

Responding to Learners' Diversity at an Informal Learning Environment: Differentiated Instruction at the Society of Christian Doctrine in Malta

Emanuel Mizzi

University of Malta

emanuel.mizzi@um.edu.mt

Abstract

Differentiated instruction for diverse learners has been generally applied to compulsory education. However, the challenge of learner diversity is faced by other educational institutions. In Malta, most children attend evening classes twice a week in Christian formation at the centres of the Society of Christian Doctrine. The aim of this study was to explore how catechists at these centres tried to facilitate the learning and participation of all. A qualitative research approach was adopted within the context of an interpretivist framework. Six catechists and eighteen children from classes in six different centres responded to semi-structured interviews, following observations of each catechist in three lessons. Data analysis yielded seven key themes. One of these themes was the planning and organising of differentiated instruction. These catechists were willing to experiment and innovate in an attempt to include all the children under their care in the learning process. As such they prepared interesting lessons, and, within a supportive learning environment, organised the differentiation of content, process and learning product. This research extends the knowledge on differentiated instruction to the informal, non-school, voluntary context. Nourishing insights are provided through reflection on the inclusive policies and practices existing in this sector.

Keywords: differentiated instruction, responding to learner diversity, informal learning environments, Society of Christian Doctrine

Introduction

Teachers are experiencing increasingly diverse classrooms (Eurydice, 2017; Mellom et al., 2018). The concept of differentiated teaching assists educators into meeting the strengths and needs of all these diverse learners (Tomlinson, 2003, 2014).

Differentiated instruction is generally applied to formal education. However, other educational institutions face the challenge of responding to learner diversity. For instance, in Malta, most children and adolescents attend twice or more weekly evening classes in Christian formation at the centres of the Society of Christian Doctrine.

The Society of Christian Doctrine (commonly known as M.U.S.E.U.M.) offers regular catechetical formation to a large number of children and adolescents every evening in its centres. Because these centres are area (town or village) based, classes within these centres include a rich diversity of learners (Mizzi, 2018; Sultana, 1996). This research study is an attempt at investigating the major research question, “What varied approaches to learning and teaching do catechists in these centres adopt in response to the reality of learner diversity in their classes?”

This research aim was pursued through qualitative research that allowed the participant catechists to describe how they approached the challenge of including all the children in learning and how this was perceived by the different children in class.

Tomlinson’s model of differentiated instruction

A model which this study has found particularly useful is that proposed by Tomlinson (1999, 2003, 2014), a long-time promoter of differentiated instruction in the formal education sector in the United States. It has proven to be particularly useful for researchers and practitioners alike (Bartolo et al., 2005, 2007; Humphrey *et al.*, 2006; Mizzi, 2018; Mizzi and Bartolo, 2007). Tomlinson (1999, 2003, 2014) suggests that responsive teaching should provide a match between the two elements in the teaching and learning process, namely the diversity of learners’ needs and strengths with the diversity of the curriculum (see Figure 1).

In order to respond effectively to student diversity and ensure learning, Tomlinson (1999, 2001, 2003, 2006, 2014) argues that teachers need to be aware of four major student traits or learner variance, namely interest, learning profile, readiness, and affect. It is this notion of diversity that this research study adopts. As teachers respond to the four learner traits that call for differentiated instruction, they can then vary the content, process, product, and

learning environment of the curriculum (ibid). She refers to the curriculum as *what* educators teach (Tomlinson, 2006).

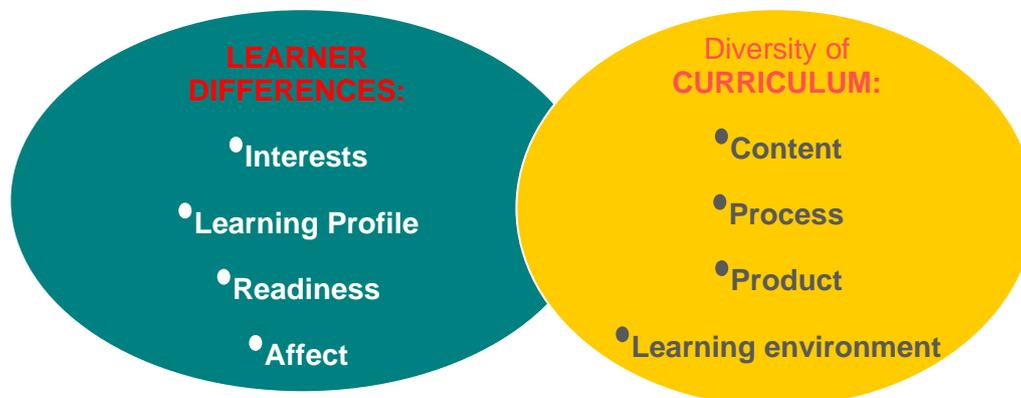


Figure 1: Matching a diversified curriculum to the diversity of learner characteristics (adapted from Tomlinson, 2014 and Humphrey et al., 2006)

In this differentiation model, teachers who decide to adhere to differentiated instruction continually assess learner readiness, interest, learning profile, and affect. Then they use what they have learned to deliberately modify content, process, product and learning environment to ensure maximum learning of content for each student (Tomlinson, 2014). In these classes, in an attempt to include everyone in the learning process, teachers “adapt their instruction according to the learners’ individual differences” (Valiandes et al., 2017, p.17). It is this notion of inclusion that this research embraces.

