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Ferdinando Cereda

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The Struggle for the Soul of Kinesiology: Strategies of Hegemony, Syncretism, and Resistance in the Italian Academic Curriculum

Ferdinando Cereda

Department of Education, Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan, Italy

ABSTRACT

Global metric-based reforms are reshaping professional academic programs in higher education, intensifying epistemological tensions within interdisciplinary fields like kinesiology. This study investigates these dynamics through the Italian case, where a recent national reform enforces bibliometric evaluation, potentially accelerating a biomedical drift. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with university curriculum leaders, three strategic responses were identified: biomedical hegemony – a pragmatic alignment with metrics; strategic syncretism – an attempt to reframe pedagogy through scientific language; and pedagogical resistance – a defense of humanistic values. Findings suggest that while intended to standardize quality, such reforms risk marginalizing pedagogical knowledge essential for professional practice. By framing the Italian context as a microcosm of a global debate, this research illustrates how academic agency navigates pressure to conform to an increasingly biomedical scientific paradigm, offering insights for scholars examining curriculum change and the legitimate body of knowledge in kinesiology.

KEYWORDS

Audit culture; biomedical drift; higher education policy; curriculum; academic agency

Introduction

The academic field of kinesiology has long been characterized by a persistent struggle for identity, caught between the fragmentation of its sub-disciplines and the aspiration for a unified, holistic understanding of human movement. As Brunsdon (2026) recently argued, the field is currently navigating a period of hyper-specialization and isolated genealogical traditions that threaten to obscure the education of the good kinesiologist, a professional capable of integrating scientific knowledge with humanistic values. This internal tension is not merely a theoretical debate but a structural reality that manifests in curriculum design, where a historical dichotomy persists: on one side, a reductionist, biomedical paradigm focused on physiological mechanisms; on the other, a holistic, pedagogical paradigm that embraces the social and behavioral sciences (Ives & Knudson, 2007; Newell, 1990). While the dominance of the biomedical focus provides a perception of greater scientific legitimacy, it risks marginalizing essential knowledge regarding motor

CONTACT Ferdinando Cereda ferdinando.cereda@unicatt.it Department of Education, Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Largo Gemelli, 1, Milan 20123, Italy

learning, pedagogy, and the social context of movement, potentially eroding the original, holistic identity of the field (Knudson, 2016).

In the contemporary higher education landscape, this disciplinary fragility is significantly amplified by the global diffusion of audit cultures (Shore, 2008). Universities are increasingly governed by new public management (NPM) models that prioritize standardized evaluation systems and quantifiable performance indicators. These top-down reforms function as powerful interventions in the politics of knowledge, altering the principles that define legitimate academic work (Apple, 2019; Ball, 2012). Major critiques of this accountability culture highlight how metric-driven systems often create "Kafkaesque" environments that transform institutional behaviors and academic subjectivities, frequently prioritizing quantifiable outputs over substantive educational quality (Aarseth, 2022; Shore & Wright, 2020). This metricization is closely tied to Goodhart's Law – the principle that when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure – which has been widely shown to distort practices in higher education evaluation (Elton, 2004). Within our specific field, scholars have acutely warned against these pressures. In what Andrews et al. (2013) termed the "McDonaldization" of kinesiology, and as Sperka and Phillips (2023) observed regarding the metricization of physical education journals, the neoliberal audit culture systematically advantages positivist, bio-scientific research while marginalizing socio-cultural and pedagogical scholarship. Consequently, since major international publication databases and citation metrics systematically favor biomedical and natural sciences over humanities and social sciences (Knudson, 2022), institutions are incentivized to align their research and their curricula with the most visible and metrically rewarded paradigm. This creates a risk of what has been termed a biomedical drift, where the pursuit of high-impact metrics inadvertently accelerates the marginalization of pedagogical and socio-cultural knowledge (Ennis, 2011). Recent empirical research confirms this trend; for example, an analysis of Canadian university curricula revealed a systemic prioritization of biophysical sciences that actively marginalizes sociocultural and pedagogical disciplines, reproducing an epistemological hierarchy aligned with neoliberal logics (Sullivan & Ali, 2024). These structural and metric pressures exacerbate a preexisting professional ambiguity found globally. Complementing these curricular findings, a recent environmental scan of Canadian kinesiology programs found that universities commonly present the degree as a pathway toward medical and allied health professions, with most suggested career options requiring additional education beyond the undergraduate level (Nagpal et al., 2025).

The Italian academic context offers a paradigmatic natural laboratory to examine these global dynamics. Historically, the Italian field of *Scienze Motorie e Sportive* has faced persistent tensions in defining its disciplinary identity following the transition from vocational physical education traditions to a fully academic field within the university system (Cereda, 2025a, p. 21). This uncertainty has been empirically documented by Raiola (2025), whose recent quantitative analysis revealed that a significant majority of Italian scholars perceive a problematic overlap between pedagogical and medical disciplinary groups, alongside a generational fracture regarding the field's epistemological core. This preexisting fragility was further exacerbated in May 2024, when the Italian Ministry of University and Research enacted a reform that restructured the academic classification of the discipline (Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca [MUR], 2024). By relocating kinesiology from the educational area (Area 11) to the medical scientific-disciplinary group (06/MEDF-01), the reform arguably reinforced institutional incentives embedded in the bibliometric evaluation

system governing academic careers and research funding, a system that structurally favors biomedical publication cultures.

Crucially, this introduces a policy contrast. Ironically, while the recent Italian system enforces a rigid, metrics-based classification, it misses the shift back toward more holistic evaluation recently emerging in contexts such as Australia. The recognition of the adverse consequences of Goodhart's Law – whereby a measure that becomes a target ceases to be a good measure – in the use of citation metrics for higher education funding has led several national systems to question the epistemic costs of single-metric approaches. For instance, the Australian Research Council has discontinued the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) framework and is currently developing a redesigned evaluation approach (Australian Research Council [ARC], 2026), while the UK's REF 2029 has expanded its evaluation framework through the introduction of the "Strategy, People and Research Environment" (SPRE) component, building on earlier work on "People, Culture and Environment" (2025). These developments acknowledge the risks associated with forcing diverse disciplines into a single metric-based evaluative framework. However, within the Italian context, legal analysis suggests that this restructuring has failed to resolve the discipline's core ambiguity. As Raiola et al. (2025) recently demonstrated, the declaratory texts of the new unified disciplinary group (06/MEDF-01) still contain significant epistemological overlaps with pedagogical domains, paradoxically reproducing epistemological ambiguity rather than resolving the discipline's long-standing quest for scientific autonomy.

