Comics as a tool to raise awareness about the need to attend to diversity. An inclusive perspective

El cómic como herramienta para la sensibilización sobre la necesidad de atender a la diversidad. Una mirada inclusiva

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Abstract

The objective of this work is to determine how the creation of comics by students fosters understanding and empathy for people with specific educational support needs. To this end, an activity was organised consisting of the production of a comic focused on issues related to educational inclusion among students in 5th and 6th grade of Primary Education at the "CEIP[1] Parque de la Muñeca" School in Guadalajara (Spain). The study shows that comics can be one very interesting tool to be used in primary education to direct the student to delve into social issues and, in turn, promote the process of reflection and deepening about diversity in a different way. Likewise, the study also shows the need to influence the development of visual literacy and multimodal skills among Primary Education students.

Keywords: Visual literacy; educational inclusion; visual narratives; comics; Primary Education.

Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es determinar de qué manera la creación de cómics por parte de los alumnos propicia la comprensión y la empatía de las personas con necesidades específicas de apoyo educativo. Para ello se organizó una actividad consistente en la realización de un cómic centrado en cuestiones relacionadas con la inclusión educativa entre alumnos de 5º y 6º de Educación Primaria del Colegio "CEIP Parque de la Muñeca" de Guadalajara (España). El estudio muestra que el cómic puede ser una herramienta de gran interés que se puede utilizar en la educación primaria para dirigir al alumno a profundizar en temas sociales y, a su vez, fomentar de una manera distinta el proceso de reflexión y profundización acerca de la diversidad. Así mismo, el estudio también muestra la necesidad de incidir en el desarrollo de la alfabetización visual y las competencias multimodales entre los estudiantes a nivel de Educación Primaria.

Palabras clave: Alfabetización visual; inclusión educativa; narrativas visuales; cómics; Educación Primaria.

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INTRODUCTION

This work reflects the confluence of two aspects that are currently of great relevance in the field of teaching. On the one hand, educational inclusion and the use of visual methodologies in the classroom in the other hand. Although they may seem to be two issues that are not directly related, they are two notions with certain vicissitudes in common. In this work, they serve to rethink educational practices and the organisation of schools, since education through methodologies that use images is, nowadays, one of the ways to achieve educational inclusion. However, as this work shows, there is still a long way to go in this field, as there is a deficit in the visual education of our students that it is desirable to remedy.

As for the meaning of inclusive education, a series of authors who have worked on this topic emphasise some aspects over others. Therefore, for example, for Echeita (2008), the concept of educational inclusion is a process that serves to progress teaching practices in all senses, promoting improvement and innovation, encouraging the cooperation of the educational community to promote the exchange, progress, improvement and effectiveness of education in schools, but, above all, "it aims at giving them meaning and guidance (...), to give them a purpose" (Echeita, 2008, p. 13). For Susinos (2005, p. 5), "inclusion is a worldwide theoretical and practical model that advocates the need to promote change in classrooms so that they become schools for all, schools in which all can participate and are welcomed as valued members of the classroom". According to Blanco (2008), educational inclusion is the transformation of education systems and cultures, as well as of educational practices and the organisation of schools in order to meet the diverse needs of students and to achieve learning and full participation by all children.

In any case, it is easy to identify the existence of a diversity of rhythms in the daily activity in educational centres, since each person needs time to assimilate knowledge; of a diversity of interests, motivations and expectations, in terms of content and methods; and of a diversity of capacities and developmental rhythms (Arnaiz & Haro, 1997). For this reason, educational inclusion is an innovative vision of education based on diversity, implying the acceptance, valuing of differences, and recognising all children as full subjects of rights (Casanova, 2011).

