTRAK
Perkembangan pendidikan abad ke-21 menuntut calon guru memiliki kompetensi pedagogis yang tidak hanya berorientasi pada penguasaan materi, tetapi juga mampu mengembangkan kreativitas, berpikir kritis, komunikasi, kolaborasi, serta karakter peserta didik. Salah satu pendekatan yang dinilai relevan untuk mencapai tujuan tersebut adalah kegiatan mendongeng (storytelling). Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis persepsi mahasiswa Program Studi Pendidikan Guru Sekolah Dasar Universitas Lambung Mangkurat mengenai pentingnya mendongeng dalam mendukung penguatan kompetensi abad ke-21 serta kontribusinya terhadap pendidikan berkelanjutan. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dengan teknik survei melalui kuesioner terbuka. Responden terdiri atas 96 mahasiswa PGSD yang dipilih menggunakan teknik purposive sampling. Data dianalisis melalui tahapan reduksi data, pengkodean, kategorisasi, penyajian data, dan penarikan simpulan dengan teknik triangulasi teori. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mayoritas mahasiswa memandang mendongeng sebagai strategi pembelajaran yang efektif dalam meningkatkan kreativitas, kemampuan komunikasi, keterampilan berpikir kritis, penguasaan bahasa, pembentukan karakter, serta penguatan nilai-nilai budaya lokal Kalimantan Selatan. Selain itu, mahasiswa menilai bahwa mendongeng berkontribusi terhadap implementasi Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), khususnya Tujuan 4 mengenai pendidikan berkualitas melalui pembelajaran yang inklusif, kreatif, dan berpusat pada peserta didik. Temuan ini mengindikasikan bahwa keterampilan mendongeng perlu diintegrasikan secara sistematis dalam kurikulum pendidikan calon guru sebagai bagian dari pengembangan kompetensi profesional di era Society 5.0.

Kata kunci: persepsi mahasiswa, mendongeng, kompetensi abad ke-21, pendidikan berkelanjutan

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INTRODUCTION

The transformation of education in the 21st century has brought about fundamental shifts in learning paradigms across all educational levels. The focus of learning has moved beyond the mere mastery of academic concepts toward the development of competencies that enable learners to adapt to rapid social, economic, cultural, and technological changes.

In this context, higher education institutions—particularly teacher education institutions—bear a strategic responsibility to prepare prospective teachers capable of delivering instruction that is innovative, adaptive, humanistic, and relevant to the future needs of society.

International organizations have identified critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration as the four core competencies essential for 21st-century graduates. Known as the "4C" skills, these competencies serve as a vital foundation for modern education. Teachers are no longer viewed as the sole source of information; rather, they act as facilitators who create meaningful learning experiences, allowing students to construct knowledge through creative, reflective, and collaborative activities.

In Indonesia, national education policy has shifted toward a more student-centered approach. The implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka emphasizes contextual learning, differentiated instruction, character building, and the development of the Profil Pelajar Pancasila (Pancasila Student Profile). This necessitates that prospective teachers master diverse instructional strategies capable of balancing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. Consequently, teacher education must go beyond equipping students with educational theory; it must also cultivate their ability to apply a variety of innovative pedagogical approaches.

One approach with significant potential to support these goals is storytelling. Storytelling—the oral delivery of narratives—integrates language, expression, movement, intonation, and social interaction, thereby creating an engaging and meaningful learning experience. Since ancient times, storytelling has served as a vital component in the transmission of culture, the instilling of moral values, and the shaping of character within a society. In the digital age, storytelling has not lost its relevance; rather, it has evolved into an educational strategy that bridges traditional learning experiences with the demands of modern education.

From a pedagogical perspective, storytelling offers learners the opportunity to cultivate their imagination, expand their vocabulary, enhance listening and speaking skills, and exercise critical thinking by engaging with the conflicts, characters, and underlying messages within a narrative. Such activities not only enrich literacy but also strengthen the interpersonal communication skills essential for life in the 21st century.

Beyond supporting academic development, storytelling contributes significantly to character formation. Stories that embody values ??such as honesty, responsibility, cooperation, social concern, and respect for diversity serve as effective tools for character education. By identifying with characters in a story, learners are encouraged to reflect on various life issues, allowing them to grasp moral values ??more profoundly than they might through the direct instruction of concepts.
In the context of South Kalimantan, storytelling takes on a broader dimension, as it is closely linked to the preservation of local culture. Various Banjar folktales, regional legends, and narratives that have emerged within wetland communities serve as rich learning resources—imbued with cultural values, local wisdom, and the collective identity of the people.

