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A Systematic Review of Digital Picture Storybooks as Multimodal Tool for Literacy Development in Students with Mild Intellectual Disabilities

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A B S T R A C T

The rapid advancement of digital technology has encouraged the integration of digital picture storybooks as instructional media that combine text, images, audio, and animation to support multimodal learning. Although their use in literacy instruction has increased, empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of digital picture storybooks for students with mild intellectual disabilities remains fragmented and has not been systematically synthesized. This study aims to systematically review empirical research published between 2020 and 2025 on the use of digital picture storybooks as multimodal instructional tools for literacy development in students with mild intellectual disabilities. A systematic literature review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. Relevant studies were identified through searches of national and international academic databases using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The selected studies were screened and analyzed using descriptive and thematic synthesis. The findings indicate that digital picture storybooks have the potential to support literacy development, particularly in vocabulary acquisition, basic reading comprehension, and learner engagement among students with mild intellectual disabilities. Overall, this review suggests that digital picture storybooks can function as effective multimodal literacy tools when implemented with appropriate instructional support, while highlighting the need for further studies.

1. Introduction

Reading ability is one of the most important indicators of a child's development, as it strongly influences cognitive growth, emotional development, and social relationships. Literacy skills enable learners to access information, communicate effectively, and participate actively in educational and social contexts. For students

with mild intellectual disabilities, however, the acquisition of literacy skills often presents persistent challenges. These challenges are closely related to limitations in cognitive functions such as working memory, attention, and symbolic comprehension, which affect students' ability to process and retain written information, also a reduced capacity for concrete reasoning across all developmental stages (Hardiyanti & Mumpuniarti, 2025). Therefore, literacy instruction for students with mild intellectual disabilities requires approaches that are concrete, contextual, and multisensory in nature (Kirk et al., 2023).

In the Indonesian context, empirical evidence indicates that students' reading literacy skills can be significantly improved through structured and level-appropriate instructional approaches, highlighting the importance of adaptive learning strategies in literacy education (Nufus et al., 2025). In recent years, the rapid advancement of digital technology and the increasing popularity of devices such as tablets and smartphones have transformed literacy instruction. Digital learning resources now increasingly integrate text, images, audio, animation, and interactivity to support learning. Digital picturebooks, with their engaging illustrations, animations, and interactive features, provide learners with new reading experiences that differ from conventional print-based texts (Li, 2024). The emergence of digital picture storybooks that integrate multiple modes—such as text, images, sound, and animation—enables students to construct meaning more richly through multimodal practices, allowing them to express emotions, identity, and understanding more effectively (Kim et al., 2021).

From a theoretical perspective, multimodal learning emphasizes that meaning is constructed through the interaction of multiple semiotic resources rather than through written language alone. Digital picture storybooks offer visual and auditory supports that can function as scaffolding for learners, particularly those who experience difficulties processing abstract verbal information. By presenting information through multiple sensory channels, multimodal materials can reduce cognitive load and facilitate comprehension, especially for students with mild intellectual disabilities who require additional visual and auditory support during learning.

Despite the increasing number of studies on educational technology, much of the existing research on digital and multimodal instructional media has focused on general learner populations. Studies on digital picture storybooks and other multimodal digital media frequently report positive effects on literacy learning, students' interest, and reading ability by activating multiple sensory modalities in ways that are consistent with multimedia learning theory (Ayu et al., 2025; Mayer, 2021; Suparti, 2025). However, findings derived from these general contexts cannot be directly generalized to learners with specific cognitive characteristics.

Research involving children with special educational needs has begun to explore the use of multimodal and digital instructional approaches. Several studies indicate that animated and multimodal media can enhance engagement, participation, and comprehension among students with intellectual disabilities in inclusive and special education settings (Frisch et al., 2025; Riga et al., 2021). Nevertheless, many of

these studies involve heterogeneous groups of learners with disabilities or do not clearly distinguish levels of intellectual disability, which limits their applicability to students with mild intellectual disabilities.

More specifically, empirical evidence that explicitly examines the effectiveness of digital media for students with mild intellectual disabilities remains limited. Recent narrative reviews suggest that research evaluating digital literacy interventions for this particular subgroup is still scarce and has not been systematically synthesized (Venkatesan, 2023). In addition, although multimodal digital interventions are widely discussed, there is a lack of studies that focus on digital picture storybooks as a distinct form of multimodal literacy intervention for students with mild intellectual disabilities (Fälth et al., 2025).