With regard to the concept of attention to diversity, this is understood in a multidimensional way so it can be approached from different perspectives: it can be considered as a social situation or as an element that generates opportunities and collective cultural enrichment. It is from this second conception, from the paradigm of the inclusive school, that this paper starts. In the research conducted by Bautista-Ochoa et al. (2021), inclusive schools go hand in hand with public schools making it impossible to distinguish between them. The key point is that public schools are common schools for all students and it is thus redundant to call them inclusive, since the principle of inclusive schools is that they are a community that lives and learns together. In this school one has the right to be educated and free to grow and live together with others, i.e. the school is pointed out as a model of democracy and social inclusion. On the other hand, the school is understood as a space of coexistence and cooperation, where all members of the team are involved. Immersion in a research project gives students autonomy, collaboration and learning development. Schools and teachers must be in constant change because they are engines of social transformation, so that the teaching staff can and the education

community must act against social injustice, individualistic approaches that favour student segregation, labelling and discriminatory education policies.

Under the LOMLOE[2], inclusive education becomes a fundamental principle. It is the commitment of the education system to facilitate learning for all students, with the same rights and equal opportunities. According to Sáez-Carreras (1997) educating for diversity is:

> A teaching-learning process based on democratic pluralism, tolerance and acceptance of difference, through which it seeks to promote the development and personal maturity of all individuals, a type of education based on human rights, maximum respect for difference, overcoming barriers and openness to globalism as a response to the type of man and society needed today (p. 31)

In this sense, the literary education model allows us to link the teaching of literature with attention to diversity from an inclusive perspective, including the ethical, aesthetic, cultural and linguistic dimensions (Badia & Cassany, 2014). Both Ibarra-Rius and Ballester-Roca (2020) and Llorens-García et al. (2020) address the issue of the use of literature for diversity. Particularly (Martínez-Muro, 2016) devotes attention to how comics can be useful in this regard.

In any case, inclusive education and its implementation in our teaching environments require reflection for which the use of visual methodologies is very useful. In this respect, such methodologies have already been used in teacher training to promote reflection on pre-university educational experience (Bailey & Van Harken, 2014; Grushka & Young, 2014). These visual productions have been an instrument both to initiate the student to reflection and to promote deliberation on a specific process. There are a number of initiatives that have used visual images in teacher education, such as Phillipson and Forlin (2011) who use them as a strategy to increase understanding of diversity and inclusion in the classroom. Others have used them to encourage prospective teachers to reflect on their socio-professional positions during the internship (Orland-Barak & Maskit, 2014). This paper aims at bringing this idea to students themselves and not only to trainee teachers as in the previous studies.

Within this use of visual methodologies, the creation of comics in the classroom is undoubtedly an interdisciplinary activity that serves as a great motivation for students (Guzmán, 2012). The production of graphic narratives, even if they are short, triggers a wide range of components that affect the different areas of any educational action and makes the students, being the producers of the stories, more aware of inclusion, facilitating communication with the other classmates and teachers, because it is easier to express what we feel and think through images sometimes.

According to Moya (2019), it is important to foster empathy in educational centres as it is one of the basic foundations of any good education professional when it is understood as the ability to put oneself in the place of the students, to understand them and to be sensitive to their needs. Those who educate in empathy are much more likely to be successful in the teaching and learning process, in the transmission of content, in the process of guiding the acquisition of the necessary competences and in the assessment of learning outcomes. Unfortunately, the way teacher selection is set up, both in pre-school, primary, secondary and university education, empathy is not considered as one of the basic skills to be professionally engaged in education. The use of images in the form of comics can help to improve this empathic capacity (Ferreiro-Peleteiro, 2019). Moreover, by making a comic, we are triggering several educational areas such as language,

mathematics or ethical values that favour the teaching-learning process as they are based on meaningful learning. Pomares-Puig (2014) stresses that one of the main objectives of the network "Comics as didactic elements" is the promotion of reading in the educational sphere and the reflection of their pedagogical possibilities from different perspectives.

It should be noted that, although comics have long been linked to counterculture and have therefore traditionally occupied a marginal position in terms of how they are viewed by the public, they are increasingly gaining a greater level of social and cultural acceptance. This increased acceptance is based both on the growing expansion of the medium as an art form (with recognition at a social level such as the establishment of the National Comic Prize or its increased presence in the university environment (Gracia-Lana, 2021)) and on the recognition of its complexity, due to the range of semiotic and temporal resources available to the comic creator and the possibilities offered by such tools as a form of expression. They can also offer engaging and demanding reading experiences, as readers are challenged to interpret spatio-temporal relationships. One of the main characteristics of comics is that they require the reader to engage his or her imagination in order to fully experience their message. For that reason, the deceptively simple first appearance of a comic masks the complex interplay between words and images and the intricate messages they can convey (Ogier & Ghosh, 2017).

