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## MOTOR ACTIVITY AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL GROWTH IN STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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### ABSTRACT

*This research explores the fundamental role of motor activity in the educational development of students with disabilities within the school context. Despite increasing awareness of its benefits, physical activity is often undervalued in educational systems, particularly in Italy, where outdated perspectives continue to hinder its full potential as an inclusive tool. The study aims to emphasize that motor activity is not solely about physical enhancement but is intrinsically linked to cognitive, emotional, and social development—dimensions especially critical for students with disabilities.*

*Motor activity represents a primary human need, with the power to significantly influence the growth and learning processes of individuals. For students with disabilities, physical education offers a dynamic and inclusive platform through which they can engage meaningfully with peers, build self-esteem, and develop essential life skills. In this light, motor activities can act as a bridge, connecting educational objectives with the broader goal of holistic development.*

*The educational value of physical activity is now globally recognized, as it contributes to the acquisition of higher-order cognitive functions such as concentration, problem-solving, and emotional regulation. Furthermore, it fosters social interactions, promotes inclusion, and supports the development of relational competencies that are crucial in both academic and professional environments. When integrated effectively into the school curriculum, physical activity can transform into a powerful pedagogical tool that promotes equity, participation, and personal growth.*

*This paper underscores the urgent need to reframe motor activity in schools not as a peripheral or optional practice, but as a central element of inclusive education. By doing so, schools can provide meaningful learning opportunities for all students, ensuring that those with disabilities are not only included but fully empowered to thrive within the educational system and beyond.*

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### Introduction

Motor activity represents a fundamental human necessity, embodying the innate need for movement that is deeply rooted in the physical, cognitive, and emotional development of every individual. Far from being limited to the enhancement of physical fitness, motor activity plays a crucial role in shaping cognitive functions, mental well-being, and, significantly, socio-relational skills. This is particularly vital for individuals with disabilities, for whom structured

physical activity can offer an invaluable channel for expression, interaction, and personal growth.

In contemporary educational discourse, the importance of physical activity has been widely recognized at the international level. It is increasingly viewed not merely as an auxiliary component of the school curriculum, but as a central educational tool capable of supporting holistic development. Despite this growing recognition, in countries such as Italy, the full potential of motor activity—especially in

inclusive education settings—remains underutilized and often overlooked due to lingering outdated perceptions.

Within the school environment, motor activity has the capacity to foster not only academic learning but also the development of higher-order cognitive skills such as critical thinking, concentration, and emotional regulation. Moreover, it nurtures the social and interpersonal skills that are essential in both educational and professional contexts. For students with disabilities, these aspects are particularly meaningful, as physical activity can provide opportunities for integration, self-confidence, and the affirmation of personal identity within a shared learning space.

Given these multidimensional benefits, motor activity should be recognized as a key element in inclusive educational practices. Its proper implementation can promote equitable learning experiences, reduce barriers to participation, and contribute to the creation of supportive and adaptive learning environments that value diversity and individuality. Reframing physical education as a transformative educational experience—rather than a recreational break—can lead to more inclusive, effective, and human-centered schooling for all learners.

#### 1. Disability and movement

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”, this is what is enshrined in article one of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, and which shows that disabled people also have the same fundamental rights as other citizens. With the Madrid Declaration of 2003, equal opportunities between able-bodied and disabled people are claimed, affecting various aspects: social, work, school and professional education, training in new technologies, social and health services, sports and leisure<sup>[1]</sup>. For this to happen it is necessary that everyone, starting from the individual citizen and then reaching the community as a whole, takes action to enhance and valorise diversity, just as is established by Article 3 of the Italian Constitution: "All citizens have equal social dignity and they are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinions, personal and social conditions." The task of the individual person, up to the State, is to be able to eliminate all possible obstacles, both from a social and economic point of view, which could affect the freedom and equality of citizens, thus negatively influencing the overall development of the

human person and consequently the participation of all in the political, economic and social organization of the country<sup>[2]</sup>.

