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Towards an Index for Embodied Education: a preliminary matrix of indicators for inclusive feasibility

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Abstract: This paper takes as its hypothesis that the move from a theoretical awareness of Embodied Education to its actual application in teaching does not depend solely on teachers' favourable attitudes, but on the integrated configuration of training-related, organisational, spatial, methodological and cultural factors that condition its feasibility in real educational settings. From this perspective, embodied inclusion is understood as a design criterion capable of affecting participation, the accessibility of activities and the quality of learning environments. Building on an earlier exploratory questionnaire-based survey conducted at e-Campus University, within the fifth cycle of the 30-CFU qualification pathways under Article 13 (2025), the paper examines the gap between recognising the educational value of the body and movement and their actual integration into classroom practice. The paper re-reads this evidence as a set of indicators of perceptions, declared practices, perceived barriers, training needs, and conditions for the adoptability of Embodied Education, also with a view to subsequently extending the investigation to teachers already in service across schools of different types and levels. The methodology comprises an exploratory re-analysis of the data collected through the questionnaire, oriented towards identifying those indicators alongside the operational proposals connected to the feasibility of Embodied Education. The innovative element lies in constructing a preliminary matrix of inclusive feasibility for Embodied Education, derived from the dimensions of the survey instrument and oriented towards observable indicators relating to teacher education, instructional design, participation, accessibility, environments, bodily and multimodal mediators, technologies, and organisational culture. The matrix is intended as an exploratory and interpretive–operational device that may contribute to defining the Index for Embodied Education.

Keywords: Embodied Education; transformative inclusion; pedagogical feasibility; teacher education; Index for Embodied Education.

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1. Introduction

The transformations currently running through education systems call for reflection on the conditions under which learning can become a meaningful, accessible, and participatory experience. Schools are required to engage with growing complexity, in which the diversity of students and the plurality of educational needs call for instructional models capable of moving beyond the mere transmission of content.

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Within this scenario, to design learning means to arrange contexts in which knowledge can be enacted, experienced and transformed into competence.

Within this perspective, the body takes on an essential role. It cannot be understood as an incidental element of the educational process, nor as a mere support for cognitive activity, but as the originary condition through which the subject knows, communicates, enters into relation with others and attributes meaning to experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2003; Sheets-Johnstone, 2011). The body in movement, gesture, posture, and interaction with the environment constitute formative dimensions that take part in the construction of knowledge. Learning, therefore, takes shape in the dynamic relationship between action, experience, emotion, environment, and reflection (Gallagher, 2005; Maggi, 2020).

The paradigm of Embodied Cognition and, at the pedagogical and instructional level, Embodied Education allow this process to be interpreted in an integrated way. Knowledge is not regarded as the outcome of a mind separate from the body, but as the result of an embodied and situated interaction between subject and world (Shapiro, 2011; Varela et al., 1991). Along these lines, bodily experience, movement, multisensoriality, mediators and the organisation of space become constitutive elements of instructional design. Embodied Education does not, therefore, merely propose motor or hands-on activities; rather, it invites us to rethink the educational environment as a context capable of making participation possible and of supporting the shared construction of meaning (Gomez Paloma et al., 2019; Maggi et al., 2025).

This approach takes on particular significance in the field of inclusion. An embodied perspective can help to make learning environments more flexible and accessible, broadening the ways in which students engage with a task, express what they understand, collaborate, and take part in activities. In this sense, inclusion does not coincide with an additional or compensatory intervention introduced after the design stage; rather, it becomes an originary criterion of design itself. The inclusive quality of an educational environment is measured by the possibility of providing plural pathways, diversified mediators, accessible instructions, adaptable spaces, and forms of participation that are not reduced to verbal or abstract performance alone (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; CAST, 2018; Rose & Meyer, 2002).

The problem from which this paper sets out concerns the distance between pedagogical adherence to the principles of Embodied Education and their stable translation into classroom practice. Previous research shows that the body, movement, and the experiential dimension are recognised by teachers as resources for learning, yet they do not always find a systematic place in everyday planning (Maggi et al., 2025). This distance cannot be read solely as a result of the individual teacher's willingness, nor as a simple matter of methodological sensibility. It points, rather, to the conditions that make embodied practices sustainable, accessible, and consistent with the constraints of schooling.

