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MOTOR ACTIVITY IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGEMENT AND GROWTH

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15600809

Abstract

Education, upbringing, and learning are critical components in the holistic development of an individual, serving as foundational elements for fostering autonomy and personal emancipation. These elements are not only about the transmission of knowledge but also about cultivating key competencies and life skills that contribute to meaningful personal and societal engagement. A well-structured educational and cognitive framework must consider the dual priorities of content delivery and methodological approach, tailoring them appropriately to the learner's context and developmental needs.

The school, in close collaboration with the family, emerges as a central environment for a child's cognitive and emotional growth. It is within these structured yet dynamic settings that learners begin to socialize, explore their identities, and test their sense of agency and effectiveness. Furthermore, effective learning environments require the thoughtful organization of physical spaces, learning materials, and interpersonal relationships. These structural components, evolving over time, significantly influence the depth and sustainability of learning outcomes.

Ultimately, this study emphasizes the importance of designing educational processes that are learner-centered, developmentally appropriate, and context-sensitive, recognizing the crucial interplay between pedagogy, environment, and social interaction in shaping competent and autonomous individuals.

Keywords: Holistic Education, Cognitive Development, Autonomy, Learning Environment, Socialization

Introduction

Education, upbringing and learning represent particularly important aspects in a developmental process, since they guide and direct the subject along a path of awareness and competence aimed at the realisation of a project of autonomy and emancipation. Every cognitive and educational project must have the aim of transmitting knowledge and knowledge and, more specifically, must set itself the objective of developing qualities, competences and skills in the individual, considering both the content to be transferred and the methods of this transfer, and finally assessing the audience to which this transmission is addressed (IAIE, 2008). The school, together with the family, represents a fundamental context for the cognitive and affective development of the subject, constituting a privileged territory for socialisation and for the experimentation of one's own effectiveness and autonomy. We can consider the organisation of activities, spaces, materials and the network of relationships that are built and constituted over time as essential conditions for all learning.

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Giving confidence, making the most of each individual's abilities, preparing means and tools in the best possible way, are actions that should commonly be part of every individual's path of growth, evolution and development. The road to knowledge and awareness of one's own tools and resources, through school and extracurricular activities, is not always approached by the subject in the same way. Personal development, evolution and growth are often attainable through alternative and parallel paths that differ according to the skills and learning styles each individual brings. In this sense, in education, it is not possible to recognise a linearity of learning in the paths of each individual subject, but rather, a peculiarity of needs and tools. With respect to disability situations, motor activity and sport are an important opportunity for the development of skills and abilities, as they generally support areas of communication, social interaction, emotionality and personal efficacy. Through sports activities we can redefine what are by definition described as problematic or complex aspects, guiding and accompanying the subject towards a path that is useful and constructive for an optimal state of health and well-being. Sport therefore leads to considerable support and backing for different aspects of this issue, while at the same time contributing to the enhancement of these individuals.

Playing a sporting activity means having the possibility of being projected into a dimension of autonomy where everyone values their own peculiarities and is enriched by the qualities of others (Bailey, 2005). Sport can thus be represented as a context where a difficulty can take on a different meaning, an experience where the subject can experiment and redefine himself in a new way, a tool in a Compensatory Project that welcomes all the nuances of a reality. Sport has several important functions, supports community and social behaviour, promotes health and psychophysical well-being, and strengthens and supports the development of the individual.

These aspects are extremely important in the life and development of every person, and in particular, in conditions of special educational needs, such as with SLDs, they can be a valuable compensatory resource. For Specific Learning Disorders, motor activity and sport can be an important opportunity for the development of skills and abilities, as they generally support areas of communication, social interaction, emotionality and finally education. Through sporting activities we can redefine what are by definition described as problematic or complex aspects, guiding and accompanying the subject towards a path that is useful and constructive for an optimal state of health and wellbeing (Besozzi, 2005). Sport therefore leads to considerable support and backing for different aspects of this issue, while at the same time contributing to the enhancement of the residual capacities of these individuals. Playing a sporting activity means having the opportunity to be projected into a dimension of autonomy where everyone values their own peculiarities and is enriched by the qualities of others.

