

Embodied Socio-Affective Learning in Adults with Intellectual Disabilities: An Educational Intervention Promoting Consent and Personal Boundaries [†]

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Abstract

Socio-affective competence is a key dimension of inclusive education for adults with intellectual disabilities. This qualitative exploratory study examined the educational processes observed during a single 90 min embodied educational intervention designed to promote awareness of interpersonal boundaries, consent, and public–private behaviours. Data were collected through structured observation grids and narrative field notes compiled by external non-participant observers and analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The findings suggest that embodied educational experiences, supported by pedagogical mediation and peer interaction, created opportunities for participants to engage with interpersonal boundaries, consent, and contextual social norms through situated interaction and guided reflection. Rather than demonstrating the development of socio-affective competence, the study provides a process-oriented interpretation of how socio-affective understanding may emerge during embodied educational experiences in inclusive educational contexts.

Keywords: embodied learning; socio-affective learning; intellectual disability; consent; personal boundaries; inclusive education; Reflexive Thematic Analysis

1. Introduction

Education is increasingly conceived as a process that supports personal, relational, and social development beyond disciplinary transmission [1,2]. Within this view, socio-affective competence—including the ability to regulate, recognise personal and social boundaries, interpret contextual norms, and respond appropriately—emerges as a developmental, context-sensitive process shaped by meaningful experiences, guided interaction, and reflective participation [2,3].

For adults with intellectual disabilities, rights-based approaches emphasise agency, self-determination, and relational potential [4,5]. Hence, recognising boundaries, understanding consent, interpreting social situations, and establishing respectful relationships are core aims of inclusive education. Yet provision remains uneven: umbrella and systematic reviews show that many programmes still prioritise biological knowledge, abuse prevention, or behavioural regulation, with limited attention to relational understanding and to the educational processes through which competence develops; evidence of transfer to everyday interactions is often scarce [4,6].

Embodied learning offers a promising framework. Grounded in embodied cognition, it views learning as arising from dynamic body–mind–environment coupling rather than



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abstract processing alone [7,8]. Recent work argues it is not merely “adding movement” but using bodily experience to mediate conceptual, relational, and reflective learning [3]. Applied to socio-affective education, concepts such as interpersonal boundaries, consent, and context-sensitive behaviour can be explored through meaningful relational experiences rather than through verbal explanation alone. However, a key gap persists: what programmes should teach is comparatively clearer than which pedagogical processes support participants’ engagement with socio-affective issues during educational activities.

Evidence syntheses recommend moving beyond outcome-oriented evaluations to examine mechanisms, pedagogical conditions, and relational processes that enable meaningful and transferable learning—particularly in inclusive contexts where participation, interaction, and negotiated meaning are central [4].

Against this backdrop, the present study adopts an embodied educational perspective to explore the educational processes observed during a structured intervention involving adults with intellectual disabilities. Rather than evaluating behavioural outcomes, the study examines how participants engaged with interpersonal boundaries, consent, and contextual social norms through embodied educational experiences, using a qualitative design informed by Reflexive Thematic Analysis [9] to provide a process-oriented interpretation of participants’ situated meaning-making and educational engagement during a single intervention.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design within an interpretivist paradigm to explore the educational processes observed during an embodied educational intervention involving adults with intellectual disabilities. Rather than evaluating predefined behavioural outcomes, the study sought to understand how participants engaged with interpersonal boundaries, consent, and contextual social norms during a single educational laboratory. The study was guided by the following research question: how do adults with intellectual disabilities engage with embodied activities addressing interpersonal boundaries, consent, and public–private situations within a structured educational laboratory? Data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) [9,10], an approach well suited to examining patterns of shared meaning while recognising the interpretative and reflexive role of researchers in qualitative knowledge production. Accordingly, themes were developed through sustained engagement with the observational material rather than conceived as objective categories emerging directly from the data.

