NEED-SUPPORTIVE TEACHING FOR INCLUSIVE MOTOR EDUCATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOL: AN INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN FOR THE TFA SOSTEGNO LABORATORY GROUNDED IN SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

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ABSTRACT
The Italian support teacher is the daily figure of inclusive motor education for pupils with disabilities, yet the Specialisation Course (TFA Sostegno) devotes limited structured time to didactic-motor preparation. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory as a model of motivation and psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Ryan et al., 2025), and in Disability Studies as a critical lens against normalisation (Goodley et al., 2018; Florian, 2019), this paper proposes a 20-hour laboratory for primary school. The Italian kinesiological reform (Law 86/2019; Legislative Decree 36/2021; Law 234/2021) provides the professional context. Basic Psychological Needs are linked to inclusion understood as transformation, from which an eight-module architecture derives, illustrated through a worked instructional unit and a trainee assessment rubric.

KEYWORDS
Self-determination theory; need-supportive teaching; inclusive physical education; support teacher education; primary school.

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1. Introduction

The amendment to Article 33 of the Italian Constitution, acknowledging the educational, social and psychophysical well-being value of sport, and the broader kinesiological reform initiated by Law 86/2019 and developed through Legislative Decree 36/2021, have reshaped the professional space of movement within the Italian educational system.

Law 234/2021 made motor education a curricular subject in the fourth and fifth years of primary school, entrusting it to specialist teachers in Motor and Sports Sciences, while parliamentary proposals aim to recognise structured physical exercise as a preventive and therapeutic instrument within the National Health Service, in liaison with sports medicine.

The Italian support teacher occupies a position of particular interest: a legally specific figure of inclusion, co-holder of the class under Law 104/1992 and co-responsible for the Individualised Educational Plan under Legislative Decree 66/2017 (amended by Legislative Decree 96/2019), with no direct equivalent in most European systems (Canevaro, Ciambrone, & Nocera, 2021). In primary school the role works alongside the generalist teacher and, from the fourth year, alongside the specialist teacher of motor education, becoming the daily figure of the inclusive motor experience of pupils with disabilities.

Initial training is governed by Ministerial Decree 249/2010 and the Ministerial Decree of 30 September 2011, which include among the compulsory laboratories of the Specialisation Course (TFA Sostegno) the one on Methods and Didactics of Motor and Sport Activities. For primary school trainees, who come mainly from the Primary Education Sciences degree programme, the laboratory represents one of the formal spaces of didactic-motor preparation in the inclusive perspective.

International literature robustly documents the effectiveness of SDT-based training interventions in the development of need-supportive competencies in physical education teachers (Reeve & Cheon, 2021; Ahmadi et al., 2023; Tessier, Ginoux, & Shankland, 2022; Burgueño et al., 2024). Recent studies show the relevance of teacher support for engagement of students with disabilities in adapted motor activities (Lin, 2026; Krun & Nesen, 2026), and the limited preparation of pre-service teachers in implementing adapted physical education in inclusive classrooms (Peromingan et al., 2026; Utami, 2026).

This paper is positioned at the intersection between the constitutional framework and public policies for well-being, on the one hand, and the didactic models for the promotion of psychophysical well-being through movement, on the other. Placing the Italian support teacher within the kinesiological reform and arguing the relevance of Self-Determination Theory in critical dialogue with Disability Studies, the proposal consists of a redesigned TFA Sostegno laboratory for primary school whose theoretical scaffold descends into an operational architecture of eight modules, illustrated through a worked instructional unit and an assessment rubric of trainee competencies.

2. The kinesiology reform and the specificity of the Italian support teacher

Article 33 of the Italian Constitution places sport within the article devoted to education and research, acknowledging it as a public-interest area with implications for university education, professional systems and educational policies.

Law 86/2019 and Legislative Decree 36/2021 established four new professions (Basic, APA, Sports Kinesiologists and Sport Manager), with the introduction of ATECO code 86.96.01 aligned to the European NACE 2.0 classification. Law

234/2021 then integrated curricular motor education in primary school, entrusted to specialist teachers in Motor and Sports Sciences.

