

UDL AS A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO DECONSTRUCTING BIAS AND STEREOTYPES IN TEACHER EDUCATION: EXPERIENCES OF USING COMICS IN UNIVERSITIES

UDL COME APPROCCIO TEORICO PER DECOSTRUIRE PREGIUDIZI E STEREOTIPI NELLA FORMAZIONE DEGLI INSEGNANTI: ESPERIENZE SULL'USO DEI FUMETTI NELLE UNIVERSITÀ



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ABSTRACT

Stereotypes and biases, the result of socialization processes and cultural structures to which humans are exposed from birth, influence educational practice in an pervasive, though often unconscious, manner (Amodio, 2014). It is therefore imperative to cultivate a critical awareness of these processes to facilitate the creation of more equitable learning environments and inclusive educational relationships. The following paper, which is part of a broader research project, examines the impact of combining visual storytelling and critical reflection on teachers in training during some workshops of the course "Inclusive Pedagogy and Disability Studies" (RomaTre University), which aims to provide knowledge and tools for intersectional analysis of social hierarchies. The analysis employs a combination of visual storytelling techniques and critical reflection, a methodology that has been found to be effective in previous studies (Moretti & Scavarda, 2021). The incorporation of comics, which adhere to the principles of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2024; Guerini et al., 2025; Centrone et al., 2025), has been demonstrated to be a highly effective medium for acquiring critical analysis skills and fostering intersectional deconstruction of prejudices that underpin forms of discrimination within educational settings.

Stereotipi e pregiudizi, frutto dei processi di socializzazione e delle strutture culturali a cui gli esseri umani sono esposti fin dalla nascita, influenzano la pratica educativa in modo pervasivo, anche se spesso inconsapevole (Amodio, 2014). È quindi indispensabile coltivare una consapevolezza critica di questi processi per facilitare la creazione di ambienti di apprendimento più equi e di relazioni educative inclusive. Il seguente articolo, che fa parte di un progetto di ricerca più ampio, esamina l'impatto della combinazione di visual storytelling e riflessione critica sugli insegnanti in formazione durante alcuni laboratori del corso "Pedagogia inclusiva e Disability Studies" (Università RomaTre), che mira a fornire conoscenze e strumenti per l'analisi intersezionale delle gerarchie sociali. L'analisi utilizza una combinazione di tecniche di narrazione visiva e di riflessione critica, una metodologia che si è rivelata efficace in studi precedenti (Moretti & Scavarda, 2021). L'incorporazione dei fumetti, che aderiscono ai principi dell'Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2024; Guerini et al., 2025; Centrone et al., 2025), si è dimostrata un mezzo molto efficace per l'acquisizione di capacità di analisi critica e per favorire la decostruzione intersezionale dei pregiudizi che sono alla base delle forme di discriminazione nei contesti educativi.

KEYWORDS

UDL; stereotypes; teacher training; comics; intersectionality

UDL; stereotipi; formazione degli insegnanti; fumetti; intersezionalità

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Introduction

Education is never considered to be a neutral process; rather, it is embedded within the complex interweaving of symbolic and cultural constructions. Through discursive and narrative practices, these constructions contribute to the shaping of subjectivity, belonging and social hierarchies (Giroux, 1988; Bocci et al., 2020). The school, as an institution that is both political and cultural, represents one of the privileged hubs at which the dual movement of reproduction and, potentially, transformation of the dominant social order unfolds (Beane & Apple, 1995). The phenomenon under scrutiny in this study is not merely a conduit for the transmission of disciplinary content or technical skills; it plays a pivotal role in the delineation of the contours of that which is considered 'normal', 'educable' and 'worthy of belonging'. It functions as a mechanism for the production of subjectivity and the construction of the boundaries between inclusion and exclusion (Bocci, 2018).

In this pedagogical space, which is never neutral, stereotypes, normative expectations and discursive devices sediment, crossing and conforming every educational relationship. A pedagogy that intends to call itself critical and transformative cannot avoid the task of questioning these devices, making visible the matrices of power that support and perpetuate them (Freire, 1970; Centrone et al., 2024). In particular, inclusive pedagogy - understood in the radical perspective offered by Disability Studies - invites us to unveil the mechanisms through which difference is constructed, represented and hierarchised (Goodley, 2024; Bocci & Guerini, 2022).

Implicit biases and prejudices, far from being mere occasional cognitive errors, take the form of structural components of educational action. They manifest themselves not only in explicit content, but in teaching choices, body postures, relational dynamics and, above all, in the collective unconscious that shapes the social imaginary (Amodio, 2014; Bocci, 2018). In such imagery, the polarisation between normality and deviance produces processes of normalisation of bodies, minds and ways of learning, inscribing exclusionary narratives in everyday educational life that are often difficult to question (Bocci & Valtellina, 2023).

One example is the representation of disability, frequently conveyed through pietistic, heroic or medicalising images (Bocci, 2025), which end up reinforcing the marginalisation of bodily, cognitive and emotional differences, reduced to mere

anomalies to be corrected or exceptions to be managed (Centrone et al., 2023; Goussot, 2011). Similar devices operate along the intersectional axes of gender, race, sexual orientation, social class, generating multiple stratifications of privilege and exclusion (Crenshaw, 1989; De Castro, 2023).

In this perspective, the initial and in-service training of teachers assumes a crucial role in the construction of a critical consciousness capable of interrogating their own imaginaries, making visible the power devices that inform and reiterate them (Centrone, 2024a). Working on implicit prejudices and biases requires, however, training devices capable of activating processes of deep reflexivity, which are difficult to trigger through traditional teaching tools.

It is from this need that the proposal to use comics as a visual storytelling and critical mediation tool in teacher training courses is based. The hybrid, multimodal and emotionally pregnant nature of the language of comics makes it possible to represent the complexity of experiences and social relations in accessible, affective and narrative forms, encouraging cognitive and emotional involvement capable of activating critical reflection (Centrone et al., 2025; Forde, 2022).

Within the theoretical framework is the present contribution, which aims to explore the possible intertwining between the Universal Design for Learning paradigm (CAST, 2018; Gordon, 2024) and the pedagogical use of comics in initial teacher education.

The UDL is configured not as a mere collection of operational indications, but as a true epistemological reconfiguration of didactics. This is based on the recognition of human variability as an original datum and on the intentional design of equitable, flexible and pluralist learning environments (De Angelis et al., 2025; Demo et al., 2022; Orlando, 2023). The UDL paradigm does not aspire to include 'others' within a predefined normative framework; rather, it advocates for a radical rethinking of the structures of knowledge, teaching and learning (Crippi, 2024; Centrone et al., 2024; Bocci, 2016). In order for such paradigms to be transformed into effective tools of educational change, it is essential that teacher training is reconfigured as a critical, reflective and participatory device. This device must be capable of promoting intersectional awareness and transformative agency.

