BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY CLUJ-NAPOCA
FACULTY OF PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES
EDUCATION, REFLECTION, DEVELOPMENT DOCTORAL SCHOOL

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION
SUMMARY

Enhancing the effectiveness of the instructional-educational process through the use of blended learning strategies for pupils with non-categorical and transitory learning difficulties in primary school

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Cluj-Napoca
2024

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Keywords: noncategorical and transitory learning difficulties; blended learning strategies; cognitive and motivational training program; innovative approaches in differentiated teaching.

The digital progress and the changes in society caused by technological developments have prompted the education system to adopt innovative teaching methods and strategies adjusted to the needs of digital native learners. The integration of digital tools in the teaching

process is a complex process, which involves the development of digital competencies of pupils and teachers. Technology has brought significant improvements in education, but there are also challenges in harnessing the potential of technology, based on sound evidence, theories and conceptions, only then can we be said to be providing support to students, teachers and educational institutions in preparing skilled, agile and practice-ready graduates (Smith et al., 2020).

Systematically incorporating technology into the teaching process allows the teacher to offer differentiated support according to the needs of the students, which makes it easier to adapt the work tasks to their pace of solving and understanding. Differentiation becomes a key focus for the teacher, with the opportunity to access digital resources in the creation of materials for pupils with non-categorical and transitional learning difficulties (NTLD).

In chapter I entitled "The concept of blended learning and the possibilities for its integration into the teaching and learning process in primary education" the potential of blended learning in creating a differentiated learning environment for pupils with non-categorical and transitory learning difficulties is presented. The use of blended learning (BL) strategies provides opportunities for students as well as teachers to take part in the educational process in varied and interactive ways. The teacher gives students the chance to optimise their learning skills, encouraging them to learn independently as well as collaboratively with others. Through the use of mixed or combined learning tools, what we call blended learning, students are allowed to continue their learning outside the classroom. The use of technology also creates differentiated instructional pathways to meet students' unique needs while respecting their individuality within a group.

In addition to this, if technology is well integrated into the lesson, becoming a routine for students, but closely monitored by the teacher, it can have a remarkable impact on student development. By having access to different teaching strategies, the teacher can individualise the learning process for each pupil, as each student is unique and has a personal way of assimilating information at their own pace. Blended Learning is a combination of traditional (face-to-face) and online learning. Blended Learning is a unique environment where interactive methods and strategies can be used in both traditional and virtual lessons.

These blended learning strategies offer the opportunity for teachers to differentiate academic content to suit the individual needs of students. Differentiation is a combination of closely monitoring progress and adapting instruction in response to students' personalised needs (Heitink et al., 2016), becoming a way of teaching in which teachers proactively modify curricula, teaching methods, resources, and learning activities to meet the diverse

needs of students, maximising learning opportunities for all students. Differentiated and individualized teaching is based on the recognition of the plurality of learners within a whole class, it involves teachers' teaching responses and adaptations to the individual needs of the learners (Bondie et al., 2019). Chapter II, Students with Noncategorical and Transitory Learning Difficulties, clarifies the profile of students with noncategorical and transitory learning difficulties, how these difficulties are distinguished from specific learning difficulties and how we can adapt academic content to the needs of students. Learning difficulties refer to problems related to learning. Identifying non-categorical and transitory learning difficulties is a long and challenging process, as we cannot refer to certain defining characteristics. Nowadays, it is a question of empowering schools and socio-educational factors, trying to identify the factors that give emergence to these learning difficulties (migration, belonging to a particular minority, laterality, the digitization phenomenon, etc.), and then providing support by adapting educational content to the specifics of each child, taking into account the needs and natural pace of growth and development. Learning is an extremely complex process, influenced by many factors, which becomes an individualised process for each person. In developing the classroom as an optimal space for learning, the teacher has a key role in creating the teaching-learning-evaluation framework, providing pupils with the whole teaching resources: knowledge, experience, explanations, opinions, affectivity, openness, sensitivity, understanding, acceptance and tolerance. Collaborative learning leads the teacher to reconsider their role as organiser of learning contexts and the learning environment, becoming a co-participant with the students in the proposed activities. The teacher makes themselves available to the pupil to empower pupils, to help them to develop, to build self-confidence, cooperation and initiative.

