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Abstract: Generative AI (Gen AI) is rapidly changing the production of visual literature, including children's book illustrations. The new AI tools offer novel pathways to make the visual development process more efficient, yet it also raises critical questions about the creative ability of children's book illustrators to create authentic and unique visuals in their own styles. Local artists and designers play an important part in constructing and preserving regional identity through their visuals embedded with cultural semiotics. Therefore, relying solely on AI tools during the visual-making process becomes a concern, especially in regions such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where the availability of culturally relevant children's visual literature remains limited. To explore this impact, a case study was conducted with fifty-nine undergraduate students at the Department of Art and Design, University of Peshawar. The students were tasked with creating illustrated children's booklets incorporating cultural themes. The purpose was to identify how they use available tools to create the booklets if given creative freedom, including AI in their creative workflow. The resulting projects include stories based on cultural themes alongside generic animal stories. Findings of this study show that a great number (fifty-eighty out of fifty-nine) utilized AI for both text generation and visual content to produce these illustrated stories. There was a heavy reliance on AI during all stages of design process: story composition, visual creation (illustrations), cover and inner pages design. The resulting artefacts reflect globally homogenized visual styles rather than authentic local representations. This paper argues that an unchecked reliance on Gen AI may reduce an illustrator's own critical thinking ability required in the complex design process. It may affect their ability to produce illustrations in their unique artistic styles. It also creates an environment of cultural disorientation that should otherwise visually reflect authentic local communities. This study proposes for a balanced Human-AI collaborative model. It insists that AI should serve as a supporting technology rather than a substitute for human creativity. The creative input of illustrators and designers must remain at the heart of visual production. The emerging technologies should amplify rather than dilute local visual narratives.

Introduction

Children illustrated books/booklets are complex multimodal objects/artefacts, the purpose of which is to engage young readers with literary material first hand. Its meaning emerges from the interplay between word and image where children are actively involved with it rather than receiving it passively (Arnheim, 1969; Crawford et al., 2024; Pantaleo, 2025). Children can read pictures long before they become fluent readers (Arizpe & Styles, 2003). The illustrations in a children's book are not decorative additions to a story but rather they introduce environments, represent relationships, and depict the ordinary routines of family and community life. They shape the way a child imagines the world beyond the walls of the home (Piaget, 1952; Bruner, 1966) which is why an illustrator does considerably more than produce attractive images. The illustrator participates in a child's understanding of the social and cultural world (Vygotsky, 1978), and it is this participation that makes children's illustration a matter of genuine educational consequence rather than a merely commercial or aesthetic concern.

Where a child's own environment is faithfully represented in the books placed before them, the encounter carries a particular weight. Research on culturally responsive materials has repeatedly shown that reading resources reflecting local places, dress, language, and everyday practice strengthen both engagement and the child's attachment to their own cultural identity (Shih, 2022; Amani & Mgaiwa, 2025). A qualitative assessment of a locally developed children's book in rural Zambia found the folktale structure and the familiar moral world of the stories to be precisely what made the book acceptable and usable within the community (Kaiser et al., 2023). Conversely, where the available literature is imported, unfamiliar, or culturally distant, children are left to construct their sense of the world from images that do not include them. This gap is not hypothetical in the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Contextually relevant children's visual literature produced within and for this region remains limited, and the young readers of Peshawar continue to grow up amid picture books whose streets, houses, foods and faces belong somewhere else.

Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) has already become indispensable in the professional and academic environment. Undergraduate art students enrolled in illustration course, previously spent weeks developing a character sheet using traditional methods of illustrating a story can now generate stories, characters, backgrounds, and complete page layouts in minutes, using AI tools. The available scholarly literature documents both the promise and the challenges of this shift. Studies across arts and design education report enhanced engagement, faster iteration, and greater diversity of ideas (Fang, 2025; Rana et al., 2025), while also noting that educators and students alike insist the human factor cannot be replaced (Sáez-Velasco et al., 2024). Others are more cautious. Habib et al. (2024), measuring divergent thinking in a college creativity course, found that while generative tools can support creative thinking, they may also depress creative confidence, and argued for a careful rather than an enthusiastic approach to integration. Fleischmann (2025) framed the central question for design educators asking how the power of these tools might be harnessed without commodifying the creative process that design education exists to cultivate.