Article 1 of the Framework Law number 104/92 states that:

- ✓ there must be full respect for human dignity and the rights of freedom and autonomy of the person with a disability and full integration/inclusion in the family, school, work and society must be promoted;
- ✓ conditions that are considered disabling and that can impede the development of the human person must be prevented and/or removed, compromising the achievement of the maximum possible autonomy and the participation of the disabled person in the life of the community;
- ✓ interventions must be prepared aimed at overcoming states of marginalization and social exclusion of the disabled person.

These and many other points have led, nowadays, to a vision that gives great importance to the quality of life of the person suffering from disability; this means having great consideration of socio-relational factors, placing them at the center of the entire system, which inevitably cannot underestimate free time which is an important indicator of quality<sup>[3]</sup>. The feeling of well-being is an important indicator of the level of quality of life, even more so for people with disabilities, as it is precisely by exploiting free time (for example practicing any physical activity) that it is possible to eliminate the sense of impotence in favor of the sense of gratification<sup>[4]</sup>. Being able to make the most of the free time factor, for people with disabilities, means being able to benefit from everything that is offered by the place where you live, fully benefiting from the citizen rights that everyone enjoys. Often when we talk about activities that can be carried out during free time, we think of any form of physical activity capable of including all "types" of people, from young to old, whether male or female, and above all disabled or otherwise.

Sporting activity can be defined as the set of all those activities, mental and physical, aimed at improving and maintaining the psychophysical system of the person, and entertaining those who practice it. Games, physical activity and recreational activities, even if their potential has not yet been exploited to the full, offer the possibility of starting to practice sports, also understood as a phase of affirmation of personal autonomy and the gratification that inevitably generates positive effects on self-esteem<sup>[5]</sup>. Promoting motor activity for people with disabilities

means recognizing the social, educational and training value inherent in it, since in addition to promoting cognitive development, the motor experience becomes a reason for emancipation and growth enhanced by constructive comparison with others, the perception of their own efficiency<sup>[6]</sup>.

The practice of physical activity must be understood as a means with an educational aim whose effectiveness is directly proportional to the playful aspect. Doing physical activity means not only trying to improve the physical component, but certainly increasing the cognitive aspect necessary for the motor learning phase, the axis of socialization that is linked to the sporting world, and finally the improvement of self-esteem<sup>[7]</sup>; therefore, from a disability perspective, the essential role of physical activity is evident as, thanks to it, it is possible to enhance the disabled person.

Motor practice stimulates and enhances the abilities of the person suffering from disability, encouraging social interaction, in order to create links with the outside world in order to allow the construction and enrichment of one's personality<sup>[8]</sup>. Furthermore, we must not forget the importance of discussion and the emotions that derive from it, which allow and encourage the growth not only of the disabled person but of the entire group.

It is thanks to sports practice that the disabled person receives benefits from a physical point of view in order to avoid the appearance of pathologies such as obesity, while from a psychological point of view, the social aspect must not be neglected as it is possible to avoid a possible social isolation<sup>[9]</sup>. What has been said is made feasible by the fact that sporting activity "forces" the disabled person to interact with the external environment, avoiding the onset of negative aspects such as motor regression or even attenuated or dulled curiosity. The practice of any form of motor activity improves the ability to process information, improves society's attitudes towards the person suffering from disability and vice versa<sup>[10]</sup>. Therefore, it can be defined as a moment of learning and personal knowledge due to the multiple external stimuli that favor knowledge and learning.

## **2. Pedagogy, disability and school**

Disability should not be considered a permanent factor as it depends on the external environment, so it would be possible to make it disappear completely or almost. To establish how much a person affected by a disability is influenced by it, indicators have been established (the same ones used for able-bodied

people) capable of evaluating the quality of life<sup>[11]</sup>. To evaluate the well-being of a person's life it is important to analyze aspects such as health, self-efficacy, sense of trust, belonging and degree of self-esteem. When it comes to well-being, the fundamental dimensions to analyze are adaptation and social support, furthermore it is possible to subject variables such as the level of affection (both positive and negative) and the overall judgment on the quality of life to an accurate evaluation. Social relationships have a great influence on subjective well-being. Belonging to a group, and in an even broader vision, to a community, turns out to be fundamental for the well-being of a disabled person, so also the quality of social relationships, which can be defined as the interaction between the subject and the context, are of fundamental importance for it to be fully included in any context.

