Sosioedukasi
JURNAL ILMIAH ILMU PENDIDIKAN DAN SOSIAL
ISSN: 2086-6135 E-ISSN: 2541-612x
Volume 15 No. 4 Desember 2026 https://ejournal.unibabwi.ac.id/index.php/sosioedukasi/index

IMPLEMENTATION OF CHARACTER EDUCATION THROUGH DIGITAL-BASED CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AS A REINFORCEMENT OF EMPATHY AMONG ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ARTICLE HISTORY
Received : 28-05-2026
Revised : 13-07-2026
Accepted : 17-11-2026

KEYWORDS
Character Education; Digital Children's Literature; Elementary School; Empathy

ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe the implementation of character education through digital-based children's literature to strengthen empathy among elementary school students and examine its impact on students' social relationships at school and at home. This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach at SD Negeri 01 Berjo. Data were obtained from fifth-grade students, teachers, the principal, parents, learning documents, and classroom activities through observations, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and documentation. Data credibility was ensured through source and method triangulation, while data were analysed using an interactive analysis model. The findings indicate that character education was implemented through the selection of digital-based children's literature, interactive reading and listening activities, reflective discussions, and empathy-based assignments. These learning activities enhanced students' emotional engagement and active participation while strengthening empathy, as reflected in increased caring attitudes, respect for others, understanding of others' feelings, and prosocial behaviour. The positive impact extended beyond the classroom, contributing to improved social interactions with peers, teachers, and family members. These findings demonstrate that digital-based children's literature provides an effective medium for integrating literacy learning with character education to foster empathy among elementary school students.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has transformed various aspects of education, including learning practices in elementary schools. Students are increasingly familiar with digital media, creating opportunities to utilize technology not only to improve academic achievement but also to strengthen character development (Maharani & Meynawati, 2024; Prayogi et al., 2025). One form of digital innovation that has attracted attention is digital-based children's literature, which combines text, images, audio, and interactive features to create meaningful learning experiences. Although digital

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media have been widely integrated into literacy instruction, their use has largely emphasized cognitive outcomes, while their potential to cultivate social-emotional competencies, particularly empathy, has received less attention (Mahpudoh et al., 2024; Nikmawati et al., 2021; Zulqadri & Nurgiyantoro, 2023). This condition highlights the need for learning approaches that integrate digital literacy with character education to respond to students' developmental needs in the digital era.

Empathy represents one of the fundamental values in character education because it enables students to understand others' perspectives, appreciate differences, and build harmonious social relationships. Riess (2017) explains that empathy involves the ability to recognize, understand, and respond appropriately to the emotions of others (Riess, 2017). Likewise, Cuff et al. (2016) distinguish empathy into cognitive and affective dimensions, emphasizing that individuals not only comprehend others' feelings but also develop emotional responsiveness toward them. Within the framework of character education, empathy belongs to the domain of *moral feeling*, which bridges moral understanding and moral action (Lickona, 2013). This perspective is consistent with the Character Education Strengthening Policy issued by the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, which emphasizes social care, cooperation, and tolerance as essential values to be developed from the elementary school level (Kemdikbud, 2017). Consequently, strengthening empathy during basic education is essential because this developmental stage provides a strategic opportunity for cultivating positive social behavior through systematic learning experiences.

Digital-based children's literature offers considerable potential as a medium for integrating literacy learning with character education. Children's literature presents narratives that are closely related to children's emotional and social experiences, enabling them to identify with story characters and internalize moral values (Nurgiyantoro, 2024; Klaver, 2021). The integration of digital technology further enriches these experiences through multimodal elements, including text, illustrations, animation, audio, and interactive features that enhance students' cognitive and emotional engagement (Forceville, 2011). Interactive digital storytelling also provides more immersive reading experiences, encouraging children to understand diverse perspectives and reflect on social situations presented in stories (Kucirkova, 2019). Previous studies have shown that digital-based children's literature serves not only as an effective literacy medium but also as a promising approach to developing empathy and other positive character values through meaningful learning experiences (Lisenbee & Ford, 2018; Chelghoum, 2024; Maritim & Buchori, 2025; Alexander, 2017).

