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TEACHING DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION. DESIGNING AN INTERDISCIPLINARY LEARNING SCENARIO FOR SUSTAINABILITY, ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP, AND INCLUSION

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Abstract:
The present paper aims to bridge pedagogical theory and practice by examining an applied framework of differentiated instruction in Higher Education through the paradigm of a learning scenario. Specifically, it focuses on the pedagogical design of an interdisciplinary learning scenario for heterogeneous classes, aiming to enhance teacher education in the fields of special and inclusive education. The content of the scenario leverages curriculum literacies at the level of instructional practice and extends to multilingual educational environments and mixed-ability classrooms across all educational contexts. Furthermore, it analyzes the interrelationship between Sustainability, Active Citizenship, and Inclusive Education, highlighting a cross-curricular approach. Overall, the study seeks to establish a differentiated and inclusive model of educational intervention for students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, with or without disabilities, in diverse classrooms. This model is intended to serve as an applied framework for critical and creative thinking, addressed to educators of all professional specialties within both formal and non-formal educational settings. The study combines inclusive education with teachers' professional development.

Keywords: differentiation, interdisciplinarity, learning scenario, inclusion, sustainability, citizenship, active citizenship, equitable learning environments, higher education

1. Introduction

This paper proposes an interdisciplinary, differentiated, and inclusive educational intervention framework, centred on the interrelated themes of Sustainability, Active

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Citizenship, and Inclusive Education. The framework is intended for educators across all professional disciplines and within both formal and non-formal educational contexts.

The learning scenario presented herein is grounded in the fundamental premise that contemporary classrooms are inherently heterogeneous (see Malisiova et al., 2023), encompassing learners with diverse learning styles, learning rates, cognitive abilities, cultural backgrounds, and psychosocial needs.

Against this backdrop, differentiated instruction is conceptualised not as a discrete pedagogical technique but as an integral component of effective educational design and practice across diverse learning environments. By acknowledging and responding to learner diversity, differentiated teaching contributes to the creation of equitable, participatory, and inclusive educational experiences that support the learning and development of all students.

Recognising that lesson planning constitutes a fundamental tool through which educators facilitate and support students' learning processes, particularly in blended learning environments (Blended Inclusion Guidelines), this study adopts an applied perspective aimed at bridging pedagogical theory and educational practice. Its primary focus is the teaching and implementation of differentiated instruction within higher education settings.

The study further seeks to contribute to the enhancement of postgraduate teacher education in the fields of special and inclusive education by fostering the development of the knowledge, skills, and pedagogical competencies required for the design and delivery of inclusive and differentiated learning experiences.

2. Purpose

The overarching goal of this learning scenario, serving as an applied framework within the Special Education postgraduate specialization in higher education, is to:

- Familiarize and train postgraduate students in contemporary scientific approaches to Universal Design, with an emphasis on applying differentiated instruction in both formal (e.g., schools across all educational levels) and non-formal settings (e.g., museums, environmental centers, etc.).
- Promote an interdisciplinary and experiential approach through the implementation of universal design and differentiated instruction, highlighting functional connections to contemporary issues relevant to both learning and everyday life.
- Design and develop differentiated learning activities using modern, creative approaches aligned with the Agenda 2030 goals.
- Leverage contemporary institutional goals within the Cypriot and Greek educational contexts (Cyprus Pedagogical Institute - Active Citizenship: Good Practices / Digital School Action - Active Citizen Initiative)

3. Learning Scenario description

Within this framework, differentiated instruction constitutes a central pedagogical and organisational pillar of the educational process. Its design aims to create an enriched learning environment, supported by appropriate resources, tools, and instructional materials, that enables learners to pursue personalised learning pathways through participation in collaborative learning activities and interactive educational experiences (Papalexopoulos et al., 2023).

Accordingly, differentiation is adopted as a pedagogical response to:

- the educational abilities and learning differences of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities;
- the complex learning needs of students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, including bilingual and multilingual learners, as well as students for whom the language of instruction is a second or foreign language.

By addressing these diverse learner profiles, differentiated instruction promotes equitable access to learning opportunities and supports the meaningful participation and academic development of all students within the wider school community.

Overall, the proposed learning scenario seeks to establish a multi-layered, flexible, and inclusive educational framework that:

- recognises and capitalises on learners' individual differences;
- promotes the equitable participation of all students;
- adapts content, learning processes, instructional resources, and expected learning outcomes to meet diverse educational needs; and
- integrates theoretical knowledge with experiential and inquiry-based learning approaches.

