ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AS A NARRATIVE MIRROR: INCLUSIVE STORYTELLING PRACTICES IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT
This exploratory descriptive study examines how inclusive storytelling, Universal Design for Learning and generative artificial intelligence can support teacher education for inclusive practices. Conducted within Inclusive Learning Technologies workshops for specialisation courses in support teaching, it analysed 162 pre and post questionnaires completed by preschool, primary and lower secondary teachers. Participants designed digital narratives with Book Creator, StoryJumper and AI tools, creating inclusive stories and visual supports. Results show a marked increase in participants' perceived knowledge of inclusive storytelling, readiness to use narrative practices and confidence in designing inclusive narrative activities. Participants also reported a more grounded view of technologies and AI as cognitive and creative mediators for personalization, accessibility and participation. The findings suggest that AI can function as a narrative mirror, enhancing reflection and planning while preserving teachers' agency and ethical responsibility.

KEYWORDS
Artificial Intelligence; inclusive storytelling; teacher education; Universal Design for Learning; digital storytelling.

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[1] Rossana Campanale contributed to the theoretical framing, interpretation of results, conclusions, and development of the concept of AI as a "narrative mirror". Angela Ruotolo contributed to the methodological design, organisation of the workshop, quantitative data collection and analysis, and writing of the results section. Federica Pepe contributed to the qualitative analysis, interpretation of open-ended responses and narrative artefacts, manuscript revision; all authors approved the final version.

1. Introduction

Teacher education must respond to heterogeneous classrooms, diverse learning needs and evolving digital environments. Inclusive instructional design therefore requires attention to accessibility, participation and personalisation from the outset. This study examines inclusive storytelling supported by generative artificial intelligence (AI) within Inclusive Learning Technologies workshops delivered as part of specialist teacher education programmes for supporting pupils with disabilities.

The study aims to describe teachers' perceptions of a workshop programme informed by Universal Design for Learning (UDL), digital storytelling and AI, and to explore the possibilities for inclusive instructional design expressed in their responses. It does not assess individual competence gains or programme effectiveness.

Participants designed digital narratives using Book Creator, StoryJumper and generative AI tools, with an emphasis on multimodality, collaborative meaning-making and professional reflection.

2. Theoretical framework

Narrative is a fundamental means of organising experience and constructing meaning. Bruner (1997) conceptualises narrative thinking as a way of making sense of reality, while Ricoeur (1986) emphasises the capacity of narrative to connect past, present and future within a coherent structure of meaning. In education, storytelling can therefore be understood as a cultural and pedagogical practice that connects knowledge, experience and identity.

Digital storytelling integrates text, images, audio, video and interactive elements. Robin (2008) and Ohler (2013) discuss its potential to support motivation,

engagement and learning. As a participatory approach, it may also support linguistic, communicative, critical and socio-emotional development.

The inclusive value of storytelling becomes particularly evident when interpreted through the lens of Universal Design for Learning. According to Rose and Meyer (2002) and CAST (2018), learner variability is not an exception to be addressed retrospectively, but an ordinary condition to be considered from the very beginning of instructional design. Inclusive storytelling responds to this principle because it offers multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement. A story can be read, listened to, visualised, dramatised, rewritten, or collaboratively constructed, enabling students with different cognitive, linguistic, cultural, and relational profiles to access the same learning experience through diverse channels.

Digital technologies provide additional resources for narrative learning environments. Rivoltella (2017) conceptualises technologies as cultural mediators that shape how knowledge is produced and shared. Platforms such as Book Creator and StoryJumper can support accessible, multimodal stories, collaborative writing, documentation of learning activities and shared digital libraries.

Generative AI may extend these possibilities when its use is guided by explicit pedagogical purposes. Floridi (2019) discusses the cultural significance of AI in knowledge production, while Long and Magerko (2020) emphasise AI literacy as a basis for understanding its opportunities, limitations and ethical implications. Selwyn (2019) cautions against assuming that technology alone improves education, highlighting the importance of reflective, pedagogically informed practice.