Research on digital literacy, children's literature, and character education has increased considerably in recent years. Previous studies have demonstrated that audiovisual-based digital storybooks effectively stimulate empathy among young children (Sumiati & Tirtayani, 2021), while children's literature contributes to character formation among elementary school students (Hafizah et al., 2022; Alimun et al., 2023). Other studies have highlighted the role of digital literature in improving students' emotional understanding and empathy (Kusuma, 2024; Talita, 2024), whereas Suhartina et al. (2024) developed character education-based illustrated stories to support Indonesian language learning. Collectively, these studies confirm the educational value of digital media and children's literature in literacy and character development. However, they predominantly examine digital media, children's literature, or character education as separate areas of inquiry. Limited attention has been given to how digital-based children's literature can be systematically implemented as a character education strategy to strengthen empathy and improve students' social relationships within both school and family contexts. This gap provides the foundation for the present study, which examines the implementation process and its impact on strengthening empathy among elementary school students through digital-based children's literature.

To address these research gaps, this study proposes an integrated approach by positioning digital-based children's literature not merely as a literacy resource but as a medium for implementing character education that strengthens empathy among elementary school students. The novelty of this study lies in three aspects. First, it integrates digital-based children's literature with character education in a structured learning process to foster empathy. Second, it examines not only the implementation process but also the influence of learning activities on students' social interactions in both school and family environments. Third, it provides an in-depth qualitative description of how students develop empathetic attitudes through reflective engagement with digital literary texts, thereby extending previous studies that primarily focused on learning outcomes or literacy achievement.

The study was conducted at SD Negeri 01 Berjo because the school has implemented digital literacy activities that provide opportunities to integrate digital-based children's literature into classroom learning. Preliminary observations

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indicated that, although students demonstrated adequate digital literacy skills, opportunities to explicitly cultivate empathy through digital literary learning remained limited. Learning activities were generally directed toward improving reading comprehension and academic performance, whereas reflective discussions on characters' emotions, perspectives, and moral values had not been systematically incorporated into instructional practices. This context offers an appropriate setting for examining how digital-based children's literature can support the implementation of character education and strengthen students' empathy in authentic learning environments.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to describe the implementation of character education through digital-based children's literature to strengthen empathy among elementary school students and to examine its impact on students' social relationships at school and at home. The findings are expected to enrich the literature on character education, digital literacy, and children's literature by providing empirical evidence regarding the integration of these three domains. In addition, the study offers practical recommendations for teachers and schools in designing meaningful learning experiences that simultaneously enhance literacy competence and foster empathy as an essential character value in elementary education

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method with a naturalistic approach to explore the implementation of character education through digital-based children's literature and its impact on students' empathy. The research was conducted from July to October 2025 in the fifth grade of SD Negeri 01 Berjo, Ngargoyoso District, Karanganyar Regency, during Indonesian language learning activities.

The research participants consisted of one fifth-grade classroom teacher, one principal, 22 fifth-grade students, and 10 parents of the students. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in the implementation of digital-based children's literature learning. The classroom teacher was selected because of responsibility for planning and implementing the learning activities, the principal provided information regarding school policies on character education and digital literacy, all 22 students participated as the primary subjects experiencing the learning process, and 10 parents were selected to provide complementary information regarding changes in students' empathetic behavior at home.

The research data comprised learning processes and outcomes obtained through non-participant observations, semi-structured interviews, empathy questionnaires, and documentation. Classroom observations were conducted while the teacher presented digital stories using a Smart Board. The stories included *Dongeng untuk Santi*, *Cerita dari Tumaritis*, and *Berputar-putar*. Observations focused on the implementation of learning activities, students' participation, and the emergence of empathetic behaviors during classroom interactions.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the classroom teacher, principal, students, and parents to obtain in-depth information regarding the implementation of learning activities and perceived changes in students' empathy. Documentation included teaching modules, digital-based children's literature materials, lesson plans, photographs of learning activities, and teacher reflection notes.

Students' empathy was assessed using a structured questionnaire employing a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was developed based on the empathy dimensions proposed by Riess (2017) and Cuff et al. (2016), including understanding others' feelings (cognitive empathy), emotional responsiveness (affective empathy), caring attitudes, respect for others, and prosocial behavior. These indicators also served as the basis for developing the observation and interview guides, enabling data triangulation across different instruments.

