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Enacting the hybrid code: specialist and generalist teacher dynamics within Italy's primary physical education reform

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ABSTRACT

Italy's Law 234/2021 introduced specialist physical education (PE) teachers into primary schools, placing a strongly classified subject role within an institution historically oriented towards curricular integration. Drawing on Bernstein's sociology of educational knowledge, this qualitative multiple-case study examined how ten specialist and ten generalist teachers, together with five headteachers, enacted the reform across ten full-time primary schools in Northern Italy. Data comprised 25 semi-structured interviews, 30 h of non-participant observation, and five specialist–generalist dyadic interviews. A theory-informed hybrid thematic analysis combined deductive use of classification, framing, and evaluative rules with inductive coding, within-case analysis, and cross-case comparison. Three interrelated tensions were identified: an epistemological mismatch between biomedical–technical preparation and holistic primary pedagogy; spatial and temporal boundary-making that reinforced strong framing; and micropolitical negotiation over assessment and evaluative authority. Two deviant cases showed that protected co-planning and shared assessment routines could soften these boundaries. The article's main contribution is to demonstrate that stronger subject classification does not itself produce pedagogical coherence: without institutional mechanisms for translating between specialist and generalist knowledge, it may intensify fragmentation. The findings support institutionalised co-planning, shared evaluative frameworks, and stronger preparation for primary pedagogy.

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Introduction

The provision of primary physical education (PE) remains a contested issue in international education policy and practice. A persistent question concerns who is best placed to teach the subject in primary schools: the generalist classroom teacher, who typically possesses strong knowledge of the child and of the wider curriculum but may lack confidence in PE, or the specialist teacher, whose disciplinary expertise may not easily align with the integrated and relational ethos of primary schooling (Griggs and Randall 2019; Jones and Green 2017). Different systems have addressed this question in markedly different ways. In England, the outsourcing of primary PE to external coaches has often marginalised generalist teachers' role in the subject, raising concerns about deprofessionalisation and curricular fragmentation (Randall 2023; Randall and Griggs 2021). In Australia, a substantial proportion of primary schools outsource at least part of their PE provision, a pattern linked less to strong pedagogical justification than to perceptions of generalist

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teachers' limited preparedness (Sears and Wilson 2024; Spittle, Spittle, and Itoh 2022). By contrast, the Republic of Ireland has developed a PE specialism pathway within generalist initial teacher education, producing graduates intended to combine disciplinary expertise with broader primary pedagogical competence (Brennan, Bowles, and Murtagh 2023).

Against this international backdrop, Italy has pursued a distinctive path. Rather than relying on outsourcing or optional specialist pathways, it has introduced specialist motor education teachers – the official Italian designation for the primary PE role – into the primary phase through national legislation. Law 234/2021 initiated a phased reform, first extending specialist provision to Year 5 and subsequently to Year 4, thereby interrupting a long-standing tradition of exclusively generalist-led movement education in primary schools (Parlamento Italiano 2021; Ministero dell'Istruzione [MI] 2022). The newly recruited specialists are required to hold a Master's degree in sport and exercise-related fields (LM-67, LM-68, or LM-47),[1] supplemented by 24 CFU/CFA in pedagogical disciplines[2] (MI 2022; Parlamento Italiano 2021). This reform does not merely introduce an additional teacher into the timetable. It reconfigures the pedagogical organisation of primary schooling by inserting a strongly specialised professional role into an institutional setting historically characterised by curricular integration, relational continuity, and a broad developmental orientation.

This structural shift may be productively examined through Basil Bernstein's sociology of educational knowledge. Bernstein's concepts of classification, framing, and pedagogic codes offer a powerful language for analysing what happens when a strongly bounded disciplinary formation enters a relatively weakly classified institutional space (Bernstein 1971; 2000). In this article, Italy's reform is interpreted as the creation of a hybrid pedagogic arrangement: a collection-code subject, taught by a designated specialist, embedded within a primary school culture that has traditionally operated according to a more integrated code. The reform raises an important analytical question. If specialist PE teachers bring with them forms of knowledge and professional identity shaped predominantly by biomedical and technical singulars, rather than by broad pedagogical regions, then strengthening subject classification may not automatically strengthen educational coherence in the primary setting (Bernstein 2000; D'Isanto et al. 2024).

Recent scholarship has begun to identify these tensions at the level of policy, curriculum, and disciplinary formation. Cross-national work on physical literacy and PE curricula has highlighted the difficulties involved in aligning holistic educational ambitions with formal curricular structures (Carl et al. 2026). Critical analyses of the Italian sport and exercise sciences landscape have questioned the epistemological balance of specialist preparation, particularly the relationship between biomedical expertise and educational purpose (Cereda 2025d; D'Isanto et al. 2024). International scholarship has also shown that both weakly and strongly classified policy arrangements may generate contradictions when translated into practice. Gerdin et al. (2025) show how broad holistic intentions may be undermined by curricular ambiguity, while other studies suggest that inserting specialists into primary settings can generate professional isolation and limited pedagogical integration when collaborative structures are weak or absent (Brennan, Bowles, and Murtagh 2025; Cruickshank et al. 2024; Penney and Alfrey 2022).

What remains underexplored, however, is how these tensions are actually lived and negotiated in Italian primary schools. Existing analyses have been useful in clarifying the structural and epistemological stakes, but they cannot explain how specialists and generalists interpret one another's roles, how pedagogical control is distributed in everyday practice, or how evaluation and legitimacy are negotiated in situ. In Bernsteinian terms, the field of recontextualisation has begun to attract attention; the field of reproduction remains much less clearly understood. This matters because reforms of teacher role differentiation do not operate mechanically – they are enacted in schools through organisational routines, professional relationships, spatial arrangements, and locally negotiated judgements about what counts as worthwhile teaching and learning.

