



# Universal Design for Learning and Life Designing in the Italian school system - An integrated inclusive model for students with disabilities

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## Abstract

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the Life Designing paradigm are effectively integrated within the Italian school system, particularly in support of students with special educational needs (SEN), by addressing individual learning profiles and fostering inclusive practices. UDL focuses on adapting pedagogical methods and modes of representation to overcome physical, cognitive and social barriers, thereby enabling personalised and differentiated learning experiences in increasingly diverse classrooms. Life Designing, although primarily associated with career and life planning, has demonstrated relevance in educational contexts by encouraging self-awareness, reflective practice and autonomous future planning (Izzo et al., 2015). It supports the construction of professional and social identities, thus enhancing individual potential and promoting inclusion.

Whilst UDL ensures equitable access to educational content through assistive technologies and adaptable teaching strategies, Life Designing develops transferable skills essential for future engagement in the labour market and for living a fulfilling life. Collectively, these frameworks empower SEN students to recognise their strengths, build autonomy, and articulate life plans aligned with their abilities and aspirations—thereby mitigating the risk of social and occupational marginalisation.

In conclusion, the integration of UDL and Life Designing offers a comprehensive and future-oriented educational response, equipping students with cognitive, emotional and professional competences vital for independent and active participation in society. This holistic model promotes not only classroom inclusion, but also long-term personal and vocational development within a culture that values diversity and prioritises equity.

**Keywords:** Universal Design for Learning, Life Designing, Disability, Italian school system, Inclusion

## 1. Introduction

In contemporary education, the principle of inclusion is recognised as a core objective, requiring strategies capable of valuing each student's uniqueness and fostering equitable

learning experiences. Within this context, the narrative approach (Bruner, 1990) and the Life Designing paradigm (Savickas et al., 2009) offer effective pedagogical tools for cultivating personal identity and supporting learners in envisioning meaningful life trajectories.

The autobiographical narrative approach is rooted in the understanding that personal stories are not simply accounts of past events, but interpretative frameworks through which individuals construct self-awareness, aspirations and insight into their capacities. When implemented in educational settings, this method enables students to engage in critical reflection, facilitating a coherent and multidimensional understanding of identity.

In parallel, the Life Designing paradigm, developed by Savickas and Guichard, promotes a proactive vision of life planning (Biancalana & Canevaro, 2019), particularly relevant for individuals with disabilities. This framework emphasizes the capacity to plan and adapt one's life course with resilience, navigating transitions and challenges. When integrated with autobiographical narrative techniques, Life Designing offers both a theoretical and practical foundation to support personal and professional growth in inclusive educational settings.

This article aims to investigate the pedagogical effectiveness of integrating the autobiographical narrative approach—applicable from early education stages—with the Life Designing paradigm and Universal Design for Learning principles in instructional planning. Through theoretical analysis and the proposal of inclusive intervention models, it seeks to provide practical insights for educators committed to cultivating increasingly inclusive and reflective school environments.

To guide this theoretical exploration, the following research questions were formulated:

- How can the integration of UDL and Life Designing enhance inclusive education for students with disabilities?
- What are the potential benefits and challenges of applying narrative-based tools and digital technologies in early career guidance within the Italian school system?

## **2. The narrative approach**

Firmly grounded in psychological and sociological disciplines, the narrative approach represents a highly effective methodology for exploring and interpreting individual and collective identity. As Bruner (2004) observed, narrative extends beyond a communicative function; it actively contributes to the construction of personal and social reality by organising experience and enabling individuals to attribute coherence and meaning to their lives. Accordingly, narration should not be viewed as merely reflective of reality, but as a dynamic process shaping perception and action within the social sphere.

McAdams (1993) further developed this conceptual framework through the theory of narrative identity, which posits that individuals construct a coherent sense of self by integrating past experiences with future aspirations. These narratives inform not only how one understands oneself, but also how one imagines personal development across time (Savickas, 2014).

Ricoeur (1984) enriched this theoretical foundation by highlighting the hermeneutic dimension of narrative, emphasising its role in mediating reflection and identity reconstruction. Through narrating lived experience, individuals reinterpret past events, orient themselves towards the future, and consolidate a resilient personal and relational identity.

Within educational contexts, storytelling emerges as a pedagogical practice aligned with these principles, offering students the opportunity to externalise experience, articulate meaning and develop communicative and reflective competences (Degerfeld, 2018; Schön, 1993). The use of structured story formats encourages shared learning, wherein students

transform individual experiences into collective insight. Metaphorical language further enriches this process by rendering abstract concepts more tangible and affectively resonant.

