

Harnessing the educational value of folktales in teaching moral education for primary school students

 Hang Nguyen Thi Thu^{1*},  Ngoc Nguyen Thi Bich²,  Trang Nguyen Thi Thu³

^{1,2,3}Faculty of Primary Education, Thai Nguyen University of Education, Vietnam; hangntt@tnue.edu.vn (H.N.T.T.)
nguyenngoc.qk@gmail.com (N.N.T.B.) nttrang.vtvty@gmail.com (T.N.T.T.).

Abstract: This study investigates whether a structured folktale-based pedagogical approach can strengthen moral education for primary students under typical classroom conditions. We developed a four-step sequence: selection of locally relevant folktales aligned with lesson standards, storytelling, guided analysis of characters' actions and consequences, and creative moral problem-solving with reflection. It was implemented in Grade-5 classrooms using a quasi-experimental pre-post design (experimental $n = 25$; control $n = 25$). Moral development was assessed on five criteria: recognition of right and wrong, moral analysis and evaluation, behavior in new situations, attitudes toward moral behavior, and real-life application, using rubrics, classroom observations, and student outputs. Implementation was feasible within ordinary lesson time; the experimental class showed marked pre-post gains across all criteria, while the control class changed minimally. Teachers reported high relevance, clarity, and usability for routine instruction. Thus, folktale-based instruction effectively translates abstract moral norms into concrete, emotionally engaging experiences that enhance students' moral cognition, attitudes, and behavior. The study contributes a classroom-ready pedagogical model with replicable lesson steps and assessment rubrics that teachers can adapt to local narratives within competency- and value-based curricula.

Keywords: Competencies, Cultural identity, Folktales, Moral education, Pedagogy, Primary education.

1. Introduction

Moral education at the primary level plays a foundational role in shaping children's personality, values, and civic responsibility. It represents the first stage of the formal education system where students encounter basic moral standards and learn how to behave appropriately within their families, schools, and communities. According to the Vietnamese General Education Curriculum 2018, moral education in primary schools emphasizes not only knowledge of ethical norms but also the formation of attitudes and the practice of behavior through lived experiences. However, in practice, moral lessons are often delivered in an abstract and lecture-centered manner, which limits students' engagement, emotional resonance, and ability to apply knowledge in real-life situations [1].

Within the broader shift toward competency- and value-based education, it is essential to explore educational approaches that are pedagogically accessible, emotionally resonant, and culturally grounded. Folktales are unique cultural artifacts passed down through generations, embodying collective wisdom, experiences, ideals, and aspirations of the people, while reflecting the moral standards of social life [2-4]. With their simple language, archetypal characters, and morally instructive plots, folktales serve as a vivid "repository of moral values" that enables primary students to approach behavioral standards in a concrete, comprehensible, and appealing manner.

International research also indicates that employing folklore in schools not only preserves cultural identity but also nurtures students' moral reasoning and social competencies. Cleto and Warman [5]

argued that fairy tales stimulate empathy and allow students to role-play in order to derive behavioral principles Cleto and Warman [5]. Supardjo et al. [6] demonstrated that Javanese folktales help shape persistence, honesty, and responsibility [6]. Similarly, Liendo [7] emphasizes the role of Peruvian teachers in using folklore to “construct identity” and foster community consciousness [7]. In Vietnam, several scholars have highlighted the potential of folktales to educate life values, foster moral attitudes, and develop social-emotional skills in students [1, 8].

Although the educational value of folktales has been affirmed, their systematic application in Moral Education at the primary level remains limited. Most teachers lack a clear pedagogical framework for selecting, narrating, and analyzing folktales in alignment with the learning outcomes of specific lessons. This situation risks underutilizing a valuable resource that could effectively link moral knowledge with lived experience, thereby making the learning process both engaging and meaningful.

Against this background, the present study examines how to harness the educational value of folktales for teaching moral education at the primary level. The paper clarifies the theoretical foundations, proposes a four-step folktale-based pedagogy, and evaluates its effectiveness through a quasi-experimental pre–post classroom design. In doing so, the study contributes to scientific understanding and offers practical guidance for renewing moral education in primary schools in line with competency- and value-based education. Specifically, this study contributes a classroom-ready four-step folktale pedagogy and a five-criterion moral development rubric, and tests their effectiveness in Grade-5 classrooms using a quasi-experimental pre–post design.

