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Navigating the translator's dilemma: a critical policy analysis of Italy's 2025 national curriculum for physical education

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critical policy analysis of Italy's proposed 2025 National Curriculum for Physical Education (PE), situating the reform within a global re-evaluation of the subject's purpose. It investigates the extent to which this reform signifies a genuine paradigm shift from a traditional, pathogenic model of 'healthism' to a salutogenic, Physical Literacy-informed approach. The analysis centres on two strategic documents: the draft Indicazioni Nazionali 2025 and the consensus paper published by the Italian Society of Motor and Sport Sciences (SISMES), the independent academic body providing the scientific benchmark for the discipline. Utilising Bacchi's 'What's the Problem Represented to Be?' framework, the study deconstructs the conceptual underpinnings of the proposed changes. The analysis reveals that the Italian reform represents a deliberate attempt to move the discipline beyond a narrow focus on fitness and disease prevention. The documents articulate a clear commitment to a holistic vision grounded in salutogenesis and Physical Literacy, emphasising the integrated development of the person. However, the central finding identifies a significant internal tension, conceptualised as the 'Translator's Dilemma'. While the curriculum's philosophical preamble champions complexity, its operational structure of specific learning objectives struggles to escape a more traditional, analytical, and performance-focused language, revealing a disjuncture between vision and operationalisation. The paper concludes that this friction illustrates the systemic challenges inherent in embedding a complex, process-oriented pedagogical philosophy into the linear architecture of a national curriculum. While the Italian case positions its policy at the vanguard of international reform, its ultimate success is contingent upon a synchronised investment in teacher education and the evolution of assessment practices. These must be re-imagined to equip practitioners to navigate the curriculum's inherent tensions and fully realise its ambitious, salutogenic potential.

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Introduction: reframing health in physical education – a paradigm in motion

Physical Education (PE) stands as a contested and perpetually redefined area of the school curriculum. As a socially constructed field, PE is shaped less by a singular, coherent disciplinary logic and more by a confluence of influential, and often competing, ideologies regarding the body, health, and the purpose of schooling. In the contemporary global landscape, these tensions are acute. As

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recent cross-cultural analyses of Health and Physical Education (HPE) curricula demonstrate, the subject is currently negotiating a profound friction between traditional, fitness-oriented models and emerging critical, socio-cultural paradigms (Deng & Fitzpatrick, 2025). While international policy increasingly advocates for integrated competence development, positioning the student as an active agent in their own well-being, the enduring legacy of a 'health and fitness' ideology often keeps practice tethered to the measurement of physical deficits and the remediation of inactivity (Alfrey et al., 2023).

It is within this turbulent global context that Italy offers a compelling and timely case study of curricular transformation. Italy is currently engaged in a comprehensive reform of its national curriculum for the first cycle of education (ages 3–14), culminating in the release of the draft *Nuove Indicazioni Nazionali 2025* (Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito, 2025).¹ This reform is not merely an administrative update; it represents a deliberate and theoretically sophisticated attempt to institutionalise a paradigm shift. Concurrently, the Italian Society of Motor and Sport Sciences (SISMES), the nation's leading academic body, has published a consensus document explicitly designed to scaffold this policy transition (SISMES, 2024). Together, these documents signal a move away from a biomedical view of movement towards a 'New Humanism', grounded in the principles of salutogenesis and complexity.

However, the translation of such ambitious philosophical visions into the linear architecture of a national curriculum is fraught with difficulty. This paper presents a critical policy analysis of Italy's proposed 2025 reform, investigating the extent to which it signifies a genuine departure from traditional models or whether it falls prey to what is termed the 'Translator's Dilemma' – a systemic friction in which holistic aspirations are compromised by the grammatical structures of assessment and prescription. Drawing on Bacchi's (2009) 'What's the Problem Represented to Be?' (WPR) framework, the analysis deconstructs how the Italian policy constructs the 'problem' of physical education not merely as student inactivity, but as a historically rooted fragmentation of the person, while positioning a new, integrated pedagogy as the proposed solution.

From pathogenesis to salutogenesis: escaping the 'impossible subject'

To understand the magnitude of the shift proposed in Italy, one must situate it against the backdrop of the 'healthism' discourse that has long dominated PE. Historically, PE policy texts and enacted curricula have often been justified through a pathogenic lens, rooted in the biomedical model, where health is defined as the absence of disease and PE is positioned as an instrument for disease prevention (Antonovsky, 1979; Quennerstedt, 2008). This dominant policy discourse, often termed 'healthism,' frames the student primarily as a body at risk, preoccupied with BMI, caloric expenditure, and fitness testing.

Recent scholarship has critiqued this model for constructing an 'impossible subject' (Alfrey et al., 2023). By framing students as inherently lacking (sedentary, unhealthy, uneducated), pathogenic curricula reinforce deficit narratives that alienate the very youth they aim to engage. The 'problem' is located within the individual's failure to be fit, rather than in structural or pedagogical incoherence. In contrast, the Italian reform aligns itself with the counter-paradigm of *salutogenesis* (Antonovsky, 1996). Rather than asking 'what makes people ill?', a salutogenic approach asks, 'what creates health?'. It views health not as a static endpoint but as a dynamic continuum, focusing on the development of 'Generalised Resistance Resources' (GRRs) – cognitive, emotional, and physical capacities that empower individuals to navigate the stressors of life. In a salutogenic PE, the goal shifts from 'curing' sedentariness to 'healthyng' – a continuous, active process of becoming (Quennerstedt, 2019).