Recent work places teacher agency and critical evaluation at the centre of generative AI integration. Kartal (2024), in a narrative inquiry involving 12 EFL student teachers, examined experiences of ChatGPT use and highlighted human–

computer co-creation and critical analysis. This context-specific study informs the present emphasis on teacher judgement; it does not establish effects in specialist programmes for supporting pupils with disabilities. Miao and Cukurova (2024) identify AI pedagogy, ethics and professional learning as dimensions of teachers' AI competence. For inclusive education, Miao and Holmes (2023) emphasise human agency, equity, linguistic and cultural diversity, and pedagogical validation of generated content. These perspectives support attention to accessibility while cautioning against assuming that generated resources are inherently inclusive.

The UDL Guidelines 3.0 (CAST, 2024) update the framework with explicit attention to learner agency, identities, belonging, and biases that create barriers. This provides a current lens for discussing whose experiences are represented in AI-generated stories and who can participate in their construction. The update is used here to contextualise the findings; it is not presented as an assessment framework applied retrospectively to the workshop or its artefacts.

Within this framework, the study proposes AI as a "narrative mirror": a cognitive and creative mediator through which teachers can examine and reorganise their design ideas. Teachers formulate prompts, evaluate generated proposals and adapt them to pupils' needs. Schön's (1983) reflective practitioner and Mezirow's (2003) transformative learning provide possible interpretative perspectives; neither is directly measured in this study.

The study addresses a practical question in teacher education: how can digital tools and generative AI support inclusive instructional design while teachers retain responsibility for pedagogical decisions? The focus is on the educational purposes assigned to these tools within the design process.

Narrative can provide a symbolic space in which differences are represented without being reduced to deficits. Characters, settings and plots allow learners to

explore belonging, communication, collaboration, conflict and mutual recognition. Participatory story design enables pupils to contribute through different modes of expression and to take on roles suited to their capabilities. Inclusive storytelling thus concerns both the content of a story and participation in its creation.

AI can contribute text, images, narrative alternatives and adaptations to this process. Its educational relevance lies partly in making design decisions explicit: teachers assess generated content against their pedagogical intentions and the needs of their pupils. This critical appraisal provides a rationale for using AI within teacher education, although its effects are not established by the present study.

Accessibility, personalisation and participation depend on instructional design, knowledge of learners and the suitability of learning resources for the intended objectives. Neither AI nor digital platforms ensure inclusion in themselves. The workshop therefore combined theoretical discussion, practical experimentation and reflection on the educational purposes of the tools.

3. Method

3.1 Design and participants

An exploratory, descriptive study was conducted within a teacher education programme. Quantitative data comprised initial and final questionnaires with five-point response scales. Qualitative material consisted of responses to a final open-ended question and digital narrative artefacts examined through an exploratory reading. The 86 initial and 76 final questionnaire submissions could not be reliably linked at the individual level and were therefore treated as unpaired datasets. Their sum, 162, represents submissions rather than distinct participants; the overlap between respondent groups is unknown.

The programme involved 200 teachers enrolled in specialist programmes for supporting pupils with disabilities at Italian universities in the 2025/2026 academic year. Participants taught at pre-primary, primary and lower secondary levels. All participated in the workshop activities and produced narrative materials, whereas questionnaire completion was voluntary. Respondents therefore constituted self-selected subsets of the cohort. The initial and final submissions represented 43% and 38% of the 200 participants, respectively. These figures are cohort-based proportions rather than confirmed survey response rates, because the number invited to each survey is undocumented.

The questionnaire exports record 86 initial and 76 final submissions, all dated 29 April 2026. No missing values occur in the four closed-ended items in either survey; the item denominators are therefore 86 and 76, respectively. All 76 final submissions contain a non-empty open-ended response. No structured demographic, professional or school-level variables appear in the exports. The distribution of the 200 participants across school levels is unavailable, limiting the description of the cohort and assessment of the representativeness of the respondent groups.