The present study addresses this gap through a qualitative multiple-case study of ten primary schools in Northern Italy during the 2024–2025 academic year. Rather than assuming that specialist provision necessarily improves or undermines primary PE, it examines how the reform is interpreted, translated, and contested in practice. The analysis focuses on the field of reproduction and on the organisational conditions through which specialist knowledge becomes, or fails to become, integrated with primary pedagogy.

The article makes three linked contributions. Empirically, it provides a multi-site account of the reform's early enactment rather than analysing policy intentions alone. Theoretically, it develops the notion of a hybrid pedagogic code to show that stronger classification can produce fragmentation when translation across professional and curricular boundaries is weak. Practically, it identifies protected co-planning and shared evaluative routines as institutional mechanisms through which specialist and generalist expertise can be combined. These contributions are developed through the following research questions:

(1) How do specialist and generalist teachers perceive and negotiate their professional boundaries and pedagogical roles within the newly reconfigured primary school setting?
(2) How does specialists' academic preparation influence the selection, sequencing, pacing, and evaluation of PE within an integrated primary environment?
(3) What organisational, relational, and micropolitical strategies are developed within schools to manage tensions and build a more shared pedagogical grammar?

Literature review

Specialists, generalists, and the limits of simple solutions

The international literature on primary PE has long been shaped by debate over the respective roles of generalist and specialist teachers. Generalist teachers are often regarded as well placed to support learning because of their sustained relationship with the class and capacity to connect PE with wider curricular and pastoral aims. At the same time, they frequently report limited confidence, insufficient preparation, and uncertainty about how to teach PE in pedagogically robust ways (Morgan and Bourke 2008; Truelove et al. 2021). These concerns have often been used to justify the expansion of specialist provision.

The literature suggests, however, that the generalist–specialist distinction should not be understood as a straightforward opposition between weak and strong teaching. Each model carries particular affordances and constraints. In England, reliance on external specialists has raised concerns that generalist teachers are excluded from meaningful engagement with PE during their preparation and early professional development (Randall 2023; Randall and Griggs 2021). In Australia, outsourcing has expanded not because of compelling evidence of superior outcomes, but because schools perceive generalists as underprepared (Sears and Wilson 2024; Spittle, Spittle, and Itoh 2022). In such contexts, specialist provision may resolve short-term competence issues while simultaneously creating longer-term questions about curricular coherence and the place of PE within the broader educational project.

The introduction of specialists does not necessarily produce pedagogical integration or stronger educational value. Telford et al. (2016) found positive outcomes associated with specialist-taught PE in relation to physical activity. Yet broader scholarship warns against treating specialist knowledge as inherently educationally sufficient. Kirk (2010) and Evans (2004) have argued that PE becomes problematic when reduced to technical performance, detached from wider socio-cultural and developmental purposes. In primary settings, the issue is not only whether movement tasks are taught accurately, but whether PE is positioned as part of a broader conception of childhood, learning, and educability. The more analytically useful question, then, concerns the conditions under which particular forms of expertise become educationally productive in primary schools.

Teacher preparation and professional formation in primary PE

The perceived weakness of generalist provision is often linked to the limited space allocated to PE within initial teacher education. Generalist teachers frequently feel underprepared to plan, teach, and assess PE, and low self-efficacy may contribute to avoidance or marginalisation of the subject (Morgan and Bourke 2008; Truelove et al. 2021). Randall (2023) shows that when primary PE is increasingly taught by others, pre-service generalists have fewer opportunities to learn how to teach it, with implications for both present provision and the future pedagogical capacity of the generalist workforce.

Yet the specialist route is not free from difficulty. Cruickshank et al. (2024) found that Australian primary PE specialists may experience isolation when their disciplinary orientation sits uneasily alongside more holistic school cultures. Brennan, Bowles, and Murtagh (2025) show that early-career PE specialism graduates in Ireland encounter micropolitical pressures to adapt to primary school norms, sometimes at the expense of their specialist identity. These studies indicate that specialist expertise, while valuable, does not automatically translate into institutional legitimacy or pedagogical integration.

The Irish case is instructive because it offers a different model. Rather than importing an external specialist identity into primary schooling, the Irish PE specialism pathway develops graduates with both specialist competence and generalist pedagogical understanding – what Brennan, Bowles, and Murtagh (2023) describe as 'the best of both worlds.' This body of work suggests that the issue is not specialist knowledge per se, but the way professional preparation positions teachers in relation to subject boundaries, child development, and collaboration with colleagues.

Bernstein's conceptual framework: classification, framing, and pedagogic codes

Bernstein's concepts of classification and framing offer a language for understanding both the structural organisation of knowledge and the social regulation of pedagogy (Bernstein 1971; 2000). Classification concerns the strength of boundaries between categories, including school subjects, forms of expertise, and teacher identities. Framing concerns control over the pedagogical message: who determines selection, sequencing, pacing, and evaluative criteria (Penney et al. 2009). Strong classification insulates subject boundaries and professional territories; weaker classification makes them more permeable and potentially more integrated (Morais and Neves 2018). Bernstein's pedagogic device further distinguishes the fields of knowledge production, recontextualisation, and reproduction. This distinction is useful here because the reform is not treated as a policy simply implemented in schools, but as a message transformed through local roles, routines, and judgements.

