

## **EMBODIED TRAINING AND SELF-DETERMINATION IN DISABILITY**

### ***EMBODIED TRAINING E AUTODETERMINAZIONE NELLA DISABILITÀ***

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#### **Abstract**

The contribution highlights how the Biodanza SRT System is an Embodied Centered innovative educational strategy which, in a pedagogical, cognitive and social key, is able to promote personal capabilities and empowerment in people (with or without disabilities), helping to deepen the reflection on the binomial of self-determination in disability and on the impact that educational interventions have in promoting self-determined and self-determining behaviors to be active protagonists of one's life. The construct of self-determination thus becomes one of the crucial contemporary issues for special pedagogy.

Il contributo evidenzia come il Sistema *Biodanza SRT* sia una strategia educativa innovativa *Embodied Centred* che, in chiave pedagogica, cognitiva e sociale, è in grado promuovere nelle persone (con o senza disabilità) *capabilities* ed *empowerment* personale contribuendo ad approfondire la riflessione sul binomio dell'autodeterminazione nella disabilità e sull'impatto che gli interventi educativi hanno nel promuovere comportamenti autodeterminati e autodeterminanti l'essere protagonisti attivi della propria vita. Il costrutto di autodeterminazione diventa pertanto una delle questioni contemporanee cruciali per la pedagogia speciale.

**Key-words** Self-determination; Special Pedagogy; Disability; Capability Approach; Biodanza SRT  
**Parole-chiave:** Autodeterminazione; Pedagogia Speciale, Disabilità; Capability; Biodanza SRT

#### **Introduction**

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WHO defines health as a condition of physical, psychological and social well-being and when a person is happy and satisfied with his life, it means that he is comfortable in life contexts and with people. There are different factors that contribute to well-being: on the one hand individual ones such as subjective well-being, optimism, happiness, perseverance, self-determination and on the other contextual ones, such as social support, a sense of belonging, harmony with one's own living environment (Ghedin, 2009).

This interpretation is also recalled among the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, where the commitment to full and effective participation and inclusion in society of disabled people, respecting their autonomy and individual independence, including the freedom to make one's own choices, while safeguarding equal opportunities and accessibility (Visentin, 2016). For people (with and without disabilities) the transition to adulthood represents a time of great expectations and hopes. The adult with disabilities is still today bound to a condition of estrangement, alienation and dependence to which scientific psycho-pedagogical research has tried to respond in the last thirty years by developing theoretical and operational models to counter aimed at the emancipation of "denied identity" (Goussot, 2009) perfectly in line at international level with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, United Nations, 2006) and nationally pursuant to the Law on After Us (L. 112/2016), already anticipated by Law 6/2004.

However, despite these acknowledgments, the reality for many adults with disabilities is very different as they are not only limited in the possibility of making choices independently and expressing preferences regarding the main aspects of their daily life (Agran, Blanchard, Wehmeyer, 2000; Mithaug, 1998; Nirje, 1972; Ward, 1992; Wehmeyer, 1997) but also hampered by overprotective families and the belief that they know what is best for them (Mitchell, 2012).

Arising from the events of US political activism (eg Independent Living Movement), self-determination presents itself as a complex notion with deep historical and philosophical roots: from the "right of self-determination" promoted by the Swedish philosopher Nirje (1972) to the first psychological applications of self-determination theory (Deci, Ryan, 1985) or, in the promotion of an inclusive society, with a crucial variable in Quality of Life models (Brown, Bayer, 1989; Schalock, 1991; Felce, Perry, 1995) (Giraldo, 2019). In the inseparable link between individual development and empowerment, an educational commitment translates into "allowing the activation of this potential through the creation of a" facilitating "environment in which the actors involved can be able to co-evolve together in the direction of positive development "(Ghedin, 2009).