The experience analysed here is part of the 'Inclusive Pedagogy and Disability Studies' course at the Università Roma Tre and is part of a broader research

project aimed at exploring the representations of disability and differences in educational contexts (Centrone, 2024a; in press). Through experiential workshops that interweave theoretical reflection and visual production, the course aimed to promote a critical, intersectional and transformative approach in future teachers.

In teacher training, the construction of authentically inclusive teaching practices requires the integration of methodologies capable of enhancing the diversity of needs, cognitive styles and modes of expression. The updated UDL framework (CAST, 2024) offers a powerful theoretical-practical framework for designing learning environments that welcome and promote plurality. In this context, the comic strip proves to be a privileged resource for its ability to integrate narrative, image and the affective-symbolic dimension.

The present study is guided by the working hypothesis that comics, understood as an aesthetic, narrative and critical device, can serve as an effective mediator to make the implicit mechanisms of prejudice visible and open up spaces for plural representation, in accordance with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

This contribution seeks to underscore the pedagogical ramifications of the approach in question by means of a qualitative analysis of the materials produced in the workshops and the participants' feedback. Furthermore, it aims to reflect on its implications for teacher training from a critical, inclusive and decolonial perspective (Muraca, 2021). The objective is twofold: firstly, to document a training experience, and secondly, to contribute to the construction of educational practices capable of interrogating and transforming the hegemonic imaginaries that structure contemporary schools.

1. Universal Design for Learning as a pedagogical device for educational justice

In today's context of increasingly complex social, cultural and political dynamics, the issue of educational accessibility imposes itself as one of the most urgent and unavoidable challenges for higher education. Overcoming a merely compensatory conception of inclusion - understood as a practice of ex post adaptation intended to 'repair' an alleged deviance from an implicit normative model - means radically rethinking the entire epistemological and design framework of university

education (Bocci et al., 2021; De Angelis, 2017). This is the perspective of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), developed by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST, 2018; 2024), which proposes a paradigm shift: designing from difference, not adapting to it.

UDL originates from the concept of Universal Design in the architectural field (Mace, 1985), where the objective was the creation of environments that can be used by everyone without the need for subsequent modifications. Translated into the educational field, this principle translates into the intentional design of educational paths capable of responding in advance to the plurality of students' needs, cognitive modes and biographical experiences (Gordon, 2014). The three axes of UDL - multiple modes of involvement, multiple modes of representation, multiple modes of action and expression - constitute a pedagogical device that operates the recognition of difference as a value and not as an exception to be tolerated.

The recent revision of the UDL guidelines (CAST, 2024) introduces significant innovations, emphasising the urgency of building environments that are not only accessible in a technical sense, but culturally relevant, emotionally safe and intersectionally aware. In particular, the need to integrate the recognition of students' multiple and stratified identities, cultural and linguistic affiliations, and practices of self-representation and self-determination into the educational project is accentuated (Elkhoury & Usman, 2021).

From a theoretical perspective, UDL is rooted in the frames of Critical Disability Studies, which problematise the medicalisation of disability and claim its inherently socio-cultural nature (Goodley et al., 2017; Migliarini, 2023). As McRuer (2016) have previously asserted, disability can be defined as an epistemic condition which interrogates and subverts societal norms, including those which pertain to education (Centrone, 2025). The intersectional perspective (Corbisiero & Nocenzi, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Centrone et al., 2024) has been demonstrated to further enrich the theoretical framework. This theoretical framework highlights how educational barriers are the effect of multiple layers of oppression that cross gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability. From this standpoint, the conception of educational environments in accordance with UDL principles does not entail the assurance of formal access to educational activities. Rather, it signifies the initiation of a process of deconstruction of the categories of 'normality' and 'deviance' that have historically governed the university and its selective mechanisms (Medeghini, 2015; Foucault, 1976).

UDL, as Erevelles (2011) observes, is therefore configured as a critical practice of resistance to the devices of compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer, 2016), decentralising the norm and valorising multiplicity as an epistemic resource.

The link between UDL and social justice appears in this sense evident: applying the principles of UDL implies assuming difference not as a deficit to be managed, but as a constitutive figure of the educational experience, an expression of the plurality of embodied experiences and knowledge (Connor et al., 2021). As underlined by critical pedagogies (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994), every educational practice is inscribed in power relations, and it is through conscious and situated design that it becomes possible to construct authentically democratic spaces of learning.

Overcoming the idea of marginal adaptation in favour of an originally inclusive design means recognising the universal right to learning in its multiplicity of expressive, cognitive and emotional forms. In this perspective, UDL stands as an instrument of radical democratisation of knowledge, oriented not only to formal equity, but to the substantial transformation of educational practices (Bocci, 2020; Hehir, 2005).

An indispensable step in this direction is the training of university teachers. It is not just a matter of acquiring technical skills on the use of UDL guidelines, but of undertaking a process of critical reflection on one's own epistemic position, on the knowledge that is legitimised and on the exclusions that are perpetuated (Centrone, 2024a).

Training programmes such as those proposed by CAST (2024) provide operational tools, but it is pedagogical awareness that assumes a decisive role: a training that promotes the adoption of multi-modal materials, plural evaluative practices and relational environments capable of supporting self-determination paths.

The creation of UDL-oriented learning environments therefore implies a profound revision of teaching practice: it is necessary to multiply the channels of knowledge representation (written texts, audiovisual materials, conceptual maps, digital simulations), to offer students the possibility of choosing between different modes of expression (essays, projects, performances, podcasts... etc.) and to build contexts capable of authentically motivating, rooted in students' experiences and interests (Guerini et al., in press).

Particular attention should be paid to the principle of multiple means of engagement, through practices that are able to promote agency, emotional resilience and a sense of belonging, as opposed to dynamics of implicit exclusion (Al-Azawei, Serenelli, & Lundqvist, 2016). The construction of emotionally safe and culturally sensitive environments is a prerequisite for meaningful learning, capable of recognising the intersectional subjectivity of each student.

Integrating UDL within a critical and intersectional pedagogy means, therefore, constantly questioning who is involved, who is excluded, what knowledge is validated and what is marginalised. It ultimately means recognising, as hooks (1994) argues, that every educational act is a political act, and that the transformation of pedagogical practices can and must become a space of resistance, care and justice.

2. The workshop experience at the University of Roma Tre: comics as an accessible tool for deconstructing stereotypes in the imagination

The formation of biases and stereotypes is a phenomenon that occurs as a result of automatic cognitive processes and social dynamics of categorisation. These processes have the capacity to be rapidly and unconsciously initiated from the earliest developmental stages of the individual. In the domain of neuroscience, a substantial corpus of research has underscored the human brain's proclivity to simplify the intricacies of the world through the process of social categorisation. This adaptive strategy serves to conserve cognitive resources while concomitantly facilitating the emergence of biases (Amodio, 2014). Implicit biases, in particular, are theorised to be structured through unconscious associations between social groups and evaluative traits (Devine, 1989). These biases are hypothesised to take root in everyday experiences, cultural messages and internalised social norms (Medeghini, 2015; Foucault, 1976).