The question of creative agency sits at the center of this debate. Rafner et al. (2025), working with think-aloud protocols during co-creative image generation, identified four dimensions along which agency operates, creative self-efficacy, control over creative action, autonomy in the process, and ownership of the product, and found that a maker's sense of agency fluctuates across the creative process rather than remaining stable, diminishing particularly at moments when the tool's output departs from what was expected. Wu et al. (2026), using Q methodology with forty art students, mapped five distinct positions students occupy, ranging from human-centered directors who treat the tool as an instrument of their

own intention to enthusiastic explorers open to sharing creative authority. What emerges from this body of work is that students do not divide neatly into adopters and refusers; they negotiate, and the terms of that negotiation are pedagogically consequential. Questions of ownership follow closely behind. Chen and He (2026) observe that authorship in AI-generated art is increasingly understood as distributed, with primary responsibility attributed to the human through prompt design, selection and interpretation, while legal frameworks across jurisdictions remain fragmented. Xu et al. (2024) similarly find that a maker's psychological sense of ownership over a co-created work rests on identifiable factors rather than arising automatically.

Two technical limitations of these systems bear directly upon the making of children's books. The first is cultural fidelity. A substantial and growing literature documents that text-to-image models reproduce the imbalances of their training data and systematically misrepresent non-Western contexts. Qadri et al. (2023), in a community-centered study situated in South Asia, showed how such models reproduce what they term an outsider's gaze upon South Asian cultures, shaped by global and regional inequities of power. Ghosh et al. (2024) identified representational harms including exoticism and cultural misappropriation in outputs depicting Indian contexts, while Zhang et al. (2024) found across three prevailing models that the cultures of disadvantaged countries are prone to neglect, that certain subjects are rendered as stereotype or as a simple patchwork of elements, and that over half of the cultural objects examined were misrepresented.

A systematic review by Elsharif et al. (2025) confirms both the persistence of these biases and the Western-centric character of the benchmarks by which they are commonly assessed, and a review focused specifically on educational settings found biased representation to be pervasive, with images frequently centering Western figures while other forms of diversity were largely overlooked (Alon et al., 2026).

The second limitation of using Gen AI during the making of children's books is narrative continuity. A sequential story/narrative requires a character that must remain the same and recognizably across every scene where it is depicted. This is precisely where current generative systems find it difficult to keep the character sketch and style consistent. Lin et al. (2026), through a narratological framework, identify character consistency as one of six dimensions along which such systems fail, and note the absence of book-scale evaluation systems adequate to the task. Mittenentzwei et al. (2025) reported that producing multiple consistent images of the same character proved a significant challenge and underlined the limited control designers retain over the output. This literature establishes that Gen AI offers real efficiencies but at the same time documents weaknesses in cultural specificity and character consistency that matter most in children's illustration. What it does not yet establish is how illustration students behave when the choice is left to them. Much of the existing work is either technical, or based upon focus groups and reflective accounts, or conducted in settings far removed from the Global South contexts whose representation is at issue. Very little of it examines the artefacts students produce when a classroom in a region such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is given complete creative freedom and asked to make something for local children.

The present study addresses that gap and inquires as how undergraduate Illustration students produce a culturally themed illustrated booklet for the children of their own city. If given creative freedom in this new era of AI, how it impacts their creative agency and their perception of incorporating cultural identity in the artefacts produce? The question confronting art and design education, as the present researcher sees it, is not whether students will use AI tools, as they are already using them. The question is why and how they should be taught to use AI effectively in their creative workflow.

