


# BEYOND BARRIERS: INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES FOR THE INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN SCHOOL SPORTS ACTIVITIES

## OLTRE LE BARRIERE: STRATEGIE INNOVATIVE PER L'INCLUSIONE DI STUDENTI CON BISOGNI EDUCATIVI SPECIALI NELLE ATTIVITÀ SPORTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

In a constantly dynamic and changing society, educational institutions bear the responsibility to foster inclusive behaviour towards individuals with Special Educational Needs. Sport activities such as baskin and sitting volley represent tool for instilling an inclusive culture from the early stages of education, influencing the entire school community. Inclusiveness transcends physical access, aiming to create an environment that appreciates diversity and encourages universal participation.

In una società dinamica e in evoluzione, le istituzioni scolastiche devono promuovere un comportamento inclusivo nei confronti degli studenti con Bisogni Educativi Speciali. Attività sportive come il baskin e il sitting volley rappresentano validi approcci per instillare una cultura inclusiva fin dalle prime fasi dell'istruzione. La costruzione di una società inclusiva trascende l'accesso fisico e mira a creare un ambiente che apprezzi la diversità e incoraggi la partecipazione universale.

### KEYWORDS

Inclusive didactics; Special Educational Need; Baskin; Sitting Volley  
Didattica inclusiva, Bisogni Educativi Speciali, Baskin, Sitting Volley.

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## Introduction

Nowadays, it is well known the role and importance that physical activity and motor education plays in the life of both adults and children. While talking about the benefits from a physical point of view may appear quite obvious in this context, it is instead interesting to deepen the role that motor and sports practice play on the cognitive, intellectual, relational and social people' life. Psycho-pedagogical theories of development, have always considered motor skills and movement as essential features in children's development, able to substantially contribute to their growth from both physical and psychological aspects (Boulch, 1992) Motor practice, especially when begun in early childhood, assumes a central role in facilitating the harmonious development of the child (Coppola & Stefano, 2015). Through physical activity, children not only develop motor skills and coordination, but also experiences an important cognitive learning process. Indeed, motor practice encourages the development of cognitive patterns, stimulating memory, concentration, and problem-solving skills (Cristiana & GOMEZ PALOMA, 2014; van der Niet et al., 2015). In addition, the involvement in motor activities promotes social and relational interactions, fostering the development of essential social-emotional skills and, at the same time, improving the child's self-esteem levels, enabling them to develop greater self-awareness and sense of self-efficacy (Marcolongo & Mariani, 2018). To this regard, Federici and colleagues showed that the implementation of a motor activity programme (six months, two lessons a week) in a primary school led to an improvement of the levels of self-efficacy in those children who belong to the experimental group compared to the control group (i.e., those who do not play physical activity). Hence, in this context, motor practice plays a key role in providing children a stimulating and inclusive environment, thus helping to positively impact their growth and learning pathway (Federici, 2018).

In today's educational landscape, the need to overcome barriers to the inclusion of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) (in Italy referred to as BES) in school sports activities has become an unavoidable priority. The expression "Special Educational Needs" (SEN) refers to special needs that students may have in the educational environment, resulting from disabilities or conditions that require additional educational support (Ianes & Cramerotti, 2013). With respect to the Italian legislative framework, Special Educational Needs have been officially institutionalised through the Ministerial Decree of 27 December 2012 (which establishes the regulatory framework for the identification and definition of Special Educational Needs (Ianes & Cramerotti, 2013). This legislation provides guidelines

for the recognition of each student's educational needs, arising from disabilities, specific learning disorders, and other conditions which may require additional educational support such as socio-economic, linguistic and cultural disadvantage (lanes & Cramerotti, 2013). In this inclusive perspective, an essential tool is represented by the Personalised Learning Plan (in Italy referred to as PDP), which identifies the pedagogical strategies and interventions that are needed in order to promote the inclusion and full development of students with Special Educational Needs within schools (Dainese, 2015). The PDP aims to personalise the educational approach in order to address the specific needs of each individual, thus promoting an inclusive school environment that foster the growth of all students respecting and preserving their individual characteristics. Creating an environment that encourages the active and meaningful participation of all students, including those with disabilities or special educational needs, is a crucial step towards a more inclusive society that respects diversity.

