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Self-esteem education: Elementary school teachers' use of role models for coin-picking children in Indonesia

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Abstract: Children who join their parents picking up coins on roadsides are vulnerable to stigma that can harm their self-esteem, while the elementary school reaches them most regularly. This study explains how elementary school teachers use role models in the social studies content of IPAS lessons, how they read coin-picking students' responses, and what limits this practice. A qualitative case study was conducted in three public elementary schools in Central Java Province, Indonesia, through semi-structured interviews with six third- and fourth-grade teachers and three principals. Data were analyzed using the interactive model and source triangulation, with Bandura's symbolic modeling, Freire's critical consciousness, and Coopersmith's four dimensions of self-esteem as lenses. Teachers present heroes, professional figures, folktale characters, and stories of the Prophet, mainly during apperception, and three name self-esteem as a value they instill. The practice is framed as general character education without specific attention to coin-picking students. According to teachers, these students attend to the figures as their peers do but appear shy when discussions touch on self-confidence and aspirations. Teachers and principals protect students' dignity by avoiding the topic of parents' work, which limits critical reflection, and the practice is not yet connected to families or government agencies.

Keywords: Self-esteem, Role models, Symbolic modeling, Critical consciousness, Coin-picking children, Elementary school

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INTRODUCTION

Childhood poverty does not only limit the fulfillment of material needs; it also shapes how children evaluate themselves. A population-based study in Japan showed that child poverty is associated with low self-esteem, partly through limited parental involvement and weak school social capital (Doi et al., 2019). Poverty also triggers stigma, both experienced and internalized by children (Vuorenlinna et al., 2023), and experiences of poverty stigma are associated with negative self-evaluations (Inglis et al., 2023). Children from poor families who perceive discrimination tend to have lower self-esteem, while social support can serve as a protective factor (Zhang et al., 2025). Child poverty is therefore a matter of dignity and self-esteem, not merely of income.

This vulnerability is greater among children involved in economic activities on the street. Street children have been reported to have lower self-esteem and resilience than other children (Maepa, 2021). A systematic review of street-begging children found a sense of helplessness manifested in low self-esteem, weak academic engagement, and a lack of long-term aspirations (Singh, 2025). Research in Addis Ababa showed that many children regard begging as shameful, even though they engage in it as part of their family responsibilities (Abebe, 2009). Efforts to build the self-esteem of street children have largely taken place outside school, for example through shelters, guidance, and skills training (Avita & Muhid, 2023). The role of the elementary school, the institution that reaches children most regularly, has received little attention in this regard.

This issue is directly related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Target 4.5 calls for equal access to education for vulnerable groups, including children in vulnerable situations, and Target 4.7 emphasizes education that promotes respect for human rights and diversity. Target 10.2 calls for the social inclusion of all, irrespective of economic status (United Nations, 2015). Education that protects and nurtures the self-esteem of children from poor and stigmatized families is part of the effort to achieve these targets.

A similar issue can be seen in a village in Central Java Province, Indonesia. Some residents of this village pick up coins thrown by motorists along a national road near the settlement, and some elementary school-aged children join their parents in this activity. This study uses the term coin pickers because the village government objects to labels given to the village by outsiders. This objection shows that external labels are felt as a burden by residents, including the children who attend school in the village.

Schools have one tool that teachers commonly use but that is rarely examined from the perspective of self-esteem: role models. Bandura (1977) showed that children learn not only from live models but also from symbolic models presented through verbal accounts, pictures, and films, through the processes of attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. The motivational theory of role modeling holds that role models serve as behavioral models, as representations of the possible, and as sources of inspiration, and these functions are especially important for members of stigmatized groups (Morgenroth et al., 2015). The influence of role models also depends on their similarity and attainability for students (Gladstone & Cimpian, 2021). Relevant and attainable exemplars are more effective in promoting engagement than extraordinary ones (Han et al., 2017).

Role models alone do not necessarily touch how children view themselves. Freire (2014) criticized banking education, which treats students as passive recipients, and proposed problem-posing education that starts from students' life situations through dialogue. Critical consciousness, the ability to read social conditions and one's position within them, is associated with adaptive developmental outcomes among marginalized youth (Heberle et al., 2020). For elementary school children, the most accessible form is reflection that starts from conflicts children experience in everyday life (Ilten-Gee & Manchanda, 2021). Elementary social studies lessons that engage students in dialogue about injustice have also been shown to foster students' critical consciousness and sense of agency (Lee & Camicia, 2023).