Motor activity is fundamental for the correct development of the individual since, thanks to the discovery and exploration of one's own body, the environment, movement and playful activity, one has the opportunity to learn numerous skills in the various developmental areas, getting to know oneself and others better, one's own potential and limits, and the social and emotional rules that guide interpersonal relationships. Through sport, it is possible

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to improve the balance between body and mind by aiming to maintain and develop skills and qualities. Sport, therefore, makes it possible to stimulate and strengthen one's resources, which, in the long term, can become tools of great strength and adaptation, capable of consolidating one's self-efficacy. Education through movement and sport can offer a tangible opportunity to acquire at an early stage the basic assumptions of sharing, built by people through mutual interactions, and used as a daily resource to interpret and give meaning to social and cultural life. Through motor activity, it is possible to acquire skills that can be used in everyday life, effective ways of emotional self-regulation and healthy lifestyles such as, for example, caring for one's body, the purposeful use of movement and the management of anxiety and stress. A new perspective of the world of sport and sporting activities thus assumes a role in society of great importance, not only as a tool used to achieve physical well-being, but above all, as a mediator of participation, compensation and growth (Canevaro & Ianes, 2002).

People with Specific Learning Disorders are, in the course of their experience, faced with numerous difficulties in terms of both personal autonomy and social and emotional autonomy. Physical activity affects individual abilities, fostering the development of innate capacities as well as the acquisition of new and different skills. Through sport, one can get involved and experiment, learn to know and control one's own body, develop a sense of self-awareness, motivation and confidence in one's own abilities and potential. Physical activity has an educational and inclusive value for every person, at every age and in every condition. Sport and movement are understood, in this sense, as a fundamental and functional tool for physical well-being and health, which means “feeling good” and “existing well”. It is therefore worth investigating how sport can reinforce and support individuals with Specific Learning Disorders and how it can provide beneficial effects capable of stimulating them towards a greater knowledge of their abilities and potential, and “compensate” them towards a favourable and effective developmental dimension.

A definition of inclusion that can summarise, albeit in a non-exhaustive manner, the epistemological and methodological state of the art of pedagogical and didactic research on inclusion: “Inclusion is a research process aimed at achieving formal and substantive equality in educational processes, through the sharing/dissemination of underlying values and principles, the reorganisation of school contexts, and the use of teaching methodologies and tools that have proven to be effective”. As is evident, this definition has three basic parts:

- inclusion is a research process;
- the purpose of inclusion is to realise equality in educational processes;
- inclusion is achieved through the sharing of values, the organisation of contexts, the use of specific methodologies and tools.

If inclusion is a research process, it means that in order to be fully realised, it is necessary to adopt a scientific attitude, characterised by consistency with basic hypotheses, even abstract and theoretical ones, which demand to be falsified, by the systematic nature of the methodologies used, by doubt and constructive criticism. There is no

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absolute state that we can call perfect inclusion, this is rather a goal to strive for in the knowledge that it will never be reached definitively because the results of the research itself will continue to produce ever more correct and effective solutions, deepening and confirming some theories and related practices and falsifying others, in a continuous path of cultural and methodological growth. Understanding inclusion as research therefore means understanding it and practising it through the lens of modern and contemporary scientific thought, as it has developed from 6th century BC Greece to the present day, passing through the Modern Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, up to the era of the Quantum and Digital Revolution.

