



Themes and values in pre-service teachers' digital storybooks: A content analysis for elementary English education

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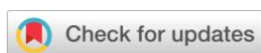
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ABSTRACT

Background: Digital storytelling has emerged as an innovative pedagogical approach that promotes meaningful learning experiences and enhances student engagement.

Objectives: This study examined the themes and values embedded in digital storybooks created by pre-service teachers and explored their implications for teaching English in elementary education.

Methods: Using a qualitative content analysis design, ten digital storybooks were purposively selected based on predetermined inclusion criteria. Data were analyzed through directed content analysis using an adapted thematic analysis framework.

Results: Findings revealed nine major themes. The most prominent were exploration-related themes (3 out of 10 storybooks, 30%) and family-sharing themes (3 out of 10 storybooks, 30%), followed by community-oriented themes (2 out of 10 storybooks, 20%). Other themes included parent-child communication and financial responsibility. The digital storybooks also embodied core values such as respect, compassion, humility, responsibility, tolerance, forgiveness, and commitment to the common good.

Conclusions: These findings suggest that digital storybooks can serve as effective resources for integrating language development, values education, and socio-emotional learning in elementary English classrooms. The study is limited by its small sample size and context-specific dataset. Further research should include a larger dataset and cross-cultural analysis to strengthen the generalizability of findings.

Keywords: digital storytelling, digital storybooks, elementary English education, pre-service teachers, themes, values.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading proficiency is widely recognized as a fundamental skill that underpins academic achievement, lifelong learning, and active participation in society. However, many education systems worldwide continue to face challenges in ensuring that children develop adequate reading skills during the primary years. One in every two Grade 5 students does not meet the minimum reading proficiency level expected for their grade, according to the 2024 Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) assessment. This finding highlights persistent concerns regarding foundational literacy and suggests that many learners are not acquiring the reading competencies necessary for academic success. Similar concerns have been reported globally. The [World Bank \(2022\)](#) estimates that learning poverty—the inability to read and understand a simple text by age ten—has increased substantially in low- and middle-income countries. Likewise, the [Pisa \(2023\)](#) reported a decline in reading performance among students participating in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), indicating that literacy challenges remain a global educational concern.

The increasing demands of 21st-century education amplify the urgency of addressing literacy challenges. English language proficiency is essential for accessing knowledge, participating in academic discourse, and succeeding in a globalized world ([UNESCO, 2023](#)). Consequently, educators are encouraged to adopt innovative instructional approaches that enhance learners' engagement and language development. One promising approach is digital storytelling, which integrates narrative construction with multimedia technologies to create meaningful and interactive learning experiences. Research has demonstrated that digital storytelling can improve learners' motivation, engagement, communication skills, and language proficiency while fostering creativity and critical thinking ([John & Ukpai, 2025](#); [Liu et al., 2018](#)). Furthermore, systematic reviews have shown that digital storytelling contributes positively to language acquisition, digital literacy, and collaborative learning across educational contexts ([Nasir, Halim, & Arsad, 2024](#)).

Previous studies have primarily focused on the effectiveness of digital storytelling as a pedagogical tool. For example, [Mukarromah et al. \(2025\)](#) found that students who created digital stories demonstrated improvements in narrative writing skills, vocabulary development, and critical thinking. Similarly, [Kurniawan & Wijayaningsih \(2025\)](#) reported that digital storytelling supports the development of speaking by enabling learners to record, review, and refine their oral language performance. Beyond language learning outcomes, researchers have also examined the educational content embedded in children's literature and digital narratives. [Gultekin & May \(2022\)](#) analyzed picture books and identified major thematic representations that influence children's perceptions of culture and identity. Likewise, [Ince \(2021\)](#) found that themes related to children's and families' experiences were dominant in the preschool literature. Belda-Medina & Goddard (2024) further demonstrated that digital stories created by pre-service teachers can promote language learning while simultaneously conveying diverse cultural perspectives. Moreover, [Lin, Ab Kadir, & Kaur \(2025\)](#) emphasized that literature serves as an important medium for transmitting moral, social, and cultural values to young learners.