Through these principles, the learning scenario aims to foster an educational environment that values diversity, encourages active engagement, and supports the holistic development of all learners across diverse school contexts.

4. Innovation of the Learning Scenario

In contemporary educational discourse, inclusion is recognised as a critical dimension for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (Kenny et al., 2023; Quirke & Galvin, 2025). The present learning scenario integrates the principles and practices of Differentiated Instruction and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in order to accommodate cognitive, linguistic, and social diversity within heterogeneous learning environments.

The innovative character of this learning scenario lies in its integration of differentiation and interdisciplinarity into a unified pedagogical framework for inclusive teaching. This approach aligns with contemporary educational priorities and responds to the growing demand for the development of inclusive learning environments capable of addressing the diverse needs, strengths, and learning profiles of all students.

The interdisciplinary approach serves as a means of differentiation, as it enables the integration of multiple subject areas, the utilisation of multiple forms of intelligence, and the development of varied learning pathways that respond to learners' diverse needs, interests and abilities.

Sustainability, Active Citizenship for All, and Quality Inclusive Education constitute interconnected thematic pillars that can be organically linked to all subject areas within the curriculum, in accordance with contemporary educational priorities and emerging societal challenges.

More specifically, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) represents a new educational vision and pedagogical approach that equips future citizens with the knowledge, skills, values, and competencies required to better understand the world in which they live. It fosters awareness of the interdependence of global social challenges, including overconsumption, the depletion of natural resources, urban decline, gender and racial inequalities, violations of human rights, and environmental degradation. Ultimately, ESD aims to empower learners to critically engage with and respond to the complexity of contemporary realities, while promoting responsible, informed, and active participation in society (IEP - Sustainability & Active Citizenship).

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), *Quality Education*, represents a global commitment to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (Global Goals - Quality Education).

Within this framework, one of the most significant challenges is the development of an ecosystemic perspective and a holistic educational environment in which sustainable schools foster the cultivation of sustainable citizenship.

The internalisation of the positive narrative of sustainability by all members of the school community empowers each individual to become an active participant in the educational process and encourages collective commitment to actions that promote meaningful change. In this context, every member of the school community is recognised as a valuable contributor to the advancement of sustainability and social transformation.

The transformation of schools into Sustainable Schools, with the ultimate aim of contributing to the achievement of the "17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)", constitutes a compelling vision for sustainable citizenship. This transformation reflects a paradigm shift in education, whereby sustainability becomes embedded in the everyday practices, values, and culture of the entire school community. Rather than merely integrating sustainability into education, this approach repositions education itself within the broader framework of sustainability.

Furthermore, this paradigm shift entails moving beyond a predominantly knowledge-centred and individualistic model of schooling towards a more community-oriented, participatory, and inclusive educational environment. Such an environment places equal emphasis on cognitive, social and emotional learning, while empowering students, educators, and other stakeholders to become agents of change within their communities and beyond (IEP - Sustainability & Active Citizenship).

In this regard, inclusive schools play a pivotal role in promoting active citizenship for all learners, particularly within the mixed-ability and multicultural classrooms that characterise twenty-first-century educational contexts. By fostering participation, equity, and respect for diversity, inclusive educational settings contribute to the development of responsible, engaged, and socially conscious citizens capable of addressing contemporary global challenges.

5. The Importance of Differentiated Instruction in Hybrid Environments of Inclusive Learning

Blended learning and hybrid environments represent an approach to education that goes beyond traditional teaching methods and combines them with technological tools; consequently, online education is integrated with traditional learning.

Developing a blended learning program can pose a challenge for educators, as the interactive element of learning is enhanced through digitally accessible educational material and software (EPALE-Blended and integrated learning).

6. Differentiation of Instruction and Universal Design for Learning

Both differentiated instruction -i.e., the adaptation of teaching in a way that responds to the individualized educational needs of students- and Universal Design for Learning (UDL); i.e., the development of accessible educational materials for all disabilities and special educational needs, represent two contemporary inclusive learning frameworks, where inclusion goes beyond the act of teaching itself (Inclusive Education Practices (IEP) - Accessible Education).

The combination of these approaches shapes a culture that implies access and accessibility to learning for all as a non-negotiable practice in the school environment, and ensures outstanding outcomes for all students in a classroom and in a school community (European School Education Platform).