From a neuropsychological perspective, the amygdaloid system and prefrontal cortical areas play a pivotal role in the regulation of emotional and behavioural responses to perceived social differences. Although implicit biases originate from automatic processes, it is possible to intervene on them through conscious cognitive monitoring. This involves brain areas deputed to self-control and belief regulation, such as the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (Amodio, 2014). Nonetheless, the effective restructuring of biases necessitates intentional and sustained educational efforts, capable of dismantling stereotypical associations

through exposure to new narratives and positive interaction contexts (Lai et al., 2016).

Social psychology has further clarified how stereotype formation does not simply result from individual errors of perception, but is deeply intertwined with power dynamics and the social organisation of inequalities. Tajfel and Turner (1979), through social identity theory, showed how the need for belonging and self-esteem leads individuals to favour their own group (ingroup) and devalue groups perceived as 'other' (outgroup). This mechanism, far from being neutral, contributes to reproducing social hierarchies and naturalising inequalities.

In education, the presence of implicit biases and stereotypes on the part of teachers can have devastating effects on the construction of students' identities and their learning trajectories. As documented in longitudinal studies (Glock & Krolak-Schwerdt, 2014), teachers, often unconsciously, tend to lower expectations of students belonging to minority groups, producing self-fulfilling prophecy effects that reinforce the educational divide. Critical pedagogy has emphasised how the educational process is inevitably imbued with values, beliefs and social representations, which must be continually brought to consciousness and deconstructed (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). c In this scenario, it becomes crucial that the initial training of future teachers includes a systematic space for reflection on implicit biases. Critical awareness of one's own cognitive automatisms and cultural biases must be recognised as an indispensable professional competence, as much as disciplinary knowledge or mastery of teaching methodologies (Gay, 2010). Without such awareness, any attempt to build inclusive educational contexts risks remaining superficial, incapable of affecting the deep structures of discrimination.

In order to deal with the complexity of identities and situations that are intertwined in contemporary schools, training on individual biases related to, for example, gender, ethnicity or disability is not enough. It is necessary to develop intersectional thinking as a professional competence. Intersectionality, a concept introduced by black feminism in the 1980s, later coined by Crenshaw (1989) and taken up in pedagogy by several authors (Erevelles, 2011; Collins & Bilge, 2016), invites us to recognise how identities are constructed at the intersection of multiple axes of oppression and privilege. In educational action, this means understanding that a student does not experience their disability status, migration background or gender affiliation separately, but experiences these dimensions simultaneously and interdependently.

Intersectional thinking enables teachers to overcome the 'compartmentalised' logic of diversity, promoting instead a pedagogy capable of seeing people in their situated complexity. Moreover, it stimulates a posture of continuous self-reflection and questioning of teaching practices, which must be analysed not only in terms of formal accessibility, but also in terms of substantive equity. As Erevelles (2011) points out, an intersectional pedagogy requires questioning how school knowledge, classroom relationships and assessment practices contribute to (re)producing inequalities, and to act intentionally to disrupt them.

The aim is not to 'correct' teachers, by blaming them, but to build a reflexive and critical professionalism, capable of reading its own practices in their socio-historical context and assuming transformative responsibility for them. Bias training, therefore, must be thought of not as an additional or optional module, but as a backbone of a new idea of teaching professionalism, rooted in social justice, the promotion of rights and the democratic transformation of education (Centrone et al., 2024).

Ultimately, training teachers capable of recognizing and deconstructing their own biases means investing in a school that does not simply include differences but takes them on as a founding principle and epistemic resource. A school that is committed not only to making knowledge accessible, but to critically transforming knowledge itself so that it becomes an instrument of collective emancipation.

For these reasons, for some years now we have started a research-training project within the laboratory of *Inclusive Pedagogy and Disability Studies* (Channels 1 and 2) of the master's degree course in Primary Education Sciences at the University of Roma Tre, which is co-designed and co-conducted by Barbara Centrone, PhD student, elementary school teacher, activist, disabled and neurodivergent queer person.

In fact, by using workshop activities we have tried to provide a space for deconstructing the personal and collective imaginary, starting from the observation that each person (in our case the focus is on teachers) is the bearer of an often tacit pedagogical epistemology, which influences the way we conceive and inhabit the educational relationship. This can also be deduced from the analysis of the vocabulary that each one uses to describe reality, that is, the way in which they perceive and represent it (Centrone, 2024).

The theoretical framework of reference is Disability Studies and Critical Disability Studies (Costantino & Valtellina, 2024), with a particular focus on the intersectional perspective (De Castro, 2023), which allows us to read disability not as an individual condition, but as a social construction interconnected with other forms of oppression and marginalization (of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, migratory status, neurodivergence, etc.). Intersectionality, taken not only as an analytical category but also as a pedagogical horizon, requires us to critically interrogate the material and symbolic conditions that make certain bodies visible and others invisible, certain learning legitimate and others marginal, certain knowledge central and others subordinate.

In this theoretical-critical context, UDL emerges as a powerful tool for disrupting the ableist and hierarchical architecture of traditional education, offering a design and value framework that assumes difference not as a problem to be solved, but as a generative and foundational resource of educational experience. Far from being a mere inclusive technique, UDL is understood here as a political-pedagogical paradigm that challenges normative models of learning and promotes a design centered on the multiplicity of ways of being, knowing and learning.

Returning to our project, we illustrate here two activities proposed in the Workshop that actively involved the participants in the creation of vignettes, which were not only the end of the training course -as an artistic product- but also the means of gaining awareness regarding one's misconceptions, as well as the tool through which to deconstruct them.

2.1 The workshop activity with comics

The workshop consists of 16 hours divided into 4 meetings. After a series of playful-experiential activities aimed at activating an atmosphere of trust and participation, some basic conceptual cores on stereotype and prejudice formation were introduced, referring to the psychosocial literature (Fiske, 2017; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Next, Garry Trudeau's *Street Calculus* vignette (Figure 1) was presented, chosen for its ability to visually translate the rapid and automatic processes of social categorization based on minimal sensory perceptions.



Figure 1. "Street Calculus" 1994 G.B. Trudeau

The cartoonist depicted a white man and an Afro-descendant man, perhaps younger, walking on the same sidewalk. What is unconsciously triggered, in a split second, is put in writing: each must establish the relationship between risk and mitigation factors to determine whether or not it is a safe situation (Izuma & al., 2019; Amodio, 2014).