2. Literature Review

Globally, numerous studies have affirmed that folktales are a valuable educational resource in primary education. Integrating fairy tales into the primary school curriculum not only develops language skills but also enhances students’ cultural and social awareness, Manukyan and Durgaryan [9] and Supardjo et al. [6]. Supardjo et al. [6] in their study of Javanese folktales, they argue that folktales help cultivate virtues such as honesty, patience, acceptance, and harmony while training students to distinguish right from wrong [6]. Similarly, Manukyan and Durgaryan [9] show that when students are exposed to moral dilemmas in stories, they develop evaluative skills and decision-making capacities [9].

Recent comparative cultural research further demonstrates the cross-continental educational relevance of folktales. Cynthiya and Bhuvaneshwari [10] analyzed folktales from six continents and found that their moral and cultural diversity can serve as intercultural bridges, fostering tolerance and global moral awareness among learners. This reinforces the notion that folktales can simultaneously teach ethical principles and cultivate intercultural competence [10].

From a cultural perspective, Liendo [7] shows that teachers’ use of folklore in schools not only preserves culture but also constructs community identity and nurtures regional pride [7]. Consistent with this, Jie [11] introduced the “Life-Based Moral Education Curriculum” in China, integrating folktales and everyday situations to foster applied moral behavior [11]. Similarly, Shih [12] emphasized the importance of embedding moral education within local culture through dialogic pedagogy, positioning the teacher as a facilitator of moral reflection rather than a transmitter of fixed norms [12].

In Vietnam, scholars have also paid close attention to this issue. Hoang [8] analyzed the educational value of Grimm and Andersen’s fairy tales in the Vietnamese language curriculum, affirming that folktales simultaneously foster language competence and nurture moral reasoning and emotional development Hoang [8]. Tran and Nguyen [1] argued that folktales can be effectively employed to teach life values, social skills, and socio-emotional competence Tran and Nguyen [1]. Bui [13] in her study of Khmer folktales in Khmer-language textbooks, proposed pedagogical techniques such as creative retelling, role-playing, and group discussion to enhance both cultural and moral education [13]. Complementing these findings, recent regional studies- such as that of Songsirisak et al. [14] in

Thailand- developed ethnic folktale-based materials that not only improved students' comprehension and cooperation skills but also deepened their understanding of honesty, gratitude, and respect [14].

Effective moral education requires a simultaneous impact on cognition, emotion, and behavior [15]. However, research in moral reading psychology shows that young children often struggle to generalize the moral message of a story; while they can easily recall events, they may fail to extract normative meanings without proper guidance [3, 15]. Recent studies, such as Hudhana [16], demonstrate that digitalized folktale comics can effectively scaffold children's reflection on moral dilemmas, enhancing their empathy and analytical skills [16]. Likewise, the sense of "wonder" in fairy tales plays a critical role in shaping moral imagination, an aspect essential for moral decision-making [17].

In Vietnam, the Ministry of Education and Training (Vietnam) [18] at the primary level simultaneously develops self-awareness, self-regulation, and communication competencies [18]. This poses an urgent demand for teaching methods that move beyond abstract lecturing toward experiential learning activities. Recent Indonesian research aligns with this shift by integrating Pancasila character values into language lessons through folktales, resulting in measurable improvements in moral reasoning and civic responsibility [19]. Such competency-oriented frameworks resonate with Vietnam's current educational reforms.

Several studies consider folktales as "one of the most accessible tools for character education," since characters and situations are strongly modeled on moral paradigms [5, 6]. The research consensus indicates that when folktales are taught through creative methods retelling, group discussion, role-play, and continuation writing, students internalize moral values and practice moral reasoning. Building on this, recent digital and immersive approaches demonstrate that modern technologies can amplify the moral and emotional impact of traditional stories [20, 21].

