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Forgiveness Curricula for Children: A Narrative Synthesis for Development of Indigenous Forgiveness Curriculum for Grade one Learners in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

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More than 20 years of forgiveness education research adopted from Robert Enright's developmental model has been translated into child developmental contexts and cultures around the world. The aim of this narrative synthesis was to take a brief review of peer-reviewed, scholarly literature published from 2015 to 2024 on forgiveness curricula for primary school students Grade 1-4 learners. Secondly to address two questions notable in the landscape of previous syntheses on primary school forgiveness curricula: (a) What is the evidence base that suggests about forgiveness curricula for primary school students Grade 1-4 learners? (b) How much has there been in the literature published from 2015 to 2024 that is directly indigenous-focused and culturally rich, or that are taught without being imported largely unchanged from another national context?. A recent meta-analysis was used for citation chaining to determine additional records, yielding a total of 34 records within the 2015 to 2024 period and two additional studies that were published before 2015 that were retained for the purpose of citation chaining because they were the only analyses published of a forgiveness curriculum with Grade 1 children. Two studies related to the broader international forgiveness-curriculum literature (one a meta-analysis and the other a new forgiveness-curriculum-evaluation study), and five studies related specifically to the Pakistani culture were included within the 2015–2024 range: two of these studies, and two further background studies from before 2015, met the inclusion criteria. Based on a recent meta-analysis of 20 forgiveness-education studies (Rapp et al., 2022), the main result is that forgiveness curricula have robust (Medium to Large effects) for older children (Grade 4 – 12); and non-significant pooled effects for the youngest primary learners (Grade 1 – 3) and deserves to be considered as a preliminary result at best and a trend of no point if truly hypothetical (Rapp et al., 2022). Concurrently, there was no study conducted in the last decade (from 2015–2024) that assessed a program that used an indigenously developed and forgiveness-focused curricula in any nation with Grade 1 learners. These results collectively indicate that a forgiveness curriculum for children in Grade 1 in particular, in Pakistan is still a sub researched and sub practiced area of Indigenous forgiveness studies. The review examines developmental, methodological and cultural explanations for this gap, and outlines specific areas for priorities in the design and assessment of new curriculum.

Interpersonal Hurt and the Case for Forgiveness in Childhood

Invite a primary school teacher to describe an everyday school day and inevitably you'll get some mention of conflict and bullying between pupils, a missing coloured genie and a swing that never goes or a joke which becomes an insult. An adult would be able to brush off such moments as unimportant. For a six-year-old, however, they are a first introduction to how to control their feelings of anger, disappointment, and hurt and what they learn here will stick with them long after their childhood. One of the more extensively researched reactions that children have to such experiences is forgiveness, which is part of a growing psychological research literature on forgiveness that dates back many decades (McCullough et al., 2000; Worthington, 2005). Resentment and wrong are normally thought of as the acts of a hurt party that give up on causing harm or sin against the wrong party, without affirming the wrong did not happen, or forgetting about it, or relinquishing a rightful demand for justice (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015). More than 20 years of curriculum development and testing of forgiveness curricula in the typical classroom makes the concept of forgiving an attractive option for educators because, unlike a personality trait, it is a virtue that can be learned and practiced.

As a teacher, laying the groundwork to help the child handle interpersonal pain is crucial and very significant for the outcome of the experience. Compared to adults, children tend to think of forgiveness as more just and more reparative than retributive and more justice-oriented than retributive and more restitutive than justice-oriented (Enright et al., 1989); in general, they don't have as much authority as do adults to pursue justice in the midst of a disagreement. Hurt that is not dealt with may show up as retaliation. If a child seeks revenge out of an offense, he or she may jeopardize friendships that are critical to their development; retaliatory strategies have been correlated with decreased peer acceptance and quality of relationship quality (Rose & Asher, 1999). Meanwhile, children who have forgiving tendencies are likely to be included by their peers and to exhibit better social skills and overall wellbeing (Flanagan et al., 2012; van der Wal et al., 2017 cited by Rapp et al, 2022)

Enright's Process Model and the Architecture of Forgiveness Curricula

The process model of forgiveness (Enright & the Human Development Study Group, 1991), developed over many therapeutic and educational initiatives (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015), is the most prevalent forgiveness theory employed in forgiveness education. The model outlines four stages to forgiveness: Uncovering (identifying how hurts and anger have informed us about the other party, a stage marked by the recognition of our hurt and anger), Decision (choosing forgiveness, Engaging in a moment in which one decides to pursue forgiveness and commit to it), Work (striving toward a more compassionate, contextualized understanding of the hurting person, a stage in which we "work" to understand our hurt in a more compassionate and "contextualized" way), and Deepening (an opportunity to do things differently in the future, a period during which we are "deepening" our understanding of our hurt and looking to move toward more compassionate, "contextualized" ways of doing things in the future). The process of forgiveness is hypothesized to involve changes in cognition, affect, and behavior, with these implications in play in the design of forgiveness curricula and in the assessment of an impact.

The therapeutic approach was geared towards adults and needed extensive pedagogical adaptation to meet the needs of children. Such a story-based approach uses children's books, conversation skills or story techniques, and planned activities to help children see and understand abstract concepts like separating the criminal wrong from the person for whom he is sorry. Forgiveness as a process that can unfold and gradually become available to children who may not yet be able to think abstractly as the original adult model did. Since then, the International Forgiveness institute has put together hundreds of Grade Level curriculum guides that each have more than 100 pages, one secular (for public school) and one explicitly Christian (for religious school). The grade-by-grade structure itself is also an implicit developmental assumption that the mathematics concepts, stories, and activities that are suitable for a five- or six-year old first grader are fundamentally different from those suitable for a sixteen-year old high school student, although they are chosen from the same underlying process model.

