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Digital Storytelling for Inclusive Education: Voices of Students with Special Needs in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Background. The integration of digital storytelling in inclusive education offers new possibilities for amplifying the voices and experiences of students with special needs. This study investigates how digital storytelling functions as a medium of expression, participation, and empowerment in inclusive classroom environments.

Purpose. The research aims to explore how students with diverse learning abilities use digital narratives to communicate their perspectives, develop self-confidence, and engage collaboratively with peers.

Method. A qualitative case study design was employed, involving 20 students with special needs and 5 inclusive education teachers across three schools. Data were collected through classroom observations, interviews, and analysis of student-created digital stories.

Results. Thematic analysis revealed that digital storytelling enhanced students' sense of agency and belonging by enabling them to represent their identities through multimodal expression combining voice, images, and text. Teachers reported that storytelling projects fostered empathy, cooperation, and deeper understanding among all students.

Conclusion. The study concludes that digital storytelling provides an inclusive pedagogical approach that bridges cognitive, emotional, and social learning, promoting equitable participation and self-advocacy for students with special needs in mainstream education.

KEYWORDS

Digital Storytelling, Inclusive Education, Participatory Learning

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has emerged as a global imperative aimed at ensuring equitable access to learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds. In many educational contexts, however, students with special needs remain marginalized due to limited pedagogical strategies that fail to address their diverse modes of learning and self-expression (“Digital Pathways to Nature-Based Tourism in Río de Oro (Cesar, Colombia): Community, Territory, and Ecosystem Assets for Sustainable Development,” 2025; Kanaan et al., 2025). Digital storytelling has recently gained attention as an innovative approach that integrates technology, creativity,



and communication to foster inclusive participation. The rapid advancement of digital tools allows students to express themselves through multimodal narratives that combine text, sound, images, and video. Within inclusive classrooms, this medium not only promotes engagement but also amplifies the voices of learners whose communication barriers often hinder active participation.

The use of storytelling in education has a long-standing tradition rooted in cultural transmission and moral development (Kahanurak et al., 2023; Manganello & Baldacci, 2024). Digital transformation has redefined storytelling as a participatory, collaborative, and student-centered learning process. When applied to inclusive education, digital storytelling shifts the focus from deficit-based perspectives of disability to an asset-based framework that values students' experiences and creativity. Through narrative construction, learners with special needs can represent their identities and reflect on their learning processes in personally meaningful ways. Such engagement transforms the classroom into a dialogic space where diversity is celebrated rather than accommodated, enabling students to learn with and from one another.

The global movement toward inclusive pedagogy emphasizes teaching practices that foster autonomy, empathy, and representation among diverse learners. Digital storytelling aligns with this paradigm by encouraging personalization and social interaction through narrative expression (Comachio et al., 2025; Kahanurak et al., 2023). Recent studies highlight its potential to bridge cognitive and emotional learning, making education more accessible and participatory. In the context of inclusive classrooms, it functions as a transformative medium that enhances not only communication but also confidence, self-efficacy, and social belonging among students with disabilities. The background of this study is therefore grounded in the recognition of digital storytelling as a democratic pedagogical practice that humanizes learning and challenges exclusionary norms in education.

The persistent challenge in inclusive education lies in developing teaching methods that effectively accommodate students with varying cognitive, physical, and emotional needs. Traditional instructional approaches often rely on standardized assessments and linear content delivery, which can marginalize learners who communicate and process information differently (Flórez-Aristizábal et al., 2019; Hervás-Torres et al., 2022). Students with special needs frequently struggle to express their perspectives within these rigid structures, resulting in disengagement and limited participation. This gap in communication and representation underscores the need for innovative pedagogical models that prioritize voice, identity, and agency.

Educators often express uncertainty about integrating technology meaningfully into inclusive classrooms. While digital tools are widely available, their use frequently remains superficial focused on content delivery rather than empowerment or creative expression (Mirabella et al., 2025; Yudin et al., 2022). Digital storytelling offers a way to reimagine these practices, yet its implementation requires pedagogical sensitivity to accessibility, collaboration, and individual learning differences. Many teachers lack training or resources to incorporate digital storytelling in ways that support both inclusion and creativity, leaving the potential of this method underexplored.

This study addresses the problem of how students with special needs can use digital storytelling to articulate their experiences and participate more fully in classroom learning. The research specifically investigates how narrative expression through digital platforms can strengthen learners' self-confidence, communication skills, and sense of belonging (Aseery, 2024; Filosofi et al., 2025). It also examines how teachers can facilitate this process ethically and effectively, ensuring that inclusion moves beyond physical presence toward genuine engagement and voice.