This study positions Bandura and Freire as complementary. Role models offer a picture of the self that children might become, while critical reflection helps children read external labels as other people's views rather than as reflections of their own worth. Self-esteem is read through

Coopersmith's (1967) four dimensions: significance, competence, virtue, and power. These dimensions serve as a lens for reading teachers' accounts of students, not as a measurement tool.

Research on character education in Indonesian elementary schools has largely focused on teachers as behavioral models through Bandura's four stages of learning (Khozin et al., 2024). Other studies have shown the use of wayang (shadow puppet) stories, punakawan (clown-servant) characters, and folktales to instill values such as responsibility, courage, honesty, and mutual cooperation (Nuryanti et al., 2025; Pratiwi et al., 2026; Zuhriyah & Fradana, 2025). These studies focus on character values in general and have not linked role models to the self-esteem of children from stigmatized families. Research on the self-esteem of poor and street children has also been largely quantitative or conducted outside the school context (Avita & Muhid, 2023; Maepa, 2021).

Based on this gap, this study aims to explain four things: (1) the role models that teachers present and the values they carry, (2) how teachers present these figures in learning, (3) the responses of coin-picking students according to teachers, read through the four dimensions of self-esteem, and (4) what limits this practice. The contribution of this study lies in reading a common role-modeling practice in elementary schools as a means of self-esteem education for children from stigmatized families, by combining symbolic modeling and critical consciousness.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. This design was chosen because teachers' practice of presenting role models takes place in a school context that cannot be separated from students' social lives, so the practice needs to be understood holistically in its natural setting (Yin, 2018). The case studied is classroom teachers' use of role models in the social studies content of IPAS lessons in classes with students who join their parents in picking up coins. Three public elementary schools in one village were treated as embedded units of analysis, so that patterns of practice could be compared across schools within the same context (Yin, 2018).

The focus of this study is the process, not the outcome. It examines the figures teachers present, how these figures are presented, how teachers read the responses of coin-picking students, and what limits the practice. Students' conditions before and after learning were not compared. Students' responses were traced through teachers' accounts and read using Coopersmith's (1967) four dimensions of self-esteem, so findings about students are treated as teachers' perceptions rather than as measures of students' self-esteem. The research flow is presented in **Figure 1**.

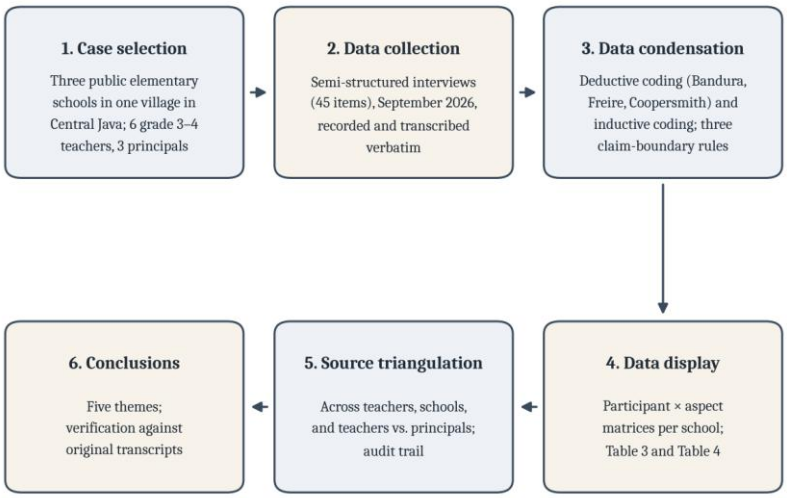


FIGURE 1. *Research flow*

Participants

The study was conducted in three public elementary schools in a village in Central Java Province, Indonesia. The names of the village and schools are withheld to protect the identities of participants and students. The participants were six classroom teachers and three principals selected through purposive sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015). Teachers were selected because they taught IPAS in grade 3 or 4 (Phase B of the Merdeka Curriculum) in the even semester of 2025/2026 and the odd semester of 2026/2027, the classes in which coin-picking students were enrolled. Principals were included as supporting informants to describe school policies and the school's relationships with parents, the village government, and relevant government agencies.