Physical literacy and its Italian translation

In international policy, the intention to foster a salutogenic orientation is increasingly framed through the concept of *Physical Literacy* (PL). Theoretically defined by Whitehead (2001, 2010) as

the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life, PL formally rejects the mind–body dualism inherent in traditional sport-technique approaches. It offers a monistic, phenomenological foundation for PE, emphasizing the lived experience of movement (Godbout, 2023). However, critical scholarship notes that the international operationalisation of PL is highly contested; rather than guaranteeing a salutogenic shift, PL policies are frequently co-opted to serve traditional, pathogenic ends, masking the persistence of performative and deficit-based discourses (Evans, 2004; Quennerstedt et al., 2021).

A crucial feature of the Italian reform is its specific adoption and adaptation of this concept. While the academic SISMES document explicitly uses the English term ‘Physical Literacy’ to align with international standards, the official Ministry policy (*Indicazioni Nazionali*) employs the term *alfabetizzazione fisico-motoria* (physical-motor literacy). This is not simply a linguistic translation, but a conceptual bridge intended to introduce the holistic attributes of PL (affective, cognitive, and physical domains) into the Italian lexicon. By doing so, the Italian policy attempts to import the ‘beatific narratives’ of PL, its promise of lifelong engagement and holistic flourishing (Quennerstedt et al., 2021), into the heart of the state education system.

However, the adoption of PL is not without risk. As Quennerstedt et al. (2021) warn, the ‘fantasmatic logics’ of PL can sometimes obscure the practical realities of schooling, creating an ‘ideological closure’ where the promise of the concept masks the persistence of traditional practices. Godbout (2023) similarly notes that the ‘surge’ of PL in policy does not automatically guarantee a shift in pedagogy; without careful enactment, it can be reduced to a new buzzword for old fitness drills. This tension is central to our inquiry.

The ‘Translator’s Dilemma’: policy slippage and enactment

The core analytical contribution of this paper is the identification of a phenomenon termed the ‘Translator’s Dilemma.’ This concept dialogues with, yet remains distinct from, recent empirical and theoretical work on curriculum ‘enactment’ and ‘slippage.’ As established by Ball (1994) and Penney and Evans (1999), and recently documented by Scanlon et al. (2023) in their analysis of Irish PE reform, ‘slippage’ occurs downstream between high-level curriculum orders and their classroom execution, demonstrating that policy is not linearly implemented but continuously re-interpreted and translated by various actors (teachers and students).

In contrast, this study identifies a structural tension located within the policy design itself, prior to any classroom implementation. The ‘Translator’s Dilemma’ refers to the textual dissonance visible within the policy documents when a complex, non-linear, and process-oriented philosophy (Salutogenesis/PL) must be translated into the bureaucratic, linear, and outcome-based grammar of a National Curriculum (Specific Learning Objectives). This reflects a broader issue in international policy analysis where, as noted by Meir (2025) in the Scottish context, policy designs often contain internal contradictions regarding problem representation that limit their capacity to effect change before enactment even begins. While ‘slippage’ creates a gap between policy and practice, the ‘Translator’s Dilemma’ represents a gap between the policy’s intent and its own operational structure. How does one mandate ‘joy of movement’ or ‘embodied self-awareness’ in a list of assessable competencies? This friction is not a failure of the Italian reform but a reflection of a global challenge in HPE policy: the clash between a ‘vision of complexity’ and the ‘machinery of schooling’ (Penney & Alfrey, 2022).

To navigate this complex landscape, this study employs a Qualitative Document Analysis (Bowen, 2009) integrated with Bacchi’s (2009) ‘What’s the Problem Represented to Be?’ (WPR) framework. Consistent with recent critical scholarship (e.g. Alfrey et al., 2023), the WPR approach is employed not to identify ‘real’ problems (such as obesity rates), but to interrogate how the policy texts construct specific representations of the ‘problem’ of PE. The guiding inquiry asks: what does the policy imply is ‘wrong’ with current PE, and what effects are produced by this representation?

This approach allows to move beyond a descriptive review of the new Italian curriculum to a critical examination of its ideological underpinnings and internal contradictions. Specifically, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How is the 'problem' of Physical Education represented within the *Indicazioni Nazionali 2025* and the supporting SISMES consensus document?
2. To what extent do the proposed solutions in these documents reflect a shift from a pathogenic/healthism paradigm to a salutogenic/Physical Literacy-informed framework?
3. What tensions ('Translator's Dilemma') emerge when this holistic philosophical vision is operationalised into specific learning objectives and assessment guidelines?

By addressing these questions, this paper contributes to the international discourse on PE curriculum reform, offering the Italian case as a lens through which to view the broader challenges of embedding health, complexity, and Physical Literacy into the structures of state education.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design, framed as a critical policy analysis. This approach understands policy not as a neutral solution, but as a site where specific visions of society are constructed and contested (Apple, 2019). The study takes the form of an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995), focusing on the specific case of Italy's 2025 curriculum reform for Physical Education (PE). The objective is not merely to describe the content of the reform, but to deconstruct and interpret its underlying pedagogical assumptions, ideological tensions, and its position within the broader international discourse on PE. This approach enables a deep and theoretically informed exploration of how a national education system attempts to navigate a significant paradigm shift in its conceptualisation of the body, health, and movement in education.