To clarify the operational impact, the reform can be interpreted by curriculum leaders as an incentive structure shaping recruitment priorities, departmental reputational strategies, and indirectly curricular choices. By classifying kinesiology under the medical area (Area 06), this shift generates an increased salience of bibliometric thresholds that are perceived as more attainable within biomedical publication cultures than within pedagogical sub-fields. In this interpretation, recruitment decisions may progressively privilege profiles aligned with high-visibility biomedical journals, while pedagogical expertise becomes comparatively harder to defend within internal evaluation conversations. Under such conditions, curricular shifts toward medically coded content emerge less as a linear policy output and more as an organizational response to the perceived rules of academic legitimacy within the reconfigured system (Cereda, 2025c).

This administrative pressure may contribute to curricular shifts toward a more naturalistic model, particularly in institutions that interpret competitiveness primarily through biomedical performance indicators. As Denison and Markula (2023) have warned, favoring a naturalistic view of movement skill learning while ignoring social theory leads to a compartmentalized and fragmented understanding of movement. In such a scenario, the complex social and pedagogical dimensions of the profession risk being treated as mere afterthoughts. Therefore, Italian curriculum leaders find themselves in a precarious position: they must navigate the ambiguous text of the new law while responding to the unambiguous institutional pressure to conform to a research culture that privileges the hard sciences.

While quantitative studies have mapped the structural dimensions of this issue (Cereda, 2025a; Raiola, 2025), a critical gap remains in understanding how these macro-level policies are interpreted and enacted at the micro-level of university governance. Recent data confirm the extent of this epistemological skew: D'Isanto et al. (2024) analyzed the scientific production of Italian full professors, revealing that over 58% of publications in the

pedagogical sub-field (M-EDF/01) fall within the biomedical domain. Consequently, kinesiology faculty and curriculum leaders in Italy are now incentivized to publish more on biomedical topics in biomedical journals; this contributes to curricular misalignment and creates the potential for future curricular changes to agree with the medical classification to ensure departmental survival. Curriculum leaders are not passive implementers of policy; they act as curriculum makers who interpret, negotiate, and sometimes contest reforms to protect their vision of the discipline (Craig et al., 2012). Understanding their strategic responses is essential for comprehending the future trajectory of kinesiology. Consequently, the present study addresses the following central research question: *How do curriculum leaders in Italian kinesiology programs negotiate the tensions between biomedical and pedagogical paradigms in response to a national reform that intensifies metric-based evaluation pressures within the academic system?* By analyzing these responses, this research aims to provide a heuristic framework for understanding how academic agency operates within the struggle for the soul of the discipline (Brunsdon, 2026), offering transferable insights for the global kinesiology community as it confronts the challenges of the twenty-first-century corporate university.

Theoretical framework: knowledge, power, and disciplinary identity

To analyze the strategic responses of curriculum leaders to metric-based reform, this study employs a framework that integrates the sociology of knowledge with the specific philosophical debates characterizing the field of kinesiology. This approach allows for an examination of both the external structural pressures shaping curricular decisions and the internal epistemological conflicts regarding the nature of the discipline.

The work of sociologist Basil Bernstein (2000) provides a foundational lens for understanding how knowledge systems are organized and controlled. Central to this analysis are the concepts of *classification* and *framing*. Classification refers to the strength of the boundaries between different categories of knowledge. A curriculum with strong classification maintains rigid distinctions between subjects (for instance, treating physiology and pedagogy as entirely separate domains), reflecting a specialized division of intellectual labor. Framing, conversely, refers to the locus of control over the selection, sequencing, and evaluation of knowledge. In the context of the contemporary audit culture (Shore, 2008), strong framing typically implies centralized control where external evaluation agencies dictate the standards of legitimate performance, thereby reducing the autonomy of local practitioners.

The recent Italian reform can be approached as a policy device that may alter disciplinary classification and, in practice, strengthen framing through externalized performance expectations. By prioritizing bibliometric indicators that favor the natural sciences, the policy implicitly establishes a hierarchy of knowledge. Biomedical disciplines, which are more aligned with high-impact international publishing, are elevated over pedagogical and social-scientific domains.[1] This structural shift exacerbates what Newell (1990) identified as the fundamental challenge of kinesiology: the organization of its diverse sub-disciplines. The risk is a fragmentation where the parent discipline disintegrates into isolated specializations, losing sight of the integrated study of physical activity.

This sociological perspective is complemented by the philosophical discourse within kinesiology regarding the two cultures of the field. Kretchmar (2014) has eloquently argued

against the polarization of the discipline into mutually exclusive scientific and humanistic camps, advocating instead for a complementary kinesiology where distinct methodologies inform one another to provide a richer understanding of human movement. However, the pressure of metric-based evaluation tends to favor a technical-rationalist model of professional education (Schön, 1983). In this model, professional practice is reduced to the application of rigorous scientific theory to instrumental problems, marginalizing the soft skills of pedagogy, ethics, and social interaction.

As Denison and Markula (2023) recently noted, overlooking social theory in favor of a purely naturalistic view leads to an impoverished understanding of movement skill learning. When the curriculum is skewed toward the biomedical paradigm to satisfy audit metrics, it risks producing graduates who possess technical knowledge but lack the holistic understanding required for effective professional practice. The strategies adopted by curriculum leaders – whether they align with, adapt to, or resist these pressures – can thus be viewed as attempts to manage this tension. They are negotiating what Ennis (2011) termed the knowledge of most worth. This involves deciding which forms of knowledge should form the core of professional identity and which can be marginalized as electives or discarded in the pursuit of program funding and prestige.

Consequently, the responses analyzed in this study are not merely administrative adjustments; they represent active engagements with the politics of knowledge (Apple, 2019). By integrating Bernstein's sociological tools (Bernstein, 2000) with the disciplinary insights of Newell (1990), Kretchmar (2014), and Denison and Markula (2023), this framework illuminates how the struggle for the curriculum is, fundamentally, a struggle for the future identity of kinesiology. Importantly, such policy shifts rarely translate into uniform curricular outcomes, as local leadership, departmental histories, and professional imaginaries mediate how reforms are interpreted and enacted. Indeed, there are likely significant financial and career consequences to these curricular changes, as funding for salaries, equipment, facilities, grants, and even book royalties can be influenced by drift in the canon of kinesiology knowledge and its prevailing curricular paradigm.

Methods

To investigate how curriculum leaders navigate the tensions between biomedical and pedagogical paradigms under the pressure of metric-based reform, this study employed a qualitative, interpretive research design. This approach was selected for its capacity to capture the nuanced, context-dependent meanings that academic agents attribute to policy changes and curricular decision-making (Creswell & Poth, 2024). By focusing on the lived experiences and strategic reasoning of those responsible for implementing the reform, the research moves beyond a textual analysis of policy documents to reveal the enacted curriculum at the institutional level.

Context and participants

The study is situated within the Italian higher education system, focusing on bachelor's and master's degree programs in Movement, Exercise, and Sport Sciences. According to most recently available official data for the 2024/2025 academic year provided by the Italian Ministry of University and Research (Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca [MUR],

2026), 49 out of 99 Italian universities offered at least one degree in this area. To clarify the institutional scope of this research, the sampling frame was restricted exclusively to the 41 publicly funded universities. Historically, these programs evolved from the former Higher Institutes of Physical Education (ISEF), which were integrated into the university system in the late 1990s. At the time of data collection, the field was undergoing a recent national reclassification of academic disciplines introduced by the Ministry of University and Research (MUR, 2024).