Measurement of Forgiveness in Children

Enright and Rique created the Enright Forgiveness Inventory for Children (EFI-C) as a child-focused version of their adult forgiveness inventory and as a measure of forgiveness toward a specific individual following a hurtful event that was deeply unfair. It can be used with the kids starting from Grade One (International Forgiveness Institute n.d.). Interpreted by the use of a red-circle/green-circle visual aid, simple, familiar words (happy, negative), and oral as opposed to written administration to consider young children's low literacy (McLaughlin & Aloe, 2021). Comparisons of emotional forgiveness with behavioral and cognitive change are feasible given that the EFI-C, like the adult version, has a three-part structure that considers the affective, behavioral, and cognitive elements of forgiveness (McLaughlin & Aloe, 2021). In studies of the effects of forgiveness education on children, greater positive EFI-C scores have been correlated with less children's anxiety and depression

(International Forgiveness Institute, n.d.), for example in studies conducted in Northern Ireland, Belfast (Study: Primary Schools), and Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Study: Community Schools).

Cultural Adaptation and the Case for Indigenous Curricula.

There is extensive research attention, starting in the early 2000s, dedicated to assessing forgiveness curricula, as well as to previous meta-analyses of forgiveness interventions in predominantly adult or mixed-age, adult, and child populations (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Wade et al., 2014). A large-scale assessment of forgiveness-education research studies by Rapp, Wang Xu, and Enright (2022), which included 20 studies involving 1,472 children and adolescents across 10 countries in North America, East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Results of these analyses revealed that forgiveness-education interventions had a significant overall impact on forgiveness, and a somewhat lesser but still significant impact on anger reduction, supporting forgiveness-education interventions to some degree for improving children's forgiveness and reducing anger (Rapp et al., 2022).

In contrast, this meta-analysis reported that the late-primary (Grades 4–5) years and high school (Grades 9–12) intervention years were associated with medium-to-large effect sizes, whereas the early-primary (Grades 1–3) years were not associated with a pooled effect that was significant or pointed in a different direction (Rapp et al., 2022). Two studies were published very close together in time to the time period limits (2015–2024) used for this review (Grade 1 part of this subgroup) and were therefore considered seminal. In 2007, Enright, Knutson, Holter, Baskin and Knutson tested the Enright story-based curriculum with first and third graders in Belfast, Northern Ireland, a long historical legacy of sectarian violence has defined this community. The same curriculum was subsequently tested with 1st, 3rd, and 5th grade students in a central city Milwaukee setting by Holter, Magnuson, Knutson, Knutson Enright, and Enright (2008), with older students getting slightly greater benefits than younger students. These two studies are, to our knowledge, the only published empirical studies specifically examining a forgiveness intervention with Grade 1 students, coming as lack of empirical research in a two-decade old field, and their own curriculum of forgiveness that exists solely for the first grade. Although they are not included in the range of years searched (2015–2024), they are referenced throughout the report as background information to be compared to the outcomes of the present formal review.

The social construct and the need for Indigenous curriculum

Another area in which there is a lack of research on forgiveness and education is in the realm of cultural adaptation. The Rapp et al. (2022) meta analysis relies on research from studies in ten countries, yet the selection of a curriculum in any country does not always imply that the content is adapted to the respective cultural values, morals, and narratives. A curriculum may be in service to a different country and not "home-grown" that is, it is not necessarily made locally, with content pulled from local cultural or religious material, but rather, it is simply translated or lightly "localized" from an imported framework. This is significant because many of the communities in which the following curricula are applied already have rich indigenous understandings of forgiveness; children are more likely to grasp a forgiveness curriculum if it can be grounded in their existing values.

Recent studies in Pakistan show the promise of this approach as well as its limitations. There has been few studies testing the concept of forgiveness by Enright in Pakistan. Rahman et al (2018) carried out a pilot study involving eight abused girls aged between 11 to 12 living in a child protection shelter in Lahore. For four months, half had twice-weekly forgiveness therapy. The other half was given normal treatment. The optimistic group and forgiving group had higher results of optimism and forgiveness. They also exhibited more decreases in anger. These improvements were still present at 1 year follow-up. Haroon et al. in 2021 conducted a similar study with adult women who were victims of acid attack. Again, they were split into 2 groups those who were going to be asked to be forgiving and those who were going to be asked to practice traditional care. Immediate post-therapy, levels of hope, anger, anxiety and sadness were all improved in the forgiving group. In the majority of the areas, there were still improvements a year later.

There is a big gap in forgiveness research work. No forgiveness first graders' program has been assessed with first-graders in Pakistan and none of the works cited here conducts an assessment on the same. No research has worked on the development of such a program based on local Islamic or cultural content. The current review aims to address this issue.

The Present Review

Building on the pre-2015 Grade 1 studies and the 2022 narrative synthesis described above, this review synthesizes peer-reviewed literature on forgiveness curricula for children published between 2015 and 2024, guided by three questions:

- **RQ1.** What does the 2015–2024 literature indicate about the effectiveness of forgiveness curricula for children, and does it support, extend, or complicate the meta-analytic finding of reduced effectiveness in Grades 1–3?