All teachers were women, while the principals comprised two women and one man. Participants had, on average, 5–10 years of teaching experience. Participants' identities were anonymized using English codes. The letter S denotes school, T denotes teacher followed by the grade number, and P denotes principal, as detailed in **Table 1**.

TABLE 1. *Participant codes and characteristics*

Code	Description	Gender	Coin-picking students in class (teacher report)
P-SA	Principal, School A	Female	–
T3-SA	Grade 3 teacher, School A	Female	None
T4-SA	Grade 4 teacher, School A	Female	None
P-SB	Principal, School B	Female	–
T3-SB	Grade 3 teacher, School B	Female	4 students, after school
T4-SB	Grade 4 teacher, School B	Female	3 students, on weekends
P-SC	Principal, School C	Male	–
T3-SC	Grade 3 teacher, School C	Female	2 students, frequency unknown
T4-SC	Grade 4 teacher, School C	Female	1 student, frequency unknown

Note: the number of students and frequency of participation are based on teachers' reports (item 1 of the interview guide).

According to teachers, coin-picking students were enrolled in the classes of teachers at School B and School C: seven students at School B and three at School C. Teachers at School A reported having no coin-picking students in their classes, consistent with P-SA's account. School A was retained as a comparison unit because its teachers carried out a similar practice of presenting role models. Almost all teachers lived near the site of the coin-picking activity, so they knew which students joined their parents through everyday observation.

Material

The main instrument was a semi-structured interview guide for classroom teachers and principals containing 45 main questions with follow-up probes. The guide was developed from the dissertation research matrix and from theoretical work on symbolic modeling (Bandura, 1977), critical consciousness (Freire, 2014), and children's self-esteem (Coopersmith, 1967). Teachers answered items 1–13 and 17–43, while principals answered items 14–16 and 39–45. Items 39–43 were asked of both as a point of comparison. This article uses the items on learning practice and its limitations (items 14–45) and the items on coin-picking students according to teachers (items 1–2 and 4–13). The aspects, indicators, and item numbers are presented in **Table 2**.

TABLE 2. *Aspects, indicators, and items of the interview guide*

Aspect	Indicators	Items	Informants
Figures, media, and values	Figures presented; reasons for selection; stories, pictures, or videos used; values instilled; links to social studies content	17–21	Teachers

Aspect	Indicators	Items	Informants
Learning from role models	Students' attention; what is remembered; behavior imitated; praise and reinforcement	22–25	Teachers
Reflection and dialogue	Inviting students to think about their own lives; dialogue about aspirations; efforts not to shame students and families	26–28	Teachers
Placement of figures in learning	Lesson stage; teacher–student relationship; responses to passive students; media; intended and observed outcomes; learning model	29–35	Teachers
Coin-picking students according to teachers	Participation; attendance and readiness to learn; peer acceptance; learning ability; self-evaluation of behavior; courage to express opinions; aspirations; labels and teasing; openness; sources of support; reactions when self-confidence and aspirations are discussed	1–2, 4–13, 36–38	Teachers
School views and limits	Practice as an effort to build self-esteem; origin of the idea; planning in lesson modules; parental involvement; cooperation with the village and agencies; school policies and constraints	14–16, 39–45	Teachers and principals

Procedure

The study began with obtaining research permits and approval from the three schools. Each participant received an explanation of the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and confidentiality, and gave consent before the interview. The researcher also stressed that the interviews were not intended to evaluate the performance of teachers or schools and that participants' accounts would not be reported to superiors or the education office in an identifiable form.

Interviews were conducted face to face and individually outside teaching hours in September 2026, lasted 45–90 minutes over one or two meetings, and were audio-recorded with participants' permission. Questions about learning practice covered two periods: the even semester of 2025/2026, when the chapters containing social studies content were taught, and the ongoing odd semester of 2026/2027. Students discussed were named only orally and recorded using codes. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim and checked before analysis. Excerpts presented in this article were translated from Indonesian by the author.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which comprises data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Condensation involved repeatedly reading each participant's answers and coding them deductively and inductively. Deductive codes were derived from three frameworks: first, types of symbolic models and Bandura's (1977) four processes of learning from models, namely attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation; second, the elements of reflection and dialogue in Freire's (2014) pedagogy; and third, Coopersmith's (1967) four dimensions of self-esteem, used to read teachers' accounts of coin-picking students. Inductive codes were opened for meanings not covered by these frameworks.