2.2. Educational Setting

The educational laboratory was based in Italy, within university premises, at the explicit request of the provider cooperative. The activity formed part of the cooperative’s ordinary educational programme for adults with intellectual disabilities and was designed to promote autonomy, social participation, and relational competence. The setting was inclusive in pedagogical terms because the activities were structured to support accessible participation through simplified verbal instructions, visual supports, music, modelling, guided interaction, peer participation, and educator mediation.

2.3. Participants

Participants were 15 adults with heterogeneous intellectual disabilities, aged between 20 and 50 years, who were already attending the provider cooperative’s educational programme. The group was already formed and was selected by the cooperative’s educators on the basis of regular attendance, adult age, willingness to participate in group activities,

and a minimum level of autonomy allowing involvement in embodied and relational educational tasks. Participants had previously taken part in educational activities addressing affectivity, relationships, autonomy, or socio-affective development. To preserve confidentiality, gender distribution and individual diagnostic profiles are not reported.

2.4. Design of the Embodied Educational Intervention

The intervention consisted of a progressive embodied educational pathway designed to promote socio-affective competence through structured experiences addressing interpersonal boundaries, consent, and contextual social understanding. Educational activities were organised into four interconnected pedagogical phases, each building upon previous experiences while progressively increasing the complexity of relational situations (Table 1).

Table 1. Pedagogical architecture of the embodied socio-affective educational intervention.

Pedagogical Phase	Embodied Educational Experiences	Educational Focus	Pedagogical Intention
Phase 1. Developing bodily and interpersonal awareness	Activities centred on bodily positioning, movement, interpersonal distance, and spatial interaction.	Promoting awareness of one's own body in relation to others and recognising personal boundaries.	To support participants' attention to bodily awareness and the recognition of interpersonal space as the foundation of respectful relationships.
Phase 2. Negotiating consent through interaction	Structured interpersonal activities, including a traffic-light activity, requiring participants to request, negotiate, and respect consent during social exchanges.	Understanding consent as a reciprocal and relational process rather than an isolated rule.	To encourage participants to explore reciprocity, communication, and the interpretation of verbal and non-verbal signals during interpersonal interactions.
Phase 3. Interpreting social contexts and boundaries	Educational experiences exploring public and private contexts, including a swimsuit-rule activity, supported by embodied activities and guided discussion.	Supporting the contextual interpretation of social norms and interpersonal situations.	To promote the interpretation of social situations by connecting concrete experiences with contextual reasoning and reflective dialogue.
Phase 4. Exploring socio-affective issues in authentic relational situations	Collaborative activities encouraging participants to analyse, discuss, and negotiate realistic interpersonal situations through guided reflection.	Connecting previously explored concepts within realistic socio-affective situations.	To support participants' engagement with embodied experience, interpersonal interaction, and reflection in realistic relational situations.

Accessibility was supported through simplified verbal instructions, visual materials, colour-coded responses, modelling, repeated examples, guided questions, extended response time, and the presence of music to regulate rhythm, movement, and transitions between activities. Three facilitators supported the 15 participants throughout the laboratory. Activities involving interpersonal interaction or physical contact were guided, voluntary, and mediated by educators. The traffic-light activity used red, yellow, and green as accessible visual markers for stop, uncertainty, and permission, allowing participants to modulate their responses through colour-based choices. The swimsuit-rule activity was presented through a realistic human-body representation and framed as an adult-oriented

discussion of bodily privacy, personal boundaries, and respect for the body, rather than as a childlike rule to be memorised.

The educational pathway combined embodied activities, guided discussion, collaborative reflection, and authentic interpersonal situations to encourage participants to actively explore socio-affective concepts through experience rather than through verbal instruction alone. These activities were intentionally selected to translate abstract socio-affective concepts into concrete and developmentally accessible educational experiences, facilitating participants' engagement through embodied interaction and guided reflection. Among the proposed activities were exercises focusing on interpersonal distance and bodily awareness, a traffic-light activity designed to facilitate the negotiation and recognition of consent, a swimsuit-rule activity supporting the recognition of private body areas, and collaborative discussions aimed at interpreting public and private situations and negotiating appropriate social behaviours.