In this context, the inclusion of comics within a pedagogy for understanding helps students to understand complex concepts and ideas by promoting reflective and critical learning through their reading (Glenberg & Robertson, 2000). Reading and making comics involves understanding visual, verbal and spatial semiotics from multiple perspectives (Eckert, 2013; Gillenwater, 2009; Jacobs, 2007) and, in many instances, the use of images facilitates the ability to store information in long-term memory (Frey and Fisher, 2008). Therefore, comics are an ideal medium for the development of visual literacy skills. For all these reasons, it seems clear that the use of comics as an educational tool has many advantages in the field of education.

With this conviction, Universidad de Alcalá has been working for some time on the inclusion of comics in the classroom. This work involves not only their inclusion through reading, but also through the creation of graphic narratives that allow students to express themselves through a multimodal medium that combines text and image. In this sense, the works presented in Gavaldón et al. (2020) are particularly interesting, as comics were used precisely for the development of students' multimodal competences; in McGarr et al. (2020) which shows the interest of creating autobiographical comics to reflect on the construction of memory and the vision that students have of the educational environment and in Gavaldón et al. (2020), which explores how the creation of comics can be an interesting tool to raise awareness among students of the need to create an intercultural society. Although there is also some experience in secondary education (Keim & Sáez-de-Adana, 2019), all these activities are framed within university education. In all of them, a problem that has been detected in (Sáez-de-Adana & Gavaldón, 2020) is the fact that there is a part of the student body that not only is not a regular reader of comics but has never read them. This means that, although they are influenced by visual messages on a daily basis, when it comes to creating their own, at least in the form of comics, they have certain difficulties, an issue that will be important in this work.

METHOD

Context of the study and participants

The study was conducted in the "CEIP Parque de La Muñeca" with students (n=40) in their fifth and sixth grade of Primary Education, a teacher from the Faculty of Education and another from the Franklin Institute of Universidad de Alcalá. The aim of the study was to determine how the creation of comics by students would foster understanding and empathy for people with specific educational support needs and, in turn, foster interpersonal relationships based on tolerance, empathy, solidarity and commitment to others. A secondary objective is to test the students' ability to communicate through images.

It should be noted that in the 6th year class there is a student with specific educational support needs associated with Down's syndrome. This is not the case in the 5th grade class, where there are no students with educational needs. In this class they have worked with the inclusive story "A special day for Laila and her friends" where different special educational needs appear, including Down syndrome, blindness, autism or people who need a wheelchair.

Development of the study

Although the final result of the activity was the production of a comic book, prior thereto, activities were designed to encourage debate and discussion on how to carry out the inclusion of a new student who arrives in the classroom or school with some kind of educational need. The aim of these discussion and debate groups was to stimulate prior reflection on the issues and how schools adapt to the diversity of students and to analyse how they provide support to each student in order to achieve an education according to individual learning needs.

Subsequently, various activities were carried out aimed at providing students with some basic knowledge to enable them to produce a comic. Specifically, a session was set up to learn what a comic book is like and its parts. A theoretical class was also designed to go deeper into the characteristics and creation of comics, working on concepts such as visual metaphors, planes, approaches, sketches, onomatopoeias, etc. The scheduling needs meant that this part only had one session, which is obviously not enough time given the complexity of the language of comics. However, this is also useful for the secondary objective of the activity as it allows us to see the students' ability to communicate through a multimodal medium such as comics.