These narrative strategies are particularly pertinent when linked to life planning and identity construction—themes central to the Life Designing paradigm explored in the subsequent section.

### **3. Life Designing**

The Life Designing paradigm constitutes a major development within the domains of career guidance and life planning, offering a modern framework to navigate the complexities of today's world. Contemporary society is defined by increasingly flexible labour environments and fluid organisational structures, which often make it difficult for individuals to envision and plan for their future. In response, career guidance professionals began integrating traditional vocational counselling with career education (Super, 1957) and counselling models (Crites, 1981).

This evolution can be traced back to Parsons' (1909) early model, which emphasized matching individual abilities and interests with the requirements of a given profession. That approach subsequently informed the development of person–environment fit theory, later refined through Holland's (1997) model of vocational congruence, which supports a more effective alignment between personal characteristics and occupational environments.

In the twenty-first century, career development theory shifted its focus from organisational contexts to the individual, highlighting personalised pathways. This shift led to the development of Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005), which emphasizes the role of brief personal narratives in shaping vocational identity. These narratives are initially deconstructed and subsequently restructured into broader identity frameworks, helping individuals co-construct the next chapter of their professional lives.

A key milestone in the conceptualisation of this theory was marked by the inaugural conference of the Society for Vocational Psychology (Savickas, 1994), where the distinction between career development theories and career counselling models was emphasized. While theories like Holland's (1990) personality types or Super's (1990) life stages focus on career development, career counselling explores deeper, relational dimensions of personal growth and decision-making.

Savickas (1996) aimed not to replace existing theoretical models, but to reframe and integrate them within a broader conceptual framework. His work revealed the interconnections among existing models and clarified their practical implications. This led to the development of a constructivist theory of vocational behavior centered on personality traits, developmental tasks, and the personal timeline.

Career Construction Counselling, as conceptualised by Savickas, places emphasis on narrative and relational dynamics in vocational development, helping individuals build coherent self-concepts and career paths. It aligns with Super's (1998) view of career counselling as a process of developing and testing an integrated self-image in the world of work.

Rather than replacing vocational guidance or career education, this model complements these practices through a more holistic, person-centred approach. It foregrounds concepts such as biographical identity, identity construction and employability, and incorporates key dimensions such as adaptability, emotional intelligence and lifelong learning.

Life Designing addresses the challenges posed by an increasingly volatile labour market, characterised by employment instability, transitional phases and multicultural dynamics. Within such contexts, the cultivation of a coherent and resilient sense of self becomes essential. The construction of self through professional engagement and interpersonal

relationships emerges as a foundational element in personal and vocational development (Savickas, 2015a).

In knowledge-based societies, individuals are increasingly required to establish alignment between their personal identity and professional activity. Such alignment supports the development of a professional identity that is simultaneously fulfilling and adaptable to labour market.

As a central tenet of the paradigm, Life Designing offers both theoretical grounding and practical tools for constructing coherent and purposeful life trajectories. It encourages individuals to articulate their experiences through structured narrative practices, employing storytelling as a foundation for informed decision-making and future-oriented planning.

A notable innovation within the Life Designing framework lies in its adaptability to varied life contexts (Savickas, 2015b). It fosters resilience and self-reflective capacity, enabling individuals to navigate life transitions with enhanced awareness and agency. By integrating personal and professional dimensions, Life Designing highlights the interdependence between lived experience, relational dynamics and identity formation (Savickas, 2015c).

Practitioners employ the Career Story Interview as a central narrative instrument, designed to reinforce individuals' self-concept and reveal their preferred self-representations. Such narratives frequently originate in periods of transition or adversity, supporting individuals in attributing meaning to discontinuities across their life course (Bruner, 1990). The thematic patterns that emerge enable a reflective process whereby past experiences, present circumstances and future aspirations are coherently integrated within a personally meaningful framework.

#### **4. Toward an inclusive integration of approach**

The integration of the autobiographical narrative approach—particularly biographical storytelling—with the Life Designing paradigm generates a theoretical and practical synergy that supports personalised and inclusive education. Both approaches aim to cultivate a reflective and resilient sense of identity through introspection and life planning (Bruner, 1990; Savickas et al., 2009). Within educational contexts, this conceptual convergence provides innovative strategies to enhance learners' self-awareness and guide the construction of coherent and personally meaningful life project.