The research instruments consisted of observation sheets, interview guides, empathy questionnaires, and documentation checklists. Prior to data collection, all instruments were reviewed through expert judgment by experts in elementary education and character education to ensure content validity and clarity. The credibility of the findings was further strengthened through source triangulation involving the principal, classroom teacher, students, and parents, as well as method triangulation by comparing data obtained from observations, interviews, questionnaires, and documentation.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The analysis focused on identifying patterns in the implementation of character education through digital-based children's literature and examining the development of students'

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empathy, particularly their ability to understand others' emotions, demonstrate caring attitudes, respect differences, and engage in positive social interactions within school and family environments.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The Implementation of Character Education through Digital-Based Children's Literature as a Reinforcement of Empathy among Elementary School Students

The implementation of character education through digital-based children's literature in this study is understood as a pedagogical process consciously and systematically designed to foster empathy among elementary school students. Digital literature was not only used as a medium for Indonesian language learning but also utilized as a means of internalizing social-emotional values through meaningful reading and listening experiences. The implementation process included the stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation of learning activities that occurred naturally within the classroom context. Each stage demonstrated the teacher's role in directing students' interactions with digital stories so that empathy values could be understood, felt, and manifested in attitudes. The following section presents the research findings related to the implementation of empathy character education through digital-based children's literature in a comprehensive and contextual manner.

Planning

The planning of empathy character education implementation through digital-based children's literature in Grade V of SD Negeri 01 Berjo was carried out in an integrated manner within the learning tools prepared before the semester began. The teacher selected the story titles *Dongeng untuk Santi*, *Cerita dari Tumaritis*, and *Berputar-putar* as the main materials for digital literacy activities. Planning data showed that the teacher prepared teaching modules containing learning outcomes, character-based learning objectives, digital literacy activity steps, empathetic discussion scenarios, and reflective assessments to measure the development of students' empathy attitudes.

Based on the analysis of the digital media used, the teacher demonstrated selective planning regarding the types and sources of media. The media prepared included interactive PDF-based electronic storybooks, animated children's story videos downloaded from learning platforms, and interactive story applications that allowed students to choose storylines. The selection of media was based on its suitability with empathy-learning objectives, ease of access through classroom projectors and teacher devices, and readability appropriate to elementary school students' age levels. In interviews, the teacher stated that the digital media were selected after reviewing the story content, illustrations, and moral messages to ensure alignment with the values of caring, tolerance, and cooperation.

Interviews with informants regarding teacher preparation before teaching indicated the existence of a material preview stage and learning-flow simulation. The teacher first read the entire digital story, marked sections containing emotional conflict, and prepared guiding questions directing students toward exploring the characters' feelings. The teacher also prepared classroom management strategies to anticipate students' emotional responses during discussions. The teacher's statements emphasized that digital media were not used merely for entertainment, but rather as tools to convey empathy values in a structured and purposeful manner.

Analysis of the teaching materials showed that the teacher designed simple worksheets containing columns for identifying characters' emotions, the reasons for those emotions, and the appropriate attitudes that should be demonstrated in similar situations. The teaching materials also included individual reflection guidelines and assignments for sharing personal experiences relevant to the stories. In the planning stage, the selection of digital stories considered the closeness of the themes to students' emotional and social experiences, such as feelings of abandonment, facing differences, and the importance of social support. The teacher selected stories that enabled students to relate narrative content to their everyday school life, allowing the internalization of empathy values to occur contextually and meaningfully.

These findings indicate that the planning stage intentionally integrated digital-based children's literature with empathy-oriented learning objectives, ensuring that character values were systematically embedded before classroom implementation.

Implementation

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The learning implementation was carried out according to the scenario in the teaching module using the Problem Based Learning (PBL) model integrated with the interactive read-aloud method based on digital children's literature. Observations showed that the teacher followed the stages of the model systematically, from problem orientation to reflection. Activities began with apperception and the delivery of learning objectives emphasizing the importance of understanding others' feelings. The teacher then presented social problems emerging in the digital stories as the focus of learning, such as friendship conflicts or feelings of exclusion. The alignment between the teaching module and classroom practice was evident in the sequence of activities, the use of problem-based guiding questions, and the empathy indicators observed throughout the process.

The first stage of PBL was conducted by orienting students toward problems through the presentation of the digital stories *Dongeng untuk Santi*, *Cerita dari Tumaritis*, and *Berputar! Berputar!* using a smart board provided through government assistance and audio speakers. The teacher read the narratives while displaying story illustrations, then paused the presentation at conflict points to raise problem questions related to the characters' feelings and actions. Data on empathy character education appeared in the story *Dongeng untuk Santi* through Atika's attitude of voluntarily reading stories aloud to Santi, who could not see, so that her friend could still enjoy the story and learn together. This friendship demonstrated the ability to understand others' conditions and the willingness to help friends with limitations.

Empathy values were also found in the story *Cerita dari Tumaritis* through interactions among characters who helped one another, discussed problems together, and maintained togetherness while facing various events in the village environment. Mutual support in daily life reflected concern for friends' conditions and the social environment, thereby shaping social empathy among the characters. Another empathy value emerged in the story *Berputar! Berputar!* through the acceptance of Didi as a child with autism. The mother and teacher characters demonstrated patience, care, and assistance in daily activities, illustrating attitudes of understanding individual differences and respecting others.