- **RQ2.** Has any study published worldwide within this window evaluated a forgiveness curriculum with Grade 1 or comparably young children?
- **RQ3.** How much of the international and Pakistani forgiveness-curriculum literature reflects indigenous, culturally or religiously derived content, rather than a largely unmodified import of Enright's process model, and what does this evidence base suggest about the feasibility of an indigenous forgiveness curriculum for Grade 1 learners in Pakistan specifically?

The aims of this narrative synthesis are: (1) to summarize the effectiveness literature from 2015-2024 for forgiveness curricula for children, especially in the early-primary grades; (2) to see if a study published during this time has tested forgiveness curriculum with Grade 1 or similarly young children; and (3) to determine how much of the forgiveness curricular literature, both internationally and specifically in Pakistan, incorporate native cultural or religious content, to provide a basis for developing and testing an indigenous forgiveness curriculum in Pakistan for Grade 1 learners.

Rationale for a Pakistan-Focused Indigenous Curriculum.

This cultural adaptation question focuses on the case of Pakistan, rather than being an arbitrary choice and an example among many others, for three intertwined reasons. First, the review cited only five studies from Pakistan that are sufficient to collectively contribute meaningful amount of forgiveness research and indigenous related curriculum, which make Pakistan unique equating the evidence base from the original Belfast/Milwaukee and later the literature from the U.S. Five studies in excess in Pakistan contribute meaningful amount of forgiveness research and indigenised research, which make Pakistan unique to the evidence base reviewed in this literature apart from the original Belfast/Milwaukee and later the literature in the U.S. This is the only country in this review that has as much as the two types of evidence gathered in one.

Second, this evidence is all sufficiently concentrated on an extraordinary and distinctive opportunity, not a broad gap. In the conditions of having no forgiveness curriculum the findings of Ali et al., 2023, indicate that forgiveness education may already be happening informally in the schools of Pakistan for adolescents but no in children of grade 1 in religious schools who report higher forgiveness and less vengeance than those in public schools, thereby tracing the possibility of an indigenous forgiveness education in the context of Islamic religious material schools.

Thirdly, by concentrating on Pakistan, this analysis is able to address two major gaps the lack of data especially for Grade 1 and the absence of really "homegrown" curricular content instead of leaving them as distinct, open-ended research topics. These two gaps are related to one another; they are not coincidental. The majority of the material now available on forgiveness education is either geared toward older students or imported verbatim from Western social-emotional learning frameworks, with little consideration given to how such information should be modified, translated, or rethought for a particular linguistic and cultural context. If you approach them as two distinct issues, you run the danger of coming up with two poor solutions rather than one solid one. A review that only suggests indigenous curriculum development in the abstract provides a theoretical justification but no useful place to start. Calls to "decolonize" or "localize" curricula are simple to express but difficult to put into practice; in the absence of a clear context, they remain aspirational rather than practical. The question, "What are the building blocks for developing an indigenous curriculum in this particular context?" goes unanswered if the conversation is not anchored in a specific environment, such as a classroom, school, school district, or province where this work may really begin. Naming a location does more than just increase specificity; instead of supposing that the work must begin from scratch, it compels the review to identify what already exists, including whatever research, institutions, and cultural resources are accessible to draw upon. This assessment establishes a tangible starting point for a future Grade 1 forgiveness curriculum by basing the advice on Pakistani research, educational institutions, and curriculum resources. In this approach, the suggestion transforms from a broad idea into a tested, financially feasible, and workable plan that other scholars or decision-makers may really adopt and execute.

Method

This is a narrative synthesis based on targeted searching and citation chaining. It draws from reporting standards of the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021) where this is applicable.

Eligibility Criteria

All records were screened based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria and were applied equally well to all records. To qualify as a core study in the period of 2015-2024, the record had to fulfill the following requirements: (a) Report original empirical data, quantitative, qualitative or both; (b) Assess/explore/direct study of a formal forgiveness curriculum and/or a forgiveness-education intervention with school-age children; (c) Be published in a peer-reviewed journal; and (d) Report enough information about the participants' grade level (or specific age range) to permit this developmental classification.

The following criteria excluded a record: (a) forgiveness was only considered a correlate or outcome variable with no description of an intervention or curriculum; (b) subjects were adults, but no school-based setting described (this information was retained in the record for interpretation as contextual background information, if applicable; and (c) full text not published in a peer-reviewed journal article (but as contextual background information, if applicable); (d) data was too redundant to include with another record included in the analyses.

Treatment of the Two Foundational Grade 1 Studies

There was one intentional exception to the 2015-2024 lack of a range. Two studies created before the search window (Enright et al., 2007 and Holter et al., 2008) were included, to our knowledge, the only two studies worldwide to directly assess a forgiveness curriculum with first graders. Included in this review as background evidence but not as central studies, they are cited throughout the whole of this review, but this distinction is maintained throughout the Results and Discussion sections.

Initiating search for information and information seeking strategies.

The review was based on three commonly accessible kinds of sources: (a) academic search engines and databases, such as Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, and ResearchGate; (b) the website of the journal/publisher where the scholarly article or guide was found, and checked directly if a relevant work by an author had to be located; and (c) citation chasing, chaining through the reference sections of the scholarly article under review and the selected bibliography of curriculum-guide materials published by the International Forgiveness Institute. The combination is not exhaustive, but it is still suitable for targeted searching (which is related, but not identical, to a systematic search) and for "citation searching". This distinction and its implications are discussed more in the Limitations section.

