

# EDUCATIONAL COMIC AS A TOOL FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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doi: 10.18355/PG.2025.14.2.10

## Abstract

The paper explores the potential of educational comics as a tool for inclusive education. Thanks to their multimodal nature and visual-narrative structure, comics can support understanding and motivation among students with different mother tongues and specific learning disorders. The study reflects on theoretical concepts of inclusion, the characteristics of educational comics, their advantages and limitations, and includes examples from teaching practice.

## Key words

inclusive education, educational comic, multimodality, students with different mother tongues, specific learning disorders

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## Introduction

Inclusive education has become one of the key principles of contemporary educational policy, emphasizing equal access to education for all learners, regardless of their abilities, language or cultural background, or specific educational needs. This concept is embedded not only in international documents, such as the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2006), but also in national curricular and legislative frameworks across many European countries, including the Czech Republic (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2016).

One of the primary tasks of an inclusive school is to identify and apply appropriate didactic tools that support the active participation of all pupils in the learning process, respect their individual needs, and help overcome potential barriers to understanding curriculum content. In this context, there is a growing interest in the use of visual and multimodal forms of education, among which the educational comic holds a prominent position (Trnova, et al., 2016). This paper aims to present the comic as a tool for inclusive education, focusing particularly on its potential to support pupils with specific learning difficulties (e.g., dyslexia) and pupils with a different first language.

## Inclusive Education and Pupils with Special Educational Needs

The term inclusive education is understood in this paper following the definition provided by the Czech legislation (Decree No. 27/2016 Coll., on the education of pupils with special educational needs and gifted pupils). It refers to the systemic and individual support of pupils who, for various reasons, require specific pedagogical approaches, educational content modification, or the provision of support measures. These may include children with physical disabilities, sensory impairments, autism spectrum disorders, but also children with specific learning disorders or pupils whose first language differs from the language of instruction (hereinafter referred to as pupils with a different first language, or DFL).

Although the term inclusive education is often associated primarily with pupils with disabilities, the current understanding emphasizes the diversity of educational needs and the effort to accommodate all pupils in a heterogeneous classroom. The importance of individualization and differentiation of teaching, as well as the role of innovative didactic strategies, is increasingly stressed in both theory and practice. One such strategy may be the use of comics, which will be explored in the following sections.

### **Comics, Multimodality, and the Role of Visual Representation in Teaching**

It is difficult to provide a single scientific definition of comic art. For the purposes of this study, we adopt McCloud's (1994) definition, which conceptualizes comics as sequential images that are interconnected and bear meaningful relationships to one another. A specific feature of comics is the integration of verbal and non-verbal elements, distinguishing them from traditional instructional materials that rely primarily on textual components. This enables the textual content to be enriched with additional layers of meaning that do not burden the reader through complex textual analysis but are conveyed visually—through images, character expressions, color, and even the shape of speech balloons (Eisner, 1985).

In connection with the growing importance of visual culture and multimodal learning approaches, the use of non-linear and visually rich educational formats is being increasingly discussed (Kress, 2010). In educational settings, these properties may be used to explain complex concepts, as the combination of visual and textual elements can help translate difficult content into a more accessible and understandable form. Visual representation of content may convey meaning in an alternative way, thereby facilitating comprehension for students with different learning styles or those experiencing linguistic or cognitive difficulties (Cook & Kirchoff, 2017; Sankey & Gardiner, 2010).

One of the most prominent multimodal tools is the comic, which integrates image, text, and often a dialogic structure. This not only enables easier tracking of narrative sequences but also enhances the accessibility of narrative-based subject matter for students who might otherwise struggle to understand it. As several studies have shown, visual representation promotes equitable access to content, particularly for students with language barriers or reading difficulties (Joannidou & Sime, 2021; Smith et al., 2021).

Educational comics can serve a wide range of didactic functions—they act as a motivational stimulus, support comprehension and memory retention, foster narrative competence, and can also be used as a tool for formative assessment (Brugar et al., 2018; Cook & Kirchoff, 2017; Sipayung et al., 2020). One of their major advantages lies in their capacity to adapt to different learning styles and student needs, making them a suitable tool for inclusive teaching practices.

#### **Pupils with a Different First Language**

For pupils with a different first language (DFL), the primary challenge lies in the language barrier, which can hinder not only comprehension of instructional content but also participation in social interactions and school activities. It is in this context that comics show potential as a supportive tool, as they:

- reduce textual complexity—meaning is conveyed through images as well as words;
- allow visual tracking of the narrative—making the storyline understandable even without full language proficiency;
- promote language development—through contextualized linguistic structures;
- enhance self-confidence and motivation—students can experience success even without full command of the instructional language.

These points are supported by several studies (Maples et al., 2016; Meuer, 2018; Ortega, 2020). Practical applications range from reading simple comic stories to creating original narratives, and even to multilingual comic versions that combine the target language with the pupil's first language.

#### **Pupils with Specific Learning Disabilities**

Among pupils with specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), comics are particularly useful due to their unique combination of textual and visual elements. Their didactic potential arises from the following properties:

- Reduction of textual load: Comics convey meaning not only through written text but also through imagery, thus minimizing the amount of linguistic decoding required.
- Support for visual memory: The sequential layout of comic panels facilitates chronological comprehension of content, aiding students in tracking narrative structure.
- Contextualization of language: Text is embedded in a visual context, which supports the decoding of meaning and enhances comprehension.
- Motivation and accessibility: Comics tend to be perceived as less threatening than continuous text, which can increase reading motivation and lower anxiety among struggling readers (Krashen, 2004).

Empirical research (Fenty & Brydon, 2019; Joannidou & Sime, 2021; Smith et al., 2021; Zashchirinskaia, 2020) confirms that pupils with reading disorders demonstrate improved reading comprehension when content is presented through graphic narratives. Comics can therefore serve as a powerful instrument not only for the development of reading skills but also for integrating these students into lessons built around mainstream curricular content.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The analysis of the use of educational comics in inclusive education demonstrates that this medium holds significant didactic potential. Its primary strength lies in the integration of visual and narrative elements, which enhance comprehensibility, support motivation, and lower comprehension barriers, particularly for pupils with language difficulties or specific learning disabilities.

Furthermore, comics provide opportunities for instructional individualization and the accommodation of diverse learning styles, aligning well with the principles of differentiated and inclusive pedagogy. However, certain limitations of this medium must not be overlooked. These include the risk of oversimplification to such a degree that the subject matter becomes distorted, potentially leading to misconceptions or misunderstanding of the underlying concept (Farinella, 2018). From the teacher's perspective, the preparation of an entirely new comic or the adaptation of existing materials to align with current curricular content can be demanding (Carter, 2007). Likewise, visualizing complex topics in comic form may pose significant creative and didactic challenges.

These limitations have been noted not only in academic studies but also in feedback from in-service teachers who incorporate comics into their instruction (Aleixo et al., 2020). Given the growing interest in multimodal and narrative-based approaches to learning, it is likely that the role of comics in inclusive education will continue to expand.

Moving forward, it will be essential to:

- systematically examine the effectiveness of comics for various learner groups;
- develop methodological resources and models of good practice;
- provide both initial and ongoing teacher education in the field of multimodal literacy;
- support collaboration between educators and illustrators/comic authors.

This paper highlights the importance of viewing comics not as a universal educational tool, but as a meaningful complement to instruction—one that, when used deliberately and with pedagogical sensitivity, can significantly contribute to achieving inclusive educational goals.

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