2.5. Data Collection

Data were collected through non-participant structured observation conducted throughout the laboratory. Nine psychology trainees independently completed one observation grid each, integrating structured indicators with brief narrative field notes for each activity. Observers were distributed across different areas of the learning environment and observed the laboratory simultaneously, while focusing on different participants, interactions, and activity zones. As some episodes could be noticed by more than one observer, overlapping observations were treated as complementary evidence rather than as independent frequency counts.

The observation protocol included indicators concerning interpersonal distance, request for permission, response to refusal, use of verbal and non-verbal signals, participation in group activities, interaction with peers, use of visual supports, need for educator mediation, uncertainty, and behavioural adjustment. Field notes provided brief contextual descriptions of relevant episodes, including moments of hesitation, peer modelling, prompting, refusal, and clarification.

2.6. Data Analysis

Data were analysed by the author using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) [9,10]. The analysis was primarily semantic and inductive: coding focused on what was observable in the grids and field notes, while the interpretation of patterns was subsequently situated within the theoretical framework of embodied learning and socio-affective education. All observation grids and field notes were read repeatedly for familiarisation. Codes were then generated across the complete dataset and organised into candidate themes through iterative comparison.

Episodes of uncertainty, hesitation, need for prompting, or divergent responses were retained in the analysis rather than treated as errors, as they provided relevant information about the situated and non-linear nature of participants' engagement. Candidate themes were reviewed for coherence and distinctiveness, with attention to avoiding a simple reproduction of the intervention phases.

2.7. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was supported by the use of a structured observation protocol, prior observer training, multiple observer perspectives, and the separation between facilitation and observation. Analytic traceability was strengthened through memoing and iterative review of codes and themes. The inclusion of uncertain, prompted, or ambiguous episodes supported a cautious interpretation of the findings and helped avoid presenting participants' responses as linear evidence of competence acquisition.

2.8. Ethical Considerations

The laboratory study was conducted in Italy, within university premises, at the explicit request of the provider cooperative, and formed part of its ordinary educational programme. Ethical review and approval were not required because the activity was educational rather than experimental or clinical, was requested by the cooperative, and involved only non-interventional observation without modification of the programme, collection of identifiable personal data, or recording of individual clinical information. Data were anonymous at source and stored in the institutional archive.

Participation followed the cooperative's standard admission, information, and consent procedures. Participants were informed verbally before the laboratory by both the facilitators and the educators. Participation was voluntary, and participants could refuse, pause, withdraw, or not respond without consequences. Educators remained present throughout the activity to support understanding, communication, comfort, and voluntariness, particularly given the sensitive nature of topics such as bodily boundaries, consent, and interpersonal contact. Activities involving interpersonal contact were guided, mediated, and non-compulsory.

3. Results

The Reflexive Thematic Analysis generated three interconnected themes describing the educational processes observed during the embodied educational intervention. Rather than reflecting individual educational activities, the themes captured recurrent patterns of meaning observed across the educational pathway as a whole. Together, they illustrate how participants engaged with interpersonal boundaries, consent, and contextual social situations through bodily experience, interpersonal interaction, contextual interpretation, and continuous educational mediation. Across all themes, participants' engagement was characterised by moments of understanding, uncertainty, negotiation, and behavioural adjustment rather than by the simple application of predefined social rules. A cross-cutting process was identified throughout the analysis, highlighting the central role of pedagogical mediation, peer interaction, and embodied participation in shaping participants' engagement across all educational experiences.

3.1. From Bodily Proximity to Interpersonal Boundaries

The first theme describes how participants engaged with interpersonal boundaries through direct bodily experience during the educational activities. Rather than initially relying on abstract notions of appropriate interpersonal behaviour, participants appeared to make sense of personal space by actively engaging in situations requiring them to regulate physical proximity, recognise the presence of others, and adjust their behaviour accordingly.