In Vietnam, folktales can serve as an effective medium for moral education if closely aligned with the behavioral standards set by the 2018 curriculum [1, 8, 13]. However, they also note the lack of a systematic pedagogical model that translates this potential into concrete steps teachers can apply. Indeed, most studies remain at the level of affirming potential without providing structured frameworks. Our study addresses this gap by proposing and validating a four-step pedagogical process: selection, storytelling, analysis, and creative moral problem-solving rooted in both empirical evidence and contemporary global research.

This gap underscores the urgent need for applied research that combines theoretical development with classroom experimentation, in order to validate and guide the use of folktales as a pedagogical tool in moral education at the primary level.

Accordingly, this study aims to:

1. Propose a pedagogical process for teaching Moral Education through folktales that enables students to both acquire moral norms and develop the capacity to analyze and practice moral behavior.
2. Examine the educational effectiveness of using folktales in moral education through classroom experiments.
3. Provide recommendations to support teachers in effectively integrating folktales into Moral Education at the primary level.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Purpose

The experiment was designed and conducted to verify the feasibility and effectiveness of integrating folktales as a pedagogical tool in teaching Moral Education at the primary level. Specifically, the study aimed to assess:

- Students' ability to recognize and distinguish right and wrong behaviors through folktale-based learning.

- The extent to which the integration of folktales enhanced students' interest and active participation in Moral Education lessons.
- The development of moral knowledge (expressions, modes of practice, and significance) and their ability to transfer these lessons into real-life situations.

3.2. Participants

The experiment involved fifth-grade students at Huong Son Primary School, Thai Nguyen City, during the academic year 2024–2025. Two classes of comparable size, background, and learning conditions were selected.

- Experimental group (5A): 25 students who received Moral Education lessons integrating folktales through the proposed four-step procedure (selection – storytelling – analysis – creative moral problem-solving).
- Control group (5B): 25 students who were taught the same lessons using traditional methods (direct teacher explanation and moral reasoning) without the integration of folktales.

The selection of parallel classes ensured objectivity and reliability in the results. Close collaboration with classroom teachers and parents facilitated the observation and documentation of changes in students' moral behaviors.

3.3. Research Design and Procedure

A quasi-experimental design with a control group was applied, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods. The experimental procedure followed four main stages:

3.3.1. Preparation stage

- Selection of Moral Education lessons in the Canh Dieu Grade 5 textbook that align with key moral standards (e.g., keeping promises, gratitude, honesty, responsibility).
- Identification of appropriate folktales such as *The Hundred-Knot Bamboo*, *The Legend of Chung Cakes and Sticky Rice*, *The Starfruit Tree*, and *Saint Giong*.
- Development of lesson plans integrating folktale-based teaching activities (storytelling, analysis, role-play, group discussions, creative endings).
- Designing assessment instruments: questionnaires, situational exercises, observation checklists, and moral behavior rubrics.

3.3.2. Implementation Stage

- Experimental group: Lessons were taught using the folktale-based procedure, engaging students in storytelling, group analysis of characters' actions, role-playing, and creative moral decision-making.
- Control group: Lessons were delivered through conventional teaching, focusing on teacher explanation and abstract discussion of moral concepts.

3.3.3. Data Collection Stage

- Pre-test and post-test surveys on students' moral awareness and attitudes.
- Moral behavior assessment through situational problem-solving tasks.
- Observation of classroom participation and group interaction.
- Collection of creative products (moral diaries, alternative story endings, short plays).

3.3.4. Data Analysis Stage

- Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, mean comparisons, and standard deviations to measure differences before and after the experiment.
- Qualitative data (observation notes, interviews, students' reflections) were coded and thematically analyzed to capture in-depth changes in moral attitudes and behaviors.

3.4. Evaluation Criteria

To ensure consistency between the experimental design and the assessment tools, students' moral development was evaluated based on five clearly defined criteria:

(1) Recognizing right and wrong behaviors: The ability of students to distinguish between morally appropriate and inappropriate actions, both in stories and in real-life contexts.

(2) Analyzing and evaluating behavior: Students' capacity to reflect on, interpret, and assess the moral significance of characters' actions in folktales.