In an embodied key, the Biodanza System is proposed as an integrated theoretical-practical and experiential training for an embodied cognition (Wilson, Golonka, 2013) and an innovative educational strategy facilitating in people (with or without disabilities) capability, self-determination and personal empowerment. Body and emotions together determine the emotional-existential quality of the experience and, consequently, the thoughts and learnings about that experience (Oliverio, 2009). The Embodied Centered methodology of Biodanza SRT is well suited as an educational perspective focused on life that involves a variety of factors such as the positive perception of one's self, the development of self-reflection and problem solving skills, the improvement of the level of self-esteem, self-efficacy and resilience in order to develop identity, personal empowerment and self-determination.

In this way, there is a need for a collective commitment aimed at building opportunities for well-being for people with disabilities, giving them the opportunity to choose, self-determining, the dimensions of well-being to be developed and through which methods and aspire to a full and autonomous life as much as possible in which the barriers to the participation of people with disabilities in social life are removed.

### ***1. Special pedagogy and Capability Approach***

The capability approach is a normative approach to human well-being that focuses on people's actual ability to achieve their own well-being rather than their mere right or freedom to do so.

The development of the capability approach offers interesting research trajectories for special pedagogy as it is an approach that looks at the relationship between the resources held by people and what they can do with them (Sen, 1999).

From the pedagogical point of view, the capability approach places the accent on the theme of human educability and development as an expression of individual potential, shifting the focus from the specificities of the condition of disability to the search for equality in terms of choices and opportunities (Sen, 2006; Nussbaum, 2007). In the educational-pedagogical field, "capability", "functionings" and "agency" are key concepts of the capability approach interposed as a function of the broader perspective of human rights, based on the criteria of social justice and equity. (Walker, Unterhalter., 2007; Alessandrini, 2014).

The capability perspective "focuses on the" ability to do "and on the new meaning that the term" competent "assumes, shifting attention to the ends (agency / substantial freedom) that individuals seek to achieve, by converting their resources into functionings) of one's life "distancing itself from considering competent action a mere finalization centered on the means (productivity / income). (Alessandrini, 2014). The agency is the result of the activation of internal resources of the subject or combined (Walker, Unterhalter 2007) with the conditions set by the environment and presupposes that each individual is a human being with a dignity, responsible in determining his own life project in light of the objectives of real interest for personal development, capable of orienting oneself towards choices that are the result of a reasoned and conscious reflection.

In education, everyone is an "agent" of their own learning and / or agent of the use of tools useful for the learning (or unfortunately of failure) of other subjects. Agency is a strategic aspect in the vision of the capability approach since it allows you to imagine other ways to act in order to assume new ways of being (Taddei, 2018). The capability approach, in fact, shifts the focus from the specificities of the condition of disability to the search for equality in terms of real choices and opportunities and social participation (Sen, 2006; Nussbaum, 2007) and therefore means "providing a concept of citizenship or civic equality in accordance with the position of disabled people "(Terzi, 2013).

The promotion of empowerment (or agency) must be understood on the one hand as strengthening the potential of people with disabilities, on the other, as recognition of the protagonism of the latter within the community to which they belong.

The capability approach shares the perspective of inclusion and empowerment, according to a holistic vision of the human being such as the bio-psycho-social paradigm and the ICF (WHO, 2001) with the interpretation of disability centered on the concept of functioning , and the perspective based on

human rights enshrined in particular by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UN, 2006).

"The competent participation of people with disabilities and their organizations produces innovation because it allows to express the point of view on their condition, often ignored or distorted if it is interpreted by institutions and professionals still firm in a medical-individual model of disability; and that direct involvement is essential to produce an inclusive society that respects the human rights of these people" (Griffo, 2018).

The well-being of people consists in the possibility of carrying out life projects that individuals are right to choose and pursue thanks to the capabilities they bring. From the Capability Approach perspective, well-being is much more than a question of money: it is an economy of human development, which pays particular attention to education as a source of social justice and interculturality.

"An education is truly suitable for freedom only if it is such as to form free citizens, citizens who are free not thanks to their wealth or their birth, but because they are able to autonomously guide their own rationality" (Nussbaum, 2007).

## **2. The construct of self-determination in special pedagogy: disabilities and educational perspectives**

Self-determination, in the philosophical tradition, according to the entry in the dictionary of the Italian language, is the "act by which man determines himself according to his own law: an expression of man's positive 'freedom', and therefore of responsibility and imputability of all his wishes and actions "(Treccani.it).

