Daniela Manno
Associate Professor of Didactics and Special Education | Department of Education, Psychology and Communication
Università degli Studi Suor Orsola Benincasa – Naples, Italy | daniela.manno@unisob.na.it

Seeing Inclusion. Thinking Inclusion. Artificial Intelligence as an Educational Tool to Reframe Representations of Disability

Vedere l'inclusione. Pensare l'inclusione. L'Intelligenza Artificiale come strumento educativo per ripensare le rappresentazioni della disabilità

Call

What happens when future teachers are asked to represent autism through metaphors and AI-generated images? This article presents an exploratory educational activity aimed at activating critical and reflective processes about inclusive education, using generative AI as a dialogic tool. Through a multi-phase path, students were guided to question the images, both internal and external, of autism, turning the encounter with AI into a moment of deconstruction and reimagination. The aggregate analysis of the students' work revealed recurring dimensions and areas of critical reflection, offering insights into the role of imagery in inclusive teacher education.

Keywords: Autism; Teacher Education; Metaphor; Imagination; Critical Reflection.

Cosa succede quando ai futuri insegnanti viene chiesto di rappresentare l'autismo attraverso metafore e immagini generate dall'IA? Questo articolo presenta un'attività didattica esplorativa volta ad attivare processi critici e riflessivi sull'educazione inclusiva, utilizzando l'IA generativa come strumento dialogico. Attraverso un percorso a più fasi, gli studenti sono stati guidati a mettere in discussione le immagini, interne ed esterne, dell'autismo, trasformando l'incontro con l'IA in un momento di decostruzione e reimmaginazione. L'analisi aggregata del lavoro degli studenti ha rivelato dimensioni ricorrenti e aree di riflessione critica, offrendo spunti di riflessione sul ruolo dell'immaginario nella formazione inclusiva degli insegnanti.

Parole chiave: Autismo; Formazione degli insegnanti; Metafora; Immaginazione; Riflessione critica

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Corresponding Author: Daniela Manno | daniela.manno@unisob.na.it

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1. The *special* in special education: learning to *think otherwise*

Speaking of inclusion means engaging not only with rules and policies, but also with images, representations, and shared imaginaries. Inclusion, before being a process to be implemented, is first and foremost a way of thinking, seeing, and constructing reality: a mental and ethical posture, rather than a set of instructions to be applied, in this case, in educational settings. A culture of inclusion requires adequate practices, those that, by embodying its core values (Booth & Ainscow, 2014), become themselves generative of new transformations, enabling the mind, shaped by culture, to contribute in turn to the creation of new cultural forms (Bruner, 2009). But this requires, as Dewey (2006) taught us, becoming aware of the myriad unspoken assumptions, implicit representations, mental images, and interpretive frames that shape our actions, including those that inform educational practices. Often, we behave as if such practices arise out of nowhere, taking them for granted. Educating in a culture of inclusion and inclusive education should therefore be conceived as a generative process, one that leads to the discovery and deep appropriation of inclusive values (see Manno, 2021; Manno & Cataldo, 2024) not as abstract content, but as horizons of meaning to be translated into practice. This involves an exercise in thinking that is both individual and collective, exploratory and critical, capable of questioning one's inner images and generating new ones.

From this theoretical and value-based horizon, the educational activity proposed to a group of preservice teachers took shape. They were invited to create visual stories about autism through the mediation of artificial intelligence. The underlying assumption was that images - especially when linked to what is not immediately visible to the eye - could help activate reflective thinking, making explicit the dominant logic underlying representations of autistic functioning. In other words, that they could support the development of what Montuschi (2004) calls "special thinking", which characterizes special education and is expressed as a way of thinking shaped by encounters with otherness and the unpredictability of real-life situations, one that resists ready-made solutions, engages in situated reflection, and continually reformulates its own orientations in search of contingent and transformative responses.

The proposal is therefore from the perspective of a special education that resists its reduction to a set of techniques and adaptations, to sectoral specialisms or medicalized interventions. Rather, it is to be understood as the theoretical foundation of inclusion itself, capable of guiding both theory and practice in the direction of plurality, inviting us to consider the diversity of human functioning in order to find the most appropriate strategies to support individuals in their full development, within a framework of self-determination. This perspective is widely shared in Italian special education and reflects the broader cultural approach of a Country long known for its full inclusion model (for some guiding perspectives on the debate, see, among others: Bocci, 2021; Canevaro, 1999, 2006, 2008; Cottini, 2016; Dainese, 2016; d'Alonzo & Caldin, 2012; d'Alonzo & Giaconi, 2024; Gaspari, 2018, 2023; Goussot, 2015; Pinnelli, Fiorucci, & Giaconi, 2024).