The study seeks to explore the role of digital storytelling as a pedagogical tool for promoting inclusion and voice among students with special needs. The first objective is to analyze how

learners use digital narratives to express personal experiences and perspectives within the classroom context. The second objective is to identify the cognitive, emotional, and social benefits of engaging in digital storytelling activities. The third objective is to evaluate how teachers design and implement digital storytelling practices that align with inclusive educational values (Filosofi et al., 2025; Loignon et al., 2021). The research aims to contribute a deeper understanding of how narrative-based digital learning can serve as both an instructional and therapeutic medium. By centering students' voices, the study aspires to demonstrate how inclusive education can be redefined as a space of shared creativity and mutual recognition. The investigation also intends to inform educators about practical strategies for designing inclusive storytelling projects that enhance participation and self-expression. The ultimate goal of this research is to humanize the learning experience by positioning students with special needs as active narrators of their own educational journeys. Through this approach, the study expects to foster broader awareness of how digital storytelling can serve as a transformative practice for inclusion, empathy, and identity development in diverse learning environments.

Existing research on digital storytelling predominantly focuses on its cognitive and linguistic benefits, often neglecting its social and emotional dimensions particularly within inclusive education. While many studies highlight the effectiveness of digital storytelling in enhancing motivation or literacy, fewer examine how it can serve as a tool for amplifying marginalized voices (Buckner, 2019; Eliseo et al., 2020). There remains a significant gap in understanding how students with disabilities experience digital storytelling as a means of self-representation and empowerment. Furthermore, previous studies have largely emphasized teacher-centered implementation of digital storytelling without sufficient attention to learner agency. Few investigations explore the ethical and relational aspects of storytelling in inclusive contexts, such as issues of representation, accessibility, and identity. This gap limits our understanding of how digital storytelling can move beyond technical engagement to become a dialogic and transformative process that affirms diversity and belonging.

This research addresses these gaps by foregrounding the lived experiences of students with special needs and positioning their narratives as central to the inquiry. By using a qualitative design grounded in participatory observation and thematic analysis, the study seeks to expand the theoretical and practical framework of inclusive pedagogy through storytelling (Bratitsis & Ziannas, 2015; Marti et al., 2016). The novelty of this research lies in its focus on digital storytelling as both a narrative and inclusive practice that empowers students with special needs to construct and communicate their identities. Unlike studies that treat digital storytelling primarily as a literacy or technological intervention, this investigation situates it within the broader framework of inclusive pedagogy and social justice education. It conceptualizes storytelling as a vehicle for self-expression, empathy-building, and dialogic participation that humanizes classroom learning. This study offers methodological innovation by integrating participatory narrative analysis, where students' voices are not merely data but co-constructed meanings that reflect their lived realities. The research design emphasizes ethical engagement and reflexivity, ensuring that students' narratives are represented authentically and respectfully. By combining narrative inquiry with inclusive educational theory, the study bridges a conceptual gap between technological innovation and humanistic pedagogy. The significance of this research extends to both theory and practice (Frisch et al., 2025; Mariyam B & Karthika, 2024). Theoretically, it advances discourse on inclusive education by highlighting storytelling as a form of narrative justice and relational learning. Practically, it provides educators with strategies to incorporate digital storytelling in ways that are accessible, equitable, and emotionally resonant. The study ultimately justifies the role of digital

storytelling as an essential tool for inclusive education, capable of transforming classrooms into spaces where every learner's story matters.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry design to explore how digital storytelling supports inclusive education by amplifying the voices of students with special needs. This design was chosen to capture the lived experiences, personal expressions, and emotional dimensions of learners as they engaged in creating digital stories. Narrative inquiry allows for an in-depth understanding of how individuals construct meaning through storytelling, making it suitable for investigating the pedagogical and psychological impacts of digital media in inclusive classrooms (Li & Qu, 2023; Simsek & Akyar, 2020). The approach emphasizes the co-construction of meaning between participants and researchers, ensuring that students' stories are analyzed not only as data but as authentic representations of their identities and learning experiences.

The population of this study consisted of students with special needs enrolled in three inclusive schools across two regions, alongside their teachers who facilitated the storytelling projects. From this population, a purposive sampling technique was used to select 18 students aged 10–15 years, representing various learning differences such as autism spectrum disorder, dyslexia, and mild intellectual disability. Additionally, six inclusive education teachers were selected to provide pedagogical perspectives and contextual understanding. The diversity of participants allowed for a rich exploration of how digital storytelling fosters engagement and inclusion among students with differing abilities and communication styles.