Data corpus: the policy and academic texts

The analysis is centred on a focused corpus of two primary documents, selected for their strategic and complementary roles in the Italian reform process. The concurrent publication of these texts provides a unique opportunity for a dialogic analysis, comparing the formal policy text with the articulated consensus of the relevant academic community.

1. *Indicazioni Nazionali per il curricolo: Scuola dell'infanzia e Scuole del Primo ciclo di istruzione* (Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito, 2025). This is the primary policy document under examination. It is a draft proposal issued by the Italian Ministry of Education and Merit, intended to replace the 2012 National Curriculum for the first cycle of education (ages 3–14). As an official policy text, it is prescriptive in nature, outlining the state-sanctioned vision, learning objectives, and competency frameworks for all subjects, including PE. Its significance lies in its power to shape the practice, content, and evaluation of PE across the entire nation. It is the formal representation of the 'problem' of PE and its proposed 'solution' within the Italian state education system.
2. *L'Educazione Fisica in Italia: Scenari, Sfide, Prospettive* (SISMES, 2024). This is a consensus document produced by the Italian Society of Motor and Sport Sciences (SISMES), the leading academic society in Italy. This text is not a state-mandated administrative policy, but rather an act of 'academic policy'. It represents the collective, peer-reviewed position of thirty researchers across sixteen universities. Its purpose is to define the discipline's epistemological foundations, providing the scientific benchmark intended to influence policymakers, headteachers, and university-level teacher education programmes.

The selection of these two documents facilitates a triangulated analysis: the ‘policy-as-text’ (Ball, 1993) of the *Indicazioni* is examined using the SISMES document to understand the academic ‘dis-course’ and ‘trajectories’ that inform, support, or potentially contest the official policy.

Analytical framework

To move beyond a superficial content analysis, this study integrates two layers of qualitative methodology: a foundational approach of qualitative document analysis, guided by a specific critical policy analysis framework.

Qualitative document analysis

The foundational method is a systematic qualitative document analysis, as described by Bowen (2009). This involves a process of reviewing and evaluating the documents to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge. It is an iterative process of skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation (Bowen, 2009). This method treats the documents not as inert sources of facts, but as rich, socially produced texts that embody particular worldviews and communicate specific messages. The analysis focused on identifying key themes, recurring concepts, patterns of language, and the internal structure of the documents’ arguments.

Bacchi’s ‘What’s the problem represented to be?’ (WPR) approach

To lend critical depth and a systematic structure to the inquiry, the analysis was guided by Carol Bacchi’s (2009) post-structuralist framework for policy analysis, known as the ‘What’s the Problem Represented to Be?’ (WPR) approach. This framework is particularly well-suited for this study because it shifts the analytical focus from accepting a policy as a neutral solution to a given problem, to interrogating how the policy itself *constructs* a particular representation of that problem. Policies, in this view, are productive; they actively shape the understanding of issues and create certain subjectivities and possibilities. This approach has been successfully applied in recent HPE scholarship to deconstruct curriculum reforms. For instance, Alfrey et al. (2023) utilised WPR to expose how Australian and Welsh curricula, despite progressive rhetoric, implicitly constructed an ‘impossible subject’ by framing students through deficit discourses of health. Similarly, this study employs WPR not to evaluate whether the Italian reform will ‘solve’ inactivity, but to reveal the underlying assumptions about the body, health, and learning that constitute the policy’s logic. By examining the ‘problem representations’ within the *Indicazioni Nazionali*, the analysis seeks to uncover the ideological tensions between the stated holistic vision and the operational directives. This study employed the first five of these questions as its primary analytical heuristic. The sixth question of the framework, which concerns the dissemination and defence of the problem representation, was excluded from this analysis. As the *Indicazioni Nazionali* are currently a draft proposal and the focus of this study is on the discursive construction of the curriculum text itself rather than its subsequent media reception or material enactment in schools, the first five questions provided the most relevant analytical scope.

1. *What’s the ‘problem’ represented to be in this policy?* This question directs the analysis to identify how the *Indicazioni Nazionali* implicitly or explicitly defines the ‘problem’ that the reformed PE curriculum is designed to ‘solve’. Specifically, the analysis interrogates whether the text frames the problem as a deficit in student fitness and behaviour, or as a structural inadequacy of previous pedagogical models (e.g. fragmentation and reductionism).
2. *What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the ‘problem’?* This prompts an examination of the unstated beliefs and values embedded in the policy. What assumptions are made about the nature of health, the body, learning, the student, and the role of the school?
3. *How has this representation of the ‘problem’ come about?* This question historicises the problem representation, connecting it to broader social, political, and scientific discourses. It invites a

consideration of how the academic debates around ‘healthism’, salutogenesis, and Physical Literacy have influenced the current policy formulation.