(3) Moral behavior in new situations: The ability to propose and demonstrate appropriate responses when confronted with novel or hypothetical moral scenarios.

(4) Attitudes toward moral behavior: The emotional engagement of students with moral issues, including empathy for characters and a positive orientation toward ethical conduct.

(5) Applying morality in daily life: The extent to which students can connect the lessons derived from folktales to their personal experiences and consistently exhibit moral behavior in everyday interactions.

These criteria were measured through a combination of pre- and post-test questionnaires, classroom observations, group discussions, and analysis of students' creative outputs (e.g., role-play performances, reflective journals, and rewritten story endings). This triangulated approach ensured a comprehensive assessment of students' moral cognition, attitudes, and behaviors, capturing both cognitive understanding and practical application of moral norms.

4. Experimental Results

4.1. Pilot Experiment Results (Round 1)

The pilot experiment was conducted to examine the initial feasibility of using folktales in teaching Moral Education for Grade 5. The results are illustrated in Figure 1.

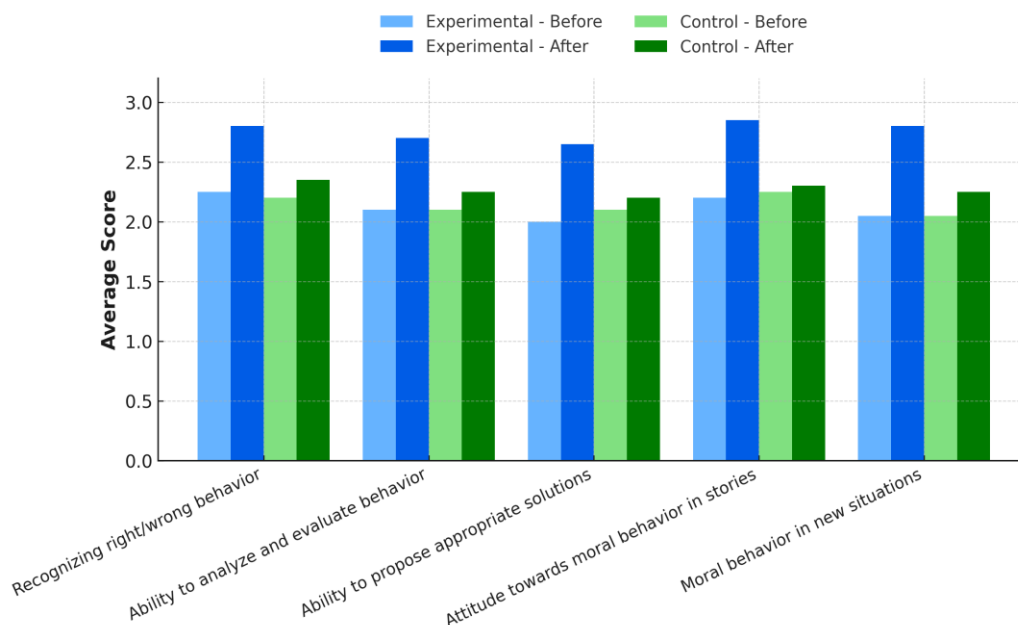


Figure 1.
Pilot Results of Control and Experimental Classes (Round 1).

As shown in Figure 1, there was a clear improvement in the experimental group compared to the control group across all five moral criteria. The average scores of the experimental group increased by approximately 0.50 to 0.70 points, whereas the control group showed only minor gains of 0.10 to 0.15 points. This indicates that students in the experimental class not only understood moral lessons more effectively but were also able to apply them to real-life situations through storytelling, character analysis, role-playing, and group discussions. Classroom observations further confirmed that students in the experimental group were more engaged, proactive, and expressive of their opinions, in contrast to the more passive learning attitudes observed in the control class. Overall, the pilot study provided preliminary evidence supporting the feasibility and potential effectiveness of folktale-based instruction, while also revealing the need for better story selection aligned with lesson objectives.