It is from this perspective that the hypothesis of the present study proceeds: the actual adoption of Embodied Education in educational settings does not depend on a single factor, but on the interweaving of professional preparation, instructional design, the organisation of space, resources, forms of mediation, technologies, relational climate and institutional culture. These dimensions help to determine whether the body and movement can become an integral part of the formative experience or whether, by contrast, they remain confined to occasional practices or left to the initiative of the individual teacher. In this sense, Embodied Education is taken not only

as a methodological orientation, but as a design perspective capable of affecting the inclusive quality of learning environments (CAST, 2018; Maggi & Balestra, 2025; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

The paper develops out of an earlier exploratory questionnaire-based survey conducted at e-Campus University, within the fifth cycle of the 30-CFU qualification pathways under Article 13, addressed to teachers in training. This survey gathered evidence on representations, declared practices, training needs and obstacles encountered in the use of Embodied Education in teaching (Maggi et al., 2025). Here, this evidence is considered not merely as descriptive findings, but as interpretive elements useful for identifying the conditions making embodied practices enactable in school settings.

The article therefore sets out to propose a first organisation of the dimensions that contribute to the inclusive feasibility of Embodied Education, taking it as the basis for the progressive development of a future Index for Embodied Education. This organisation considers several core areas: teacher preparation, design intentionality, participation, accessibility, environments, bodily and multimodal mediators, technologies, and organisational culture. The proposal is neither conclusive nor validatory in character; rather, it is configured as a preliminary matrix intended to guide observation, empirical comparison, and the subsequent formalisation of indicators.

Along these lines, the reference to the logic of the Index makes it possible to conceive of inclusion not as a statement of principle, but as a process to be made visible through practices and conditions of participation (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). A future Index for Embodied Education could help to recognise how the body, movement, gesture, materials, technologies, and the organisation of space may become resources for broadening accessibility and supporting student participation. The aim is not to classify teaching experiences according to a prescriptive logic, but to delineate a conceptual and operational device capable of guiding teachers, schools, and teacher educators towards sustainable, accessible and participatory practices.

2. Theoretical framework

Starting from the hypothesis that the feasibility of Embodied Education depends on the interweaving of training-related, design-related, spatial and cultural dimensions, the theoretical framework explores the contribution of embodiment both to the definition of teachers' professional action and to the construction of inclusive educational environments.

The national and international body of studies focused on embodiment, the guidelines for public and school policy set out by the United Nations 2030 Agenda, and the 2018 European Recommendations on key competences for lifelong learning are, from this perspective, "united by the drive to place the sensorimotor dimension at the centre of the process of knowing, and with it the continuous dialogue between the individual and the environment" (Ferri, 2022, p. 24, citing Damiano, 2009).

In continuity with this, the analysis of the present study's data prompts careful reflection on the theme of *embodied teaching*, that is, on the "embodied dimension of teaching and learning processes within educational settings" (Ferri, 2022, back cover).

After all, to speak of teaching means to consider the performative (Rivoltella, 2021) and multidimensional (Doyle, 1986) nature of teacher professionalism. In the educational scene, teachers act according to the various operational situations they face, modulate the emotional climate by opening themselves to listening, meet stu-

dents through gestures, postures and movements, and organise active, hands-on, multisensory teaching, including by making use of decentralised and outdoor classrooms.

And it is in this scenario that teachers' situated action "requires the ability to read and understand the bodily signals of the context, to modulate one's own bodily agency and to regulate interaction in the learning environment according to the emerging needs of the class group" (Creati et al., 2026, pp. 357–358, citing Cassese, 2024).

A distinction is therefore drawn around the notion of the "professional garment that each teacher tailors for themselves in their everyday professional, *embodied* action" (Ferri, 2022, p. 61), since "every teacher has their own educational philosophy and their own habitus, from which derives not so much, and not only, the choice of possible approaches as the ways in which they manage instructional situations, regulate their action in context according to events, and reorganise their planning in relation to the factors present in the setting" (Rossi, 2011, p. 93).