Furthermore, existing empirical findings related to digital picture storybooks for students with mild intellectual disabilities remain fragmented. Studies differ substantially in terms of research design, intervention duration, instructional context, and literacy outcome measures. Some studies emphasize vocabulary acquisition, while others focus on reading comprehension or learner engagement, which limits the comparability and synthesis of results. Consequently, the overall strength and consistency of evidence supporting the use of digital picture storybooks for literacy development in students with mild intellectual disabilities remain unclear.

This study aims to systematically review and synthesize empirical research published between 2020 and 2025 on the use of digital picture storybooks as multimodal instructional tools for literacy development in students with mild intellectual disabilities. Specifically, this review focuses on identifying the types of digital picture storybook interventions implemented, the literacy outcomes examined (including vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and learner engagement), and the instructional contexts in which these interventions are applied.

2. Methodology

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) design to synthesize empirical evidence on the use of digital picture storybooks as multimodal instructional tools for literacy development in students with mild intellectual disabilities. The SLR approach was selected to enable a comprehensive, transparent, and structured examination of existing research findings related to this topic. The review process was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure methodological rigor and replicability in the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of relevant studies. PRISMA was used as a guiding framework to systematically document each stage of the review process and minimize potential selection bias. Through this approach, the study aimed to provide a clear overview of research trends, intervention characteristics, and reported literacy outcomes associated with digital picture storybooks. The

systematic review design also allowed for the identification of research gaps and inconsistencies across studies, particularly in relation to instructional contexts and outcome measures. By synthesizing findings from multiple empirical sources, this study seeks to contribute a coherent and evidence-based understanding of the potential role of digital picture storybooks in supporting literacy development among students with mild intellectual disabilities.

Search Strategy and Data Sources

The literature search was conducted using national and international academic databases, including Google Scholar, nationally accredited journals, and reputable international journals. The search focused on studies published between 2020 and 2025 to capture recent empirical evidence relevant to the research topic and ensure the inclusion of up-to-date findings. To achieve comprehensive and systematic coverage, the search was carried out in English using predefined keywords combined with Boolean operators. This approach was intended to identify relevant empirical studies examining the use of digital picture storybooks and multimodal learning for literacy development, particularly within the context of students with mild intellectual disabilities.

The search string was developed by integrating three main conceptual components, namely digital picture storybooks and multimodal learning, literacy-related outcomes, and mild intellectual disability. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were applied to systematically combine keywords and broaden the scope of retrieval across databases. The final search string included combinations of terms related to digital picture storybooks and multimodal learning (e.g., “digital picture storybooks,” “digital picturebooks,” “digital picturebook,” and “multimodal learning”), literacy outcomes (e.g., “literacy,” “literacy development,” “reading literacy,” and “reading comprehension”), and participant characteristics (e.g., “mild intellectual disability,” “intellectual disability,” and “mild ID”). The search process was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and dissertations written in English that reported empirical findings related to literacy development and digital multimodal interventions for students with mild intellectual disabilities.

Identification, Screening, and Eligibility

The identification stage yielded a total of 110 records from the database searches. After removing duplicate records**,** 85 articles remained for further screening. During the screening stage, titles and abstracts were reviewed to assess relevance to the research focus, resulting in the exclusion of articles that did not meet the inclusion criteria. Subsequently, 30 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Following the eligibility assessment, 10 studies (consisting of nine journal articles, and one conference proceeding, met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final analysis. The stages of the study selection process are illustrated in Figure 1.

