



Double Blind Peer Review

Citation

Lo Piccolo, A., Campanella, G., & Andolina, L. (2025). Body and mind: synergies for a new adaptive education. *Giornale italiano di educazione alla salute, sport e didattica inclusiva*, 9(2).

Doi:

<https://doi.org/10.32043/gsd.v9i2.1421>

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gsdjournal.it

ISSN: 2532-3296

ISBN: 978-88-6022-510-8

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ABSTRACT

Global changes require flexible education, which finds a concrete response in the UDL model, conceiving learning as a dynamic network of interactions between teachers, students and resources. The paper analyzes the body-mind symbiosis following the principles of UDL by promoting cognitive, emotional and psychological growth. In this context, teachers and students become co-learners, adapt to natural and digital stimuli, developing resilience to face an ever-changing future.

I cambiamenti globali richiedono un'educazione flessibile, che trova nel modello UDL una risposta concreta, concependo l'apprendimento come una rete dinamica tra docenti, allievi e risorse. Il contributo analizza la simbiosi corpo-mente seguendo i principi dell'UDL promuovendo crescita cognitiva, emotiva e psicologica. In questo contesto docenti e allievi, diventano co-apprendenti, si adattano agli stimoli naturali e digitali, sviluppando resilienza per affrontare un futuro in continuo mutamento.

KEYWORDS

Body, mind, innovation, UDL.
Corpo, mente, innovazione, UDL.

Received 30/04/2025

Accepted 17/06/2025

Published 20/06/2025

Introduction

The contemporary global context is marked by interrelated challenges such as climate crises, rapid economic transformations, and increasing social inequalities which, according to UNESCO (2021), undermine the sustainability of social structures. In particular, the rise in inequalities—exacerbated by globalization—has led to new forms of marginalization and conflict, highlighting the urgent need for an education capable of preparing individuals to cope with uncertainty and to contribute to a more equitable and sustainable future. In this scenario, education can no longer be confined to the transmission of content; it must evolve into a holistic process encompassing the development of cognitive, socio-emotional, physical, and relational competencies. Morin (1999) emphasizes that "to educate means to prepare for complexity," for change and for uncertainty. Consequently, there is an urgent need to rethink pedagogical methods in order to more effectively meet the demands of a rapidly changing world. The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework emerges as an innovative, inclusive, and flexible response, capable of adapting to students' cognitive, emotional, and physical diversity (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2014). UDL is grounded in the recognition of individual learning differences and promotes diverse instructional strategies across the domains of representation, expression, and engagement. As noted by Savia (2016), UDL not only facilitates access to content but also fosters a learning environment that allows each student to learn according to their own pace and style, simultaneously stimulating physical and emotional engagement.

Within this framework, the body assumes a central role: no longer regarded as a passive support system, it becomes an active agent in cognitive and regulatory processes. Folci and Baroni (2022) argue that the body contributes significantly to motivation, concentration, and emotional regulation. Educational neuroscience and motor sciences increasingly demonstrate the inseparable connection between bodily, cognitive, and emotional processes. Gardner (1993), through his theory of multiple intelligences, affirms that learning also involves bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and spatial intelligences—essential components for a comprehensive educational experience. A growing body of research highlights the benefits of integrating movement into the school environment. Premoli (2008) asserts that bodily experiences stimulate multiple cognitive and emotional levels, while Savia (2016) underscores how physical activities tied to curricular content can enhance motivation, improve problem-solving abilities, and increase student

engagement. In light of this evidence, the present study aims to explore the effectiveness of integrating body–mind practices into the UDL framework in primary education. The research adopts both experimental and observational approaches and focuses on second-grade primary school students. Two groups will be involved: an experimental group, which will participate in an eight-week intervention based on incorporating bodily movement into instructional activities, and a control group, which will continue with standard curricular practices. The educational intervention will be designed to stimulate bodily awareness, posture, breathing, and movement as tools for learning, with the objective of positively influencing attention, motivation, and emotional regulation. Data collection will include weekly classroom observations, teacher-completed checklists, and pre- and post-intervention questionnaires.