4. *What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences?* This is a crucial critical step. The analysis identified what is ignored or taken for granted. For example, are the structural constraints on schools (e.g. funding, facilities, teacher training) left unexamined? Are alternative conceptualisations of PE silenced?
5. *What effects are produced by this representation of the ‘problem’?* This question focuses on the likely consequences of the policy. How might this new curriculum shape the identities of students and teachers? What kinds of practices might it encourage or discourage? How might it affect what is considered ‘valid’ knowledge and assessment in PE?

By integrating Bowen’s systematic approach with Bacchi’s critical framework, the analysis can move from describing *what* is in the documents to explaining *how* they work ideologically to construct a new vision for PE in Italy, while also revealing the inherent complexities and tensions within that vision.

Analytical procedure

The analysis was conducted in three distinct but overlapping phases.

Phase 1: Thematic coding and document profiling. Both documents were read in their entirety to establish a deep familiarity with their structure, language, and overarching arguments. During this phase, an initial inductive coding process was applied to identify salient and recurring concepts. Codes were generated based on key terms used within the texts themselves (e.g. ‘complexity’, ‘holistic’, ‘wellbeing’, ‘competence’, ‘Physical Literacy’, ‘embodiment’). This allowed for a bottom-up mapping of the conceptual landscape of each document.

Phase 2: Application of the WPR framework. Following the initial thematic coding, the WPR questions were applied systematically as a deductive analytical lens. Each document was re-read and interrogated through the framework. For instance, in applying Question 1, passages that define the aims and rationale of PE were analysed to construct the official ‘problem representation’. In applying Question 2, the philosophical preambles and introductory sections were deconstructed to unearth underlying assumptions about the mind–body relationship and the nature of health. This phase resulted in a structured deconstruction of each document’s core logic.

Phase 3: Comparative and interpretive synthesis. In the final phase, the findings from the analysis of the two documents were synthesised and compared. This involved identifying areas of strong convergence (e.g. the shared critique of reductionism) and, more importantly, areas of subtle divergence or tension. The *SISMES* document was used as an academic benchmark to evaluate the coherence of the *Indicazioni Nazionali*. The core paradigms identified in the international literature – pathogenesis/healthism versus salutogenesis/Physical Literacy – provided the theoretical framework for interpreting the findings. It was at this stage that the analysis sought to articulate the ‘Translator’s Dilemma’ by juxtaposing the high-level, holistic vision articulated in the policy’s preamble with the more granular and potentially traditional formulation of its specific learning objectives.

This interpretive process formed the basis of the ‘Analysis’ and ‘Discussion’ sections of the article. Throughout the process, intellectual honesty was maintained by grounding all interpretations in direct evidence from the texts and by acknowledging the specific nature and limitations of each document.

Analysis: deconstructing a policy in transition

The analysis of the *Indicazioni Nazionali 2025* and the *SISMES* (2024) consensus document reveals a profound and deliberate effort to re-conceptualise Physical Education (PE) in Italy. Applying Bacchi’s (2009) framework, the overarching ‘problem’ that this reform is ‘represented to be’ solving is the

historical inadequacy of a fragmented, dualistic, and instrumentally-focused approach to PE. The proposed ‘solution’ is the institutionalisation of a new paradigm grounded in complexity, holism, and a deeper educational purpose. This analysis unfolds in three stages: first, by deconstructing the overarching philosophical vision presented in the *Indicazioni Nazionali*; second, by examining how this vision is translated into the specific pedagogical framework for PE; and third, by comparing this policy text with the explicit academic consensus articulated in the SISMES document, which provides a clear benchmark for the paradigm shift.

The ‘New Humanism’: a salutogenic vision for the curriculum as a whole

The *Indicazioni Nazionali 2025* is built upon a robust philosophical foundation articulated in its ‘General Cultural Premise’ (*Premessa culturale generale*). This preamble is not a perfunctory introduction but a substantive manifesto that constructs a particular vision of education for the contemporary era. The document explicitly frames its project as a ‘New Humanism’ (*Nuovo Umanesimo*), a response to a world characterised by profound change, technological disruption, and social complexity. The ‘problem’ is implicitly represented as a form of educational alienation, where fragmented knowledge and a technocratic focus have failed to equip students to navigate their lives in a meaningful way.

The proposed solution is a return to the centrality of the ‘person,’ a concept rooted in both the Italian Constitution and Western philosophical traditions. The curriculum’s primary goal is stated as the ‘integral and harmonious formation of all dimensions of the person: cognitive, affective, relational, corporeal, aesthetic, ethical, spiritual’ (Ministero dell’Istruzione e del Merito, 2025, p. 6). This statement is of paramount importance. The explicit inclusion and equal weighting of the ‘corporeal’ (*corporea*) dimension alongside the cognitive and ethical represents a significant break from a traditionally dualistic educational culture that often privileges the mind over the body. This holistic vision presupposes that education’s role is not simply to fill students with knowledge (a pathogenic focus on ‘curing’ ignorance), but to cultivate the resources for a flourishing life.