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants who hold formal strategic roles in curricular governance. Eligibility criteria included holding positions such as Head of Department, Degree Program Coordinator, or senior faculty member with documented responsibilities in curriculum committees. Recruitment occurred through a two-step approach. First, eligible leaders were identified through publicly available institutional governance information (department webpages and degree program committee listings). Second, initial e-mail invitations were sent to identified leaders, followed by a single reminder after 10 days when no response was received. To reduce gatekeeper concentration, recruitment did not rely on nomination chains alone, and institutional representation was capped at a maximum of two participants per university. To ensure maximum variation and representativeness of the national landscape, the recruitment matrix considered three key variables:

(1) Geographical location: Participants were selected from universities in Northern, Central, Island, and Southern Italy to account for regional differences in academic culture and resources.
(2) Institution type: The sample included both large, research-intensive universities (often more sensitive to international rankings) and smaller, teaching-focused institutions.
(3) Epistemological orientation: Programs with a historically strong biomedical tradition were included alongside those with a more established pedagogical or social-scientific focus.

A total of 15 curriculum leaders from 12 different universities participated in the study. Invitations were sent to 24 eligible leaders; 15 agreed to participate, 6 did not respond, and 3 declined due to time constraints. The sample consisted of 4 Heads of Department, 6 Program Coordinators, 2 Senior Academics, and 3 senior committee members. All participants were tenured associate or full professors with at least 10 years of academic experience. The decision to focus on curriculum leaders intentionally privileges governance perspectives rather than student or early-career academics. This constitutes an elite sample by design; however, the research question concerns policy interpretation and strategic curricular decision-making, which are structurally concentrated in formal leadership positions. The study therefore prioritizes decision-rationales and institutional sensemaking processes, rather than classroom enactment or learner experience. Following the methodological recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2021b) for reflexive thematic analysis, sample size was not determined by the concept of data saturation (which implies information redundancy), but rather by the principle of information power (Malterud et al., 2016).

To ensure transparency regarding the sample's diversity while maintaining strict anonymity, Table 1 details the characteristics of the 15 participants. Furthermore, the primary emphasis of participants' doctoral degrees (e.g., biomedical, pedagogical, or hybrid) was

Table 1. Participant characteristics and contextual information.

ID	Role	Macro-Region	Institution Type	Prevalent Degree Level	Primary Doctoral Emphasis	Epistemological Orientation (Self-Perceived)	Strategy Adopted
P1	Head of Dept.	North	Large/Research-Intensive	Bachelor (L-22)	Biomedical	Biomedical	Biomedical Hegemony
P2	Senior Academic	South	Medium/Teaching-Focused	Master (LM-67)	Pedagogical	Pedagogical	Pedagogical Resistance
P3	Head of Dept.	North	Large/Research-Intensive	Master (LM-68)	Biomedical	Biomedical	Biomedical Hegemony
P4	Prog. Coord.	Center	Large/Generalist	Bachelor (L-22)	Hybrid	Mixed/Hybrid	Strategic Syncretism
P5	Senior Academic	Center	Medium/Historical	Bachelor (L-22)	Pedagogical	Pedagogical	Strategic Syncretism
P6	Prog. Coord.	South	Small/Community-based	Master (LM-67)	Pedagogical	Pedagogical	Pedagogical Resistance
P7	Committee Mem.	North	Large/Polytech focus	Bachelor (L-22)	Biomedical	Biomedical	Biomedical Hegemony
P8	Prog. Coord.	North	Medium/Research-Intensive	Master (LM-68)	Biomedical	Biomedical	Biomedical Hegemony
P9	Head of Dept.	South	Large/Generalist	Bachelor (L-22)	Pedagogical	Pedagogical	Pedagogical Resistance
P10	Prog. Coord.	Center	Small/Public	Master (LM-67)	Hybrid	Mixed/Hybrid	Strategic Syncretism
P11	Prog. Coord.	North	Medium/Generalist	Master (LM-68)	Biomedical-leaning Hybrid	Mixed/Hybrid	Strategic Syncretism
P12	Committee Mem.	South	Large/Generalist	Bachelor (L-22)	Pedagogical	Pedagogical	Pedagogical Resistance
P13	Head of Dept.	Center	Large/Research-Intensive	Master (LM-67)	Biomedical	Biomedical	Biomedical Hegemony
P14	Prog. Coord.	Islands	Small/Teaching-Focused	Bachelor (L-22)	Pedagogical	Pedagogical	Pedagogical Resistance
P15	Committee Mem.	North	Large/Research-Intensive	Master (LM-68)	Biomedical	Biomedical	Biomedical Hegemony

Note. Macro-regions follow Italian statistical classification (ISTAT). Institution type is defined based on size and research output volume.

recorded to provide additional contextual insight. The recruitment matrix achieved a balanced representation across macro-regions (North, Central, South/Islands), institution types (Research-Intensive vs. Teaching-Focused), and academic roles, supporting the declared maximum variation strategy. This variation was crucial for capturing how different institutional pressures – varying from large, metric-sensitive departments to smaller, community-oriented programs – influence curricular decisions. Given the specificity of participants' institutional roles, the focused research question, and the theoretically informed analytic framework, the sample was considered sufficient to support a nuanced typology of strategic curricular responses. Information power was therefore treated as an adaptive judgment grounded in the observed richness and conceptual density of accounts, rather than as a saturation claim implying redundancy. The study was conducted in full compliance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval for the research was granted by the University Territorial Ethics Committee (reference: UTEC 2024–0036). All participants were provided with a detailed information sheet explaining the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Written informed consent was obtained from all individuals prior to their participation. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all personal and institutional identifiers have been removed from the data and the final manuscript.

Data collection

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured, in-depth interviews. A topic guide was developed based on the theoretical framework, focusing on participants' interpretations of the reform, their perception of disciplinary identity, and the rationale behind recent curricular changes. Questions invited participants to reflect on tensions between scientific rigor and professional relevance, and to describe concrete examples of how these tensions were negotiated in committee meetings.