The research questions focus on three main aspects: (1) the impact of conscious bodily engagement on students' concentration, motivation, and emotional regulation; (2) the effectiveness of mindful movement in supporting successful learning strategies; and (3) the potential of the body to serve as a mediator for authentic and meaningful school experiences. The study is organized into three primary sections. The first outlines the theoretical framework, research objectives, and methodological design. The second focuses on the design and implementation of the “Body and Mind” educational intervention, which integrates brief embodied practices into curricular instruction, drawing on the principles of Universal Design for Learning to promote a multisensory and inclusive educational experience. The third and final section details the phases, instruments, and strategies for evaluating the intervention, followed by a brief concluding reflection. Among the expected outcomes, it is hypothesized that the integration of the body into instructional design will significantly enhance attention, stimulate intrinsic motivation, and foster emotional regulation through activities such as stretching and mindful breathing. Additionally, a positive impact is anticipated on students' overall well-being and classroom climate. Should the body–mind approach be validated by positive results, it could offer a robust foundation for rethinking traditional pedagogical methodologies—toward a more inclusive, dynamic, and emotionally and relationally responsive education.

Finally, the practical implications of the project suggest that an education integrating body and mind can reinforce students' social-emotional competencies, supporting the development of empathy, resilience, and self- and other-

awareness. In a world of constant transformation, such skills are crucial for facing future challenges with greater balance and active participation.

1. Theoretical framework, objectives and methodological design of the project

This research design has been developed within the framework of the PhD program in “Educational Processes in Heterogeneous and Multicultural Contexts” at the University of Enna “Kore,” in collaboration with a local primary school. The project originates from the awareness that, within the current international social landscape, one of the most pressing challenges facing educational systems is the promotion of social inclusion, understood as a principle to be implemented transversally across all domains and for all individuals (UNESCO, 2017). In line with this premise, genuinely inclusive education cannot overlook a holistic vision of the human being—one who learns through the body, feels with the mind, and constructs meaning through emotions and gestures. Moving beyond the notion of abstract, disembodied knowledge, contemporary educational research is rediscovering the central role of corporeality as an essential and irreplaceable component of cognitive and emotional processes. Overcoming the traditional dichotomy between mind and body entails recognizing the active role of embodied experience in the construction of knowledge, thereby placing the totality of the person at the center of the educational process (Gomez Paloma F., 2016).

From this perspective, the project “Body and Mind: Synergies between Body and Mind for Authentic and Adaptive Learning in Primary School” is grounded in a robust theoretical framework that integrates the principles of Embodied Cognition and Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

According to the Embodied Cognition approach, the body is not merely a support for cognitive activity but is constitutively involved in it. Cognitive and emotional functions emerge through the dynamic interaction between the organism and its environment (Gallese, 2021). Learning, therefore, cannot be conceived as a purely mental process but rather as an activity that engages the individual as a whole, in a continuous interplay of action, perception, and emotion (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2019). This vision intersects with the principles of UDL, which advocate for an inclusive and flexible pedagogy capable of addressing the neurocognitive variability of students (Marzocchi, Molin, Poli, 2021). UDL, by acknowledging the

diversity of ways in which individuals learn, promotes the design of universally accessible instruction. This approach ensures that knowledge and skills can be acquired, processed, and expressed through multiple communicative codes and diverse learning pathways. As such, it represents an educational and didactic model that enables each student to access, process, and convey knowledge according to their unique characteristics. The synergy among mind, body, and emotions not only enriches the learning experience but also enhances its authenticity, adaptability, and long-term retention. Especially in primary education, where concrete experience constitutes the main vehicle for competency development, promoting activities that integrate movement, emotional expression, and cognitive processes provides all students with meaningful opportunities for growth and academic success (Gallese & Cuccio, 2014).

The project aims to operationalize this theoretical foundation by developing educational pathways that leverage corporeality as a pivotal driver of authentic learning. In recent decades, the UDL framework has gained increasing prominence both in scholarly discourse and educational practice, positioning itself as an innovative approach for creating inclusive, flexible, and adaptive learning environments that respond to students' neurocognitive diversity. UDL challenges traditional didactic schemas, disrupts the linearity of conventional educational trajectories, and, simultaneously, offers tools for reconfiguring educational processes and redefining the meaning of teaching itself (Robinson, 2016). In this context, competent teachers—fully aware that they cannot exert absolute control over the educational process—strive to continually establish optimal conditions for each student's learning.