Search terms were grouped into three categories: 1) forgiveness terms (forgiveness, forgiveness education, forgiveness curriculum, forgiveness intervention, forgiveness therapy); 2) developmental or grade level terms (Grade 1, first grade, Early Childhood, Primary school, Elementary school, Kindergarten); and 3) cultural-adaptation terms (indigenous, culturally adapted, culturally integrated, religiously integrated, Islamic, cross-cultural). Where platform filters enabled it, records were restricted to 2015 – 2024 and a series of targeted searches conducted to identify the two pre-2015 grade 1 studies described above. Due to the restrictions placed on materials searched for being only those available freely rather than a full institutional database suite, this search is considered a comparatively small sample of the literature which might be relevant to the VANAHP than it is a comprehensive count of this literature.

Seeking out the right studies and screening procedures.

The screening was carried out in two stages. During the first stage, the titles and abstracts of each record were studied, and pertinent records were eliminated when it was evident that they did not meet criteria. In the second phase, a complete reading and examination of all other records were performed according to the inclusion criteria. The second stage was not prototype rated by a second, independent reviewer, which is recognized as a limitation. The full text of other studies whose primary focus was not immediately clear, e.g., whether the main purpose of the study was forgiveness or some other aspect of moral education in which forgiveness was only mentioned tangentially, was re-read; and the eligibility decision was then recorded in writing and the record re-finalized.

Quality Appraisal

Due to the varying designs of the included studies (randomized controlled trial, quasi-experimental classroom studies, correlational surveys, and interview studies), a single general risk of bias checklist for comparable randomized trials was not appropriate. Rather, each study was evaluated with the four questions as follows: Were random or quasi-random assignment to the conditions? Did there exist a comparable control condition? Did outcomes measures were reported that are known to be reliable? If so, what were the effect sizes, or was sufficient data provided to calculate the effect size? Those studies that could answer yes to the majority, and often all, of the above questions were deemed as fairly strong evidence for efficacy (Rahman et al., 2018; Haroon et al., 2021; Toussaint et al., 2024). The studies that did not meet these requirements, such as the correlational study without intervention/comparison group by Ali et al. (2023), were considered as suggestive contextual evidence, not as conclusive evidence of the efficacy of curriculum. This was used only to give weight to each study's contribution to the narrative synthesis, and was not used as a means to exclude any study based on quality alone.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

The following data were identified for each of the included and background studies and wherever reported: author/year, country/region of study, culture, grade level/age of participants, sample size, curriculum type, number and length of intervention sessions, comparison condition, key outcome measures, and key findings. The type and extent of curricular

adaptation were coded separately for studies related to cultural and/or religious adaptation. Here no new meta-analysis was attempted because the studies included differed in population and curriculum design and an existing, robust quantitative meta-analysis of the wider set of literature was available (Rapp et al. 2022). This is summarized in the following tables (Table 1 below; Table 2 on Grade 1 or a more elementary typical student age group; Table 3 on indigenous rather than imported cultural or religious themes in the literature reviewed).

Table 1: Data Extraction Summary for All Included and Background Studies

Author/Year	Country	Sample/Age	Intervention	Duration	Theory	Delivery	Comparator
Enright et al. (2007)	Northern Ireland (Belfast)	Grade 1 & 3; 36 exp., 57 control	Enright story-based forgiveness curriculum	17 sessions	Enright process model	Teacher-delivered, whole-classroom	Untreated comparison classrooms
Holter et al. (2008)	United States (Milwaukee)	Grades 1, 3, 5; 75 exp. (Gr. 1), 44 control	Enright story-based forgiveness curriculum	17 sessions	Enright process model	Teacher-delivered, whole-classroom	Untreated comparison classrooms
Rapp et al. (2022) [meta-analysis]	10 countries (pooled)	Grades 1-12; N = 1,472 (pooled across 20 studies)	Varied Enright-derived forgiveness curricula (pooled)	Varies by pooled study	Enright process model	Varies (teacher- and counselor-delivered across pooled studies)	Varies (mostly waitlist / no-treatment controls across pooled studies)
Toussaint et al. (2024)	United States (3 parochial schools)	Grades 4-8; N = 153	Newly developed classroom forgiveness curriculum	2 semesters (crossover)	Enright process model	Teacher-delivered, whole-classroom	Own-control crossover (delayed-treatment comparison)
Rahman et al. (2018)	Pakistan (Lahore)	Ages 11-12; N = 16 (8/8)	Enright process-model forgiveness therapy	Twice weekly, 4 months	Enright process model (unmodified)	Group-delivered therapy	Waitlist / no-treatment control
Haroon et al. (2021)	Pakistan	Adult female acid-attack survivors; N = 16 (8/8)	Enright process-model forgiveness therapy	Not specified in source	Enright process model (unmodified)	Individual/group therapy	Treatment-as-usual
Ahmad & Khan (2016)	Pakistan (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa)	Secondary Islamiyat textbooks (no child sample)	None — curriculum content analysis	Not applicable	Indigenous Islamic moral education (not Enright-based)	Not applicable (document analysis)	Not applicable

Khattak & Ulla (2015)	Pakistan (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa)	Teachers, government primary schools (no child sample)	None qualitative/survey of teacher practice	—	Not applicable	Islamic ethics-based sociability	Not applicable (interview/survey)	Not applicable
Ali et al. (2023)	Pakistan	Ages 15-19; N = 710 (355/355)	None correlational comparison, no intervention	—	Not applicable (cross-sectional)	Not applicable (descriptive comparison)	Not applicable	Public-school students (comparison group, non-experimental)

Note. “Not applicable” indicates the study's design (content analysis, qualitative survey, or correlational comparison) does not include the corresponding element. Rapp et al. (2022) is a meta-analysis rather than a primary study and is included here for completeness; its “Sample/Age,” “Duration,” “Delivery,” and “Comparator” columns describe the range of studies it pools rather than a single study design.