Recent literature analyses the compatibility between training objectives of degree courses and the kinesiologist profile (D'Isanto et al., 2022; D'Isanto et al., 2024), redefining the scientific and professional identity of Italian motor sciences and pointing to the need for an epistemological reassessment of the field and a consequent curricular reform (Cereda, 2025).

Parliamentary proposals aim to recognise structured physical exercise, already defined by Legislative Decree 36/2021, as a preventive instrument within the National Health Service, entrusting its administration to graduates in Motor Sciences in liaison with sports medicine and general practitioners, within "health gyms" and the essential levels of care. If approved, significant effects will follow on the new professions of movement and on the relationship between educational and health figures in schools, in coherence with the WHO Health 2020 indications.

The Italian support teacher is structurally different from analogous European figures: co-holder of the class and co-responsible for educational design across the formative process of the pupil, the role is accessed through a one-year specialisation course integrating educational disciplines, special didactics, laboratories and traineeship. The German Sonderpädagoge mainly operates within a school system where special schools retain significant presence; the Spanish maestro de Pedagogía Terapéutica is embedded in mainstream schools under a different legal status; the French enseignant spécialisé qualified through the CAPPEI accompanies inclusion in forms distinct from Italian co-ownership.

In primary school, the support teacher typically comes from the Primary Education Sciences single-cycle degree, with generalist preparation and specific instruction in motor didactics. With the introduction of the specialist teacher of motor education in the fourth and fifth years under Law 234/2021, the role operates in a context where generalist and specialist teachers coexist depending on the class, requiring didactic-motor preparation oriented towards the educational relationship, personalised design and professional liaison.

3. Self-Determination Theory and Disability Studies in critical dialogue

Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) is a macro-theory of motivation and psychological well-being grounded in the assumption that three Basic Psychological Needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness) exist, whose satisfaction produces autonomous motivation, engagement and well-being, while frustration generates demotivation, maladaptive behaviours and ill-being.

The theory has expanded through the study of teacher behaviours that support or hinder need satisfaction (Reeve & Cheon, 2021; Ahmadi et al., 2023), the analysis of student motivational profiles in physical education (Burgueño et al., 2024), and the exploration of cultural and economic variations in need support (Ryan et al., 2025). Context-specific research shows that teacher support for basic needs is associated with socio-emotional competencies (Wang, Zeng, & King, 2025), that peers can provide support in cooperative contexts (van Leeuwen, Hornstra, & Flunger, 2023), and that effects converge with teacher expectations theory (Hornstra, Stroet, Rubie-Davies, & Flint, 2023).

School-based motor activity exposes the pupil to frustration of the three basic needs: performance is visible, peer comparison is structural, the choice of

partners and roles takes place in public, and motor errors are immediately perceptible. For pupils with disabilities exposure is amplified and may translate into repeated learned helplessness, social isolation and progressive disengagement (Lin, 2026; Krun & Nesen, 2026). A need-supportive teaching style reduces the frustration of psychological needs, sustains autonomous motivation and protects psychological well-being in the motor experience, with SDT taking the shape of a theory of psychophysical well-being in movement (tab. 1).

Table 1. Need-supportive and need-thwarting behaviours in inclusive motor education.

Need	Need-supportive style	Need-thwarting style	Relevance for disability
Autonomy	Meaningful choice of task; justification of activity rationale; valuing the pupil's voice	Uniform and imposed tasks; control through external rewards; sanction of variance	Reduces the risk of learned helplessness in pupils with a history of motor exclusion
Competence	Progressive task gradation; informational feedback; visibility of individual progress	Social comparison; evaluative-only feedback; public exposure of failure	Protects against repeated failure experiences, frequent in motor activities
Relatedness	Construction of stable heterogeneous groups; individualised attention; cooperative orientation	Spontaneous group formation with structural exclusion; emotional distance	Reduces the risk of social isolation, particularly intense in physical education

Disability Studies (Goodley et al., 2018) have argued that an individual-psychological approach to disability risks turning inclusion into normalisation,

where the pupil becomes the object of an intervention aimed at bringing them closer to an implicit motor norm, rather than a subject whose voice redefines the norm itself.