The second stage, organizing students for learning, was conducted by dividing students into small groups. Students discussed the causes of the conflicts experienced by the characters. They also discussed solutions that demonstrated empathetic attitudes. These solutions included helping friends with limitations, understanding the characters' feelings, and accepting individual differences.The third stage, individual and group investigation, was conducted through worksheets. Students identified the emotions of the characters based on the stories. They also related those emotions to their personal experiences in everyday life.

The fourth stage, developing and presenting work results, was conducted through group presentations. Students presented the results of their discussions in front of the class. They also read reflections about empathetic behaviors that could be applied in daily life. The fifth stage, analysis and evaluation, was conducted through classical discussions. The teacher guided students to conclude the learning outcomes. The teacher reaffirmed empathy values at the end of the lesson. Students understood the importance of understanding others' feelings, helping friends, and respecting differences in social interactions. The learning atmosphere remained conducive, communicative, and participatory throughout all stages of the model implementation. Observation results showed that students paid attention to the presentations enthusiastically, actively participated in group discussions, and confidently expressed opinions during presentations. Interview and questionnaire data revealed that students enjoyed the lessons and found it easier to understand the material because the digital stories helped them imagine situations concretely. Emotional engagement was evident through spontaneous responses, expressions of empathy toward the characters, and students' ability to formulate appropriate attitudes that should be demonstrated in similar situations

Evaluation

The evaluation of empathy character education implementation was conducted through observations of the learning process, interviews with teachers and the principal, and teacher reflections after the activities took place. Observation results showed that the teacher consistently connected the content of digital stories with students' social lives at school through guiding questions and directed discussions. The teacher guided students to assess the characters' actions from the perspectives of empathy, care, and social responsibility. Students were asked to identify the characters' feelings, the causes of those emotions, and alternative attitudes that would demonstrate greater empathy. This process gradually trained students' reflective thinking and moral reasoning skills. A conducive classroom environment was evident from orderly discussions,

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mutual respect for opinions, and minimal negative interruptions. The teacher emphasized that learning activities were directed toward enabling students to view problems from the perspective of others' feelings, rather than solely from their own viewpoints.

Interview results with the teacher indicated that the use of digital-based children's literature was viewed as a character education strategy. This strategy was designed sustainably within the school literacy program. The teacher believed that digital stories supported by visual and audio elements were able to provide stronger emotional experiences. Such stories were considered more engaging compared to conventional printed texts. The principal stated that institutional support was provided through the availability of smart boards and access to digital media as part of learning innovation. Documentation in the form of activity photographs, student reflection sheets, and group work results demonstrated active participation throughout the learning process. Teacher evaluations indicated behavioral changes among students, such as increased concern for friends, greater willingness to help others, and improved ability to express feelings more openly. This information confirms that digital-based children's literature functions as a reinforcement of empathy in elementary school learning.

To strengthen the findings from observations and interviews, this study also used student response questionnaires regarding digital-based children's literature learning. The questionnaires were administered to 15 fifth-grade students at SDN 01 Berjo, Ngargoyoso District, Karanganyar Regency, to determine students' level of interest, their ability to understand characters' feelings, and their encouragement toward caring attitudes after participating in digital story-based learning. The results of the student response questionnaire are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Results of Student Response Questionnaire toward Digital-Based Children's Literature Learning

No	Observed Indicator	Number of Students	Percentage	Category
1	Easier to understand the characters' feelings through digital stories	13	87%	Very Good
2	Learning is more interesting compared to conventional learning	14	93%	Very Good
3	Encouraged to behave more caringly toward friends	12	80%	Good

Source: Research data (2025)

Table 1 shows consistently positive student responses toward digital-based children's literature learning. The highest percentage was found for students' interest in learning (93%), followed by understanding the characters' feelings (87%). Although encouragement to demonstrate caring behaviour obtained the lowest percentage (80%), the result remained within the "Good" category, indicating that students had begun to transfer emotional understanding into prosocial behaviour. These findings suggest that digital stories effectively stimulated both emotional engagement and empathy development. This study also observed the development of students' empathy through aspects of social relationships within school and family environments. Observations were conducted throughout the learning process to identify changes in students' social behavior after participating in digital-based children's literature learning. The results of observations on students' empathy development are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Observation Results of Students' Empathy Development Toward Digital-Based Children's Literature Learning