After the theory sessions, an activity was designed with the aim of awakening emotions of empathy and assertiveness, so that the students put themselves in the place of the new students arriving at the school, so that they understand how they feel because they do not know anyone, in addition to the fact that they have special educational needs. The aim is to enable them to understand the difficulties they may face and how to solve them, so that newcomers feel welcomed, understood and integrated, and thus achieve full inclusion. To that end, they were asked to create comics reflecting any of the following themes:

1. A comic that reflects the feelings, problems or fears of a child with needs when he arrives at a new school and has to adapt to the rules of a school, a society and an environment that is not his own. The relationship of school rules can be reflected upon. They can be asked the following question: How will this new student with educational needs be integrated into the school and the classroom?

2. A comic reflecting the situations that a new student faces on arrival at a school or classroom. E.g. type of disability, situations of refusal, learners' prior knowledge, inclusion, etc.

Data analysis

The comics made by the students were analysed by the two teachers, first individually and then jointly discussing the findings. We also analysed how inclusion issues were dealt with in schools; if problems were raised, how they were shown to the reader; what kind of conflicts were portrayed and what kind of stereotypes were present. The analysis was conducted using conceptual metaphor theory, which focuses on interpreting discourses, regardless of the medium used, and which in turn draws on cognitive theory. Conceptual metaphor, in cognitive linguistics, makes it possible to understand and experience one thing through concepts related to another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5). This type of metaphor seeks to understand human thought, emotions and action using strategies that allow us to draw on the construction of mental models of how the world works. The use of this type of metaphor in the field of comics (El Refaie, 2012) and is key in the field of graphic medicine, a field in which great advances are being made to create empathy towards different diseases through the use of comics and other visual resources. In this regard, see (González-Cabeza, 2016; Lalanda, 2019) among others. Another important element was the appropriate use of comic language in conveying ideas to test the need to improve students' multimodal skills.

RESULTS

This may be due to the age of the students but, above all, probably to the low use of comics in school curricula and the decrease in the reading of comics by children, as shown in the study presented in (Sáez-de-Adana & Gavaldón, 2020) mentioned above. However, the results show that this activity has allowed students to put themselves in the shoes of their potential peers with specific educational support needs and to create feelings of empathy towards them. This is clear from the point of view of the construction of history, as most of the works follow a similar pattern. In most stories we have a child who comes to class with some kind of disability. Thereafter, there is a process of integration by the students, sometimes mediated by the teacher, in which there is generally a happy ending in which the new student is integrated into the dynamics of the class and the class in turn adapts to his needs. This evidently shows that students understand inclusion as UNESCO defines it as "a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all

children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children" (UNESCO, 2003).

What is interesting about the comics produced is that they show that this process described by UNESCO is carried out by the students themselves, who are the ones who carry out the integrative process. Therefore, these creations show an involvement on the part of students at these levels in the last years of primary school in facilitating all that is related to educational inclusion.

This activity promotes student reflection because there is a need to understand and go deeper into the subject they want to show in the images in a different way than a simple essay, as it requires the use of visual metaphors to understand how the new student feels, which facilitates the process of empathy on the part of the author of the comic. For example, in the comic in figure 1, in the fourth panel, it is perfectly shown how the character of the blind girl perceives her companions who are represented by their conversation in the form of speech bubbles, which is the only information that the protagonist receives. This way, the author of this comic has had to try to empathise with the situation and, above all, to transmit it to the reader. In this case, the author plays the role of a blind person. So when the blind girl is escorted to her seat, she exclaims "How cool it (the desk) must be!" showing how her perception of her surroundings is different. It is also interesting that the other children ask him how she learns, which suggests that there is an understanding that as a blind person, learning is different. However, at the end of the comic, the process of inclusion is emphasised, highlighting that she is not different, showing a clear example of educational inclusion. We all have our shortcomings and our difficulties, but we are similar to the others, we are all different to some extent and this is reflected very well in figure 1.