In PE scholarship, Bernsteinian concepts have been used to illuminate curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Evans and Penney (1995) analysed the politics of PE curriculum making, while Penney et al. (2009) explored curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment as interconnected message systems. Young et al. (2021) showed how strong classification and framing can narrow evaluative possibilities in PE. O'Connor, Alfrey, and Penney (2024) demonstrate the continued relevance of classification for understanding how games and sports are organised within PE knowledge structures. Tsangaridou, Charalambous, and Kyriakides (2024) found that taking a PE specialisation within generalist teacher education influenced pre-service teachers' views, indicating that the classificatory structure of initial preparation has consequences for later practice. This is especially relevant in the Italian case, where specialist teachers enter primary schools after formation routes not located within primary teacher education.

Collaboration and the possibility of a shared pedagogical grammar

If the central issue is not simply expertise but its educational integration, then co-planning, shared teaching, and collaborative reflection become significant. Clohessy, Bowles, and Ní Chróinín (2020) found that class-swapping arrangements in Irish primary PE could support generalist confidence and

professional engagement. Kihara et al. (2021) showed that lesson study can provide a productive framework for collaborative pedagogical inquiry in primary PE. These studies shift the debate away from the specialist–generalist binary, highlighting that the educational value of specialist provision depends on the organisational conditions through which expertise is shared and translated into school practice.

The Italian context and the empirical gap

The Italian primary school has historically been organised around the figure of the *maestro/a prevalente* – a generalist class teacher who accompanies the same group of children across multiple subjects and years, building sustained relational knowledge. Within this tradition, movement education was not conceived as a discrete discipline but as a pedagogical resource woven into the fabric of daily school life: teachers used physical activities to support socialisation, emotional self-regulation, rhythm for language acquisition, and spatial reasoning for early mathematics. The curricular logic was integrative by design, and the generalist teacher's legitimacy rested precisely on the capacity to connect learning experiences across domains rather than to deliver subject-specific instruction. This cultural and institutional history makes the introduction of specialist motor education teachers particularly significant. The reform does not simply insert a new professional figure into the timetable; it disrupts a deeply embedded pedagogical grammar in which movement was understood as belonging to the class teacher and to the relational life of the classroom.

Recent Italian scholarship has raised concerns about the epistemological profile of specialist degree pathways (Cereda 2025d; D'Isanto et al. 2024), while Piccioli, Cioni, and Pannone (2025) highlight the importance of teacher preparation structures in shaping how motor education is enacted. Specifically, D'Isanto et al. (2024) identify a strong scientific and disciplinary identity within the movement, exercise, and sport sciences, while Cereda (2025d) argues for renewed reflection on the epistemological and curricular orientation of kinesiology in Italy. Taken together, these studies suggest that the Italian reform may generate profound tensions between the knowledge structures embedded in specialist preparation and the pedagogical expectations of primary education. The Italian case is therefore analytically significant not only in national terms, but also as a site through which wider questions about curriculum classification, teacher identity, and policy enactment can be examined. International comparative work reinforces these concerns: Carl et al. (2026) show that the compatibility of PE curricula with physical literacy depends on the relationship between policy intentions, teacher education, and enactment; Gerdin et al. (2025) show that even well-intentioned frameworks may fail when structural conditions are contradictory.

What remains insufficiently understood is how these structural tensions are negotiated in the everyday life of schools. The present study addresses this gap by examining the field of reproduction: how a formally introduced specialist role is translated into local pedagogical relations, and which organisational conditions mediate the encounter between strongly classified disciplinary expertise and an integrated primary-school ethos.

Methodology

Research design

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design to examine the early enactment of specialist motor education within Italian primary schools (Yin 2018). Each school was treated as a bounded case of policy enactment, while the ten-case design enabled comparison of recurrent and divergent configurations across the set (Stake 2006). The unit of analysis was not the individual teacher in isolation, but the specialist–generalist arrangement as organised within each school. This distinction was important because the study examined how knowledge boundaries

and pedagogical control were produced through relationships, routines, and institutional conditions.

A social constructivist orientation informed the study. Policy was understood as interpreted, mediated, and translated rather than linearly implemented (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012). Bernstein's concepts supplied an external language of description for examining classification, framing, and evaluative rules, but they were used as sensitising concepts rather than as a fixed coding template. The design therefore combined theoretically directed attention with openness to meanings and practices not anticipated by the framework.

Context and participant selection

The research was conducted during the 2024–2025 academic year in ten state primary schools located across three provinces within one Northern Italian region. Selection was purposive and criterion-based: eligible schools had incorporated specialist motor education into routine provision under Law 234/2021 and operated a tempo pieno (full-time) model, which offered extended opportunities to examine how specialist lessons were positioned within the school day. The provinces were selected because of their established full-time provision and early deployment of specialist teachers. The sampling strategy sought information-rich cases rather than statistical representativeness (Patton 2015). Fieldwork also coincided with a national assessment transition: from the 2024–2025 academic year, periodic and final assessment in primary schools was legally redefined through synthetic judgements linked to descriptions of pupils' learning levels (MIM 2025a; MIM 2025b; Parlamento Italiano 2024).

After school-level access had been obtained, participants were selected because they were directly involved in the specialist–generalist arrangement within each case. The sample comprised 25 participants: ten specialist motor education teachers, ten generalist classroom teachers, and five headteachers. Specialists held Master's degrees in Sport Sciences (LM-67 or LM-68), together with the required educational credits, and had between one and three years of primary teaching experience. Generalists had 8–25 years of experience and worked with the participating specialists. Headteachers provided an organisational and leadership perspective; their inclusion in five cases reflected access constraints and was treated as contextual enrichment rather than as a complete leadership stratum. Table 1 summarises the cases, participants, and data sources.