The vignette was the subject of collective discussion, guided by prompting questions that focused on the choice of words and characteristics identified and selected. It aroused curiosity and questions that *white* ethnicity was counted among both risk and mitigating factors, which allowed the topic of racism and internalized stigma to be addressed.

Aware of the widespread reluctance among adults-in-training to try their hand at drawing, we first showed a slide featuring the definition (taken from an online vocabulary) of the verb to *draw* and an image reminiscent of Munch's famous painting *The Scream*, so that irony could prevent and dampen any feelings of anxiety or discomfort that may arise from the thought of having to draw.

We next projected the prompt for the first activity, to be done individually: *Along the lines of the vignette shown, draw two people who do not know each other and who find themselves near each other. For each make a list of risk factors and mitigation factors and choose which ones the character might tick and which ones might not.* Next came the delivery of the second activity, to be done in group of two: *Create groups of 2. Draw a vignette in which there are teacher and student at school. For each person make a list of risk factors and mitigation factors and choose which ones the character might tick and which ones might not.*

Both prompts were formulated with attention to the principles of cognitive accessibility: clear and unambiguous language, highly readable fonts, the possibility to choose the most congenial medium of expression (paper, digital media, AI image-making software), and the faculty to add written annotations to make explicit or enrich the graphic product (Rose & Meyer, 2002; CAST, 2018).

In addition, both prompts presented the following indication: *You can choose whether to draw on paper, digitally, create a collage, use image-making software through artificial intelligence (in which case, you are asked to report the prompts provided to obtain the desired image). Should you feel the need or desire to enrich the drawing, you may add a written note.*

Below is a selection of the vignettes created by the participants (Figure 2; 3; 4; 5).