Evidence-based research confirms that UDL not only enhances accessibility and participation but also positively influences crucial variables such as motivation, well-being, engagement, and academic achievement. Numerous national and international studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of UDL principles in school and educational settings. In Italy, four major investigations (Calvani, 2012; Mangiatordi & Serenelli, 2013; Guglielman, 2014; Ghedin & Mazzocut, 2017) have served as key reference points in this field. In particular, Guglielman's study emphasized the importance of integrating UDL principles into e-learning design. Similarly, findings from Ghedin and Mazzocut's research highlight a growing sensitivity to inclusive education in the Italian context, creating a fertile ground for the dissemination of UDL-based approaches. Nonetheless, to ensure a

systematic and structured implementation of UDL, targeted actions are required—particularly in strengthening schools' inclusive ethos and investing in ongoing teacher training. Overall, these studies have demonstrated that teacher training aligned with the UDL model fosters improved inclusive practices, positively shapes attitudes toward inclusion, and contributes to school well-being (Savia, 2016). Furthermore, even in the absence of explicit knowledge of the model, many schools have already adopted practices that align spontaneously with UDL principles. Internationally, longitudinal studies and meta-analyses confirm that UDL implementation enhances active student participation, increases motivation, and elevates overall satisfaction levels—even among students with disabilities. Additionally, specific studies (e.g., Marino, 2009) show that UDL contributes to more inclusive and cooperative learning environments. These results underscore the importance of continuing along experimental research trajectories—particularly within the Italian context—to further validate the efficacy of UDL in curriculum design and in the transformation of educational environments. In line with current trends in educational research, this project proposes an exploratory experimental study aimed at investigating the effectiveness of the synergistic integration of body, mind, and emotions in learning processes. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, grounded in the belief that neither quantitative nor qualitative methodologies alone are sufficient to fully capture the complexity of cognitive and emotional dynamics in real-world school settings. As Trinchero (2019) suggests, mixed methods offer a particularly effective strategy in educational research, enabling the integration of numerical and narrative data, standardized assessments and in-depth observations, and thus providing a multilayered understanding of the phenomena under study. This project will collect quantitative data through structured instruments (e.g., rating scales, cognitive performance tests) while also gathering qualitative data through semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and analysis of student work.

The methodological structure follows an explanatory sequential design, as described in the mixed-methods literature, in which the analysis of quantitative data precedes and informs the qualitative phase, thereby enriching and problematizing its interpretive scope. Particular attention will be devoted to the development of age-appropriate and neurocognitively-sensitive assessment tools, as well as to the integration of analytical phases to ensure interpretive coherence and methodological rigor. In doing so, the project seeks not only to test the

effectiveness of the proposed educational practices but also to contribute to the advancement of complex educational research models capable of reflecting the richness and variability of real educational contexts (Lambert, 2019).

2. Design and implementation of the "Body and Mind" educational intervention

In outlining the implementation phase of the research project, a methodology sensitive to the complexity of contemporary educational contexts was adopted. The intervention—conducted directly within authentic classroom settings—integrates the practical dimension of teaching with the reflective dimension of scientific inquiry. Through a cyclical process of observation, action, and evaluation, the aim is to foster continuous improvement of educational practices by actively involving teachers and students in the co-construction of knowledge and the refinement of intervention tools. The pervasive influence of the virtual dimension in the lives of new generations undermines relational skills and self-awareness. In this scenario, embodied education emerges as a crucial means to reestablish an authentic relationship with oneself and others. Embodied experiences promote perceptual, affective, and identity development, whereas its neglect obstructs the formation of meaningful relationships and subjectivity (Coco, 2015). In light of these theoretical insights, it was deemed appropriate to translate these premises into a structured action aimed at verifying the educational effectiveness of embodied practices within the school context. Thus, the research seeks to investigate the emergent processes—rather than focusing solely on final outcomes—that arise when learning is supported by embodied practices and didactic activities capable of engaging the mind–body system in a non-linear, dynamic, embodied, and situated logic.

The intervention will be conducted in a regular school environment and will involve two groups of second-grade primary students: an experimental group, systematically exposed to body–mind practices integrated into curricular instruction, and a control group engaged in traditional teaching activities. The inclusion of a control group provides a necessary comparison parameter to more reliably measure the efficacy of the intervention. Against the backdrop of current educational challenges and reflections on the Italian school context, the study aims to offer operational answers to the following questions:

1. Does the use of the body (during breaks and instructional time) improve processes of attention, motivation, and emotional regulation?
2. How can movement help children concentrate and select effective learning strategies?
3. What is the impact of the proposed practices on active student engagement and the authenticity of learning processes?