Three coding rules were applied to keep claims within bounds. First, accounts of students feeling capable like the figures were coded as self-efficacy, and were coded as self-esteem only when linked to feeling worthy, accepted, or not inferior to peers (Bandura, 1997). Second, teachers' statements about changes in students' attitudes were coded as teachers' perceptions, not as evidence of change in self-esteem. Third, School A teachers' answers about students in their classes, who did not pick up coins, were used as a comparison and were not merged with accounts of coin-picking students.

Coding results were displayed in participant-by-aspect matrices for each school, so that similarities and differences across teachers, across schools, and between teachers and principals

could be read. Trustworthiness was maintained through source triangulation, comparing teachers' accounts across the three schools and comparing teachers' and principals' accounts on items asked of both (Carter et al., 2014). Convergent accounts were read as corroboration, complementary accounts were used to broaden the explanation, and divergent accounts were reported as findings rather than set aside (Farquhar et al., 2020). All coding decisions were recorded as an audit trail (Nowell et al., 2017). The data in this study were limited to interviews, as classroom observations and lesson documents were not available; findings about learning practice are therefore read as practice as described by teachers and principals.

RESULTS

The results are presented in five themes that follow the aims of the study. Each excerpt is labeled with the participant code listed in **Table 1**. Words in square brackets are anonymizations or clarifications added by the author.

Role Models, Media, and Values Presented by Teachers

All six teachers presented role models in IPAS lessons, drawing on various types of figures. Heroes were presented by four teachers, professional figures by two, folktale and wayang characters by three, and the Prophet by one. T3-SB used the widest range of figures, including stories she wrote herself:

> "Local folktales Banyumas such as Joko Kaiman, wayang characters such as Bawor (local punakawan character), and stories I make up myself that contain character values." (T3-SB)



FIGURE 2. *Interview with T3-SB*

Teachers' reasons for choosing figures were nearly uniform: the figures have good character and are easy to use as examples. T3-SB stated that figures were chosen because they "offer an example and a character that students can imitate." Most stories were told in each teacher's own version, supported by online videos (T3-SA), pictures of heroes with their stories (T3-SC), and storybooks. T4-SA presented the Prophet through storytelling. The figures, media, and values mentioned by each teacher are presented in **Table 3**.

TABLE 3. *Figures, media, and values presented by teachers*

Code	Figures	Media	Values to be instilled
T3-SA	Heroes	Online videos	Honesty, courage, love of the homeland
T3-SB	Professional figures, heroes, wayang characters, story characters	Local folktales, a local punakawan character, teacher-made stories, pictures, videos	Honesty, care, courage, self-esteem, tolerance, self-confidence, hard work
T3-SC	Heroes, professional figures	Pictures of heroes and their stories	Courage, honesty, care

Code	Figures	Media	Values to be instilled
T4-SA	The Prophet	Folktales, stories of the Prophet	Mutual respect, living in harmony, courage
T4-SB	Folktale characters	Folktales, teacher's own versions of stories	Courage, honesty, care, self-esteem
T4-SC	Heroes	Histories of heroes	Honesty, care, courage, self-esteem, tolerance

Source: teachers' answers to items 17–20 and 32.

The values most often mentioned were honesty, courage, and care. Self-esteem was explicitly named by three teachers (T3-SB, T4-SB, and T4-SC), and self-confidence by T3-SB. Teachers saw the figures as examples that give children a sense of who they might become:

> "Through these figures, children can at least follow their example, think about whom they will become like, and tell good characters from bad ones; children like to imitate." (teachers' account)

Teachers linked figures to social studies content by matching figures to the chapter being taught, searching the internet for relevant figures (T3-SA, T4-SC), and using them as picture or video media (T3-SC). Students' aspirations, such as becoming teachers, pilots, doctors, and police officers, emerged when IPAS lessons covered the topic of professions.