Respondent-level comparisons by school level, prior experience or familiarity were unavailable. The comparability of the two respondent groups therefore cannot be established. Differences in group composition and non-response may account for differences in aggregate profiles. The lower number of final submissions cannot be interpreted as individual attrition because the datasets are unpaired.

3.2 Workshop structure

The 25-hour workshop comprised an initial phase addressing theoretical and methodological principles, intended to establish a shared vocabulary, followed by

a design phase. During the latter, participants developed stories or digital books with attention to narrative structure, accessibility and multimodality.

Participants explored UDL principles, the DigCompEdu framework (Redecker, 2017), inclusive and digital storytelling, and the pedagogical implications of generative AI. They then used Book Creator, StoryJumper and generative AI tools to design digital stories and inclusive narrative activities. Individual work preceded collaborative activities, with attention to potential classroom application.

Before using the platforms, participants discussed accessibility, multimodality, differentiation, participation and responsible AI use. They reviewed their products in relation to UDL principles, explaining design choices and considering adaptations for their classes. They also shared products, challenges and possible solutions, discussing accessibility, narrative coherence and applicability to classroom teaching. These activities formed part of the workshop and were not independently scored assessments of competence.

3.3 Questionnaires and descriptive analysis

The questionnaires were developed ad hoc for exploratory use and were not validated before administration. They addressed four areas: knowledge of inclusive storytelling, narrative practices in teaching, inclusive narrative design, and perceived support from technologies and AI. All eight closed-ended items used a five-point response scale with endpoints of 1 = “per niente” (not at all) and 5 = “moltissimo” (very much). Intermediate verbal labels are not documented. Appendix A provides editorial English translations of the closed-ended items and the available original Italian open-ended question. The full Italian wording of the closed-ended items could not be recovered from the available materials; the English translations are not validated versions of the instruments.

The documentation does not identify the instrument developers or describe adaptation from existing measures, expert review, piloting or comprehension checks. The account of instrument development is consequently limited to its exploratory purpose, content areas and response format. The correspondence between item topics and workshop objectives does not establish a documented development or validation procedure.

Initial familiarity with inclusive storytelling and final perceived knowledge gain are distinct constructs. Initial use of narrative practices and final perceived preparedness are also distinct. The design items refer respectively to feeling "prepared" and feeling "able"; these are related but are not assumed to be interchangeable measures. The technologies/AI item also differs: the initial version asks about supporting storytelling in educational settings, whereas the final version adds "effectively" and refers to educational storytelling. Although the numerical categories and endpoint anchors match, these wording differences and a shared five-point format do not establish measurement equivalence.

Frequencies, percentages and means are reported separately for each survey. Means summarise numerically coded ordinal responses and should not be interpreted as validated competence scores. No paired tests, change scores or causal estimates were calculated. Tables 1 and 2 present separate response profiles because neither item equivalence nor respondent-group comparability has been established.

3.4 Qualitative component and artefacts

The qualitative component involved an exploratory thematic reading informed by Braun and Clarke (2006), undertaken to contextualise the descriptive questionnaire findings. Federica Pepe was responsible for the qualitative analysis and interpretation of open-ended responses and narrative artefacts. The thematic

account describes personalisation and multimodality, AI-assisted idea generation and adaptation, co-creation, and concerns about digital competence. These descriptive groupings do not indicate thematic prevalence or demonstrate saturation.

The available corpus contains 76 non-empty open-ended responses, including brief and nonspecific answers. The analysed subset and any exclusions are undocumented. Records of coding stages, the number of coders, theme-selection criteria and code revisions are also unavailable. Independent double coding, intercoder agreement, an audit trail, peer review and member checking are not documented. The findings are therefore presented as an exploratory interpretation; the analytical process and consistency of interpretation cannot be independently assessed from the available records.