The research utilized multiple instruments to ensure triangulation and data validity. The primary instrument was a semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit participants' reflections on their storytelling experiences, perceptions of inclusion, and sense of self-expression (Camilo Espinosa Domínguez et al., 2025; Nykvist et al., 2025). Supplementary instruments included classroom observation protocols, digital story analysis sheets, and reflective journals written by teachers. The digital stories produced by the students themselves served as primary narrative artifacts, containing verbal, visual, and auditory components that reflected their emotions, values, and aspirations. These instruments collectively provided both narrative depth and multimodal insight into the participants' learning processes.

The research procedure followed four structured phases. The first phase involved preliminary observation and rapport-building with students and teachers to establish trust and familiarity with the digital tools (Abreu et al., 2023; Ramírez-Verdugo, 2024). The second phase consisted of storytelling workshops, where participants learned to use accessible digital media applications such as Canva, Clipchamp, and PowerPoint to craft their narratives. The third phase focused on the creation and presentation of digital stories, during which participants were guided to integrate personal experiences with creative expression. The final phase included data collection through interviews and analysis of the digital artifacts. Ethical considerations were strictly maintained by obtaining informed consent, ensuring anonymity, and respecting the participants' autonomy in sharing their stories.

The collected data were analyzed through thematic and narrative analysis. Thematic analysis identified recurring patterns related to voice, identity, and inclusion, while narrative analysis interpreted the structure and content of individual stories to understand personal meaning-making processes. This dual approach ensured a comprehensive interpretation that combined descriptive accuracy with interpretive depth (Proctor, 2019; Rajagopal & Chandrashekar, 2025). The methodological framework positioned students as co-authors of knowledge rather than mere

subjects, reflecting the inclusive spirit of the research and aligning with the ethical and pedagogical goals of digital storytelling as a transformative learning practice.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis was based on qualitative data obtained from 18 students with special needs and six inclusive education teachers, supported by 54 digital storytelling artifacts, 24 interview transcripts, and six reflective journals. The following table summarizes the types of disabilities represented and the corresponding digital outputs:

Table 1. Types of Disabilities and Number of Digital Story Outputs

Type of Disability	Number of Students	Digital Story Outputs
Autism Spectrum Disorder	7	21
Dyslexia	5	15
Mild Intellectual Disability	4	12
ADHD	2	6
Total	18	54

Data revealed that all participants successfully completed at least one digital story project. Most students preferred combining visuals and narration rather than text-based storytelling, indicating a shift toward multimodal literacy engagement. The secondary data obtained from school inclusion reports indicated that digital storytelling projects led to an average 30% increase in classroom participation rates among students with special needs. Teachers' reflections supported this quantitative indicator, noting observable improvements in self-confidence, communication fluency, and peer collaboration. The overall data trends demonstrated that digital storytelling enhanced students' expressive skills across cognitive and emotional domains. Students used stories to narrate personal experiences, family life, or aspirations, creating emotionally resonant narratives that fostered a sense of ownership over learning. Teachers observed that students became more willing to speak publicly and collaborate in group activities after engaging with digital media. Students with autism showed significant engagement when combining audio narration with images, reducing their verbal anxiety and increasing communicative confidence. Meanwhile, learners with dyslexia benefited from the visual-to-text transition process, which improved reading comprehension and narrative sequencing. Digital storytelling thus provided differentiated learning pathways aligned with each learner's strengths.

The qualitative coding revealed three dominant themes: *voice empowerment*, *social inclusion*, and *creative identity formation*. Voice empowerment referred to students' ability to express personal emotions and experiences through digital formats. Social inclusion emerged as a result of peer collaboration during story production, while creative identity formation described how students began to view themselves as capable storytellers rather than passive learners. Narrative analysis indicated that 72% of student-created stories contained explicit self-referential elements, such as "my dream," "my challenge," or "my family." This reflects a strong connection between storytelling and self-awareness development. Furthermore, the participatory structure of the activity reduced stigma within the classroom as students without disabilities began assisting their peers in editing and producing digital stories. The inferential interpretation of the findings showed that digital storytelling significantly contributed to improving both cognitive and affective engagement in inclusive settings. Thematic correlations revealed that emotional expression (theme 1) and collaboration (theme 2) were positively associated with perceived inclusion (theme 3). This

relationship indicates that inclusion is not only structural but also experiential, mediated through creativity and empathy.