The Society of Christian Doctrine

The Society of Christian Doctrine was founded by Saint George Preca in March 1907 for Catholic lay men and women who want to assist in the faith formation of children, adolescents and adults. At that time, Saint George Preca, concerned about the catechetical formation being provided to children and youths, set out to teaching the Gospel to lay people. He gathered around him and taught a number of youths, who eventually started to open up centres around the Maltese Islands, teaching children, adolescents and young people.

The male section of the Society has 33 centres in Malta and six centres in Gozo. The number of male members is 318 in the Maltese Islands (Society of Christian Doctrine, 2019), with an additional fifty members outside Malta, especially in

Australia where the Society first established itself in 1956. The women's section has 200 members running 25 centres in Malta and Gozo. In addition to Australia, the activities of the Society extend to Australia, the United Kingdom, Albania, Kenya, Cuba, Poland and Peru.

Every evening, these celibate catechists open the centres for the catechetical formation of children and adolescents, and occasionally for adults as well. In 2019, the male section of the Society in Malta and Gozo welcomed in its centres 8400 learners, aged between five and twenty years (Society of Christian Doctrine, 2019). Children attend these centres, first to receive formation for the reception of the Sacraments, and later for a more comprehensive life-long faith formation.

All catechists of this Society provide their service after their normal day's work. Additional activities for children and youths include recreational and related activities. After their classes, the members participate in a daily one-hour formation session. These sessions include Bible study, theology, liturgy, spiritual reading, catechetics and social teaching. This is a process of on-going formation in common, prepared by members for the members of the same centre.

Saint George Preca was aware of the richness of diversity in a class of children: "Not all children are alike, but they are all precious, because they are all created in the likeness of God" (Preca, 1970, p.12). He urged catechists to always "deliver a lesson to the soul when you find yourselves in the occasion of adapting a spiritual message according to the circumstances of the person who is listening" (Preca, 2004, p.23). He reminded his members that their teaching should be well understood by all (Preca, 1915; Sultana, 1996).

Methodology

The aim of this study was to identify and describe the ways in which these educators in the informal learning sector differentiated their instruction in response to learner diversity. The major research question was, "What varied approaches to learning and teaching do catechists adopt in response to the reality of learner diversity in their classes?"

The study's aim was pursued through qualitative research. This allowed the participant catechists to describe how they approached the challenge of including all the children in learning and how this was perceived by the

different children in class. This study was focused on classes for nine-year-olds attending twice a week for their Confirmation class.

Purposive sampling was employed to select six catechists from six different centres on the basis of their being regarded by their superiors as actively trying to respond to learner diversity.

Table: *The sample of the respondent catechists*

Catechist	Teaching experience (years)	Number of children in class
C1	13	18
C2	5	42
C3	15	18
C4	36	21
C5	10	19
C6	18	17

The three boys interviewed from each class in the sample will be referred to as B1, 2, 3 of 1-6 (e.g. B3.5 = the third participant boy in C5's class). The observed class will be coded as Ob, in general, and numbered to add specificity (e.g. Ob2.3 = second lesson observation at Centre 3).

A semi-structured interview was held with each participant aimed at eliciting a description of experiences relevant to responsive teaching. This took from an hour to an hour-and-a-half. Each catechist was observed for three lessons in order to examine directly how he responded to existing learner diversity. Lessons observed lasted around 30-40 minutes. Furthermore, in an attempt to explore to what extent lessons were meeting their needs and interests, three children from each class were interviewed. Each interview lasted approximately half an hour.

Interview data were transcribed and lesson observations written up. ATLAS.ti software was used for the qualitative and thematic analysis of the resulting data. Initially, each text was read several times. Textual passages were then categorised according to their relation to 'responding to learner diversity'. The length of the passages varied from a few words to a whole paragraph. The software was useful in capturing all data relevant to the categories.

Throughout the process, the aims, the research question and the relevant literature, especially Tomlinson's model, were used to guide the organisation and interpretation of the data. The first three centres analysed provided me with a framework of the themes that had emerged so far. This framework was then applied to a thematic analysis of the data from the remaining three centres, allowing for emerging new categories, themes or modifications. In due course, notes were also written describing each data segment. This was an occasion for further data analysis. Finally, the results were written up from this information, once again allowing for further modifications within and amongst the themes.

Attempts were made to ensure that the data and their analysis reflected as truthfully as possible what was going on in these classes with regard to the response to learner diversity. Using multiple methods of data collection helped to rigorously capture the process of differentiation existing within the classes (Cohen et al, 2011; Robson et al, 2016). The author has also been a member of the Society for the last thirty years and had firsthand knowledge of similar situations. At the same time, during the course of the study, it was kept in mind that the research was as much about the researcher's own experience as it was about that of others (Vernon, 1999). By piloting the interview questions and observation guidelines and being open to feedback from a critical friend, an attempt was made to avoid bias during the questioning and the writing up of the observation notes. Furthermore, an attempt was made to take note of all data including deviant cases (negative case analysis). This search for negative cases was an important means of countering researcher bias (Silverman, 2014).

