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Baskin as a Lever for School Inclusion in Secondary School: An Experimental Study Between Sport, Citizenship and Relational Well-Being

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Abstract

This study explores the effectiveness of Baskin—an inclusive sport discipline—as a pedagogical tool to promote school inclusion, social cohesion and motivation in secondary school students. The intervention, conducted on a sample of 600 students in four Italian institutions, adopted an experimental design with pre–post measurements and a mixed methods approach. The quantitative results, obtained by means of validated psychometric instruments (PIQ, Classroom Cohesion Scale, AMS), showed significant improvements in all variables investigated in the experimental group compared with the control ($p < 0.001$). The qualitative analysis, based on interviews, focus groups and reflexive diaries, highlighted five thematic areas: revaluation of diversity, improvement of the classroom climate, development of self-efficacy, restructuring of interpersonal relationships and request for project continuity. Baskin emerged as a comprehensive educational practice, capable of integrating corporeity, citizenship and critical thinking. The systematic inclusion of inclusive sport in the curriculum and initial teacher training is suggested, as well as the promotion of school networks and longitudinal studies. Baskin emerges as a pedagogy of participation that contributes to transforming school culture, making inclusion concrete.

Keywords: Baskin; inclusion; sport

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1. Introduction

School inclusion is one of the most urgent pedagogical and political priorities in contemporary education systems today. The aim is no longer just to guarantee access to education for all students but to build school contexts capable of welcoming diversity as a resource and not as an obstacle. According to the UNESCO (2020) guidelines, inclusion implies a profound transformation of school culture, teaching practices and relationships in order to eliminate all forms of discrimination and inequality. It is therefore necessary to move from a logic of "inclusion" to a true "active participation", in which each student is enabled to learn, express him/herself and contribute meaningfully to school life. This change implies a rethinking of the school's role not only as an educational agency but as a context for the integral development of the person. In this direction is also the contribution

of F. Tafuri and Latino (2024), who emphasize the strategic importance of systemic interventions, such as the school medicine service, in promoting the psycho-physical well-being of students. Such integrated approaches—combining prevention, treatment and health promotion—emphasize the need to build a safe, welcoming and inclusive educational environment, where well-being is not a prerequisite for learning but an integral part of it. In this context, physical and sports education can be a powerful tool for transformation. It offers a privileged ground for encounters between students with different abilities, backgrounds and needs, and enables the experimentation of cooperative, creative and inclusive ways of relating. Similar inclusive outcomes have been observed in paralympic powerlifting, where training fosters both physical and psychosocial development in athletes with disabilities (Aidar et al., 2022). As underlined by several recent studies, school sport, if designed in an inclusive way, can foster the development of self-efficacy, improve the classroom climate and enhance school motivation. In particular, Baskin—integrated basketball—represents an original model of inclusive sport; it was conceived in Italy during the 2000s and progressively adopted in many European schools. Unlike other adapted practices, Baskin was created to be played together by people with and without disabilities, providing for differentiated but equivalent roles. Each role is assigned not on the basis of a deficit, but of the individual's cognitive, motor and relational potential, according to a principle of functional equity and shared responsibility (M. G. Tafuri et al., 2025). Numerous scientific contributions have highlighted the positive impact of Baskin on reducing relational barriers, increasing participation and improving group dynamics, particularly in secondary school contexts. However, the transformative potential of this discipline in secondary school, where identification processes, relational conflicts and motivational challenges become more complex, remains poorly explored. The study presented here fits into this research gap, proposing a large-scale experimental intervention in four high schools, with the aim of assessing the effectiveness of a Baskin-based teaching program in promoting inclusion, social cohesion and school motivation. The intervention was designed not only as a sporting activity but as an educational experience capable of transforming the collective identity of the class, enhancing diversity as the foundation of democratic coexistence.

2. Objective

The main objective of this study is to evaluate the impact of a school-based Baskin intervention on the promotion of inclusion, social cohesion and motivation in secondary school students. It is intended to ascertain the extent to which a structured program of inclusive physical activity can positively affect socio-relational and motivational variables, with particular attention to students with special educational needs (BES) and those at risk of school exclusion. The specific objectives are:

- To analyze changes in the perception of school inclusion before and after the intervention;
- To assess the evolution of social cohesion within the class group;
- To examine changes in school motivation and self-determination;
- To collect qualitative evidence about the students' and teachers' experience.