The tension between SDT and Disability Studies is generative. SDT provides the operational model for teacher education, specifying what sustaining autonomy, competence and relatedness means in the educational motor relationship. Disability Studies, at the same time, provide the critical lens that prevents the model from sliding into normalisation: support for needs is offered to recognise the pupil with disabilities as an active subject in the construction of their own motor experience, rather than to realign them with a canonical motricity (fig. 1).

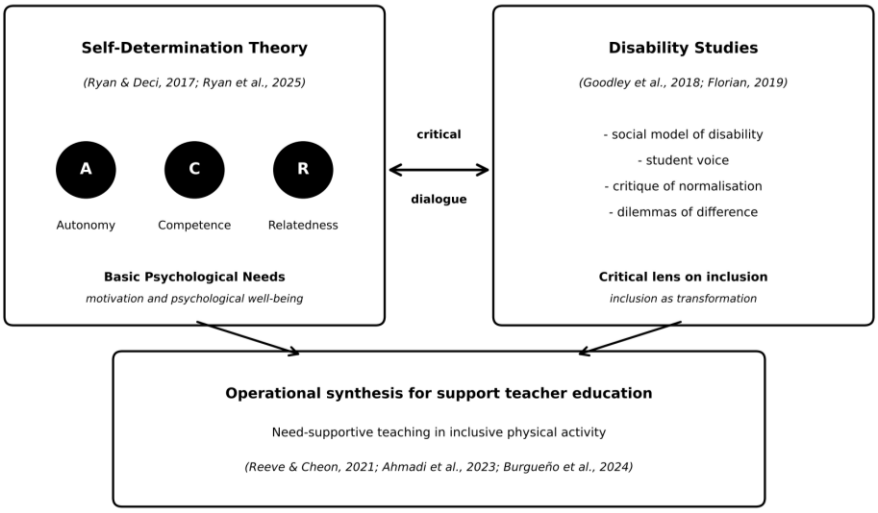


Figure 1. SDT and Disability Studies in critical dialogue.

4. The TFA Sostegno laboratory on methods and didactics of motor activities

The laboratory on Methods and Didactics of Motor and Sport Activities is included among the compulsory laboratories of the TFA Sostegno by the Ministerial Decree of 30 September 2011. Lasting approximately 20 hours, it is primarily entrusted to lecturers of the M-EDF/01 and M-EDF/02 scientific sectors, or of special didactics (M-PED/03). The plurality of pedagogical approaches reflects the plurality of Italian academic traditions in school-based motor education (Casolo, 2023), yet makes homogeneous and theoretically grounded preparation difficult.

The TFA Sostegno trainee for primary school is typically a qualified teacher holding a Master's degree in Primary Education Sciences, with motor preparation limited to the subject within the degree programme. The laboratory operates on an adult population with basic motor preparation, within a limited time and with the responsibility of building competencies for the daily inclusion of pupils with disabilities.

The role of the specialised Master teacher differs from that of the curricular teacher of physical education, whose university training is the object of structured reflection on the core curriculum for the Italian school (D'Elia, Mazzeo, & Raiola, 2018), now including, under Law 234/2021, the specialist teacher for primary school.

Three critical issues warrant intervention: the frequent absence of an explicit theoretical scaffold risks reducing training to a collection of technical adaptations by disability category, instead of a need-supportive relational stance transferable across contexts; the limited critical dialogue with Disability Studies tends to present inclusive motor education as an unproblematised

normative horizon; the restricted treatment of professional liaison with the new figures introduced by the kinesiology reform leaves the support teacher without a clear representation of their role in relation to the specialist teacher and to the territorial APA kinesiologist (Pace et al., 2024).

5. Methodology and laboratory architecture

This paper is theoretical-design in nature and falls within the preliminary phase of analysis and design of educational design research (Aiello et al., 2023). The implementation phase and empirical evaluation of the model constitute a subsequent development of the research line and lie outside the aims of the work.