7. Differentiated Learning Scenario

The work positions differentiated instruction within the context of higher education as a component of teacher education. More specifically, it focuses on familiarizing and training postgraduate students, as prospective educators, in the theoretical principles and practical application of differentiated instruction. The overarching aim is to equip them with the pedagogical knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary to design, implement, and evaluate inclusive and differentiated learning environments within their future professional teaching contexts. Therefore, the study is concerned not merely with the use of differentiated instruction in higher education itself, but with the preparation

of educators who will subsequently apply differentiated pedagogical practices across diverse educational settings and levels.

The following section outlines the pedagogical design of the learning scenario.

7.1 Theoretical and Pedagogical Framework

The implementation of a differentiated learning scenario enhances student engagement. The learning scenario is underpinned by the integration of interdisciplinarity, differentiation, and inclusion:

- through scientific concepts, social values, and everyday practices (interdisciplinary approach);
- through differentiation of content, process, and learning product (Tomlinson, 2014);
- through the equal participation of students with disabilities and/or special educational needs and multilingual backgrounds (UNESCO, 2020).

7.2 Aim of the Scenario

We aim at the active engagement of all students in activities that:

- enhance knowledge of sustainability, active citizenship, and inclusion,
- cultivate attitudes of responsibility, solidarity, and respect for diversity,
- promote skills of critical thinking, social collaboration, and creativity,
- facilitate the equal participation of students with disabilities, and different linguistic backgrounds or/and special educational needs (SEN).

7.3 Age group and educational level

Primary education, students aged 9-12 years. With appropriate adaptation, the learning scenario can also be implemented in secondary education students. It is addressed to students with and without disabilities in mixed-ability classrooms and multilingual environments. The learning scenario can also be applied to youth or adult groups.

7.4 Duration

3 months, and with appropriate adaptation within corresponding formal and non-formal educational contexts.

7.5 Field

General education, Blended learning, Hybrid/combined educational environments.

7.6 Tools

School Digital Education Platforms (Digital School Platform) and digital learning objects (CTI eBooks Repository), digital learning tools (EdTech Greece).

7.7 Keywords

Differentiation, Inclusion, Citizenship.

7.8 Connection with curriculum subjects

Language, Mathematics, Technology (ICT), Social and Civic Education, Science, etc.

7.9 Literacies

- Language literacy, Mathematical literacy, Digital literacy, Civic literacy, Environmental literacy, etc.
- Language literacy refers to the production of written and spoken discourse, e.g. thoughts, experiences, narratives, memories, stories, etc. It can be combined with foreign language lessons and art activities for expressing emotions, etc.
- Mathematical literacy contributes to understanding predictions and graphs, financial decisions and their impacts, surveys, and avoiding misinformation through numerical data, etc.
- Digital literacy refers to the use of digital tools, platforms, and software, visualization of material, creation of tables, concept maps, diagrams, images, crosswords, quizzes, animations, presentations, etc.
- Civic literacy refers to awareness of responsibility towards the community in terms of rights and obligations, informing public authorities (e.g. the role of local government), participation in active citizenship actions addressing emerging social issues, and understanding the role of social institutions, processes of social changes, understanding the function of social groups, etc.
- Environmental literacy refers to the natural and social ecosystem of cities, understanding basic ecological concepts, and raising awareness of sustainable environmental ecosystems, such as natural parks, urban neighborhoods, archaeological sites, etc.

7.10. Goals / Skills

The targeted skills are analyzed below.

7.10.1 Creative thinking

Students should construct concepts through graded vocabulary, visualizations, examples, and experiential learning. They should also develop linguistic skills through multimodal means (images, symbols, diagrams), write across different linguistic backgrounds using simplified texts, vocabulary tables, bilingual aids, and collaborative learning.

7.10.2 Critical thinking

Students should understand the reciprocal relationship between concepts and undertake action to improve the school environment. They should also develop argumentation skills at the level of comparison, analysis, synthesis, and contrasting viewpoints.

7.10.3 Problem-solving

Students should investigate problems, organize information, collect, evaluate, and analyze data, as well as reject assumptions, draw conclusions, and formulate solutions through alternative ways of understanding and expression.

7.10.4 Organization and decision-making

Students should develop skills of observation, collection, and organization of information, as well as comparison and contrast. They may participate in activities with adapted levels of difficulty and alternative roles (observer, recorder, presenter).