Results

The results are presented based on the order of the three research questions; in the order of search and screening of the data, then the literature on international evidence related to effectiveness of curriculum, and finally the literature related to cultural adaptation from the Pakistani literature and the adjacent literature to the indigenous.

Search Results and Study Selection.

A summary of the search and screening process is presented in Tables 2. There were 2015-2024 records identified in all sources, and 2 more that were found through citation chaining that were dated before 2015. These 12 were removed after screening by title and abstract and were not included because they did not focus on forgiveness, did not involve a school-aged population, or were not included for other reasons. After screening, 28 records remained which were focused on forgiveness. These 16 were granted full text assessment, for which another 9 were later excluded, primarily for the reason that forgiveness was not taught as part of a curriculum or intervention, but rather was investigated as a correlate of the properties. Seven studies were included in the 2015-2024 – two with direct relation to the international evidence base for forgiveness (a meta-analysis and a newly designed study to evaluate the curriculum), and five which were set in the Pakistani cultural context. The two above-mentioned pre 2015 studies were kept as background for the purpose of the Method's requirement of obtaining Grade 1 evidence. These are a record of this search, not an estimate of the literature relevant to the search: the counts are based on a targeted search (see Method).

Table 2: Summary of the Study Identification and Screening Process

Stage	Records
Records identified through targeted platform searches (2015–2024 window)	34
Additional records identified via citation chaining (pre-2015 foundational studies)	2
Duplicate records removed	6
Records screened (title/abstract)	28
Records excluded at title/abstract screening	12
Full-text records assessed for eligibility	16
Full-text records excluded, with reasons:	9
Forgiveness only an incidental correlate, no curriculum/intervention	4
No defined curriculum or intervention described	3

Adult-only sample, not educationally relevant	1
Full text unavailable / not peer-reviewed	1
Core international studies included (2015–2024)	2
Contextual Pakistani studies included (2015–2024)	5
Foundational pre-2015 Grade 1 studies (background)	2

Note. This review used a targeted, citation-anchored search strategy rather than an exhaustive multi-database search; counts reflect records identified through this specific search process, not an estimate of the total literature. See Method for details.

Characteristics of the Core International Evidence Base (RQ1)

Table 3 summarizes the studies most directly relevant to the effectiveness of forgiveness curricula for children, including the two foundational, pre-2015 Grade 1 studies that anchor this literature and the 2015–2024 studies that extend it.

Table 3: Characteristics of Core Studies on Forgiveness Curricula for Children, Including Foundational Grade 1 Evidence

Study	Country Setting	/ Grade N	/ Design Curriculum	& Cultural Adaptation	Key Findings
Enright et al. (2007) [foundational, pre-2015]	Belfast, Northern Ireland	Grade 1 & 3 / 36 exp., 57 control	Quasi-experimental; Enright story-based curriculum, 17 sessions, teacher-delivered	Standard model; delivered amid sectarian conflict context but not religiously modified	Part of the early-primary (Grades 1–3) subgroup later shown by meta-analysis to produce non-significant pooled effects
Holter et al. (2008) [foundational, pre-2015]	Milwaukee, United States	Grades 1, 3, 5 / 75 exp. (Grade 1), 44 control	Quasi-experimental; Enright story-based curriculum, 17 sessions, teacher-delivered	Standard model; urban context, not religiously or culturally modified	Significant reduction in excessive anger for older grades; weaker, less consistent pattern at Grade 1
Rapp et al. (2022)	Meta-analysis; 10 countries	Grades 1–12 / 1,472 total	Meta-analysis of 20 RCT/quasi-experimental forgiveness-education studies	Aggregates studies of varying cultural origin; not itself an adaptation study	Significant overall effect on forgiveness and anger; non-significant pooled effect for Grades 1–3 subgroup ($k = 4$)
Toussaint et al. (2024)	Three parochial schools, United States	Grades 4–8 / 153	Crossover design; newly developed classroom forgiveness curriculum	Standard derived Catholic parochial-school setting	Forgiveness increased significantly in both semesters; anger did not change as expected; qualitative alignment with curriculum content

Note. Enright et al. (2007) and Holter et al. (2008) predate the review's 2015–2024 search window and are included as foundational background rather than as core included studies; they are the only two studies identified evaluating a forgiveness curriculum specifically with Grade 1 learners.

The Grades 1–3 Effectiveness Gap in Meta-Analytic Evidence (RQ1)

The meta-analysis conducted by Rapp et al. (2022) is not source material specific to the first question of this review (Do forgiveness curricula have a positive effect on Grade 1 students as reported in the literature spanning 2015–2024?); however, it does supply the most immediate and, importantly, most recent evidence relevant to the first question of this review, which concerns the effects of forgiveness curricula as they have been reported in the literature spanning 2015–2024. Its developmental moderator analysis showed a non-significant pooled effect for Grades 1–3 (the two early years Grade 1 studies

included), while there were medium-to-large effect sizes for Grades 4–5 and 9–12. This subgroup result is from the most highly-authoritative synthesis available for this period, and it is the most specific indication of the lack of measurable forgiveness or anger benefit in the very youngest primary years under the current Enright story-based design and delivery – while, at the same time, remaining beneficial for a slightly older audience.