The model was built through regulatory reconnaissance of the constitutional and kinesiological landscape, a narrative review of the literature on SDT, inclusive physical education, support teacher training and Disability Studies, and the operational translation of SDT principles into laboratory activities coherent with the TFA Sostegno primary strand. The adopted construction criteria include theoretical coherence with the SDT–Disability Studies scaffold, sustainability within 20 hours, calibration to primary school, transferability across universities and professional liaison with the figures introduced by the reform.

The design of motor activities in Italian schools constitutes a specific field of study (D'Elia & Raiola, 2019), within which the TFA Sostegno laboratory represents a formative space with its own constraints and aims. The proposed laboratory is articulated in eight modules of two hours and a half each, distributed across four formative phases (fig. 2).

An introductory phase is dedicated to the constitutional framework and the kinesiology reform as interpretative horizon. The theoretical double literacy of the trainee is grafted on it, moving first through SDT and then through the reading of disability from a motor perspective on both the functioning dimension (ICF-CY) and the critical one of Disability Studies. The third phase develops practical competencies of designing, delivering and analysing need-supportive motor activities in inclusive contexts, through cooperative learning, microteaching in the gym and critical use of digital technologies. The course closes with assessment, professional liaison and the final project work. Each module centres on one or more Basic Psychological Needs in a logic of progressive integration, and each output converges into the final project work as a piece of a unitary design (tab. 2).

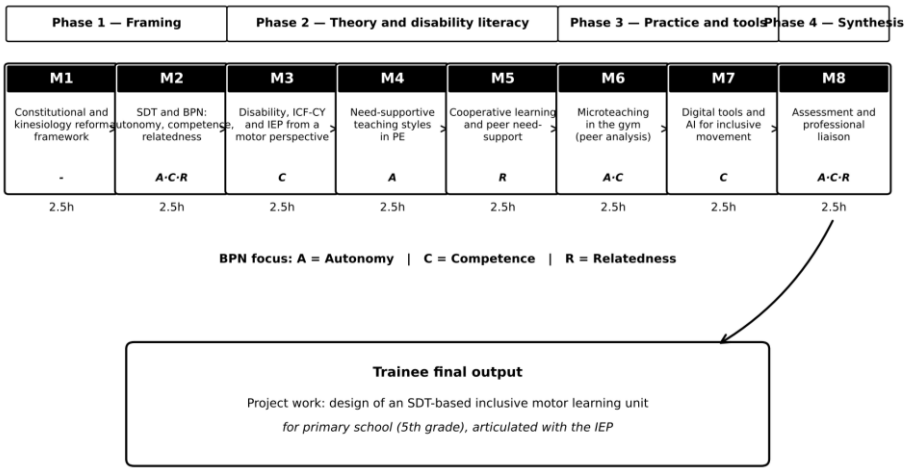


Figure 2. TFA Sostegno laboratory architecture (20 hours, 8 modules) for primary school.

Table 2. Structure of the laboratory in eight modules.

M.	Hours	Module title	Contents	BPN	Output
M1	2.5	Constitutional framework and kinesiology reform	Art. 33 Constitution; Law 86/2019; Legislative Decree 36/2021; Law 234/2021	—	Concept map
M2	2.5	SDT and Basic Psychological Needs	Autonomy, competence, relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017); psychological well-being	*A · C · R*	Operational glossary
M3	2.5	Disability, ICF-CY and IEP from a motor perspective	Motor reading of the functioning profile; Disability Studies (Goodley et al., 2018)	*C*	IEP analysis
M4	2.5	Need-supportive teaching styles in physical education	Motivational behaviours (Ahmadi et al., 2023); profiles in PE (Burgueño et al., 2024)	*A*	Adapted learning unit
M5	2.5	Cooperative learning and peer need-support	Motor cooperative learning (van Leeuwen et al., 2023); heterogeneous roles	*R*	Cooperative design
M6	2.5	Microteaching in the gym	Peer-led delivery and analysis with a need-supportive focus; video analysis	*A · C*	Video self-analysis
M7	2.5	Digital tools and AI for inclusive movement	Digital tools for engagement monitoring (Petrini, 2025)	*C*	Selected tool
M8	2.5	Assessment, professional liaison and motor IEP	Authentic rubrics; liaison with specialist teacher and territorial APA kinesiologist	*A · C · R*	Final project work

The final project work entails the design of an inclusive need-supportive instructional unit. The example presented is a four-lesson unit of sixty minutes each, aimed at a fifth-year primary school class with two pupils with disabilities

(Autism Spectrum Disorder level 1 under DSM-5; right-sided spastic hemiparesis). Titled Territori in movimento, it relies on a sequence from individual exploration to collective cooperation, mobilising the three basic needs in succession.