Research Objectives

The objectives of the present study are as follows:

1. Identify how students used Generative AI across story, image, character, layout, and composition stages.
2. Examine cultural representation by observing how Peshawar/KP themes, symbols, places, language, and everyday life appeared in the booklets.
3. Assess creative agency, whether students remained creative decision-makers or became dependent on AI outputs.
4. Use the classroom evidence to propose a Human-AI collaborative workflow model for children's illustration.

Research Questions

RQ1. How do students use Generative AI when given creative freedom?

RQ2. Which stages of the booklet workflow involve AI most strongly?

RQ3. How is local culture/context represented in the final booklets?

RQ4. Does AI use appear to support or reduce human creative agency?

RQ5. What implications emerge for illustration pedagogy and Human-AI collaboration?

Methodology

Research design

The study uses a convergent mixed-methods design within a single classroom case. Two bodies of evidence were assembled. 1) Students' open and closed questionnaire responses about their own practice. 2) Students' Artefacts booklets they produced (Fig.1)

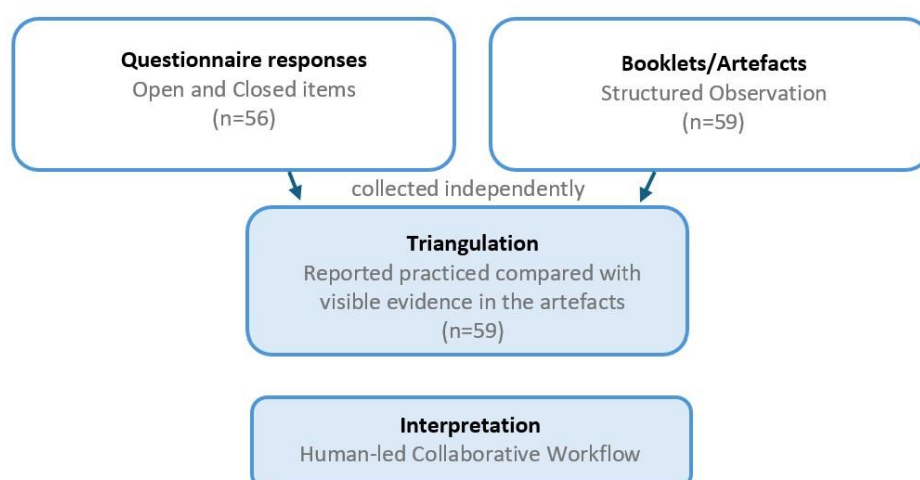


Figure 1. Convergent mixed-methods design

Population and sample

Sixty-one undergraduate students were enrolled in the Illustration course at the Department of Art and Design, University of Peshawar, during the 6th semester of the study. Fifty-nine submitted completed booklets, and these form the artefact samples. Fifty-six completed the questionnaire, 94.9 percent of those who submitted work. Three booklets have no matching questionnaire response. These were coded on the artefact dimensions and recorded as carrying no self-report, and no inference about their process was drawn from the visual evidence alone.

The assignment

Students were asked to write, illustrate and lay out a complete children's booklet for the children of

Peshawar and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The brief specified the intended audience and required a coherent visual narrative. It did not restrict the method, and students could work entirely by hand using traditional media of illustration, Digital illustration, the latest AI image-generation tools, or any combination. They were explicitly told that the medium of their choice would not be a criterion of assessment. This freedom was deliberate, as mandating AI use would have measured compliance; prohibiting it would have measured nothing, since the tools were already in use. Leaving the decision open was the only way to observe what students do when the given the creative freedom.

Data collection

Two sources of evidence were gathered from the same cohort at the close of the same semester. The booklets carry the analysis; the questionnaire supports it.