No	Aspect of Social Relationship	Number of Students	Percentage	Category
1	Demonstrating concern toward friends	13	87%	Very Good
2	Showing greater respect for friends' opinions during discussions	12	80%	Good
3	Demonstrating empathetic attitudes toward teachers	14	93%	Very Good
4	Able to understand parents' feelings at home	11	73%	Good

Source: Research data (2025)

Table 2 demonstrates that students' empathy was consistently reflected across different social relationships. Empathy toward teachers obtained the highest percentage (93%), whereas understanding parents' feelings showed the lowest percentage (73%). Although family-related empathy developed at a relatively lower level, all observed aspects were classified as Good or Very Good. These findings indicate that empathy developed not only within classroom interactions but also extended to students' broader social environments.

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The research findings show that students learned empathy through direct interaction with digital-based children's literature that presented emotional experiences concretely and meaningfully. During the learning process, students observed story content, characters' behaviors, and responses to social conflicts presented in digital texts. These observations encouraged students to understand the characters' feelings and the situations they faced, thereby generating strong emotional involvement. The impact was evident in students' tendency to imitate positive behaviors found in the stories, such as helping friends, respecting differences, and demonstrating concern in daily interactions. This process indicates that digital literature functions not only as a literacy medium but also as an effective means of shaping and strengthening students' empathetic behavior through contextual learning experiences.

The Impact of Digital-Based Children's Literature Learning on the Formation of Empathy Character among Elementary School Students

The research findings are presented to provide a comprehensive description of the impact of digital-based children's literature learning on the formation of empathy character. The data presentation is based on the context of students' social relationships, namely relationships with classmates, teachers, parents, and the school environment. This categorization shows that empathy developed through digital literacy experiences is not only visible in classroom interactions but also extends to various social environments of students. The following section presents the research findings systematically based on the results of questionnaires, observations, interviews, and documentation.

Students

The impact of digital-based children's literature learning on peer relationships was evident in students' increased attention toward their friends' feelings. Questionnaire results showed that most students were in the "often" and "always" categories in terms of paying attention to friends' feelings, respecting differences of opinion, using polite language, and helping friends who faced difficulties. These data indicate the development of affective empathy reflected in real behavior. Social relationships among students became more supportive, dialogic, and characterized by fewer conflicts.

Observation results showed changes in students' behavior during peer interactions after the learning activities had been consistently implemented. Students listened more attentively, interrupted one another less frequently, and the classroom became more participatory and inclusive. Emotional involvement with story characters was reflected in students' attitudes toward their peers. The frequency of relevant responses increased, empathetic expressions were used more often, and disruptive behaviors decreased. Questionnaire results also showed improvement in indicators related to understanding feelings and caring attitudes.

Further observations revealed a reduction in mocking behavior and demeaning jokes. Students who had previously been passive began to express opinions more confidently because they felt appreciated. Group work became more cooperative with fair task distribution. Spontaneous responses, such as helping friends, increasingly emerged without teacher direction. This indicates the development of both cognitive and affective empathy in classroom social interactions.

Interview results with students indicated more empathetic attitudes. Students no longer laughed at their friends' mistakes but instead helped them correct them. Awareness that friends also have feelings increased significantly. Interviews with teachers reinforced these findings by showing greater social sensitivity among students. Teachers observed that students responded more quickly when classmates experienced difficulties.

Documentation in the form of teacher notes and students' reflective assignments supported these findings. The notes indicated a decrease in minor conflicts among students. Reflective assignments contained empathetic expressions such as the desire to help and understand friends' feelings. This evidence demonstrates consistency between students' words and behaviors. The integration of the data indicates that digital-based children's literature learning contributed significantly to the development of empathy and the strengthening of students' social relationships in a sustainable manner.

Teachers

The impact on students' relationships with teachers was reflected in increased respect, patience, and openness in communication. Questionnaire results showed that most students were in the "often" and "always" categories in terms of appreciating teachers' efforts, patiently listening to explanations, feeling comfortable communicating, and being confident in asking questions. These findings indicate the development of students' cognitive empathy in understanding teachers' roles. The learning climate became more positive because interactions occurred with mutual respect.

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Observation results showed changes in teachers' roles and strategies after digital literature learning was implemented. Teachers were no longer focused solely on delivering material but also on internalizing values through dialogue and reflection. Open-ended questions were used more frequently to encourage understanding of characters' feelings and their connection to students' experiences. Two-way interaction increased compared to previous learning practices that tended to be one-way. The learning approach became more humanistic and reflective.