Participants will be second-grade primary school children—a pedagogically and psychologically strategic choice. At this stage, students have already acquired basic literacy and numeracy skills, while retaining high neurocognitive plasticity, making them particularly receptive to embodied and metacognitive stimuli (Diamond, 2013). This developmental window is ideal for introducing educational strategies that simultaneously act upon cognitive, emotional, and bodily levels.

A central element of the methodological design is the analysis of the emotional dimension in relation to learning: positive emotional states facilitate attention, memory, and motivation processes, while negative emotional experiences can significantly hinder knowledge acquisition and retrieval. Within this theoretical framework, the project aims to understand how emotional regulation—supported by mindful bodily activities and inclusive teaching practices—can positively affect students' well-being and academic performance. At the start of the research, preliminary training sessions will be held for participating teachers, accompanied by ongoing supervision to ensure methodological coherence and adherence to operational guidelines. The experimental phase will introduce two complementary types of practices on a daily or weekly basis.

Firstly, brief yet high-impact embodied–emotional practices—such as guided breathing, mindful stretching, and circle-time emotion sharing—will be implemented to promote bodily awareness, emotional regulation, and class cohesion.

Secondly, these practices will be integrated with adaptive instructional activities aligned with curricular content, particularly in Italian and mathematics, following an inclusive and flexible logic.

The first category of activities, scheduled for the start of the school day or during breaks, focuses on emotional regulation, relaxation, and concentration. Their primary objective is to cultivate an optimal learning environment by reducing stress, improving emotion management, and preparing students to meet

cognitive demands. Their brevity allows for natural integration into the school routine, creating a fluid transition into heightened attention and participation.

The second category, integrated into Italian and mathematics lessons, consists of more structured and articulated activities rooted in UDL principles. These are deliberately and systematically designed to embed the bodily dimension into cognitive processes and learning. This intervention seeks to establish a multisensory, inclusive pedagogical model that fosters authentic participation by simultaneously engaging motor, affective, and cognitive skills. From the study's onset, both types of activities will run in parallel. For instance, in Italian lessons, children will be prompted to physically embody the content of read texts—through gestures, postures, and symbolic movements—fostering deeper semantic and affective processing (Gherardi, 2013). In mathematics, the body will serve as a medium to visualize abstract concepts: students may walk along number lines drawn on the floor, represent operations through spatial movements, or translate calculations into rhythmic motor sequences. These strategies aim not only to make learning more accessible and motivating but also to anchor cognitive concepts in sensory-motor experiences, in line with findings from embodied cognition research (Macedonia, 2019).

Finally, movement, if properly integrated, functions as a natural regulator of attention and emotional levels, thereby enhancing classroom well-being. Specifically in Italian, the notion of "embodied storytelling" will utilize the body to represent narrative events, characters' emotions, and key concepts. After shared reading, students will choose how to physically interpret the story—be it through gesture sequences, situational enactments, or symbolic posture expressions (e.g., curved for sadness, upright for courage). This choice empowers students to personalize their engagement and explore narratives more deeply according to their sensitivities. These motor representations will subsequently be expressed verbally and in writing—via concept maps, brief summaries, or metacognitive reflections—thus integrating bodily, cognitive, and expressive dimensions. Additionally, "reading in movement" activities will enable students to explore key text elements spatially, choosing movement paths aligned with their learning styles (e.g., walking story sequences vs. jumping on key words). The variety of offered modalities allows each child to experience the content uniquely, supporting comprehension and retention.

Here, UDL principles are actualized through choice—not only in activity type but also in collaborative grouping—fostering active participation and intrinsic

motivation, as students make decisions that reflect their interests and preferences (Savia, 2016). Similarly, in mathematics, body–mind integration will feature dynamic number representations (“motor calculations”). The teacher will propose several interaction modes, and students will choose which to perform—walking, jumping, or running along dynamic number lines, or executing arithmetic operations via rhythmic movements like clapping or stepping. These options reinforce the connection between bodily rhythm and numeric structure. Geometric activities will allow students to choose between physically forming shapes with their bodies or constructing them using materials like ropes, tape, or 3D objects.