Despite these contributions, a significant gap remains in the literature. Most existing studies have concentrated on the effectiveness of digital storytelling in

improving language skills, learner engagement, or instructional outcomes. Other studies have examined themes and values within published children's literature. However, limited attention has been given to the thematic and value-based content embedded in digital storybooks created by pre-service teachers. Consequently, little is known about the themes and values that future teachers integrate into their digital narratives and how these may contribute to English language teaching in elementary education.

This study aimed to: 1) Identify the themes embedded in digital storybooks created by pre-service teachers; 2) Examine the values represented in the digital storybooks; and 3) Explore the implications of these themes and values for teaching English in elementary education.

This study offers a distinct contribution by shifting the focus from learning outcomes to content analysis. Rather than examining whether digital storytelling improves language performance, the study investigates the themes and values embedded in digital storybooks produced by pre-service teachers. Using a qualitative content analysis, the study provides insights into how future educators construct narratives that integrate language learning with character formation and socio-emotional development. This focus represents a novel perspective within digital storytelling research, particularly in the context of elementary English education.

METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach using directed content analysis to examine the themes and values embedded in digital storybooks created by pre-service teachers in the Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEED) Department, College of Education, Mindanao State University – General Santos City. Content analysis was selected because it allows researchers to systematically identify, categorize, and interpret recurring themes and value representations within textual and visual narratives.

Data Source and Sampling

The data source consisted of digital storybooks developed by pre-service teachers enrolled in the Bachelor's in Elementary Education (BEED) program at the College of Education, Mindanao State University–General Santos City.

Purposive sampling was employed to select the storybooks for analysis. Predetermined inclusion criteria guided the selection: (a) a BEED pre-service teacher created the digital storybook, (b) the storybook was written in English, (c) it contained complete narrative elements, including characters, setting, and plot, (d) it incorporated visual illustrations, and (e) the digital file was accessible and complete for analysis. Storybooks that were incomplete, duplicated, or did not meet these criteria were excluded. Based on these criteria, ten digital storybooks were selected and subjected to detailed content analysis.

Research Instrument

The study utilized an adapted content analysis framework based on [Turhan \(2020\)](#). The framework guided the identification and categorization of themes and values present in the digital storybooks. The instrument focused on examining

narrative content, character interactions, plot development, illustrations, and moral messages embedded in the stories.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed a multi-stage coding process. First, all selected digital storybooks were read and reviewed repeatedly to gain familiarity with the content. During this stage, significant textual and visual elements related to themes and values were noted. Second, open coding was conducted to identify meaningful units of analysis, including recurring ideas, events, character actions, and moral messages. Third, similar codes were grouped into broader categories through axial coding. Related categories were then clustered to form overarching themes and values represented across the storybooks. Finally, selective coding was employed to refine, organize, and interpret the final themes and values that emerged from the dataset. Frequency counts were also generated to determine the prevalence of each identified theme across the ten digital storybooks.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the credibility and dependability of the findings, researcher triangulation was employed throughout the coding process. Two researchers independently reviewed the coding categories, themes, and value classifications. Any discrepancies in interpretation were discussed until consensus was reached.

An audit trail was maintained to document coding decisions, category development, and analytical procedures. This process strengthened the dependability and confirmability of the findings by ensuring transparency and consistency throughout the analysis.

Furthermore, prolonged engagement with the data through repeated readings and re-examination of the storybooks enhanced the credibility of the thematic interpretations.

RESULTS

Themes Embedded in the Digital Storybooks

Analysis of the ten digital storybooks revealed four major thematic categories: family values, exploration and adventure, prosocial behavior and community engagement, and personal development (Table 1). Among these categories, family-related themes emerged most frequently, appearing in four of the ten storybooks (40%). These themes emphasized sibling relationships, family traditions, sharing behaviors, and communication between parents and children. The prominence of family-oriented themes suggests that pre-service teachers recognize the family as an important context for children's social, emotional, and moral development.

Exploration and adventure ranked second among the thematic categories, appearing in three storybooks (30%). These narratives highlighted children's curiosity, independence, friendship, and problem-solving abilities. Stories within this category portrayed young characters actively engaging with their surroundings, overcoming challenges, and learning through experience. The presence of these themes reflects the importance of fostering creativity, autonomy, and resilience among elementary learners.