This approach is particularly valuable in teacher education, as it not only provides the practical tools to address different educational needs, but more importantly, it offers the conceptual tools to engage in reflective thinking and to develop a deeper understanding of human complexity (see, e.g.: Aiello & Giaconi, 2024; Canevaro & Ianes, 2021; Cottini, 2017; d'Alonzo, Bocci, & Pinnelli, 2015; Sibilio & Aiello, 2018), and to act in an ethically grounded way (see, e.g., Wiedebusch et al., 2024), fostering a vision of school as an open, reflective institution oriented toward educational justice (see, e.g.: Goodley et al., 2018; D'Alessio, 2011; Medeghini & Fornasa, 2011; Medeghini et al., 2013).

2. Learning to see the invisible. An educational pathway

The educational activity proposed to the students has been designed to foster a consciously inclusive posture in teaching practices, particularly in the presence of people with autism (see Cottini, 2022) or, adopting an identity-first language (see Acanfora, 2021; Vanolo, 2024), of autistic people. To this end, an

educational model has been developed that, by supporting the transition from concepts to their representations - first as mental representations, then as graphic ones - through the generative device of metaphor and the instrumental mediation of artificial intelligence, could encourage a problematization of the social imaginaries associated with autism and a reflection on their implications in educational contexts.

The structure of the activity, to be carried out in groups, was organized into the following phases. These were not conceived as a rigid sequence, but rather as a recursive process: each phase could be revisited and reworked cyclically, within a continuous dynamic of discovery, reflection, and revision.

1. *Identify key concepts.* Students were asked to select a number of topics related to the school inclusion of pupils with autism, the central theme of the course, and to identify the concepts they found most meaningful and wanted to focus in their final work.
2. *Associating metaphors and developing inner images.* For each key concept identified, students were asked to associate a metaphor - which could also be drawn from literary, cinematic, or scientific references - with the aim of stimulating critical and creative thinking capable of fostering a deeper understanding of theoretical concepts. In teacher education in particular, metaphors can open windows to the visions and models that operate beneath the surface, shaping educational practices without always being fully visible or acknowledged (see, e.g.: Bufalino, D'Aprile, & Strongoli, 2019; Fabbri, Bracci, & Romano, 2021; Strongoli, 2017). Metaphor is a powerful tool for activating thought (see Lakoff & Johnson, 2022; Ortony, 1993): it not only helps translate complex concepts into communicable forms, but also enables a restructuring of experience through symbolic and imaginative language. Metaphor – bringing together elements not through logical contiguity, but through affective resonance – invokes a mode of knowing that is both intuitive and reflective. As Lakoff (1993) suggests, our conceptual system is largely metaphorical: we do not merely use metaphors to explain, we think through them. Giami et al. (2007), drawing on Sontag's claim that metaphor forms the basis for most types of understanding – including scientific understanding – conducted a (not recent, yet relevant) study aimed at identifying the metaphors embedded in the everyday use of the term "handicap" in France. Their research highlighted how language itself creates a metaphorical reality, as it cannot always fully capture people, situations, and events in a way that corresponds to their actual complexity (on the topic of disability representations, see e.g.: Friso, 2017, 2019; Vadalà, 2011, 2013). Although brief, these theoretical premises were those from which students were invited to produce metaphors, not as embellishments, but as generative devices for mental imagery. As Kosslyn (1994) demonstrated, mental imagery is not a passive internal reproduction, but an active representation, a cognitive tool that enables us to construct, transform, and manipulate scenarios, concepts, and possibilities: its formation activates brain areas similar to those involved in visual perception, confirming the deep connection between seeing and imagining.
3. *Interacting with AI and generating external images.* In the previous phase, the image was framed, within a cognitivist perspective, as a mental image: an internal device for symbolic processing, useful for enhancing comprehension, memory, and creativity. Moving to the generation of external images through AI, the perspective shifts: the image becomes a cultural artifact, a semiotic tool, and an expression of social imaginaries with which one must critically engage. At this stage, students were invited to externalize the mental image they had constructed by elaborating a detailed prompt to be input into a generative AI tool, specifically ChatGPT and DALL·E, thereby also engaging in processes of AI literacy (see Agrusti, 2023; Elliott, 2021; Ranieri, 2025; Ranieri, Cuomo, & Biagini, 2024; Panciroli & Rivoltella, 2023; Seldon, 2018). Generating the image required careful prompt construction, with the option to revise and refine based on the result obtained. Particular emphasis was placed on the inclusion of contextual data and theoretical references, in order to avoid the risk that the supposed neutrality of AI might reinforce stereotypical or reductive representations shaped by dominant cultural imaginaries. The generated image was thus understood as a symbolic mediator: a lens through which students could question their own cultural frameworks and activate critical reflection. From a socio-

cultural perspective, the image, like any sign, can be seen not as a reflection of reality, but as a tool through which thought takes shape in dialogue with culture (Vygotsky, 2007).