"Man is a social animal", this is what was stated by Aristotle, and it means that any person needs to relate to all the actors in the surrounding world. This means stating that everyone needs to feel loved, cared for and have any need satisfied, be it physical or emotional. The above establishes that social and subjective well-being must be enhanced to encourage young people to adopt correct and healthy lifestyles in order to promote the ability to deal with the possible onset of problematic situations<sup>[12]</sup>. Furthermore, increasing social well-being allows us to promote attitudes of social interaction and social acceptance. It is important to promote social well-being immediately, from an early age, and from this perspective the school has this responsibility, as the primary objectives are the education and inclusion of all<sup>[13]</sup>. Furthermore, in an extracurricular context, social well-being is able to improve the quality of life of people with disabilities thanks to the use of various activities, including physical activity, during free time. This demonstrates the link between physical education in school and physical or sporting practice outside of school. At school age, pupils with disabilities may have problems from the point of view of adapting to the demands of the school, to which is added difficulty in obtaining good levels of social acceptance, in particular, in particular, they may rarely experience

relationship difficulties with the teacher or, more frequently, with the peer group. Furthermore, it has been seen that, especially in adolescence, disabled students demonstrate greater difficulties in creating and managing to maintain interactions with their classmates in a stable and lasting way over time<sup>[14]</sup>. All this could have a negative impact on the processes of adaptation to adult life. The school's task is to train "the adult of the future", for which fundamental aspects such as a better quality of life must be considered, and for this to happen, it is important to be able to obtain recognition of fundamental rights, in order to protect and ensure the maximum possible autonomy for all people who need it<sup>[15]</sup>. When we talk about autonomy we refer to multiple points of view: personal, work, social and family, all essential to make a person with a disability feel an integral part of society. This term does not simply refer to the care of the person's life in the sense of removing the causes of marginalization, but to offer the possibility, thanks to tools, methodologies, techniques and targeted paths, to be an active and proactive part of the choices that are made. made and which directly affect the life of the disabled person. It is from this perspective that the school, through training programs, should encourage the development of all the skills that will lead to the achievement of personal autonomy<sup>[16]</sup>. The term educate means to define the ability to be able to bring it out, in order to obtain the truth from the person and not introduce it. Therefore, there is a need to exploit motor activity as a fundamental element both from an educational and a socio-relational point of view. The school's task is to be able to create the foundations so that life skills (Life Skills), understood as the set of personal and relational skills, are well structured in the disabled person, so as to be able to create correctly and profitable bond between himself and the surrounding environment. It must therefore be an advocate of lifelong learning, capable of providing all the effective strategies to be used to resolve any problems that may arise in daily life. The school context must be the ideal place to design and

plan the interventions to be implemented to create the adult of tomorrow, and in this sense it is important that we focus on the development of transversal skills in order to favor the structuring of the self, of identity of the disabled person<sup>[17]</sup>.

### **3. The importance of inclusive teaching in schools**

Educating through movement from the early years of life is of fundamental importance as it allows and promotes knowledge of one's body and helps to improve the quality of life<sup>[18]</sup>. Motor activity and movement in general must be understood as an educational possibility with an indispensable educational value for the development of identity and social interactions with the surrounding environment and with one's classmates<sup>[19]</sup>. When we talk about team motor practice we must think of all the multiple situations that favor the stimulation of individual initiative. Physical activity for people with disabilities can represent a moment of social emancipation and individual growth, as discussion and collaboration with others can and must be understood as the structuring of an environment full of significant stimuli.

The practice of physical activity has fundamental values for the development of the person:

- Helps to express one's creativity;
- It is an instrument of moral and physical elevation; - It's a cultural value.