The construct of self-determination In addition to this personal trait, it also has a meaning referring to the community and close to the socio-political reflection on the basis of which self-determination represents the right of a nation or a group of people to freely choose their own system of government (internal self-determination) and to be free from any external domination (external self-determination) (Treccani.it).

In the psycho-educational field, one of the first applications of this construct dates back to the Self-Determination Theory model (Deci and Ryan, 1985) according to which self-determination represents the ability to choose between different options, determining, through these choices, one's own acting personal. This ability requires not only precise individual skills (ability to choose; decision-making ability; ability to define goals; problem-solving skills; self-defense and leadership skills; self-awareness and self-knowledge; self-management and self-regulation skills), but also a particularly favorable environment for the person (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Autonomy, relationship and (personal) competence are the three psychological needs (innate and universal) intrinsic to the concept of self-determination, whose satisfaction - on which individual motivation also plays a fundamental role - is crucial for subjective well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The psychoeducational meaning of the construct of self-determination (Wehmeyer, 1998) in special pedagogy (in particular in the studies on intellectual disability in adolescence and adulthood) has been analyzed in the last twenty years by various authors who have returned a rather articulated and complex image. characterized by different perspectives conventionally divided into three macro-categories (Milthaug, 1998): ecological, socio-political, psycho-educational. The ecological perspective analyzes the environmental factors that may or may not affect the different life contexts

of the (adult) person with disabilities and consequently influence the levels of AD. These factors include both the "immediate" life environment in which the individual is inserted (housing, education, professional, family, etc.) and the possible conditioning at the macrosocial level (culture, legal-political system, etc.) (Abery, 1994 ; Abery, Stancliffe, 1996; Stancliffe, 2000).

The socio-political perspective is exemplified by the transition from a highly regulated and regulated social system to a person-centered one, in which people with disabilities (or those who care for them) can decide and control the subsidies and funding they want. and be able to use. According to this model, CEO is based on four principles: the freedom to choose where and with whom to live and how to spend one's time; the ability to control the money needed for their support; support organized in highly personalized ways based on the wishes and needs of the person; responsibility for the wise use of public funding and to contribute to one's community (Mithaug, 1996a; 1996b; 1998). The psycho-educational perspective, starting from the self-determination theory developed by American psychologists (Deci, Ryan, 1985), refers to the functional model of self-determination theory which, while recognizing the role played by environmental factors (Wehmeyer, 1998; Wehmeyer, Bolding, 2001) pays greater attention to the personal dimension of the individual with disabilities, and precisely to the skills necessary for him / her to be able to self-determine. The essential characteristics of self-determined behavior are four: autonomy; self-regulation; psychological empowerment, self-realization (Wehmeyer, Garner, 2003). In this interpretation, self-determination is therefore understood as an ideal whose promotion guarantees the individual access to what he or she desires in his life and for his future (Wehmeyer 1996, Agran, 2000) not as a program or a way to design possible services for the person with disabilities, since self-determination consists in the subject's ability to act as a primary causal agent beyond external conditioning and influences (Wehmeyer, 1996).

Self-determination is a multidimensional construct that refers to the person's ability to act as a primary causal agent in their life and to make choices regarding their actions without undue external influence or interference (Wehmeyer, 1996) and can be more generally defined as a "Dispositional characteristic that manifests itself in acting as a causal agent" (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Rifenshark, Little, 2015), or a variable that, in promoting an inclusive society, becomes crucial in Quality of Life models (Brown, Bayer, 1989; Shalock, 1991; Fern, Perry, 1995). In the context of disability, the principle of self-determination has become the watchword for the recognition of the civil rights of people with disabilities which are sanctioned and reaffirmed, also in Italy, by the law on After Us (L. 112/2016) which makes use of what has already been mentioned in Article 1 of Law 6/2004: "to protect, with the least possible limitation of the ability to act, people who lack, in whole or in part, autonomy in carrying out the functions of daily life, through interventions of temporary or permanent support ". According to the principle of self-determination, they therefore claim their right to be involved in decisions relating to support and assistance services, as well as to all essential aspects of their life such as the Movement for Independent Life (International movement born in California in the seventies) which promotes the self-determination of people with disabilities to favor their full social inclusion by overcoming a merely welfare logic).