4.2. Main Experiment Results (Round 2)

After adjustments from Round 1, the main experiment was implemented over a period of 6 weeks, covering a wider range of lessons. Classes were conducted simultaneously in the experimental group (with folktale integration) and the control group (without folktale). The results of the main experiment are summarized in *Figures 2, 3, and 4*.

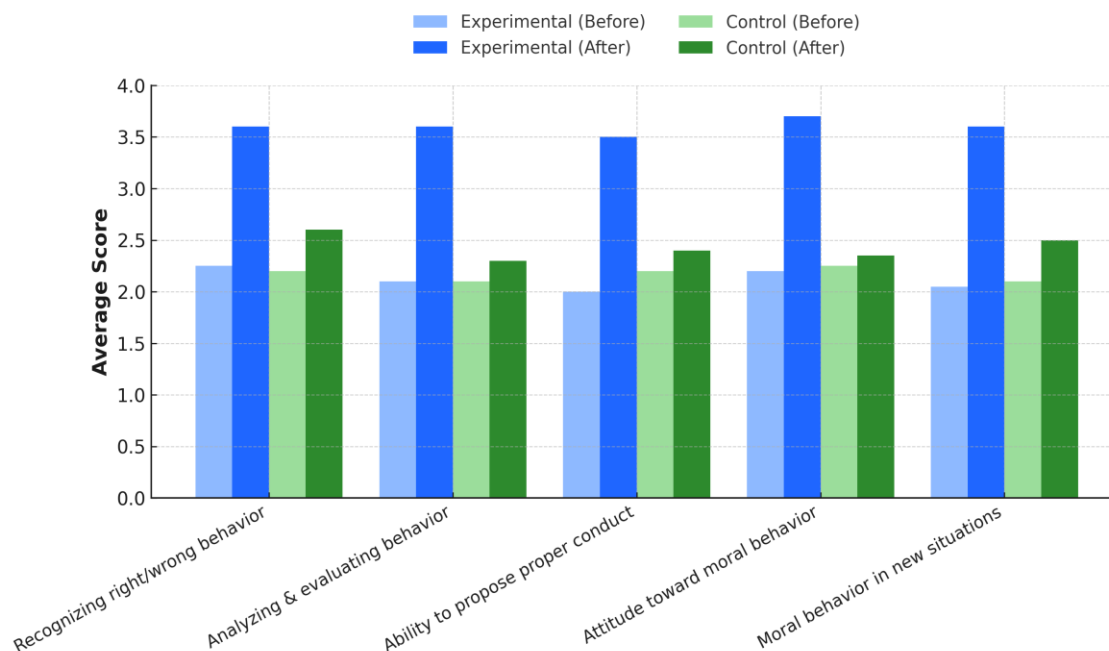


Figure 2.
Pilot Results of Control and Experimental Classes (Round 2).

Figure 2 highlights distinct and statistically significant differences between the experimental and control groups after instruction. Across all five criteria, the average scores of the experimental group increased substantially (by 1.4 to 1.55 points), while the control group showed only marginal improvements (0.1–0.2 points). Specifically:

For “Recognizing right and wrong behavior,” the experimental group rose sharply from 2.25 to nearly 3.65, while the control group only improved slightly from 2.4 to 2.6. This suggests that folktales provided concrete moral contexts, helping students distinguish ethical from unethical actions.

For “Analyzing and evaluating behavior,” the experimental group achieved the greatest improvement (+1.5 points), reflecting enhanced moral reasoning through discussion and role-play. In contrast, the control group improved minimally (+0.09 points), indicating the limitations of teacher-centered instruction.

For “Ability to propose proper conduct,” experimental group students improved from 2.0 to approximately 3.55 (+1.55 points), demonstrating stronger abilities to suggest appropriate behavior. The control group showed only a small increase (+0.1 points).

For “Attitude toward moral behavior,” experimental students achieved a significant gain (+1.4 points), whereas the control group remained nearly unchanged (+0.1 points). This underscores the emotional and motivational influence of folktales on students’ moral awareness.

For “Moral behavior in new situations,” the experimental group again showed strong improvement (+1.55 points), demonstrating their ability to transfer moral principles from folktales to real-life contexts. The control group showed only a modest increase (+0.2 points).