Classroom observations showed that teachers became more sensitive to students' emotional responses. Students' expressions were addressed with appropriate reinforcement or clarification. Teachers provided opportunities for students to express opinions without fear. Interviews with teachers confirmed that the focus of learning shifted toward students' ability to feel and interpret situations. Teachers also began assessing changes in attitudes, not merely academic achievement.

Teachers experienced increased competence in utilizing learning technology. Digital media encouraged creativity in selecting contextual and engaging teaching materials. Teachers felt that the classroom atmosphere became livelier and that students were more focused. The integration of technology also encouraged teachers' ongoing professional development. This indicates that the impact of learning was not limited to students but also extended to teachers.

Documentation in the form of lesson plans and reflection notes showed the integration of empathy values into learning activities. Teaching tools included character indicators in addition to literacy aspects. Anecdotal records indicated changes toward more comprehensive evaluation patterns. These data reinforce that digital literature learning had an impact on teacher professionalism. Teachers acted as facilitators who developed literacy while simultaneously shaping students' empathy in a sustainable manner.

Parents

Digital literature learning also impacted students' relationships with their parents at home. Questionnaire results showed dominant responses on the "often" and "always" scales for statements such as, "I try to understand my parents' feelings when they are tired," "I appreciate my parents' sacrifices in meeting my needs," and "I am more open in expressing my feelings to my parents." Other statements such as "I help with household chores without being asked" and "I respect my parents' decisions even when they differ from my wishes" also received high scores. These data indicate that empathy formed in the classroom was internalized within the family environment. Changes in students' behavior were visible in increased care and responsibility at home.

Observation results not only showed behavioral changes among students in the classroom but also indicated impacts extending into the family environment. Students appeared more likely to retell digital stories learned at school. Story sections involving emotional aspects became the most frequently shared. During reflection activities, students were able to connect empathy values with experiences at home. These responses became early indicators of value transfer from school to family.

Observations of students' reflective assignments revealed statements related to behavior at home. Students wrote commitments to be more patient with younger siblings or to help their parents. The emerging narratives demonstrated the development of emotional awareness in daily life. The connection between literacy experiences and real-life practices strengthened the meaning of learning. This process indicates that empathy values did not stop at understanding but were implemented in action.

Interview results with parents further reinforced these findings. Parents stated that their children began to show greater concern toward family members. Children became more sensitive to siblings' feelings and attempted to provide comforting responses. Parents also observed improved communication at home. Digital literature learning triggered reflective dialogue between children and parents.

Interviews with teachers also strengthened these findings. Teachers received feedback from parents regarding changes in students' behaviour at home. This information demonstrated a connection between learning at school and behavior within the family. Communication between teachers and parents became more open. Students' character development became a shared concern.

Documentation in the form of parents' messages and school communication records served as supporting evidence. Parents expressed appreciation for the digital literacy program implemented by the school. The program was considered not only to increase reading interest but also to shape children's character. This evidence demonstrates consistency between observations at school and reports from home. Changes in students' behaviour were monitored continuously. The integration

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of observation, interview, and documentation results indicates a positive impact of learning on family relationships. Empathy values instilled at school were reinforced through practice at home. Children's interactions with parents became warmer and more caring. Synergy between school and family played an important role in character formation. This process strengthened the sustainability of students' empathy character education. These results demonstrate that empathy acquired through classroom learning was transferred into the family context, indicating continuity between school-based character education and students' everyday behaviour

Learning Environment

The impact of learning was visible in students increased social concern and sense of belonging. Questionnaire results showed that most students selected scales 3 and 4 on indicators related to concern for cleanliness, active participation in social activities, and appreciation for school facilities. High responses also appeared in aspects of tolerance toward different backgrounds and the desire to contribute to school improvement. These findings confirm that empathy developed not only in interpersonal relationships but also in broader social awareness. Learning became more inclusive, orderly, and participatory as a result of digital-based children's literature.

Observation results showed changes in the school's social climate toward a more conducive environment. Interactions among students inside and outside the classroom became more positive, especially during breaks and collaborative work across subjects. The intensity of minor conflicts, such as teasing or fighting over turns, decreased. Students became more accustomed to using polite language and respecting others in various activities. These conditions reflect the beginning formation of an empathetic culture within the school environment.

Observations of literacy activities showed increased student participation in shared reading programs. Enthusiasm toward digital reading materials encouraged other teachers to adopt similar approaches. The learning environment became more interactive and oriented toward character strengthening. The integration of empathy values was also visible in routine activities such as morning assemblies and classroom discussions. This demonstrates the systematic strengthening of a positive school culture.