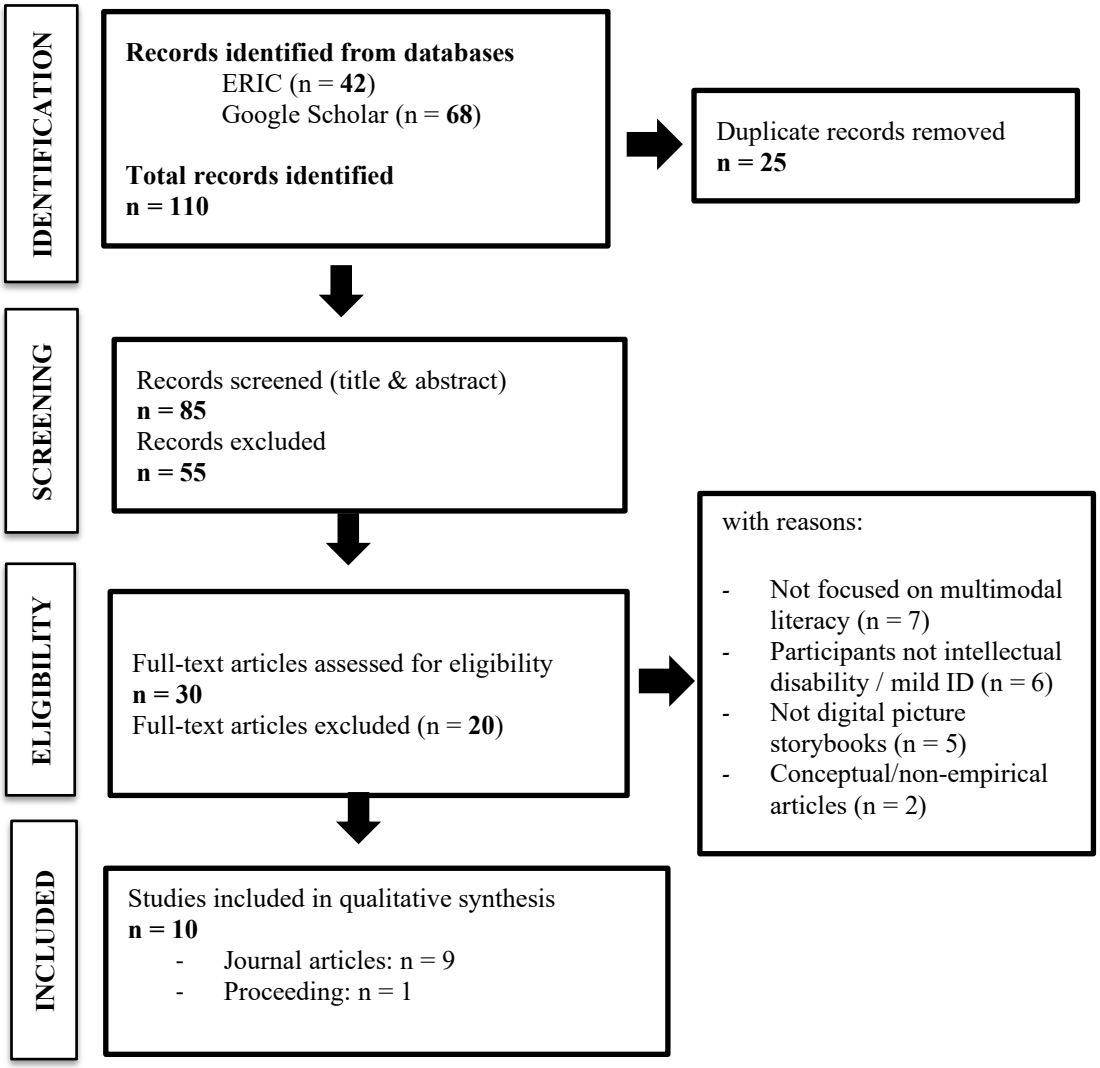

Figure 1. Stages of the journal and conference proceeding article search process.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for this review were as follows:

1. Empirical studies involving participants with mild intellectual disabilities;
2. Studies employing digital picture storybooks or multimodal digital storytelling media as instructional interventions;
3. Studies reporting literacy-related outcomes, such as vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, or learning engagement;
4. Publications released between 2020 to 2025.

Studies were excluded if they did not specifically involve participants with mild intellectual disabilities, did not use digital picture storybooks or multimodal digital media as the primary intervention, were non-empirical in nature, or did not report clear literacy-related outcomes.

Quality Appraisal

To assess the methodological quality of the included studies, a quality appraisal process was conducted based on predefined criteria, including clarity of research design, participant description, intervention implementation, outcome measurement, and data analysis procedures. Each study was reviewed to identify potential sources of bias, such as small sample size, lack of control groups, or insufficient reporting of intervention procedures. Studies that met the minimum quality criteria were retained for analysis, while methodological limitations were considered during the interpretation of findings.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Data extraction was conducted systematically using a standardized form to collect detailed information from each selected study, including publication year, research design, participant characteristics, intervention type and duration, and reported literacy-related outcomes. This structured extraction process ensured consistency and accuracy in capturing relevant data across studies. Descriptive analysis was employed to summarize research trends, intervention characteristics, and patterns of literacy outcomes identified in the reviewed literature. Through this approach, similarities and differences among studies were examined to provide a comprehensive overview of how digital picture storybooks have been implemented in various instructional contexts. Given the heterogeneity in research designs, participant characteristics, and outcome measures, the findings were synthesized using descriptive and thematic analysis rather than statistical aggregation. This method allowed for an in-depth interpretation of the evidence while preserving the contextual richness of individual studies and supporting a coherent synthesis of the existing literature.

