

# Narrating disability: Self-Perception and Identity Construction in students with Special Educational Needs

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**Abstract:** Adolescence is a crucial period for identity formation and for self-perception development. During this process, individuals acquire and experience information and circumstances that influence them both positively and negatively. Continuous Digital transformation process, nowadays an integral part of daily life, plays a fundamental role in shaping this process. Specifically, for students with special educational needs, these tools are facilitator inclusive resources; however, if used inappropriately, they may become a source of exclusion. In this regard, educational environments have the responsibility to support students in understanding and using these technologies consciously, providing opportunities for growth and skill development. This study, based on a theoretical analysis, aims to explore how schools can guide students in building a positive identity, focusing on the use of digital storytelling as an inclusive teaching methodology. The aim is to foster a sense of belonging and inclusion among students with special educational needs.

**Keywords:** Special educational needs; Digital Storytelling; Identity; Media; School.

## 1. Introduction

Discussing adolescence today is both a complex and necessary task. Social and cultural changes of recent years have significantly impacted every person. It is widely recognized that, among all stages of human life, adolescence is one of the most delicate and often challenging to navigate. Defining adolescence in a single, universal way is quite difficult and often limiting. However, it can be stated that this phase of life is represented by a series of physical, psychological, social and cultural changes, all of which directly influence the construction of an individual's identity. The formation of identity and the development of self-perception in adolescents are shaped by multiple internal and external influences. However, it is primarily through interactions with their surrounding environment that individuals construct their self-concept.

With digitalization, society has multiple transformations, changing people daily life. Today's youth no longer explore their environment in a purely "analogue" manner; instead, they engage with the world beyond their immediate surroundings through media and social networks. In this sense, they push beyond their own boundaries, exploring new contexts and developing a sense of belonging (Bruno, 2019). Moreover, digital technology allows individuals to stay connected with the world, yet paradoxically, it can also lead to greater detachment and disconnection from reality. This is where educational intervention becomes crucial-addressing problematic behaviors and leveraging digital innovation as an educational and inclusive tool, rather than as a means of separation or exclusion.



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Regarding the concept of adolescence, Palmonari (1997) deeply analysed it, identifying multiple key characteristics within it, such as biological, cognitive and social changes (Ferreiro et al., 2014). The self-image that adolescents develop, influenced by various psychological and sociocultural factors, significantly impacts their physical and mental health.

In this regard, nowadays even the role of the media affects the construction of self-image, thereby influencing an individual's quality of life. Indeed, while a positive self-perception can lead to increased self-esteem and the development of a positive individual attitude, a negative self-image can result in low self-esteem, leading to isolation and depression (Alipour et al., 2015). Digital media can present stereotypical portrayals of disability and individual challenges, posing the risk of becoming vehicles of exclusion. In this scenario, the rise of digital technology has allowed cinema and TV series to become prominent elements in an individual's daily lives, shaping a collective imagination regarding various aspects of society and culture (Tatulli et al., 2024). Several studies have found that an incorrect and distorted perception of oneself and one's physical appearance, especially during adolescence, can lead to a higher likelihood of developing depressive symptoms (Ferreiro et al., 2014). From a sociocultural perspective, particularly in Western countries, thinness is often perceived as an attractive (Metcalf et al., 2000) and dominant trait. This beauty stereotype is reinforced by the representations of the body promoted by the media, which negatively affect adolescents' health and self-perception (Brennan et al., 2010).

Furthermore, other studies (Brennan et al., 2010) have identified a gender difference in body image dissatisfaction, which appears to be particularly prevalent among females. The misperception of one's body and the resulting dissatisfaction not only pose a risk to an adolescent's well-being but are even more concerning for girls than for boys, significantly affecting both psychological and motivational aspects in both genders (Ferreiro et al., 2011; Ferreiro et al., 2014). This issue becomes even more critical when adolescents with special educational needs develop such concerns.

According to Sociocultural Theory (Morrison et al., 2004) increased exposure to mass media portraying idealized beauty standards negatively influences self-perception. The issue becomes even more significant when individuals with different challenges encounter these stereotypes without having the necessary tools to critically interpret the information they are exposed to. Since identity formation also occurs through interaction with the surrounding context, individuals may internalize stereotypes and prejudices that influence their self-perception, especially if their characteristics do not align with the standards promoted by the media. The continuous rise in the use of social networks and streaming platforms for watching films and TV series has inevitably embedded itself into adolescents' daily lives, becoming a reference point for self-evaluation and for interpreting their own experiences.