Accordingly, without seeking to reformulate a complete inventory of all the competences that the ideal teacher should possess (Santerini, 2002), it seems reasonable to capture the dynamism of the teaching profession and thus to incorporate the stance of *embodied teaching* into the landscape of the contemporary school.

Recognising the thesis that no framework is definitive and exhaustive - "no reference text can, after all, guarantee a consensual, complete and stable representation of a profession or of the competences it brings into play" (Perrenoud, 2002, p. 13) - it is consistent with the survey conducted to consider a further domain of competence, made explicit here - *Valuing the embodied dimension of teaching and in teaching* (Ferri, 2022) - in addition to Perrenoud's ten families of competences, recognised as priorities in the initial and continuing education of teachers.

Consequently, two stances emerge in connection with the role of teachers. The first refers to the *embodied dimension of teaching*, in which "trainer and trainee interact, driven by the 'need to meet', since teaching and learning are factors of continuous transformative exchange for both" (Scarpa, 2021, p. 85), and are key devices in the co-construction "of embodied and situated cognitive, affective and relational networks" (Scarpa, 2021, p. 85). The second, drawing on the concept of the *embodied dimension in teaching*, focuses on the embodiment of teachers - that is, on "what teachers do and say" (Madureira Ferreira & Ineson, 2026) - in the course of everyday instructional practice.

The teacher's embodied presence is thus realised through "active listening and focused attention" (Gallese, Moriggi & Rivoltella, 2025, p. 165) towards each student. Indeed, to accompany students along the learning path "one must *be present*, not merely *be there*" (Gallese, Moriggi & Rivoltella, 2025, p. 165), and this must be done within a weave in which "body and word, action and symbolisation are interwoven simultaneously within an educational relationship, in which it is difficult to trace a hierarchical before and after, through a process of mutual contamination" (Gabelli & Mirabelli, 2019, p. 16).

In line with these understandings, there emerges the need to seek out and activate "a plurality of forms of communication, in which non-verbal behaviour and the use of the body are by no means subsidiary and/or complementary functions" (Carboni, 2013, p. 50). The latter, indeed, make it possible to support, promote and value every student, fostering their processes of inclusion.

3. Methodology

The data-collection instrument aims to investigate teachers' perceptions of instructional practices grounded in Embodied Education and intended to promote, through bodily engagement, inclusion and educational sustainability.

The questionnaire consists of 38 items and is structured into multiple-choice questions, five-point Likert rating scales, closed-response questions and one open-ended question. It seeks to identify the inclusive feasibility of Embodied Education through its eight constituent dimensions: socio-demographic profile; training in and knowledge of EE; the perception of its importance, its perceived effectiveness and views on the usefulness of the method; instructional practices and strategies applied; the impact on inclusion; educational sustainability and environmental awareness; tools, resources and technological support; and collaboration and proposals for improvement (Maggi et al., 2025).

The instrument offers an exploratory categorisation of the dimensions considered fundamental in fostering the inclusive feasibility of learning. From this perspective, teacher preparation, design intentionality, and the integration of bodily and multimodal mediators are regarded as conditions capable of facilitating, but also of challenging, organisational culture and the embodied dimension of teaching.

The questionnaire operates within a twofold *top-down* and *bottom-up* perspective. The questions, defined and designed on the basis of the relevant scientific literature (Maggi et al., 2025), are intended to contribute to the construction of a framework for EE, with reference to the logic of the Index (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). At the same time, the analysis of the needs and evidence gathered from teachers makes it possible to frame the research from a *bottom-up* perspective, taking the dimensions investigated as criteria and conditions for inclusive effectiveness and feasibility.

Teachers' participation in the study on EE makes it possible, as Fabbri (2018) underlines, to interrogate the instructional action declared by the participants, whose involvement represents the condition that facilitates the processes of implementing change (Del Gobbo, 2018). From this perspective, the proposed matrix can be read as a first device of inclusive feasibility, oriented towards valuing the embodied dimension of teaching (Ferri, 2022).