Also in line with the ICF (WHO, 2001), the level of IQ is not the only factor affecting the capacity for self-determination (Wehmeyer, Bolding, 2001) it would emerge from the functional interaction between individual characteristics, personal skills and competences. and the environments in which people with disabilities live, learn, work (Wehmeyer, Schwartz, 1997).



The ability to act in a self-determined manner depends both on the acquisition of specific individual skills and on the opportunities that the environment is able to offer so that these behaviors are really implemented (Cottini, 2016). Although there are not many studies examining the influence of environmental factors on self-determination, the literature suggests that, through targeted support and interventions, access to inclusive contexts leads to higher levels of self-determination regardless of intellectual functioning (Carter lane, Cooney, Weir, Moss, Machalicek 2013; Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, Little, Garner, Lawrence, 2007; Stancliffe, 1997).

Behind the principle of self-determination lies the legacy of modern thought deposited in the functional model of self-determination and in the Causal Agency Theory: freedom consists in the possibility of acting without impediments and constraints and an action is free when causally determined by intentions, from the desires and beliefs of the acting subject (Sacchi, Giraldo, 2018). If, self-determination means controlling one's life (Wehemeyer, 1998), then it is clear how, when placed in the context of disability, self-determined action is configured as awareness, (pro) activity, choice and participation. The causal agent, in fact, is the one who, from a tendentially passive recipient of care and assistance, turns the person into an active protagonist of his own life. (Sacchi, Giraldo, 2018).

If on a scientific level these conclusions raise few critical issues in those situations of disability characterized by low levels of functioning and significant cognitive impairments, on the other hand, both the specific skills of the person with disabilities and the opportunities offered by their own life context which tends to vicariously lack. decisions, even the most common ones relating to everyday life (Cottini, 2016).

There is a delicate balance between the need / right of AD of the same people with disabilities and the educational attention of the other (educator, parent, support administrator, etc.) and it is in the dialogue between these two poles, self-determination and protection, that we play both the task of the educator, the caregiver, the teacher, the parent in protecting and, at the same time promoting, the space of "the least possible limitation of the ability to act" of the person with disabilities (Law 6/2004) and the possibility of the latter of constructing its own identity and acting as the primary causal agent in the real world. The self-determined person operates as a causal agent with the intent of building his own future based on both his personal skills (such as knowing how to make choices, planning goals, directing and self-monitoring his behavior) and on opportunities and environment must offer so that such conduct can be really implemented. (Cottini 2016),

People with disabilities report that they actually enjoy scarce possibilities to make choices independently and to express preferences regarding the main aspects of their life, recording low levels of agency, encouraging research to implement specific psychoeducational intervention programs to promote self-determination by favoring a active and direct involvement in educational activities (Whemeyer, Shogren, 2016). Regardless of one's intellectual functioning (Carter, lane, Cooney, Weir, Moss, Machalicek 2013; Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, Little, Garner, Lawrence, 2007; Stancliffe, 1997), through individualized inclusive programs the person with disabilities can reach good levels of self-determination which corresponds to a better quality of life (Wehemeyer, Scharlock, 2001; Lachapelle, Wehmeyer, Haelewyck, Courbois, Keith, SchalocK, Walsh, 2005; Wehemeyer, Scwartz, 1997).

The ability to make daily choices represents one of the crucial skills to allow people with disabilities (in particular, adolescents and adults with severe intellectual disabilities) to self-determine, identify and achieve the life goals they set for their future (Ward, 1996).

Self-determination concerns the entire decision-making process from the identification of objectives and viable alternatives to the estimation of the results obtained is not determined by the choice itself and does not even coincide with the achievement of specific results.

The disabled adult is called to self-determination and special pedagogy must respond to this right and need by developing training programs aimed at promoting the skills to assume self-determined behaviors (Cottini, 2016) that favor access to adults.