This research study is underpinned by an understanding that ontology is real and epistemology is relativist; ontology (i.e. what is real, the nature of reality) is not reducible to epistemology (i.e. our knowledge of reality) – there is a 'real' world and it is theory-laden and not theory-determined (Fletcher, 2017). Human knowledge captures only a small part of a deeper and vaster reality. The epistemological basis is one of a relationship and interaction between the researcher and participants with values and beliefs being made explicit and the findings being created. Participants would have been subject to influences which shape their world view and of learning, and so they would be reflecting different interpretations of reality. Their responses would be inextricably linked with their conceptions of learning and would reflect different assumptions and backgrounds. Shaikh (2013) argues that participants in any social act will have different views on the act itself and on the outcomes. People develop their own beliefs and understanding of phenomena; but in forming

these perspectives there will inevitably be elements of inconsistency and bias: the principle of fallibility (Soros, 2013). Even the perspective of one individual will be influenced by different values, which in themselves may be inconsistent (Shaikh, 2013).

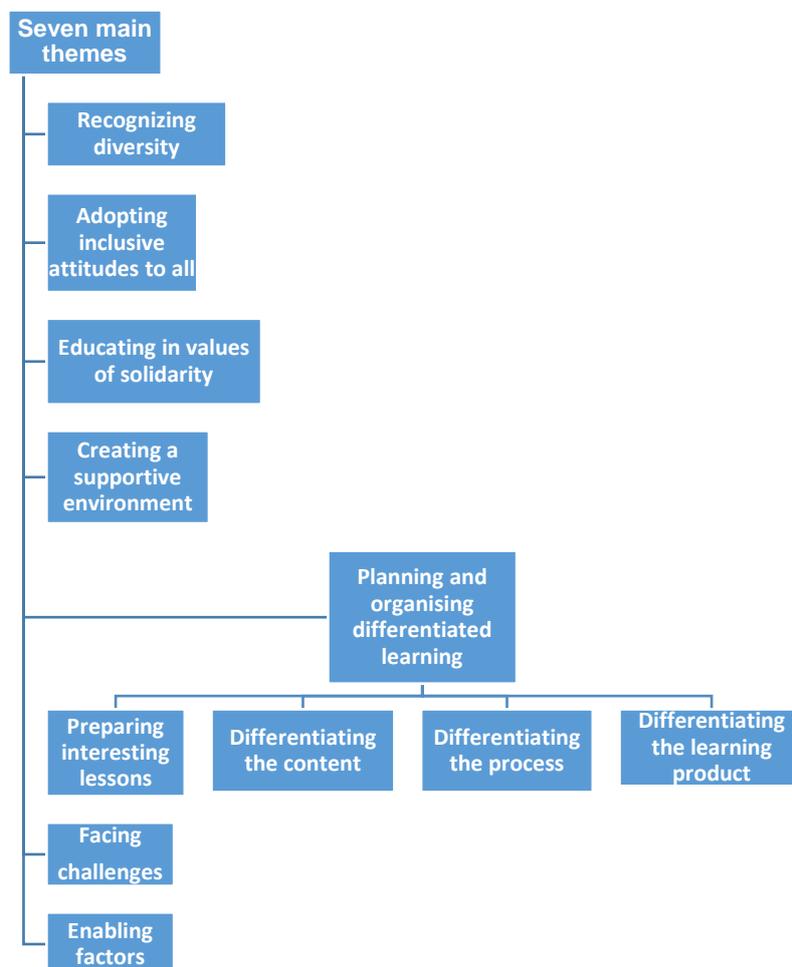


Figure 2: Themes emerging from the research study

Results

Tomlinson's model of differentiated instruction proved to be a useful framework for analysing the data. Seven main themes emerged (see Figure 2). These catechists prepared stimulating lessons and, within a supportive learning environment, sought to engage each and every child through responsive teaching and learning. This paper focuses on the theme related to the planning and organisation of differentiated learning.

These participants were willing to experiment and innovate in an attempt to include all the children in the learning process. They prepared lessons informed by the differentiation of content, process and learning product (Figure 3).

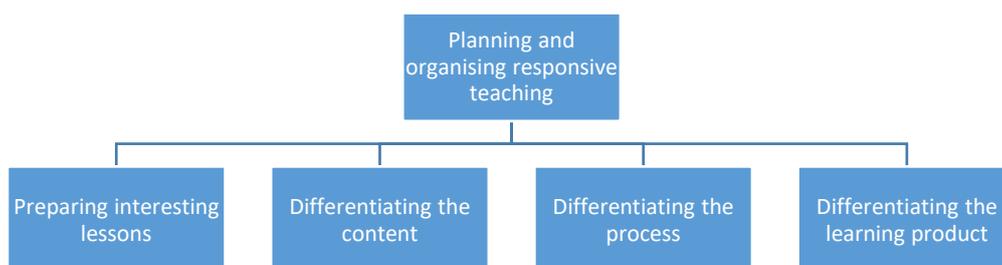


Figure 3: Planning and organising responsive teaching

Lesson Preparation

The importance of preparation was stressed by all: “If something is planned, the children participate and enjoy themselves” (C3). The ingredients of an ideal catechist were “to prepare and to be dedicated” (C6).

These catechists reported that they planned lessons that would be interesting to the children in general rather than as individuals: “I think that they will enjoy this” (C3). They reported that they generally adapted to individual children during the lesson itself: “I target particular examples for particular children” (C1). C2 presented examples that were relevant to the life of the children, such as when they fought in the playground. “Very often I prepare in a general way; I do not keep particular children in mind. But then I adapt accordingly at that moment” (C6). Such adaptation became easier as one grew more experienced (C3).