The diversification of the questions allows an exploratory investigation of perceptions, declared practices and conditions of feasibility of Embodied Education. The analysis of the data collected makes it possible to map the sample under examination and to relate representations, uses, critical issues, training needs, and operational proposals. The open-ended question, without constituting an autonomous qualitative section, offers further interpretive elements for identifying critical issues, suggestions, and possible developments of the proposed instructional model, contributing to the progressive definition of the dimensions of the Index.

4. Dataset analysis and preliminary matrix

The present analysis is in continuity with what has already been highlighted in the contribution by Maggi, Balestra and Zappa (2025, pp. 5–9). In particular, with regard to the socio-demographic dimension (items 1–4) of the respondents (N = 327), there is a positive and statistically significant relationship, albeit of modest magnitude, between the frequency of use of embodied activities and teachers' age ($\varrho = .121$; $p = .029$). In the 31–40 age band, indeed, only 11.6% report using such practices.

In continuity with this finding, the joint examination of the dimension relating to knowledge of and training in EE (items 5–9; 28) and the one labelled "Instructional practices and strategies applied" (items 11–12; 14–18) shows that training in EE practices constitutes a critical element: the training received (item 6) is insufficient or partial in 71.6% of cases; moreover, 73.7% of respondents (item 28) report having no specific training in EE. Spearman's correlation analysis reveals a positive and statistically significant relationship, again of modest magnitude, between the frequency of use of embodied activities and years of teaching experience ($\varrho = .134$; $p = .015$). In particular, the teachers who use EE practices often or always are above all those with more than 21 years of service (52%). Among the strategies used (item 12), recourse to experiential learning emerges prominently (42.5%).

Turning to the dimension of the use and perceived effectiveness of EE (item 10: "Do you use EE practices in class?"; item 13: "To what extent do you consider the use of the body and movement in learning to be effective?"), the teachers who report using such practices "always" or "often" are 25.1%, whilst 33.9% state that they use them "sometimes". As regards the responses to item 13, 38.8% of respondents consider the use of the body and movement very effective, 38.0% fairly effective and 8.9% extremely effective. The Spearman correlation analysis, conducted on the teachers who report using the practices at least occasionally (N = 193), shows a strong positive relationship between the importance attributed to integrating the body into learning and the perception of its effectiveness ($\varrho = .634$; $p < .001$). By contrast, the frequency of use of the practices is not significantly associated with the importance attributed to bodily integration in learning.

Beyond the role of the body in learning in general, the subsequent questions (items 14–18) provide indications of the perceived effectiveness of embodied practices with respect to the acquisition of broader competences. Analysis of the results for the teachers who report using such practices at least occasionally (N = 193) shows that participation, creativity, and memorisation are rated positively by almost all respondents.

Returning to the overall sample, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted on items 13–17. Item 18 was excluded because its responses are not distributed along a scale, whilst item 13 was included as it relates to the perceived effectiveness of EE practices for learning. The analysis revealed a one-dimensional structure integrating learning, active participation, creativity, memorisation, and emotional well-being. The first factor has an eigenvalue of 3.39 and explains 67.7% of the total variance; the internal consistency of the scale is high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$).

The general effects of embodied practices, treated as a single factor (items 13–17), were subsequently analysed in relation to the design strategies used (item 22): observation/review, co-design, adaptation of activities and co-teaching. To this end, a Kruskal–Wallis test was conducted, from which no statistically significant differences emerged. Nevertheless, observation/review and co-design show slightly higher means.

With regard to the dimension of inclusion (items 19–21 and 23), almost all teachers (98.6%) consider that EE fosters inclusion in general and the engagement of students with SEN (items 19–20). Where students with special educational needs are present, the practices are personalised in 45.3% of cases (item 21); visual supports and sensory materials are also used (29.1%), and work is done to create safe and welcoming environments (26.3%). As for the EE activities considered most effective in

fostering inclusion (item 23), the following emerge: active participation through non-verbal expressive mediators, such as theatre, movement, dance and breathing (48%); empathy and the taking of different perspectives through role play (38.5%); and cooperation and positive interdependence through group games (36.7%).