Themes associated with prosocial behavior and community engagement were identified in two storybooks (20%). These stories emphasized kindness, empathy, cooperation, and collective responsibility toward others. The narratives encouraged

helping behaviors and demonstrated how individuals can contribute positively to their communities. Such themes align with the broader educational goal of promoting social-emotional learning and responsible citizenship among young learners.

The remaining storybook (10%) focused on personal development, particularly financial responsibility and wise decision-making. This theme highlighted the importance of making thoughtful choices and understanding the consequences of one's actions. Although less frequently represented, this finding indicates that pre-service teachers also recognize the value of introducing practical life skills through digital storytelling.

Overall, the findings suggest that pre-service teachers construct digital narratives that emphasize positive interpersonal relationships, character formation, and social responsibility. Across the storybooks, themes were primarily centered on helping others, maintaining family relationships, exploring new experiences, and developing responsible behavior. These patterns indicate that digital storybooks can serve not only as language-learning materials but also as resources for promoting values education and socio-emotional development in elementary classrooms.

Values Embedded in the Digital Storybooks

Content analysis revealed that the digital storybooks incorporated a range of moral and social values (Table 2). The most frequently represented value category was respect and care for others, which appeared across the majority of the storybooks. This value was reflected through acts of kindness, sharing, cooperation, empathy, and concern for the well-being of family members, friends, and community members. The consistent presence of this value indicates that pre-service teachers place considerable emphasis on fostering positive interpersonal relationships and prosocial behavior among young learners.

Another prominent value category was self-respect, humility, self-discipline, and responsibility. These values were reflected in characters who demonstrated accountability for their actions, avoided selfish behavior, and made decisions based on fairness and consideration for others. Several storybooks portrayed situations in which characters learned the importance of honesty, responsibility, and self-control, suggesting that pre-service teachers view character formation as an essential component of elementary education.

The analysis also identified values related to commitment to something greater than oneself. These values were represented through themes of hope, perseverance, purpose, and personal growth. Characters often demonstrated determination to improve their circumstances or contribute positively to their communities. Such representations highlight the importance of encouraging learners to develop aspirations and a sense of responsibility beyond individual interests.

In addition, values associated with caring for other living things and the environment emerged in selected storybooks. These narratives encouraged environmental awareness, appreciation of nature, and responsible stewardship of resources. Although less frequently represented than other value categories, these findings suggest an awareness of the role of literature in promoting environmental responsibility among young learners.

Taken together, the identified values demonstrate that digital storybooks created by pre-service teachers extend beyond language instruction and entertainment. They function as educational resources that support moral development, social-emotional

learning, and character education. The integration of these values into narrative contexts enables learners to engage with ethical concepts in meaningful, developmentally appropriate ways.

Table 1. Distribution of Themes Identified in the Digital Storybooks

Theme Category	Specific Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Prosocial Behavior	Kindness in Times of Pandemic	1	10%
Community Engagement	Hope for New Beginning in the Community	1	10%
Exploration and Adventure	Exploration and Resolving Challenges in the Community	1	10%
Exploration and Adventure	Exploration with Friends	1	10%
Exploration and Adventure	Independence in Exploration	1	10%
Family Values	Giving Importance to Family Culture Through Sharing	1	10%
Family Values	Showing Love to Siblings Through Sharing	2	20%
Family Values	Importance of Communication Between Parent and Child	1	10%
Personal Development	Importance of Spending Money Wisely	1	10%
Total		10	100%

Table 2. Moral Values Identified in the Digital Storybooks

Digital Book No.	Title of the Digital Book	Moral Values										Overall Values
		Commitment to something greater than oneself	Self-respect, with humility, self-discipline, and responsibility			Respect and care for other people	Caring for other living things and the environment					
			Aspect									
			A	B	C		A	B	C	A	B	
1	The Girl Who Planted Kindness							√	√	√		Respect and care for other people
2	S.I.N.D.A.W. Special Innovation to Nurture and Develop Amazing Wonders of Crayons			√								Commitment to something greater than oneself
3	Pepe the Explorer									√		Respect and care for other people
4	To Aunt Lyns House									√		Respect and care for other people
5	Alfur's Adventure for the Week								√			Respect and care for other people
6	Kong & Kayto								√		√	Respect and Care for other People
7	A Loving Brother James									√		Respect and care for other people
8	The Four Brothers and the Cookie Jar					√						Self-respect, with humility, self-discipline and responsibility
9	The Shapes Behind Christmas										√	Respect and care for other people
10	The Math Hero and The Superstar Writer (The Old Man and His Money)					√						Self-respect, with humility, self-discipline and responsibility