Integrating local folklore into instruction not only strengthens students' cultural literacy but also serves as a form of education rooted in local wisdom—aligning with the vision of Lambung Mangkurat University, an institution dedicated to the development of knowledge centered on wetland environments.

Meanwhile, global education is currently oriented toward the achievement of the Sustainable

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Development Goals (SDGs), specifically Goal 4: Quality Education. Quality education is understood not merely as the enhancement of academic achievement, but as a learning process that fosters individuals who are creative, critical, possess strong character, value diversity, and demonstrate a commitment to sustainable development. Storytelling serves as a potent medium for integrating these values, as it facilitates learning that is contextual, inclusive, and closely aligned with the students' own experiences.

Although various studies have explored the benefits of storytelling in education, most have focused primarily on its effectiveness in developing reading and speaking skills, or on language acquisition among early childhood and primary school-aged children.

Other research has examined the implementation of storytelling as an instructional tool without exploring the perceptions of university students—future educators—regarding the importance of this skill. Yet, these perceptions are crucial, as they influence the students' readiness to employ storytelling once they enter the professional field as educators.

Furthermore, research linking storytelling to 21st-century competencies and sustainable education—specifically within the context of students in the Primary School Teacher Education program at Lambung Mangkurat University—remains quite limited.

This situation highlights a research gap that necessitates a more comprehensive study into how these students perceive the strategic role of storytelling in primary education.

Based on this, this study aims to analyze the perceptions of students in the Primary School Teacher Education Study Program at Lambung Mangkurat University regarding the importance of storytelling in strengthening 21st-century competencies and supporting the implementation of sustainable education. The findings are expected to provide a theoretical contribution to the development of research on storytelling in teacher education, as well as offer practical recommendations for the development of teacher training curricula in Indonesia, particularly at Lambung Mangkurat University.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach with a survey research design. A qualitative approach was chosen because the research aims to gain an in-depth understanding of students' perceptions regarding the importance of storytelling as a learning strategy for developing 21st-century competencies and supporting the implementation of lifelong learning.

This approach enables the researcher to obtain a comprehensive overview of the students' experiences, perspectives, and interpretations of the phenomenon under study. The research paradigm is rooted in constructivism, which posits that knowledge is constructed through experience, social interaction, and individual reflection on the learning environment. Consequently, students' perceptions are understood as the product of their academic experiences, instructional practices, and interactions throughout their studies in the Primary School Teacher Education (PGSD) program.

The study was conducted within the Primary School Teacher Education (PGSD) program at the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Lambung Mangkurat University, in Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan. The selection of this site was based on several considerations:

First, the PGSD program at Lambung Mangkurat University is an institution dedicated to the professional preparation of prospective primary school teachers. Second, the curriculum provides opportunities for students to explore various creative instructional strategies, including storytelling as a component of language and literature education.

Third, Lambung Mangkurat University's academic focus is centered on wetland environments, which facilitates the integration of local Banjar folklore as a contextual learning resource.

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The research subjects consist of 96 students from the Primary School Teacher Education (PGSD) program at Lambung Mangkurat University who are currently in their fourth and sixth semesters. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling—a method in which the sample is chosen based on specific criteria. These criteria include:

1. the students have completed the course on Indonesian Language Instruction for Primary Schools;
2. the students have gained practical teaching experience through school observations;
3. the students possess an understanding of literacy-based learning concepts;
4. the students are willing to participate as research respondents.

Table 1
Characteristics of Respondents

No.	Charateristic	N	Percentage
1	Semester IV	54	56,25
2	Semester VI	42	43,75
	Total	96	100

The primary instrument was an open-ended questionnaire designed to elicit information regarding students' perceptions of the benefits of storytelling. The questionnaire consisted of five key questions:

1. What is your opinion on the importance of storytelling in primary school education?
2. In your view, what 21st-century competencies can be developed through storytelling activities?
3. What role does storytelling play in shaping students' character?
4. How does storytelling relate to the preservation of local culture in South Kalimantan?
5. What is the relevance of storytelling to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

These questions were designed to allow respondents to provide open, unrestricted answers, thereby yielding rich and in-depth data.