3. Experimental Design

A parallel group experimental design with pre–post measurements was adopted. The sample, consisting of 600 students divided equally between the experimental group (n = 300) and the control group (n = 300), was selected from four secondary schools located in urban and semi-urban areas. Assignment to the groups was not by randomization but was carried out on the basis of the existing sections, which were already structured by level and course of study. Data collection took place at two points in time: T0 (pre-intervention) and T1 (post-intervention), through the use of validated psychometric instruments and self-

administered questionnaires. A comparative analysis between the groups was also carried out by means of independent samples *t*-tests and effect size measures (Cohen's d) in order to estimate the significance and magnitude of the intervention effect. The methodological approach included an integration of quantitative and qualitative data (mixed methods design), with thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006)'s model for qualitative data. The intervention took place over 12 weeks, for a total of 24 sessions, delivered during physical education class time. The operational phases were:

1. Phase T0—Pre-test
    - Administration of PIQ, Classroom Cohesion Scale and AMS;
    - Collection of socio-demographic data;
    - Structured observations of the classroom climate.
2. Implementation of the intervention
    - Baskin sessions structured in recursive phases (relational warm-up, role rotation, regulated game, debriefing);
    - Continuous supervision by the research team with observation sheets;
    - Compilation of sports diaries.
3. Phase T1—Post-test
    - Re-administration of the same psychometric instruments;
    - Conducting interviews and focus groups;
    - Collection of reflective materials.

Quantitative approach

The quantitative analysis included:

- *t*-tests for independent samples to compare experimental and control groups;
- Calculation of effect sizes (Cohen's d);
- Preliminary checks on statistical assumptions (normality, homoscedasticity);
- Use of SPSS 26 software.

The instruments used, all of which were validated, measured three key dimensions: perception of inclusion (PIQ), group cohesion, and academic motivation (AMS).

Qualitative approach

The qualitative component was based on:

- 30 narrative diaries (compiled weekly);
- 40 semi-structured interviews with students and teachers;
- 4 focus groups of 6–8 students each.

The analysis was conducted using inductive thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006), divided into:

1. Familiarization;
2. Initial code generation;
3. Theme construction;
4. Theme revision;
5. Definition and naming;
6. Report writing.

To ensure the credibility and reliability of the analytical process, the following were used:

- Double coding by two independent researchers;
- Triangulation of sources (interviews, focus groups, diaries);
- Member checking with the teachers involved.

4. Inclusion Criteria

To ensure the homogeneity of the sample and the relevance of the data collected, strict inclusion criteria were defined that were consistent with the objectives of this study. They included:

- Students regularly enrolled in the three years of secondary school (classes III, IV, V) in order to ensure greater relational stability and cognitive maturity compatible with the reflective and cooperative activities envisaged by the project.
- Participants with regular school attendance (at least 80% of the hours in the trimester preceding the intervention), to ensure teaching continuity and effective exposure to the program.
- Presence in class of at least one student with special educational needs (BES), certified or uncertified, in order to verify the impact of Baskin on truly heterogeneous contexts with inclusive needs.
- Informed consent signed by parents or legal guardians for underage students, and by the students themselves if they are of age, in line with ethical regulations on educational research.
- Willingness to actively participate in motor and reflective activities, including game sessions, role rotations and compilation of qualitative materials (diaries, interviews, focus groups).

Students with documented medical limitations that prevented safe participation in the planned physical activities were excluded from the sample, as well as those who did not express voluntary availability or did not ensure sufficient attendance at the intervention.

Exclusion criteria

- Students with medical conditions that prevented physical activity;
- Lack of informed consent;
- Attendance below the required threshold;
- Unwillingness to participate.

Characteristics of the experimental group

In addition to the general parameters, the experimental group presented:

- Greater internal heterogeneity in terms of motor skills;
- A higher average presence of students with relational fragility declared in the initial questionnaires;
- Active participation in Baskin sessions and in the production of qualitative materials.

Characteristics of the control group

The control group carried out:

- Regular physical education lessons not structured on Baskin,
- Traditional motor activities not based on role rotation or reflective devices;
- No additional support sessions.

5. Quantitative Instruments

The following standardized and scientifically validated instruments were used for the quantitative survey: perceived inclusion questionnaire (PIQ), an instrument developed by Venetz et al. (2015), used to measure students' perceived inclusion in terms of social acceptance, participation and relational support; classroom cohesion scale, adopted to assess classroom group cohesion, with items related to cooperation, mutual respect and solidarity among students; academic motivation scale (AMS), Italian version validated by Alivernini et al. (2005), used to measure the different types of school motivation (intrinsic,

extrinsic and amotivation) according to the self-determination theory model (Deci & Ryan, 2000). All instruments were administered in paper format in a school environment with teacher and researcher supervision. Data analysis was performed with SPSS 26 statistical software, applying *t*-tests for comparisons between independent groups and calculation of effect size with Cohen's index (d).