Non-categorical and transitory learning difficulties may occur at a particular point in a student's existential moment, but they resolve themselves after a certain time. These difficulties can be defined as induced because they can be influenced by external factors that have an impact on students' academic activity. Factors that may influence pupils' work include the relationship between parents and children; the relationship between pupils and teachers; the influence of the peer group; change of school environment; change of residence; tragic events involving the pupil, etc.

The scientific literature discusses the fact that there are some causes of learning difficulties, some biological and physiological causes (premature birth; chronic diseases; hormonal problems; metabolic problems, etc.), psychological causes (affective disorders; perceptual problems; slow learning pace, etc.), environmental causes (change of school

environment; poor living conditions; relationship difficulties) or some unknown causes (Catalano, 2009). In other words, in the case of non-categorical learning difficulties,- there is a risk of developing a poly difficulty of learning or plural difficulty of learning, as students face several learning difficulties simultaneously, caused by various factors related to the cognitive and affective characteristics of the student, the type of content to which the student is exposed, the methods used by the teacher and the factors inherent to the lesson (Penso, 2002), becoming also a defining element for the transitory character of non-categorical learning difficulties.

Chapter III entitled Creating an Effective Learning Environment for Students with Non-categorical and Transitory Learning Difficulties Using Blended Learning Strategies addresses the importance of creating a learning environment based on blended learning strategies that will challenge students with NTLD. Inclusive learning environments using blended learning tools offer accessibility and support to children with low socio-economic status as well as to categories of learners with learning difficulties or certain special educational needs (Bosse, 2014). The use of digital technologies can make learning materials more easily accessible to students individualised to their needs and interests, creating a flexible and accessible learning environment. According to the Global Education Monitoring Report 2023 (GEM), digital technologies are helping to reduce the cost of access to education for some disadvantaged groups: those living in hard-to-reach areas, students who face learning difficulties, lack time or have missed out on educational opportunities in the past. While technology facilitates access to education, this report shows that there are digital divides in terms of access to appropriate technologies and the skills needed to use them effectively. An increasing number of educational platforms offer the opportunity to create differentiated and individualised educational content tailored to the needs and developmental levels of students.

In the case of students with non-categorical and transitory learning difficulties, emotional support is essential in raising awareness of the learning difficulty and establishing remedial steps, given that students may experience a learning difficulty due to external situations. In this sense, the model offered by the 7 Habits of Effective Learners can facilitate the empowerment of learners and encourage autonomy in the learning process, helping learners with learning difficulties in setting meaningful goals and addressing a growth mindset. By applying this principle of paradigm shift and seeing the school differently, activities can be developed to support the growth mindset, improving classroom management and pupils' academic outcomes.

The second section of the paper proposes a cognitive and motivational instructional training program, "Innovative approaches in differentiated teaching using blended learning (BL) strategies for students with non-categorical and transitory learning difficulties (NTLD) in Mathematics and Environmental Exploration (MEM) and Communication in Romanian (CLR)".

This research aims to determine the influence of blended learning activities on students with non-categorical and transitory learning difficulties in Mathematics and Environmental Exploration (MEM) and Communication in Romanian (CLR), and to identify innovative approaches in differentiated teaching of these subjects in order to make learning more effective for these students. Through the formative intervention at the level of students with non-categorical and transitory learning difficulties, in the context of teaching activities based on blended learning strategies, we expect that students will improve their competencies related to operating with theoretical and practical notions, both in MEM and CLR.

The research objectives were:

O1. To design an experimental cognitive and motivational instructional training program based on blended learning strategies for second grade students with NTLD for MEM and CLR disciplines.

O2. To determine the effectiveness of the implemented program through the initial and final assessment of 2nd grade students with non-categorical and transitory learning difficulties.