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Figure 1. Comic made by a 5th grade Primary School student

As for special educational needs or different abilities, it is interesting to note that in the comics of 5th grade primary school students, only physical disabilities are shown, with blindness or the use of a wheelchair standing out (both issues appear in 33% of the comics presented). This is because the text used to address this issue deals primarily with this type of special skills. However, in the 6th grade class, who have a classmate with Down's syndrome, the appearance of intellectual disabilities is present. "They laughed at him for having Down's syndrome" is said in the comic in figure 2, showing this mockery as something evidently negative. But it is not only Down's syndrome that appears among the intellectual disabilities, but there are also other stories in that class where autism is also mentioned. In this respect, the comic in figure 3 where depression is mentioned as a disability is curious. Although it is true that this is an isolated case, it may be due to the fact that intellectual issues may be confused, at this age, with certain mental problems due to their less representable nature. This would also explain the absence of intellectual disabilities in the 5th grade comics, as this difficulty in representation is not compensated for by living with a classmate with Down's syndrome.

Figure 2. Comic made by a 6th grade Primary School student

Figure 3. Comic made by a 6th grade Primary School student
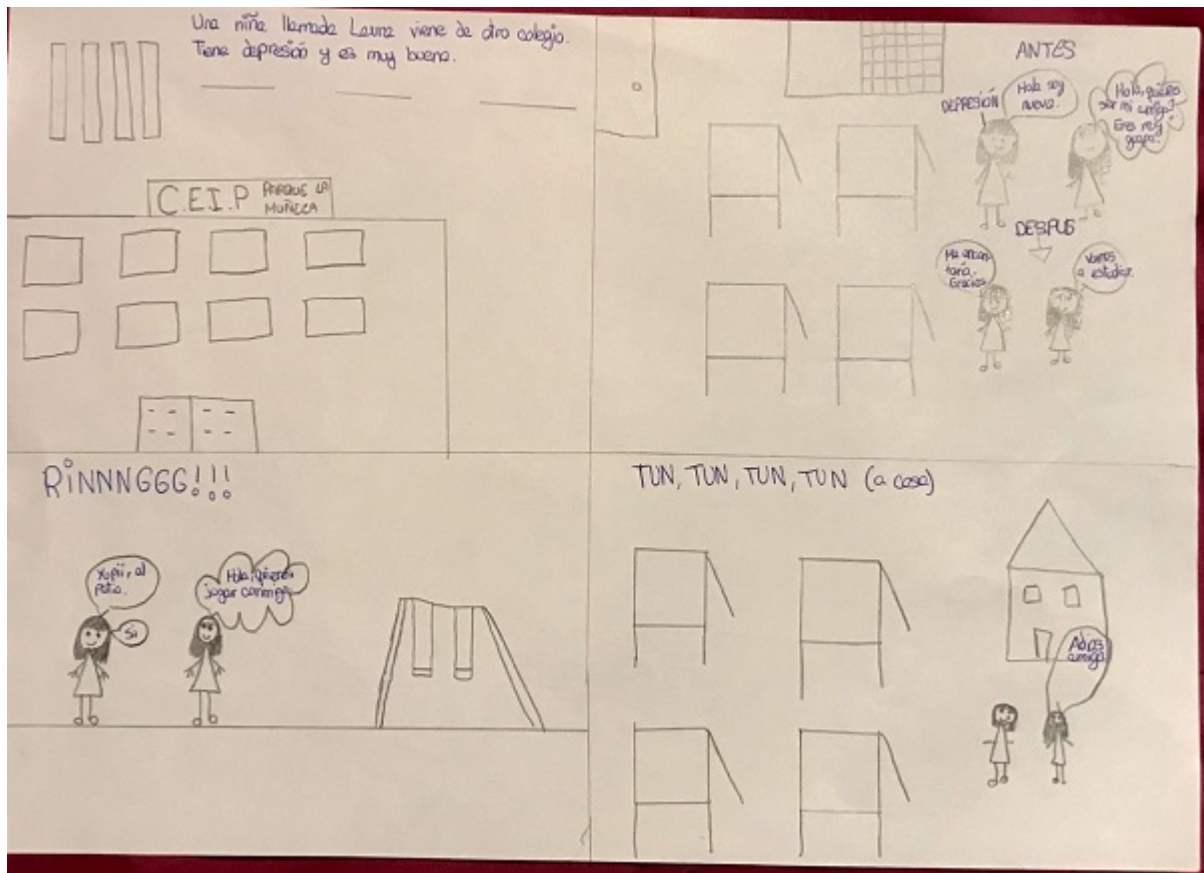
It is interesting to highlight the comic shown in figure 4 for its exceptional character as it is not narrated from the point of view of the pupils who receive a classmate with a disability, but from the point of view of the child who is in a wheelchair, where we can see in figure 4 that being in a wheelchair (or having a different ability) does not prevent him from carrying out a normal daily activity and practising sport. It clearly shows that the student can not only watch sport behind the screen, but that there is a sport adapted to everyone, and if you want to, you can do it. As in the previous cases, the final message is one of self-improvement, a process of self-improvement that demonstrates a great empathetic capacity on the part of the author of the comic, since in the general message of integration that is presented, one of the main problems is that the situation of disability is still presented in the "other", in the student who comes back to the class and to the educational centre and, despite the desire for integration that the comics present, on too many occasions there is no display of the point of view of the person who is the object of the process of inclusion. It is true that this may have been given by the statement of the assignment which asked to show the problems of a new student in class, but it is also true that it was not only asked to show these problems, but also the feelings of the new student, something that does not appear in all the stories. Although some achieve this objective with an external point of view, the transmission of feelings is better achieved in those comics where the point of view of the student with a disability is adopted, either because the story is told in the first person (as in figure 4) or because there are some panels that try to express the student's perception of the world (as in figure 1).