Starting from the interests, motivations, needs and desires expressed by the person with disabilities and, based on these, through specific actions and interventions, build and promote a targeted and personalized educational planning that promotes self-determination as a way to guarantee the freedom of the individual understood as a unifying factor and collective emancipation.

The transition to adult life for people with disabilities represents a challenge for the individual himself, for families, for caregivers and for the scientific community, stimulating and supporting "new visions" capable of considering original solutions and alternatives to face the future of people with disabilities and unhinge, once and for all, the welfare, infantilizing and overprotective attitudes that often accompany certain conditions of disability (Cottini, Fedeli, Zorzi, 2016).

Working in the perspective of self-determination means changing the gaze and the educational approach, it is about "building environments in which everyone can find freely chosen spaces for action, at least within the limits of the possibilities offered by each" (Cottini, 2016) and involves the courage of a "reform of thought" (Morin, 2000).

and of an essential change in terms of culture, policies and practices (Gardou, 2006)

### **3. Biodanza SRT: Embodied Centered educational strategy as an experience of self-determination**

The intensification of the dialogue between educational sciences and cognitive sciences in recent years has contributed to widening the boundaries and perspectives inherent both in studies on learning (memory, attention, language) and on body consciousness as a mediation of knowledge (Fischer, Daniel, Immordino-Yang, Stern, Battro, Koizumi, 2007).

Research and studies on the paradigm defined embodied theory focus on the role of the body in the process of constitution and development of cognition and identity (Cappuccio, 2006; Gallagher, 2005) basing the study on the ecological mind, that is: the mind ontologically interdependent on the body and the environment.

Francisco Varela (1996) proposes a path aimed at reconsidering, including and putting in the foreground the role of lived experience (Varela 1996; Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1991) by shifting the study of the mind from a neutral condition to a situated one, and studied in the four dimensions commonly called the "4 Es": embodied, embedded, ex-tended, enacted, or the mind embodied in the subject, rooted in the environment, dependent on social relationships and agitated (Clark 2008; Varela, Thompson, Rosch, 1991).

The bodily experience, as an existential and pragmatic field of manifestation of the living in which cognition is not simply performed but enacted, represents an extremely interesting field of study also for its concrete repercussions on the educational level (Francesconi, 2011) and within the embodied perspective, that of corporeality and bodily cognition appears to be a very promising area for the future.

From the perspective of Embodied Cognition, "every form of human cognition is embodied, that is, rooted in bodily experience" (Gallese, 2016) and the body laboratory is that dimension that allows for the incorporation of knowledge. Embodied centered teaching emphasizes the role of corporeality and its multiple repercussions in the cognitive field and through learning by doing develops problem solving and decision making skills, encouraging self-determination and personal empowerment. Creating embodied-based learning environments means privileging an experiential education centered on innovative educational methodologies that use the body as a medium to facilitate metacognitive and self-determination processes in order to develop and increase those personal resources designed to stimulate the reorganization of self-knowledge and their own well-being, to choose, pursue and realize their own life plan.

The Biodanza SRT System is a bodily mediation pedagogy that through the spontaneous manifestation of emotions aroused by music, movement and encounter (with oneself and with others) stimulates the human potential in terms of vitality, affectivity, creativity, through an empathic interaction between individual and group oriented towards the harmonious and integrated development of people's identity.

The group in Biodanza constitutes an educational and didactic resource that "is based on the belief that the active participation of each individual member of the group represents an enrichment for all the others" (Ghedini, 2016) promoting self-determination and empowerment in order to facilitate self-realization in an inclusive climate that helps to create a solid socio-affective, communicative and relational basis. In line with the principles of the Pedagogy of the body (Gamelli, 2011), which studies learning as a play of thought-body-emotion, restoring centrality to the sensory experience in educational and didactic contexts, Biodanza SRT is "a system of human integration, organic renewal, affective education and re-learning of the original functions of life "(Toro, 2010), whose purpose is to allow people to make contact with themselves and their emotions , feel the body and express one's identity through the vivencia: the experience lived and radiated in the present moment (Toro, 2016). In Biodanza, making your own dance means integrating your feelings with your actions, creating a communion between the feelings and emotions that animate us and their visible expression of our movement in the world (Toro Araneda, 2007).