O3. To determine the effectiveness of the activities included in the experimental program based on blended learning strategies in facilitating learning for students with non-categorical and transitory learning difficulties at MEM and CLR in second grade.

O4. To determine the association between low performance of students with NTLD and low intrinsic motivation.

Under pedagogical research, the following research questions are proposed concerning the issues of our study:

a) **The main research question:** How does the experimental cognitive and motivational training program Innovative Approaches in Differentiated Differentiated Teaching using blended learning strategies for students with NTLD will lead to the improvement of general and specific competences in the curricula of the subjects Mathematics and Environmental Studies (MEM) and Communication in Romanian (CLR)?

b) Secondary research questions:

- How significantly does using blended learning strategies contribute to improving non-categorical and transient learning difficulties?
- To what extent can the differentiation of the teaching process based on blended learning strategies used with second-grade students with NTLD lead to improving key competencies?
- To what extent can non-categorical and transitory learning difficulties be associated with low learning motivation?

In organising and conducting the experimental research we used the theoretical premises and the specific objectives stated above, which allowed us to formulate the working hypotheses necessary to carry out an effective and relevant experiment for educational activity.

As a result, **the research hypothesis** from which the experiment was structured is based on the idea that: the experimental program of cognitive and motivational program *Innovative approaches in differentiated content teaching in MEM and CLR using blended learning strategies* will contribute to the increase of individual performance of students with NTLD in the second grade.

To clarify the general hypothesis, three secondary hypotheses have been added, closely related to Mathematics and Exploration of the Environment (MEM) and Communication in Romanian (CLR), whose effects influence the general hypothesis. These can also be called auxiliary hypotheses since they can add value to the general hypothesis.

Secondary Hypothesis 1: The experimental cognitive and motivational training program based on the differentiation of the teaching process using BL strategies for second grade students with NTLD will contribute to the development of the general competenci-es foreseen in the syllabus of the subjects MEM and CLR:

C.G. 1. Using numbers in elementary calculations (MEN, 2013)

C.G. 3. Receiving a variety of written messages in familiar communication contexts (MEN, 2013)

Secondary Hypothesis 2: The experimental cognitive and motivational training program based on the differentiation of the didactic process using BL strategies for second grade students with NTLD will contribute to the development of specific competencies foreseen in the syllabus of the subjects MEM and CLR:

C.S. 1.5. Performing multiplication and division in the 0-1000 concentric by repeated addition/subtraction (MEN, 2013)

C.S. 4.1. Writing messages in different communication contexts (MEN, 2013)

Secondary Hypothesis 3: The experimental cognitive and motivational training program based on the differentiation of the didactic process using BL strategies for second grade students with NTLD will contribute to the development of specific competenci-es foreseen in the syllabus of the subjects MEM and CLR:

C.S. 5.2 Solving problems of the type a±b=x; a±b±c=x in 0-1000 concentric; a-b=x; a:b=x, in 0-100 concentric, with support in objects, images or schematic representations (MEN, 2013)

Expressing interest in reading age-appropriate books (MEN, 2013)

Secondary Hypothesis 4: The experimental cognitive and motivational training program based on the differentiation of the teaching process using BL strategies for students with NTLD in the second grade will contribute to increase their intrinsic motivation.

The independent variable of the research was **(V.I.)** The experimental cognitive and motivational instructional training program based on differentiation of the teaching process using BL strategies for students with NTLD in the second grade.

Dependent variables:

(V.D.1) the level of development of the general competences stipulated in the syllabus of Mathematics and Environmental Exploration and Communication in Romanian C.G. 1. Using numbers in elementary calculations (MEN, 2013) and C. G. 3. Receiving a variety of written messages in familiar communication contexts (MEN, 2013).

(V.D.2) the level of development of the specific competences foreseen in the syllabus of Mathematics and Environmental Exploration and Communication in Romanian C.S. 1.5. Performing multiplication and division in the 0-1000 range by repeated addition/subtraction (MEN, 2013) and C.S. 4.1.