Only when a child’s needs were very different was there pre-planning with one learner in mind. C3 discussed how he kept in mind a child suffering from epileptic fits; he did not prepare visual activities that excluded him from class.

Differentiating the content

The analysis of the data showed that these participants modified four aspects of content, namely its relation to learners' interests, experiences, and levels of understanding (see Figure 4).

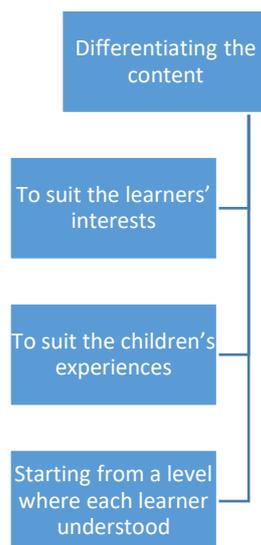


Figure 4: Differentiating the content

Modifying the content to suit the learners' interests

The participants understood the importance of adapting content to suit the children's interests: "When you discuss what a child loves, you draw his attention" (C5).

These participants were observed targeting various examples to different children. In classes where the hobby of most children was football, for instance, catechists brought examples from this game, such as how one should work in a team and the need for sacrifice. Adaptations were often personalised. To illustrate the attitude of gratitude towards others, C3 directed an example towards Isaac, which I later confirmed adored spaghetti: "Mum has prepared a plate of spaghetti as you like it, Isaac. And you say, 'Well done mum!'"

Adapting the content to suit the children's experiences

All participants strived to make content relevant to the children's life experiences. C1 believed that abstract concepts needed to be concretised in

their own experiences. For example, when discussing the topic 'conscience', he would ask, "Have you ever felt something within you telling you that you have done wrong?" Before giving his own input, C1 waited for their own experiences.

Three catechists referred to children's actual behaviours in order to help them improve. For instance, C5 addressed quarrels that had occurred: "How can I myself be a builder of peace?" (Ob3.5)

As regards examples targeted towards particular children, two catechists were careful to avoid particular examples. For instance, C3 was careful about how to talk about parents since a child's father was dead and another one was fostered.

To make content relevant to the experience of the child, collaboration with parents was sought. For instance, a parent informed C1 about a misbehaviour of her child. The latter brought a similar case during the lesson. The child spoke up, "I have done this yesterday!" (Ob2.1)

Starting from a level where each understood

Participants reported that their aim was "to start from what everyone knows and always proceed according to their knowledge" (C1). Lessons were observed to be taught at different levels to different children.

"I do it in every lesson: I depart from the basic, and then I help them proceed in their learning" (C1). He argued that the basic concepts should be understood by everyone. Then there were the advanced learners who would ask for more. Those who would not understand, would not have missed the basic material. He was observed explaining the basic knowledge and facts, and then proceeding to explain at higher levels, involving most of the children, especially the withdrawn ones. C4 specifically employed this strategy as regards to two very slow learners. One child, B3.2, explained: "Our catechist adapts the difficult lessons so that we understand them well. He explains in a different manner but which means the same."

Differentiating the process

Another important way in which these participants tried to reach all learners was by differentiating the learning process. Figure 5 summarises the results.

Teaching was focused on the learners rather than on the catechist, use was made of different modalities or multiple intelligences, and the catechist's person was regarded as an indispensable resource.

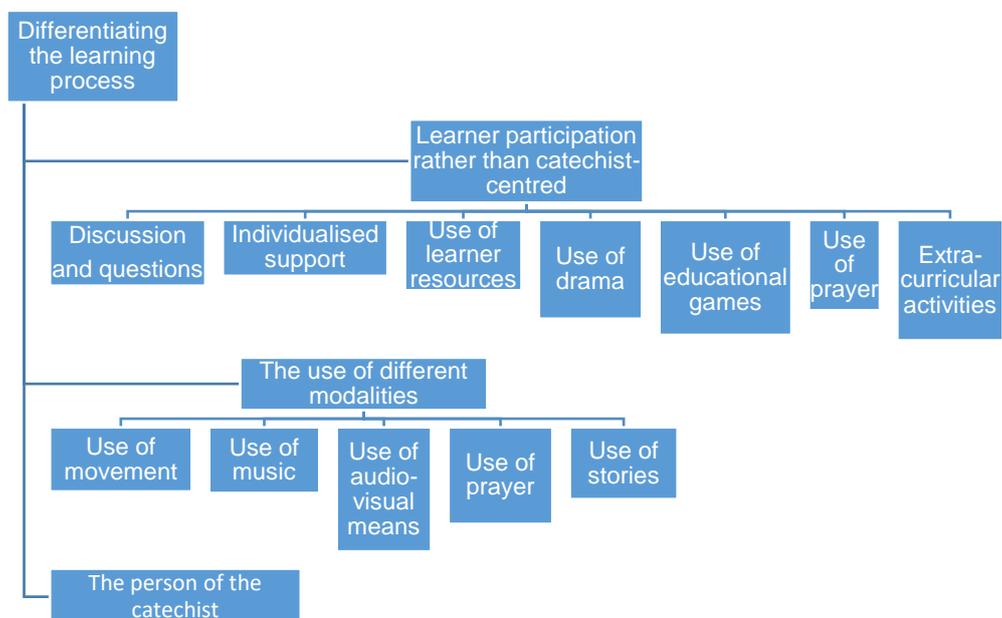


Figure 5: Differentiating the learning process

Catechists were explicit in their deliberate variation of methods to reach all children: “At times I explain and at times we play. The more activities we do, the more levels we will be reaching” (C3). Two catechists (C3 and C4) referred to it as ‘opening up’ or ‘playing around with’ the content. C5 even put this in step fashion:

I first research about the topic. Then I think how I am going to explain it ... A story, an example from the lives of the saints, a reflective sentence, a video clip.