Observational data indicated that most participants were generally able to maintain an appropriate interpersonal distance during educational activities. However, moments of excessive proximity or uncertainty were also documented, particularly during the initial phases of the intervention, revealing that awareness of interpersonal boundaries was not yet consistently integrated into participants' spontaneous behaviour. These situations frequently became opportunities for educational reflection, as participants modified their actions following verbal guidance, peer observation, or direct experience within the activity itself. For example, during an activity focusing on interpersonal distance, one participant initially approached a peer without respecting personal space. After observing peers' behaviour and receiving a brief educational prompt, the participant repositioned spontaneously before continuing the interaction, suggesting increased attention to interpersonal boundaries within the educational situation. Importantly, behavioural adjustments rarely occurred in isolation. Participants often observed how peers positioned themselves before

modifying their own behaviour, suggesting that interpersonal boundaries were negotiated within the social dynamics of the group rather than addressed solely at an individual level. These episodes illustrate how behavioural adjustment frequently emerged through shared participation rather than through individual correction. Educational mediation further supported this process by encouraging participants to reflect upon the consequences of excessive proximity and to recognise bodily space as a reciprocal dimension of interpersonal relationships rather than as an individual characteristic. Overall, the analysis suggests that embodied educational experiences created opportunities for participants to explore interpersonal boundaries through action, observation, and guided reflection. Bodily interaction did not simply illustrate pre-specified concepts; instead, it constituted the educational context through which interpersonal boundaries could be explored as meaningful and socially interpretable within the educational situation.

3.2. *Consent as a Reciprocal and Negotiated Process*

The second theme captures how participants engaged with consent as a relational process involving communication, reciprocity, and the continuous interpretation of interpersonal signals. Rather than treating consent as a fixed rule requiring a correct response, the educational experiences encouraged participants to recognise that interpersonal interactions involve asking, waiting, interpreting responses, accepting refusal, and adjusting behaviour accordingly.

Observational material suggested that participants generally recognised explicit situations involving permission and refusal. Nevertheless, greater uncertainty emerged when interactions required interpretation of less explicit communicative signals or involved socially ambiguous situations. The traffic-light activity provided particularly rich opportunities for observing these processes, as participants appeared more confident when dealing with clearly identifiable situations than when confronted with intermediate scenarios requiring contextual judgement. Field notes documented moments in which participants used the red, yellow, and green markers to express refusal, uncertainty, or permission, with some responses requiring educator mediation before being clarified within the group. Similarly, activities requiring participants to ask permission before initiating interpersonal interaction revealed that requests were not always made spontaneously, although the importance of asking permission became more visible during guided activities.

In several instances, participants modified their behaviour after observing peers or following educational prompts indicating that participants' responses were shaped by peer interaction and educational mediation rather than by the simple recall of previously learned information. While many participants appropriately interrupted interaction following a refusal, observational notes documented situations in which additional pedagogical mediation was required to support understanding of non-verbal communication, rejection, or hesitation.

Overall, the analysis indicates that participants engaged with consent not as an isolated behavioural prescription but as a reciprocal communicative process requiring continuous attention to both one's own intentions and the responses of others.

3.3. *From Concrete Rules to Contextual Social Understanding*

The third theme concerns how participants used concrete educational rules as entry points for more contextual interpretations of socio-affective situations. Throughout the intervention, embodied and visually accessible educational supports functioned as important pedagogical scaffolds. However, observational data suggested that these supports acquired educational value primarily when participants were encouraged to interpret their meaning across different interpersonal contexts.

Activities exploring the distinction between public and private contexts illustrated this process particularly clearly. Participants generally classified prototypical public and private situations correctly, whereas uncertainty increased when scenarios involved unfamiliar contexts or multiple social cues requiring contextual interpretation. Similar patterns were observed during activities concerning bodily privacy, where the “swimsuit rule”, presented through a realistic human-body representation, provided an accessible reference for recognising private body areas. Rather than functioning as a rule to be memorised, the visual support appeared to facilitate discussion about bodily privacy, personal boundaries, and respect for the body. Observation grids also reported episodes in which the realistic body representation supported discussion of private body areas, although some situations required further clarification when participants moved from the visual rule to more context-sensitive examples.

