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Gamification, Scaffolding and Integrative Background: Toward an Inclusive Education Model

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Abstract

This article investigates the theoretical interconnections among gamification, Bruner's concept of scaffolding, and the Italian pedagogical method of the integrative background, examining their potential in fostering personalized and inclusive education. Based on a critical synthesis of theoretical and empirical contributions from recent literature, the study highlights how the convergence of these methodologies can enhance motivation, cognitive development, and active engagement in diverse educational settings. Gamification is analyzed as a tool that fosters engagement and persistence through playful learning dynamics, acting as motivational scaffolding. Scaffolding, as conceptualized by Bruner and enriched by Vygotsky's contributions, is presented as a flexible support process that adapts to students' evolving cognitive and emotional needs. The integrative background, *sfondo integratore*, as developed by Canevaro and Zanelli, is presented as a contextualized methodology that fosters shared meaning-making and reduces barriers to learning and creates inclusive learning environments. Based on these analyses, the paper proposes a theoretical model that integrates gamification, scaffolding, and the integrative background into a coherent educational framework. This model aims to support inclusive practices by promoting meaningful, differentiated learning pathways and improving participation and academic achievement for all learners. The study offers methodological insights for the design of inclusive teaching practices and reflects on the transformative potential of integrating

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game-based, scaffolded, and narrative-driven learning strategies across diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: Gamification, Scaffolding, Integrative background, Inclusive education, Personalized learning

Introduction

Inclusive education seeks to guarantee equal learning opportunities for all students, irrespective of their abilities or disabilities. As educational contexts become increasingly diverse, there is a growing need for methodologies that not only engage learners but also support them according to their specific cognitive and emotional profiles. Within this context, gamification, scaffolding, and the integrative background method emerge as highly promising approaches.

Jerome Bruner's scaffolding (1976) emphasizes the role of guided support in enabling learners to achieve objectives that they could not reach independently. Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) underpins this notion, highlighting the critical role of more knowledgeable others in the learning process (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978, 1987).

Gamification, defined as the application of game elements in non-game contexts (Deterding et al., 2011), has gained traction for its capacity to enhance motivation and engagement. Meanwhile, the integrative background, formulated within Italian institutional pedagogy by Canevaro and Zanelli (1986; 1988), utilizes narrative frameworks to create emotionally resonant learning environments that facilitate inclusive education.

Recent studies (Della Volpe, 2024) suggest that an integrated application of these methodologies could foster both academic success and emotional well-being in learners with special needs.

This article investigates the theoretical interconnections among these three approaches - gamification, Bruner's scaffolding, and the integrative background - emphasizing their combined potential to support inclusive education. It further aims to identify effective and transferable instructional practices that foster personalized learning and equitable participation, with a particular focus on addressing the needs of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) across diverse educational settings.

Methods

Given the increasing academic and pedagogical interest in inclusive education and in the transformative potential of innovative teaching methodologies, this study adopted a qualitative and theoretical-critical research approach. The methodology is grounded in a systematic literature review and a conceptual analysis of three pedagogical approaches:

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gamification, Bruner's scaffolding, and the Italian institutional pedagogy framework known as the integrative background. The research aims to explore the theoretical interconnections among these approaches and to identify transferable instructional strategies capable of supporting personalized and inclusive education for students with special educational needs (SEN).

The literature review was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. A four-phase methodological process was followed: planning the review, conducting comprehensive database searches, analyzing the selected literature, and synthesizing the findings. The bibliographic search focused on peer-reviewed publications dated from 2010 to 2024. The academic databases Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, SpringerLink, and IEEE Xplore were consulted to ensure the inclusion of highly relevant and recent contributions. The search terms combined keywords such as "gamification," "Bruner scaffolding," "integrative background," "inclusive education," "personalized learning," and "special educational needs."

Inclusion criteria for the literature selection required that sources: (1) explicitly address at least one of the three focal methodologies; (2) focus on inclusive education practices or the inclusion of students with SEN; and (3) demonstrate methodological rigor, whether theoretical or empirical. Exclusion criteria included articles lacking methodological clarity, those unrelated to the educational field, and those not addressing inclusivity. After the initial screening process and abstract review, a final sample of 142 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters was selected for full-text analysis.