Interview results with teachers reinforced these findings. Teachers stated that the program not only improved literacy but also fostered concern among students. Institutional support was reflected in a calmer and more communicative school atmosphere. Interviews with other teachers indicated collaborative effects in the implementation of learning practices. These good practices began to be adopted by other classes to instill values of cooperation and tolerance.

School documentation showed that the use of digital media had been integrated into academic programs and literacy activities. School agendas and activity photographs demonstrated students' active participation in digital-based learning. Teacher evaluation meetings also recorded a decrease in minor violations among students. These data confirm that the impact of learning was not merely individual in nature. The changes that occurred contributed to the formation of a more humanistic and empathetic school culture.

Discussion

The implementation of empathy character education through digital-based children's literature was carried out in a planned, contextual, and reflective manner. The findings demonstrate that digital literature functioned not only as a literacy medium but also as a pedagogical tool that facilitated students' emotional engagement with story characters. Students were encouraged to understand, experience, and reflect on the characters' emotions before relating these experiences to their own social interactions. This process explains why empathy was strengthened throughout the learning activities. Rather than receiving moral values passively, students actively constructed empathy through guided discussions, reflection, and interaction with digital narratives. The visual and audio elements embedded in digital stories further supported emotional immersion, making abstract values more concrete and meaningful for elementary school students. These findings are consistent with Abni et al. (2024), who stated that digital media enhance affective engagement through contextual visual and audio support. The present study extends this perspective by demonstrating that emotional engagement becomes effective in strengthening empathy only when it is accompanied by systematic teacher facilitation and reflective learning activities.

At the planning stage, teachers positioned digital-based children's literature as an integral component of character-oriented learning rather than merely as supplementary reading material. The careful selection of stories portraying friendship, caring, tolerance, and respect for differences ensured that the learning content reflected situations familiar to students. This

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JURNAL ILMIAH ILMU PENDIDIKAN DAN SOSIAL
ISSN: 2086-6135 E-ISSN: 2541-612x
Volume 15 No. 4 Desember 2026 https://ejournal.unibabwi.ac.id/index.php/sosioedukasi/index

contextual relevance enabled students to connect story events with their own experiences, thereby facilitating the internalization of empathy values. In addition, the preparation of guiding questions, reflection activities, and worksheets indicated that empathy development had been intentionally designed before classroom implementation began. These findings are in line with Nurgiyantoro (2024), who emphasized the importance of representing children's emotional and social experiences in literature. Likewise, Isnaini et al. (2024) reported that digital media increase students' engagement and emotional involvement during learning. The present findings suggest that careful instructional planning is a determining factor in transforming digital literature from a literacy resource into an effective medium for character education.

During the implementation stage, digital-based interactive read-aloud activities supported by smart boards created opportunities for students to engage in empathetic dialogue through questioning, discussion, and collaborative reflection. Students did not simply identify the emotions of story characters but were encouraged to analyze the causes of those emotions, evaluate alternative responses, and compare the situations with their own daily experiences. Such activities stimulated both emotional involvement and critical reflection, allowing students to gradually construct empathy through meaningful social interaction. This process explains how empathy developed from cognitive understanding into observable behaviour during classroom discussions and group activities. These findings align with Alexander's (2017) concept of digital storytelling, which highlights the importance of digital narratives in creating meaningful learning experiences. They also support Kucirkova's (2019) view that literature provides opportunities for children to understand multiple perspectives and develop empathy through narrative experiences.

Students learned empathy by observing the behaviours demonstrated by story characters and subsequently applying these behaviours during classroom interactions. Caring, cooperation, tolerance, and respect portrayed in the stories served as behavioural models that students observed, remembered, discussed, and imitated in authentic situations. The repeated cycle of observation, reflection, teacher feedback, and peer interaction gradually strengthened students' empathetic behaviour. This finding indicates that empathy did not emerge spontaneously but developed through continuous social learning processes that connected narrative experiences with real-life practice. Such findings are consistent with Social Learning Theory proposed by Bandura (1997), which explains that individuals acquire social behaviour through observation, imitation, reinforcement, and repeated practice.