The design assumes three operational principles. Each lesson identifies a central Basic Psychological Need around which didactic choices are organised. Disability-related adaptations are structural components of the unit, with each pupil operating within a frame including visual schemas, differentiated materials, extended times and graded-responsibility roles. The role of the support teacher is defined in liaison with the specialist teacher of motor education, with shared design, communicative mediation and facilitation of class group interactions (tab. 3).

Table 3. Example instructional unit Territori in movimento (4 lessons × 60 minutes, fifth-year primary school class).

Lesson	Motor objective	BPN	Disability-related adaptations	Role of the support teacher
L1 Exploration	Basic motor patterns; spatial orientation	*Autonomy*	Visual schema of the pathway; extended time and supports	Co-design with the specialist teacher; visual mediation
L2 Coordination	Hand-eye coordination in pairs	*Relatedness*	Stable heterogeneous pairs; differentiated materials	Facilitation of interactions; modelling
L3 Strategy	Understanding and applying game rules	*Competence*	Visual schemas of rules; graded-responsibility roles	Scaffolding for understanding; peer tutoring
L4 Cooperative tournament	Team game with cooperative scoring	$A \cdot C \cdot R$	Redundant roles; cooperative scoring	Structured observation; final debriefing

The assessment of trainee competencies is based on a four-dimension, three-level rubric for formative reading of the course. The four dimensions (regulatory knowledge, mastery of SDT, inclusive design, professional liaison) correspond to the main axes of the laboratory. The three levels (basic, intermediate, advanced) describe progressively more articulated performances, where the advanced level coincides with the ability to integrate the different axes into a coherent design practice (tab. 4).

Table 4. Competence rubric for the TFA trainee at the end of the laboratory.

Competence dimension	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced
Kinesiological regulatory knowledge	Recognises the main regulations	Links regulations to the inclusive primary school context	Critically integrates regulations into the motor IEP
Mastery of Self-Determination Theory	Defines the three Basic Psychological Needs	Identifies need-thwarting behaviours in observed practice	Designs context-coherent need-supportive interventions
Inclusive design	Adapts pre-existing activities	Designs learning units with disability-specific adaptations	Designs accessible learning units integrated with the IEP
Professional liaison	Knows the figures (specialist teacher, APA kinesiologist)	Communicates with the specialist teacher of motor education	Co-designs with specialist teacher and APA kinesiologist

6. Discussion, limits and research perspectives

The model carries constitutive tensions worth explicit treatment. The most evident concerns the relationship between formative time and depth of competencies, since twenty hours do not suffice for expert training of the support teacher in inclusive motor activities. The model should be understood as the structured starting point of a formative trajectory the teacher continues

in professional practice, with the aid of liaison with the specialist figures of the new kinesiological landscape, enabled by an explicit theoretical scaffold that equips the trainee with a stable interpretative stance.

A tension of different nature, internal to the theoretical scaffold, concerns the SDT–Disability Studies dialogue: integration requires vigilance, because the risk is to read need-supportive teaching as an effective technique of normalisation, losing the political and relational dimension that Disability Studies posit as irreducible. The model assumes this tension in a generative key: SDT offers the operational grammar of the educational motor relationship, while Disability Studies prevent such grammar from crystallising into a manual of good practices neutralised on the critical plane.