3. Results and Discussion

Results

The systematic review identified 10 empirical studies published between 2020 to 2025 that met the inclusion criteria, consisting of eight journal articles, one conference proceeding, and one dissertation. The selected studies employed diverse research designs, including quasi-experimental studies, classroom action research, and small-scale experimental designs. Most studies focused on early literacy outcomes among students with mild intellectual disabilities, particularly vocabulary acquisition, basic reading comprehension, and learning engagement. The following section presents the results of the review of articles relevant to Digital Picture Storybooks as Multimodal Tool for Literacy Development in Students with Mild Intellectual Disabilities. Data from these articles are documented as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Findings Related to Digital Picture Storybooks as Multimodal Media for Literacy in Mild Intellectual Disabilities

No	Source	Author	Year	Journal / Proceedings	Findings
1	Multimodal Literacy in a New Era of Educational Technology	Unsworth	2024	ECNU Review of Education	Visual representations, perspectives, and animations transform the way readers understand stories. Multimodal literacy needs to be taught explicitly, as meaning is constructed not only from text but also from the combination of images, movement, and audio. (Unsworth, 2024).
2	Using Instructional Scaffolding and Multimodal Texts to Enhance Reading Comprehension	Yawiloeng	2022	Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies	Multimodal texts combined with instructional scaffolding help enhance reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and reading motivation through visual support in the meaning-making process (Yawiloeng, 2022).
3	Moral Sensitivity of Young People with Intellectual Disability	Otrębski & Czusz-Sudoł	2022	The European Educational Researcher	Children with mild intellectual disabilities have a better ability to understand social meaning compared to those with moderate levels, indicating the potential of using visual–narrative media for learning values and contextual understanding.(Otrebski & Czusz-Sudoł, 2022).
4	Need of Educational Technology Tools for Cognitive Development …	Kumaran & Govindapillai	2020	CELDA Proceedings	Interactive digital media (AR/visual) enhance attention, memory, and learning responses among students with intellectual disabilities, and teachers require visual media as cognitive scaffolding.

					(Kumaran & Govindapillai, 2020).
5	Image Perception and Reception in Wordless Picturebooks	Sarimski et al.	2024	Journal of Intellectual Disabilities	Children with mild intellectual disabilities are able to process the meaning of images at a level nearly comparable to typically developing children, indicating that picture storybooks (without text) are effective for visual and multimodal literacy. (Sarimski et al., 2024).
6	Picturebook Videos with Key Word Signing	Cruz Leon & Zorn	2025	Augmentative and Alternative Communication	Picture storybook videos with visual cues enhance engagement and multimodal communication and are easy to use within family contexts (Cruz Leon & Zorn, 2025).
7	Rethinking Contributions to iPad Storymaking	Doak	2023	Literacy	Children with learning disabilities can still act as co-authors in digital stories. Multimodal literacy strengthens agency, participation, and meaning-making despite limitations in verbal language. (Doak, 2023).
8	Evaluating the Usefulness of a Wordless Picturebook…	Wythe et al.	2024	Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities	Wordless picturebooks are effective tools for communication and visual meaning-making; however, they require guidance to ensure accurate interpretation of images. (Wythe et al., 2024).
9	An Evaluation of an Adaptive Learning System Based on Multimodal Affect Recognition	Standen et al.	2020	British Journal of Educational Technology	Multimodal systems (visual–interactive) increase engagement and reduce boredom, supporting the learning processes of children with intellectual disabilities, although their academic impact may require a longer time to emerge. (Standen et al., 2020).

10	Enhancing Students' Reading Interest by Developing Augmented Reality-Based Storybooks	Wirda et al.	2025	Journal of Educational Sciences	The study developed an augmented reality–based picture storybook using the ADDIE model and found that the media was appropriate and effective in enhancing students' reading interest and engagement. (Jannah et al., 2025).

Based on the extracted data, the results were categorized into three main outcome domains: (1) vocabulary development, (2) reading comprehension, and (3) learner engagement. This categorization enabled a systematic synthesis of findings across studies rather than a purely narrative summary. First, improvements in vocabulary development were consistently reported across studies that utilized digital picture storybooks integrating visual illustrations, audio narration, and written text. Several studies indicated that students were better able to recognize and recall words when vocabulary items were supported by images and spoken cues, facilitating word–meaning associations (Yawiloeng, 2022; Egert et al., 2022). The use of visual narratives and animations was found to support word learning by providing concrete contextual cues, which is particularly beneficial for students with mild intellectual disabilities who experience difficulties with abstract language processing.