This orientation resonates strongly with the core tenets of salutogenesis. The document’s emphasis on ‘wellbeing’ (*benessere*), the ‘full development of the human person’ (*pieno sviluppo della persona umana*), and the capacity to ‘govern the good of freedom’ (*governare il bene della libertà*) (Ministero dell’Istruzione e del Merito, 2025, p. 7) reflects a focus on creating the conditions for health in its broadest sense. The student is framed not as a passive recipient of instruction but as an ‘active subject of their own learning’ (*soggetto attivo del proprio apprendimento*), an agent in their own development. Furthermore, the document critically addresses the challenge of technology, particularly Artificial Intelligence (AI). It rejects both technophobia and uncritical adoption, instead advocating for a humanistic governance of technology, where students are equipped with ‘prudence and critical sense’ (*prudenza e senso critico*) to use technology as a tool while remaining masters of it (Ministero dell’Istruzione e del Merito, 2025, p. 9). This can be interpreted as a strategy for developing critical resources to navigate a key stressor of modern life, a fundamentally salutogenic concern.

The paradigm shift in physical education: from performance to complexity

This broad, salutogenic vision is directly translated into the specific framework for PE. The preamble to the PE section of the *Indicazioni Nazionali* represents one of the most explicit and theoretically sophisticated articulations of the paradigm shift found in the entire document. It begins by stating that PE is grounded in the ‘paradigm of complexity’ and aims to ‘radically transform the pedagogical and didactic conceptions of motor and sport sciences, assuming their tendentially non-linear and systemic character’ (Ministero dell’Istruzione e del Merito, 2025, p. 97).

This language is highly significant. The rejection of ‘linear’ and ‘analytical and reductionist readings’ is a direct critique of the pathogenic/biomedical paradigm that has traditionally underpinned

PE. The problem is explicitly represented as an outdated, mechanistic view of the body and movement. The proposed solution is a holistic and relational understanding. The text states:

The discipline concerns the study of the human body and movement in the context of the complex interactions – physical, cognitive, emotional and social – of the body in action in relation to different environments (Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito, 2025, p. 97).

This formulation is a clear expression of an *embodied* perspective, deeply aligned with the philosophical underpinnings of Physical Literacy (Whitehead, 2007). It moves beyond the body as an object of training and re-frames it as the very medium of existence and learning. The goal of PE is consequently redefined. It is not simply about improving fitness or teaching sport skills, but about fostering an 'increasingly aware and autonomous journey of physical-motor literacy of the person' (*percorso, progressivamente consapevole e autonomo di alfabetizzazione fisico-motoria della persona*). While the document does not use the English term 'Physical Literacy,' the Italian 'alfabetizzazione fisico-motoria' is its direct conceptual equivalent, thus positioning the concept as a core feature of the proposed policy. Its aim is explicitly stated as enabling students to develop 'active and healthy lifestyles oriented towards wellbeing and sustainability' (Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito, 2025, p. 97). Here, sustainability is understood in its broadest sense, encompassing personal, social, and environmental dimensions, aligning with the broader European educational agenda on sustainable development (e.g. Council of the European Union, 2018). This demonstrates a clear alignment with a strengths-based approach focused on building lifelong resources for health.

Academic consensus: the SISMES document as a benchmark for physical literacy

The analysis of the SISMES (2024) consensus document confirms that this paradigm shift is not a top-down policy imposition but a reflection of a mature academic consensus. This document acts as a powerful benchmark, articulating with even greater clarity and coherence the theoretical framework that the *Indicazioni Nazionali* gestures towards.

From its opening pages, the SISMES document explicitly grounds its vision in the international discourse on Physical Literacy (PL). The 'Glossary of Epistemological Terms' (p. 8) and the chapter on 'Cultural References' (p. 23) are dedicated to defining and operationalising PL as the central organising concept for the discipline. It adopts Whitehead's (2019) holistic definition, emphasising the interconnections between the physical, affective, and cognitive domains. The SISMES document represents the 'problem' of Italian PE as a historical 'cultural *vulnus*' (p. 29) caused by the dominance of a 'biomedical vision' that has marginalised the educational and pedagogical dimensions of the field.

The 'solution' proposed is the systematic and coherent adoption of PL as the foundation for the entire curriculum. The finalities of PE are explicitly defined as 'the development of PL' (p. 53), which is then broken down into five interconnected areas: physico-motor, cognitive, social, affective-relational, and behavioural. This structure provides a clear and consistent framework that runs through the entire document, from the definition of learning objectives to the recommendations for pedagogy and assessment. The SISMES document, by contrast, achieves greater internal coherence. While it also breaks PL down into constituent parts, it does so by consistently organising its entire proposal – from finalities and objectives to assessment – around five interconnected domains: physico-motor, cognitive, social, affective-relational, and behavioural. This structure acts as a persistent conceptual thread, ensuring that even specific skills are framed within the broader holistic vision, thereby mitigating the risk of fragmentation that is more evident in the *Indicazioni*. This coherence, however, stands in contrast to the more disjointed structure of the official policy text.

The 'Translator's Dilemma': tension between vision and operation

While the philosophical vision of the *Indicazioni Nazionali* is remarkably progressive and aligned with the salutogenic paradigm, a critical tension emerges when this vision is translated into the

prescribed format of 'Specific Learning Objectives' (*Obiettivi Specifici di Apprendimento*). This format, which requires the articulation of observable behaviours for each grade level, appears to struggle to contain the holistic and process-oriented nature of the new paradigm. This gives rise to what can be termed the 'Translator's Dilemma': the challenge of converting a complex, relational theory into a set of linear, atomised, and assessable curriculum statements.