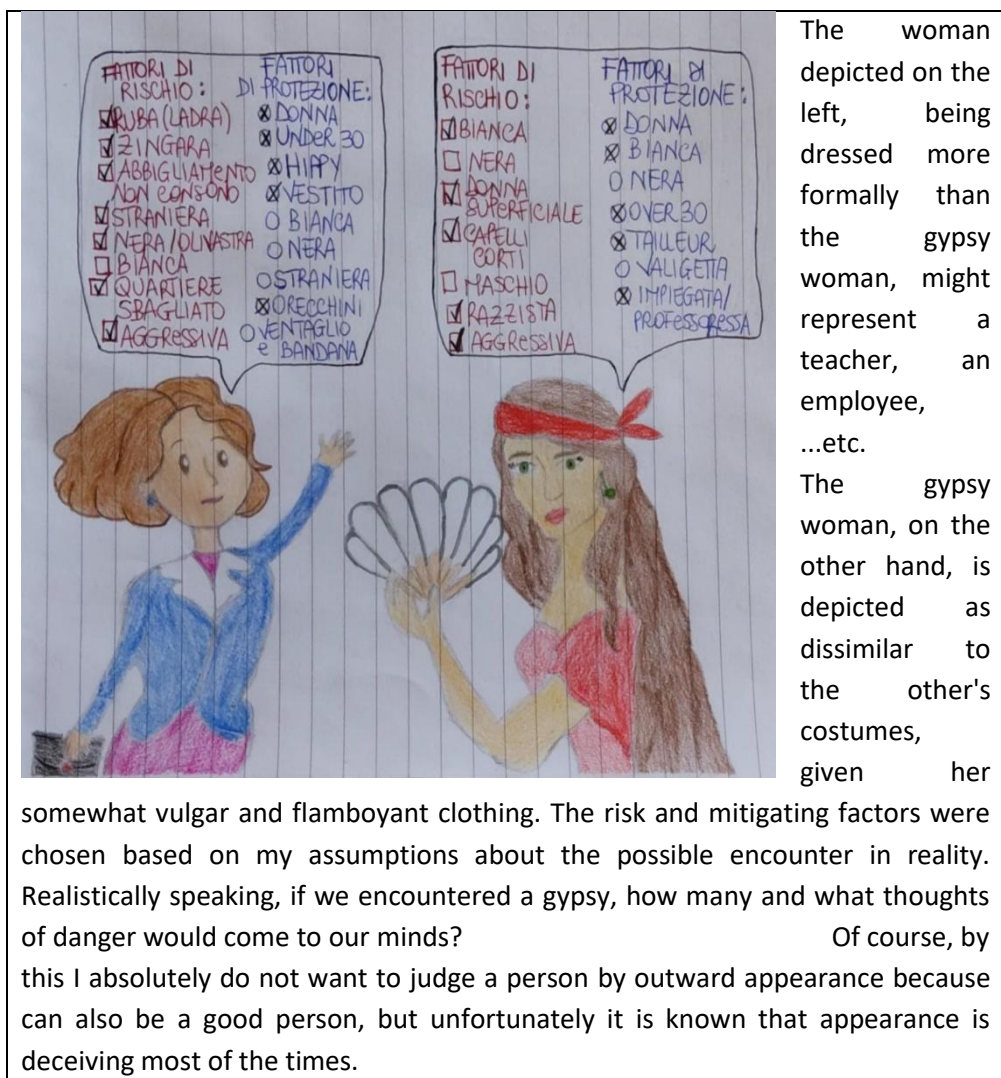


Figure 2

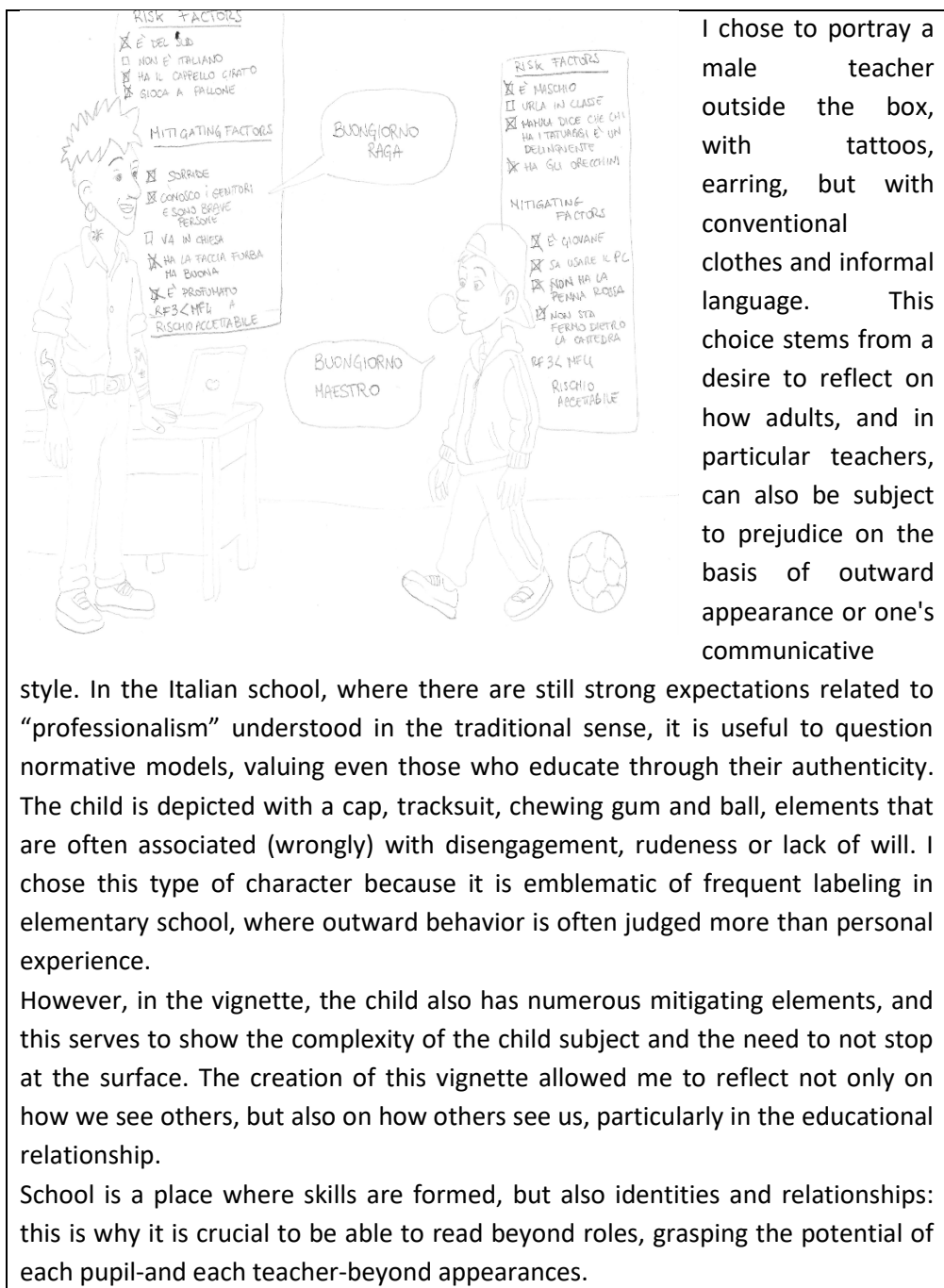


Figure 3

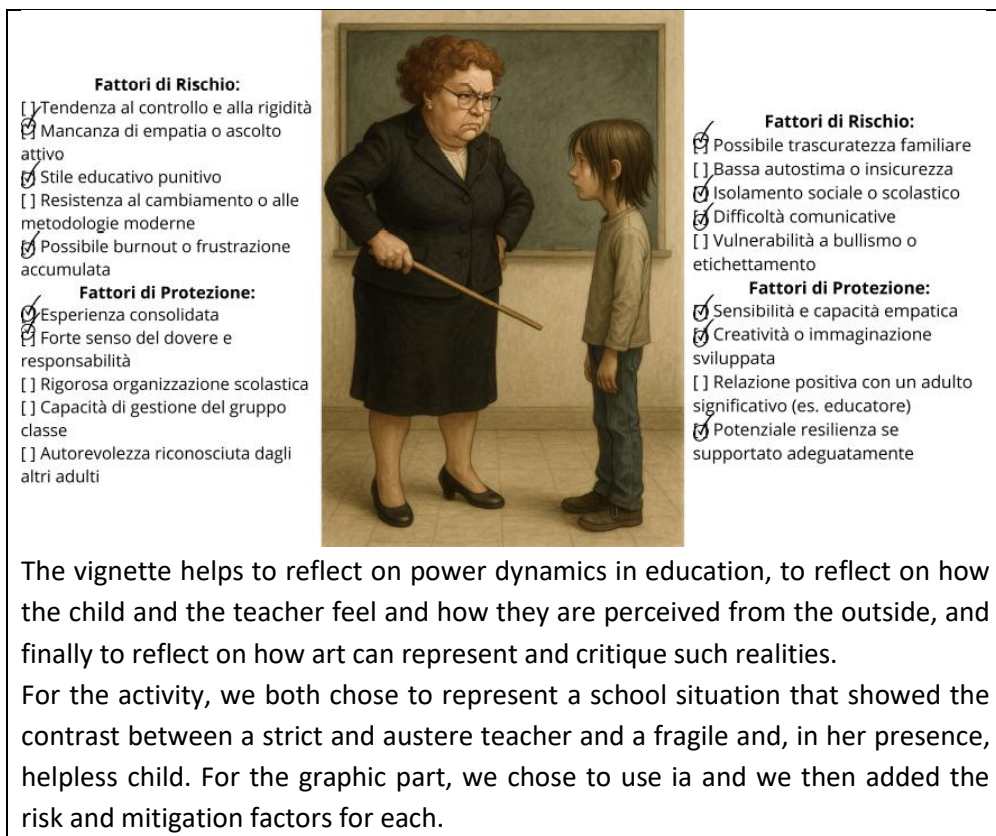


Figure 4

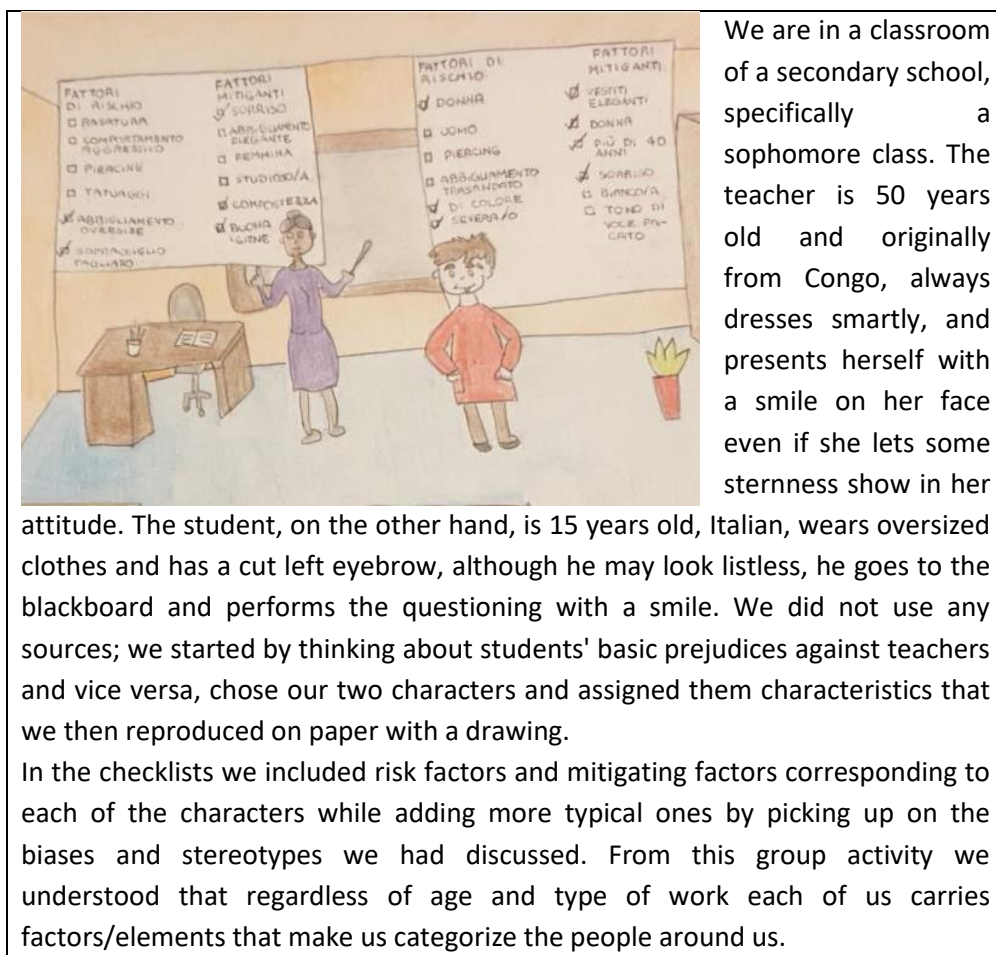


Figure 5

To guide the analysis of the vignettes and notes written by the participants, we referred to the following questions:

- i. What characteristics do the characters chosen and portrayed embody?
- ii. Which characteristics are most frequently counted among the risk factors? Which among the protective factors?
- iii. What content, relational, and methodological reflections are advanced during and after the creative process?

For reasons of space, we report below tables summarizing some of the data that emerged from the thematic analysis we performed on the n=203 vignettes depicting a teacher and a student in the school context (Table 1; 2; 3; 4).

Gender attributed to the characters		
Gender	Teacher	Student
male	60	112
female	143	88
not specified	0	3

Table 1. Gender attribution

Most frequent risk and mitigation factors			
		Teacher	Student
temperamental traits	mitigation factors	64	38
	risk factors	130	156
behaviour	mitigation factors	177	63
	risk factors	113	202
clothing	mitigation factors	174	45
	risk factors	23	34

Table 2. Most frequent risk and mitigation factors chosen by them

Character and professional stereotyping based on gender (teacher)

authoritarian male teacher	28
funny young male teacher	5
old authoritarian female teacher	22
inexperienced young female teacher	38

Table 3. How they characterised the teachers

Stereotyping of students

bipoc male child with disturbing behaviour	112
white male child with ADHD	38
white female child with ADHD	10
foreign/bipoc/rom/sinti student not doing well at school because not supported by parents	66

Table 4. How they characterised the students

Analyzing the checklists of risk factors in the vignettes created in pairs (teacher and student at school, n=203) and individually (two adults in the street, n=315), we note that gender biases are the most represented in both situations, followed by racist and classist biases (Table 5).

Stigmatizing stereotype:	Teacher & student at school	Two adults in the street
Total n. of vignettes:	203	315
Sexist	175	280
Racism	87	217
Classism	90	147
Fatphobia	87	42
Cissexism	21	44
Ableism	62	33
Islamophobia	24	36
Ageism	98	134
Anti-gypsyism	24	113

Table 5. Stereotypes related to stigma and discrimination- Comparison of cartoons depicting the school context and cartoons depicting two people meeting in the street

We think it is interesting to point out that although many participants specified that the choice of risk and mitigation factors is the result of a process of cognitive empathy, aimed at identifying biases and stereotypes that the character may have introjected, analyzing their lexical choices in the checklists and written notes raised interesting questions about the biases of teachers-in-training, particularly related to gender, *race*, fatness, class, age, and religion. For reasons of space, these questions will be the subject of future contributions.

2.2 Considerations on comics as a universally accessible pedagogical device