Second, findings related to reading comprehension demonstrated that digital picture storybooks supported students' understanding of story elements, such as characters, events, and sequences. Studies employing multimodal story formats reported that students were more capable of answering simple comprehension questions and retelling story content when information was presented through combined visual and auditory modes (Sarimski et al., 2024; Wythe et al., 2024). These results suggest that multimodal representations can enhance comprehension by reinforcing meaning through multiple channels. Third, nearly all reviewed studies reported positive effects on learner engagement and motivation. Digital picture storybooks were associated with increased attention, participation, and interaction during literacy activities, particularly when interactive features or guided instructional support were provided (Frisch et al., 2025; Cruz Leon & Zorn, 2025). Engagement outcomes were often described through observational measures, indicating that students demonstrated sustained focus and active involvement when using digital multimodal media.

Discussion

The findings of this systematic review indicate that digital picture storybooks have the potential to support literacy development among students with mild intellectual disabilities, particularly in the areas of vocabulary acquisition, basic reading comprehension, and learner engagement. These results are consistent with theoretical perspectives on multimodal learning, which emphasize that learning is

enhanced when information is presented through multiple sensory channels (Mayer, 2021; Unsworth, 2024). For students with mild intellectual disabilities, multimodal supports appear to function as cognitive scaffolds that reduce processing demands and facilitate meaning-making.

However, a critical examination of the reviewed studies reveals several methodological limitations that must be considered when interpreting these findings. First, many studies employed small sample sizes and short intervention durations, which limit the generalizability and long-term applicability of the results. Second, variations in research design, including the absence of control groups in some studies, reduce the strength of causal inferences regarding the effectiveness of digital picture storybooks.

In addition, substantial variation in intervention characteristics was observed across studies. Differences in media design, instructional duration, and the presence or absence of teacher guidance influenced reported outcomes. Studies that incorporated structured instructional support and repeated exposure to digital picture storybooks tended to report stronger literacy gains than those using brief or unguided interventions. This variation suggests that the effectiveness of digital picture storybooks is closely tied to pedagogical implementation rather than to technology alone.

Potential publication bias should also be considered, as most reviewed studies reported positive outcomes, with limited discussion of null or negative findings. This tendency may overestimate the overall effectiveness of digital picture storybooks. Furthermore, outcome measures varied widely across studies, ranging from observational engagement indicators to researcher-developed literacy assessments, which complicates quantitative comparison and synthesis. Despite these limitations, the reviewed evidence suggests that digital picture storybooks offer meaningful instructional advantages when used appropriately with students with mild intellectual disabilities. The integration of visual, auditory, and textual elements aligns well with learners' cognitive profiles and supports engagement and comprehension. Nevertheless, future research should employ more rigorous experimental designs, standardized literacy outcome measures, and longer intervention periods to strengthen the evidence base and reduce methodological bias. Overall, this systematic review highlights both the potential and the limitations of digital picture storybooks as multimodal literacy tools. While current findings are encouraging, they should be interpreted cautiously, and further high-quality research is required to establish more definitive conclusions regarding their effectiveness for students with mild intellectual disabilities.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to systematically review and synthesize empirical evidence on the use of digital picture storybooks as multimodal instructional tools for literacy development in students with mild intellectual disabilities. Based on a critical synthesis of studies published between 2020 and 2025, the findings indicate that the

research objective of this study was successfully achieved. The reviewed evidence suggests that digital picture storybooks have strong potential to support literacy learning by offering multimodal representations that align with the cognitive and learning characteristics of students with mild intellectual disabilities. Rather than functioning merely as technological supplements, these media operate as pedagogical tools that facilitate meaning-making through the integration of visual, auditory, and textual elements, particularly when supported by appropriate instructional guidance and sustained implementation. However, this review also highlights that the strength of the available evidence is shaped by variations in research design, intervention implementation, and outcome measurement across primary studies. These methodological differences require cautious interpretation of the findings and indicate that the effectiveness of digital picture storybooks cannot be separated from contextual and pedagogical factors. Overall, this systematic review confirms the potential success of digital picture storybooks as multimodal literacy tools for students with mild intellectual disabilities, while emphasizing the need for future research to adopt more rigorous study designs, standardized interventions, and clearer reporting practices to strengthen evidence-based application in special education contexts.

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