To strengthen the data obtained from the questionnaires, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with ten students, selected based on the diversity of their responses. The interviews were held face-to-face, lasting approximately 30–45 minutes per respondent. The results of these interviews served as a form of data triangulation.

Documentation was gathered regarding various student learning activities, instructional materials, course syllabi (RPS), and records of teaching practice activities involving the use of storytelling.

The research instruments were developed based on a synthesis of theories concerning 21st-century competencies, storytelling, character education, and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The instruments were validated by three experts: an expert in primary education, an expert in Indonesian language education, and an expert in educational evaluation. Validation was conducted based on content validity. Following the assessment by the validators, all indicators were deemed suitable for use, subject to minor editorial revisions.

Table 2
Research Instrument Indicators

No.	Indicator	Sub-Indicator
1	Creativity	Developing imagination, generating new ideas, divergent thinking
2	Critical thinking	Analyzing story content, problem-solving, drawing conclusions
3	Communication	Speaking, listening, presenting, public speaking
4	Collaboration	Group discussion, collaboration, mutual respect

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5	Literacy	Interest in reading, vocabulary, reading comprehension skills
6	Character	Honesty, responsibility, discipline, empathy
7	Cultural preservation	Banjar folklore, local wisdom, cultural identity
8	SDGs	Quality education, inclusivity, lifelong learning

The research data were analyzed using the interactive analysis technique developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2020), which consists of four stages: (1) data collection from open-ended questionnaires, interview transcripts, and supporting documents; (2) data reduction through repeated reading, selection, coding, and the grouping of similar responses into thematic categories; (3) data presentation in the form of frequency distribution tables, descriptive percentages, direct quotes from respondents, and a narrative of the findings; and (4) drawing conclusions based on the trends in respondents' perceptions. Data validity was ensured through methodological triangulation (comparing questionnaire data, interviews, and documentation), source triangulation (comparing responses from fourth- and sixth-semester students), member checking with respondents, and peer debriefing with two lecturers specializing in Indonesian Language Education and Primary School Teacher Education.

RESULTS

The analysis of data from open-ended questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and documentation—involving 96 students from the Primary School Teacher Education Department at Lambung Mangkurat University—yielded nine primary categories regarding students' perceptions of the importance of storytelling. The frequency distribution and percentages for all categories of student perceptions are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Students' Perceptions Regarding the Importance of Storytelling

Table 3
Student Perceptions Regarding the Importance of Storytelling

No.	Category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Developing creativity and imagination	82	85,42
2	Enhancing communication skills	79	82,29
3	Developing critical thinking abilities	73	76,04
4	Developing language skills	70	72,92
5	Shaping the character of learners	68	70,83
6	Fostering an interest in reading and literacy	61	63,54
7	Preserving local culture	57	59,38
8	Boosting self-confidence	54	56,25
9	Strengthening SDG values	49	51,04

Based on Table 3, the most dominant student perception relates to the role of storytelling in developing students' creativity and imagination (85.42%), while the perception with the lowest percentage concerns the reinforcement of Sustainable Development Goals (51.04%). In detail, the research findings are categorized into two subheadings, corresponding to the research questions.

1. Student Perceptions Regarding the Importance of Storytelling in Strengthening 21st-Century Competencies

The research findings concerning student perceptions of the role of storytelling in strengthening 21st-century competencies are divided into the following five key points.

1.1 Development of Students' Creativity and Imagination

A total of 82 students (85.42%) view storytelling as the most effective learning strategy

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for fostering creativity and imagination in primary school students. Respondents noted that storytelling creates space for students to visualize characters and settings, devise alternative plotlines, and connect the content of the story to their own daily experiences. One respondent remarked, "When a teacher tells a story, students do not merely listen; they also visualize the characters, the setting, and even the ending, which helps their creativity flourish." Another respondent emphasized that "storytelling encourages children to confidently create new stories based on their own imagination."

1.2 Enhancement of Interpersonal and Oral Communication Skills

A total of 79 students (82.29%) believe that storytelling directly cultivates communication proficiency in both teachers and students. Identified communication indicators include the confidence to speak in front of the class, the effective use of intonation and expression, the coherent articulation of ideas, vocabulary expansion, and the development of a more dynamic, two-way dialogic interaction compared to conventional lecture-based methods.