## 2. Materials and Methods

As previously mentioned, adolescence represents a crucial period of identity formation, and this process can be influenced by exposure to digital media. In the current society stage, audiovisual content plays a highly significant and impactful communicative role, capable of transcending linguistic and cultural barriers. Media, in fact, serves as one of the primary sources of information for adolescents. The way media portray disability or individual differences can have either a positive or a negative impact, depending on how these representations are constructed.

According to Bocci and Bonavolontà (2020), the representation of disability in cinematic narratives generally takes on a dual meaning: on one hand, the inclusion of diversity signifies cultural progress, promoting the perception of difference as an integral something unsettling, frequently leading to stereotypical portrayals that frame it as ambiguous or negative. However, the need to represent cultural and personal pluralism, with a focus on valuing individual uniqueness, can have a positive impact and promote body positivity as a means of embracing human imperfection (Patat & Bombara, 2024). According to a 2019 ISTAT survey, only 19.2% of people with severe disabilities report a high level of life satisfaction, compared to 44.5% of the general population. This data highlights the importance of paying greater attention to how disability is perceived, especially by those who experience it for the first time. In this regard, the media should emphasize self-understanding and awareness of others, engaging in discussions about the meaning of normality (Patat & Bombara, 2024). By doing so, they can challenge the stereotypical concept of perfection in contemporary society. Cinema, TV series and media in general can thus deconstruct these stereotypes, fostering critical thinking in every individual.

Although media are increasingly normalizing the concept of diversity (Bocci & Domenici, 2019), there is often a risk of oversimplifying the perception of otherness, inadvertently attempting to normalize it without leaving room for self-determination.

Over time, numerous representations of disability have emerged, particularly in cinema. Schianchi (2020) cites *Il finto storpio* as the first Italian film featuring a disabled character, relegated to a comedic role. In the past, disability in cinematic representation was often confined to humour. Following the era of freak shows (Schianchi, 2020), the trend shifted toward “pretend invalids”, integrating disability into a playful dimension. According to a study conducted by Atkinson et al. (2024), the first films depicting physical disabilities date back to 1898, while films addressing mental disabilities appeared in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both frequently relying on stereotypes. Often limited to secondary characters, disability was portrayed as a form of punishment and used as a narrative device to advance the plot, rarely occupying a central role.

Historically, the representation of disability in the media has been shaped by two main perspectives (Atkinson et al., 2024, Montanari et al., 2022):

- **The Hero (Supercrip):** This portrayal focuses on individuals who overcome their disability through extraordinary achievements, fostering unrealistic expectations. In this narrative, disability is overly emphasized, and the character’s entire identity revolves around their condition and their ability to surpass it.
- **The Victim or the Fragile Figure:** This representation depicts individuals as constantly in need of protection or care, reinforcing a sense of inferiority.

Although these portrayals seem to be opposites, they share a common flaw: they reduce individuals with disabilities to their condition through stigmatizing stereotypes. In both cases, there is an exaggerated emphasis on the character’s struggles.

Tatulli et al. (2024) identify three phases in the cinematic representation of disability over time. The first, dating back to the early 20th century, is characterized by the stereotype of disability as victimization. The second phase, during the 1970s, saw cinema become a tool for raising awareness. In the third phase, corresponding to contemporary society, there is greater attention to the complexity and depth of characters with disabilities, striving to move beyond victimization and/or heroism.

Therefore, an accurate representation of people with disabilities can lead to a transformation in society (Atkinson et al., 2024), where every individual can feel

welcomed and recognized for whom they are. Baccassino & Pinnelli (2022) cite the TV series *Young Sheldon* as a example of a positive representation of individual specificity, as it explores the emotional, familial, and social challenges of a boy with special educational needs. Through this non-stereotypical representation, individuals are able to see themselves reflected and learn positive information that contributes to the development of their self-esteem and self-perception. TV series like *Young Sheldon* tackle issues related to diversity, family relationships, bullying, and the education system, offering a more nuanced and realistic model of representation (Baccassino & Pinnelli, 2022). Zhang and Haller (2013) assert that media are a key source not only for learning attitudes and beliefs but also for shaping self-esteem and a sense of self-efficacy.

### 3. Results

Using digital media in a critical and conscious manner within the school context allows students with special educational needs to give meaning to their lives, questioning their own condition and seeking new solutions. With the guidance of the teacher, students have the opportunity to deconstruct distorted representations of disability and lay the foundation for personal and emotional growth (Baccassino & Pinnelli, 2022).