Biographical storytelling enables students to explore and narrate their own identities by engaging with past experiences and formulating aspirations for the future. This process fosters the development of a cohesive self-concept, wherein personal events are invested with meaning and organised within a developmental narrative. Life Designing, in turn, offers a structured framework through which such experiences can be recontextualised, thereby delineating a dynamic path of personal growth.

Together, these approaches empower students not only to understand who they are and where they come from, but also to design who they aspire to become and how to achieve those goals. This integrated framework is particularly effective in inclusive environments, where diverse lived experiences require flexible and individualised pedagogical responses—especially in the case of students with special educational needs (SEN).

Nonetheless, biographical approaches and tools such as the Career Story Interview (Savickas, 2005) may present practical challenges in school settings, as they do not inherently accommodate the full spectrum of accessibility needs. For this reason, the incorporation of a

universal design framework—specifically Universal Design for Learning (UDL)<sup>1</sup>—is essential (Rose, 2000; CAST, 2018).

UDL facilitates the creation of inclusive learning environments in which all students, irrespective of physical, cognitive or linguistic differences, can actively engage with and benefit from educational opportunities. Assistive technologies such as text-to-speech software, simplified writing platforms and multimedia storytelling applications support SEN students in articulating and sharing their personal narratives (Besio, 2005; Sgambelluri, 2020).

Work also plays a vital role in the development of identity for individuals with disabilities. Learning to work encompasses more than the acquisition of technical skills; it also involves the development of social maturity, adherence to rules, acquisition of roles and collaborative interaction. These elements contribute to the formation of a coherent adult identity, facilitating recognition and social inclusion (Friso & Caldin, 2022).

Such a developmental trajectory requires the collaborative involvement of families, educators and health and social service professionals, working collectively to support students in designing and pursuing their futures. Within this framework, education becomes a continuous process of self-perception and self-assessment, reinforcing students' capacities to plan and orient their lives throughout their academic journey.

## **5. Career guidance activities and inclusive educational processes**

The Life Designing paradigm and the autobiographical narrative approach both originate from a unified vision of education as a lifelong process of identity construction, wherein individuals reflect upon their experiences to interpret their personal trajectories and actively plan for the future. This theoretical integration not only supports students in developing self-awareness and building meaningful life projects, but also contributes to fostering inclusive educational environments that ensure the full and active participation of students with special educational needs (SEN).

In early childhood education, guidance begins with promoting emotional awareness and expression—essential dimensions for identity formation in young learners (Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978). Developmental theories (Bandura, 1977; Erikson, 1950; Freud, 1905; Pavlov, 1927; Skinner, 1938; Watson, 1924) underscore the significance of symbolic play and social interaction in shaping cognitive and emotional growth. Within this framework, activities such as illustrating emotionally significant experiences or using visual metaphors to represent future aspirations—e.g. timelines or capability charts—have proven effective in stimulating children's self-reflection (James, 2017; Lakoff, 2022). These strategies promote identity formation through play, creativity and peer interaction, thereby supporting inclusive and harmonious development.

For children with disabilities, such activities can be enhanced through the use of assistive technologies—for example, speech synthesis tools or simplified writing applications—which improve communication and foster broader participation.

As students' progress into primary education, narrative and reflective competencies develop further. At this stage, the autobiographical narrative approach becomes an effective pedagogical tool to support identity consolidation and self-awareness (Bruner, 1996). The use

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<sup>1</sup> Universal Design for Learning (UDL) represents a model for designing instructional materials, methods, and strategies whose primary goal is no longer to create individualized interventions as exceptions to a standard approach, but rather to build, from the outset, a framework accessible to all. Its broad accessibility is rooted in a flexible approach that can be adapted and personalized, allowing every student to participate, engage, and learn effectively.

of personal journals, in which students record and reflect on daily experiences, cultivates critical thinking and emotional literacy. Storytelling practices—encouraging children to share personal episodes—foster mutual understanding and self-expression, supporting a more integrated and reflective classroom environment.

In lower secondary education, guidance assumes a more complex role as students begin to explore personal interests, ambitions and future pathways (Erikson, 1996). Psychological theories of adolescence (Erikson, 1950; Piaget, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978; Bowlby, 1969; Bronfenbrenner, 1979) emphasise this developmental phase as critical for identity formation. Activities that encourage symbolic and imaginative representations of future selves—for example, selecting objects or images to depict vocational aspirations—stimulate creativity and support decision-making. For SEN students, these methods can be adapted through digital mind mapping tools and interactive technologies, allowing for personalised access and enhanced engagement (Burke et al., 2013; Van Laarhoven et al., 2018).