Figure 4. **Comic made by a 5th grade Primary School student**
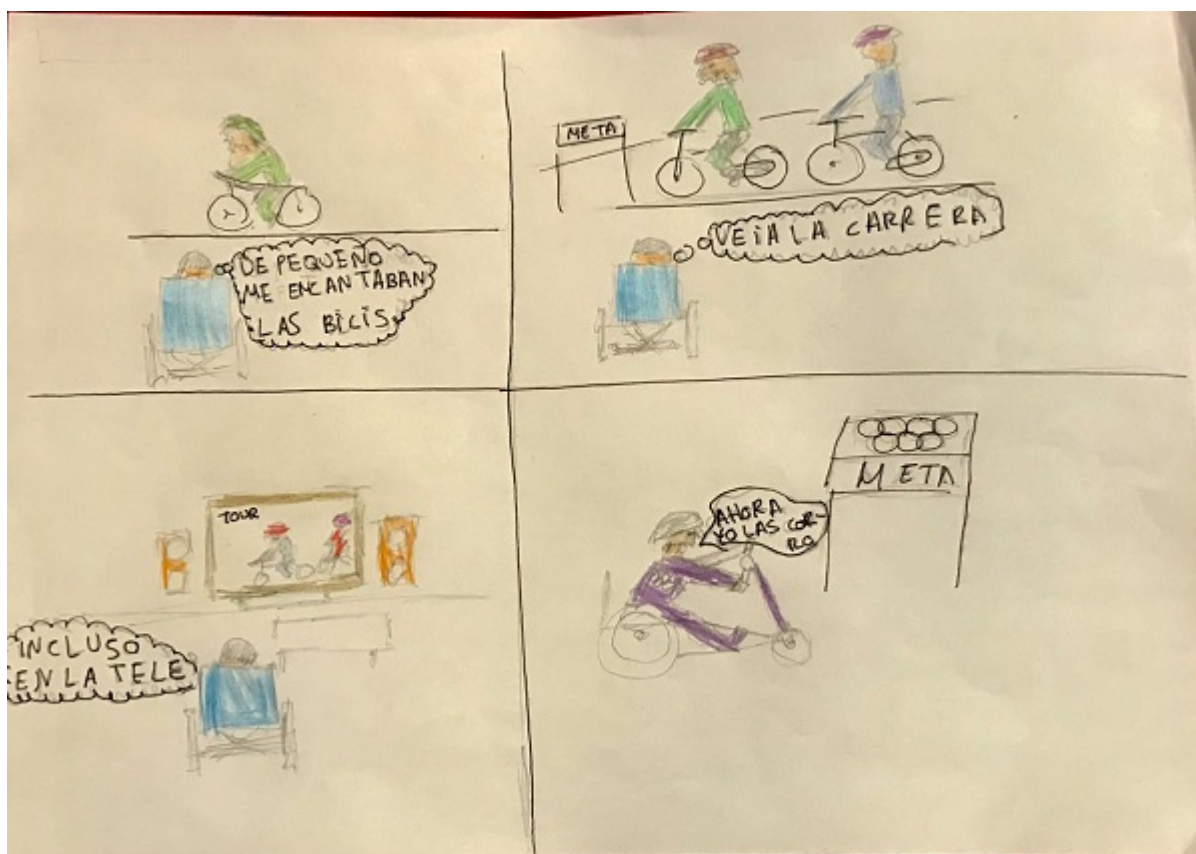
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The research shows how comics can be a tool for the process of inclusion in the classroom. Readers, especially children and young people, should understand that the focus of comics is not always linked to heroes/heroines and anti-heroes, but can also serve as social criticism or moral reflections, and in many cases even as funny or humorous stories with a reflective undertone, and also as visual material for educational inclusion. This is something that many readers are familiar with thanks to the so-called "Young adult" comic market (Tarbox, 2017), but which is sometimes lost in the ocean of manga and superhero comics.