Participants produced more than 200 digital narrative artefacts, including inclusive stories, interactive books and shared narrative libraries. Exploratory examination and workshop discussion focused on accessibility, multimodality, narrative coherence and applicability to classroom teaching; participants also considered adaptations for their classes. The artefacts contextualise the design activities. No standardised scoring, systematic coding of the corpus or independent assessment of competence was documented. Artefact production is therefore not interpreted as evidence of competence gains or as independent validation of questionnaire responses.

The precise artefact inventory, examined subset and selection procedure are undocumented. Although Federica Pepe was responsible for qualitative analysis, the records do not identify additional reviewers or their roles. There is no systematic record of the four characteristics or of associations between specific artefacts and themes. The open-ended question primarily elicited intended future use, although some responses described existing practices or completed products.

These self-reports do not verify classroom implementation, its timing relative to the workshop or pupil outcomes.

3.5 Ethics and data management

Questionnaire completion was voluntary. The exported datasets contain timestamps and numerical responses, together with open-ended responses in the final survey, but no name or email fields. Initial and final responses could not be reliably linked. The absence of these fields does not establish anonymity at collection or complete anonymisation of open-ended responses and artefacts.

Documentation of participant information and consent, data protection procedures, and ethics approval, exemption or an institutional determination regarding review is unavailable. The conditions governing data collection and subsequent use therefore cannot be fully assessed. Voluntary participation does not, by itself, establish informed consent, and no claim of documented consent, full anonymisation, ethical approval, exemption or regulatory compliance is made. Direct participant quotations and reproductions of narrative artefacts are omitted. Their omission does not resolve the lack of documentation concerning use of the underlying data.

4. Results

4.1 Survey-specific response profiles

Tables 1 and 2 summarise the initial and final questionnaire responses, respectively. Percentages represent the combined proportion selecting categories 4 or 5 on scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). All closed-ended items were complete, yielding item-level denominators of 86 and 76. Percentages were calculated from category counts and rounded to one decimal place; means were rounded to two decimal places.

Table 1. Initial questionnaire response profile (n = 86)

Item focus	Categories 4–5 (%)	Mean score
Familiarity with inclusive storytelling	17.4	2.58
Use of narrative practices in teaching	23.3	2.69
Preparedness for inclusive narrative design	18.6	2.58
Perceived support of technologies and AI	83.7	4.35

Note. Response scale: 1 = not at all; 5 = very much. Percentages combine categories 4 and 5. Means summarise ordinal responses; they are not competence scores. Initial and final datasets are unpaired.

Table 2. Final questionnaire response profile (n = 76)

Item focus	Categories 4–5 (%)	Mean score
Retrospective perception of knowledge gain	85.5	4.28
Perceived greater preparedness to use narrative practices	77.6	4.11
Perceived ability to design inclusive narrative activities	71.1	3.97
Perceived support of technologies and AI	94.7	4.63

Note. Response scale: 1 = not at all; 5 = very much. Percentages combine categories 4 and 5. Means summarise ordinal responses; they are not competence scores. Initial and final datasets are unpaired.

In the initial survey, 43.0% of respondents selected categories 1 or 2 for familiarity with inclusive storytelling, and the same proportion selected these categories for the use of narrative practices. For preparedness to design inclusive narrative activities, the corresponding proportion was 47.7% (41/86). These responses represent ordinal self-reports rather than objective measures of behaviour or competence.

For the final item on perceived knowledge gain, 32 respondents selected category 4 and 33 selected category 5 (85.5% combined); one selected category 2 and none selected category 1. These ratings reflect retrospective perceptions elicited by the

item, not measured differences between initial and final knowledge. Categories 4 and 5 accounted for 77.6% of responses on perceived greater preparedness to use narrative practices and 71.1% on perceived ability to design inclusive narrative activities.

The technology and AI items received predominantly high ratings in both surveys. In the initial survey, 25.6% selected category 4 and 58.1% category 5; the corresponding final-survey proportions were 26.3% and 68.4%. These separate distributions concern perceived support for storytelling rather than proficiency in using AI tools. They do not demonstrate individual change or improvement attributable to the workshop.