Schools are identified as Schools 1–10 and provinces as A–C. Participant roles, rather than personal pseudonyms, are used in the presentation of quotations. This approach preserves the analytic distinction between specialist, generalist, and leadership perspectives while limiting deductive identification within small school teams.

Table 1. Distribution of participants and data-generation methods across the ten primary-school cases.

Case	Province	Timetable	Participants	Data-generation methods
School 1	A	Full-time	1 Spec., 1 Gen., 1 HT	3 interviews; 3 h observation; dyadic interview
School 2	A	Full-time	1 Spec., 1 Gen., 1 HT	3 interviews; 3 h observation; dyadic interview
School 3	A	Full-time	1 Spec., 1 Gen.	2 interviews; 3 h observation
School 4	B	Full-time	1 Spec., 1 Gen., 1 HT	3 interviews; 3 h observation; dyadic interview
School 5	B	Full-time	1 Spec., 1 Gen.	2 interviews; 3 h observation
School 6	B	Full-time	1 Spec., 1 Gen., 1 HT	3 interviews; 3 h observation; dyadic interview
School 7	C	Full-time	1 Spec., 1 Gen.	2 interviews; 3 h observation
School 8	C	Full-time	1 Spec., 1 Gen., 1 HT	3 interviews; 3 h observation; dyadic interview
School 9	C	Full-time	1 Spec., 1 Gen.	2 interviews; 3 h observation
School 10	C	Full-time	1 Spec., 1 Gen.	2 interviews; 3 h observation
Total: 10	**3 Prov.**	**100% full-time**	**10 Spec., 10 Gen., 5 HT (N = 25)**	**25** interviews; 30 h observation; **5** dyadic interviews

Note: *Full-time* refers to the Italian *tempo pieno* model, a primary-school timetable comprising 40 h per week, including lunchtime. Spec. = specialist motor education teacher; Gen. = generalist classroom teacher; HT = headteacher.

Data generation

Data were generated over six months (October 2024–March 2025) through three complementary methods: individual semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and specialist–generalist dyadic interviews. The methods were selected to connect participants' accounts of the reform with observation of its enactment and with the relational negotiation of meanings between professional groups.

All fieldwork was carried out by the author, who conducted every interview, dyadic interview, and observation session. Continuity of the fieldworker across the ten cases supported comparability, though it also concentrated interpretive responsibility in one person; the implications are addressed below. Interviews and dyadic interviews were audio-recorded with participants' written permission and transcribed verbatim. Observations were documented in handwritten fieldnotes, since recording equipment was not authorised in classrooms. The topic guide was piloted with one specialist and one generalist in a school outside the sample. Piloting led to two changes: assessment questions were moved later in the sequence, because participants proved reluctant to discuss evaluative disagreement before rapport had been established, and a prompt on co-planning was added after both pilot participants raised it unprompted.

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 25 participants and lasted 45–60 min. The topic guide was organised around the research questions while remaining open to participants' own terms and priorities. Prompts addressed the following: understandings of the reform and professional role; perceived boundaries between specialist and generalist expertise; the selection, sequencing, pacing, and evaluation of PE; experiences of collaboration and conflict; and organisational strategies used to connect PE with wider class life. Follow-up questions invited concrete examples and clarification of differences between formal policy expectations and everyday practice.

Thirty hours of non-participant observation were completed, approximately three hours in each school. The observational unit included the timetabled PE episode and, where accessible, the transition into and out of the lesson. A structured protocol informed by Bernstein's external language of description recorded who selected activities, how tasks were sequenced and paced, how space and communication were organised, what evaluative criteria were made visible, and how generalists participated when present. Particular attention was paid to handovers, teacher positioning, feedback, assessment talk, and moments in which professional boundaries became observable. Fieldnotes were expanded within 24 h and linked to the relevant case.

Five dyadic interviews, each lasting approximately 50 min, were conducted in Schools 1, 2, 4, 6, and 8. Each brought together a specialist and a generalist from the same school to discuss collaboration, planning, assessment, and the educational purposes of PE. The dyadic format was used because it made agreement, qualification, challenge, and negotiation observable in interaction, thereby complementing the individually produced accounts. Dyadic interviews are not miniature focus groups. The format brings together two participants with a shared institutional history, and the analytic interest lies in how each qualifies, supports, or contests what the other says (Morgan et al. 2013).

The three methods had complementary analytic functions. Individual interviews provided role-specific accounts; observations examined how control and boundaries were enacted in situated practice; and dyadic interviews illuminated how shared or competing meanings were negotiated. Observation was not treated as a simple check on the truth of interview accounts. Instead, convergences and discrepancies between sources were retained as evidence of the complexity of policy enactment.

All interview and dyadic-interview material was generated in Italian and transcribed verbatim. Selected quotations were translated into English and checked by a bilingual colleague external to the study. Translation prioritised conceptual equivalence and the preservation of participants' register rather than literal word-for-word correspondence. Translation was treated as an interpretive act with epistemological consequences, not as a technical operation performed once the analysis was complete (Temple and Young 2004). Data generation ended when cross-case comparison

stopped yielding new configurations of the specialist–generalist arrangement, rather than at a predetermined target. The final corpus – 25 interviews, 30 h of observation, and five dyadic interviews across ten cases – was judged adequate to the analytic purpose of the study, which was to identify recurrent and divergent patterns of enactment and not to establish their prevalence.