The selected publications were examined using thematic coding to identify core pedagogical elements, theoretical synergies, and practical applications relevant to inclusive teaching. Coding categories emerged both deductively from the research questions and inductively from recurring themes in the literature. This dual coding process allowed for a robust cross-comparison of how gamification, scaffolding, and the integrative background converge in support of inclusive practices. Articles were grouped according to key themes such as motivation and engagement, support for cognitive development, emotional scaffolding, use of narrative structures, and implementation in diverse classroom settings.

Particular attention was given to studies documenting the application of gamification techniques in inclusive classrooms. These contributions often highlight the use of game mechanics - such as point systems, badges, leaderboards, and adaptive challenges - as motivational tools that enhance student engagement and autonomy. When linked to user-centered design principles and supported by emerging technologies (e.g., virtual reality, artificial intelligence, educational robotics), gamification strategies

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demonstrate significant promise in addressing the unique needs of SEN learners.

Additionally, empirical and conceptual studies on Bruner's scaffolding were reviewed to understand its contemporary interpretations and implementations. The literature illustrates how scaffolding has evolved beyond a purely cognitive construct to include emotional and metacognitive dimensions. The reviewed works consistently demonstrate the value of scaffolding in fostering student autonomy, particularly through gradual withdrawal of support as learners gain competence. These findings align with the inclusive education imperative of promoting self-regulated learning in heterogeneous classrooms.

The integrative background (*sfondo integratore*), developed by Canevaro and Zanelli within the Italian pedagogical tradition, emerged in the review as a powerful mechanism for creating emotionally resonant and contextually meaningful learning environments. Literature on the integrative background emphasizes the creation of shared class narratives that connect academic content to students' lived experiences. Such an approach fosters inclusion by allowing diverse learners to recognize themselves within the learning process and by reducing psychological and cultural barriers.

Cross-comparative analysis of the literature revealed multiple points of theoretical convergence. For instance, gamification's narrative and experiential dimensions resonate with the story-based nature of the integrative background, while the structure of reward-based learning aligns well with the progressive support mechanisms inherent in scaffolding. Furthermore, all three methodologies center the learner's active role in the educational process and emphasize flexibility, adaptability, and engagement - three pillars of inclusive pedagogy.

Methodologically, the review also incorporated citation analysis to identify influential authors, institutions, and publication trends within the research domain. Bibliometric indicators from Scopus and Web of Science were used to track the evolution of scholarship on each approach, identify interdisciplinary collaborations, and assess the geographical distribution of research outputs.

While no statistical or experimental data analysis was employed due to the qualitative nature of the study, the systematic and structured methodology enabled a deep conceptual synthesis. This conceptual mapping laid the groundwork for the proposed integrative model of inclusive education, which combines gamification, scaffolding, and the integrative background into a unified framework.

The methodological design of this study not only allowed for the identification of effective inclusive teaching practices but also offered a meta-reflection on the epistemological underpinnings of each approach. This

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included considerations of constructivism, social learning theory, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and narrative pedagogy. Each of these theoretical orientations contributes to understanding why and how the three methodologies under study align with the goals of inclusive education.

Ultimately, this methodological process yielded a comprehensive understanding of the pedagogical affordances of gamification, scaffolding, and integrative background approaches. It also facilitated the identification of gaps in the current research landscape, such as the scarcity of longitudinal studies that measure the long-term impact of these methodologies on inclusion outcomes. Future empirical research is needed to further validate and refine the theoretical model proposed here, ideally through mixed-method or action-research designs conducted in real-world classroom contexts.

In summary, the methods employed in this study support the dual aims of answering the proposed research questions: (1) to map the theoretical interconnections among the three pedagogical approaches, and (2) to extract effective, transferable instructional practices for inclusive and personalized learning. The conceptual framework generated through this systematic and thematic review provides a foundation for the development of innovative teaching models that are both inclusive and responsive to the complex realities of contemporary classrooms.

To enhance transparency and provide an overview of the review process, Table 1 summarizes the key conceptual phases, their focus, and resulting contributions.