4. *Critically evaluating AI-generated images.* AI generates images based on the human imaginaries on which it has been trained: it does not think, but reflects the limitations, omissions, and cultural biases embedded in its data. Engaging with these images therefore means engaging with dominant social representations, often filtered, questionable, and in need of deconstruction. For this reason, the fourth phase of the activity involved a critical analysis of the generated images, including a comparison with the initial concept/metaphor and a check of their coherence with the concept the group intended to represent. This was also in line with the course objectives of avoiding stereotypical or reductive representations. When necessary, students revised their prompts to improve the communicative effectiveness of the images, guided by an analysis grid that include the key concept, metaphor, prompt, AI-generated image, AI comment, and group comment.
5. *Building a visual narrative.* Based on the images generated, each group created a coherent visual narrative capable of conveying the meaning of the initial internal images represented by the metaphors, and of generating new ones.

3. Dwelling in the Image. Questioning the Gaze

A total of 244 students participated in the activity, divided into 18 working groups.

The reading of their works revealed a significant variety of interests and perspectives, evident in the key concepts identified by the groups (theory of mind, neurodiversity, intersubjectivity, enabling environments, cognitive-behavioural strategies, UDL, structured teaching, educational relationships) and also in the broad range of cultural references to which these concepts were linked (films, TV series, cartoons, songs, novels, myths, works of art, and in some cases, philosophical ideas and scientific theories). Although this is not an empirical study in the strict sense, but rather an exploratory experience, it is still possible to offer an overall reflection on the educational activity, also to highlight some elements that may contribute to a broader understanding of its meaning and implications, considering the dimensions that can be inferred from the same phases in which the activity was structured, particularly the use of metaphors (mental images) and the interaction with AI, which influenced the visual narratives (graphic images) that were produced.

Regarding the use of metaphor, some works showed a strong ability for symbolic synthesis and original representation of the identified concepts. We can mention, for example, the *Myth of Theseus* used to represent school as a labyrinth and structured teaching as Ariadne's thread (G-14); the Platonic *Allegory of the Cave* and Schopenhauer's concept of the *Veil of Maya*, linked to social roles and the theory of mental simulation (G-11); the film *Inside Out* as a metaphor for Theory of Mind and the novel *The Little Prince* for intersubjectivity (G-2); the image of a rainbow and a blooming garden, accompanied by the song *Here Comes the Sun*, representing the variety of profiles within the autism spectrum; and *Winnie the Pooh* and *Eleanor Oliphant*, used as metaphors for social isolation (G-9). In these and other similar cases, the choice of open and evocative references supported more autonomous elaborations, capable of sustaining original metaphorical reinterpretations.

In some cases, the choice of metaphors drew on cultural references explicitly linked to autism or somehow connected to it, such as the biographical film *Temple Grandin*, used as a metaphor for positive reinforcement and token economy, or the TV series *Atypical* for reasonable accommodation (G-6), as well as concepts like self-advocacy to represent preference assessment (G-18). Although relevant, these metaphors, due to their lower evocative power, led to the production of more descriptive images, within a relationship with AI that was more oriented toward functionality than reflective engagement. This was also the case in works where cultural references not directly related to neurodivergence or disability were used, but were instead based on the logic of redemption, as in the case of *The Ugly Duckling*, adopted as a metaphor for personal transformation (G-4), without questioning the idea of improvement as adaptation

to the norm implied by the original tale. Another example is the use of references such as *Frozen*, in which the ice castle becomes a metaphor for social isolation, potentially reinforcing a stereotypical view of Kanner syndrome (G-16).