Data analysis

Interview and dyadic-interview transcripts, together with expanded observation fieldnotes, were imported into NVivo 14. The material was analysed through a theory-informed hybrid deductive–inductive reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021a; 2025). Bernstein's concepts operated as sensitising devices that directed attention to boundaries, control, and evaluative rules; they did not constitute a closed codebook. Inductive coding remained open to participants' accounts of uncertainty, legitimacy, isolation, adaptation, and collaboration. Coding was interpretive rather than frequency-based: a pattern could be analytically important because it clarified a mechanism or a contrasting case, not only because it occurred often.

Analysis proceeded through six connected stages. First, transcripts and fieldnotes were read repeatedly for familiarisation, with preliminary notes recorded by case and participant role. Second, initial coding was conducted across each data source, combining deductive code families derived from classification, framing, and evaluative criteria with inductive codes grounded in participants' language and observed practice. Third, a within-case summary was prepared for each school, comparing specialist, generalist, leadership, and observational material. Fourth, cross-case matrices were used to compare the ten schools, identify recurrent configurations, and retain divergent or negative cases (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2020). Fifth, related codes were clustered into candidate themes and checked against the full dataset. Sixth, themes were refined, named, and reviewed for internal coherence, distinction from one another, and capacity to answer the research questions. No separate categorical level was imposed; consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, related codes were clustered directly into candidate themes during the fifth stage and subsequently refined during the sixth.

The research questions informed, but did not predetermine, theme construction. RQ1 oriented attention to professional boundaries and pedagogical roles; RQ2 to selection, sequencing, pacing, and evaluation; and RQ3 to organisational and relational strategies. At the theme-review stage, each candidate theme was mapped against these questions and against the contributing data sources. The final themes cut across more than one research question, reflecting the interdependence of knowledge, organisation, and assessment. Table 2 presents an illustrative analytic map from sensitising concepts and initial codes to the final themes.

To deepen reflexive scrutiny, a colleague external to the study reviewed a subset of material spanning different participant roles, cases, and data types, and discussed coding decisions with the author. This process was not used to calculate inter-rater reliability or to establish a single correct coding (Braun and Clarke 2021a; 2021b). Differences were used dialogically to test alternative interpretations, question premature closure, and examine whether the developing themes were overly shaped by the author's prior theoretical commitments.

Analytic integration involved comparison rather than simple aggregation. Themes were supported through patterns across participant accounts and observation records, while discrepancies were examined rather than removed. Schools 2 and 6 were retained as deviant cases because their collaborative routines showed conditions under which the dominant boundaries could be softened. An audit trail documented coding notes, case summaries, cross-case matrices, theme revisions, and reflexive decisions.

Positionality, trustworthiness, and ethics

The author occupied a position of proximity and potential implication as a senior academic in exercise and sport science who has written critically about Italian PE policy. This position provided

Table 2. Illustrative analytic map from sensitising concepts and initial codes to final themes.

Sensitising concept / analytic focus	Illustrative initial codes	Theme or cross-cutting pattern	Research question(s)
Classification of knowledge and professional identity	Biomedical–technical preparation; holistic knowledge of the child; cross-curricular movement; specialist/generalist role boundary	Theme 1: Epistemological dissonance and the limits of specialist preparation	RQ1; RQ2
Framing and the material organisation of pedagogy	Transfer of control; classroom/gym ownership; physical co-presence; task selection and sequencing; timetable isolation; ritualised handover	Theme 2: Spatial and temporal boundary-making	RQ1; RQ2
Evaluative rules, legitimacy, and symbolic authority	Motor-execution marks; holistic judgement; corridor/WhatsApp negotiation; translation into report cards; limited time at scrutinio	Theme 3: Assessment, evaluative authority, and micropolitical negotiation	RQ1; RQ2
Boundary-crossing and deviant-case analysis	Protected co-planning; shared rubrics; participation in class councils; reciprocal feedback; curricular connection	Cross-cutting mechanism: institutional mediation and shared pedagogical grammar	RQ3

Note: The codes shown are illustrative rather than exhaustive. Deductive and inductive codes were iteratively refined through within-case analysis, cross-case comparison, and review against the research questions.

contextual knowledge but also created a risk that prior commitments concerning specialist preparation and the reform might prematurely organise interpretation. Reflexivity was therefore treated as part of the analytic process rather than as a retrospective declaration. A reflexive journal recorded expectations, interpretive shifts, and decisions throughout fieldwork and analysis, while peer debriefing provided an external challenge to emerging claims. Trustworthiness was further supported through methodological triangulation, within-case and cross-case comparison, explicit retention of deviant cases, and maintenance of an audit trail (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Member checking and inter-rater reliability were deliberately not used as verification devices, since both rest on assumptions about a single recoverable meaning that are difficult to reconcile with an interpretive orientation (Smith and McGannon 2018). Credibility rested on the comparison of interview, dyadic-interview, and observation material; dependability and confirmability were supported by documented analytic decisions; and transferability was addressed through contextual and case description. The study received ethical approval from the University Territorial Ethics Committee (reference: UTEC 2023–091). All participating adults gave written informed consent. Because observation took place during timetabled lessons, the parents or guardians of pupils in the observed classes were informed in writing through the school and given the opportunity to object, and pupils were told at the start of each session that an adult would be present to observe how the lesson was organised rather than to assess them. No data were generated about individual pupils: fieldnotes recorded teacher action, task organisation, and the use of space, and no pupil was named, individually described, or photographed. Schools, teachers, and headteachers were anonymised, and professional roles rather than personal pseudonyms are used throughout.

Findings

The analysis generated three interrelated themes: epistemological dissonance; spatial and temporal boundary-making; and the micropolitics of assessment. Each theme drew on more than one data source and was examined across the ten cases. Quotations are used to illustrate analytic patterns rather than to imply numerical prevalence. Schools 2 and 6 are presented as deviant cases because they made visible the organisational conditions under which otherwise strong boundaries could be softened.