6. Qualitative Tools

The qualitative component of this study involved the collection and analysis of a plurality of narrative and reflective sources, useful for capturing the meanings attributed by students and teachers to the lived experience. Three main instruments were used: Semi-structured interviews, conducted on 20 students in the experimental group and 10 teachers by trained researchers, with open-ended questions aimed at exploring perceptions about the relational climate, the inclusive effectiveness of Baskin and individual transformations. The interviews lasted an average of 30 min and were transcribed in full. Focus groups, where four focus groups were conducted, each with six–eight participants, facilitating collective discussions on emerging themes. The conduction followed a non-directive facilitative approach, according to criteria, to stimulate spontaneous dialogue between peers. Sports diaries, where each student in the experimental group filled in a personal diary on a weekly basis, in which they noted down feelings, emotions, significant episodes and critical reflections on their activities. These materials were analyzed as sources of narrative introspection and metacognition. The qualitative data were analyzed by means of inductive thematic coding, following Braun and Clarke (2006)'s model. Two independent researchers coded the texts, with subsequent intersubjective triangulation to ensure the reliability of the analysis. The macro-categories that emerged were discussed with the teachers involved, in a participatory and reflective manner.

7. Teaching Activities

The didactic course structured for the intervention consisted of 24 sessions, spread over 12 weeks, on a bi-weekly basis. Each meeting, lasting 60 min, was divided into four main phases, designed according to a logic of progressive empowerment, active exploration and critical reflection.

1. Initial phase—relational warm-up (10 min): This phase was designed to create a positive relational climate, break the ice between participants and facilitate peer encounters. Low motor intensity cooperative activities such as "talking concentric circles", "chains of names and movements" or symbolic games were proposed to foster mutual acquaintance. The aim was not only a physical warm-up but above all an emotional/relational one.
2. Technical and tactical phase—role rotation (20 min): During this phase, each student experimented with different Baskin roles, each with different characteristics and responsibilities (e.g., role 5 for students with limited motor skills, role 1 for organizational and game-building functions, role 3 for finalization). Role rotation was systematically guided to promote empathy, cognitive decentralization and respect for others. The PE teacher acted as a facilitator and critical observer, stimulating participants' awareness of their own and others' abilities.
3. Situational phase—regulated game (20 min): Students participated in real Baskin matches, applying the official rules of the discipline. The playful and competitive context, while remaining inclusive, favored bringing into play cognitive (reading the situation), social (cooperation, negotiation), motor and decision-making skills. The teacher intervened to highlight significant episodes and draw attention to elements such as fair play, self-organization and role responsibility.

4. Reflective phase—debriefing and self-assessment (10 min): Through circle time, reflective writing or shared concept maps, the students processed what they had experienced in the session. Guiding questions included: "How did you feel in your role?", "What did you learn today from others?", "What difficulties did you encounter and how did you overcome them?" A system of individual 'sports diaries was also introduced, in which everyone could write down emotions, progress and resolutions. Reflection was at the heart of the learning experience, as it made it possible to move from doing to understanding.

In addition to the structure of the teaching program, various methodological devices were implemented to reinforce the effectiveness of the intervention:

- Initial training was provided for all teachers involved, with the aim of providing the theoretical and operational foundations of Baskin and cooperative work in inclusive context. This training was based on established models of peer and cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2009), highlighting the pedagogical implications of assigning differentiated roles and managing heterogeneous groups.
- During the project, continuous monitoring by a research team was planned, with systematic observations, collection of feedback and supervision meetings. This practice is in line with the recommendations of participatory educational research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), which emphasizes the importance of continuous critical reflection for the adaptation and improvement of interventions.
- A peer tutoring system was implemented, whereby students with more experience in cooperative dynamics supported peers in difficulty. Peer tutoring, which has been extensively studied in the educational field, has been shown to be an effective tool for improving learning and strengthening social bonds, increasing the sense of collective efficacy.
- The intervention was accompanied by an active citizenship education component, in which the values that emerged from the inclusive game were linked to current social and cultural issues. Through interdisciplinary activities, debates and group work, students were stimulated to reflect on the concepts of equity, participation and social justice (Mordacci, 2017), consolidating the connection between bodily experience and civic skills.