1.3 Honing Critical Thinking Skills through the Analysis of Story Conflicts

A total of 73 students (76.04%) linked storytelling activities to the enhancement of students' critical thinking skills. According to the respondents, a narrative structure containing conflict encourages students to identify problems, explore cause-and-effect relationships, formulate alternative solutions, and evaluate the decisions made by characters—thereby exercising Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS).

1.4 Strengthening Language Skills and Foundational Literacy

A total of 70 students (72.92%) stated that storytelling contributes to the mastery of four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) as well as the acquisition of new vocabulary. In line with this, 61 students (63.54%) assessed that storytelling can naturally foster an interest in reading, as students are motivated to explore other stories, while 54 students (56.25%) added that the act of performing a story boosts students' self-confidence.

1.5 Distribution of 4C Competency Priorities in Storytelling Activities

When respondents were asked to select one primary competency from the 4C framework (Creativity, Communication, Critical Thinking, and Collaboration) that is most prominently developed through storytelling activities, the distribution of responses was obtained as presented in Table 4.

Table 4
Distribution of 4C Competency Priorities in Storytelling Activities

No.	Category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Creativity	30	31,25
2	Communication	24	25,00
3	Critical Thinking	22	22,92
4	Collaboration	20	20,83

Based on Table 4, creativity ranks as the highest priority according to the students' perceptions (31.25%), followed by communication (25.00%), critical thinking (22.92%), and collaboration (20.83%).

2. Students' Perceptions of the Contribution of Storytelling to Supporting Sustainable Education

The research findings regarding the contribution of storytelling activities to sustainable education are categorized into the following three main points.

2.1 Character Development and the Integration of Moral Values

A total of 68 students (70.83%) identified storytelling as an effective medium for internalizing character values ??in learners. The character values most frequently mentioned by respondents include honesty, responsibility, cooperation, discipline, empathy, and mutual

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respect for differences. Respondents noted that instilling moral values ??through the examples set by characters in a story is much easier for learners to internalize than receiving direct, instructive advice.

2.2 Preservation of Local Culture and Wetland-Related Wisdom in South Kalimantan

A total of 57 students (59.38%) asserted that storytelling plays a strategic role in preserving the local culture of South Kalimantan. The students identified various Banjar folktales and stories reflecting local wisdom related to wetlands—such as *Putri Junjung Buih*, *Datu Sanggul*, the legend of *Pulau Kembang*, the origins of the Barito River, and folktales from the Meratus Mountains—as relevant for integration into primary school education to strengthen cultural identity and foster students' appreciation for their local environment.

2.3 Support for the Achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Goal 4

A total of 49 students (51.04%) believe that storytelling has a clear relevance to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically Goal 4, which focuses on quality education. This contribution is identified through the creation of a learning environment that is inclusive, creative, respectful of sociocultural diversity, and learner-centered, while also fostering a culture of lifelong learning.

DISCUSSION

Research findings indicate that students in the Primary School Teacher Education Department at Lambung Mangkurat University hold a highly positive perception regarding the urgency of storytelling in strengthening 21st-century competencies. The prevalence of student perceptions concerning creativity (85.42%), communication skills (82.29%), and critical thinking (76.04%) reflects a shift in the pedagogical paradigm of prospective teachers—moving away from conventional, educator-centered instruction toward active, learner-centered learning. From the perspectives of developmental psychology and primary education pedagogy, storytelling functions by activating children's narrative thinking structures and imagination, thereby rendering abstract concepts more concrete and meaningful. As emphasized by Egan (2022), stories serve as a primary cognitive tool for building students' emotional and intellectual engagement. In line with Vygotsky's (2021) social constructivist perspective, the dialogic interaction that occurs during storytelling positions language as an instrument for social thinking; this facilitates students in constructing new knowledge, evaluating conflicts between characters, and progressively practicing critical reasoning.