Theme 1: Epistemological dissonance and the limits of specialist preparation

Across the ten cases, the most consistent pattern concerned the perceived mismatch between specialists' academic preparation and the relational, developmental, and cross-curricular demands

of primary schooling. Specialists repeatedly described university training as rich in scientific and technical content but weakly connected to the pedagogical grammar they encountered in primary settings:

> 'My Master's degree prepared me to optimise athletic performance and correct postural deficits. When I entered the primary school, I realised that a nine-year-old child needs emotional regulation, socialisation through play, and cross-curricular learning. The biomedical knowledge I possess feels entirely disconnected from the reality of these children.' *(Specialist teacher)*

A second specialist described arriving 'armed with test protocols and motor assessment batteries' only to discover that colleagues were more concerned with pupils' anxiety, friendships, and family context. The issue was not a lack of expertise, but an incongruity between the kind of expertise specialists possessed and the pedagogical grammar of the primary school.

Generalist teachers did not deny the value of specialist motor knowledge. Several, however, described the reform as producing a more segmented experience:

> 'Before the reform, motor education was woven into everything – we used movement to teach geometry or rhythm for language. Now, the specialist arrives, takes the children to the gym, and teaches highly specific motor drills. The subject has become a silo. It is highly scientific, but it has lost its connection to the rest of the child's learning.' *(Generalist teacher)*

Another generalist noted that PE now appeared to pupils as 'a different world, with different rules, a different language.' These comments did not amount to wholesale rejection, but they indicate a perceived shift from the integrated use of movement towards a more insulated subject formation.

Observation data supported these accounts. In School 3, fieldnotes recorded a revealing sequence: during the morning literacy block, the generalist used body percussion to practise syllable segmentation. Forty minutes later, the specialist introduced a separate warm-up based on agility-ladder drills, without reference to the earlier activity. One episode treated movement as a cross-curricular pedagogical resource; the other treated it as disciplinary content. Both were purposeful, but they unfolded without visible curricular connection. The episode therefore showed not an intrinsic weakness in either practice, but the absence of a mechanism through which two legitimate uses of movement could be related.

The pattern varied in intensity. Some specialists maintained a strongly technical organisation of content, whereas a smaller number adapted their practice through play, storytelling, or closer coordination with class teachers. One specialist described how feedback from a generalist colleague prompted a substantial change:

> 'In my first year, I was essentially running a junior athletics programme for nine-year-olds. Then a generalist colleague told me, quite directly, that the children were coming back to class overstimulated and unable to concentrate. That conversation forced me to rethink everything. Now I start every lesson with a cooperative game that connects to whatever topic the class is studying that week. It is not what I was trained to do, but it works.' *(Specialist teacher)*

These accounts show that epistemological dissonance was neither universal nor immutable. It became less pronounced where generalists offered formative feedback and specialists treated primary pedagogy as a resource rather than as a constraint. The theme addresses RQ1 and RQ2 by showing that professional boundaries were shaped not only by formal qualifications but also by opportunities for reciprocal pedagogical learning. The contribution of this theme is to specify that epistemological dissonance belongs to the arrangement rather than to the individual specialist, and that it is modifiable where colleagues make alternative pedagogical meanings available.

Theme 2: Spatial and temporal boundary-making in the enactment of PE

Observation data revealed that the reform was enacted not only through beliefs and identities, but through the material organisation of school life. In most observed lessons, the transition from classroom to gymnasium marked a transfer of pedagogical control from generalist to specialist.

Generalists were often physically present but pedagogically marginal, acting in supervisory, disciplinary, or pastoral capacities rather than as co-instructors. Specialists typically controlled task selection, sequencing, pacing, and correction. Many lessons were structured, purposeful, and engaging; the recurring issue was that this strong framing operated within a relatively insulated setting, with limited connection to wider class life.

One headteacher captured a pattern visible across several cases:

> 'The law mandates co-teaching on paper, but in practice, we have physical co-presence without pedagogical integration. The classroom belongs to the generalist, and the gym belongs to the specialist. They are two sovereigns ruling adjacent, but entirely separate, kingdoms.' *(Headteacher)*

Observation notes from School 4 illustrated this spatial separation with particular clarity. At 10:30, the generalist teacher led the class to the gymnasium doors, handed the attendance register to the specialist, exchanged a brief greeting, and immediately returned to the classroom to mark homework. For the following hour, the specialist managed the lesson in complete pedagogical isolation: she selected activities, regulated transitions, managed behaviour, and evaluated performance without any input from – or communication with – the generalist. When the bell rang, the process reversed: the specialist returned the register at the door, the generalist resumed full authority, and neither teacher made reference to what had occurred in the other's space. This ritualised handover, observed in variant forms across seven of the ten schools, exemplified how physical co-presence could coexist with pedagogical separateness.

Temporal arrangements reinforced spatial separation. In several schools, specialist lessons were placed at the end of the morning or day for organisational convenience, reducing opportunities for debriefing, curricular linkage, or joint reflection. PE became both spatially and temporally distinct from class life.

Across the cases, spatial and temporal separation operated as an organisational mechanism of classification. In a minority of lessons, generalists intervened informally to support individual pupils or connect activities to class routines, indicating that the boundary was permeable under some conditions. This theme addresses RQ1 and RQ2 by showing that framing was produced materially: timetables, doorways, registers, teacher positioning, and the allocation of planning time structured who could select, sequence, pace, and evaluate the lesson. What this adds is a material account of framing. The boundary between specialist and generalist was held in place less by conviction than by doorways, timetables, and the absence of protected planning time – which is precisely why it proved permeable once those arrangements changed.