The findings further indicate that students developed both cognitive and affective dimensions of empathy throughout the learning process. Students demonstrated cognitive empathy by understanding the perspectives and emotions of story characters, while affective empathy was reflected in their emotional concern and willingness to help others. The integration of these two dimensions enabled students to move beyond understanding empathy conceptually toward expressing it through prosocial behaviour in classroom interactions. Moreover, reflective discussions encouraged students to evaluate their own behaviour and consider more empathetic responses in similar situations. These findings are consistent with the concepts of empathy proposed by Cuff et al. (2016) and Riess (2017), which emphasize that empathy encompasses both understanding others' emotional states and responding appropriately to those emotions. The findings also indicate that digital-based children's literature contributes not only to empathy development but also to students' broader moral awareness.

The impact of learning became evident in students' relationships with peers and teachers. Students demonstrated greater willingness to help classmates, respect different opinions, cooperate during group work, and communicate more politely with teachers. These behavioural changes suggest that empathy had been internalized into students' everyday social interactions rather than remaining at the level of emotional understanding alone. This finding also indicates that digital-based children's literature facilitated the transfer of empathy from narrative experiences to authentic interpersonal relationships. Similar improvements in students' character development have been reported by Hafizah et al. (2022) and Rosid (2021). Likewise, the increasingly dialogic and humanistic relationships between students and teachers support the findings of Lisenbee and Ford (2018) and Iskandar et al. (2023), who emphasized the importance of literature-based learning in strengthening meaningful teacher–student interactions.

The influence of digital-based children's literature extended beyond classroom learning into students' family and school environments. Increased caring attitudes, openness, responsibility, and sensitivity toward family members indicate that empathy developed at school was transferred into students' daily lives. This transfer demonstrates that meaningful character education requires opportunities for students to apply empathy across different social contexts rather than only

Sosioedukasi
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within classroom activities. These findings are consistent with Sumiati and Tirtayani (2021), who reported that digital storytelling contributes to children's social-emotional development beyond formal learning settings.

The broader impact was also reflected in the development of a more inclusive and empathetic school environment. Reduced peer conflicts, increased participation in collaborative activities, and stronger respect for diversity indicate that empathy gradually became part of the school's social culture. The representation of diversity and inclusive relationships within digital stories encouraged students to appreciate individual differences and develop greater social awareness. These findings are consistent with Nugrahani et al. (2020) and Maharani and Meynawati (2024), who highlighted the contribution of character-based literacy programs to positive school culture. Furthermore, the representation of diverse characters and social situations supports the findings of Kurniawan et al. (2024), who emphasized that inclusive narratives strengthen students' understanding of others' feelings and social conditions.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings demonstrate that empathy was strengthened because digital-based children's literature was integrated with systematic reflection, teacher facilitation, collaborative discussion, and authentic social practice. The learning process enabled students to integrate cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of empathy, allowing them not only to recognize others' emotions but also to translate this understanding into caring behaviour. This finding has important implications for elementary education, suggesting that digital literacy programs should be designed to foster students' social-emotional competencies alongside reading skills. These findings are consistent with Widayati et al. (2024). The present study is further supported by Krissandi (2021), Latuconsina et al. (2022), Nurmalia (2023), Noviarini et al. (2024), Ummah and Saputra (2025), Nugrahani et al. (2019), Widayati et al. (2023), Kurniasih et al. (2026), and Sutarti et al. (2026), all of whom emphasize that digital literature provides meaningful and participatory learning experiences that contribute to the sustainable development of empathy and character among elementary school students

CONCLUSION

The implementation of character education through digital-based children's literature in Grade V of SD Negeri 01 Berjo was carried out through interactive read-aloud activities, group discussions, reflective dialogues, and the use of digital stories closely related to students' social-emotional experiences. Teachers played an active role in facilitating students' interactions with the stories, enabling empathy values to be understood, experienced, reflected upon, and internalized. The findings demonstrate that this learning approach strengthened students' empathy, as reflected in increased caring attitudes, mutual respect, polite communication, and prosocial behavior in their interactions with peers, teachers, and family members. In addition, the integration of digital-based children's literature contributed to the development of a more humanistic and inclusive learning environment, indicating its potential as an effective strategy for simultaneously promoting literacy and character education in elementary schools.

From a practical perspective, these findings suggest that elementary school teachers and schools can integrate digital-based children's literature into literacy programs by combining interactive storytelling, reflective discussions, and collaborative learning activities to foster students' empathy in authentic social contexts. However, this study was conducted in a single elementary school involving one fifth-grade class within a relatively limited period; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all educational settings. Future research is recommended to involve a larger number of schools and participants and to employ longitudinal designs to examine the long-term sustainability of empathy development through digital-based children's literature.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

During the preparation of this work the authors used Artificial Intelligence (AI) in order to improve the language and readability of the manuscript. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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