However, the challenges related to implementation of effective inclusion strategies are multiple and complex. Physical, social and psychological barriers can significantly limit the participation and the positive experience of students with SEN in school sports activities. The lack of awareness and educators' specific training, taken together with inadequate facilities and resources, can hamper the creation of an inclusive and welcoming environment for all.

In today's rapidly changing educational context, the promotion of inclusive physical education is not only a desirable goal, but an indispensable necessity to ensure equality of opportunity and empowerment of every individual within the school context. Therefore, the aim of this essay is to examine in depth the existing challenges and to propose innovative and practical strategies to overcome these barriers and promote a truly inclusive school sport environment.

## **1. Inclusive didactics strategies and special educational needs.**

The advent of special pedagogy was a milestone that made possible the development of theories and teaching methodologies able to take into account the individual characteristics of each student, providing the necessary impulse to shape a learning environment that responds to the heterogeneous needs of students, including those with Special Educational Needs (NES). Indeed, the purpose of special pedagogy is to develop strategies and models of action able to reduce differences and, at the same time, enable the development of each individual's

potential (Gaspari, 2021). In this perspective, inclusive teaching strategies aim at the personalisation of teaching and are mirrored in a series of flexible and adaptable practices to ensure optimal involvement of each student.

In this inclusive and integrated perspective, the concepts of *personalisation* and *individualisation* of teaching become the cardinal principles around which teaching action must turn. Teachers, through their methodological and educational approaches, must always be able to emphasise the non-standardisable uniqueness of each student, in order to foster the full realisation of the self (Lampacrescia & Porfiri, 2015). While the fundamental objective of the personalisation of teaching is for, each student, to achieve his/her own cognitive excellence in full respect of interests and learning styles, the individualisation of teaching aims to adapt teaching methods according to the needs and/or difficulties of each student while guaranteeing the achievement of objectives common to the entire class group (Baldacci, 2005). In this regard, dispensatory measures and compensatory tools are key resources aimed to ensure an effective learning process of students with SEN (Guaraldi et al., 2013). They are supportive teaching tools which are designed to reduce the barriers that some students may encounter during their learning process and are aimed to encourage and to promote the active students' participation. Dispensatory measures are teaching strategies aimed to prevent the SEN students from performing in ways that would make it excessively difficult to achieve a learning objective (Guaraldi et al., 2013). These include, for example, having more time to perform a task or avoiding reading aloud. On the other hand, compensatory measures represent a wide range of tools (such as concept maps to tablets and calculators) that enrich and, at the same time, lighten the student's learning experience (Ventriglia et al., 2017).

Within this articulated and complex perspective, it is evident that the role of teachers become a pivotal element in the realisation of a successful learning process. The methodologies and teaching strategies that teachers are called upon to adopt vary depending on the context and the difficulties that students with SEN have to deal with. These methodological approaches certainly include *peer tutoring* and *cooperative learning*.

Peer tutoring is a teaching methodology that places the SEN student and those without SEN on an equal level (Topping et al., 2017). Hence, the students' empowerment is promoted in a mutual and bidimensional way capable of creating an environment in which success and achievement is shared and celebrated together.

Cooperative learning is an inclusive teaching strategy through which students are organised into small groups and learn in small groups, supporting each other to achieve common goals, seeking to mutually improve their learning. This methodology differs from both competitive and individualistic learning and, unlike these, has the advantage to be suitable to every subject and curriculum. The teacher's task in this case is to organise activities by creating learning environments in which students work through a constant process of “group problem solving”, achieving goals whose realisation requires the personal contribution of all (Dansereau, 1988; McMaster & Fuchs, 2002).

## **2. Motor activities and Special Education Needs**

An educational process oriented towards inclusivity must ensure that each and every student has the opportunity to express him or herself equally, taking into account the abilities and potential of each student (Rosa & Madonna, 2019).