Theme 3: Assessment, evaluative authority, and micropolitical negotiation

Assessment emerged as the clearest site of micropolitical tension. Participants described difficulty reconciling specialist judgements focused on motor competences with broader primary-school expectations concerning participation, inclusion, effort, and overall development. Because the study coincided with a transition in national assessment arrangements, teachers were negotiating professional authority while also adapting to revised formal criteria.

> 'We evaluate the children during the five-minute changeover in the corridor, or via WhatsApp in the evening. The specialist gives me a grade based on motor execution, and I have to somehow translate that into our holistic rubric. It is a constant negotiation.' *(Generalist teacher)*

Another generalist expressed similar concern:

> 'The specialist sends me a list of marks – 'throwing: sufficient; balance: good.' But our assessment system asks me to evaluate the whole child. I cannot simply transplant motor test results into a competence-based report card.' *(Generalist teacher)*

These accounts suggest that the difficulty was not simply technical. Teachers were attempting to reconcile different evaluative logics without stable institutional time or a fully shared language of

judgement. Specialists, by contrast, described uncertainty about whether their subject-specific assessments would retain authority when final judgements were agreed:

> 'I see the children for two hours a week. The generalist sees them for twenty. When it comes to finalising the report card, my assessment of their physical literacy is often overridden by the generalist's assessment of their general classroom behaviour. My subject is treated as a secondary appendage.' *(Specialist teacher)*

> 'At the scrutinio, I am sometimes asked to present my evaluations in three minutes. Three minutes for an entire subject. That tells you everything about where PE sits in the hierarchy.' *(Specialist teacher)*

Assessment therefore concerned not only measurement but legitimacy and symbolic authority. Formal inclusion of the specialist did not by itself determine which knowledge counted, who translated subject-specific evidence into the report card, or how PE was positioned within the hierarchy of primary-school subjects.

In two schools, however, teachers had developed more collaborative approaches that offered a visible counterpoint to the dominant pattern. These cases deserve closer attention because they illustrate that the tensions described above are not structurally inevitable. In School 2, the headteacher had instituted a mandatory fortnightly joint planning session of approximately thirty minutes, during which the specialist and generalist were expected to co-design assessment rubrics. Through sustained negotiation over several months, the two teachers had produced an observation grid that evaluated not only the mechanics of fundamental motor skills – throwing accuracy, dynamic balance, spatial orientation – but also how pupils encouraged peers during cooperative tasks, managed frustration during competitive games, and transferred movement vocabulary into classroom discussion. The generalist from this school described the arrangement as transformative:

> 'Once we started planning together, I realised that the specialist was not just teaching motor drills – she was observing things about the children that I had never noticed. And she began to understand that my evaluation of a child's effort or emotional resilience was not a vague impression but a professional judgement based on months of daily contact.' *(Generalist teacher, School 2)*

In School 6, a similar dynamic had emerged through the initiative of the two teachers involved. The specialist attended part of the generalist's weekly class council meetings, and both teachers reported that this participation gradually softened the boundary between their evaluative logics. These deviant cases showed that the dominant pattern was not structurally inevitable. The assessment theme addresses RQ1 and RQ2 by showing how evaluative authority and professional boundaries were negotiated. The deviant-case analysis additionally answers RQ3 by identifying protected co-planning, shared rubrics, participation in collegial meetings, and reciprocal professional feedback as mechanisms of boundary-crossing. Here the article contributes a further point: formal inclusion of a subject specialist settles neither whose evidence counts at the moment of judgement nor who performs the translation into the report card.

Discussion

Taken together, the findings show that Italy's reform is enacted as a hybrid pedagogical arrangement in which formal differentiation of PE coexists with the integrated ethos of primary education. The three themes were not independent. Professional preparation shaped what specialists treated as legitimate knowledge; spatial and temporal routines insulated that knowledge from wider class life; and assessment made competing evaluative rules and claims to authority visible. This friction mirrors a broader structural contradiction within recent Italian educational policy, conceptualised as the 'Translator's Dilemma': the profound systemic difficulty of translating holistic intentions into operational assessment frameworks (Cereda 2026a). This relational pattern helps explain why the same formal policy produced fragmented enactment in most cases but more integrated arrangements in Schools 2 and 6.

Bernstein's framework clarifies that classification and framing are not inherently educationally beneficial or detrimental. Stronger classification can secure a visible disciplinary identity and bring

valued technical expertise into primary schooling. However, the present cases show that stronger classification does not automatically generate coherence. If weak classification can undermine holistic intentions through ambiguity (Gerdin et al. 2025), strong classification creates a different risk: fragmentation when schools lack mechanisms for translating between specialist knowledge, primary pedagogy, and local relationships. The hybrid code is therefore best understood not as a stable compromise, but as an arrangement whose educational effects depend on institutional mediation.

At the level of professional formation, the findings extend research showing that preparation shapes how PE is enacted (Randall 2023; Tsangaridou, Charalambous, and Kyriakides 2024) and that specialists may experience organisational isolation in primary settings (Brennan, Bowles, and Murtagh 2025; Cruickshank et al. 2024). The Italian cases add that isolation can also be epistemological: knowledge formed within biomedical and technical traditions may enter a school culture organised around relational continuity and curricular integration (Cereda 2025a; 2025d; 2026b; D'Isanto et al. 2024). When applied uncritically, such technical paradigms risk enacting a hidden curriculum that flattens the complex affective and relational dimensions of physical education into measurable outputs alone (Cereda 2025c). This should not be read as a deficit account of specialist teachers. Their adaptations demonstrate that professional practice can change when relationships make alternative pedagogical meanings available. At the organisational level, the gymnasium, timetable, corridor handover, and assessment meeting functioned as boundary devices that distributed control over selection, sequencing, pacing, and evaluative criteria (Penney et al. 2009; Young et al. 2021). Conversely, the deviant cases support research on class swapping, collaborative inquiry, and lesson study by showing that shared routines can make expertise available across professional boundaries (Clohessy, Bowles, and Ní Chróinín 2020; Kihara et al. 2021).