In upper secondary school, guidance shifts towards preparing students for adult roles and employment. Here, professional autobiography becomes a key method for linking educational experiences to future career choices (Savickas, 2001). Life Designing theory underscores the importance of narrative reconstruction in developing vocational identity, encouraging students to reinterpret their experiences in light of future ambitions.

At this level, integrating Life Designing with the development of career portfolios is particularly relevant. Students are supported in documenting their skills, achievements and goals, while engaging in structured reflection about future pathways. To ensure inclusion, digital platforms can be employed to create accessible and dynamic portfolios, especially for students with disabilities. These tools promote self-determination (Cottini, 2016), autonomy and active participation in educational planning.

Adult learning theories (Kolb, 1984; Knowles, 1980; Lave, 1991; Tough, 1971) reinforce the importance of self-directed learning and metacognitive reflection in this stage of development. Portfolios serve not only as repositories of experience, but also as tools for intentional learning navigation. Once again, assistive technologies play a vital role in ensuring that SEN students can fully engage in these educational processes, from reflective practice to life design.

### **5.1 Case Study: The MiRacconto App – A pedagogical tool for inclusive narrative design**

The MiRacconto app, currently under development, constitutes a concrete and innovative application of the theoretical integration among Universal Design for Learning (UDL), narrative pedagogy and the Life Designing paradigm. Conceived within an educational framework that prioritises subjectivity and the early promotion of self-determination, MiRacconto is specifically designed to support primary school pupils—particularly those with special educational needs (SEN)—in the processes of self-narration, identity construction and future-oriented reflection. The digital tool provides a flexible and inclusive environment for autobiographical storytelling, underpinned by multimodal interaction and assistive technology features.

The structural core of the application is articulated around a high-density metaphor: the "Tree of Competencies". This symbolic construct consists of four distinct sections, each representing a fundamental dimension of identity and development. The roots refer to the pupil's origins, personal relationships and cultural context; the trunk signifies current self-perception, emotional experiences and core values; the branches represent perceived talents, interests and personal strengths; while the leaves correspond to aspirations, desires and projections into the future. Through a scaffolded and guided interface, learners select from curated sets of visual and textual elements—carefully designed to be both accessible and

culturally responsive—in order to compose a personalised digital autobiographical narrative that reflects both present identity and future orientation.

From a design perspective, MiRacconto aligns explicitly with the three core principles of Universal Design for Learning as formulated by CAST (2011; 2018). The app provides multiple means of representation—including text, audio, symbolic imagery and augmentative communication strategies. It facilitates various forms of expression, allowing learners to engage in guided writing, drawing and voice recording. Furthermore, it enhances engagement through emotionally resonant interactions, avatar personalisation and light gamification, thereby fostering motivation and a sense of ownership throughout the narrative construction process.

UDL serves not merely as a framework for creating differentiated interventions, but as a paradigm for designing universally accessible educational resources from the outset. Its inherent flexibility allows for adaptation and personalisation across a wide range of learner profiles, ensuring meaningful participation and equitable access for all pupils.

The pedagogical value of MiRacconto is not limited to its technological affordances, but resides in the intentional architecture that underpins its educational use. A forthcoming pilot study, scheduled for implementation in Italian mainstream primary schools during the 2025–2026 academic year, will involve full participation of second-cycle classrooms. The research design adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining standardised quantitative tools and qualitative interpretive instruments.

The intervention begins with a collective classroom session, during which the aims of the activity are introduced and an initial self-report measure of perceived self-determination is administered—adapted from validated tools such as the AIR Self-Determination Scale for children aged 8 to 10. Each pupil subsequently interacts with the application individually in the presence of a researcher, who observes the experience via a structured protocol, noting behavioural indicators, emotional responses and spontaneous verbal expressions. Particular attention is devoted to SEN pupils, who are supported by their dedicated educators to ensure consistency with inclusive practice and full accessibility.

Upon completion, each pupil receives a personalised PDF output, visually presenting their “Tree of Competencies” alongside their autobiographical story. This document functions both as a tangible product of the experience and as a meaningful artefact of identity exploration. A follow-up classroom session provides space for shared reflection, accompanied by a second administration of the self-determination measure and an additional questionnaire focused on school engagement. In parallel, the digital outputs are subjected to thematic qualitative analysis using MAXQDA software, following an interpretive coding scheme aligned with the four symbolic dimensions of the tree.