Interviews were conducted online between September and December 2025, lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To triangulate the interview data, a documentary analysis was conducted for each participating institution. The corpus included (a) the official Degree Program Regulations (Regolamenti Didattici, RAD), (b) a targeted set of course syllabi corresponding to curriculum areas explicitly discussed during interviews (e.g., foundational sciences, teaching and learning, professional practice), and (c) departmental or degree-program strategic planning documents when publicly available. Documents were retrieved through institutional websites or internal repositories accessible to faculty members and were restricted to current versions between 2024 and 2025 to align with the timing of the reform's implementation. Across the 12 institutions, the documentary dataset comprised 12 RAD files, 36 course syllabi (approximately three per institution), and 7 strategic planning documents.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). Consistent with the rejection of positivist coding reliability measures in favor of interpretative depth, this method acknowledges the researcher's active role in knowledge production and emphasizes the importance of reflexivity. The analysis followed a six-phase process: (1)

familiarization with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes against the dataset; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report. Documentary analysis followed a directed content approach focused on curricular classification signals and audit-facing discursive markers. For RAD and syllabi, extraction fields included (a) course title changes, (b) ECTS/credit allocations, (c) prerequisite structures, (d) assessment formats, and (e) declared learning outcomes and vocabulary (e.g., biomedical lexicon versus pedagogical/humanistic framing). Strategic plans were examined for performance indicators and institutional value statements (e.g., bibliometric targets, community impact, professional mission claims). Documentary patterns were then compared with interview themes to identify convergence (alignment between declared strategy and formal traces) or discrepancy (declared strategy not substantiated by observed curricular structures).

The coding process was both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (informed by the theoretical concepts of classification, framing, and disciplinary identity). Initial codes such as pressure to publish, rebranding courses, and defending values were grouped into candidate themes. These were then refined into the three final strategic categories: *Biomedical Hegemony*, *Strategic Syncretism*, and *Pedagogical Resistance*. Theme development was treated as an interpretive process rather than as a linear extraction of categories. Initial coding generated a set of recurrent meaning units (e.g., metric survival, recruitment defensibility, course rebranding, translation into biomedical idioms, shielding pedagogical cores, ethical injury, and local autonomy claims). These were iteratively clustered into candidate themes based on shared logics of curricular justification (e.g., compliance through biomedical reinforcement; protection through epistemic translation; refusal through value-based curricular defense). During refinement, particular attention was given to boundary cases in which a single participant articulated competing rationales across different curricular domains (e.g., endorsing bibliometric hiring thresholds while simultaneously protecting high-ECTS pedagogical cores). Such internal contradictions were retained analytically as evidence of institutional tension rather than treated as coding noise.

Trustworthiness and positionality

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, a reflexive journal was maintained throughout the research process. This journal documented analytical decisions and helped to monitor potential biases. It is important to disclose that the author is an academic insider within the Italian kinesiology system. At the same time, insider access may increase the likelihood of recruiting leaders already engaged with, or motivated by, the reform debate; to mitigate this, eligibility screening was based on formal governance roles rather than advocacy positions, and recruitment targeted institutions across macro-regions and organizational profiles. However, it also carried the risk of imposing preexisting assumptions on the data. To mitigate this risk, attention was maintained on participants' own justificatory language, and boundary cases were actively examined. For example, some leaders expressed support for biomedical hiring logics as an organizational survival tactic while simultaneously describing deliberate micro-level decisions to preserve pedagogical identity through protected credits, internship design, or teaching philosophy statements. These cases strengthened analytic confidence by demonstrating that curricular strategy was not uniformly coherent within individuals or institutions. The use of extensive direct quotations in the results section

further serves to ground the interpretation in the participants' voices, allowing readers to assess the validity of the claims.

Results

The analysis of the interview data revealed three distinct strategic responses adopted by curriculum leaders to navigate the pressures of the new academic reform. These strategies termed *Biomedical Hegemony*, *Strategic Syncretism*, and *Pedagogical Resistance* illuminate a field in flux, actively negotiating its identity at a critical juncture. The findings demonstrate that the choice of strategy is not merely administrative but deeply epistemological, reflecting conflicting visions of what constitutes the good kinesiologist (Brunsdon, 2026). To triangulate these qualitative insights, a documentary analysis of Degree Program Regulations (RAD) and course syllabi was performed. Although the three strategies are presented as analytically distinct, the interview accounts suggested that they were not always enacted as mutually exclusive options. In several institutions, strategy appeared to vary by curricular layer (e.g., biomedical reinforcement in foundational science units alongside pedagogical protection in professional practice components) or by governance arena (formal compliance in recruitment narratives paired with informal resistance within curriculum committees). This indicates that the typology should be read as a heuristic map of dominant rationales rather than as a rigid classification of institutions. As summarized in Table 2, the documentary traces broadly corroborate the three strategic logics by showing how participants' accounts were reflected in formal curricular artifacts. At the same time, documents occasionally revealed partial implementation, suggesting that strategic discourse and enacted curricular change were not always fully aligned.

Biomedical hegemony: the rationale of metrics

The most prevalent strategy, particularly evident in larger, research-intensive universities, was a pragmatic alignment with the perceived demands of the new bibliometric system. This approach, termed biomedical hegemony, involves a conscious strengthening of the biomedical components of the curriculum at the expense of pedagogical and social-scientific subjects. Leaders adopting this strategy justified their decisions not on pedagogical grounds, but as a rational necessity to ensure the survival and competitiveness of their departments in a changed academic landscape.

The logic underpinning this strategy is rooted in the audit culture mechanism: the new evaluation system rewards disciplines that produce research publishable in high-impact, international journals – a domain historically dominated by the natural and medical sciences. Consequently, curriculum leaders felt compelled to prioritize these disciplines to secure funding and prestige. As one Head of Department from a Northern university explained, the reform forces a stark choice between educational idealism and institutional survival:

> Look, we can talk about the educational value of pedagogy all day, but the reality is that the Ministry and the evaluation agencies are now counting citations. A single article in a good physiology journal carries more weight for our department's ranking than ten books on teaching methods. Our recruitment strategy, our course offerings . . . everything must be geared towards what is measurable. It is not a matter of what we prefer; it is a matter of institutional survival. We need to be realistic about the rules of the game. (Participant 3, Head of Department)

Table 2. Documentary evidence of curricular strategies (triangulation of interview data with RAD and syllabi).

Strategy	Key Document Indicators (Observed in RAD & Syllabi)	Specific examples extracted from dataset	Triangulation judgment
Biomedical Hegemony	**ECTS shift**: Reduction of M-EDF/01–02 credits in favor of BIO/09 (Physiology) and MED/33 (Locomotor). **Recruitment**: Calls for positions in Sector 06/N2 vs 11/D2. **Prerequisites**: Mandatory biomedical entry tests.	*"In the L-22 revision (2024), we replaced 6 ECTS of 'History of Sport' with 'Applied Biochemistry.'"* (RAD Analysis, University P3) *"Syllabus focus changed from 'teaching methods' to 'metabolic pathways.'"*	Convergent: strong alignment between interview rationales and ECTS/recruitment/prerequisite traces.
Strategic Syncretism	**Rebranding**: Course titles combining pedagogical nouns with scientific adjectives (e.g., "Neuro,"- "Evidence-based"). **Learning outcomes**: Hybrid vocabulary mixing "educational relationship" with "motor control mechanisms."	*"Course renaming: from 'Didactics of Movement' to 'Neuroscience of Learning Processes.'"* (Syllabus Analysis, University P5) *"Assessment methods shifted from oral exams to multiple-choice tests on scientific papers."*	Convergent: rebranding and hybrid vocabulary visible in titles and outcomes; partial shifts in assessment formats.
Pedagogical Resistance	**Course defense**: Maintenance of high ECTS in M-EDF/01 despite national trends. **Mission statements**: Explicit reference to "social value," "inclusion," and "educator profile" in Degree Program Objectives (SUA-CdS).	*"Strategic Plan (2024–26) lists 'Social Impact' and 'Territorial Integration' as key KPIs instead of just H-Index."* (Document Analysis, University P14) *"Retention of 'Philosophy of Sport' as a mandatory core course."*	Partially convergent: mission statements and ECTS protection visible; vulnerability and compromise documented in strategic plans.