The booklets

The fifty-nine completed booklets were examined through structured observation. Each was read page by page as a whole object, in the way a child or a teacher would encounter it, before any judgement was recorded. The reading attended to what the booklet shows rather than to how it was made, since the process behind a finished page cannot be recovered from the page alone.

Seven qualities were recorded for each booklet: evidence of AI use, visible human intervention, local and cultural focus, cultural and contextual representation, creative agency, originality, character consistency, and suitability for children. Each was recorded as high, moderate, low or not visible (applied where the artefact alone gave no basis for judgement). One restriction governed the reading throughout. No image was described as AI-generated unless the student had reported using such tools or the page carried visible evidence of their use. Where doubt remained, the booklet was recorded as showing AI-style features rather than as AI-generated.

Table 1. Sets out the criteria that guided the reading.

Quality	High	Moderate	Low
Evidence of AI use	Reported, or visually dominant across several pages or stages	Some visible or reported use, not dominant	Limited evidence
Visible human intervention	Clear editing, redrawing, layout control, correction or refinement	Some editing and layout decisions, many outputs largely unaltered	Little visible correction; images appear pasted or minimally adjusted
Cultural and contextual representation	Local places, food, language, dress and community life specifically depicted	Local theme present, details generic or surface level	Theme local, visuals generic, foreign or inaccurate
Creative agency	Student decisions, style, sequencing and judgement visible throughout	Some decisions visible, AI carries major design choices	Agency weak, AI drives most visual and narrative decisions

Originality	Distinct visual and narrative treatment, not homogenised	Some original decisions, familiar AI aesthetics or repeated formats	Generic, template-like, close to common AI storybook output
Character consistency	Characters visually coherent across pages	Some variation, identity mostly understandable	Characters change noticeably across pages or scenes
Suitability for children	Readable, age-appropriate, coherent, visuals support meaning	Mostly suitable, some readability or sequencing issues	Unclear text, confusing visuals or poor sequencing

Table 1. Qualities recorded during the reading of the booklets.

Contextual relevance as the guiding criterion

Central to the reading was the question of contextual relevance, which this study defines as a visual narrative that connects with the lived realities of the children for whom it is intended. Seven elements were treated as constituting it: lived identity; local language and bilingual realities; familiar places and everyday environments; food, markets, homes, streets and schools; family and community practices; contemporary clothing and media exposure; and the hybrid identities shaped by local and global life together. A booklet naming a local subject was not, on that account alone, treated as contextually relevant. The question asked of each artefact was whether a child of Peshawar would recognise the world it depicts. This distinction between a local theme and a locally specific depiction organises much of what follows.

The questionnaire

A descriptive questionnaire was administered through Google Forms. It comprised thirty items across six sections: background information, AI usage, creative process, cultural representation, creativity and learning, and the future of AI in illustration education. It combined closed items with three open questions asking whether students would work differently if they repeated the assignment, what they considered the principal advantage of these tools, and what further comment they wished to offer. The questionnaire was treated throughout as supporting evidence. It established how widely a pattern seen in the booklets held across the cohort and gave access to the reasoning students offered for their choices. It was not used to advance claims the artefacts could not sustain.

Data analysis

The booklets were read first and in full, before any questionnaire response was consulted. Had the reading been informed by what a student said about their own process, the two sources would no longer have been independent, and the comparison between them would have confirmed rather than tested anything. Where the two later pointed in the same direction, the finding is reported as corroborated; where they diverged, the divergence is reported as it stands rather than resolved in favour of either. The open responses were then read in full and analysed thematically, following the phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Codes were generated inductively across the three open items, gathered into candidate themes, and checked against the whole corpus rather than against selected passages, so that a theme resting on a few articulate answers would not be mistaken for a general position. Closed responses were summarised as simple frequencies.

A subset of nine booklets was re-examined after an interval, without reference to the original record, to

confirm that the criteria had been applied consistently across a long reading.