In this perspective, the integration of motor activity in education programmes represents a valuable facilitator to promote the inclusion of students with Special Educational Needs (BES), offering a range of benefits on a cognitive, social and relational level in full compliance with the principles of *Universalism*, the *joint school* and the *centrality of the person* (Caione, 2021). This practice not only contributes to physical development but also plays a fundamental role in creating an inclusive environment that values and supports diversity. In fact, the practice of sport has the capacity to satisfy intrinsic human needs through experiences of play, movement and group life (Palma & Ascione, 2017).

Practising motor activity benefits students with SEN on several levels. Indisputably, the practice of motor activity becomes an opportunity for students to reflect on their own corporeity, explore spaces and communicate and relate to others effectively (Minghelli, 2023). Similarly, the participation of SEN students in school motor activities encourages socialisation processes with their schoolmates while ensuring an improved sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Scarinci et al., 2022). From this point of view, the practice of motor activities becomes an essential tool for consolidating social and ethical values that are indispensable to provide the proper inclusion of all students in different social contexts (Caione, 2021).

Promoting inclusion through these activities contributes to the creation of a school community that celebrates diversity, welcomes differences and fosters a climate of mutual respect. Motor activities open new pathways for cognitive, social and

relational development, shaping an educational environment that embraces diversity and promotes the participation of all, regardless of their individual characteristics (Mura, 2009).

### **3. Baskin and sitting volleyball: two examples of inclusive sports activities.**

From what has been said so far, it is clear that in the construction of a truly inclusive educational process, a privileged role is played by the body, which becomes the unifying element of expressive and relational possibilities (Moliterni, c2013). Therefore, motor activity becomes the tool, the vehicle, able of fostering inclusion processes especially for students with special educational needs.

In this regard, an example of an inclusive sport is represented by *baskin*, a sport activity naturally inspired by basketball, of which it retains the main objective (i.e., making the hoop), while changing some rules in order to make it accessible to everyone (Sisti et al., 2021). The primary goal is to ensure participation by all regardless of skill level and the physical and/or cognitive abilities. In *baskin*, for example, players' roles are chosen according to each player's ability. Moreover, two more shooting positions are added with respect to the traditional basketball (Rosa & Madonna, 2019). In study conducted by Molitieni et al., it has been shown that the practice of *baskin* promotes prosocial behaviour and empathy, thus representing the ideal social vehicle to promote the values of inclusion and active citizenship (Moliterni & Mastrangelo, 2016).

Similarly, sitting volleyball is a sport loosely inspired by volleyball. However, unlike the traditional volleyball, players are sitting in the game court, whose dimensions are reduced, and the height of the net is lower. To this regard, D'Isanto showed that, through a specific four-week sitting volleyball training, athletes with disabilities had significantly improved their sporting skills, promoting, simultaneously, inclusive pattern of participation in sport (D'isanto, 2020). In another study conducted by Charalampos et al., it has been shown that the practice of sitting volleyball contributes to improving athletes' pro-social behaviour improving the team spirit and the ability of disabled players to externalize their emotions (Charalampos et al., 2015).

*Baskin* and sitting volleyball are just two examples of how sport can be shaped to suit the different abilities of participants, encouraging involvement and celebration of differences. These are activities that go beyond the mere concept of competitive practice but become facilitators for the creation of an inclusive environment that

enhances the contribution of each individual regardless of their physical characteristics and abilities.

## Conclusions

This essay explored the crucial role of physical activity and motor education in the holistic development of individuals, emphasising their impact not only on physical well-being, but also on cognitive, intellectual and social aspects. From the perspective of a constantly changing society, it is the task of the educational institution to lay the foundations for the construction and development of inclusive behaviour towards people with Special Educational Needs. From this perspective, sport becomes an essential vehicle for promoting a culture of inclusion from the earliest years of education. Its influence extends beyond the confines of the gymnasium, permeating the entire school community and helping to shape the mindset of students. Inclusiveness is not only about physical access to activities, but also about creating an environment that values diversity and encourages the participation of all, regardless of their characteristics. It is only by recognising the uniqueness of diversity that it is possible to ensure the development of an inclusive society that, in the words of Dario Ianes, incorporates within itself "the special normality" (Ianes, 2006).

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