From the perspective of developing professional competencies for prospective teachers within Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs), the high level of appreciation among students for storytelling indicates that oral narrative skills remain considered crucial, even amidst the massive penetration of digital technology. These findings reinforce the research of Sa'diah et al. (2024:302), which demonstrates the effectiveness of storytelling in enhancing the speaking skills of elementary school students, while also expanding upon the work of Banda & Kaani (2026:32), who highlighted the strong acceptance among educators regarding the use of storytelling interventions in literacy instruction. Nevertheless, the distribution of the "4C" skills—with collaboration ranked lowest (20.83%)—suggests that students still tend to perceive storytelling primarily as an individual performance by the teacher in front of the class, rather than as a participatory learning strategy involving group projects or paired storytelling. This aligns with the findings of Araujo & Santos (2026:1) and Palem et al. (2026:135), both of which underscore the need to update teacher education curricula to more systematically integrate multimodal and collaborative storytelling. Regarding the dimension of sustainable education, the research results show that students are able to connect the practice of storytelling with character development (70.83%) and the preservation of local wisdom from South Kalimantan (59.38%),

although the percentage of students who explicitly link these practices to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework remains the lowest (51.04%). From the standpoint of values-based education and cultural sustainability, the students' high level of awareness in highlighting Banjar folklore—such as the tales of Putri Junjung Buih and the origins of the Barito River—represents a highly valuable pedagogical asset. As noted by Noddings (2022), narratives that resonate with students' social reality foster moral empathy and ecological concern more effectively than normative doctrines. Utilizing folklore centered on the river and wetland ecosystems of South Kalimantan not only preserves intangible cultural heritage but also instills an awareness of environmental stewardship from the primary school level.

Conversely, from the perspective of global educational policy literacy, the relatively low percentage of explicit recognition regarding the link between storytelling and SDG 4 (51.04%)—compared to its association with creativity (85.42%)—reveals a gap in conceptual understanding among pre-service teachers. While these students grasp the principles of inclusive, engaging, and child-friendly classroom practices, they do not yet fully connect these pedagogical approaches to the macro-level goals of sustainable development (Education for Sustainable Development). This finding aligns with research by Anggorowati et al. (2026:190) and Leal et al. (2026:1), which emphasizes that mainstreaming the SDGs into teacher education curricula must be done explicitly and systematically to ensure that future teachers possess a comprehensive understanding of sustainability. Therefore, the Primary School Teacher Education (PGSD) Department at Lambung Mangkurat University should integrate Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) content into courses on language skills and children's literature, enabling students to design storytelling activities based on wetland folklore that are oriented toward achieving quality education in the era of Society 5.0.

This study offers advantages over several previous studies, such as those by Sa'diah et al. (2024:302) and Marlinda et al. (2024), by moving beyond a focus on student learning outcomes in a single classroom. Instead, it explores in depth the perceptions of 96 pre-service teacher candidates from two different cohorts, utilizing a triangulation of open-ended questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and an analysis of curriculum documents. This approach provides a comprehensive overview of the pedagogical readiness of these future educators to integrate 21st-century skills, local wetland wisdom, and the goals of sustainable education. Nevertheless, the study has limitations regarding the scope of its variables and its reliance on the students' subjective (self-reported) perceptions, without direct observation of their storytelling performance in actual classroom settings. Future research is encouraged to combine the analysis of perceptions with performance assessments and to expand the scope of the study to include participants from other teacher education institutions (LPTK).

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis and discussion, which address the research questions, two main conclusions can be drawn. First, students in the Primary School Teacher Education (PGSD) program at Lambung Mangkurat University hold a highly positive perception of the importance of storytelling in strengthening 21st-century competencies. Storytelling is considered most effective for developing creativity and imagination (85.42%), enhancing communication skills (82.29%), honing critical thinking abilities (76.04%), and strengthening students' language proficiency and foundational literacy (72.92%). Within the framework of the 4C competencies, "creativity" ranks highest (31.25%), followed by "communication" (25.00%), "critical thinking" (22.92%), and "collaboration" (20.83%). This indicates that storytelling skills remain relevant as an active pedagogical strategy for prospective primary school teachers, though the collaborative dimension still requires further optimization.

Furthermore, the students perceive that storytelling activities make a tangible contribution

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to Education for Sustainable Development. This contribution is realized through the shaping of character and the internalization of moral values ??in learners (70.83%); the preservation of local culture and the environmental wisdom of the wetlands in South Kalimantan—grounded in Banjar folklore (59.38%); and support for the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which focuses on inclusive, student-centered quality education (51.04%). Nevertheless, the relatively low percentage of explicit understanding regarding the link between storytelling and the SDG framework suggests a need for a more systematic integration of storytelling skills and content related to sustainable development within the curriculum for prospective teachers in the era of Society 5.0.

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