This internal friction can be understood not merely as a bureaucratic challenge, but as a textual manifestation of a deep-rooted epistemological schism within the Italian context, namely the historical fragmentation between the biomedical and the humanistic-pedagogical paradigms of movement sciences (Cereda, 2024, 2025a), a dichotomy that recent scholarship suggests must be addressed through integrated, interdisciplinary frameworks (Cereda, 2026). The salutogenic, holistic vision articulated in the policy's preamble promotes an integrated form of learning, where the boundaries between physical, cognitive, and emotional domains are intentionally blurred. In contrast, the formal, linear architecture of a national curriculum, with its mandated structure of discrete and assessable learning objectives, inherently favours a more fragmented approach. The 'Translator's Dilemma' thus emerges from the structural conflict between a pedagogical philosophy of integration and a bureaucratic structure that demands specification and separation.

For example, the overarching aim appears framed through concepts such as 'complexity,' 'non-linearity,' and 'embodied experience.' Yet, at the operational level, the learning objectives frequently echo the terminology of a preceding paradigm. Phrases such as 'Acquire the fundamental motor skills,' 'Exercise specific abilities and practicable tactics in game activities,' and 'Organise movements that are finalised and precise' (Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito, 2025, p. 98) illustrate this conceptual dissonance. This is not to say these objectives are inappropriate; fundamental motor skills and tactics are necessary components of PE. However, their formulation reflects a more analytical and performance-oriented language than the holistic philosophy of the preamble might suggest. The language of 'acquiring' and 'exercising' skills can be read as more instrumental than the language of 'experiencing' and 'becoming' that characterises the salutogenic vision. A disjuncture appears between the *why* of PE (the holistic premise) and the *what* of PE (the specific objectives). The SISMES (2024) document, by contrast, maintains a more consistent language, framing even specific skills within the broader context of the five domains of PL, thus better preserving the integrity of the holistic model.

This tension within the *Indicazioni Nazionali* is not necessarily a failure of the policy, but rather a textual manifestation of a system in transition. The document successfully establishes a new, progressive horizon for PE in Italy, fundamentally reframing its purpose. However, in the act of translating this vision into the established bureaucratic and organisational structures of a national curriculum, it reveals the persistent 'gravitational pull' of the older, more easily quantifiable, pathogenic paradigm. The silence in the document (Bacchi's fourth question) is on the issue of assessment: it champions a new vision without providing a correspondingly new framework for how this holistic, process-oriented learning can be authentically assessed, leaving this crucial aspect of the 'Translator's Dilemma' to be resolved by teachers themselves.

Discussion

The analysis of Italy's proposed 2025 curriculum reform reveals a policy landscape in a state of profound and self-aware transition. The *Indicazioni Nazionali* and the accompanying SISMES consensus document are not mere updates to an existing framework; they represent a concerted effort to fundamentally shift the paradigm of Physical Education (PE) away from a historically dominant pathogenic and instrumentalist model towards a more holistic, educational, and salutogenic vision. The findings confirm a clear alignment with international scholarly movements advocating for a strengths-based re-conceptualisation of health and physical activity in schools. However, the analysis also uncovers a crucial disjuncture between the reform's ambitious philosophical vision and its operational articulation, a tension that illuminates the systemic challenges inherent in large-scale

curriculum change. This discussion will interpret these findings through the theoretical lenses of salutogenesis and Physical Literacy, elaborating on the concept of the 'Translator's Dilemma' and its implications for policy and practice.

Embracing a salutogenic future: The rejection of 'healthism'

A central finding of this analysis is the official text's overt departure from the pathogenic model, a framework widely critiqued in international literature as 'healthism' (Crawford, 1980). The Italian policy explicitly identifies the problem as the historical reliance on a PE curriculum whose primary justification was disease prevention and the remediation of physical deficits. This deficit-based approach, as scholars like Gard and Wright (2001) and Kirk (2006) have extensively documented, often results in a narrow, biomedical focus that can be counterproductive, leading to student disengagement and reinforcing a dualistic view of the mind and body. Empirical research with children confirms these concerns, showing how students internalise this message in reductionist and moralistic ways. For example, Powell and Fitzpatrick (2015) found that primary school children equated being 'fit' almost exclusively with being 'nonfat' and associated being overweight with moral failings such as laziness, demonstrating the profound impact of these dominant health discourses on children's lived experiences and self-perception. The Italian documents, in their call for a 'paradigm of complexity' and their critique of 'analytical and reductionist readings,' directly challenge this legacy.

The new vision articulated in both the *Indicazioni Nazionali* and the SISMES document is unequivocally salutogenic (Antonovsky, 1979). The focus shifts from mitigating risks to building resources. The curriculum's stated aim is to foster students' wellbeing, autonomy, and critical awareness, enabling them to construct a positive and enduring relationship with their embodied selves. This aligns strongly with Quennerstedt's (2008) argument that a salutogenic PE should focus on the qualities, abilities, and knowledge that pupils can develop to 'enrich their lives, strengthen them as healthy citizens and contribute to a sustainable (health) development' (p. 267). The Italian reform conceptualises PE not as a medical intervention but as a core educational experience, a space for 'learning health' as a dynamic and lifelong process, or what Quennerstedt (2019) terms 'healthying'.