Placement of Figures in Learning and Learning from Role Models

Five of the six teachers presented figures during apperception. T3-SB presented them during apperception and core activities, while T4-SC did so only during core activities. All teachers named problem-based learning as the model they usually used, and T3-SB explained where the figures fit within it:

> "Problem-based learning, in apperception and in core activities, to analyze what values the figure has." (T3-SB)

Teachers considered that this approach could be used in other learning models. Presenting figures was also recorded in lesson modules because, according to teachers, apperception must be written in the lesson module. The media used were mostly books, and teachers named concrete and digital media as unmet needs.

Teachers' accounts can be read through the four processes of learning from models. Regarding attention, four teachers described students as enthusiastic, two as attentive, and T3-SB added that students were "enthusiastic and wanted to become" like the figures. Regarding retention, students remembered the figures' character and goodness, which teachers checked by asking about them in the following lesson. Regarding reproduction, teachers mentioned attitudes imitated in everyday school life, such as getting along and showing respect. T3-SB recounted:

> "In their behavior inside and outside the classroom, some children seem braver and more active in speaking up; they are starting to feel less inferior and more confident when coming to the front of the class." (T3-SB)

Regarding motivation, all teachers described the same approach: encouraging and supporting students. T3-SB gave an example of praise that linked students' behavior to the figures' example:

> "Very good, keep up the spirit, carry on, and follow the good values of the figures I use in our lessons, okay." (T3-SB)

Self-Esteem within the Frame of General Character Education

Teachers did not regard presenting figures as an effort specifically aimed at building self-esteem. When asked whether this activity was an effort to build students' self-confidence and self-esteem, all teachers answered that it depended on the figure and the material. T3-SB answered that it "depends on the figure and the character to be presented," while T4-SC stated that the teacher "decides the figure and the material according to what character is to be learned." The reason teachers gave was "because it is part of the character (values) to be achieved."

This frame of general character education was also evident in the target of the practice. Teachers stated that there was no special treatment for coin-picking students when responding to students who were shy, passive, or answered incorrectly. Principals described school programs for building students' self-confidence as efforts "to cultivate and strengthen character values," and programs for students from coin-picking families as "the same as for other students." The idea for the practice did not come from any specific policy on coin-picking students either:

> "The idea came from training activities and teacher discussions within a cluster or learning group called the inter-school learning community." (teachers' account)

Teachers hoped that students' character would change for the better and that they would apply the values of the role models in their lives. When asked about attitude changes not written in the learning objectives, T3-SB, T3-SC, and T4-SB mentioned self-esteem and self-confidence, while the other teachers mentioned honesty and mutual respect. All teachers considered that students had become more enthusiastic, braver in expressing opinions, more honest, and less inferior. These accounts are teachers' perceptions and were not accompanied by specific examples that would allow such changes to be traced further.

Responses of Coin-Picking Students According to Teachers

Teachers at School B and School C described coin-picking students as paying attention to the figures just as their peers did. Differences emerged only when discussions touched on the students themselves. When lessons addressed self-confidence, hard work, or aspirations, T3-SB, T3-SC, and T4-SB described coin-picking students as "shy," and T4-SC described them as "a little afraid." The students still answered when asked, but at School B and School C they remained shy. T3-SC interpreted this difference as follows:

> "Maybe they actually know that picking up coins is something that makes them feel ashamed." (T3-SC)



FIGURE 3. *Interview with T3-SC*

Teachers at School A, whose classes had no coin-picking students, reported no difference in reactions among students when these topics were discussed. All teachers, including School A teachers referring to students in their classes, stated that there had been changes in how students viewed themselves, but gave no examples. The accounts of School B and School C teachers about coin-picking students are organized according to the four dimensions of self-esteem in **Table 4**.

TABLE 4. *Teachers' accounts of coin-picking students according to Coopersmith's four dimensions of self-esteem*

Dimension	Relevant items	Accounts of School B and School C teachers
Significance	Peer acceptance; labels and teasing; openness; sources of support	Feeling inferior and quiet, as if afraid of being wrong (T3-SB, T3-SC, T4-SB, T4-SC), withdrawn (T3-SB); get along with peers, although teachers knew little about their close friends; teased at times but not shunned (all four teachers); hide their activity (T3-SB, T3-SC) or are open about it (T4-SB, T4-SC); rarely share and are reserved (T3-SB), quiet (T3-SC, T4-SC), go to the classroom teacher when quarreling with classmates (T4-SB)