Note. Examples reported in the table are drawn from document fields systematically extracted (title, ECTS allocation, prerequisites, learning outcomes, and assessment formats) and selected for maximal representativeness of each strategy across institutions.

This participant's language, invoking survival and measurable outcomes, exemplifies the internalization of a technical-rationalist logic. The curriculum is reshaped to mirror the evaluation criteria, effectively creating a feedback loop where biomedical dominance is reinforced by recruitment policies. Another Program Coordinator described how this pressure directly impacts the hiring of new faculty and, consequently, the content delivered to students:

> When we hire a new lecturer, we are forced to look at their H-index. Academics from the biomedical sector simply have stronger metrics. This inevitably means our teaching staff becomes more biomedically oriented, and the curriculum naturally follows that trend. We are redesigning our introductory courses to have a stronger scientific foundation . . . students need that from day one if they are to understand the research we produce. We are effectively becoming a preparatory degree for medicine or physiotherapy, whether we admit it or not. (Participant 8, Program Coordinator)

Notably, even within biomedical-aligned accounts, ambivalence emerged regarding professional formation. One coordinator described accepting metric-oriented recruitment as unavoidable while attempting to protect pedagogical competence in the enacted curriculum:

> If the system rewards H-index, the system will win at recruitment. But that does not mean students should lose the capacity to teach. The curriculum still needs spaces where learning is relational, not only measurable. (Participant 7, Committee Member)

This biomedical drift is not accidental but structural, as evidenced by the systematic replacement of pedagogical modules with biomedical ones observed in the RADs of research-intensive universities (P1, P3, P7) – including cases where leaders expressed ambivalence about the professional costs of such alignment. By aligning the curriculum with the research strengths of the faculty, strengths determined by bibliometric algorithms, these institutions are implicitly redefining the field's identity. The result is a curriculum where the hard sciences are presented as the core knowledge, while pedagogical skills are marginalized or treated as secondary applications. This strategy represents a classic form of institutional isomorphism, where the pressure to conform to the state's evaluation framework overrides local disciplinary traditions.

Strategic syncretism: rebranding for survival

A second, more innovative strategy was identified, which can be termed strategic syncretism. Rather than simply capitulating to the biomedical paradigm, leaders adopting this approach sought to integrate and reconcile the competing cultures of the discipline. This strategy involves creatively reframing pedagogical and social-scientific concepts using language compatible with the new metrics-driven environment. The goal is to preserve the presence of these "softer" disciplines in the curriculum by dressing them in the garb of hard science, thereby making them appear more rigorous to evaluators and students alike.

This approach often manifests as a form of rebranding, where course titles and descriptions are modified to emphasize their scientific underpinnings without fundamentally altering the humanistic content. This strategic renaming echoes historical developments in the United States, where, beginning in the 1960s and accelerating through the 1980s, departments transitioned from "physical education" to "kinesiology." This new title projected a more scientific, academic identity in research-intensive institutions, while simultaneously serving as a sufficiently ambiguous, protective umbrella for humanities and pedagogical scholars (Sage, 2013; Twietmeyer, 2012a). However, relying on this pragmatic sheltering carries profound epistemological risks. Specifically, it threatens to obscure what Kretchmar (2015) describes as "pluralistic internalism" – the recognition that physical activity holds diverse, intrinsic human meanings (such as aesthetic, communitarian, and existential values) that cannot be fully captured by a reductionist scientific vernacular. A senior academic from a Central Italian university provided a compelling example of how pedagogy is being translated into a neuroscientific vernacular, a trend confirmed by the syllabus analysis which showed a 30% increase in course titles containing prefixes like "neuro-" or "bio-" in Central Italian universities:

> We are not abandoning pedagogy; we are rebranding it. Instead of a course on Didactics of Motor Activities, we are launching one called Neurocognitive Science of Skill Acquisition. The content is similar—we still talk about teaching and learning—but the framework is grounded in neuroscience. It allows our research to be published in different kinds of journals and makes the subject appear more robust to both students and university administrators. It is a survival strategy: we use the language of science to defend the practice of education. (Participant 5, Senior Academic)

At the same time, leaders pursuing syncretism did not always portray it as a stable solution. Some acknowledged that the translation strategy could be pedagogically costly or could gradually shift the meaning of pedagogical concepts toward biomedical reductionism:

> Rebranding protects the course today, but it also changes how colleagues read it. Over time, the label becomes the content. (Participant 10, Program Coordinator)

This response highlights a sophisticated form of agency. Curriculum leaders are not passive victims of the reform; they are actively recontextualizing their discipline to fit the new legitimacy structures. By linking pedagogy to neuroscience, they attempt to bridge the gap between what Kretchmar (2014) calls the two cultures of kinesiology. However, this strategy is not without risk. While it may secure short-term legitimacy, there is a danger that the specific moral and relational dimensions of teaching – the art of the profession – may be lost in the translation to scientific variables.

The syncretic approach also extends to research strategies that underpin curriculum development. Leaders described pushing for mixed-methods research that combines qualitative inquiry with quantitative metrics to validate pedagogical interventions. This aligns with Denison and Markula's (2023) call for an intra-action between the physical and the social, although in this context, it is often driven by pragmatic necessity rather than pure theoretical commitment. One Program Coordinator explained how this hybrid approach helps bridge the divide between the laboratory and the field:

> A purely ethnographic study of a coach's behavior is now a very difficult sell. But a study that combines observational analysis with performance data, lactate measurements, and GPS tracking … that is a project that can be funded and published internationally. It is about finding a bridge, a common language between the field and the lab. We are trying to build that bridge in our curriculum, showing students that you cannot be a good coach if you don't understand physiology, but you also cannot apply physiology if you don't understand the person. (Participant 11, Program Coordinator)

Strategic syncretism thus represents an attempt to achieve a form of complementary kinesiology (Kretchmar, 2014) under duress. It acknowledges the power of the biomedical paradigm but seeks to harness it to validate pedagogical aims. Whether this results in a true integration of knowledge or merely a superficial juxtaposition remains a point of tension, but it undeniably represents a creative refusal to let the pedagogical soul of the discipline be entirely erased by the audit culture.