Triangulation of data—including quantitative measures, narrative artefacts and observational records—offers a comprehensive insight into the impact of MiRacconto on pupils’ narrative competence, self-awareness and future orientation. By embedding its structure within narrative pedagogy and aligning its accessibility features with UDL principles, MiRacconto seeks to operate not merely as a digital tool, but as a pedagogical artefact capable of catalysing meaningful, authentic and inclusive learning processes.

The project thus responds not only to theoretical imperatives of equity and personalisation, but also invites a reconceptualization of guidance and orientation as early, inclusive and identity-driven processes. Its potential lies in cultivating agency, reflective capacity and life design from the earliest stages of schooling.

## **6. Conclusions**

The integration of the narrative approach and Life Designing paradigm, supported by the pedagogical framework of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), offers an innovative and future-facing perspective within contemporary educational discourse. UDL provides a flexible lens for re-evaluating everyday teaching practices and for guiding intentional pedagogical decisions that enhance learning opportunities for all. This paradigm shift moves beyond rigid programming and standardised models, towards an educational culture that acknowledges individual learner profiles, personal trajectories and latent potential—creating a space where learning is both meaningful and accessible.

The proposal to embed inclusive practices through UDL responds to the imperative of making this framework not simply theoretical, but pedagogically applicable in everyday instructional contexts. It is important to underscore, however, that the Italian school system is already underpinned by a consolidated tradition of inclusive education practices (Sgambelluri, 2020; Sgambelluri, 2023). Yet, the full implementation of the integrative model discussed herein necessitates critical awareness of several operational challenges. Among these, the need for targeted teacher education is central, particularly for those facilitating narrative and Life Designing processes in classrooms. Additionally, such practices entail investment in time, training and technological infrastructure, which may prove demanding under prevailing curricular and institutional constraints.

Furthermore, cultural and structural resistance to a personalised model of educational guidance—still often grounded in prescriptive and standardised paradigms—may hinder the systemic uptake of flexible and reflexive methodologies. These challenges should not be construed as limitations of the model itself, but rather as opportunities for further reflection, interdisciplinary dialogue and policy evolution.

A concrete illustration of how these theoretical perspectives may be translated into pedagogical practice is the development of the MiRacconto application, currently in its design phase. This digital tool offers a universally accessible environment for early guidance through autobiographical storytelling, directly aligned with the principles of Universal Design for Learning. By enabling pupils to construct a personalised “Tree of Competencies” using multimodal inputs—drawings, voice recordings, symbolic imagery and guided writing—the app supports reflective identity construction and future-oriented thinking from early primary education.

The platform’s affordances have been designed to ensure accessibility and engagement: avatar-based navigation, adaptable visual design and gamified elements contribute to sustaining motivation and participation, particularly among pupils with SEN. This project presents a viable and actionable model of how UDL, narrative identity and Life Designing may converge within a single pedagogical experience (Moon, 2024), promoting agency, self-awareness and life planning from a young age.

The learning environments enabled by this model also benefit from the use of assistive technologies and flexible teaching methods, making it possible to support all pupils in constructing meaningful and personalised life paths. This includes the development of transversal competencies essential for navigating social and professional domains (Michalski et al., 2021; Sgambelluri, 2023), with the integration of tools that accommodate specific learning needs<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Assistive Technologies (AT) include all technological tools essential for individuals with disabilities, as well as compensatory devices designed for students with special educational needs. Assistive Technologies support students with disabilities whenever they need to address specific personal challenges and are therefore considered permanent. In contrast, compensatory tools are used

This comprehensive educational model enhances self-esteem, autonomy and resilience, equipping pupils with the cognitive, emotional and social skills necessary to face future challenges and actively participate in an inclusive society. Ultimately, the synthesis of UDL, Life Designing and narrative pedagogy offers a dynamic, evidence-informed and responsive framework for addressing the complexities of twenty-first-century education, where diversity is recognised as a resource and equity as an essential condition for development.

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on a temporary basis, depending on the needs identified, and may also serve as helpful resources for the entire class. For a more in-depth discussion, see: S. Besio, *Assistive Technologies for Disability*, Vol. 6, Lecce: Pensa Multimedia, 2005.

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