Dimension	Relevant items	Accounts of School B and School C teachers
Competence	Learning ability and motivation; reactions when self-confidence, hard work, and aspirations are discussed; aspirations	Low learning ability and motivation (all four teachers); shy (T3-SB, T3-SC, T4-SB) or a little afraid (T4-SC); have ordinary aspirations like other students (all teachers)
Virtue	Self-evaluation of own behavior after doing wrong	Cry, stay silent, or must be urged to apologize (T3-SB); stay silent (T3-SC); arrogant (T4-SB); must be urged to apologize (T4-SC)
Power	Courage to express opinions and make choices	Students still lack the courage to express their opinions and make choices (all four teachers)

Source: teachers' answers to items 4–8, 10, 12–13, and 36–37.

Table 4 shows that teachers' accounts mostly touch on the dimensions of significance and competence. Coin-picking students are accepted socially but have been teased, tend to feel inferior, and some hide their activity at school. The virtue dimension appears in varied responses when students do something wrong, while the power dimension has no data. According to teachers, participation in coin picking did not meaningfully affect students' attendance or readiness to learn. T3-SB noted that homework was sometimes forgotten, especially on Mondays and after long holidays. Furthermore, the students still lack the confidence to express their opinions and make choices.

Protecting Dignity by Avoiding the Topic of Parents' Work

Teachers responded to teasing by enforcing a rule against bullying or mocking classmates under any circumstances. Almost all teachers also said that "some people regard picking up coins as a normal activity." Four of the six teachers had invited students to think about their own lives through reflection, while T3-SA and T4-SC had never done so. T3-SC said that during reflection students admitted imitating the attitudes of the figures in the stories. T3-SB described varied student responses:

> "I ask during reflection, and the responses vary: some are silent, and some say enthusiastically that they are braver in speaking up and no longer afraid of being wrong when they are in the right." (T3-SB)

All teachers discussed aspirations by asking questions. T3-SB recounted an experience when a coin-picking student shared an aspiration and was teased by a classmate:

> "During a lesson, when a coin-picking student shared [an aspiration], a classmate mocked them. I reprimanded the classmate, saying that belittling others is not good and counts as bullying, without directly labeling coin picking as wrong. Instead, I used the phrase 'how good it would be to become…', so the child was given the chance to open their mind to choose their path in life later, and of course without touching on their background." (T3-SB)

All teachers expressed similar caution. Teachers stated that no student had been offended because "all teachers are always careful to convey character values without touching on their parents' work as coin pickers." Principals held the same stance. All three principals stated that they did not involve the parents of coin-picking students because they "do not want to offend the students' parents." This caution protects students and their families from shame, but it also means that coin picking is never discussed as part of social life that could be reflected on together.

A Practice Not Yet Connected to Families and Government Agencies

All three principals stated that they had never been contacted by, or cooperated with, the social affairs office or the civil service police unit regarding students who picked up coins. Relations with the village government were limited to advice. P-SB and P-SC stated that the school "was once advised not to allow our students to join their parents in picking up coins," while P-SA stated that the school had never dealt with the village on this matter because none of its students picked

up coins. Cooperation with agencies or the village to support these students "does not exist so far, only informal conversations."

Of the possible constraints of budget, time, curriculum demands, and relationships with parents, all three principals named the relationship with parents as what limited the school in addressing students who picked up coins. The practice of presenting figures thus takes place entirely within the classroom. It is not yet accompanied by communication with families and is not yet part of cooperation among the school, the village, and relevant agencies.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that elementary school teachers already carry out a practice that overlaps with self-esteem education: presenting role models who carry values of courage, honesty, care, self-confidence, and self-esteem. This practice is framed as general character education, is not specifically directed at coin-picking students, and is limited by teachers' and principals' caution not to touch on parents' work. The following discussion reads these findings through symbolic modeling, self-esteem, and critical consciousness.

Role Models as Symbolic Models

The range of figures teachers presented is consistent with Bandura's (1977) view that symbolic models can be presented through verbal accounts, pictures, and films. Stories of the Prophet told orally show that a figure can serve as a model without being visualized. This finding is in line with work that places the Prophet as the main exemplar in applying Bandura's theory to Islamic religious education (Sabililhaq et al., 2024). Unlike studies that highlight teachers as behavioral models (Khozin et al., 2024), the practice in this study relies on figures who are not present in the classroom.