All practices will be customizable to accommodate different cognitive styles and provide multiple participation alternatives—core to UDL—so that each student can select the modality that best aligns with their learning preferences. This operational model fosters deep, embodied learning and reduces barriers via adaptive, inclusive, and flexible teaching strategies.

The intervention will be implemented seamlessly within the school's daily life—valuing spontaneity and authenticity. Brief embodied activities such as guided breathing, mindful stretching, and emotion-sharing circles are recommended daily or at least three times weekly to reinforce emotional regulation, attention, and bodily awareness skills, creating a more receptive and focused learning environment. For the adaptive curricular activities in Italian and mathematics, the ideal frequency is two to three times per week. This schedule allows integration with curricular demands without disrupting program continuity, maintaining a dynamic balance between motor activities and academic content.

3. Phases, tools and strategies for the evaluation of the integrated educational intervention

The structure of the work is articulated into four distinct yet interconnected phases. The first phase entails a preliminary training session for the participating teachers, followed by an analysis of the specific school context, a detailed presentation of the research project, and the administration of an initial questionnaire to the participating students. This self-perceptive questionnaire, employing smileys/emoticons, aims to capture aspects related to attention, intrinsic motivation, emotional awareness, and the quality of the school

experience. The use of both traditional assessment tools, such as written questionnaires, and digital platforms, for example interactive tools like “Genially,” may be considered. The second phase involves the implementation of the educational activities. During this period, teachers are requested to observe any significant changes, employing systematic documentation tools, including a structured weekly logbook to monitor the development of the intervention. Additionally, they will be asked to conduct semi-structured interviews and document any critical issues, personal reflections, and observed reactions in the children. This approach aims to collect valuable qualitative data to better understand the project’s progression and its daily impact. The third phase is dedicated to the systematic collection of data necessary for subsequent qualitative and quantitative analyses of the observed dynamics. It is essential to prepare a careful observation and data-gathering phase consistent with the principles of evidence-based teaching (Vivanet, 2015). The interplay between brief embodied practices and adaptive educational pathways, while harmoniously integrated into daily school routines, demands meticulous documentation of educational processes and their outcomes to scientifically validate the intervention’s impact across multiple domains of student development.

As previously indicated, the data collection phase will adopt a mixed-methods approach, combining systematic observation and self-assessment instruments carefully selected to provide a multi-level reading of educational processes (Pintus & Bertolini, 2022), thus enabling an integrated analysis on both quantitative and qualitative levels.

Quantitatively measurable data will be processed using statistical tools and software such as Excel and SPSS, with pre- and post-intervention scores compared to identify significant variations and calculate perceived improvements within each domain. Simultaneously, the qualitative analysis will focus on systematic teacher observations and periodic metacognitive self-assessments administered to the students. Observations will monitor parameters such as concentration, emotion regulation, and use of metacognitive strategies, while self-assessments will enable children to reflect on their own learning processes, the strategies employed, and the emotions experienced during body–mind activities, thereby promoting initial metacognitive literacy in line with self-regulated learning models (Zimmerman, 2002). The instruments, adapted to the age and neurocognitive characteristics of the students, will provide crucial qualitative data for exploring

emotional and cognitive dynamics. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data will allow for a comprehensive and in-depth evaluation of the intervention's impact. Quantitative results will provide measures of score changes, while observations and self-assessments will offer insights into emerging dynamics during the activities.

Finally, the fourth phase involves administering a concluding questionnaire (using the same modalities as the initial questionnaire) aimed at detecting any changes in students' perceptions and attitudes following the intervention. The data thus obtained will be integrated with those collected in the previous phases, strengthening the validity of the results and offering a broader and more coherent understanding of the intervention's effectiveness. The final analysis will not be limited to detecting the presence or absence of measurable effects but will seek to interpret the meaning of observed changes by linking quantitative data (score variations) with qualitative data (narratives, perceptions, observations). A final feedback session with the involved teachers is planned, during which the evidence collected will be discussed, the experimented teaching practices reflected upon, and the possibility of consolidating or extending the intervention over time evaluated.

Author contributions

Introduction: Alessandra Lo Piccolo

Theoretical framework, objectives and methodological design of the project:
Giulia Campanella

Design and implementation of the "Body and Mind" educational intervention:
Laura Andolina

Phases, tools and strategies for the evaluation of the integrated educational intervention: Laura Andolina

Conclusions: Alessandra Lo Piccolo

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