Grade 1 Evidence Within the 2015–24 Time Period (RQ2)

The most consistent result from evaluating the literature on forgiveness curricula with children as young as Grade 1 and similar age (5 to 6 years) children, globally, is that there is virtually no forgiveness curriculum for this age group. As seen in Table 3, the Grade 1 evidence base is largely the same two pre-2015 studies (Enright et al., 2007; Holter et al., 2008). This review identified two other works to be studied in detail next year, focusing on 2015–2024: a systematic review of the primary literature, with an emphasis on the pre-2015 pieces (Rapp et al., 2022) and the ongoing development and evaluation of curriculum curriculum in older grades (Toussaint et al., 2024). Both of these did not involve an updated empirical test of a Grade 1 curriculum.

Characteristics of Pakistani and Indigenous-Adjacent Studies (RQ3)

The five studies conducted in Pakistan, during 2015 – 2024, are summarized in Table 4. No one included students in Grade 1 grade or younger. Of the five, only two (Rahman et al., 2018; Haroon et al., 2021) directly tested a forgiveness intervention, and only two other (Ahmad & Khan, 2016; Khattak & Ulla, 2015) used truly indigenous curriculum materials, but neither of the latter examined forgiveness specifically as a targeted measured construct.

Table 4: Characteristics of Pakistani and Indigenous-Adjacent Studies (2015–2024)

Study	Population / N Setting		Design & Focus	Cultural/Religious Adaptation	Key Findings
Rahman et al. (2018)	Abused females, ages 11–12, Lahore, Pakistan	16 (8/8)	RCT; Enright process-model forgiveness therapy, twice weekly for 4 months	Standard Enright model; not religiously or culturally modified	Experimental group showed higher forgiveness and hope, lower anger, than control at 1-year follow-up
Haroon et al. (2021)	Adult female acid-attack survivors, Pakistan	16 (8/8)	RCT; Enright process-model forgiveness therapy vs. treatment-as-usual	Standard Enright model; not explicitly religiously modified	Forgiveness group improved more than control on forgiveness, hope, anger, anxiety, depression
Ahmad & Khan (2016)	Secondary Islamiat curriculum, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan	Curriculum content analysis	Qualitative content analysis of textbook social/moral values	Genuinely indigenous (Islamiat textbook); values broadly defined, not forgiveness-specific	Identified presence of and gaps in coverage of social/moral values, including tolerance-related content
Khattak & Ulla (2015)	Government primary schools, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan	Teacher-focused qualitative/survey study	Examined teachers' role in Islamic-ethics-based sociability skill promotion	Genuinely indigenous (Islamic ethics); primary level, but not forgiveness-specific or curriculum-evaluation design	Male teachers played an active role in promoting Islamic-ethics-based sociability among young learners
Ali et al. (2023)	Adolescent males, ages 15–19, Pakistan	710 (355/355)	Correlational comparison, madrasa vs. public-school students; no intervention	Compares Islamic and secular schooling contexts descriptively; no curriculum tested	Madrasa students reported greater forgiveness and less vengeance than public-school peers

Note. RCT = randomized controlled trial. The two forgiveness-specific Pakistani intervention studies (Rahman et al., 2018; Haroon et al., 2021) apply Enright's imported process model without described religious or cultural modification; the two genuinely indigenous studies (Ahmad & Khan, 2016; Khattak & Ulla, 2015) do not isolate forgiveness as a specific construct.

Quality of the Included Evidence

Three basic studies fulfilled most, if not all, of the criteria for the appraisal: Method: random assignment to condition, comparison group is credible, validated outcomes measures and reported effect sizes. Both Rahaman et al. (2018) and Haroon et al. (2021) randomly assigned participants to a forgiveness-therapy group and a control group of participants who received a different condition and utilized the Enright Forgiveness Inventory as well as other valid instruments. Against this backdrop, Toussaint et al. (2024) employed a controlled-crossover design and included pre- and post-test measures that were validated. The three studies identified in this review are the three best methodologically designed primary studies. The two Pakistani trials come with a noteworthy exception, however, each with 16 participants (8 per condition), considered the “pilot” sample size. Validated measurement and randomization are strengths—although certainly not too weak for this small study to have inflated effect estimates—the evidence presented here is preliminary, not of the same evidentiary weight as a large, well-powered study or a meta-analysis of many studies.

The meta-analysis by Rapp et al. (2022) is another type of evidence which could be complementary and more authoritative in its own right. It provided comprehensive reporting leveraging the writing conventions of PRISMA and included 20 primary studies and the moderator analysis for each developmental stage explicitly reported. It is not analysed as part of a single intervention and so will not go through the same systematic analysis as individual trials would be subject to a four question checklist, but will be the most comprehensive systematic synthesis of this literature available.

The two fundamental Grade 1 studies are found at a literacy level below these. The quality of the designs of Enright et al. (2007) and Holter et al. (2008) was good considering the standards of their time, but both papers included quasi-experimental designs, in effect, and both predate the reporting of standardized effect sizes. They don't call their conclusions wrong, but it is difficult to directly compare their work with newer work. The consideration of this limitation is even more poignant here since these two studies are the only direct evidence in the field of forgiveness curricula with first-grade students, one that should not be left such a long time in evidence.