Pedagogical resistance: defending humanistic values

The third and least common strategy was one of active and explicit resistance. Adherents to this approach, typically senior academics from institutions with a long and proud tradition in pedagogical or humanistic studies, openly contested the logic of the new reform. They defended a vision of kinesiology as a fundamentally educational discipline, arguing that a narrow focus on bibliometrics would betray its core mission and the formation of the good kinesiologist (Brunsdon, 2026). This resistance was not merely a nostalgic defense of the past, but a forward-looking assertion of what Ennis (2011) termed the knowledge of most worth.

Leaders in this category viewed biomedical drift as an existential threat to the profession. They argued that while physiological knowledge is necessary, it is insufficient for the complex reality of professional practice, which requires relational, ethical, and pedagogical competencies. Recent empirical evidence from the Italian context strongly supports this stance, demonstrating that essential professional skills – such as adaptability, communication, and clinical reasoning – are primarily developed through supervised internships and reflective practice rather than theoretical coursework alone (Cereda, 2025d). One senior academic, whose doctoral training was firmly rooted in pedagogy, articulated this position with notable force, rejecting the algorithmic logic of the new evaluation system:

> I refuse to let our curriculum be dictated by an algorithm. Our purpose is to train educators, coaches, and professionals who understand human beings, not just biological machines. We teach philosophy of sport, ethics, adapted physical activity . . . These subjects do not generate high citation counts, but they are the soul of our profession. To remove them would be an act of educational malpractice, and we will defend their place in our program. We are here to form citizens, not just technicians. (Participant 2, Senior Academic)

Resistance also appeared constrained by pragmatic trade-offs. Some leaders described protecting "core" pedagogical courses while conceding peripheral reductions to maintain institutional credibility under audit conditions:

> Certain courses are non-negotiable. Others become bargaining chips so the program can remain legible to the university in Area 06. (Participant 12, Committee Member)

This resistance was not limited to rhetoric; it manifested in concrete institutional actions. Participants described leveraging local autonomy to protect at-risk courses and advocating for alternative evaluation models that recognize social impact alongside citation metrics. Importantly, this strategy was bolstered by collective action at the national level. Several participants referenced the recent Consensus Document published by the Italian Society of Motor and Sports Sciences (SISMeS, 2024) as a crucial tool for legitimizing their stance. By defining Physical Education as a discipline centered on physical literacy and social inclusion, this document provided a formal, scholarly counter-narrative to the biomedical reductionism enforced by the ministry.

However, choosing resistance comes with significant costs. In a system increasingly governed by universalistic metrics, departments that prioritize social value over impact factor risk losing funding and status. A Program Coordinator from a smaller university explained the precarious nature of this position:

> We know we are at a disadvantage in the national evaluation system. So, we focus on what we can control: the quality of our teaching and the success of our graduates in the professional world. We build strong relationships with schools and sport organizations. We make the case to the university leadership that our value cannot be measured by H-index alone, but by our impact on the community. It is a constant battle, but it is one we are committed to fighting because we believe in a holistic vision of the human mover. (Participant 14, Program Coordinator)

Pedagogical resistance, therefore, highlights the resilience of academic agency in the face of what has elsewhere been termed the "Translator's Dilemma": the systemic friction that occurs when a holistic, process-oriented educational philosophy must be translated into the linear, performance-based grammar of a national curriculum (Cereda, 2026). Documentary

Table 3. Summary of strategic responses and implications.

Strategic response	Curricular structure	Epistemological orientation	Implications for professional formation
Biomedical hegemony	Strengthening of biomedical content; marginalization of pedagogical subjects	Technical-rationalist; knowledge-centered; metrics-driven	Produces scientific practitioners aligned with external standards; potential deskilling in pedagogical practice
Strategic syncretism	Integration of biomedical and pedagogical domains; interdisciplinary course design	Hybridized epistemology; strategic reframing of pedagogical content	Forms holistic integrators capable of navigating complexity; risk of superficial integration
Pedagogical resistance	Protection of humanistic and practice-oriented content; defense of pedagogical autonomy	Holistic/Educational; critical of evaluation metrics; value-driven	Cultivates reflective educators with strong ethical and relational focus; risk of institutional marginalization.

Note. This table summarizes the three strategic responses identified in the study, highlighting their structural, epistemological, and developmental implications. It provides a transferable heuristic framework for analyzing curriculum politics in other professional fields.

analysis of departmental strategic plans (e.g., University P14) corroborated this stance, revealing explicit KPIs linked to "social territory impact" rather than bibliographic metrics. Despite powerful structural pressures to conform, these leaders actively curate a curriculum that prioritizes humanistic values. They embody the struggle to maintain a distinct disciplinary identity, one that refuses to be subsumed by the medical sciences, even when doing so requires working against the grain of national policy. A summary of these three strategic responses is presented in Table 3.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the complex and often fraught process of curricular change in an academic and professional field under intense institutional pressure. Importantly, the interpretations presented here should not be read as normative judgments about these strategies, but as an analytical reconstruction of how curriculum leaders themselves make sense of and navigate the institutional pressures shaping the field. The three strategies identified – biomedical hegemony, strategic syncretism, and pedagogical resistance – are not merely reactive administrative choices. At the same time, the strategies should be understood as dominant justificatory logics that can co-exist within institutions, rather than as mutually exclusive institutional identities. Rather, they represent profound engagements with the politics of knowledge (Apple, 2019), revealing a struggle over the very definition of legitimate knowledge in kinesiology. This internal tension mirrors the core friction of the "Translator's Dilemma" (Cereda, 2026), where the salutogenic, holistic vision of a reform clashes with the bureaucratic, performance-oriented demands of its operationalization. The three strategies identified in this study can be interpreted as distinct responses to this very dilemma: biomedical hegemony represents a full alignment with the operational grammar of metrics, while pedagogical resistance defends the holistic vision, and strategic syncretism attempts to navigate the space between the two. This struggle, while situated in the specific regulatory context of Italy, reflects a broader, international tension within professional higher education curricula. The following sections interpret these strategies through the theoretical lenses of symbolic control and disciplinary identity, connecting the Italian case to the global dynamics shaping the field.

Metric-based isomorphism and the marginalization of pedagogy

The dominance of the biomedical hegemony strategy among Italian curriculum leaders can be understood as a highly rational response to a powerful shift in the principles of classification and framing within the academic system. As Raiola (2025) recently demonstrated, the Italian academic community is characterized by a significant perception of overlap between pedagogical and medical domains, with a large majority of scholars acknowledging the ambiguity of current disciplinary boundaries. The national reform (MUR, 2024), by instituting a strict bibliometric evaluation system, effectively resolves this ambiguity by force: it imposes a hierarchy where academic output that is quantifiable and publishable in high-impact international journals is deemed most valuable.