Note. Check marks (√) indicate the presence of value indicators identified during the coding process. The "Overall Values" column represents the dominant value category reflected in each digital storybook.

Table 3. Distribution of Values Identified in the Digital Storybooks

Value Category	Frequency	Percentage
Respect and Care for Other People	7	70%
Self-respect, Humility, Self-discipline and Responsibility	2	20%
Commitment to Something Greater than Oneself	1	10%
Caring for Other Living Things and the Environment	2	20%

Table 3 presents the distribution of values identified in the digital storybooks created by pre-service teachers. Among the four value categories, respect and care for others emerged as the most dominant, appearing in 7 out of 10 storybooks (70%). This value was reflected in acts of kindness, empathy, sharing, cooperation, and concern for others' well-being. The prominence of this value suggests that pre-service teachers place considerable emphasis on fostering positive interpersonal relationships and prosocial behavior among young learners.

The value category of self-respect, humility, self-discipline, and responsibility was identified in two storybooks (20%). These narratives highlighted accountability, self-control, and responsible decision-making, indicating the importance of character development and personal growth in children's learning experiences. Similarly, caring for other living things and the environment was represented in two storybooks (20%), emphasizing environmental awareness, stewardship, and appreciation for nature.

Commitment to something greater than oneself appeared in one storybook (10%). This value was associated with purpose, perseverance, and the pursuit of meaningful goals beyond personal interests. Although less frequently represented, it reflects the potential of digital storybooks to promote broader moral and ethical perspectives among learners.

Overall, the findings indicate that the digital storybooks predominantly emphasized values related to social responsibility, empathy, and respect for others. These patterns suggest that pre-service teachers intentionally integrate moral and character education into their digital narratives, enabling digital storybooks to function not only as language-learning resources but also as tools for values formation and socio-emotional development in elementary education.

DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that family values, exploration and adventure, prosocial behavior and community engagement, and personal development were the dominant thematic categories represented in the digital storybooks created by pre-service teachers. The prominence of these themes suggests that pre-service teachers intentionally selected topics that are meaningful, relatable, and developmentally appropriate for elementary learners. Rather than focusing solely on language instruction, the digital narratives reflected children's everyday experiences, social relationships, and moral development. This finding supports Kılınçcı & Bayraktar (2021), who emphasized that children's literature contributes not only to literacy development but also to learners' emotional, cognitive, and social growth.

The dominance of family-related themes may be attributed to the central role of family experiences in children's lives. Stories involving sibling relationships, family traditions, sharing, and communication provide familiar contexts through which children can connect personal experiences with narrative content. Similarly,

exploration and adventure themes reflected children's natural curiosity and desire to interact with the world around them. These findings suggest that pre-service teachers recognize the importance of contextualizing learning experiences within situations that children can easily understand and relate to. This observation is consistent with [Daulay et al. \(2023\)](#), who argued that theme-based learning grounded in children's real-life experiences enhances engagement and meaningful learning.

Another notable finding is the presence of community-oriented and prosocial themes, including kindness, empathy, cooperation, and helping behaviors. These themes indicate that pre-service teachers view digital storytelling not merely as a language-learning tool but also as a medium for fostering positive social values. The integration of such themes may be particularly important in contemporary educational settings where social-emotional learning has become an increasingly significant educational objective. Furthermore, digital storytelling enables learners to visualize characters, events, and social interactions, making abstract values more concrete and meaningful. This supports the findings of [Demirbaşı & Şahin \(2022\)](#), who found that digital stories encourage active engagement and help learners establish meaningful connections between narrative experiences and real-world situations.