Findings and Discussion

Four findings emerged from the reading of the booklets and the questionnaire responses. They are presented in turn, each with the artefact evidence that supports it, the questionnaire evidence that establishes its reach, and its bearing on the existing literature. Figure 2 summaries what the reading of the fifty-nine booklets recorded.

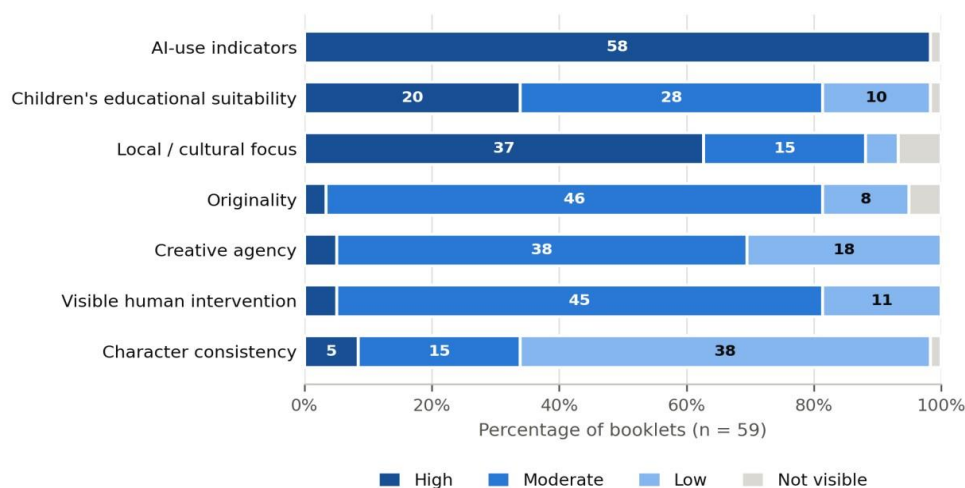


Figure 2. Qualities recorded across the fifty-nine booklets.

AI entered the full creative workflow

Fifty-four of the fifty-six respondents reported using generative AI, and all but one of the booklets carries clear visual evidence of that use. Tool selection concentrated in general-purpose assistants rather than the specialist image software of professional practice: students reached for what was already available to them. AI usage was not confined to a single stage. It was heaviest at illustration generation, followed by image editing, character development and cover design, and extended in some cases to story writing, translation and proofreading. Three-quarters of respondents estimated that these tools had generated more than two-fifths of the artefact they submitted. AI had entered the workflow rather than assisting at its margins. Brainstorming involved AI for only a small minority, most students having developed their own story idea before approaching the tools at all, and page layout was the least automated stage of the entire workflow. This runs contrary to a common expectation in the pedagogical literature, which anticipates that generative tools will serve principally as instruments of ideation (Medel-Vera et al., 2025; Fang, 2025). The pattern is pedagogically consequential. Composing a booklet, deciding what appears on which page and how a sequence carries a reader forward, is the task these systems perform least well, and it is the task students continued to perform themselves.

Increased efficiency reported

Speed dominated the open responses, and where accounts were elaborated the elaboration concerned the rate at which visual alternatives could be generated and compared rather than the quality of any single output. A smaller strand located the advantage in access, observing that these tools place illustrated book production within reach of those without drawing training or equipment, a consideration carrying weight in a region where such access is far from universal. Majority agreed that the tools had helped them finish more quickly, and complete illustrated booklets were produced within a limited period by students who would previously have spent weeks on a character sheet alone.

The booklets also show what the efficiency cost. Character consistency was the weakest quality

recorded across the corpus: in about two-thirds of the booklets the central figure altered noticeably from page to page, and only a handful held a character stable throughout. Students had identified the same difficulty independently, naming it the hardest aspect of the assignment by a clear margin. Observation of their artefacts confirmed it without reference to their reports, giving applied confirmation to a limitation the technical literature has documented in isolation (Lin et al., 2026; Mittenentzwei et al., 2025). A children's book depends upon a reader recognising the same figure from one page to the next.