Table 1. Conceptual phases of the literature-based review

Phase	Description	Outcome
Conceptual Framing	Identification of the three core constructs: gamification, scaffolding, and the integrative background, within the context of inclusive education.	Defined theoretical pillars guiding the review.
Source Selection	Manual selection of 22 relevant sources based on theoretical significance, methodological clarity, and relevance to inclusive practices (2010–2024).	A curated, high-quality bibliographic corpus.
Thematic Analysis	Thematic reading and categorization of literature focusing on key pedagogical functions, such as engagement, differentiation, and emotional support.	Identification of recurring educational themes across all three methodologies.
Comparative Synthesis	Analysis of conceptual overlaps and complementarities among the three approaches, highlighting their contribution to inclusive education when integrated.	Triadic framework linking motivation, scaffolding, and narrative meaning-making.
Model Formulation	The construction of a theoretical model integrating the three methodologies, aligned with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles.	A conceptual triangle of inclusive pedagogy supporting personalized and equitable learning.

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Results

The results of this study respond to the two central research questions: (1) identifying the theoretical interconnections among gamification, Bruner's scaffolding, and the integrative background, and their potential to support inclusive education; and (2) determining effective and transferable instructional practices that promote personalized learning and the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) across diverse educational settings.

Theoretical Interconnections

The systematic review highlighted strong conceptual and practical synergies among the three pedagogical approaches under investigation. Gamification, scaffolding, and the integrative background - though initially distinct - demonstrate converging educational aims and complementary mechanisms when applied in inclusive contexts.

Gamification emerged from the literature as a motivational tool with significant potential to function as a form of emotional and cognitive scaffolding. Through the integration of game elements such as points, levels, digital badges, adaptive feedback, and social collaboration, gamification supports students' engagement and perseverance (Kiryakova *et al.*, 2014; Daineko *et al.,* 2023; Jadán-Guerrero *et al.*, 2023; Baumuratova, *et al.*, 2024). Della Volpe (2024) notes that gamification offers emotionally rich, context-sensitive environments that act as scaffolding devices. These environments are particularly effective for students with special educational needs, as they help sustain attention and boost self-efficacy through positive reinforcement and repetition.

Bruner's concept of scaffolding remains foundational in inclusive education research. Originating from Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), scaffolding refers to structured pedagogical support that is gradually withdrawn as the learner becomes more autonomous. Bruner further develops the theoretical nuance in Actual Minds, Possible Worlds (1986). This mechanism aligns closely with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) - the space where learners perform tasks with guidance that they could not yet accomplish independently (Wells, 1999; Moll, 1990). The literature consistently confirms that such contingent, fading support enhances teachers' ability to respond flexibly to students' cognitive and emotional readiness, making it especially effective in inclusive, diverse classroom environments (Tudge, 1992).

The integrative background, as originally conceptualized by Canevaro, Lippi, and Zanelli (1988), represents a pedagogical framework that adds a critical narrative and emotional dimension to inclusive education. It supports the construction of meaningful learning by anchoring instruction in students'

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lived experiences, cultural contexts, and individual identities. This approach promotes a learning environment in which all students - particularly those with special educational needs - can see themselves reflected in the educational process, fostering both cognitive engagement and emotional belonging. Dainese (2019) further develops the theoretical foundations of the integrative background, emphasizing its role as a dynamic and inclusive scaffolding structure that interweaves personal stories, collective memory, and the symbolic dimension of the classroom. In this sense, the integrative background functions both as an organizational device and a semantic framework, capable of reducing educational barriers and enhancing participation through shared, emotionally resonant narratives. According to studies such as those published in La Nouvelle Revue de l'Adaptation et de la Scolarisation (Mäkinen, M., & Mäkinen, E., 2011), this methodology fosters a collective narrative that reinforces inclusion by allowing students to feel recognized and emotionally secure within the classroom space

The convergence of these three approaches becomes most evident when examined through the lens of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Each strategy contributes a unique layer: gamification provides engagement and motivation; scaffolding structures the learning process; and the integrative background embeds knowledge in emotionally relevant contexts. Della Volpe (2024) explicitly connects scenario-based learning with both the UDL framework and the principles of the integrative background, illustrating how shared narratives serve as containers for personalized scaffolding and motivational design. These scenarios mirror students' lived experiences, enabling meaningful participation and reducing learning barriers (Della Volpe, 2024).