A further tension emerges among the figures the reform places on the stage of educational movement: the specialist teacher of motor education and the APA kinesiologist, with the support teacher called to liaise with both. The risk is that the APA kinesiologist, a health-related figure, ends up substituting the support teacher in the motor relationship with the pupil with disabilities, pulling the experience back under the medical model. The laboratory model assumes the support teacher as the educational focal point, with APA kinesiologist and specialist teacher intervening as specialist liaison figures. Such liaison requires awareness of the training objectives of the degree pathways converging into the new professions of movement (D'Isanto et al., 2022), avoiding role overlaps while recognising the educational specificity of the support teacher.

A final tension concerns the generalisability of the model. Calibrated on the primary school strand of the Italian TFA Sostegno, its transferability is mediated by the specificity of a figure, the support teacher, that has no direct equivalent in most European systems. The founding principle, training teachers in inclusive contexts in a theoretically grounded need-supportive style, nonetheless

transcends the Italian system and dialogues with the international debate on pre-service teacher preparation for adapted physical education (Peromingan et al., 2026; Utami, 2026), offering a model of integrated training that places the educational teacher at the centre of the inclusive motor relationship.

The theoretical-design nature of the work points to the need for empirical validation through subsequent phases of implementation in real training contexts. Calibrated for primary school in light of the recent impact of Law 234/2021, the proposal leaves open the adaptation to lower secondary school, where the coexistence between support teacher and curricular teacher of physical education gives rise to a different professional and formative configuration.

From these tensions and limits, the research lines the work intends to open follow naturally. The most direct concerns the empirical experimentation of the model in Italian universities, with pre- and post-measurement of trainees' perceived need-support and qualitative analysis of their design productions. A comparative direction concerns the analysis of training pathways for teachers specialised in inclusive motor education in other European systems, within the frame of the European Qualifications Framework. A critical trajectory opens on the side of qualitative research and concerns the systematic listening of the voice of pupils with disabilities and in-service support teachers regarding their experiences of motor education, drawing on consolidated methodologies (Barr et al., 2023; D'Angelo et al., 2020; Dee-Price et al., 2021) that restore a knowledge speaking with disability. A twenty-hour laboratory can become a formative space in which the grammar of Self-Determination Theory and the critical vigilance of Disability Studies translate into a stance of the support teacher capable of recognising, in the motor experience of the pupil with disabilities, a subjectivity to accompany.

7. Conclusions

The Italian kinesiology reform and the constitutional recognition of the psychophysical well-being value of sport have opened a new political-educational space, within which the support teacher retains a specific and non-substitutable role as the daily educational focal point of the inclusive motor experience of pupils with disabilities.

The professional convergence promoted by the reform risks eroding this role by subtraction, transferring motor action to figures of a health-related or specialist character (D'Isanto et al., 2022; Cereda, 2025); in such a scenario the initial training of the support teacher acquires strategic value as an educational stance irreducible to the logics of clinical-functional intervention.

The proposal has identified in the laboratory on Methods and Didactics of Motor and Sport Activities a formative space redesignable in coherence with the international scientific debate, through Self-Determination Theory as scaffold of motivation and psychological well-being in the educational motor relationship (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Reeve & Cheon, 2021), and Disability Studies as critical lens able to prevent inclusion from sliding into normalisation (Goodley et al., 2018; Florian, 2019).

The operational articulation has taken the form of a didactic tool of twenty hours distributed in eight modules, with an example instructional unit for the fifth-year primary school class and an assessment rubric of trainee competencies. Its transferability, as declared among the limits, remains conditioned on the specificity of the context in which it is deployed, and any further adaptation would require a new negotiation among theoretical scaffold, programme regulation and trainee population.

The work positions itself at the intersection of public policies for well-being and inclusive didactics of the body, in dialogue with the WHO Health 2020 horizon and the discussion on didactic models for the promotion of psychophysical well-being through movement in formal learning environments. The specificity of the Italian support teacher becomes paradigmatic in its capacity to interrogate the European debate on teacher preparation for inclusive motor education (Peromingan et al., 2026; Utami, 2026), and to reaffirm that, in the motor relationship with the pupil with disabilities, the educational dimension precedes and grounds the technical-specialist one (Canevaro et al., 2021; Dell'Anna et al., 2023).

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