This salutogenic orientation is given pedagogical form through the adoption of the principles of Physical Literacy (PL). While only the SISMES (2024) document uses the term explicitly, the *Indicazioni Nazionali* embodies its core tenets. The emphasis on the integration of physical competence with affective domains (motivation, confidence) and cognitive domains (knowledge, understanding) is a direct reflection of Whitehead's (2010) foundational definition. The Italian reform understands that a positive relationship with physical activity is not built solely on technical proficiency but on a foundation of confidence, joy, and meaning. It seeks to educate students who are not just competent movers, but who value their embodiment and possess the agency to pursue an active life in ways that are personally significant. This represents a mature and sophisticated understanding of the goals of PE, positioning the Italian curriculum at the forefront of contemporary pedagogical thought.

The 'Translator's Dilemma': a tension between holism and operation

Despite this clear and commendable vision, the analysis revealed a persistent tension between the holistic, relational philosophy of the preambles and the more atomised, performance-oriented language of the specific learning objectives within the *Indicazioni Nazionali*. This is the core of the 'Translator's Dilemma', a phenomenon that highlights the systemic challenges of translating meaning across the different stages of what has been called the 'circuit of cultural production' – from the policy's visionary 'production' to its bureaucratic 'distribution' and classroom 'reception' (Apple, 2019). A salutogenic, Physical Literacy-informed paradigm is, by its very nature, complex, non-linear, and process-oriented. It deals with emergent qualities like confidence, resilience, and motivation. A national curriculum document, however, is a bureaucratic tool that typically demands linearity, categorisation, and the articulation of measurable outcomes. The tension arises from the attempt to fit a round philosophical peg into a square administrative hole.

This internal friction echoes what is widely documented in the literature as *policy slippage* (Ball, 1994; Penney & Evans, 1999; Scanlon et al., 2023). In their analysis of curriculum enactment, these scholars document how high-level pedagogical visions are often re-interpreted or diluted as they move from policy text to classroom practice. The Italian case reveals that this slippage is not merely a downstream effect of teacher implementation but is embedded within the textual design itself. It reflects a clash between what Quennerstedt et al. (2021) term the ‘fantasmatic logics’ of Physical Literacy – the ‘beatific narratives’ of holistic flourishing – and the persistent, linear grammar of school assessment. While the philosophical sections articulate a new ‘doctrine’ of complexity, the operational sections partially retain the linguistic structures of the old paradigm, creating a textual dissonance that teachers must navigate.

This is not a simple oversight but reflects a deeper systemic challenge. A curriculum built on discrete, observable skills (‘execute specific tactics’, ‘organise precise movements’) is relatively straightforward to plan, deliver, and, crucially, assess through traditional methods. A curriculum built on the development of ‘confidence,’ ‘embodied understanding,’ and the ability to ‘navigate complexity’ requires a far more sophisticated pedagogical and assessment repertoire, one based on formative, process-oriented, and authentic methods (López-Pastor et al., 2013). The *Indicazioni Nazionali*, by articulating the new vision without simultaneously providing a new and coherent framework for its assessment, leaves this critical translation work entirely to teachers. The document effectively says, ‘This is our new philosophy,’ but provides a toolkit of objectives that still partially fits the old one, creating a potential for confusion and a reversion to established practices.

The SISMES (2024) document, being an academic text, largely avoids this dilemma. It can afford to maintain a high level of theoretical coherence, presenting an integrated model where finalities, objectives, and assessment are all consistently framed within the five domains of PL. The *Indicazioni*, as a state policy, must operate within the existing structures of schooling, assessment, and accountability, and the tension in its text reflects this pragmatic constraint.

Implications for policy, teacher education, and practice

The Italian case offers several crucial lessons for the international PE community. Firstly, it demonstrates that a national curriculum can serve as a powerful vehicle for articulating a sophisticated and progressive pedagogical vision. The explicit embrace of complexity and embodiment in a formal policy document is a significant achievement that can provide a mandate for change and innovation at the school level.

Secondly, it highlights that the articulation of a vision is only the first step. The ‘Translator’s Dilemma’ suggests that curriculum reform cannot succeed without a parallel reform in the two areas that bring policy to life: teacher education – both pre-service and in-service professional development – and assessment. The practical consequences of neglecting these areas are stark. Recent research into Norway’s new holistic curriculum (LK20), which shares a similar philosophical ambition to the Italian reform, provides a compelling empirical illustration of this. Studies reveal that teachers, when confronted with new aims they perceive as ‘too vague and open-ended’, experience profound uncertainty, find assessment significantly more ‘challenging’, and express a clear need for greater professional support (Tremoen & Ligestad, 2025). This uncertainty and lack of clear assessment frameworks can lead teachers to revert to traditional, ‘secure’ instruction, such as focusing on whether students are ‘breaking a sweat’, as a more tangible, albeit educationally limited, measure of success (Aasland et al., 2024). These empirical findings underscore the practical consequences of the ‘Translator’s Dilemma’, which becomes even more acute when a reform embraces Physical Literacy. Scholars now conceptualise PL not simply as an outcome, but as an emerging pedagogical model in its own right, one that requires a fundamental shift from behaviourist to holistic and student-centred practices (Valle-Muñoz et al., 2025). Successfully enacting this model depends on teachers’ capacity to foster autonomy and utilise continuous formative assessment – competencies that are often underdeveloped in traditional training. The documented struggles of educators to