The use of multimedia products and films creates a shared space in which students can achieve greater awareness of their challenges, promoting acceptance (Atkinson et al., 2024). Educating students about differences and the critical use of digital media and multimedia products has a powerful transformative effect (Bocci & Domenici, 2019), contributing to the development of a positive attitude toward others.

The recognition of stereotypes in film products and their deconstruction is essential for building a shared sense of reality, with the aim of promoting inclusion and reducing marginalization (Atkinson et al., 2024).

Using films within the school context as a tool to understand one's own experiences and to engage in comparison with others is crucial to not only eliminating stereotypes and prejudices but also for strengthening one's identity. Addressing issues related to one's own condition and recognizing oneself fosters self-empowerment and the appreciation of one's potential (Baccassino & Pinnelli, 2022).

The importance of addressing themes related to diversity, family relationships, and peer relationships provides a more nuanced and realistic model of societal representation (Baccassino & Pinnelli, 2022), promoting respect for individuality and encouraging engagement with the reference social group (Tatulli et al., 2024).

The school, therefore, as a privileged space for the formation and emancipation of the individual, through media and digital technologies, can promote the emotional and creative development of students. In this regard, one of the most appropriate methodologies for these goals is storytelling. Through storytelling, the individual has the opportunity to reflect on themselves and their experiences while simultaneously constructing a positive self-perception.

Living in today's digital society, we propose Digital Storytelling as a favored narrative approach for self-awareness and recognition through the development and strengthening of digital skills. The implementation of storytelling and the use of digital technologies in education are recognized as fundamental for the development of both subject-specific and transversal skills (Rosa et al., 2023), engaging not only the students but also the teachers. Teachers, along with all those working in helping rela-

tionships (Salis, 2018), should act to foster the emancipation and development of students. The connection established among all participants promotes the development of digital skills, encouraging communication and fostering the inclusion of students with special educational needs (Lazzari, 2015).

#### 4. Discussion

The use of Digital Storytelling in the educational context is crucial for fostering critical awareness of digital media and strengthening metacognition. Some scholars (Bruschi et al., 2024; Lambert, 2013) identify several strengths of Digital Storytelling when used in educational settings:

1. Bringing out and reorienting prejudices and stereotypes.
2. Promoting awareness of one's own characteristics and emotional state.
3. Using images and sounds that facilitate the expression of one's inner state and thoughts.

The inclusive context in which Digital Storytelling is implemented should aim to create accessible spaces where students and teachers can collaborate to build narratives that celebrate diversity, providing tools to critically analyse media representations of disability.

Through this educational practice, learning environments are created that enhance meaningful narratives through shared reflection. Additionally, storytelling allows students with special educational needs to improve their self-perception, increasing their self-esteem and self-confidence. By reflecting on their personal experiences, students can express their emotions, fostering a deeper understanding of their lives (Bruschi et al., 2024).

As an inclusive methodology, Digital Storytelling has a strong reflective and emotional component: it encourages democratic behaviour, stimulates creativity, and promotes freedom of expression. This narrative approach, supported by multimedia and digital tools, is capable of amplifying the construction of knowledge through the simultaneous use of multiple communication codes and languages. It also enhances the possibilities for sharing and metacognition through collaboration between students and teachers.

#### 5. Conclusions

Recognizing diversity as a richness rather than a disparity is one of the main goals that every educational environment should set for itself. Guiding students in reflecting on and understanding their own world is essential not only for eliminating both material and immaterial barriers but also for creating a space where distances are shortened and care for oneself and others is prioritized (Montanari et al., 2022).

Audiovisual products, when used in a critical and conscious manner, can become effective tools for fostering empathy and promoting self-determination through the acceptance of one's uniqueness. The use of cinema and TV series, as well as digital storytelling, becomes crucial for stimulating metacognition and emotional intelligence.

Thinking and acting based on the ICF framework, focusing on the functioning and quality of life of the individual, is essential for helping students understand and internalize their potential (Tatulli et al., 2024).

The creation of an educational community that considers diversity as a valuable element offers individuals, through storytelling, the opportunity to give meaning and



significance to their experiences. The construction of identity in adolescents with special educational needs is a process influenced by the environment, with the school playing a key role. Through educational action, schools can dismantle stereotypes, promote empowerment, and ensure full participation from everyone, fostering the academic success of each individual student. By promoting authentic narratives, it is possible to build a society where every individual has the opportunity to be an active protagonist in their own story.

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