Turning to the dimension of sustainability (items 24–26), the link between EE and sustainability appears to be recognised but not yet fully consolidated: 44.3% of respondents report being unable to express a view on this relationship. This is an aspect that will require further investigation in future surveys.

Table 1. Preliminary matrix of inclusive feasibility

Index dimension	Empirical evidence	Feasibility indicator
Teacher education (items 6, 28)	• 71.6% rate the training they received as insufficient/partial; • 73.7% report a lack of specific training Presence of hands-on, situated training in EE	Presence of hands-on, situated training in EE
Instructional design (items 10, 13)	• The gap between importance and use shows that theoretical adherence is not enough	Intentional inclusion of bodily mediators in the design
Accessibility (item 21)	• 45.3% personalise activities; • 29.1% use visual/sensory supports	Availability of accessible instructions, materials and multimodal channels
Participation (item 23)	• Theatre, movement, dance, breathing 48%; • role play 38.5%; • group games 36.7%	Plurality of participatory forms, not only verbal
Environments (item 29)	• 59.6% require adequate spaces; • 53.5% report inadequate spaces	Flexibility and modularity of spaces
Organisational culture (item 29)	• 30.9% report resistance from colleagues/school leadership	Collegial and institutional support
Resources and supports (item 30)	• Materials 35.2%; • experts 33.3%; • technologies 30%	Availability of mediators, tools and external supports

To conclude, within the scope of the present paper the analysis of the role of innovative technologies in supporting EE activities (items 33–37) and of the dimension relating to collaboration and proposals for improvement (items 27–30; 38) is deferred to further study. Here, in particular, the responses to two items considered crucial for the construction of a future Index for EE are recalled. In item 29, relating to the critical issues identified, inadequate spaces (53,3%) and resistance from col-

leagues and school leadership (30.9%) emerge above all: these data confirm that the feasibility of EE is not only methodological, but also organisational and environmental. As regards the operational proposals for improving the applicability of the practices (item 30), the responses highlight the need for training (69.7%), workshops (57.5%), collaboration with experts (42.8%) and structured modules or interdisciplinary pathways (30.9%). Table 1 summarises the most significant data, which make it possible to outline a first matrix of inclusive feasibility.

5. Discussion

The data analysis provides elements in support of the paper's hypothesis and clarifies its empirical terms. The first salient element is the dissociation between the value attributed to embodied practices and their actual use. While the importance accorded to integrating the body into learning and its perceived effectiveness are strongly correlated ($\varrho = .634$; $p < .001$), the frequency with which these practices are adopted is not significantly associated with the importance attributed to them. Pedagogical adherence, however widespread, does not in itself translate into systematic use, and the resulting gap concerns not beliefs but the conditions that make instructional action feasible.

A second, counter-intuitive, finding points in the same direction. The frequency of use increases both with age ($\varrho = .121$; $p = .029$) and with length of service ($\varrho = .134$; $p = .015$), although both associations are of modest magnitude. Teachers with more than twenty-one years of experience prove to be the most assiduous users (52%), as against 11.6% in the 31–40 age band. Since embodied practices, being less structured and more exposed to the unpredictability of the class group, require professional confidence and command of the context, their adoption appears to depend not only on the knowledge teachers possess but on their confidence in their own ability to regulate action in situ (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001; Rossi, 2011).

It is on the terrain of the conditions of practice that the data offer the clearest support for the thesis. The training received is judged insufficient or partial by 71.6% of respondents; 73.7% also indicate the lack of specific training among the principal difficulties, alongside inadequate spaces (53.5%) and resistance from colleagues and school leadership (30.9%). Consistently, the proposals for improvement, training (69.7%), workshops (57.5%) and collaboration with experts (42.8%), do not invoke individual motivation alone, confirming that the feasibility of Embodied Education is not an exclusively methodological question but bears on the training-related, organisational, spatial and cultural dimensions of school settings (Del Gobbo, 2018).