Taken together, these results confirm that folktale-based instruction not only improved moral cognition but also fostered attitudinal and behavioral transformation among students.

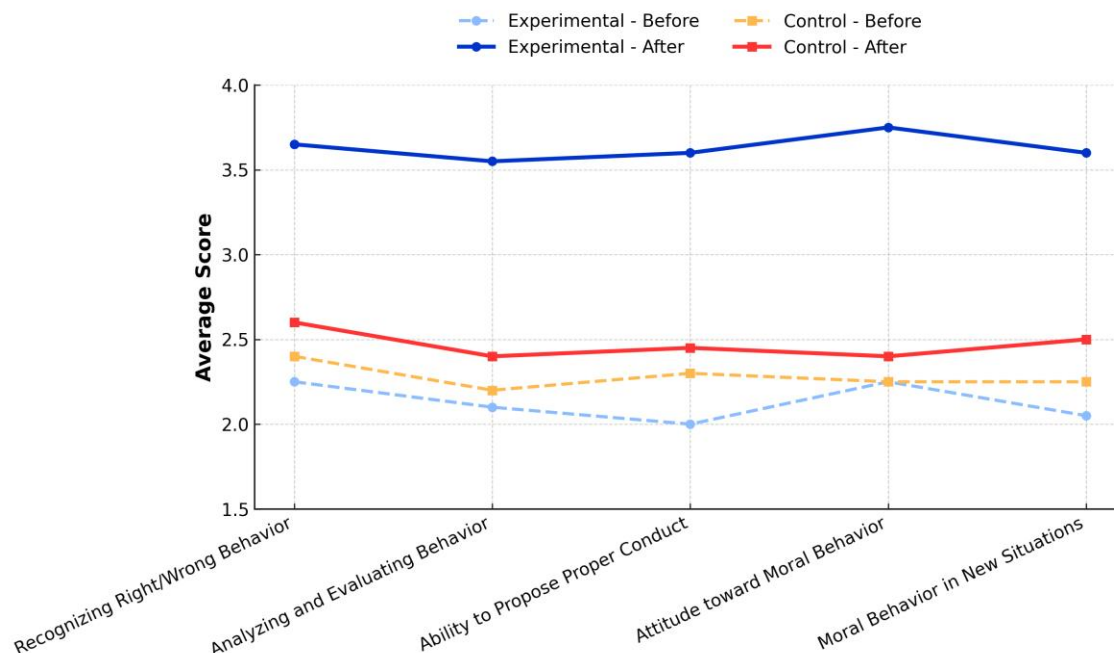


Figure 3.
Trend of Moral Competency Development (Round 2).

Figure 3 illustrates the developmental trajectory of moral competencies before and after the experiment in both groups. It is evident that the experimental group achieved consistent and substantial growth across all criteria, from recognizing right and wrong, analyzing and evaluating behavior, responding to new situations, to demonstrating positive attitudes and applying morals in daily life. The post-experiment trend line of the experimental group remained consistently higher and more stable, indicating comprehensive and sustainable improvement. In contrast, the control group showed only minimal progress, with its trend line remaining nearly flat, reflecting the pedagogical limitations of conventional approaches.

Figure 3 illustrates the developmental trajectory of moral competencies before and after the experiment in both groups. It is evident that the experimental group achieved consistent and substantial improvement across all five criteria, from recognizing right and wrong, analyzing and evaluating behavior, and proposing appropriate conduct, to demonstrating positive attitudes and moral behavior in new situations. The post-experiment trend line of the experimental group remains consistently higher and more stable, indicating comprehensive and sustainable development in students' moral competencies. In contrast, the control group exhibited only minimal and irregular progress, with its trend line remaining nearly flat, thereby reflecting the pedagogical limitations of conventional, lecture-based instruction.