In the embodied perspective, the Biodanza SRT methodology takes into consideration the experience itself and its broader reflections on the person as the theme of consciousness / awareness comes into play.

Biodanza SRT therefore, in addition to promoting emotional and cognitive control, attention and memory is also aimed at achieving multiple purposes of a pedagogical nature including psychophysical well-being, self-esteem, body recognition, emotional / affective balance , the control of behavior and the ethical dimension of existence: it is a potentially fertile ground, of authentic construction, incorporation and validation of skills (Gamelli, 2009) capacity building, self-determination and empowerment. By acquiring a "personal power" the person has greater self-confidence, develops his skills and talents to the fullest, becoming the protagonist of his own growth and thus realizing his own actualizing tendency: Empowerment (Rogers, 1969).

By promoting better autonomy, a better possibility of social participation is also guaranteed both directly, by creating a context of aggregation and union that leads the participants to feel part of a group and to feel part of it, and indirectly by increasing the desire to share, interact and stay contact with others giving back a better quality of life (Rosa, Madonna, 2019b).



The Biodanza SRT System represents a particularly interesting body-mediated educational strategy for the study and development of the body-mind-emotion relationship, in fact in the scientific literature it emerges that it is:

- an important strategy for the prevention of emotional distress with significant variations on alexithymia (Giannelli, Giannino, Mingarelli, 2015);
- a good methodology to reduce stress and improve mood, emotional intelligence, self-esteem, sense of competence, effectiveness and self-awareness, social skills (Castañeda, 2009; Villegas, Stuck, 1999); Stueck, Villegas, Terren, Toro, Mazzarella, Schroeder, 2008).

From the study carried out in the field of Mental Health (Ghedin, 2016) it was found that the participants rediscovered their uniqueness and experience the joy of existing by rediscovering the pleasure linked to the body, the ability to get excited and to enter into a relationship with the other with whom a significant emotional and empathic bond is established during the dance (Ghedin, 2016). Based on these premises, ICF-CY mediation was used as a conceptual orderer to find the results of clinical Biodanza in mental health, through the creation of a modifying environment that promotes the well-being of the people involved (Ghedin, 2016).

Furthermore, the results obtained from a study focused on Biodanza SRT interventions proposed to minors subjected to a restriction regime at the IPM "Fornelli" in Bari have highlighted a qualitative significance of the experience lived by inmates in all the estimated aspects: cognitive- behavioral, emotional, motivational and relational and have facilitated the adoption of socially accepted behaviors that are the basis of reintegration into civil society (Rosa, Madonna, 2019a; Rosa, 2019). Living an active life despite the disability by encouraging being protagonists of one's own life while respecting the value and dignity of others are primary objectives and key elements on which an educational intervention of the Biodanza SRT System is focused in order to promote the integral development of the individual. they pursue the achievement of bio-psycho-social well-being, encouraging self-determination in the longitudinal perspective of the personal Life Project.

## **Conclusions**

The rapid development of neuroscience in the last 20 years has introduced new elements of discussion also in debates within the social sciences that can no longer ignore issues such as identity / self / consciousness, learning and intelligence, language, memory, corporeality and motility, emotions, perception, intersubjectivity and empathy fields of study related to pedagogy and educational practice, favoring and consolidating the dialogue between the educational sciences and cognitive neuroscience (Fischer, Daniel, Immordino-Yang, Stern, Battro, Koizumi, 2007; Stern, 2005). By strengthening the awareness of one's identity through Biodanza SRT it is possible to promote the maintenance of psycho-physical-emotional well-being, promote positive attitudes, guide human beings to rediscover the pleasure of feeling protagonists, free and aware of their own life experience. The educational role of Embodied Centered educational methodologies such as the Biodanza SRT System, turns out to be a fertile subject of investigation capable of combining research interests pertaining to both pedagogical and cognitive sciences.

The work confirms the need to enrich the literature of research dedicated to self-determination and its assessment in disability and is a basis for future research ideas.

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