In interacting with the AI, some groups adopted a dialogical approach, rephrasing the prompts several times based on the responses obtained and, in doing so, clarifying (also and above all to themselves) their mental images and, therefore, their communicative intentions. This also allowed them to better control the risk of the AI producing stereotypical images. When the AI was treated as a reflective interlocutor, prompts were reformulated not only to obtain an image more in keeping with the requests, but also to problematize the ones provided. In one case, for instance, students asked the AI what it thought and why it thought so, in relation to an image that, originating from metaphors linked to *Pippi Longstocking* and Nobita from *Doraemon*, portrayed a support figure in an assistive role within a stereotypical setting, where functioning difference was represented by the AI through a person using a wheelchair (G-7). On the other hand, when the relationship with the AI was more oriented towards instrumental functionality, even when reformulations were present, these concerned aesthetic aspects or consistency with the prompts initially formulated, without necessarily revisiting the underlying concept, such as when the presence of the *Three Musketeers* was requested and insisted upon in the image, to evoke the idea of collaboration in inclusive education (G-6).

While deferring to a later experience that, on the basis of this initial reflection, may allow for a more detailed analysis of the final visual narratives produced, it is possible here to note that a particularly significant point emerges: the challenge of representing what cannot be seen, such as ways of perceiving or thinking that resist ordinary symbolic codification. Faced with this difficulty, many students resorted to visual shortcuts, using familiar symbols or immediate iconic solutions such as isolated figures, ordered environments, and strong colour contrasts, often ending up reproducing simplified visions. These features reveal a tendency to encode difference according to reassuring narrative logics anchored in exceptionality, rather than opening up to the plurality of human functioning. At times, even when explicitly asked not to depict isolated figures, student work resulted in images only seemingly inclusive that were, inspired by an assimilationist model, one in which the logic of adaptation prevails, and inclusion is confused with normalization. AI, because of the way it functions based on more widespread visual repertoires, has often reinforced this approach, creating imagery that reflects dominant narratives rather than the complexity of lived experiences. Instead, the aim is to conceive of and attempt to represent inclusion not as an act of adaptation, but as an experience of coexistence among differences (Acanfora, 2022; Canevaro, 2021), adopting a perspective that can comprehend – in the Latin sense of *cum-prehendere* – diversity without enacting a mechanism of homogenisation.

From a truly inclusive perspective, grounded in an openness to continuous transformation guided by values of justice and equity, the central issue should not be how to represent autism in an effort to find comprehensive codifications or definitive images. Rather, it lies in shifting attention from *what* is observed to *who* observes, and *how* they observe, problematizing the very act of looking and leaving it open, fluid, and capable of recognising and respecting the plurality and complexity of human experience.

4. What we… *saw, thought, learned*

The experience took place within a specific educational context – a university course for future teachers – and was conceived as an exploratory educational activity. Moreover, the students' work was subject to a partial and non-systematic analysis. Nevertheless, what is shared in the previous paragraph may be seen as offering confirmation of the importance of educating the gaze in inclusive teacher education and of using artificial intelligence as a possible mediator of thinking.

Indeed, AI can be used not only to generate images, but also to stimulate reflective and critical thinking about how complex concepts such as disability and inclusion are represented. As students' work showed,

in some cases, the interaction with the AI created a significant gap between intention and outcome, providing valuable opportunities for students to become aware of implicit imaginaries.

If we understand pedagogical practice as a space where content, languages, and imaginaries intertwine in the construction of meaning, then working with images takes on strategic significance. Because representation does not mean confining something within an image, but rather opening an interpretative space where differences are not absorbed into pre-established models, but are recognized in their uniqueness and irreducibility. Inclusive education, then, does not arise from the search for the most accurate image, but from the capacity to multiply gazes, to interrogate images, and to deconstruct them in the very act of generating them. Every image – even the most unbiased – is already, in itself, a potential new stereotype. The task is not to avoid stereotypes, but to consciously dwell within their limits, accepting that representation, though necessary, is always partial.

We have to learn to see *pluralistically*, in order to think – and to teach – *otherwise*.

Ethical Note

The materials produced by the students were collected solely for educational purposes within a university training activity. They were analysed in an anonymous and aggregated form, without collecting any personal or sensitive data. The activity had an exploratory and reflective focus, aimed at examining the educational proposal and its pedagogical implications. However, great care was taken to ensure the privacy and anonymity of the students.

Concluding note. Between artificial mediation and human gaze

During the initial stages of writing this article, a generative artificial intelligence model (ChatGPT, OpenAI, 2024) was used as a dialogic and reflective tool, thereby further exploring the implications of using AI in inclusive critical thinking education. AI was not used as a source of content, and all ideas, theoretical choices, argument structures, and interpretations are solely those of the author.

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