Motor activity and motor sciences in the school context must be understood as an opportunity for everyone, without any distinction, to be able to offer their contribution in the process of building the identity of disabled and non-disabled students. In the school context, motor practice must not be understood at competitive levels, on the contrary it must favor the possibility of being able to measure oneself with others, but above all with oneself, in order to know one's own resources and abilities in order to deal with the peer group. The role of motor sciences towards the disabled student from a scholastic perspective should be to be able to enhance individual abilities, increase others to the point of fortifying the interested person to encourage encounters with the surrounding



environment and with the peer group, managing to deal with objectives with an increasing degree of difficulty<sup>[20]</sup>. Therefore the purpose of physical practice in the school context is to offer new possible paths to knowledge and inclusion paths, starting right from school, from the first levels of education, in order to encourage its permanence throughout the entire life cycle. of life, so that it can be seen not only from a competitive point of view but also and above all from the point of view of fun, training, play, recreation and therefore as a moment and opportunity for growth. Sports practice must be understood as an educational strategy to overcome the possible onset of social isolation of the person suffering from disability <sup>[21]</sup>. It must be understood as a way of being able to see oneself in a positive sense, capable of improving one's self-image; furthermore, we must not forget that learning occurs through experience, and it is thanks to it that it is possible to have a greater emotional boost capable of helping to overcome the onset of any moments of discouragement and fragility due to difficulties and isolation that could occur outside of "protected" environments such as the family<sup>[22]</sup>. Finally, we must not forget that when we talk about physical activity at school we promote positive interdependence, self-confidence and self-sufficiency. When the student leaves the familiar environment, he does so to enter a new group, going against others and experimenting with different roles (adversary, companion, ally) in order to achieve a common goal. Furthermore, sensations, both positive and negative, such as the fear of not making it or the fatigue of exercising, respect for the rules, commitment to school and physical activity, make him feel part of the whole environment, making him motivated, autonomous and determined in dealing with any difficulties that may arise. Physical activity in school must be seen as a strategic tool of education, which manages to pursue the ultimate goal, that is, the socio-educational well-being of all, in which there are equal opportunities, opportunities and possibilities of choice. The school connected to

physical activity allows us to experiment with new forms of inclusion, capable of addressing everyone and, at the same time, being able to find the "suitable paths" for everyone<sup>[23]</sup>. Finally, we must not forget to practice physical activity in the school context, it means doing it together, able-bodied students and those with disabilities, in order to enhance the potential, through the precise play roles, necessary for the success of the activity. All exercises are carried out in the same spaces, all together and at the same time, this ensures that there are beneficial effects both from a psycho-physical and socio-relational point of view. As far as the psycho-physical aspect is concerned, suffice it to say that motor practice at school helps disabled students to have greater static and dynamic balance, which is necessary in walking, without forgetting that it is possible to strengthen the muscular system, resistance, strength, favoring a reduction in heart rate. The above guarantees the ability to orient and move correctly in space, managing to improve one's spatio-temporal organizational capabilities. All this allows the disabled student to acquire greater confidence in everything he does but above all towards himself, thus increasing his sense of self-confidence. Furthermore, from a psychological point of view, we must consider that disabled people have always encountered difficulties throughout their lives, and physical practice combined with the school context represents one of the first moments of satisfaction due to achieving the goal without the help of parents, as motor practice stimulates intellect and creativity while keeping memory and concentration trained. From a socio-relational point of view, school as well as physical practice promotes inclusion in the social context, as in order to achieve the objective it is necessary to collaborate with the other members of the team group, managing to encourage the construction of identity personal of the disabled person <sup>[24]</sup>.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The school context must be seen as the universe in which young people shape their personality on a daily basis <sup>[25]</sup>, so it contains the set of all the

values that build a single system in which the rich world certainly falls of disability to which the world of sports practice must be associated, which now includes an ever-increasing number of children, pupils and adults suffering from disabilities.

The ability to learn through movement is something innate that everyone has since birth, allowing them to interact with the surrounding world and explore it in an active and participatory way, promoting the growth of knowledge of the surrounding environment<sup>[26]</sup>.

The body must be understood as the means by which we can receive all the most sincere information about ourselves, capable, therefore, of making us perceive who we are, what we live and what we feel. Here movement takes on a fundamental role from the point of view of learning, understood as the only channel capable of positively influencing not only the motor sphere, but also the relational, cognitive and emotional ones.

The Italian school boasts a long tradition from the point of view of the integration of pupils suffering from disabilities, and its role is to promote and encourage meetings between people "bearers" of different abilities, culture, age and social class, it must be able to, also taking advantage of what is offered by physical and sporting practice, create a single training action which has the task of enhancing, enhancing and strengthening all skills, thus managing to include all students in this process without excluding anyone.

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