They believed that “the variety of activities keeps the children all the time having something to think about” (C2). This was especially true in the case of children with hyperactivity issues. Variety was appreciated: “Every method has its own appeal” (B3.2).

For these lessons containing variety, C3 coined the term ‘enhanced lecture’. He did the delivery of the lesson, but constantly involved the learners:

There are children who are asked a question, those who enjoy a joke, those who are involved in drama, or singing, or doing something different. These are simple things, but which children enjoy!

Aiming at learner participation rather than catechist-centred instruction

A variety of methods were used in which active learner participation was inherent. These included the use of discussion, questions, individualised support, learner resources, drama, educational games, groups, prayer sessions, extra-curricular activities, and other activities that involved the children. C4 described how his method of teaching had progressed:

I used to employ the traditional teaching method: I just lecture and then I ask at the end to check if they have understood. Nowadays I love discussing with the children so that everyone is involved.

Employing discussion and questions: Five catechists based their lessons on discussion: “During the lesson, rather than giving the input myself, I provide some input, and then I let them ask” (C1). This catechist reported that he had worked hard to educate his learners, especially the quiet ones, to engage in discussions. He was observed in discussions, which continued after lessons, in the playground, “at times children challenging each other.”

Such use of discussion was loved by the children: “What I like best out of lessons is that everyone can share their point of view” (B2.5). B3.4 reported that the ideal catechist allowed them to discuss their ideas.

Resources that helped C2 and C5 to generate discussion were the textbook’s questions and reading stories: “I enjoy the textbook questions, because it’s amazing how many ideas the children generate, especially when you have open-ended questions” (C2). Discussion was more interesting when relevant issues from the children’s life were discussed. C5 recounted stories from a book; these involved the children into discussing issues. Such stories were vividly remembered by the interviewees.

The question-based approach was a useful aid for reaching out to all learners. It was enjoyed by the children, with interviewees claiming that they “learned from each other” (B3.6). B1.3’s favourite lesson was when his catechist asked

them questions. Important elements in these catechists' questioning technique included:

- a) No ridicule was employed for no or incorrect answers, thus setting the climate where one felt free to make mistakes: "When someone get a question wrong, our catechist tells us, 'What matters is that you have tried!'" (B3.4);
- b) Children were prompted and questions rephrased to help them answer correctly;
- c) Use of humour prevailed;
- d) It was observed that questions were posed in such a way that children felt a sense of achievement when answering correctly;
- e) Three catechists reported that different questions were asked to different children: "Advanced learners are given half a word and they answer correctly, while others are helped so that they can contribute what they can" (C6).

Individualised support: These participants mentioned how they attempted to support individual children.

Three catechists reported their efforts to reach out to children with challenging behaviour: "I need much patience to work with him ... I work individually with him" (C5). C2 did his best to include them, by employing their particular intelligences, for example, their kinaesthetic intelligence: "Very often they are in the forefront in the playground". B1.2 confirmed, "My catechist gives special attention to naughty children."

Five catechists talked about their attempts at involving withdrawn learners:

The only way to involve a particular child is to tell him myself and he just confirms, "Yes" or "No". Fortunately, I know his family. Therefore, I can tell him about himself. (C1)

Use of learner resources: In these classes, learners were engaged into explaining to others and providing peer support. Four catechists involved children into explaining to their peers. C4 assigned small mixed-ability groups of children a task to learn, such as a sentence from the workbook: "I tell the bright boy, 'Now you who have to teach it to them.'" He reported that this exercise was very often a successful one. Similarly, two children with disability at Centre 4 were supported by their peers.

The use of drama: Four catechists considered the use of drama as an enjoyable way of engaging and motivating children. B3.4 wanted more plays during lessons so that they could learn more. When asked about a lesson in which he had managed to involve most children, C6 mentioned when he had organised a play of the Last Supper. He had managed to involve 15 out of the 17 children in class.

Use of educational games: Participants employed games such as quizzes, 'guess who/what?' and 'hangman' as tools to engage all children. These provided an enjoyable learning experience: "I would like to have more games, because whilst playing I am enjoying myself and learning" (B3.3).

The use of prayer: Four catechists used prayer sessions as an occasion where all learners could participate. During Lent and Advent, C1 organised five-minute prayer sessions during which most children participated. C3 organised a Pentecost celebration, which included singing, explaining posters, and silent and communal prayer. B2.3 singled it out as a lesson he had much enjoyed.

Extra-curricular activities: These included barbecues, sports days, crafts, and going to the beach (in summer). Four catechists reported that these fostered "a healthy climate" (C2). B1.6's most enjoyable lesson was when "first we had a football game, then we said the rosary and had a barbeque."

The use of different modalities

To enhance the learning and participation of all, these participants employed children's multiple intelligences. C6 recounted how he liked "using the whiteboard, pictures, stories or films. So that if someone hasn't understood my explanation, he understands through something else." B1.6 confirmed how he "learned better with something different than usual. For example, a story is narrated either using a video clip, or a powerpoint or pictures." B3.2 noted that each modality had "its own appeal! Because singing is singing ... I enjoy the quiz very much. But I also like the others."