These strategies broadened the educational scope of the project, helping to transform the school environment into a cooperative and responsible learning community.

8. Quantitative Results

The quantitative analysis was based on data collected using validated instruments and compared between the two groups involved. The results were subjected to statistical tests (*t*-test for independent samples) to check the significance of the differences between the experimental and control group.

As shown in the Table 1, the observed differences were all statistically significant, with a significance level $p < 0.001$, indicating that the Baskin-based intervention produced substantial positive effects. Perceived inclusion increased by an average of 25%, suggesting a change in students' perceptions of their own acceptance and participation in school life.

Group cohesion increased significantly, reflecting a greater willingness to cooperate, solidarity and mutual respect among class members. This result is in line with the hypothesis that Baskin serves as a "social bridge" between students with different abilities. Furthermore, school motivation—measured considering both the intrinsic and extrinsic components—showed a qualitative leap, with a particularly marked increase in autonomous motivation (self-determination and sense of belonging). This result appears

consistent with the principles of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), according to which inclusive and supportive learning environments foster self-directed motivation.

Table 1. Differences between the experimental and control groups.

Variable	Experimental Group (Mean ± SD)	Control Group (Mean ± SD)	*p*-Value
Perceived inclusion	4.12 ± 0.63	3.28 ± 0.51	<0.001
Group cohesion	4.34 ± 0.48	3.42 ± 0.59	<0.001
School motivation	4.03 ± 0.70	3.19 ± 0.61	<0.001

9. Qualitative Findings

The qualitative analysis complemented the numerical data with an in-depth understanding of the participants' perceptions, emotions and experiences. In total, 30 logbooks, 40 semi-structured interviews and 4 focus groups were analyzed, with thematic coding according to Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis followed a rigorous six-stage approach (familiarization with the data, initial code generation, theme research, theme review, theme definition and naming, report writing), and yielded a dense and articulate representation of the students' experience. Five main macro-categories emerged:

1. Recognition of the value of diversity: Students expressed a profound transformation in their perception of disability and diversity. Initially perceived as obstacles, these differences gradually became objects of appreciation and positive recognition. Participants began to describe diversity as "a resource for the group" and "an opportunity to learn new things". The experience of differentiated roles and the obligation to cooperate made the value of complementarity visible, arousing feelings of respect and gratitude. This reconfiguration is consistent with the capabilities-based approach of inclusive pedagogy (Nussbaum, 2011), according to which each individual contributes specific and non-hierarchical capabilities.
2. Improvement of the classroom climate: Almost all the students and all the teachers interviewed reported a perceived improvement in the relational climate. Decreased conflicts, increased solidarity, greater empathy and willingness to help were reported. Several students pointed out that the climate of trust generated during the Baskin sessions also transferred to other disciplines, suggesting a systemic effect of the intervention. One participant wrote: "Before in school we used to ignore each other outside class, now we greet each other in the corridors and also help each other in other subjects".
3. Development of self-efficacy and self-esteem: Several students with disabilities or relationship fragilities reported that they experienced the experience as highly valuing. The recognition received through the roles of responsibility fostered a redefinition of the self as competent and capable. One student with anxiety disorder stated: "This is the first time I feel useful in a group without feeling judged." The data collected in the diaries show a progressive increase in positive self-referential vocabulary, in particular in the concepts of self-efficacy ("I did it", "I can do it") and agency ("I succeeded in . . .", "I did it . . .").
4. Restructuring of interpersonal relationships: The intervention had an impact on group dynamics, favoring the emergence of new transversal relationships. In particular, there was a reduction in the phenomenon of static subgroups, typical of high school, in favor of greater relational permeability. The cooperative context and rotation of roles created unprecedented opportunities for interaction, bringing together students who would

rarely have collaborated. Teachers reported that the new friendship networks created in the context of the project also had positive effects on general school participation.

5. Request for continuity and replicability: All the focus groups and over 90% of the students interviewed expressed a strong desire to continue the experience. Baskin was described not only as "fun" and "engaging", but also as "instructive" and "educational". The teachers emphasized the desirability of structuring a real "transversal curriculum" based on relational skills, inclusion and active citizenship. This desire for continuity was interpreted as an indicator of the perceived effectiveness of the model and its rootedness in the students' school identity.

Overall, the qualitative results confirmed and enriched the quantitative ones, offering a coherent and deeply meaningful picture of the educational impact of Baskin. The mixed methods approach made it possible not only to measure the effects of the intervention, but also to understand its transformative dynamics and experiential value, giving direct voice to the protagonists of the educational process.