This system inherently favors the natural and medical sciences, whose research practices and publication cultures align seamlessly with the logic of citation metrics (Knudson, 2022). In this context, the decision by curriculum leaders to prioritize biomedical subjects is a pragmatic act of aligning their enacted curriculum with the new official principles of evaluation. This behavior is a classic example of coercive institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), where organizations within a field come to resemble one another in response to external pressures. Here, the pressure is exerted by the state's new evaluation framework, which acts as a powerful selection mechanism.

This finding resonates with long-standing international critiques that have warned of a pervasive biomedical drift in Kinesiology, often driven by the perceived higher status and greater funding opportunities of the medical sciences (Ives & Knudson, 2007). The Italian case strongly suggests that top-down, metrics-based reforms accelerate this trend, pushing curricula toward the technical-rationalist model described by Schön (1983). As Knudson (2016) and other prominent scholars have cautioned (Twietmeyer, 2012a; van der Mars, 2011; Zeigler, 1990), this narrowing of the curriculum threatens the uniqueness of the profession. If kinesiology programs become indistinguishable from pre-medical or pre-physical therapy degrees, they risk losing their specific mandate to train professionals capable of educational and social intervention.

Furthermore, the hegemonic response described by participants – where recruitment is driven by H-index rather than curricular needs – creates a self-reinforcing cycle. As departments hire more biomedical researchers to meet metric targets, the collective pedagogical expertise of the faculty diminishes. This structural transformation has profound implications for the good kinesiologist (Brunsdon, 2026). A curriculum that is heavily skewed toward physiology and biomechanics may produce graduates who are technically competent in measuring human performance but ill-equipped to address the behavioral, social, and ethical dimensions of physical activity. This is not a hypothetical concern; empirical studies have shown that even after extensive training, many graduates in the field feel their knowledge is insufficient to practice safely and effectively in complex social environments (Ekkekakis et al., 2016). This curricular fragmentation has direct consequences on identity formation. As Cereda (2025b) recently observed among Italian exercise science students, exposure to competing epistemological paradigms, without adequate integration, can hinder the development of a coherent professional self. Furthermore, this reductionist focus threatens the "epistemic quality" of the curriculum (Hudson et al., 2023). It is crucial to emphasize that both biomedical and pedagogical paradigms offer complex, theoretically rich, and integrated forms of

knowledge essential to the field (Twietmeyer, 2012b). Biomedical sciences provide vital, sophisticated insights into the physiological mechanisms of human movement. However, as scholars advocating for a holistic kinesiology point out, scientific and humanistic inquiries are complementary rather than mutually exclusive (Twietmeyer, 2012a). By excessively prioritizing quantifiable biomedical outputs at the expense of pedagogical and sociocultural reasoning, the curriculum risks under-representing the multidimensional context necessary for professional agency. It is an over-reliance on a single metric-driven epistemology – rather than the biomedical knowledge itself – that hinders the holistic preparation of future practitioners. Students risk internalizing a hierarchical view where "scientific" (biomedical) knowledge is valued over "professional" (pedagogical) doing, mirroring the institutional tensions described by curriculum leaders. Thus, the pursuit of metric excellence may come at the cost of professional relevance, a paradox that lies at the heart of the current crisis in higher education.

The perils and promise of syncretism

In contrast to the passive compliance of hegemony, strategic syncretism represents a more sophisticated and agentic negotiation of structural pressures. Instead of accepting the marginalization of pedagogical knowledge, curriculum leaders adopting this strategy attempt to weaken the boundaries between paradigms by creating a new, integrated, and often hybrid language. The rebranding of pedagogy as neurocognitive science or skill acquisition is a classic example of what Bernstein (2000) termed a recontextualizing move, where the discourses of one field are appropriated to enhance the legitimacy of another.

This strategy can be interpreted as an imperfect attempt to realize the complementary kinesiology advocated by Kretchmar (2014). Kretchmar argued that the field's strength lies not in the victory of one culture over the other, but in their mutual enrichment. By linking pedagogical methods to neuroscientific evidence, Italian curriculum leaders are, in effect, trying to demonstrate that teaching is not an art devoid of science, but a complex practice grounded in observable biological mechanisms. As Denison and Markula (2023) suggest, overcoming the dualism between the natural and social sciences is essential for a holistic understanding of movement. Syncretism, in this view, could be a productive pathway toward that goal, fostering a curriculum where the what of physiology informs the how of pedagogy.

However, the data suggest that strategic syncretism was rarely mere "lip service" or cosmetic compliance. Rather, the dominant pattern among syncretic leaders was a constrained but genuine effort to preserve and integrate pedagogical knowledge by translating it into forms legible within a biomedical, metrics-driven environment. Nevertheless, participants openly acknowledged that this pragmatic integrative work carries significant epistemic risks, chief among them the creation of what Knudson (2025) terms a "sixth-grade band" approach to interdisciplinarity – a dissonant collection of isolated parts rather than a truly integrated "symphony orchestra." These risks include gradual semantic drift and possible future biomedical capture. If the critical, humanistic, and value-laden core of pedagogy – what Ennis (2011) calls the knowledge of most worth – becomes lost in translation, the specific epistemological contributions of the field remain subordinate. Moreover, this strategy risks functioning as a mechanism that may ultimately

disadvantage the academic workforce. By validating the lexicon of the dominant group to secure short-term survival, syncretists inadvertently reinforce the hierarchy they seek to navigate. There is a tangible long-term danger that when current "rebranded" pedagogues retire, university boards (pressured by the metric incentives of the new Area 06) will take the course titles literally. They may choose to replace a retiring syncretist not with another educator skilled in translation, but with a pure biomedical scientist who fits the label perfectly, effectively completing the marginalization the strategy sought to prevent.

Furthermore, by filtering the curriculum primarily through metric demands, programs risk losing what Young (2013) terms "powerful knowledge" – the specialized, conceptual understanding derived from a balance of both scientific and humanistic traditions. A multidimensional context applies equally to biomedical and pedagogical worlds; therefore, a curriculum driven solely by single-metric compliance denies students access to the full spectrum of alternative ways of knowing.

This behavior can be interpreted as a form of symbolic compliance (Dumková & Anchor, 2025), where institutions adopt practices to appear legitimate to external stakeholders (evaluators, ministries), even if internal practices remain decoupled from these external presentations. As Annala (2023) observed using Bernstein's framework in cross-institutional contexts, such curricular convergence often occurs only at the level of "official discourse," while the underlying "invisible pedagogic order" remains fractured. Similarly, the syncretic rebranding observed here risks creating a superficial unity where pedagogical and biomedical knowledge are juxtaposed rather than truly integrated. While syncretism appears more substantive than simple decoupling, it nonetheless reveals a deep tension between authentic integration and strategic performance. If the rebranding is merely cosmetic, it may save the course title but lose the disciplinary soul. Conversely, if it represents a genuine effort to build bridges between the lab and the gym, it could offer a model for a more unified kinesiology curriculum, one that respects the two cultures while navigating the institutional pressures characterizing contemporary higher education systems. To move beyond compromise in name only and foster true integration, it is recommended that departments intentionally design co-taught modules, establish interdisciplinary research clusters that equally value qualitative and quantitative methodologies, and advocate for faculty evaluation rubrics that explicitly reward cross-disciplinary scholarship.