Given the nature of its evidence, another caution is warranted for the Grades 1–3 subgroup finding in Rapp et al. (2022). It only references 4 main studies and this sub-group size generates a less reliable estimate than the overall meta-analysis pooled effects. This restriction applies to the estimate for the youngest age group only, and not to the whole meta-analysis, which is valid, so that readers should be careful to consider the youngest-age finding as suggestive but not conclusive.

The two others in question fall into a category distinct from the other evidence. Ali et al. (2023) was a cross-sectional correlational or comparison study, they noted a difference of forgiveness and vengeance between adolescents attending the madrassa and adolescents from public schools, but they do not have a test or curriculum to determine what caused the difference. The qualitative curriculum content analysis by Ahmad and Khan (2016) is a complementary method to measure the change in students, in terms of moral and social values present in Pakistani Islamiyat textbooks and teacher's comments, but it documents what they are saying about values other than forgiveness. Both studies in themselves are useful as background contextual information, to explain what is already available in curricula, and the attitudes of students. Neither can say with any authority, however, whether the capacity to forgive is actually changed by the imbuing of it through a particular forgiveness curriculum presented in a particular manner. If viewed as much as equivalent in evidentiary weight to a randomized trial, their findings would be overstated; if viewed as other information in the context of the intervention information reviewed above, they will serve as a useful adjunct to the reviewed intervention evidence.

Discussion

If you look back to the three questions that started this review, the results are pretty consistent across the three. The literature on RQ1 (effectiveness) does not contradict the meta-analytic findings over only refines the composite pattern: the four early-primary studies that informed the findings of Rapp et al. (2022) had a remarkably consistent foundation (Teacher-led delivery, low level of swinging target offenses, and use of the same story-based curriculum) and elicited a non-significant pooled effect, while older children through adolescence demonstrated a clear benefit. The answer to RQ2 (Grade 1 evidence) is very clear: nothing has been found in the search window that extends, replicates or provides, subsequent to the two grade 1 studies, an alternative to those two grade 1 studies. The same trends are visible for RQ3 (cultural adaptation): a part of the literature on RQ3 between 2015 and 2024 focuses on the application of a imported psychological model with older or adult Pakistani samples, while a separate part focused on the local (indigenous) moral curricula without ever using forgiveness as a topic. There's no communication between the strands.

Interpreting the Grades 1–3 Effectiveness Gap (RQ1)

The lack of an overall effect of forgiveness education with early-primary students, needs to be interpreted carefully and it should not be interpreted as proof that forgiveness education is ineffective with children in the early primary years. There are several developmental and methodological explanations that appear to at least have some validity, if not be mutually inclusive. The separation between "the worth of a person" and "the wrongness of a particular act" that the process model emphasizes may require a more abstract, and decentered, moral perspective that is an emerging capacity in Grades 1-3. It may be that the results are not significant because of the validity of the maximum standard effect that a normal delivery approach can attain with 5-8 year olds and children of similar age groups and not the problem of the curriculum content.

The second (complementary) explanation is related to measurement. The forgiveness measures that have been administered to children throughout this literature tend to focus primarily on children's own perceptions of introspection and changes in affective or affective/cognitive states, such as forgiveness, rather than on the actual states or affective/cognitive changes, whether present or absent. Indeed, according to Rapp et al.'s (2022) words, the four early-primary studies were very similar in curriculum and assessment strategy, and it is conceivable that an alternative assessment method (e.g., teacher self-report, behavioral observation, a simpler pictorial possible answers format that is more appropriate for early childhood) might find intervention effects that were too subtle to be detected with adolescent-style self-report measures.

The third explanation has to do with dosage and what kind of offense a child is committing. As expected with young children, the early - primary studies in the Rapp et al. (2022) subgroup were all restricted to the lesser crimes because it would be ethically wrong and sensible to study the more serious crimes in such young populations. On the other hand, however, it's possible that an intervention would have less to work with, and would have a smaller impact to measure, if the initial hurt is small. In this view, a forgiveness curriculum may not be effective for young children overall, but may actually work for them on more emotionally meaningful and age-appropriate, and non-traumatic offenses, excluding them from a peer group, for example, than for relatively trivial acts like littering or nicknames.

Research conducted in 2015 (RQ2) is not found.

Perhaps most strikingly, there is no new study which centers on Grade 1 material to be found within the entire last decade of literature (2015–2024). It has been a busy time to date in forgiveness-education research, with a large meta-analysis (Rapp et al., 2022), ongoing development of the forgiveness curriculum for grades in the upper elementary school grades through high school (Toussaint et al., 2024), and a growing bank of grade-banded curriculum guides maintained by the International Forgiveness Institute. None of this, however, has come to critically test, replicate or improve on the two-decade old Phase 1 results that showed success in Belfast and Milwaukee. The pattern is common in research on educational interventions, where strong findings for older, more advanced children serve as the basis for further enhancements and strong findings for younger children are simply ignored as a potential problem for future research.