The observation also disclosed a pattern the existing literature does not report. Booklets pursuing local cultural content drifted more, not less: among those showing a strong local focus, character consistency failed in close to three-quarters, while the small number carrying no cultural content showed no such failure. That group is too small to carry a firm conclusion, but the direction is what the bias literature would predict, since a system asked to hold a locally specific face stable across scenes draws on training data in which that face is scarce (Qadri et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). Students attempting the culturally specific work this region most needs were attempting the work these tools support least well.

Uneven Cultural relevance:

Local themes were present in most of the corpus. Roughly three-fifths of the booklets showed a strong local or cultural focus, and the subjects students chose reached into village life, local dress, the named streets and markets of Peshawar, regional food, folk narrative and Pashto language. The intention to make something for local children was evident throughout.

Contextual specificity varied considerably. Some booklets depicted places and practices with enough particularity that a child of this region would recognise them. Others carried a local theme while the visuals remained generic, and a number were visually polished and culturally hollow. A local theme is not the same property as a locally specific depiction, and the corpus contained a good deal of the first with markedly less of the second.

More than a third of respondents conducted no research into the culture of Peshawar or Khyber Pakhtunkhwa before writing their prompts, and a further fifth only partially. More than two-thirds noticed at least one cultural problem in the images returned to them, reporting foreign looking characters, incorrect architecture, generic clothing and absent local identity. These failures correspond closely to what the technical literature would predict. Text-to-image systems reproduce an outsider's gaze upon South Asian cultures (Qadri et al., 2023) and misrepresent a majority of the cultural objects examined, neglecting the cultures of disadvantaged countries (Zhang et al., 2024), biases that persist across the benchmarks by which they are assessed (Elsharif et al., 2025). A clear majority judged their own finished booklet culturally authentic, and only two respondents disagreed. This is the study's central pedagogical finding, and it concerns self-diagnosis rather than technique. Asked what they would change if they repeated the assignment, respondents located the remedy overwhelmingly in their own prompting: prompt writing was the training they requested most, while contextual research was requested by fewer respondents than any other option offered. Students identified a problem of craft where the evidence indicates a problem of knowledge, and the confidence with which they judged their own work suggests they lacked the grounding required to detect the difference. Contextual relevance requires research, deliberate prompting and human refinement. It cannot be secured by prompting technique alone.

Creative agency became a concern:

Where AI made most of the decisions, the student's own style, critical judgement and contextual refinement became difficult to see in the finished work. The reading found visible human intervention at

a high level in only three of the fifty-nine booklets, and those three were the only three in which creative agency was also strong. All three were among the strongest on suitability for children, and no booklet outside that group showed comparable authorial control.

The remainder divided between booklets in which some editing and layout decisions were visible, but many outputs appeared largely unaltered, and a smaller number showing little correction at all. Originality clustered heavily at the middle of the scale, where the reading recorded some original decisions alongside familiar generative aesthetics and repeated formats; only two booklets were judged to carry a distinct visual treatment. This clustering is the artefact-level expression of the homogenisation students themselves described, and it gives substance to the concern that unchecked reliance on these systems dilutes rather than amplifies local visual narratives.

Students were divided on whether this had happened to them, splitting almost evenly three ways between agreement, disagreement and neutrality when asked whether AI had reduced their creative decision-making. The division is consistent with Rafner et al. (2025), for whom a maker's sense of control fluctuates across the creative process and diminishes when output departs from intention, and with the typology of student positions mapped by Wu et al. (2026). Creative agency appears as a property of how the tool was used rather than of how the user felt about using it, which is encouraging for pedagogy, since practice can be taught in a way that disposition cannot. It also bears on the questions of ownership raised by Xu et al. (2024) and Chen and He (2026), since authorship in co-created work rests on precisely the activities that left the least trace here.