4.2 Open-ended responses and narrative products

Respondents described personalised stories, visual and audio elements, role play, simulations and narrative scenarios for introducing topics, supporting language development, addressing conflict and civic education, and responding to communication difficulties. Responses referred to pupils with autism, specific learning disorders, ADHD and dyslexia. These accounts describe proposed or reported applications; they do not establish effectiveness for these learners.

Descriptions of AI-assisted activities included generating images and characters, adapting texts and developing classroom stories. Proposals for co-creation involved pupils defining characters and settings, then evaluating and revising AI-generated narrative developments. Shared digital libraries were also proposed as a means of presenting pupils' work.

The thematic account included favourable views of AI support, alongside concerns about limited digital competence and preferences for collaboration with colleagues. Thematic frequencies are not reported because the analysed subset of the 76 available responses and the coding record are undocumented. Direct

quotations are omitted because documentation of permission to publish them is unavailable (Section 3.5).

More than 200 narrative artefacts were produced during the workshop. In the absence of systematic assessment records, their production documents participation in design activities but does not support estimates of artefact quality, accessibility or competence.

5. Discussion

The final survey responses indicate favourable perceptions of inclusive storytelling and technological support. The initial survey and exploratory qualitative account provide additional descriptive context. These findings do not establish change during the programme: the datasets are unpaired, group comparability is unknown and several items assess different dimensions. In particular, perceived knowledge gain is a retrospective judgement rather than a measured change in knowledge.

The responses concerning personalisation, visual and sound elements, and co-creation are consistent with the pedagogical possibilities of narrative discussed by Bruner (1997) and Ricoeur (1986), and with UDL's attention to multiple means of engagement, representation, action and expression (CAST, 2018). This consistency concerns the content of participants' accounts; it does not demonstrate reduced barriers, increased participation or improved learning among pupils. The UDL Guidelines 3.0 (CAST, 2024) further invite scrutiny of representation, belonging and bias in generated narratives, issues that future artefact assessments could examine explicitly.

Schön's (1983) account of reflective practice offers a possible interpretation of the workshop's design, discussion and revision activities. Mezirow's (2003) perspective raises questions about whether teachers reconsider assumptions about inclusion and technology. Neither reflection nor perspective transformation was

operationalised or directly measured. These frameworks therefore inform interpretation rather than establish professional transformation.

The “narrative mirror” metaphor frames the relationship between teachers’ intentions and AI-generated proposals. Although the exploratory thematic account includes supportive views of AI, it neither establishes consensus among respondents nor independently demonstrates a reflective process. Teachers’ selection, revision and contextualisation of generated content remain central to this conceptual interpretation.

This interpretation resonates with Kartal’s (2024) emphasis on critical engagement and co-creation in a different teacher education setting, and with the AI pedagogy and professional learning dimensions proposed by Miao and Cukurova (2024). The present study cannot isolate the contribution of AI from storytelling, UDL, collaborative work or the overall training experience. Its practical implication is to examine these elements together when designing and evaluating similar workshops.

A pedagogical implication is that teacher education should address the purposes of AI use alongside technical skills. Generating text or images requires consideration of the intended learners, potential barriers and opportunities for participation. The “narrative mirror” perspective situates AI within a dialogic design process in which teachers critically evaluate generated responses and adapt them to the educational context.

Multimodality and pupil co-authorship were among the possibilities described in the open-ended responses. Images, audio, recorded speech, drawings and simplified texts may provide different forms of access, while pupils may contribute characters, endings and interpretations. Establishing whether these practices

support accessible, participatory learning requires classroom observation and attention to learners' perspectives.

Ethical evaluation of AI-generated resources should consider stereotypes, linguistic and cultural representation, privacy and suitability for individual pupils (Miao & Holmes, 2023). These concerns are consistent with the workshop's emphasis on teacher responsibility. They do not, however, establish compliance with research ethics requirements: documentation of consent, data protection and the basis for ethics review is unavailable for this study (Section 3.5).