As also noted in the scientific literature (Giorgi et al., 2021; Moretti & Scavarda, 2021), creative methods are based on a conception of knowledge as a situated and relational process, which is built in doing and doing together, directly involving the participants. Comics may be more effective and less *obstructive* for some neurodivergent people who think in images (Grandin, 2000; Bacon & Handley, 2010) and, in general, for anyone who wants to cross the (culturally

imposed) boundaries between *paradigmatic* and *narrative* forms of thought and communication, which determine immersion and fully embrace the nonverbal and, above all, the *emotional* dimension: artistic images can help us access what may be difficult to put into words.

Comics is, by its very nature, an inherently multimodal language: it combines verbal and visual codes, mobilizes narrative and iconographic decoding skills, and stimulates cognitive, affective and aesthetic dimensions (Moretti & Scavarda, 2021). According to Kress (2009), multimodality offers multiple accesses to meaning, allowing subjects to select channels and modalities that are more akin to their own modes of understanding and production.

Applying comics in education therefore means multiplying the access points to learning, overcoming the exclusive centrality of linear verbal text and encouraging richer forms of engagement, understanding and representation of knowledge.

The integration of comics into university educational pathways responds in a profound and articulate way to the three principles on which the UDL Guidelines 3.0 are based: *Design Multiple Means of Engagement*, *Design Multiple Means of Representation*, and *Design Multiple Means of Action & Expression*. Through comics, in fact, we activate dynamics of access, participation, and expression that fully reflect the new *guidelines* and *considerations* proposed by CAST 3.0 (2024).

Comics, by definition, integrate text, image, narrative rhythm and graphic symbols (consideration 2.5), expanding the ways in which ideas can be communicated (consideration 5.1). Students can choose from a wide variety of tools and modes of construction, composition, and creativity (consideration 5.2): they freely choose whether to use paper and pencil on a sheet of paper, create paper or digital collages, use artificial intelligence, Power Point or Canva, or any other software and modes of creation and interaction (consideration 4.1 and 4.2)

The fact that students had the opportunity to choose in what format, with what graphic style, on what platform to create it, and whether to use colors or not, meant that the information represented through the activity was conveyed in a way that was truly accessible (consideration 1.1) and enhancing different narrative, visual and emotional ways of constructing knowledge (consideration 3.3) and different learning and perceptual channels (consideration 1.2) as well as skills that are unfortunately still considered "unconventional" or "nontraditional" (consideration 5.4).

The ability to choose themes, graphic styles and narrative modes allows students to exercise agency, expressing personal identities and preferences (consideration 7.1); the playful and creative nature of comics encourages symbolic play and expressive experimentation, nurturing the pleasure of learning (consideration 7.3).