The local folktale and punakawan characters used by T3-SB deserve particular attention. The influence of role models depends on their similarity and attainability for students (Gladstone & Cimpian, 2021), and attainable exemplars are more effective in promoting engagement than extraordinary ones (Han et al., 2017). Local figures are closer to children's language and environment than national heroes. Indonesian studies have also shown that punakawan and wayang stories help students understand values more concretely (Nuryanti et al., 2025; Pratiwi et al., 2026). Heroes can still serve as role models for children from stigmatized groups if their stories highlight struggles from difficult circumstances, because role models function as representations of what is possible (Morgenroth et al., 2015). Figures portrayed as extraordinary from the outset risk widening the distance between children and their aspirations.

The placement of figures mainly during apperception indicates that their presence in lessons is brief and serves mostly as an opening to the material. Students' attention was high, but retention was traced by teachers only through questions in the following lesson, and reproduction was read from general attitudes at school. Of Bandura's (1977) four processes, attention and motivation were the clearest in teachers' accounts, while retention and reproduction were the hardest to trace. Only T3-SB described core activities as a place where students analyze the values a figure holds. This practice could be developed further, because figures that appear only at the opening of a lesson are less likely to be connected by students to themselves.

Equal Attention, Different Responses

The finding that coin-picking students attended to the figures as their peers did but became shy when discussions turned to themselves suggests that attention is not the same as identification. Students can enjoy a figure's story without feeling included in the possibilities that the story offers. T3-SC's interpretation that students actually know that coin picking makes them feel ashamed is consistent with the finding that many children regard begging as shameful. The tendency of some students to hide their activity at school is also consistent with findings that working-class children in disadvantaged primary schools suppress their identities to fit school norms, with consequences such as feelings of inferiority and anxiety (Campion & Ingram, 2026).

Through Coopersmith's (1967) lens, teachers' accounts mostly touch on the dimensions of significance and competence. Students are accepted socially but have been teased and tend to feel

inferior. This matters because social acceptance plays a role in self-esteem development in middle childhood (Magro et al., 2019), and perceived discrimination among children from poor families is associated with lower self-esteem, with social support as a protective factor (Zhang et al., 2025). Teachers' firm responses to teasing and T4-SB's availability as someone students turn to can be read as sources of significance at school. The virtue dimension shows varied responses, ranging from crying to arrogance, so the direction of students' self-evaluation of their behavior cannot yet be concluded. The power dimension has no data, a gap that should be filled by research that listens to students directly.

Teachers' perceptions that students have become braver in speaking up and less inferior should be read with caution. Courage to speak up and come to the front of the class is closer to self-efficacy, the belief in one's capability to perform an action, than to self-esteem as an evaluation of one's worth (Bandura, 1977). Such courage can be read as a sign of self-esteem only if students link it to feeling worthy and accepted. Teachers' warm praise linked to the figures' values is also healthier than inflated praise, because warmth and realistic appreciation nurture self-esteem without fostering narcissism (Brummelman & Sedikides, 2020). Perceptions of change were also reported by School A teachers about students who did not pick up coins, suggesting that the changes teachers perceive are general rather than specific to coin-picking students.

Caution That Protects and Limits

Teachers' and principals' stance of not touching on parents' work shows care for the dignity of students and their families. T3-SB's response using the phrase "how good it would be to become…" shows an effort to open future possibilities without blaming students' backgrounds. This phrase can be read as a seed of dialogue in Freire's (2014) sense, as the teacher does not impose judgment and leaves room for students to choose.

The same caution also limits room for critical consciousness. Freire (2014) placed students' life situations at the center as material to be examined together, whereas in the practice studied these situations were avoided. The view that picking up coins is normal, mentioned by almost all teachers, was never discussed in class, so the practice continues to be accepted without question. The reflection carried out by four teachers mostly asked about the figures' attitudes that students imitated, rather than inviting students to read the labels and practices around them. Poverty stigma is associated with negative self-evaluations (Inglis et al., 2023), and labels that are never discussed risk being accepted by children as descriptions of themselves.