Contribution to knowledge

The article's main contribution to knowledge, therefore, is to show that stronger subject classification does not automatically strengthen primary PE. When a collection-code subject is inserted into an integrated institution without corresponding mechanisms of translation, formal specialisation can intensify pedagogical fragmentation across knowledge, space and time, and assessment.

Three more specific contributions follow. Empirically, the study provides a multi-site account of how Italy's reform is enacted in the field of reproduction, extending analysis beyond policy design and teacher-preparation structures. Theoretically, it develops the hybrid-code argument by identifying institutional mediation as the mechanism connecting classification to pedagogical coherence or fragmentation. Organisationally, it shows that co-planning, shared assessment, collegial participation, and reciprocal feedback are not peripheral examples of good practice; they are boundary-crossing devices through which specialist and generalist knowledge can be recontextualised into a shared pedagogical grammar.

Policy and practice implications

For school leaders, formal role allocation and physical co-presence are insufficient. Protected co-planning time, timetables that permit debriefing, shared assessment routines, and specialist participation in class or year-group meetings should be built into school organisation rather than left to personal goodwill. Collaborative approaches such as lesson study offer relevant models because they make the selection of content, observation of pupils, and evaluation of learning a shared object of professional inquiry (Clohessy, Bowles, and Ní Chróinín 2020; Kihara et al. 2021).

For teacher educators and policymakers, the findings raise questions about the relationship between sport-science preparation and the demands of primary pedagogy. Specialist pathways would benefit from more explicit engagement with child development, inclusive and play-based pedagogy, curricular integration, assessment in primary settings, and supervised experience in

primary schools. Evidence from exercise and sports science internships clearly demonstrates that the transition from discipline-specific knowledge to applied professional practice does not happen organically; it requires robust scaffolding and guided reflective routines to bridge the theory-practice gap effectively (Cereda 2025b). This does not require diluting disciplinary expertise; it requires preparing specialists to translate that expertise across institutional and professional boundaries. The Irish PE specialism model remains instructive because it combines specialist competence with broader primary pedagogical formation (Brennan, Bowles, and Murtagh 2023). National and local guidance should also clarify the pedagogical purpose of co-presence and the respective responsibilities of specialists and generalists in assessment.

Limitations and future research

The study was conducted in ten full-time schools in Northern Italy and does not support statistical generalisation. All specialists were early-career primary teachers, the fieldwork covered the early phase of an evolving reform, and the 30 h of observation captured selected episodes rather than the full complexity of school life. Headteacher and dyadic-interview data were available in five cases, creating an uneven leadership and relational dataset across schools. The author's proximity to the field and the translation of quotations also required reflexive management. These limitations do not invalidate the patterns identified, but they delimit the claims to analytic transferability. Longitudinal research should follow specialist–generalist arrangements as roles stabilise; comparative work should examine other Italian regions and school-time models; and intervention studies should test structured co-planning, co-teaching, and shared assessment. Research incorporating pupils' perspectives would also clarify how organisational boundaries are experienced in learning.

Conclusion

This study examined how specialist and generalist teachers negotiated professional roles, pedagogical control, and assessment during the early enactment of Italy's primary motor-education reform. Across the ten cases, stronger subject differentiation coexisted uneasily with the integrated educational ethos of the primary phase. Specialists' preparation, the spatial and temporal organisation of lessons, and competing evaluative logics combined to produce a hybrid arrangement whose coherence could not be assumed.

These patterns come from ten full-time schools in a single region, observed during the first phase of a reform still taking shape; they are offered as analytically transferable rather than statistically generalisable. The findings neither support a return to exclusively generalist provision nor justify a simple celebration of specialisation. They indicate that the educational value of the reform depends on institutional design: protected co-planning, shared evaluative frameworks, participation in collegial routines, and preparation that connects disciplinary expertise with primary pedagogy. The wider lesson is that introducing specialist roles into integrated primary institutions does not resolve the relationship between expertise and educational coherence; it relocates that problem to the organisational boundaries where professional knowledge must be translated and shared. The article's main contribution to knowledge, therefore, is to have shown that classification without translation produces fragmentation rather than coherence, and that the institutional work of translation – not the qualification held by the teacher – is where the educational value of the reform is decided.

Notes

1. In the Italian higher education system, 'LM' stands for Laurea Magistrale (a two-year Master's degree equivalent to 120 ECTS credits, following a three-year Bachelor's degree). LM-67 pertains to Preventive and Adapted

Physical Activities; LM-68 to Sport Sciences and Techniques; and LM-47 to Management of Sport and Motor Activities. The candidates recruited are trained primarily as sport science specialists rather than primary school educators.

2. The '24 CFU/CFA' refers to 24 university credits (ECTS) in anthropo-psycho-pedagogical disciplines and teaching methodologies, required as a minimum pedagogical supplement for these subject specialists to qualify for teaching.

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Author contributions

CRediT: **Ferdinando Cereda:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The qualitative data supporting this study are not publicly available because their disclosure could compromise participant confidentiality and permit deductive identification of participating schools and teachers.

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