(V.D.3) the level of development of the specific competences foreseen in the syllabus of Mathematics and Environmental Exploration and Communication in Romanian C.S. 5.2. Solving problems of the type a±b=x; a±b±c=x in the 0-1000 concentric; a-b=x; a:b=x, in the 0-100 concentric, with the support of objects, images or schematic representations (MEN, 2013) and C.S. 3.4. Expressing interest in reading age-appropriate books (MEN, 2013).

(V.D.4) the degree of intrinsic motivation of students with NCD.

The sample of subjects included in the experimental research consisted of 210 second grade students with non-categorical and transitory learning difficulties, enrolled in one of the 5 schools participating in the study, in Cluj-Napoca, which have the necessary infrastructure to use blended learning strategies. The identification of students with learning difficulties was

based on the methods proposed in the focus group conducted with teachers in Cluj-Napoca. The sample size was identified based on power analysis. According to the power analysis performed in GPower (for a standard power of 0.95) the sample we will need is a minimum of 208 participants, who will be divided into two groups, one experimental and one control. The alpha threshold is 0.05, which indicates that the results are likely to be significant. For this purpose, the 210 pupils were divided into two groups: 106 pupils in the experimental group and 104 pupils in the control group.

The experimental research theme *Innovative approaches in differentiated instruction using blended learning strategies for students with non-categorical and transitory learning difficulties in Mathematics and Environmental Exploration (MEM) and Communication in Romanian (CLR)* aimed to develop an experimental cognitive and motivational training program for students with NTLD in the second grade, through which open educational resources were developed and used in the experimental phase. Differentiated materials were created using different platforms and apps, targeting the competences proposed in the research. At the same time, the platforms and apps were selected to allow the realisation of OERs in line with the research theme, offering the possibility to differentiate the content according to the competence level of the students. In addition to the activities circumscribed to the two subjects (MEM and CLR), activities were carried out to facilitate the increase of students' motivation. The materials used at this stage come from the international Leader in Me program, which aims to prepare students to become more motivated and self-aware. In addition, the underlying principles of the program, the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People and the Four Disciplines of Execution, transcend cultural boundaries in their universality, preparing all types of learners, regardless of their level of competence.

Research methods and instruments:

Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used in the research, which allowed a rigorous and detailed data collection: analysis of school documents, focus group method, questionnaire survey, experimental method, Questionnaire for the Assessment of Learning Strategies (SMALSI), Standardised Tests for National Assessment at the end of the second grade.

In the research approach, a focus group with primary school teachers was considered to facilitate the composition of the sample of students with non-categorical and transitory learning difficulties who fulfil the criteria for taking part in the experimental research: not to hold a CES certificate, to be enrolled in grade II at schools in Cluj-Napoca and to be literate.

The observational phase ran from September to December 2023. In this stage we aimed to use the triangulation method in creating the profile of the student with non-categorical and transitory learning difficulties, as well as highlighting their individual needs in relation to academic work. Following this stage, we were able to observe the parents' perspective on their children's learning difficulties, how the activity of these pupils in the classroom is described from the teacher's perspective, as well as the influence of the environment on the pupils' activity, information obtained through direct observation of the pupils in the classroom.

The pre-experimental phase (December 2023) aimed at the initial testing of students with non-categorical and transitory learning difficulties. To obtain information on the students' proficiency level, the testing method was used: the initial test which facilitated the identification of students' needs, and gaps in understanding of the basic concepts in the two subjects. The initial testing of the students utilised the test for the National Assessment Class II, the year 2023, Test 1, for each of the three tests: Mathematics and Exploring the Environment, Communication in Romanian - reading, and Communication in Romanian - writing. Following the initial testing of the students, it was possible to determine the level of proficiency of each student in each of the three components. In addition to the competencies related to the two subjects, the Strategic Strategies for Assessment of Learning Assessment Questionnaire (SMALSI), provided by the Cognitrom Research Organization, was used to discover the initial motivation level of the pupils with NTLD.