The findings also revealed that respect and care for other people was the most frequently represented value category. This predominance suggests that pre-service teachers place considerable emphasis on interpersonal relationships, empathy, compassion, and cooperation when creating educational materials for young learners. Other values, including self-respect, humility, self-discipline, responsibility, commitment to something greater than oneself, and caring for the environment, were also represented, although less frequently. These findings are consistent with [Lin et al. \(2025\)](#), who emphasized that literature serves as an important medium for transmitting moral, social, and cultural values to children. Through narrative experiences, learners are exposed to ethical situations that encourage reflection on appropriate behaviors, social responsibility, and respect for others ([Gunawardena & Brown, 2021](#); [Swanson, 2016](#)).

Beyond identifying themes and values, the findings highlight the broader educational role of digital storybooks. Previous studies have frequently focused on the effectiveness of digital storytelling in improving language-related outcomes such as speaking, writing, engagement, and motivation ([Safii, Tjalau, & Pakaya, 2025](#); [Yu & Zeng, 2026](#)). However, the present study demonstrates that digital storybooks also function as value-laden educational texts that communicate cultural beliefs, social expectations, and moral principles. This finding extends the existing literature by shifting attention from instructional outcomes toward the content and educational messages embedded within digital narratives. In this regard, digital storytelling may be viewed not only as a technological innovation but also as a pedagogical approach that integrates language learning, values education, and socio-emotional development.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support sociocultural views of learning, which emphasize that language, narratives, and social interactions play a significant role in children's meaning-making processes. The themes and values identified in the digital storybooks reflect how pre-service teachers construct narratives that connect language learning with social and cultural experiences. Consequently, digital storybooks should be understood not merely as instructional

materials but as cultural artifacts that influence learners' understanding of identity, relationships, responsibility, and community participation.

The findings also have practical implications for teacher education. Since the digital storybooks addressed both linguistic and moral learning objectives, teacher preparation programs should provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to develop competencies in digital storytelling, narrative construction, and values integration. Strengthening these competencies may help future teachers design instructional materials that simultaneously support language acquisition, character education, and learner engagement.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study analyzed only ten digital storybooks produced by pre-service teachers from a single institution, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts. Second, the study focused exclusively on content analysis and did not investigate how learners interpret, respond to, or learn from the identified themes and values. Third, factors that may influence story creation, such as pre-service teachers' cultural backgrounds, personal experiences, technological skills, and pedagogical beliefs, were not examined. These variables may have shaped the themes and values represented in the digital storybooks and warrant further investigation in future studies. Future research may involve larger datasets, multiple institutions, and cross-cultural comparisons to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how digital storytelling contributes to language learning and values education.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the themes and values embedded in digital storybooks created by pre-service teachers and explored their implications for teaching English in elementary education. The findings revealed four major thematic categories: family values, exploration and adventure, prosocial behavior and community engagement, and personal development. Among these categories, family-related themes emerged as the most dominant, followed by exploration and adventure themes. These findings indicate that pre-service teachers tend to create narratives that reflect children's everyday experiences, interpersonal relationships, and opportunities for character development.

The study also found that respect and care for other people was the most frequently represented value category, followed by self-respect, humility, self-discipline, responsibility, commitment to something greater than oneself, and caring for other living things and the environment. The presence of these values suggests that digital storybooks serve not only as language-learning materials but also as tools for promoting moral development, social-emotional learning, and values education among elementary learners.

The findings contribute to the growing body of research on digital storytelling by demonstrating that digital storybooks created by pre-service teachers contain meaningful thematic and value-based content that may support English language learning in elementary classrooms. Beyond developing language skills, digital storytelling offers opportunities to integrate character education and culturally relevant learning experiences into instructional materials. Therefore, digital

storybooks may be considered valuable educational resources that support both linguistic and holistic learner development.

AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

During manuscript preparation, the authors used Generative AI, such as ChatGPT and Grammarly (Grammarly Inc.), for language editing, including improving grammar, sentence structure, readability, and the overall clarity of the manuscript. The authors maintain full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, integrity, and final content of this manuscript, including all interpretations, analyses, and conclusions presented.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to the qualitative nature of the study and the need to protect participant confidentiality, the full interview transcripts are not publicly available.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author hereby declares that this research is free from conflicts of interest with any party.

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