Comparative analysis between the pre-project and post-project reflections of teachers demonstrated an attitudinal shift. Teachers initially perceived digital media as a potential distraction but later acknowledged its transformative impact on accessibility and student motivation. The inferential link between inclusive pedagogy and technological engagement reinforces the need for multimodal learning frameworks in special education. Cross-thematic analysis revealed a relational pattern between storytelling content and emotional development. Students who incorporated personal experiences into their stories demonstrated higher self-efficacy, as reflected in teacher evaluations and peer responses. The use of narrative as an emotional bridge reduced behavioral withdrawal among learners with autism and encouraged cooperative play during digital editing sessions. The relationship between digital literacy and inclusion was further highlighted by the teachers' feedback. Those who actively participated in co-creating stories with their students reported stronger interpersonal connections and more responsive classroom atmospheres. This interrelation underscores the importance of collaborative pedagogy in digital storytelling environments.

One illustrative case involved "Aisha," a 12-year-old student with mild autism, who created a digital story titled *My World of Colors*. Her narrative combined watercolor paintings, recorded reflections, and soft background music. The process of producing her story helped her articulate emotions she previously struggled to express verbally. Teachers observed that her classmates showed greater empathy and began engaging her in group discussions after viewing her project. Another case involved "Rafi," a student with dyslexia, who used photographs and voiceovers to narrate his journey of learning to read. His story titled *My Voice Matters* became a catalyst for classroom conversations about perseverance and acceptance. Both cases exemplify how digital storytelling acts as a catalyst for social and emotional inclusion through creative participation. The findings indicated that the implementation of digital storytelling transcended traditional inclusive teaching by merging academic content with affective learning outcomes. Students were not merely recipients of instruction but co-creators of classroom culture through their digital narratives. Teachers described the process as "mutually transformative," reflecting both pedagogical and emotional growth.

The digital storytelling framework encouraged accessibility, allowing multiple forms of input such as voice, image, and animation. These multimodal affordances accommodated different abilities while reinforcing the notion that expression does not have to conform to a singular linguistic or cognitive mode (Ben-Ahmed, 2023; Uribe et al., 2024). The results therefore position digital storytelling as an inclusive pedagogy that humanizes education by honoring every learner's narrative form. The results collectively indicate that digital storytelling serves as both a pedagogical and therapeutic mechanism for inclusive education. Its capacity to engage emotion, creativity, and cognition simultaneously makes it an effective tool for transforming special needs education into a participatory and empathetic practice. The enhancement of voice, identity, and belonging highlights storytelling's central role in fostering inclusive learning cultures. The overall interpretation suggests that digital storytelling provides more than technological innovation it constitutes a paradigm shift toward equity and empathy in education. By enabling students with special needs to become narrators of their own experiences, this approach redefines inclusion as an active, creative, and empowering process rooted in shared humanity.

The findings of this study revealed that digital storytelling significantly enhanced inclusion and participation among students with special needs. Students demonstrated increased confidence,

engagement, and social interaction when allowed to express themselves through multimedia narratives (Chuane et al., 2025; Palomino-Gómez et al., 2025). Teachers observed positive changes in students' behavior and emotional expression, particularly in learners who previously struggled to communicate verbally or in writing. The narratives produced by these students highlighted their creativity, resilience, and individuality, suggesting that digital storytelling successfully provided an alternative platform for voice and agency in inclusive classrooms. The analysis also showed that the multimodal nature of digital storytelling combining sound, visuals, and text enabled diverse learners to access and express meaning according to their strengths. Students with autism or dyslexia, for instance, utilized visual and auditory elements more effectively than textual ones. These multimodal compositions reflected not only their learning outcomes but also their personal identities and emotional journeys (Belda-Medina, 2022; Re & Valente, 2023). The storytelling process thus functioned as both a cognitive and affective scaffold, fostering inclusivity and self-empowerment.

The results of this research align with prior studies emphasizing the transformative role of digital storytelling in inclusive and participatory education. Scholars such as Robin (2016) and Ohler (2018) identified storytelling as a bridge between technology and personal expression, enabling marginalized learners to construct knowledge through identity-centered narratives. The present study extends these findings by situating them within special education, where multimodal engagement serves as a key factor for accessibility and differentiation. Unlike previous studies focusing primarily on cognitive gains, this research underscores the affective dimension of inclusion the sense of belonging, recognition, and validation achieved through narrative participation. The study diverges from purely technological approaches that prioritize digital proficiency over pedagogical empathy. Instead, it resonates with humanistic perspectives of inclusive education (Pervez & Orchard, 2025; Yasar-Akyar et al., 2022), where learning is viewed as a socially situated and emotionally responsive process. The novelty of this research lies in demonstrating that digital storytelling not only facilitates inclusive teaching but also transforms traditional power dynamics between teachers and students. By positioning students with special needs as creators of knowledge, this approach challenges deficit-oriented pedagogies and reinforces equity-based educational paradigms.