The experimental phase took place from January to March 2024, during which time individualised plans were drawn up for students with non-categorical and transitional learning difficulties, followed by the implementation of the proposed intervention program over 10 weeks, one activity per week for each of the two subjects, MEM and CLR. At this stage the actual experiment was carried out, which aimed at differentiating the teaching process based on blended learning strategies used with second-grade students with non-categorical learning difficulties. The proposed activities offered the opportunity to deepen at their own pace the concepts addressed, students receiving differentiated and individualised materials. The planning of the sessions took into account the objectives proposed for each of the three proposed levels: elementary, intermediate, advanced, creating Open Educational Resources (OER) appropriate to each objective, for each level, within each lesson. In addition to the activities to achieve competences in MEM and CLR, activities were carried out to increase students' motivation, personal appreciation and self-esteem. These activities discussed the personal values each individual has and the progress we can make if

we are confident in our strengths. At the same time, in this stage of increasing motivation, students were taught to set a goal and concrete steps to reach it, but more than that, techniques for monitoring progress. One activity is highlighted in the following example:

Title of activity: Practice and write correctly

Subject: Communication in Romanian

Week: 8

Aim of the activity: Practice writing correctly

Materials: Differentiated digital games; support material Leader in Me;

Organisation and implementation of the activity: In the first part of the activity, students learned what a personal mission statement is, each of them trying to compose a personal mission statement based on the examples given in the Leader in Me support materials. The aim of the mission statement was for students to identify weaknesses in their academic work that they would like to improve. The figures below represent the steps for completing the personal mission statement. After this step, the students were divided into three teams to solve differentiated work tasks using the station method. In rotation, students had the opportunity to solve the work tasks at all three stations. At each station, students could access a digital game, which they solved online, while also writing their answers in **their notebooks.**

Station 1: Choose the correct syllable division of the given words.

https://wordwall.net/resource/35994955/cate-silabe

Station 2: Write suitable synonyms for the following words.

https://wordwall.net/resource/31109963/sinonime

Station 3: Put the punctuation marks in the right place.

https://wordwall.net/resource/7958305/semnele-de-punctua%c8%9bie

Comments: Students had limited time (5-7 minutes) to complete the tasks for each station. After the digital timer sounded, students rotated to another workstation. The digital timer was projected on the board throughout the activity.

The post-experimental phase aimed at the final testing of students with non-categorical and transitory learning difficulties. The final testing of the students used the test for the National Assessment grade II, the year 2023, Test 2, for each of the three tests: Mathematics and Environmental Exploration, Communication in the Romanian Language-Reading, Communication in the Romanian Language- Writing. At the same time, in terms of motivation, the Questionnaire for the Assessment of Learning Strategies (SMALSI) was

applied to see the level of motivation of the students following the experimental cognitive and motivational training program. At the end of the activities, pretest and post-test results were compared and an analysis of students' results in the National Assessment at the end of the second grade was also carried out.

Research results

Statistical data were analysed using the statistical program SPSS 26. In order to test the general hypothesis, both (1) parametric tests, used when the data distribution is consistent with the theoretical distribution, i.e. normality (T-test; ANOVA; Pearson correlations), and (2) nonparametric tests, used to determine whether there is a significant relationship between variables (Mann-Whitney U test; Kruskal-Wallis; Spearman correlations; Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk), which revealed both the associations between the variables in the research hypothesis and the hierarchical multiple regressions which revealed that students with non-categorical learning difficulties who participated in a cognitive and motivational training program based on blended learning strategies, showed progress in the subjects MEM and CLR, in terms of the six competencies considered.

Results obtained in the observational phase

The use of the triangulation method facilitated the development of the profile of the pupil with non-categorical learning difficulties, relating to the perspective of teachers and parents, as well as to the observation of pupils' behaviour in the classroom. The data analysis shows that pupils with NTLD have difficulties in using numbers in elementary calculations, and teachers have a lower perception of pupils' skills than parents and observations. This suggests that pupils exhibit moderate numeracy skills, with slightly more positive ratings in family and observational contexts. At the same time, pupils have difficulties understanding keywords and their application in solving mathematical problems. Teachers perceive writing skills as below average, while parents reflect more positive ratings. Pupils' motivation is assessed as moderate by teachers and activities in this direction are needed.