An example of the use of different modalities in a lesson was when C3 used various ways of teaching about prayer:

- By means of a play he had with a child;
- Using posters he affixed on the whiteboard, such as "Thanks Lord";
- The effective use of the questioning technique;

- Through a song, children were encouraged to clap, wave and join their hands. Participation was expected;
- He allowed space for silent and communal prayers (Ob1.3).

The use of movement: Three catechists appealed to kinaesthetic learners. Movement was employed during drama. For example, at Centre 3 a big boy played the part of the horse while a smaller one as Saint Martin riding on him.

C3 argued that movement on the part of the catechist helped to maintain the learners' focus. B3.4 referred to the gestures used by his catechist as helping him to understand better.

The use of music: All these catechists employed music to reach out to the children possessing musical intelligence. For instance, C4 reported that a song had a particular appeal to the musical intelligence of one particular child; his mother had told him that he was singing it at home. Auditory learners were engaged by listening to a recorded passage from the Gospel (Ob2.4). During a song at Centre 2, one boy was acting as if playing the guitar and then the drums. Another one was following the rhythm of the song by seemingly playing the piano (Ob2.2). Singing assisted the creation of an inclusive climate; B3.3 reported that he and his friends felt relaxed when singing.

The use of audio-visual means: Such means employed by these catechists included posters, pictures, slides, powerpoint presentations, maps, video clips and the whiteboard. They believed in these resources: "With these resources you reach out to more children. The visual remains" (C2). Two catechists reported that they used these resources to reinforce points that they wanted to teach: "I clarify by means of audio-visual resources" (C2). The importance of employing visual means was reported by the children: "I find that seeing is the best way to understand things" (B3.1).

The audiovisual required preparation, such as assessing if it was suitable and preparing the classroom beforehand. C2 had also built his own audio-visual presentations: "It requires preparation, but the children do appreciate it." Coupled with skilful storytelling, audio-visual means were observed to be very effective in conveying the intended message. By way of contrast, C3 did not use I.C.T. because of a boy suffering from epileptic fits. Although this created a new challenge, he reported that he had managed to devise ways to make lessons equally enjoyable.

The whiteboard too was widely used: “I use it to write certain difficult or important words” (C2). All catechists were observed using it for graphic designs as well as words. It was observed to be used to give weight to the input of the children (Ob3.2), thus enhancing participation: “He asked us to give titles of praise to Mary and he wrote them on the whiteboard. I enjoyed that lesson” (B2.2).

The use of prayer: Learners were given space to practise their spiritual modality. I observed children at various centres expressing their intimate prayers. For example, a child asked the class to pray for his hospitalized grandmother, and soon afterwards another one prayed for his sick father (Ob1.3). Most children participated when asked to say a prayer which they had been asked to write (Ob2.3).

The use of stories: Two catechists referred to the efficacy of the story as a strategy to help their children understand key concepts: “From the story the children glean the main learning objective that is to be learned ... Everyone understands a story” (C2). At first, C6 put forward the concept, for example, ‘faith’. Then, through the use of stories he helped his learners understand the concept.

The effective way in which these catechists narrated stories was observed. In particular they:

- a) narrated in a lively and vivid way, very often employing a sense of humour;
- b) explained very clearly, taking nothing for granted; and
- c) in due process, they asked questions to both struggling and advanced learners.

The person of the catechist

Three participants reported that the person of the catechist was essential: “The catechist, his person, must be a resource in itself to deliver the message” (C1). When asked what he loved most out of his lessons, B3.4 replied, “I like how my catechist explains ... Because he knows how to talk!”

Differentiating the learning product

This section discusses the opportunities the catechists gave to their learners to show what they had learned. The results are summarised in Figure 6.

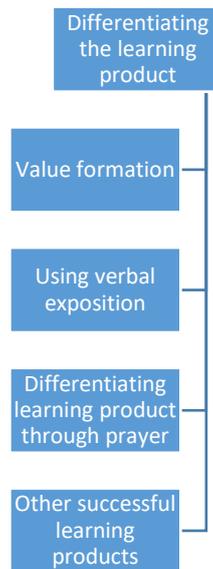


Figure 6: Differentiating the learning product

Value formation

Three catechists reported that the most important learning product was the formation of a good character: “The satisfaction is that what you have given them today, they will eventually use it.” (C1). These participants pursued the application of learning during leisure: “In the playground the children show in practice what they have learned in class.” (C1).

Using verbal exposition

These catechists emphasised the oral manner as a learning product: “This is the best product. When they are giving it, the children are giving everything with it.” (C1). The questioning technique was a useful tool in this regard: “From the questions I ask, children have the opportunity to show what they are learning” (C3). B3.1 reported that after a story, his catechist used to say, “Now tell me a lesson you have learned!”

C2 was aware of the wider access offered by oral assessment: “The child may have a problem in reading and writing, but when he comes to talk, he participates actively.”

Differentiating learning product through prayer

An effective way for differentiating the learning product was giving the children space to say their own prayers: “To say a prayer, you would be testing yourself about what you have learned” (B3.3). He reported that because he often had to write a prayer in the workbook task, he had to read the relevant lesson from the accompanying textbook.

Successful learning products

C6 described a group product. After explaining five parables, children were organised into mixed-ability groups and asked to draw a parable as they perceived it. They collaboratively worked together. The charts were then exhibited in class. On the other hand, C3 asked the children to write and decorate some sentences from the Gospel: “Their ideas are amazing. Creativity emerges”.