The issue is not a choice between protecting and raising awareness. Critical consciousness for elementary school children can begin with reflection that starts from everyday conflicts and is adjusted to children's stage of reasoning (Ilten-Gee & Manchanda, 2021). Evidence on how critical consciousness forms in childhood remains limited (Heberle et al., 2020), so the appropriate level for third and fourth graders is reflection, not a demand to challenge social conditions. Stories of figures who struggled out of difficult circumstances can function as counternarratives to demeaning views (Starkey, 2021). Elementary social studies lessons that engage students in dialogue about injustice have also been shown to foster their sense of agency (Lee & Camicia, 2023). Symbolic modeling and critical reflection therefore need to work together: figures offer a picture of a possible self, while reflection helps children let go of the labels that stand in the way of that picture.

General Character Education and the Limits of the School's Role

The frame of general character education has two sides. A practice that grew out of training and an inter-school learning community spreads widely and does not single out coin-picking students as a different group, so it does not add to their stigma. The same frame, however, makes self-esteem only one value among many, dependent on whichever figure happens to be chosen, and not designed to meet the needs of students who face teasing and shame. Indonesian research on folktales and wayang has likewise emphasized general character values (Nuryanti et al., 2025; Zuhriyah & Fradana, 2025). This study suggests that the same practice can be turned into self-esteem education if teachers recognize it and design it deliberately.

The school's disconnection from families and government agencies limits the reach of this practice. Poverty is associated with children's low self-esteem through limited parental involvement and weak school social capital (Doi et al., 2019), so classroom efforts alone are not enough. Reviews of teacher exemplarity also show that character formation is most meaningful when values at school are consistent with experiences at home (Darmawan & Umam, 2026). The values children learn in class meet the practices they live every day with their families, and work drawing on Bourdieu shows that a mismatch between home and school can lead children to hide part of their identity (Campion & Ingram, 2026). Principals' reluctance to involve parents for fear of offending them is understandable, but efforts to build children's self-esteem that have so far taken place outside school (Avita & Muhid, 2023) need to be brought together with the school's role through approaches that do not blame families.

Implications

These findings carry three implications for elementary social studies learning. First, teachers can deliberately design the presentation of figures as self-esteem education by choosing figures close to children's lives, including local folktale characters, and by highlighting stories of struggle from difficult circumstances. Second, figures should be carried from apperception into core activities and reflection, so that students are invited to connect the figures' values with themselves through safe dialogue that does not shame their families. Third, schools need to build communication with parents, the village, and relevant agencies that starts from respect for families rather than from prohibition alone. The inter-school learning community that has been the source of teachers' ideas can serve as a forum for developing these three aspects.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that elementary school teachers in three schools in Central Java Province use role models, namely heroes, professional figures, folktale and wayang characters, and stories of the Prophet, in the social studies content of IPAS lessons. Figures are presented mainly during apperception and recorded in lesson modules, with diverse values, and three teachers named self-esteem as one of the values they instill. This practice is framed as general character education and is not specifically directed at coin-picking students. According to teachers, coin-picking students attend to the figures as their peers do but appear shy or afraid when discussions touch on self-confidence, hard work, and aspirations. Teachers' accounts mostly touch on the dimensions of significance and competence. Teachers and principals protect students' dignity by avoiding the topic of parents' work, which limits room for critical reflection, and the practice is not yet connected to families or relevant government agencies.

Theoretically, this study shows that symbolic modeling and critical consciousness need to be combined in self-esteem education for children from stigmatized families. Role models capture children's attention, but without safe reflection, figures risk remaining pleasant stories that do not touch how children view themselves. Practically, this study suggests that teachers deliberately design the presentation of figures, choose figures that children can relate to and attain, and bring figures into reflection activities, and that schools build cooperation with families and relevant agencies.

This study has several limitations. The data came only from interviews with teachers and principals, without classroom observations, lesson documents, or students' voices. Findings on students' responses are therefore teachers' perceptions, and the power dimension of self-esteem could not be read. This study also did not compare students' conditions before and after learning, so it cannot draw conclusions about changes in self-esteem, and it was limited to three schools in one village. Future research is encouraged to involve students through child-friendly interview techniques, conduct repeated classroom observations, examine lesson modules, and test learning designs that combine role models and critical reflection in other schools with similar contexts.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. They are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise the privacy of participants and students.

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