10. Discussion

The results that emerged from this study confirm and extend the evidence in the international literature on the effectiveness of inclusive sports practices in promoting school well-being, positive relationships and prosocial attitudes. The Baskin project, in particular, proved capable of operating simultaneously on several dimensions of the school experience: cognitive, emotional, relational and identity.

The significant increase in levels of perceived inclusion suggests that cooperative environments, in which everyone plays a significant and recognized role, foster the construction of an authentic sense of belonging (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; UNESCO, 2020). In line with the data presented by M. G. Tafuri et al. (2025), the inclusive play context functioned as a catalyst for new relational dynamics, breaking hierarchical patterns and invisible barriers between students.

From the point of view of social cohesion, the results confirm what has emerged in other research (Lindsay et al., 2020; Cummings, 2018): activities structured on differentiated but interdependent roles create a culture of mutual help and respect, contributing to the creation of a "team climate" even outside the sport context. The testimonies collected show that this cohesion is not a side effect but a goal intentionally pursued through cooperative play, shared reflection and individual empowerment (Darcy & Lock, 2020).

Particularly relevant is the increase in school motivation in the participants, especially in the intrinsic component. This result is consistent with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which identifies the sense of competence, autonomy and relationship as the pillars of authentic motivation. Baskin, as an experience structured on role autonomy and cooperative interdependence, thus appears consistent with a pedagogical model capable of "nurturing" such basic psychological needs (Freire et al., 2022). This integrated approach is also confirmed in the study by Morsanuto et al. (2023), who demonstrated how inclusive motor activities and structured educational environments can facilitate not only motor development but also relational skills, fostering a vision of diversity as an educational and social resource.

The project also fostered a restructuring of representations of disability, as shown by the narratives that emerged in the focus groups. The students stopped perceiving disability as a limitation to be compensated for and began to recognize it as an integral part of normality. This semantic shift is crucial to building a truly inclusive school, in which diversity is not an exception to be tolerated but a value to be integrated. As Zhang (2022) suggests, direct experiences of cooperation with peers with disabilities reduce stigma and promote an attitude of openness towards diversity.

Finally, the project's effectiveness was enhanced by the reflective dimension through tools such as sports diaries, circle time and co-assessment. These devices fostered socio-emotional metacognition, making the learning experience conscious and enhancing its transformative effects (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

11. Conclusions

In light of the results that emerged, the Baskin project can be considered a valid pedagogical model for the promotion of school inclusion in secondary school. The proposed approach is distinguished by its ability to combine motor activity, critical reflection and community building, configuring itself as a comprehensive and multilevel educational device.

The benefits observed—increased perceived inclusion, strengthened social cohesion and increased motivation—suggest that Baskin can not only be an effective educational activity but also a lever for rethinking school culture in greater depth. At a time when school dropouts and youth discomfort are on the rise, practices such as Baskin can help build educational contexts capable of responding to the needs of all students, promoting sense, belonging and trust.

From an institutional point of view, it is desirable that projects such as this are systematically integrated into the three-year plans of the educational offer (PTOF), supported by initial and in-service training programs for teachers. As suggested by Darcy et al. (2023), the adoption of inclusive educational sports represents one of the most promising strategies to translate the goals of Agenda 2030 (Goal 4) into practice.

In terms of practical implications, it is proposed to provide weekly curricular hours dedicated to inclusive sport, in particular Baskin, as an integral part of physical education and citizenship activities; integrate specific modules on inclusive sport, heterogeneous class management and participatory assessment into initial teacher training (especially in university courses in primary education and in schools of specialization for secondary teaching); create territorial networks between schools that have experimented with Baskin practices, promoting professional learning communities and exchanges of good practices, including through digital platforms; foster partnerships with local authorities, universities and sports federations to ensure project continuity, resources and technical support; include Baskin in health education and psycho-physical well-being projects promoted by ASLs, youth councils and school listening desks.

For the future, it is deemed necessary to initiate longitudinal studies that can measure the impact of such interventions in the medium to long term, also exploring possible effects on psychological well-being, school performance and conflict management skills. It will also be useful to compare Baskin with other inclusive practices (such as goalball, sitting volleyball, cooperative games) to identify common pedagogical conditions for success.

In summary, Baskin is configured as a pedagogy of participation, which integrates corporeity, emotion and critical thinking. In a school that wants to be inclusive, it is not enough to "talk about diversity", it must be experienced, organized and valued. Baskin shows that it can be done, with competence, enthusiasm and vision.

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