Across the dataset, participants frequently revised their responses following discussion, clarification, or comparison with peers. Rather than representing simple correction of incorrect answers, these moments reflected ongoing processes of collective interpretation. The observational material therefore suggests that concrete rules functioned primarily as educational entry points supporting increasingly contextual reflection during the activities.

3.4. Cross-Cutting Educational Process: Engagement Through Mediation, Participation, and Peer Interaction

Across all three themes, participants’ engagement appeared to be shaped by pedagogical mediation, embodied participation, and interaction with peers. Observational notes documented situations in which participants reconsidered or adjusted their responses following group discussion, educator feedback, or observation of other participants’ actions. Likewise, activities involving movement, cooperation, and direct interpersonal engagement appeared to generate greater participation than those relying exclusively on verbal explanation. Music also functioned as a temporal and embodied regulator, supporting rhythm, turn-taking, and transitions between activities.

Rather than functioning as external supports added to learning, pedagogical mediation and peer interaction appeared to constitute integral components of the educational process itself. Participants did not simply apply previously acquired socio-affective knowledge during embodied activities; instead, their interpretations appeared to evolve through shared educational experiences in which bodily engagement, dialogue, observation, and guided reflection continuously interacted.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the educational value of the intervention did not reside exclusively in the specific activities proposed, but in the pedagogical architecture through which embodied experience, relational interaction, and educational mediation created opportunities for participants to engage with socio-affective issues in meaningful and contextually situated ways.

4. Discussion

This study provides insight into how embodied participation, pedagogical mediation, and peer interaction may support participants’ engagement with socio-affective issues during an embodied educational intervention involving adults with intellectual disabilities. Rather than treating consent and interpersonal boundaries as the acquisition of predefined rules, the findings suggest that participants engaged with these concepts as relational and context-sensitive practices. Observational data indicated that participants increasingly attended to interpersonal signals, regulated interpersonal distance, and adapted their responses according to the educational situations encountered during the intervention. Ambiguity, rather than the simple absence of “knowledge”, appeared to represent a recur-

ring challenge, highlighting why purely informational programmes may be insufficient to address the complexity of socio-affective situations encountered in everyday life [4,6].

The findings also extend current discussions of embodied learning beyond simply “adding movement” [3,7,8]. Within the observed educational context, bodily activities appeared to provide opportunities for participants to explore socio-affective concepts through guided interaction and reflection. Observational evidence suggests that embodied experience alone may not be sufficient; rather, pedagogical mediation appeared to facilitate participants’ interpretation of their experiences through guided questioning, discussion, and shared reflection. This interpretation is consistent with socio-constructivist perspectives, suggesting that the educational value of embodied activities may lie not in the activities themselves but in the interaction between embodied experience, pedagogical mediation, and social participation.

Several educational implications emerge from these observations. First, educational pathways may benefit from revisiting the same socio-affective concepts across different situations, allowing participants to explore uncertainty and contextual variation rather than relying exclusively on rule recall. Second, approaching consent as a dialogic process centred on requesting permission, interpreting verbal and non-verbal signals, checking understanding, and adapting behaviour may provide a pedagogically accessible way of addressing its relational nature. Third, educational supports such as the swimsuit rule may be more effective when used as starting points for contextual discussion rather than as fixed rules, thereby encouraging participants to reflect on different interpersonal situations.

The findings also suggest that process-oriented indicators may be particularly informative when examining short educational interventions embedded within routine services. Observable behaviours such as initiating consent checks, adjusting interpersonal distance following feedback, or responding to peers’ actions may provide useful insights into participants’ engagement during educational activities, without implying stable learning or long-term competence development. Such a process-oriented perspective is consistent with Reflexive Thematic Analysis, which conceptualises themes as interpretative patterns of shared meaning rather than objective discoveries [9,10], and with recommendations to investigate the pedagogical mechanisms and contextual conditions supporting socio-affective education [4].