articulate PL's holistic principles, often reducing it to its more observable components like motor skills (Robinson et al., 2018; Rutkauskaite et al., 2024), can thus be understood as a direct consequence of this pedagogical gap. Without robust teacher education and new assessment frameworks designed to support this new model, the most innovative aspects of a reform risk being lost in translation. If the Italian reform is to achieve its salutogenic potential, teacher education must therefore move beyond technical-didactic training to equip teachers with the deep pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987) required to understand and enact a philosophy of complexity. This includes developing expertise in student-centred pedagogies, formative assessment, and creating inclusive learning environments. Teachers must be educated not just as deliverers of content, but as 'curriculum makers' (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992) and 'reflective practitioners' (Schön, 1992) who can navigate the official curriculum's tensions and translate its highest aspirations into meaningful experiences for their students. Indeed, navigating such tensions is a core developmental challenge, as recent research highlights that the very formation of professional identity for exercise science students in the Italian context involves a complex process of reconciling competing epistemological and disciplinary paradigms (Cereda, 2025b).

Finally, the Italian case underscores the critical importance of a dynamic and collaborative relationship between the academic community and policy-makers. The SISMES document is not merely a commentary on the reform; it is an active participant in it. It provides the intellectual resources, the shared language, and the theoretical coherence that can guide the implementation of the *Indicazioni Nazionali*. For the reform to be successful, the 'academic policy' articulated by SISMES must inform the 'state policy' not just at the moment of its writing, but throughout the ongoing processes of implementation, professional development, and future revision. This dialogue is essential to ensure that the progressive and genuinely educational vision for PE, so clearly articulated in principle, does not get lost in translation.

Conclusion

The analysis of Italy's proposed 2025 National Curriculum reveals a policy undergoing profound transition. Although the reform articulates a sophisticated, salutogenic vision aligned with the core tenets of Physical Literacy, it remains constrained by what is described as the 'Translator's Dilemma'. This internal textual friction – between a philosophy of complexity and the linear grammar of assessment objectives – highlights the systemic challenges inherent in embedding a process-oriented pedagogy within state education systems. The Italian case therefore serves as a salient reminder to the international community that successful reform of Physical Education is a multi-layered endeavour that cannot conclude with the publication of a policy text alone.

Articulating a new vision in a policy document is a necessary but insufficient first step in effecting material pedagogical change. The true test of a paradigm shift lies not in the elegance of its philosophical statements, but in its capacity to succeed – defined here as the successful translation of policy into coherent, daily practices that positively shape students' lifelong relationship with physical activity. For this translation to succeed, curriculum reform must be supported by a systemic and synchronised investment in two other critical areas: the evolution of assessment practices and the professional development of teachers. Assessment must move beyond a narrow focus on quantifiable motor outcomes to embrace formative, authentic methods that can capture the development of the holistic attributes at the heart of Physical Literacy, such as confidence, motivation, and critical understanding.

Concurrently, continuous professional development (CPD) and pre-service teacher education must be re-imagined. As established in international physical education literature, effective curriculum reform is entirely contingent upon robust, sustained, and theoretically grounded teacher education that fosters professional agency and design expertise (Armour & Makopoulou, 2012; Binkhorst et al., 2024; Scanlon et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2026). Teachers must be prepared not as mere technicians delivering a prescribed set of activities, but as reflective professionals and curriculum

leaders. They require the deep pedagogical content knowledge necessary to navigate the ‘Translator’s Dilemma’ – to understand the profound philosophy underpinning the new curriculum and to develop innovative pedagogical strategies that bring its holistic vision to life in the complex reality of the gymnasium. The dialogue between the academic community and policy-makers, exemplified by the SISMES consensus document, is vital in providing the intellectual resources for this ongoing professional learning.

Ultimately, Italy’s 2025 curriculum reform is a bold and promising step towards a more educationally robust and humanistic future for Physical Education. It affirms that the goal of the discipline is not simply to produce fitter bodies or better athletes, but to cultivate physically literate individuals who are empowered to lead active, healthy, and fulfilling lives. The tensions identified within its text should not be seen as a weakness, but as an honest reflection of the profound challenge at hand. They serve as a vital agenda for future work, highlighting the critical need to avoid what Quennerstedt et al. (2021) term an ‘ideological closure’. Even as the new paradigm shifts from ‘horrific narratives’ of disease to ‘beatific narratives’ of wellbeing, it is crucial to maintain a critical stance, ensuring that the progressive vision does not become a new set of unchallengeable promises. This requires a continued and collaborative effort among policy-makers, academics, and practitioners to ensure that the inspiring promise of this new paradigm is fully and meaningfully realised in the lives of all students.

Note

1. It should be noted that this analysis was conducted on the official draft version of the *Indicazioni Nazionali 2025*, which was the text available at the time of the manuscript’s initial submission (July 2025). Subsequent to this, on 27 January 2026, the policy was formally enacted into law (Decree no. 221, 9 December 2025, www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2026/01/27/26G00021/sg). A meticulous comparison has confirmed that the sections pertaining to physical education remain substantively unaltered in the final legislative text. The analysis and its conclusions presented herein, therefore, retain their validity and contemporaneous relevance.

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