The data on inclusion support the transformative potential of the practices, recognised by almost all respondents (98.6%), and clarify their function. Non-verbal expressive mediators (48%), role play (38.5%), and group games (36.7%) broaden the ways of accessing the task and of expressing what has been learnt, valuing resources that cannot be reduced to verbal or abstract performance alone (CAST, 2018; Rose & Meyer, 2002). The inclusive value does not, however, lie in bodily activation as such, but in the degree to which bodily engagement is integrated into the learning objectives (Skulmowski & Rey, 2018), a distinction that prevents the presence of motor activities from being confused with the inclusive quality of the design.

It is at this level that the results signal the need for a *change of scale*. The shift from episodic practices to intentional forms of design is not played out in the introduction of individual bodily activities, but in the way in which spaces, times, materials, lan-

guages, and professional collaborations support participation. It is no coincidence that the factor analysis of the perceived effects (items 13–17) returns a one-dimensional structure (67.7% of variance explained; α = .88), within which the benefits of Embodied Education tend, in teachers' eyes, to take shape as an integrated construct linking learning, participation, creativity, memorisation and emotional well-being. The preliminary matrix responds to this need, tracing the evidence back to a number of observable cores, training, design, environments, mediators, technologies, organisational culture, not in a prescriptive vein, but in order to make the conditions of feasibility discussable and comparable.

Rather than settling the question, the survey opens up a programme of work. The preliminary matrix constitutes a first device for reading the conditions of feasibility of Embodied Education; its consolidation now requires extending the survey beyond the single university and trainee teachers and complementing the self-reported data with direct observation of classroom practice. The relationship between Embodied Education and sustainability also remains to be explored further, an area on which 44.3% of respondents do not yet express a defined position. These are the steps through which the matrix may evolve from an interpretive outline into a validated instrument.

6. Conclusion

The paper has taken the evidence of an earlier exploratory questionnaire-based survey on Embodied Education as a starting point for outlining a first architecture of conditions and indicators of inclusive feasibility. From this perspective, perceptions, declared practices, obstacles and training needs have been considered not merely as descriptive outcomes, but as elements useful for guiding the progressive construction of an Index for Embodied Education.

The results provide elements in support of the problem from which the research sets out, since recognising the educational value of the body and movement does not, in itself, determine their stable integration into instructional design. The gap between pedagogical adherence and the systematic use of embodied practices highlights the need to consider not only teachers' individual dispositions but also the training-related, organisational, spatial, and cultural conditions that make their adoption possible in school settings.

The preliminary matrix proposed here is situated along these lines. It does not take on a prescriptive or classificatory function; rather, it is configured as an exploratory device useful for making visible the conditions that foster or hinder Embodied Education in classroom practice. In continuity with the logic of the Index for Inclusion, attention is placed on the cultures, policies and practices that can broaden students' possibilities for participation (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

From this perspective, the Index for Embodied Education may support processes of self-evaluation, design, and improvement of school practices. Its function lies in prompting teachers, schools, and teacher educators to interrogate the organisation of space, the quality of mediation, the use of bodily and multimodal languages, professional collaboration and the relationship between instructional intentionality and the accessibility of the educational experience. The appeal to embodiment thus makes it possible to connect the embodied dimension of learning to teacher professionalism and to the design quality of educational environments (Ferri, 2022; Rossi, 2011; CAST, 2018).

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This study nonetheless retains a preliminary character since the proposed matrix requires further steps of empirical comparison and progressive validation in differentiated school settings. In this direction, it represents a first step towards defining an instrument capable of accompanying the transition from episodic embodied experiences to more intentional, shared, and documentable forms of inclusive design.

Author Contributions

The study design and the final revision of the manuscript were carried out jointly by all authors. The drafting of the manuscript was distributed as follows: D. Maggi wrote Sections 1 and 6; C. Zappa wrote Section 2; G. Rocchi wrote Section 3; P. Cortiana wrote Section 4; and A. Balestra wrote Section 5.

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