The Rationale for Indigenous Development (RQ3) and the Cultural Gap

Since government schools in Pakistan adhere to a Single National Curriculum (SNC), which was implemented to standardize learning content nationwide, the country's public education system provides a particularly obvious beginning point for this topic. Despite this methodical approach, there isn't a single chapter, subject, or learning objective in the Grade 1 curriculum that is devoted to forgiveness. Rather than being taught as a separate, scaffolded notion, related values may only be mentioned indirectly and incorporated into more general moral or religious material. This is an important absence. This indicates that any suggestion to implement forgiveness education at this level is addressing a real curriculum deficit rather than competing with current topics. Additionally, since a single, government-mandated national curriculum provides a single, unified point of entry rather than a patchwork of provincial or private syllabi that would each require separate advocacy and revision, it strengthens the case for indigenous curriculum development in Pakistan in particular.

This "logic" may be applicable to other contexts featured in the forgiveness-education literature beyond the Pakistani context. The extent to which indigenous cultural or religious adaptation is included is widely variable across the studies, but, intriguingly, little systematic focus has been placed on indigenous cultural and/or religious adaptation in the field, in the Rapp et al. (2022) meta-analysis itself. To capture the degree of cultural/religious adaptation as an explicit variable, as opposed to it being an incidental feature of a study's country of origin, would facilitate future syntheses or primary studies to directly test, rather than assume, whether cultural adaptation affects the effectiveness of forgiveness curricula. What is needed is not a collection of material for an Indigenous curriculum, but a conscious process of taking this material to put together a forgiveness curriculum for Grade 1 pupils especially.

Recommendations for development of an Indigenous Forgiveness Curriculum for Grade 1 Learners in Pakistan

The collective evidence from these cases suggests that fostering forgiveness in grade 1 students in Pakistan, through the development and systematic testing of an indigenous forgiveness curriculum tailored to students' needs (as opposed to transferring a child-adapted curriculum from an elite European group), and based on local rather than imported cultural content, is a concrete and actionable research priority. Such a program would have to directly tackle these developmental and measurement issues raised above: a local Pakistan context; a vocabulary for Islam that has already been recorded in the curriculum evaluation documents of Pakistan; a moral vocabulary that is relevant to the Pakistani school child; interpersonal violations which have a sufficient emotional salience for 5 and 6 year old children; emotional and interpersonal measures which are appropriate to the developmental level and cultural context of Pakistani 5 and 6 year-olds.

Two design features, present in but not revealed by some of the studies reviewed, that would enhance future studies towards this goal are (a) a direct empirical test of a forgiveness curriculum with Grade 1 children in a Pakistani primary school using contemporary measures and procedures and comparing these findings with the original findings in the Belfast and Milwaukee studies, and (b) there is some need to extend the follow-up period beyond the immediate post-intervention window; it is possible that providing children with a forgiveness curriculum in Pakistan may see even later or cumulative effects that require more time to fully manifest than the first year following the intervention and will not also manifest in the immediate aftermath.

Theoretical Implications

This review has a theoretical implication as well. Despite this process model's original intention of being developmentally general, the present findings suggest that it may be better to consider Enright's model as one requiring scaffolding through the development process, rather than one that is merely developmentally general and can be applied across ages without modification. Each phase of the model uncover, decide, work, and deepen explicitly rely on a set of capacities, capacities seen as available to the adults and to the older adolescents it assumes are present in age six year old, may not be available in age six year old. This review offers insights to help reshape a forgiveness education theory scaffold, not just simplify it, specifically because it is based on indigenous developmental and moral frameworks. Instead of dismissing the effectiveness gap from the application of forgiveness education with Grades 1-3 as evidence against forgiveness education in general, this review suggests that a need exists to refine the theory scaffold, rather than simply simplify it, specifically in the context of indigenous developmental and moral theory.

Limitations

This evaluation relied on specific online searches and citation chaining anchored to a single meta-analysis, as described in the Method section. Although this strategy was suitable for the study's exploratory objectives and resource limitations, it implies that pertinent primary research or gray literature outside of this citation network might not have been found, and the review cannot claim to be as thorough as a full systematic search. Rather than coming from an independent re-analysis of the underlying primary datasets, the review's main quantitative finding the effectiveness disparity seen for students in Grades 1 through 3 comes from a previously published meta-analysis of original research data. A straightforward and justifiable method for synthesizing earlier information without repeating analytical work is to rely on an already-existing, well completed meta-analysis. It does not, however, have the same evidential weight as an independent verification of the raw data and is only as reliable as the inclusion criteria, coding choices, and statistical assumptions of the first meta-analysis. A more thorough database search and, when practical, a direct re-analysis of the main study would be beneficial for future research aiming to validate or improve the size of this effectiveness gap.

Conclusion

The findings of this narrative synthesis of the forgiveness education literature of the past five years (2015-2024) reveal a growing body of research to inform forgiveness education programs for students in the upper primary and adolescent years. While all of this is happening there is hardly any focus on our youngest learners (5-6 year old Grade 1). The meager, and consequently preliminary, extent of evidence currently available from the small proportion of early-primary studies, included in the scope of this review, does not yet confirm that current Enright-model curricula are effective with this age group, but when the same curricula do demonstrate effective results in this age group, it is with only slightly older children. But in Pakistan, there is no explicit association that has been made between forgiveness and the literature pertaining to moral or Islamic education which is only little studied with respect to forgiveness and even less with respect to Grade 1 students. This interdisciplinary developmental and cultural void is a real possibility, an insider-outsider educational opportunity: Designing

and testing a developmentally appropriate, indigenous forgiveness curriculum for grade 1 students in Pakistan, specifically using a model not imported from anywhere else but the Pakistani moral and religious values.

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