Effective and Transferable Practices

The review also identified a wide range of practical strategies that combine these methodologies in support of inclusive education. One recurring theme is the use of educational digital games in classrooms with SEN learners. These games offer structured progression, immediate feedback, and safe spaces for trial and error - aligning closely with the principles of scaffolding (Chen & Law, 2016; Hou & Keng, 2021). By embedding narrative elements from the integrative background, these digital environments become emotionally resonant, reinforcing memory, motivation, and social belonging (Barzilai & Blau, 2014).

For example, games that incorporate student-generated stories or culturally relevant themes provide both cognitive and affective scaffolding. These activities allow learners to practice autonomy while remaining anchored to a familiar and meaningful context. The integration of game mechanics such as badges, digital rewards, or progress dashboards promotes self-awareness

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and metacognition - key aspects of inclusive and personalized learning (Deterding et al., 2011).

Another effective practice includes collaborative learning tasks supported by gamified feedback systems. When paired with well-designed scaffolding - such as prompting questions, structured peer support, and gradual task difficulty - these experiences foster both inclusion and academic resilience. The literature also supports differentiated instruction models that leverage scaffolding techniques and narrative context to adjust complexity levels without excluding learners with specific challenges.

Importantly, the integrative background provides a framework for culturally sustaining pedagogy, emphasizing the role of school as a place of shared meaning-making. By inviting students to bring their personal narratives into the classroom, educators foster a sense of identity and relevance. This, in turn, reduces psychological barriers to participation, especially for learners from marginalized or diverse backgrounds (Canevaro et al., 1988).

In recent years, studies have documented the application of integrative background techniques in digital platforms, particularly through scenario-based gamified learning. These environments use branching narratives, role-playing elements, and collaborative missions to promote inclusion and personalize learning trajectories. Scenario-based learning tools, when informed by UDL and scaffolded design, enable educators to create differentiated pathways that respect each learner's pace and interests.

These findings align with those of Liasidou (2015), who argues that inclusive pedagogies must be flexible, relational, and responsive to learners' identities and needs. Moreover, gamified practices are increasingly supported by technologies such as educational robotics and virtual reality, which can be tailored to accommodate different sensory, cognitive, and motor needs. These innovations extend the scaffolding metaphor into multimodal spaces, allowing learners to engage through various channels.

The integrative model proposed in this study synthesizes these insights by positioning gamification, scaffolding, and the integrative background as overlapping supports in a triadic framework. Gamification serves as the entry point for engagement, scaffolds the learner's journey, and the integrative background ensures emotional and cultural connection. Together, these approaches create an inclusive ecosystem where students with SEN can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Cross-study comparisons further reveal the adaptability of this model across educational contexts. Whether in primary schools, special education programs, or mainstream inclusive settings, the integration of these methods proves to be both effective and flexible. However, the review also indicates a lack of longitudinal data on the sustained impact of these strategies. Future research should therefore include longitudinal designs to assess how

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integrated pedagogical models influence long-term academic outcomes, social integration, and learner autonomy.

In conclusion, the results of this study affirm that gamification, scaffolding, and the integrative background are theoretically and practically compatible in fostering inclusive and personalized education. Their intersection offers a powerful strategy set to address the diverse needs of learners in real-world educational contexts. By centering the student experience, acknowledging cognitive and emotional diversity, and providing adaptive learning pathways, this triadic model represents a significant contribution to the field of inclusive pedagogy.

Discussion

The findings of this review suggest that gamification, scaffolding, and the integrative background are not isolated didactic strategies but rather complementary methodologies that - when employed in an integrated manner - can powerfully support inclusive and personalized education. Each of the three approaches offers unique but synergistic contributions to the creation of engaging, differentiated, and emotionally resonant learning environments. Together, they construct a flexible pedagogical framework adaptable to the diverse needs of students, particularly those with special educational needs (SEN).

Gamification acts as an emotional and motivational bridge, scaffolding supports cognitive and metacognitive development, and integrative backgrounds provide a cultural and narrative framework for learning. Together, they allow educators to tailor instruction to the individual profiles of learners, promoting engagement, autonomy, and deep understanding.