7.10.5 Communication of ideas

Students may publish online on websites, use photographic material, etc.

7.10.6 Collaboration

Students should cultivate positive attitudes and cooperative behaviors, strengthening self-esteem and the sense of belonging. They should also develop collaborative skills and respect for linguistic, cultural, and learning diversity.

7.10.7 Responsibility and initiative-taking

Division of tasks and distribution of roles among students.

7.10.8 Learning how to learn – interactive discussion questions within the group and evidence-based practices

To consolidate a project or learning activity (e.g. reading promotion, educational field trip, museum kit, etc.), the following indicative interactive questions are suggested:

- What specific skills are being developed?
- Which forms of expression, engagement, and representation are being used?
- How are the learning approaches connected to Universal Design for Learning?
- What multiple means are observed?
- Would you apply a similar example? If not, why? If yes, what would you add or change?
- How are the principles of motivation applied to all learning approaches?
- How is differentiation incorporated?
- Which other inclusive pedagogical practices can you identify?
- How does children's multiple intelligences influence the teacher's inclusive pedagogical practices?

Evidence-based practices are required for each disability category, with an emphasis on the principles and best practices of effective instruction tailored to the specific characteristics and educational needs of each disability.

The synergistic integration of differentiated instruction, research-supported evidence-based strategies, and assistive technology constitutes a recommended and effective approach to addressing diverse learning need in inclusive and heterogeneous classes.

8. Learning activity and connection of objectives with Sustainability, Active Citizenship and Inclusion [Agenda 2030]

The learning activity aims to strengthen and expand an organized framework of communication and collaboration between educators and learners, contributing to the formation of a creative and dynamic ecosystem for building knowledge, skills, and values through good practices.

The pedagogical and organizational framework of the learning activity approaches learning as a holistic process that connects knowledge, values, attitudes, life skills, and an inclusive culture. It promotes understanding of the interdependence of the Agenda 2030 goals between sustainability, active citizenship, and inclusion, and finally fosters responsible individual and collective behaviors within mixed classroom environments of the 21st century.

It is based on a cross-sectoral strategy that links key concepts within the framework of Agenda 2030, e.g., humanistic values, inclusion, awareness of diversity, digital literacy, collaborative learning, etc.

8.1 Sustainability

Awareness of the natural, social, and cultural environment, critical exploration of sustainable development models, etc.

8.2 Citizenship

Active participation in collective actions, responsibility and cooperation, respect for democratic values, etc.

8.3 Inclusion

Inclusive culture in mixed/combined environments, respect for diversity, disability, and intercultural identity in modern multilingual school settings, etc.

The purpose of the learning activity is the promotion of sustainability, citizenship, and inclusion through differentiated and interdisciplinary teaching and learning approaches.

Given that the need for communication, collaboration, critical reflection, and creative approaches is evident in modern hybrid educational environments, thinking

stimuli can be drawn from contemporary reality, e.g., the school, social, natural, cultural, and digital environment.

The interdisciplinary combination enhances holistic and critical thinking, ethical awareness, and innovative creativity- elements essential for shaping tomorrow's active citizens.

Choosing teaching and learning strategies for Sustainability, Active Citizenship, and Inclusion in school environments - the example of creative problem-solving.

9. Creative problem-solving & equal learning opportunities in inclusive educational environments

As inclusivity is directly linked to the goals of Agenda 2030, the activation of creative thinking recognizes and utilizes the multiplicity of human intelligence (linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal) across all subject areas in terms of holism and interdisciplinarity (see Ioannidi & Malafantis, 2023). Here, a problem-solving model (problem solving) is proposed, the DUPE model, as described by Elliott et al. (2008):

- **D (Define):** Define the nature of the problem.
- **U (Understand):** Understand the nature of the problem.
- **P (Plan):** Plan its solution; Select appropriate strategies.
- **E (Evaluate):** Evaluate your plan for its suitability and likelihood of success.

The development process of problem-solving in the three interdependent concepts of "Sustainability, Active Citizenship, Inclusion" is analyzed in the following sequential stages (Flogaiti et al., 2021):

A. 1st phase: The Problem.

- Identification of a problematic situation,
- Investigation and analysis of the situation (causes, factors, relationships and interactions between them, etc.),
- Representation / clear formulation of the problem - diagnosis.

B. 2nd phase: The Solutions.

- Search for solutions,
- Evaluation of solutions,
- Selection of the appropriate solution (decision-making).