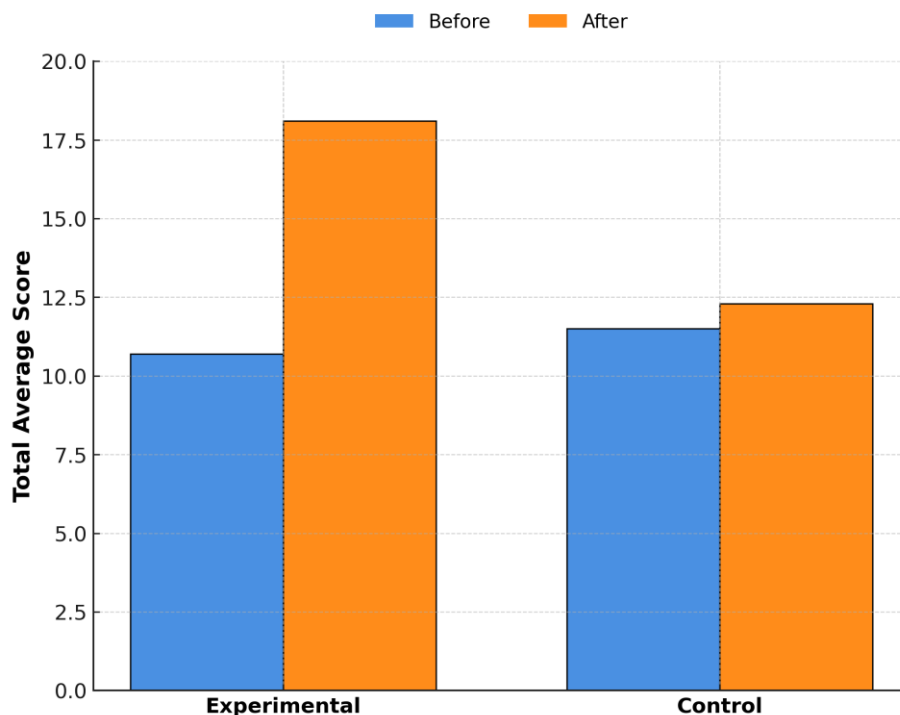


Figure 4.
Comparison of Experimental and Control Groups (Round 2).

Figure 4 presents a comparison of the overall mean scores of moral competencies between the two groups before and after the experiment. The experimental group showed remarkable progress, with its total score increasing from 10.7 to 18.1 (+7.4 points), indicating a clear enhancement in moral knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Meanwhile, the control group improved only slightly, from 11.5 to 12.3 (+0.8 points), suggesting that traditional instruction had limited influence on students' moral competency development. This stark contrast provides strong empirical evidence that integrating folktales into moral education is a pedagogically effective approach, enhancing not only cognitive understanding but also emotional engagement and behavioral practice.

5. Discussion

The experimental results provided clear and consistent evidence for the effectiveness of integrating folktales into moral education at the primary level. In particular, the pilot study (Round 1) demonstrated that students in the experimental group showed significant progress across all five dimensions of moral competence compared with the control group. The most notable improvements were observed in students' ability to analyze and evaluate behavior, propose appropriate conduct, and demonstrate moral behavior in new situations. These outcomes suggest that folktales with their vivid characters, emotional depth, and symbolic situations can engage students cognitively and affectively, enabling them to reflect critically on moral actions.

In the main experiment (Round 2), the results became even more pronounced. The experimental group's total average moral competency score increased from 10.7 to 18.1, a difference of +7.4 points, while the control group only improved slightly from 11.5 to 12.3 (+0.8 points). This striking difference indicates that the folktale-based approach is not only pedagogically feasible but also considerably more effective than traditional lecture-based instruction. Students exposed to folktales participated more actively in storytelling, discussion, role-playing, and creative activities, thereby transforming abstract moral concepts into concrete, memorable experiences.

Furthermore, these findings align closely with prior research [5, 6, 22], emphasizing that folktales enhance empathy, critical thinking, and moral judgment in children. The Vietnamese context further corroborates this evidence: students not only grasped the intended moral norms but also expressed genuine emotional engagement and demonstrated improved conduct in both classroom activities and daily life. This confirms that folktales should not be treated as supplementary resources but rather as a central pedagogical medium for moral formation.

However, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the experiment involved a relatively small sample within a single school, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the effectiveness of this approach depends heavily on teachers' storytelling competence and their ability to design engaging, reflective activities. Without adequate training or pedagogical creativity, the instructional impact may diminish. Third, while short-term improvements were evident, the study did not track long-term changes in students' moral behavior outside the classroom.

Despite these limitations, the findings strongly advocate for the systematic integration of folktales into moral education. This approach provides a culturally grounded, emotionally engaging, and pedagogically effective means of fostering moral development in children. Future research should include larger samples, diverse folktales from different regions, and long-term follow-up studies to validate and refine the proposed model.

The findings of this study also yield several key implications for educational practice:

5.1. Integrating Folktales as a Core Teaching Resource

Folktales should not be used merely as supplementary material but integrated systematically into moral education lessons. Their narrative structure, symbolic characters, and cultural resonance make them powerful tools for illustrating moral norms in ways that are vivid and relatable for children.

5.2. Enhancing Teacher Capacity in Storytelling and Facilitation

The success of this approach depends largely on teachers' storytelling skills and their ability to facilitate meaningful discussions. Training programs for primary school teachers should therefore emphasize expressive narration, the use of visual aids, and strategies for engaging students in reflective and participatory activities.

5.3. Linking Moral Analysis with Creative Practice

Beyond analysis of characters' actions, activities such as role-playing, dramatization, and creative rewriting of story endings can foster critical thinking, empathy, and moral imagination. These experiential tasks enable students not only to comprehend moral norms but also to apply them in diverse social contexts.

5.4. Fostering Emotional Engagement Alongside Cognitive Understanding

Folktales have the capacity to evoke strong emotional responses. Teachers should leverage this by encouraging students to express their feelings about characters' actions and by guiding them to connect these emotions with moral reasoning and personal experiences.

5.5. Building Cultural Identity Through Moral Education

Employing Vietnamese folktales in moral education not only shapes ethical behavior but also reinforces students' appreciation of national cultural values. This dual impact contributes simultaneously to character formation and cultural heritage preservation, fully aligning with the objectives of the 2018 General Education Curriculum.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrated the substantial pedagogical potential of folktales in teaching moral education to primary school students. By developing and applying a structured procedure including

selecting appropriate folktales, storytelling, analyzing characters' moral actions, and encouraging creative problem-solving, the research confirmed both the feasibility and effectiveness of integrating folktales into moral education lessons.

The experimental results revealed remarkable improvements in students' moral competencies, including recognizing right and wrong, analyzing and evaluating behavior, proposing appropriate responses, demonstrating positive moral attitudes, and applying ethical norms in real-life contexts. In contrast, the control group, taught through traditional lecturing, showed only marginal progress. These findings highlight that folktale-based pedagogy not only strengthens students' cognitive understanding of moral concepts but also cultivates emotional engagement, empathy, and ethical practice.

Furthermore, the study reinforces the broader cultural and educational value of folktales. They serve as a bridge between abstract moral norms and children's lived experiences, while simultaneously transmitting the rich heritage of Vietnamese traditions and values. Thus, folktales function as a dual resource: a pedagogical tool for moral formation and a medium for cultural identity development, in line with the Ministry of Education and Training (Vietnam) [18].

Future research should broaden the scope by applying folktales to other grade levels, comparing genres (myths, legends, fables), and exploring long-term behavioral outcomes. Overall, this study contributes both theoretical insights and empirical evidence affirming that the systematic integration of folktales can make moral education more engaging, meaningful, and effective in shaping students' character and cultural consciousness.

Institutional Review Board Statement:

The study was conducted under the official approval of Thai Nguyen University of Education (Decision No. 3921/QĐ-ĐHSP, dated December 25, 2024), which authorized the researcher to carry out educational research involving primary school participants. All research activities complied with the university's ethical standards for studies involving human participants in educational settings.

Informed Consent Statement:

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from all teachers, students, and their guardians prior to participation, with the right to withdraw at any time. No personal identifiers were collected, and all data were treated with strict confidentiality and used solely for academic purposes.

Data Availability Statement:

De-identified data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to institutional ethics approval.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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