Pre-experimental results

The statistical analysis of the students' results on the initial testing for the three tests (MEM; CLR-Writing; CLR-Reading) showed that Mathematics (MEM) seems to be the subject that raised the greatest dilemmas for the students, with the greatest variation between performance levels and the lowest percentage of students at the Advanced level compared to Writing and Reading, where the majority of students are at the Advanced level. However, for

the control group, the easiest subject seems to be Reading, with 75 students at the Advanced level, compared to 70 in Writing and only 26 in Math (MEM). For the experimental group, CLR-Reading is also the easiest subject, with 88 students at the Advanced level, more than the 73 in Writing and 41 in Math (MEM). In order to see to what extent the motivation of students with noncategorical learning difficulties influences their 'performance on the three tests, the *Strategic Strategies for Assessment of Learning Skills (SMALSI) questionnaire* was applied, focusing on the scales: motivation; reading and writing skills.

The results obtained from the analysis of the items related to motivation showed that only 4 students were highly motivated in the control group and only one student in the experimental group. As far as reading and information selection skills are concerned, within each group, there was a very low number of students with well-developed skills: control group 7/104 = 6.7%; experimental group 6/106 = 5.7%, which shows that few students checked the answers they have written before the test is given or few students remember essential information from a text they have read. This scale addresses issues related to comprehension of the information read or the speed of selecting key concepts from a text. As far as reading, writing and note-taking skills are concerned, within each group, there was a very low number of students with well-developed skills: control group 11/104 = 10.58%; experimental group 14/106 = 13.21%, which shows that students' ability to take notes while reading a text is extremely low, students' vocabulary is quite poorly developed when writing a composition and they fail to structure their ideas in writing.

Comparison of pretest and posttest results

From the comparative analysis of the results obtained by the students in the initial test and in the post-test, a significant change can be observed in the initial levels of the students (beginner, intermediate, advanced). In the case of the maths test, there was a decrease in the beginner group (15 students in the pretest and 4 in the posttest in the experimental group; 18 students in the pretest and 4 in the posttest in the control group). There was a significant difference between the two groups in the number of students who developed their skills by moving to the advanced group. At the same time, we checked whether there are significant differences between pretest and posttest in the SMALSI questionnaire in terms of motivation, reading ability and writing ability. Results showed that in the case of motivation, students are more confident in their own strengths. For the experimental group there is a statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores, suggesting an improvement in motivation. Analysing the results, we can conclude that in the experimental group there were significant differences for all three tests (MEM; CLR-reading; CLR-writing), which shows

that the experimental cognitive and motivational training program had an influence on students' activity.

CONCLUSIONS

We can conclude that the differentiation and individualization of the teaching process based on *blended learning* strategies used in the case of second-grade students with DÎN leads to the improvement of general and specific competencies provided by the syllabuses of the subjects MEM and CLR, as well as to the increase of students' motivation. One of the limitations encountered in the research approach refers to the sample of subjects, as many of the teachers were reluctant to participate in this study, the teachers included in the sample were those who signed an agreement willing to take part in the research, being informed about the research objectives and dissemination of results. Even though it was emphasised that their identity would remain anonymous at the time of publication of the results, some teachers declined participation. It is relevant to introduce a new term to define these non-categorical and transitory learning difficulties as they represent a difficulty that does not result from intellectual disabilities, sensory impairments or emotional disturbance. In this sense, noncategorical and transitory learning difficulties encompass the whole range of learning problems that are common in schools, of a temporary or permanent nature and of intrinsic or extrinsic origin for students (Albuquerque, 2019). Thus, we can say that this category of learning difficulties are barriers in the learning process, having repercussions on the assimilation, processing and use of information from a cognitive, metacognitive, as well as non-cognitive perspective.

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