Given the wide range of situations and the dynamics of the educational environment in which our students find themselves, it is logical to think that it is not enough to provide them with theoretical knowledge in order for them to develop competences related to educational inclusion. It could be more useful to implement flexible methodological strategies that allow them to inquire into the problems they may encounter in the classroom, reflect on them and look for possible solutions. Class discussions are a good tool, but often these discussions remain in the air without being captured in some form for further analysis. Using comics as a strategy to stimulate the learning process and as a vehicle to encourage critical reflection is an innovative methodology.

Tackling this type of story through comics, as well as getting them to look at the issue of diversity in the classroom, has facilitated reflection on the role of the school in society

and how the students themselves are key agents of integration. From a communication point of view, they have been able to develop multimodal competences by having to use a different medium from the predominant one based on textual writing. When the learner finishes the story by solving the problem in an easy and simple way, they are reflecting themselves within the story and show that they have the capacity to solve the problems associated with educational inclusion on their own. Use of comics is a methodology that should be explored in depth since, in addition to encouraging critical reflection, it can be a strategy that helps to visualise how the student sees him within the various situations of a classroom.

That said, challenges remain. The first relates to the perception of comics, both within some educational circles and in society at large. Despite El Refaie's (2012) assertion that comics are gaining a level of social and cultural acceptance as legitimate and credible forms of expression and communication, there seems to be a way to go in this regard, as evidenced by some shortcomings in the development of visual literacy in storytelling through images. The growing recognition of the importance of more visual forms of literacy and the contribution that comics can make to addressing these literacies is likely to accelerate their acceptance in education in the future, but there is still a long way to go in this respect.

Another potential limitation of this medium as a tool for reflection may be related to the author's difficulty in portraying negative aspects of the problem, especially unpleasant situations. The fact that there is always a positive resolution and that no traumatic situations arise may not so much be due to students trying to show their view of the problem in the most positive way possible but may reflect their inability to express these challenging experiences in a visual way. It is also possible that it is the novel task of creating comics that has influenced the nature of the students' comics.

In any case, moving towards more powerful forms of communication and expression in reflective practice offers enormous opportunities and, as this article has highlighted, comics are a particularly good medium in this regard. The study has highlighted that, despite students' initial reservations and limited experience with the medium, they are able to express their feelings about the situation. However, the work presented herein shows that there is still a lot of work to be done to standardise the introduction of visual media in the classroom, as the use of metaphor is not fully developed. For this reason, this work also demonstrates the need to focus on this aspect, to include visual literacy as a key element in the training of our students if we want them to take advantage of all the benefits inherent in multimodal communication.

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Notes

[1] Pre-primary and Primary School

[2] Organic Act Amending the Organic Act on Education.