C. 3rd phase: Action.

- Development of an action plan,
- Implementation of the action,
- Evaluation and feedback of the process.

Furthermore, within the framework of creative problem-solving, the following steps take place:

- Data collection for the problem**:** Recording information related to the problem, e.g., what, who, when, where, how, why. *E.g., assignment topic: "Sustainable ways of living in the natural and human-made environment"*
  Collection and recording of information on the topic (definition, dimensions, policies, attitudes toward life, etc.).
- Formulation of the problem**:** Precise definition of the problem. *E.g., recording existing measures for addressing it, and identifying new ways, practices, and measures for each context.*
- Generation of proposed ideas/solutions**:** Use of creative ideation techniques. *E.g., asking questions to generate many ideas at different levels, eliminating obstacles, and exploring different aspects of the issue.*
- Evaluation of proposed ideas/solutions:

Use of multiple criteria, e.g. practicality, cost, time, consequences, stakeholders involved, available resources, ethical issues. *E.g., based on the above criteria, which ideas are the most suitable?*

- Implementation of ideas/solutions**:**
  - Strategic planning, implementation timeline, action plan, specific actions.
  - Writing the study with a detailed description of the process and findings, as well as dissemination to stakeholders. *E.g., an action plan is defined so that the most effective proposed ideas/solutions are implemented and utilized.*

It is also recorded that possible negative reactions are identified and ways of disseminating the results are determined.

In conclusion, it is clear that creative problem-solving requires specific actions, such as (Bransford & Stein, 1994, as cited in Schunk, 2010, p. 214):

- problem identification,
- clarification and representation of the problem,
- exploration of possible strategies,
- selection of actions according to these strategies,
- evaluation of the outcomes of the actions.

The goal is always the development of creative thinking skills through the production of oral and written language in any subject of the curriculum.

In this context, across all educational settings, interdisciplinary and experiential project-based learning activities can be integrated. Examples of such activities include:

- creative writing activities for empathy in Language lessons;
- analysis of historical events and milestones for combating discrimination in History;
- discussion on human rights and social responsibility in Civic and Political Education;

- creation of artworks on diversity in Art Education, with the support of digital technologies;
- cooperative games in Physical Education;
- familiarization with accessible and flexible digital environments in Informatics;
- science projects on sustainable development, the role of active citizens, biodiversity and its protection, cultural diversity in the natural environment;
- student-centered teaching with participatory methods such as brainstorming, concept mapping, etc., aligned with the Agenda 2030 goals for reducing inequalities and ensuring quality education for all, etc.

In this way, heuristic methods are shaped with didactic advantages and enhanced communication with our students in school life, in order for them to become systematic problem solvers and to create alternative options for achieving goals. In other words, they should be able to understand a problem (e.g., underline keywords, group data and requirements, etc.), devise a plan (organize a solution strategy, etc.), implement it (execution and checking of actions), and finally reflect on it (Schunk, 2010, pp. 213-214), in a participatory, inclusive, and non-exclusionary manner, promoting collaborative problem-solving.

By implementing inclusive policies and educational practices, schools can increase student outcomes and ensure inclusion in school and life (UNESCO; Kefallinou et al., 2020). The successful implementation of inclusive education is a major challenge and concerns everyone's attitude through bridging gaps (Shanjuvigasini et al., 2023), with sustainability, citizenship, and inclusion as cornerstone principles.

10. Conclusion

Agenda 2030 promotes ways of teaching and learning that can include everyone through lifelong learning opportunities within an educational system (Lane et al., 2023). On the other hand, working on creative learning projects can help develop students' competencies, and the interaction between teachers and students during the process of defining and solving problems provides an ideal forum for supporting both creativity and inclusivity for all (Fredagsvik, 2023).

Therefore, education oriented toward creative learning can offer significant benefits to schools and society, as it represents a form of learning that includes creative expression within academic learning. Opportunities for students to engage in creative learning may range from smaller-scale learning experiences that benefit their own learning and that of others, to larger-scale initiatives that can make a positive and lasting contribution to learning and people's lives both within and beyond classroom and school walls (Beghetto, 2021).

Thus, education is redefined toward full inclusion without special education as a separate system, as well as toward an alternative redefinition of special education in an inclusive framework (Kauffman et al., 2022). Differentiated learning scenarios constitute

alternative ways of redefining both special and inclusive learning in the light of education for all within supportive environments and heterogeneous contexts.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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