Overall, the findings suggest that embodied educational activities may represent valuable pedagogical contexts in which participants can engage with consent, interpersonal boundaries, and contextual social norms through embodied participation, dialogue, and guided reflection. Within the observed educational setting, these processes appeared to support participants’ engagement with socio-affective issues, offering a process-oriented perspective that may inform future research and the design of inclusive educational practices [3,4,6–8].

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the intervention was conducted within a single educational setting involving a specific group of adults with intellectual disabilities and consisted of a single educational session. Consequently, the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts or participant groups should be considered with caution. Second, the analysis relied exclusively on structured observational data. Although this approach allowed the researchers to examine educational processes as they unfolded during the intervention, the findings reflect participants’ experiences from an observational perspective rather than through their own voices. This represents a particularly important limitation given the rights-based and inclusive educational framework underpinning the study, which emphasises agency,

participation, and self-determination. Future research should therefore complement observational methods with participatory qualitative approaches, such as interviews, focus groups, or adapted communication strategies, to better capture participants' subjective experiences and interpretations. Finally, the study explored socio-affective learning within a single embodied educational pathway and did not examine the maintenance or transfer of learning over time. Longitudinal research conducted across different educational settings and involving diverse disability profiles would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how socio-affective educational processes are maintained, transferred, and supported beyond structured interventions.

5. Conclusions

This study explored the educational processes observed during an embodied educational intervention involving adults with intellectual disabilities. Adopting a qualitative, process-oriented perspective, the research shifted attention from the evaluation of behavioural outcomes to the educational processes through which participants engaged with interpersonal boundaries, consent, and contextual social norms.

The findings suggest that socio-affective issues can be meaningfully explored through educational experiences that combine embodied participation, pedagogical mediation, peer interaction, and contextual reflection. Within the observed educational setting, embodied activities functioned not merely as instructional strategies but as pedagogical contexts in which participants engaged with relational concepts through action, dialogue, and guided reflection.

The study also highlights the value of approaching consent as a relational and contextual educational construct. Educational pathways centred on authentic interaction, dialogue, and guided reflection may offer meaningful opportunities for participants to engage with socio-affective issues beyond the transmission of normative knowledge alone.

As this study was based on observations collected during a single educational intervention, the findings should be interpreted as a process-oriented account of participants' engagement within a specific educational context rather than as evidence of stable learning, competence development, or intervention effectiveness. Future research should examine whether the educational processes observed in this study are maintained over time, transferred to everyday contexts, and supported across different educational settings.

Ultimately, the contribution of this study lies not in demonstrating the effectiveness of a specific educational intervention but in offering a pedagogical perspective for interpreting how embodied participation, educational mediation, peer interaction, and contextual reflection may shape participants' engagement with socio-affective issues during educational experiences. This perspective contributes to ongoing discussions in inclusive pedagogy and special education while providing conceptual directions for the design of educational pathways that promote relational autonomy, participation, and inclusive socio-affective education.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were not required because the activity was not designed as an experimental or clinical intervention, but as an educational laboratory explicitly requested by the provider cooperative and delivered within the premises of the University. The study involved only non-interventional observation of a routine educational activity, without modifying the programme, collecting identifiable personal data, or recording individual clinical information. Data were anonymised at source and stored in the institutional archive.

Informed Consent Statement: Participation followed the provider cooperative's standard admission, information, and consent procedures, which included general consent for educational activities and

the anonymous use of observational documentation. Participants were informed verbally by both the workshop facilitators and the educators before the activity. Participation and observation were voluntary, and participants could decline, withdraw, pause, or not respond without consequences. Educators remained present throughout the activity to support understanding, voluntariness, communication, and participants' comfort.

Data Availability Statement: The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available, as they consist of paper-based observational records concerning a potentially vulnerable population. The anonymized observational materials are securely stored in the institutional archive in accordance with applicable privacy and ethical requirements.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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