Conclusion

This research study attempted to make sense of the teaching and learning in these classes in the informal learning environment through the lens provided by Tomlinson’s model of differentiated instruction. Catechists attempted to get to know their learners’ readiness levels, interests, learning profile and affect, and ‘orchestrate’ their teaching and learning accordingly (Tomlinson 2003, 2014). This is an important consideration for student-teachers and teachers in the formal learning sector: the priority of getting to know their learners and modifying aspects of the content, process, learning product and learning environment in response to learner diversity in their classes. I claim that this would be a practical contribution towards inclusion, representing an attempt to include each and every child in the learning process. This was the notion of inclusion that this research embraced.

The findings of this study tie into the literature on inclusion and differentiated teaching; these participants embraced inclusive attitudes (Mizzi, 2018) and were motivated to try to engage in learning all their diverse learners. They thus prepared stimulating lessons and, within a supportive learning environment (Mizzi and Bartolo, 2007), sought to engage each and every child through lesson adaptation. If pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986b, 1987a) is defined as the knowledge of what facilitates learning for students and of

effective ways of representing content knowledge to learners (ibid.; Durden, 2016), then I argue that these participants were effective in this regard.

By investing efforts into “connecting” with their learners (Tomlinson 2003, 2014), it was possible for these catechists to adequately differentiate the content, the process and the learning product to involve their children more into learning. They modified aspects of content, namely its relation to learners’ interests, experiences, and levels of understanding. Consequently, they managed to ‘catch’ and ‘hold’ their children’s attention (Dewey, 2008) and provide them with a more relevant and meaningful learning experience. Another important way in which they tried to involve all children in learning was by differentiating the learning process. Teaching in these classes was focused on the learners rather than on the catechist, use was made of different modalities or multiple intelligences, and the catechist’s person was regarded as an indispensable resource. Particular strategies mentioned by these catechists match those mentioned by teachers in the formal learning environment, such as the use of the ‘teacher’s passion’ which delivered the dramatic presentation of stories and accounts (Bartolo et al., 2005; Pollard et al., 2014), and that games used should have an educational value (Calleja and Johnston, 2015). As regards to the differentiation by learning product, verbal exposition or ‘feedback’ was an important mode of demonstrating what one had learned. This is in line with McNamara and Moreton (2001) and Pollard et al. (2014). The organisation of prayer sessions assisted in fostering the ‘affect’ that I observed prevailing in the classes visited (Tomlinson, 2006). The teacher in a formal learning environment is encouraged to experiment with providing short periods of quiet time for reflection. The most important learning product, however, was the cultivation of values, which was best shown in how the children behaved in real life situations. The participants pursued the application of such learning during leisure. This study encourages teachers in formal learning environments to be aware of their important role in infusing values in their teaching (e.g. Brant, 2011).

This study highlights similarities and discrepancies between the prescriptive literature on organising responsive teaching and actual practice. While prescriptive models emphasise the preparation of individualised lessons, these catechists mentioned preparing varied and interesting lessons generally, but then adapted the lesson for individual learners during the lesson itself. This is similar to Bartolo et al.’s (2005) results who emphasised the teacher’s flexibility in lesson delivery. In the foregoing study research, in describing most

successful engagement, teachers did not refer to times when they prepared greatly differentiated lessons. They made reference mainly to activities and material that grabbed all the students' attention and motivation. Such lessons allowed for different modes of involvement. This is similar to the findings of this study, where differentiation by process consisted of presentation modes that involved all the children in learning, through activities that called for the participation of everyone and employed their different modalities. Such finding is also similar to that of McGarvey et al. (1998) where teachers mostly differentiated within "an interactive teaching style to support individuals during group tasks" (p.150). Participants allowed room for spontaneity, which evolved as one acquired more experience (C3). This is also in line with Bartolo et al.'s (2007) suggestion and research finding that whilst planning the curriculum with the learners in mind, in order to be inclusive and responsive, a teacher must be flexible in using his/her plans in class and adapt on the spot.

References

- Bartolo, P.A., Humphrey, N., Mol Lous, A., and Wetso, G.M. (2005). European teachers' concerns and experiences in responding to diversity in the classroom. *Proceedings of the 30th Annual Conference ATEE, Amsterdam 22-26 October 2005*.
- Bartolo, P.A., Janik, I., Janikova, V., Hofsäss, T., Koinzer, P., Vilkiene, V., Calleja, C., Cefai, C., Chetcuti, D., Ale, P., Mol Lous, A., Wetso, G., Humphrey, N. (2007). *Responding to student diversity: Teacher's Handbook*. Malta: University of Malta.
- Bartolo, P.A., Janik, I., Janikova, V., Hofsäss, T., Koinzer, P., Vilkiene, V., Calleja, C., Cefai, C., Chetcuti, D., Ale, P., Mol Lous, A., Wetso, G., Humphrey, N. (2007). *Responding to student diversity: Tutor's Manual*. Malta: University of Malta.
- Brant, J. (2011). The Case for Values in Economics Education. *Citizenship, Social and Economics Education*. 10 (2 & 3), 117-128.
- Calleja, C. and Johnston, C. (2015). *A Learning Paradigm. Informed by Knowledge of the Learning Self. A Compendium of Applied Research on the Let Me Learn Process*. Malta: Horizons.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., and Morrison, K. (2011). *Research Methods in Education*. Seventh edition. US: Routledge.
- Dewey, J. (2008). *Experience and Education*. Kappa Delta Pi Lecture.
- Durden, G. (2016). "Interpreting Beginner Teachers' knowledge in terms of Phenomenography-Variation Theory: A way forward for researching and operationalising Pedagogical Content Knowledge?"
- European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2017). *Key Data of Teaching Languages at School in Europe - 2017 edition*. Eurydice Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