The integration of these three methodologies aligns with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which emphasizes flexibility, student agency, and multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression. In the proposed model, each approach fulfills a UDL function:

Gamification → Enhances engagement and motivation
Scaffolding → Structures cognitive development and gradual autonomy
Integrative background → Anchors learning in emotional and cultural meaning

This triadic configuration supports personalized learning pathways, allowing students to advance at their own pace while engaging with content in ways that are emotionally relevant and cognitively accessible.

Below is a conceptual diagram summarizing the central contribution of this article:

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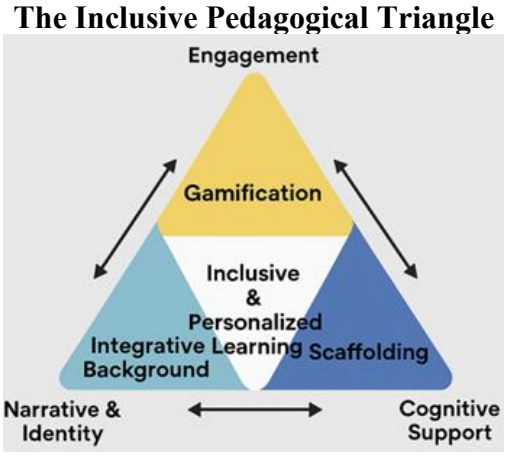

Figure 1. The Inclusive Pedagogical Triangle: Interactions among Gamification, Scaffolding, and Integrative Background

Such integration also encourages inclusive instructional design, where tasks are not only accessible but also personally meaningful. For instance, a gamified math lesson based on a culturally familiar story - with adaptive difficulty and real-time scaffolding - can support both struggling and advanced learners. This promotes individual growth without disrupting classroom cohesion.

Limitations of the current research include the relatively small number of empirical studies that explicitly combine all three methodologies. Moreover, successful implementation demands significant teacher training and curricular flexibility, which may not be uniformly available.

Nonetheless, these approaches align strongly with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles and offer promising avenues for reducing educational barriers and improving outcomes for students with disabilities.

This triangle represents how the three approaches synergize to support personalized learning. At the center lies the goal of inclusive education, achieved through the interplay of motivational engagement (gamification), structured learning support (scaffolding), and emotional-cultural resonance (integrative background).

Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that significant theoretical and methodological synergies exist among gamification, scaffolding, and the integrative background, and that these can be meaningfully integrated to construct a coherent and inclusive pedagogical model. Rather than operating in isolation, these three approaches offer complementary contributions that, when combined, create a robust framework capable of addressing the multifaceted needs of today's diverse classrooms.

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Gamification, by promoting engagement through motivational mechanisms and emotional resonance, facilitates learner participation and persistence. Scaffolding ensures cognitive and metacognitive support through adaptable and gradually withdrawn guidance, enabling students to progress at their own pace toward autonomy. The integrative background adds a fundamental narrative and cultural dimension to learning, allowing students to see their identities reflected in the educational process and to connect more deeply with content.

Together, these methodologies form a triadic model that supports personalized learning and inclusive education, particularly for students with special educational needs (SEN). The model aligns well with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, reinforcing the idea that inclusive practices should be embedded from the outset in curriculum and instruction - not added as accommodations after the fact.

Despite the promising potential of this integrated approach, challenges remain. The lack of empirical research combining all three methodologies in a single educational intervention limits the generalizability of the model. Moreover, successful implementation requires systemic support, including teacher training, curricular flexibility, and access to appropriate technologies. These structural factors must be addressed to ensure that inclusive innovation becomes a sustainable reality in varied educational settings.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal and mixed-method studies to evaluate the effectiveness of this triadic model over time, especially in terms of academic achievement, social participation, and emotional well-being. In particular, further exploration is needed into how this model can be adapted to different age groups, subject areas, and cultural contexts. It is also crucial to develop teacher training frameworks and curricular tools that translate the theoretical model into daily classroom practices.

In conclusion, the integration of gamification, scaffolding, and an integrative background offers not only a conceptual contribution to inclusive pedagogy but also practical guidance for educators seeking to create learning environments that are accessible, equitable, and transformative. By centering learners' experiences, diversifying instructional strategies, and fostering deep engagement, this model paves the way for a more inclusive and meaningful future in education.

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