Nine in ten students agreed that they should first learn traditional illustration skills before making extensive use of these tools, with a single dissenting voice, and four in five held that human creativity should remain the primary driving force. Most said they would work differently if they repeated the assignment, and the intended change ran consistently towards greater human control: beginning from their own drawing and confining the tool to later stages. These judgements were reached through use, by students who had just produced much of their own submitted work with the systems they were assessing. They bear on the question Fleischmann (2025) poses for design educators concerning how these tools might be harnessed without commodifying the creative process, and this cohort answers it by subordinating the tool to a sequence in which human capability is established first.

Conclusion

Generative AI was widely adopted by the illustration students, who valued it for efficiency in illustration production. It entered their workflow as a whole rather than at its margins, and its use was strongest in the visual production stages: illustration generation, image editing, character development and cover design. It was weakest at brainstorming and page layout, so that conception and compositional judgment remained largely human while execution did not.

Contextual relevance cannot be assumed from the presence of local themes. It requires cultural research, careful prompting and human refinement, and the first of these was frequently absent. More than a third of respondents researched nothing about the culture they set out to depict, more than two-thirds observed inaccuracies in the images returned to them, and a clear majority nonetheless judged their finished booklets culturally authentic. That gap between confidence and process is not one that improved tools will close.

Creative agency was uneven. Students were divided on whether these systems had reduced their own decision-making, while the booklets showed sustained authorial control in only three cases and originality clustered in a familiar generative register. Yet the cohort agreed strongly that human creativity and traditional illustration skills remain necessary, and that foundational capability should

precede extensive use.

These findings support a guided human-AI collaborative workflow in which the illustrator remains the author of the work. The children of Peshawar have long had too few books in which they can recognise their own streets, their own dress and their own language. Generative AI offers the possibility that this scarcity might be addressed at speed and at low cost, and the risk that it will be addressed with images that are visually polished and culturally hollow. Which outcome follows will be decided not by the tools but by whether the illustrators now being trained are taught to research before they prompt, to look critically at what they are given, and to remain the authors of the work that carries their name.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are offered for illustration pedagogy.

1. Teach AI as an assistive tool, not as a replacement for the illustrator. This is the position the cohort itself reached, and curriculum should meet students there rather than behind them.
2. Require contextual research before students prompt AI for children's visual narratives. This is the clearest gap the study identifies, and which students were least able to identify for themselves.
3. Assess the process, not only the final booklet: prompts, sketches, rejected outputs, edits and refinements. Human judgment leaves no trace in a polished artefact unless the assessment requires it.
4. Train students in prompt writing, visual literacy, cultural semiotics, ethical AI use and humanled design judgment. Prompt writing was the training students most requested; cultural competence is the training the evidence suggests they most require.
5. Encourage students to document where human decisions shaped the final work, both as a discipline of reflection and as a foundation for the questions of authorship this field has yet to settle.
6. Develop and test the human-AI workflow set out in Figure 3.

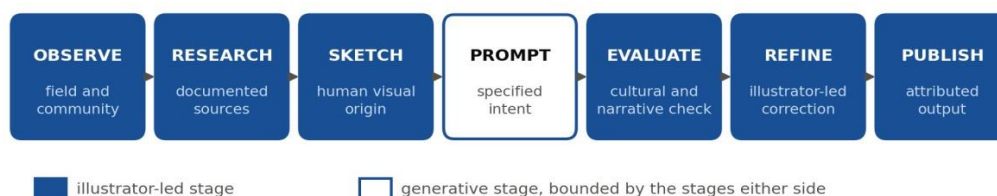


Figure 3. Proposed human-led collaborative workflow for children's book illustration.

The sequence places observation and research before prompting, retains human sketching as the origin of the visual idea, and treats evaluation and refinement as obligatory rather than optional. It corresponds closely to the workflow students proposed for themselves, and to the practice evident in the few booklets that achieved strong ratings across the qualities recorded.

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