In addition, the combination of images and text makes it possible to clarify vocabulary (consideration 2.1) and make complex content accessible (consideration 2.2). Some people voluntarily chose to include dialect words and slurs, which enriched their representations (consideration 2.3) and gave rise to a collective reflection on the stigma attached to dialect forms and the classist and anti-meridionalist matrix of this stigma, which is still very strong in Italy.

Moreover, designing a comic strip requires clarifying the narrative and communicative goals, fostering a clear understanding of the purpose of the work (consideration 8.1); balancing challenge and support, it ensures that each student can work on differentiated tasks according to his or her expressive and graphic skills and will (consideration 8.2), establishing a climate of collaboration and co-construction of knowledge (consideration 8.3) based on positive interdependence (Bembich, 2020).

Creating critical comics made it possible to connect the individual prior experiences recalled through introspection, to the new content learned through the other activities planned in the previous workshop meetings (consideration 3.1) and thus to address stereotypes and biases in a safe judgment-free space-time in which to gradually increase their skills with peer support (consideration 5.3). In fact, it all begins with the solicitation to recount lived experiences or represent social issues: this on the one hand fosters authentic connections between students' knowledge and experience (consideration 7.2) and on the other hand, having to authentically translate what is shared reinforces a sense of belonging (consideration 8.5). Moving from the introspection phase to the sharing phase and to the negotiation phase with the partner of the working pair, with all the decision-making processes necessary to design a vignette built around a meaningful goal (consideration 6.1), require planning and problem solving (consideration 6.2) to organize knowledge and experiences in a visual and understandable way (consideration 6.3) and monitor the creation process (consideration 6.4).

Working introspectively, narratively and creatively allows students to transfer what they have learned to other cognitive, creative, emotional and experiential

contexts (consideration 3.4), making them able to recognize visible cultural or educational threats (consideration 7.4).

From the observations made and the analysis of the feedback received from the female students who took part in the activities, we can argue that comics proved to be a valuable tool for activating processes of deconstructing stereotypes through nonverbal modalities, which stimulate creativity (Bocci & Bonavolontà, 2022), lateral thinking (Zollo et al., 2015) and visual intelligence (Gardner, 2005). In fact, the written notes, which accompanied most of the delivered vignettes, sometimes took the form of captions, aimed at better specifying what was drawn, other times of texts justifying the choices made, or even reflections on the creation process and the pedagogical significance of the activity. Below is a table showing some of the notes written by the students (Table 6):

I found the activity very interesting because it allowed me to change my point of view and reason by putting myself in the shoes of the two subjects involved. Besides, I like drawing, and at the university they never let us do it.	I decided to represent these two people based on my stereotypes and fears. Doing it with drawing was easier and less embarrassing than if we had to do it verbally. That is why I think it is an activity that could also work well in elementary school.	When I had to draw myself I really realised some thoughts I had, what my attention was drawn to. [...] If I had to speak them verbally or write them down I would not have externalised them and perhaps not even thought them.
I found the activity in general interesting, first of all because it draws on a wealth of experience that accompanies us every day, precisely because instinctive actions, and then also because it was fun to try my hand at drawing-I haven't drawn in years!	I found this activity very interesting in that I was able to represent a situation common to all college girls, but especially those who attend our university campus. [...] I was able to learn how to use artificial intelligence to generate images.	I wanted to reflect on risk factors and mitigation factors by tying them, however, to situations of power asymmetries. The vignette allows for a good idea of what is happening.

Table 6. Some reflections written by students on comics as an accessible medium

Once the comics were completed, students had the opportunity to share on the online platform the comics created and then to observe those produced by others and leave feedback, comments¹, questions, observations. Analysis of the comics produced allowed them to provide concrete and constructive feedback geared toward improvement (consideration 8.5) and identification of narrative and relational patterns and critical elements to work on (consideration 3.2). This also allowed us to reason about how graphic storytelling can stimulate alternative forms of knowledge and signification (consideration 3.3) and foster processes of cognitive and emotional empathy, of critical analysis about the ways in which we look at inter-individual differences as well as to reason about what restorative educational practices can be put in place in light of the stereotypes that emerged from the comics (consideration 9.4). In this regard, here are some notes written by the students (tab 7):

...More difficult was to empathize with the subjectivity we tried to represent [...] Also influencing the choice of characters was the desire to think of two subjects who were physically distant but could be close in another way, and we were able to represent this with drawing	This activity made me reflect on how stereotypes are inherent in every context, starting from the street to work environments, recreational environments, and even in educational settings.	I believe that it is essential first of all to have an awareness of the prejudices that condition us. Only from this can we feel the need and urgency to embark on paths of deconstruction.
If the choice of characters was immediate, the rest of the work was anything but simple [...] after an initial step where we pinned down the stereotypes that each of us assigned to the teacher and the pupil, the first doubts began. [...] We did not always share the same reasoning, then confronting each other we obviously came to an agreement, but this made us realise how personal there is in the interpretation of the	From this group activity we understood that regardless of age and type of work done each of us brings with us factors/elements that make us cataloging the people around us.	Pedagogically, it was very helpful to realize how unconsciously there are stereotypes now internalized by each of us. I think it is crucial first of all to have the awareness of the prejudices that condition us. Only from this can we feel the need and the urgency of undertaking paths of

¹ The analysis of these shared reflections will, for reasons of space, be deepened in future contributions.

Other, unknown par excellence, strange, different, incomprehensible: therefore fearsome.		deconstruction.
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Tab 7: Some reflections written by students on using comics to reason about stereotypes

Given the theme around which the comic strip was to be built -risk and mitigation factors that link to stereotypical representations in the imagination- having to represent an "Other" with all its characteristics, each student was enabled to explore personal ideas, beliefs, expectations and motivations through a visual and textual narrative (consideration 9.1) that reflected a plurality of authentic experiences (consideration 1.3), and this activated processes of critical self-analysis and reflective collective discussion about their representations of the world (considerations 9.2 and 9.3). In fact, therefore, this activity also allows one to reason about the biases in the use of language and symbols and deconstruct them (consideration 2.4) through becoming aware of the psychosocial dynamics that generate exclusion (consideration 6.5).

In other words, comics emerge as an educational and instructional tool capable of supporting multimodal translation strategies that enable students to construct robust, situated, and transferable understandings (CAST, 2023). Comics-based workshop activities solicit creative problem solving, self-monitoring, and the development of soft skills critical for autonomy in learning and life. The inherently multimodal nature of comics offers multiple modes of access, fostering the recognition and appreciation of different cognitive styles, cultural experiences and modes of expression, and thus helping to disrupt normative educational models that reward only certain forms of knowledge and communication.

In addition, the narrative and visual practices inherent in comics make possible more meaningful and deeply internalized learning, nurturing a sense of belonging, identity-building and mutual recognition. Through comics, students can express their understanding and experiences in diverse and accessible ways, overcoming communicative and cognitive barriers that traditional teaching approaches often perpetuate. Comics foster students' authentic engagement by providing spaces for choice, personal relevance and creative play, elements that are not only functional in sustaining motivation and perseverance, but also serve as radical

pedagogical acts of restoring agency, valuing difference and promoting educational equity.