Resistance as a fight for the good kinesiologist

Finally, pedagogical resistance represents an explicit challenge to the new system of classification and its underlying values. By defending a humanistic and educational vision of kinesiology, these leaders are asserting an alternative definition of legitimate knowledge, one grounded in practice, ethics, and the holistic development of the person. Their stance aligns with Brunsdon's (2026) call to educate for the good kinesiologist, a professional who possesses not only technical competence but also the moral character and wisdom to apply that competence for the public good.

This resistance is not an isolated act of defiance but is increasingly finding institutional support. The recent publication of the Consensus Document by the Italian Society of Motor and Sports Sciences (SISMeS, 2024) is a pivotal development in this struggle. By formally defining Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy as distinct, essential

components of the academic field – anchored in concepts like *physical literacy* and social inclusion – this document provides a collective, scholarly foundation for resistance. It allows individual curriculum leaders to claim that their defense of pedagogically oriented disciplines is not a personal preference but an adherence to the recognized standards of the scientific community. This stance aligns with what Deng (2025) describes as the educational and Didaktik way of thinking, which views the central purpose of the curriculum not merely as knowledge transmission, but as individual formation (Bildung) and the cultivation of human powers – goals that are often obscured by metric-driven reforms.

The values defended by these resistors resonate with Twietmeyer's (2012b) four marks of holistic kinesiology, which emphasize the embodied, cultural, and moral dimensions of human movement. From this perspective, a curriculum driven predominantly by bibliometric indicators risks narrowing professional preparation by underweighting relational, ethical, and pedagogical competencies that are difficult to render visible through citation metrics. As Raiola (2025) noted, there is a generational divide in how these values are perceived, with younger researchers potentially more open to hybridity. In the accounts analyzed, resistance was articulated as a responsibility to preserve educational and professional rationales that participants regarded as structurally undervalued within bibliometric accountability environments.

Crucially, this resistance aligns with the expressed needs of practitioners. International research indicates that Physical Education teachers and coaches consistently call for smaller class sizes, more interactive experiences, and training in social-emotional learning – all aspects that are threatened by the massification and scientization of the curriculum (Johnson et al., 2025). Therefore, pedagogical resistance is not merely a nostalgic stance; it is a pragmatic defense of the conditions necessary for effective professional preparation and effective teaching for learning.

However, the position of these resistors remains precarious. In a system increasingly governed by universalistic metrics, localized claims to value based on community impact or student formation are difficult to sustain. The ambiguity within the reform's text may offer some room for maneuver, but the overarching pressure of the bibliometric framework remains immense. This strategy, therefore, highlights the enduring power of local academic cultures and principled leadership, but it also raises critical questions about their long-term viability without broader policy changes. It is a struggle for the identity of the discipline, fought on the terrain of the curriculum, between a vision that increasingly aligns kinesiology with biomedical paradigms and another that seeks to maintain a broader, integrative conception of the discipline oriented toward human movement, education, and health.

Limitations and future directions

While this study offers deep insights into academic agency, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, by relying on semi-structured interviews, the data capture the declared and strategic curriculum as perceived by leaders; this may differ from the enacted curriculum experienced by students in the classroom, suggesting a need for future ethnographic observation. Second, although the Italian context is framed as a microcosm of global trends, the specific legal mechanics of the Ministerial Decree No. 639/2024 are unique, which may limit the direct transferability of administrative details to other national systems. Third,

documentary analysis depended on the public availability and institutional updating of RAD and syllabi, which may lag behind committee decisions and may not fully capture informal curricular enactment. Finally, as the reform is relatively recent, the long-term success of the "syncretic" and "resistance" strategies in securing departmental survival remains to be verified through longitudinal analysis.

Conclusion

This study has examined the complex curricular landscape of Italian kinesiology in the wake of a significant national academic reform. By exploring the strategic responses of university curriculum leaders, it has moved beyond a simple policy analysis to reveal the deep-seated epistemological struggles that define the field's contemporary identity. The identification of three distinct strategies (biomedical hegemony, strategic syncretism, and pedagogical resistance) demonstrates that the curriculum is not a static entity but a dynamic site of negotiation, adaptation, and contestation, particularly under the pressure of metric-based evaluation frameworks. This dynamic mirrors findings from other national contexts, such as Finland, where university-wide top-down reforms have similarly triggered diverse forms of academic agency, ranging from compliance to active resistance (Honkimäki et al., 2024). Moreover, the tension observed between biomedical hegemony and pedagogical resistance reflects a broader theoretical divide in higher education identified by Macfarlane (2025): the clash between "functional pragmatists," who align with performative metrics to ensure efficiency, and "critical theorists," who challenge these structures to defend social justice and educational values. In the Italian context, this dialectic is not just theoretical but existential, determining the very survival of the discipline's pedagogical soul.

The findings confirm that top-down, metrics-driven reforms are powerful forces in shaping higher education, often accelerating preexisting trends toward a biomedical, technical-rationalist model of professional knowledge. This has profound implications not only for the internal balance of curricula but also for the professional identity and practical capabilities of future graduates. A curriculum overly skewed toward disciplines that perform well on bibliometric indicators risks failing to equip professionals with the crucial pedagogical, psychological, and social competencies required for effective practice. In essence, such a curriculum risks privileging one way of knowing (scholarly inquiry amenable to metrics) at the expense of the rich knowledge derived from personal physical experience and reflective professional practice.

However, the study also highlights the enduring agency of academic leaders and local institutional cultures. The existence of strategic syncretism and pedagogical resistance suggests that the future of the curriculum is not predetermined by policy. These strategies represent vital efforts to preserve intellectual diversity and defend a more holistic, humanistic vision of professional education. They underscore the importance of fostering interdisciplinary dialogue and supporting innovative curricular models that can bridge the gap between competing paradigms, even within a constraining regulatory environment.

For policymakers and academic leaders, both in Italy and internationally, this research serves as a cautionary tale. It suggests that reforms aimed at standardization and evaluation must be designed with a sophisticated understanding of their potential impact on curricular diversity. A one-size-fits-all approach based on narrow bibliometric indicators risks

impoverishing, rather than strengthening, complex professional fields like kinesiology. The challenge for this discipline is to forge a curriculum that is both scientifically rigorous and deeply human, resisting the pressure to become merely a technical sub-field of medicine. Ultimately, the politics of knowledge enacted in the curriculum will determine whether the good kinesiologist remains a central goal of university education or becomes a casualty of the audit culture.

Note

1. It is worth noting the epistemic pressure inherent in having to append the modifier "scientific" to pedagogical and social disciplines – which possess their own long-standing scientific traditions – merely to defend their knowledge and curricular boundaries against biomedical encroachment.

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ORCID

Ferdinando Cereda http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3120-0684

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