- Fletcher, A.J. (2017). Applying Critical Realism in Qualitative Research: Methodology Meets Method, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 20(2), 181-194.
- Humphrey, N., Bartolo, P., Ale, P., Calleja, C., Hofsaess, T., Janikova, V., Mol Lous, A., Vilkiene, V., Wetso, G., (2006). Understanding and responding to diversity in the primary classroom: an international study. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 29(3), 305-318.
- McGarvey, B., Marriott, S., Morgan, V., & Abbott, L. (1998). Approaches to Differentiation in the Core Subjects: The Experience of Northern Ireland Primary Teachers. *Evaluation and Research in Education*, 12(3), 140-152.
- Mellom, P. J., Straubhaar, R., Balderas, C., Ariail, M., Portes, P. R. (2018). They come with nothing: How professional development in a culturally responsive pedagogy shapes teacher attitudes towards Latino/a English language learners, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 71, 98-107.
- Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment (2005). *For All Children to Succeed: A new Network Organization for Quality Education in Malta*. Malta: Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment.
- Mizzi, E. & Bartolo, P.A. (2007). Creating inclusive environments: A supportive learning climate for children at the Society of Christian Doctrine in Malta. In P. A. Bartolo, A. Mol Lous, and T. Hofsäss (Eds), *Responding to Student Diversity. Teacher Education and Classroom Practice* (pp. 267-293). Malta: University of Malta.
- Mizzi, E. (2018). Educators' Attitudes at an Informal Learning Environment in the Society of Christian Doctrine in Malta: Insights for Teacher Education. *Scottish Educational Review*, 50(2), 39-53.
- Pollard, A., Black-Hawkins, K., Cliff Hodges, G., Dudley, P., James, M., Linklater, H., Swaffield, S., Swann, M., Turner, F., Warwick, P., Winterbottom, M., & Wolpert, M., (2014). *Reflective Teaching in schools*, Bloomsbury.
- Preca, G. (1915). *Il-Ctieb tal-Costituzzjonijiet għall-Għakda tal-Papidi taht il-mahtur speċjali San Ġwann il-Battista, il-Precursur tas-Sinjur* (pro manuscripto).
- Preca, G. (1970). *A Guide to those who Teach Children*. Malta: Veritas Press.
- Preca, G. (2004). *Il-Ġemmarju, Societas Doctrinae Christianae*. Malta: Veritas Press.
- Robson, C. & McCartan K. (2016). *Real World Research. A Resource for Users of Social Research Methods in Applied Settings*. UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
- Silverman, D. (2014). *Interpreting Qualitative Data*. Sage Publications Ltd.
- Shaikh, A. (2013). On the role of reflexivity in economic analysis. *Journal of Economic Methodology*, 20(4), 439-445.
- Shulman, L.S. (1986b). Those Who Understand: Knowledge Growth in Teaching. *Educational Researcher*, 15(2), 4-14.
- Shulman, L.S. (1987a) "Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform", *Harvard Educational Review*, 57(2), 4-14.
- Society of Christian Doctrine (2019). *Administrative Report: January – December 2019. Delegation of Malta and Gozo*.

- Society of Christian Doctrine M.U.S.E.U.M. (2020). <http://www.sdcmuseum.org>
- Soros, G. (2013). Fallibility, reflexivity and the human uncertainty principle. *Journal of Economic Methodology*, 20(4), 309–329.
- Sultana, R.G. (1996). Adult education and the politics of knowledge: the relevance of Malta's Dun Gorg Preca, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 15(4), 276–285.
- Tanti, A. (2017). *An Investigation into Teachers' Perceptions Regarding Gifted and Talented Students in State Senior Secondary Schools in Malta*. Dissertation submitted to the University of Leicester in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MSc Educational Leadership.
- Tomlinson, C.A. (1999). *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of all Learners*. Virginia: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Tomlinson, C.A. (2001). *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-ability Classrooms (2nd Ed.)*. Alexandria, VA: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Tomlinson, C.A. (2003). *Fulfilling the Promise of the Differentiated Classroom: Strategies and Tools for Responsive Teaching*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Tomlinson, C.A. (2006). *An Educator's Guide to Differentiating Instruction*. Houghton Mifflin Guide Series.
- Tomlinson, C.A. (2014). *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of all Learners*. Second Edition. Virginia: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Valiandes, S. & Neophytou, L. (Eds.). (2017). *Teachers' Guide to Differentiation*, Nicosia, Cyprus: Cyprus Pedagogical Institute.
- Vernon, A. (1999). Reflexivity: The dilemmas of researching from the inside. In C. Barnes and G. Mercer (Eds.), *Doing Disability Research*. Leeds: The Disability Press.
- Xiberras, E. (2018). *Fostering Inclusive Pedagogies in the Teaching of Business Studies: A Resource Pack*. Dissertation submitted to the University of Malta in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters in Teaching and Learning in Business Education.