The findings signify a paradigm shift in how inclusive education can be understood and practiced. The active involvement of students in digital storytelling projects reflects a movement from tokenistic inclusion where students are merely present to participatory inclusion, where they become visible contributors to classroom discourse. The narratives they created reveal authentic perspectives on learning, friendship, and self-worth, marking a critical step toward democratizing classroom communication. The storytelling process itself emerged as a form of narrative therapy within educational contexts. Through telling and visualizing their stories, students with special needs found new ways to process emotions, build self-esteem, and form connections with peers. These findings signify that inclusive education is not solely about accommodating differences but also about creating dialogic spaces where stories humanize learning and foster mutual empathy. The implications of this study extend to pedagogical design, teacher professional development, and educational policy. For teachers, the results suggest the need to adopt digital storytelling as a routine pedagogical tool to promote engagement, self-expression, and inclusion. Teacher education programs should incorporate training in narrative-based technology integration to equip educators with skills to guide creative and reflective learning experiences for diverse learners.

At the policy level, these findings advocate for a broader conceptualization of inclusion that emphasizes narrative agency alongside accessibility. Educational frameworks should recognize storytelling as a legitimate form of assessment and expression for students with special needs. The

study also implies that integrating narrative technologies can contribute to the development of emotionally intelligent and socially cohesive learning environments, where every student's story is valued as a contribution to collective knowledge. The success of digital storytelling in promoting inclusion can be attributed to its alignment with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which emphasizes multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression. The multimodal format of digital storytelling allowed learners to overcome linguistic and cognitive barriers by engaging sensory, emotional, and social dimensions of learning simultaneously. This inclusive affordance fostered motivation and agency, particularly among students with disabilities who often experience frustration in conventional classrooms.

The results also reflect the intrinsic power of narrative as a human learning mechanism. Stories organize experience, enable reflection, and provide coherence to personal identity. For students with special needs, whose educational experiences are frequently fragmented by stigma or misunderstanding, digital storytelling offered a coherent space for reconstructing self-identity and social recognition. The findings thus confirm that the pedagogical strength of storytelling lies in its ability to merge personal meaning-making with collective understanding. Future educational practices must build upon these findings by institutionalizing digital storytelling as a core strategy for inclusive education. Schools should develop collaborative projects where students of all abilities co-create narratives, fostering empathy and community. The inclusion of assistive technologies such as voice recognition software or visual aids should be expanded to ensure broader accessibility within storytelling activities.

Further research could explore longitudinal impacts of digital storytelling on identity development, academic performance, and emotional well-being among students with special needs. Investigating cross-cultural adaptations of digital storytelling in inclusive education contexts could also reveal how cultural narratives shape inclusion practices globally. The next phase of inquiry should integrate narrative analytics and artificial intelligence to enhance adaptive storytelling tools that respond dynamically to each learner's expressive patterns, ensuring that inclusion evolves in step with digital innovation.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study lies in the discovery that digital storytelling functions as both a pedagogical and psychological medium for amplifying the voices of students with special needs. Unlike conventional inclusive learning approaches that emphasize accommodation and support, digital storytelling repositions learners as active narrators of their own experiences. This study revealed that students' self-expression through multimedia narratives not only enhanced engagement but also reshaped peer perceptions, fostering empathy and collaboration in the classroom. The process enabled students to convey emotional depth, reflect on identity, and participate meaningfully in shared learning. This finding underscores that inclusion transcends accessibility; it requires recognition of each learner's story as an integral part of the educational dialogue.

The added value of this research rests on its conceptual and methodological contribution to inclusive education. Conceptually, it introduces the framework of "narrative inclusion," a pedagogical model that integrates digital storytelling with inclusive learning principles to promote emotional equity and self-representation. Methodologically, it offers a structured model of narrative inquiry supported by multimodal data collection and analysis that captures cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of learning. The integration of qualitative narrative analysis with digital media content analysis provides a replicable blueprint for future researchers seeking to investigate

inclusive practices using technology-enhanced storytelling as both a research tool and an intervention strategy.

The limitations of this study primarily relate to the contextual and demographic scope of the participants, which involved a relatively small sample from three inclusive schools. The study did not account for long-term behavioral or academic outcomes following the storytelling interventions, limiting its longitudinal implications. Future research should therefore expand across broader and more diverse educational settings, exploring the sustainability and scalability of digital storytelling in inclusion programs. Subsequent studies could integrate mixed-methods designs, incorporating quantitative measures of emotional intelligence, engagement, and academic performance to complement narrative insights. Advancing this line of research will contribute to refining narrative pedagogy as a cornerstone of inclusive, human-centered education in the digital age.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

Author 4: Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing - original draft.

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