Despite this, comics still struggle to be recognized as a legitimate language in the pedagogical field, unlike other research and training tools such as theater or music. Yet, experiences such as those of Graphic Medicine (Moretti & Scavarda, 2021), Graphic Anthropology (Ramos, 2004) and the use of comics in Disability Studies to de-medicalize disability narratives (Squier, 2015; Scavarda, 2024) show us the transformative power of these languages.

Such perspectives are deeply intertwined with the assumptions of Disability Studies and inclusive pedagogy, which aim to dismantle ableist rhetorics and promote alternative narratives of disability and difference. Comics, precisely because of its hybrid, corporeal, accessible and popular nature, lends itself particularly well to this task. As Moretti and Scavarda (2021) observe, the strength of comics lies in its ability to activate an "experiential and empathic dimension of reading," which involves the body, memory, and emotions. This makes it possible not only to conceptually understand otherness, but to "feel" it, to experience it vicariously, if only for a moment. In education, this possibility has enormous transformative potential.

In our training project, the use of comics thus had a twofold function: on the one hand, it allowed participants to explore in a nonjudgmental way their own mental images about disability and otherness, making stereotypes and unconscious biases visible; on the other hand, it offered a creative space to imagine new, more inclusive, plural and situated narratives. Ultimately, it was a process of unlearning and re-learning, in which visual language functioned as a "technology of critical imagination" (Scavarda, 2024), capable of opening glimpses toward transformative education.

Conclusions

Stereotypes, implicit biases and prejudices do not represent occasional anomalies, but rather constitute structural elements of the hegemonic narratives that govern access to knowledge, the distribution of educational opportunities and the configuration of school legitimacy. They manifest themselves through language, gestures, curricular practices and teaching choices, delineating what we might call a *naturalized pedagogical imaginary*, capable of unconsciously orienting

educational dynamics and circumscribing the margins of participation (Bocci & Guerini, 2022). In this framework, a pedagogical work of critical deconstruction of such imaginaries becomes imperative, so that teacher education, from the first school cycle onward, engages actively in the promotion of a pedagogy oriented toward epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007) and educational equity (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

The challenge of ensuring authentic accessibility to knowledge, understood as the possibility of active co-participation in the processes of knowledge construction, appears more urgent today than ever before, not least in light of the increasing pervasiveness of digital technologies. While these seem to multiply learning contexts, they also risk generating new forms of exclusion related to critical decoding and meaning attribution skills (Rose & Meyer, 2002; Selwyn, 2021; De Castro et al., 2023). It therefore becomes necessary for educators, and especially teachers, to develop an informed and critical approach to the use of cultural mediators, avoiding both technophobic rejection and uncritical acceptance of their supposed neutrality (Livingstone, 2012).

Educational experiences conducted in university settings highlight how the adoption of multimodal and narrative approaches can facilitate greater awareness of exclusionary mechanisms and the transformative potential of intersectional pedagogy (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1994). In particular, the use of comics as a visual storytelling tool has proven particularly effective in promoting processes of critical reflection, emotional engagement and deconstruction of internalized stereotypes (Centrone et al., 2025). Thanks to its ability to combine narrative and image, comics allow for the representation of experiences of marginalization and conflict in synthetic and emotionally dense forms, prompting a critical reworking of experiences and promoting the activation of a more conscious pedagogical posture (Plava & Moretti, 2024; Scavarda, 2024).

In this paper we illustrated a research-training experience conducted with students of the master's degree course in Primary Education Sciences, involved in laboratory activities aimed at using comics as a reflective tool on the prejudices and stereotypes activated in the educational relationship (Bocci & Guerini, 2022; Centrone, 2024a; Bocci & Bonavolontà, 2022). The activities fostered the emergence of tacit epistemologies, i.e., that set of unconscious views, beliefs, and representations that profoundly influence the way we teach and learn (Castellana & Botta, 2023; Bocci & Travaglini, 2016).

Particular attention has been paid to the critical analysis of the language used to describe self and other, in the belief that words are carriers of worldviews and tools of inclusion or exclusion (Centrone, 2024; van Dijk, 2011). It has been seen how, comics, thanks to their iconic-narrative dimension, represent a powerful pedagogical means to activate processes of affective and cognitive deconstruction of stereotypes, making visible the symbolic conflicts and value hierarchies underlying representations of otherness.

The results of the workshop experience, confirmed by the thematic analysis of the collected data, suggest that the use of comics in teacher education fully adheres to the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), namely diversification of means of engagement, representation and expression (CAST, 2024). The use of unconventional tools made it possible for everyone to be actively involved while respecting different modes of expression and cognitive styles.

Employing comics in university teacher education contexts is not only an effective methodological choice, but a conscious political and pedagogical action aimed at building genuinely inclusive learning environments that recognize the plurality of ways of knowing and being in the world, and actively challenge the ableist logics still pervasive in contemporary educational systems.

However, the effectiveness of inclusive educational approaches requires that university environments also be designed according to criteria of universal accessibility (Mace, 1985). Flexible classrooms with moveable furniture suitable for a plurality of physical and cognitive needs are necessary conditions to prevent architectural and organizational barriers from impairing participation and learning.

In conclusion, the experience documented here is intended to offer a small contribution to the growing literature promoting the use of narrative and multimodal tools in inclusive educational processes (Bocci & Fontana, 2024), from the perspective of helping to transform educational contexts from devices of exclusion to spaces of recognition and participation. Promoting accessibility and educational justice means radically questioning the organization of educational environments so that all subjectivity can find space and full expression (Centrone et al., 2025; Guerini et al., in press).

The educational system, far from being a neutral space, is configured as a terrain traversed by power relations, discursive practices and representations that produce and reproduce inequalities (Centrone et al., 2024). In this context,

training teachers can no longer be limited to the transmission of technical knowledge but must promote a critical awareness of the naturalization mechanisms that sustain hierarchies and processes of exclusion.

UDL, interpreted in the framework of Disability Studies and critical pedagogy, emerges as a paradigm capable of redefining the very architecture of teaching, restoring centrality to the concepts of accessibility, participation and epistemic justice. Integrating narrative practices such as comics into educational pathways, in the intersectional and transformative perspective proposed here, represents a concrete step toward the construction of a truly inclusive pedagogy capable of envisioning a more equitable education for all.

Author contributions

The paper is the result of joint work between the authors. For the sole purpose of individual contributions, where required, it is specified that Introduction was written by Fabio Bocci; sections 1, 2, 2.1 and 2.2 were written by Barbara Centrone; Conclusions was written by Ines Guerini.

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