The transferability of the findings is limited by voluntary survey participation, the unavailable school-level distribution of the cohort, unknown respondent-group composition and overlap, unvalidated ad hoc instruments, differences in item wording and incomplete documentation of qualitative analysis. Cohort-based submission proportions cannot be treated as confirmed invitation-based response rates. Response anchors and item-level denominators are reported, but measurement equivalence is unestablished and the full original Italian wording of the closed-ended items is unavailable. Exploratory examination of artefacts does not independently verify self-reported competence. Without a control group, paired longitudinal data or direct evidence of pupil outcomes, effects cannot be attributed to the programme. Social desirability and the positive retrospective framing of final items may also have influenced responses.

6. Conclusions

This exploratory, descriptive study reports questionnaire response profiles and accounts of intended or reported uses of inclusive storytelling supported by generative AI. Final-survey respondents expressed favourable perceptions of narrative design and technological support. The findings do not establish individual competence gains, professional transformation or effects on pupil learning. AI as a

"narrative mirror" is proposed as a pedagogical interpretation of teachers' engagement with generated content.

Future research should combine matched longitudinal data and equivalent validated items with classroom observations and transparent analysis of open responses and artefacts. Rubrics could examine accessibility, narrative coherence, multimodality, pupil participation and the teacher's critical revision of AI-generated content. Such evidence would help distinguish perceptions of preparedness from observed instructional design competence and educational outcomes.

Appendix A Questionnaire items

The closed-ended items below are editorial English translations. Their full original Italian wording could not be recovered from the available materials and has not been reconstructed. The inventory includes four initial and four final closed-ended items, together with the final open-ended question, whose available Italian wording is reproduced below. All closed-ended items use response categories 1–5, with documented endpoints of "1 = per niente" and "5 = moltissimo" (1 = not at all; 5 = very much). Intermediate verbal labels are unspecified. These translations are neither validated English instruments nor a complete reproduction of the original Italian questionnaires.

Initial questionnaire

1. How familiar are you with the concept of inclusive storytelling?

Response categories: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Endpoint anchors: 1 = not at all; 5 = very much. Intermediate verbal labels are not specified in the export.

2. Do you use narrative practices in your teaching?

Response categories: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Endpoint anchors: 1 = not at all; 5 = very much. Intermediate verbal labels are not specified in the export.

3. Do you feel prepared to design inclusive teaching activities based on narrative?

Response categories: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Endpoint anchors: 1 = not at all; 5 = very much. Intermediate verbal labels are not specified in the export.

4. Do you think that technologies (e.g. AI) can support storytelling in educational settings?

Response categories: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Endpoint anchors: 1 = not at all; 5 = very much. Intermediate verbal labels are not specified in the export.

Final questionnaire

1. Has your knowledge of inclusive storytelling increased?

Response categories: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Endpoint anchors: 1 = not at all; 5 = very much. Intermediate verbal labels are not specified in the export.

2. Do you feel more prepared to use narrative practices in teaching?

Response categories: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Endpoint anchors: 1 = not at all; 5 = very much. Intermediate verbal labels are not specified in the export.

3. Do you feel able to design inclusive activities based on narrative?

Response categories: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Endpoint anchors: 1 = not at all; 5 = very much. Intermediate verbal labels are not specified in the export.

4. Do you think that technologies (e.g. AI) can effectively support educational storytelling?

Response categories: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Endpoint anchors: 1 = not at all; 5 = very much. Intermediate verbal labels are not specified in the export.

5. Open-ended question. Original Italian wording: “In che modo pensi di integrare lo storytelling (eventualmente con IA) nella tua didattica?” Editorial English translation: “How do you plan to integrate storytelling (possibly with AI) into your

teaching?" All 76 final submissions contain an answer. The export provides no additional instructions and does not establish whether answering was required or optional.

No demographic or professional background question appears in either export. The available materials do not permit verification of the complete administered forms, including instructions, sections, branching and required-response settings. The presence of an answer in every submitted record does not establish that a field was mandatory.

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