If the purpose of inclusion is to realise equality in and through educational processes, then the main references for achieving it are ethics, politics and law, philosophy, history, pedagogy and in general the multiplicity of human sciences dealing with man and his formation, the species, society. The scientific attitude alone is not enough, indeed, left free to achieve any end, it can even propagate exclusionary educational practices

(Olivencia, 2021). A rigorously and scientifically compiled IEP if it then materialises in a teaching practice that is always and only individualised, carried out by the support teacher alone, does not produce inclusion but exclusion, segregation, marginalisation, in short, inequality. This is why it is important to trace school inclusion back to the political debate on democracy, rights, equality, which also originated in the lands bordering the Aegean Sea more than two thousand years ago but only reached full maturity in the second half of the twentieth century, after the hell of the Great World War of the twentieth century (1914-1945), with the defeat of anti-democratic regimes and the various international proclamations of Human Rights.

If inclusion is not to remain a mere rhetorical exercise, it must be achieved through precise operational actions. Firstly, it is a matter of sharing and disseminating within the school, within individual institutions, those values that support inclusion, i.e. equality, solidarity, welcome, etc., through in-service training meetings characterised by a dialogical, dialectical, conversational approach. It's not about imposing values, that wouldn't work anyway, it's about building them, recognising them, sharing them and then practising them. Directly linked to the question of values we then have the organisation of school contexts that must be able to reflect those values taken as a guide to inclusion; from the timetable to the management of spaces, from the language used in the classroom to the management of the relationship with parents and so on. Finally, we have the didactic and methodological aspects, which are also relevant to the reference values and the organisation of the school context. Methodologies that emerge from pedagogical and didactic research, that have proven to be effective in inclusive contexts, that are recognised by the community of researchers and teachers. The definition of inclusion has the ambition of synthesising the different souls of inclusion in education, namely the psycho-pedagogical-curricular one, the one linked to Evidence Based Education and the one linked to Disability Studies.

The former is certainly more deeply rooted in our country since it has accompanied, supported and spread the culture of school integration from the late 1970s onwards. It is the jewel in the crown of Italian pedagogical

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research, no other western country boasts such a rich and flourishing tradition of research on school integration, because Italy is among the very few countries that have decided to abolish differentiated classes and to include disabled pupils in mainstream classes in all school orders since the second half of the 1970s. Thanks to this important line of research, Italian teachers have access to specific teaching tools and methodologies for special education (Soresi, et Al., 2011).

The second is much more recent, originated in the medical field and attempts to apply the principles of empirical and scientific evidence in the field of special education as well, i.e. to promote the dissemination of methodologies that have proven to be scientifically effective, capable of improving teaching and learning processes. Particular attention is paid to systematic observation and evaluation tools in order to arrive at informed and evidence-based teaching choices (Trombetta & Rosiello, 2000). Disability Studies, as we will see later, offer a radically different perspective through which to understand and practice inclusion, drawing attention to the role of context, language, ethics, etc. (Aslan, 2020). Thus, inclusion cannot be reduced to pure practice, to a set of operational prescriptions supported by the results of scientific research; it also expresses a political and ethical choice, i.e. an ongoing tension towards democratic education and equality. In order not to reduce this to pure rhetoric, an analysis of the relationship between school inclusion, democratic education and social equality is necessary.

1. Motor and Sport Activity in an Educational and Inclusive Perspective

Sport is a universal and global phenomenon involving many different contexts, most of which go beyond purely physical and competitive content to include other aspects that contribute to the entire structure that revolves around it. The multiplicity of elements that make up the essence of the world of sport fully justifies its definition as a “phenomenon”, understood as a fact or event that is of particular interest, relevance and value. In this sense, it is appropriate to assess the complexity of the overall structure of sport in all its technical and organisational aspects, cultural influence and social force, education/training, interaction and relationship.

In this perspective, sport can be considered as a system, which can take on both a closed and an open configuration. In the closed representation, it has internal mechanisms that act on its components in such a way that the entire construct maintains its functionality. In the open structure, sport is fully integrated into the social fabric, connects with it and, like all open systems, communicates through different channels and modalities. In other words, sport, as an open system, permeates its context and that of its participants, making it a particularly valuable prerogative in all circumstances in which those who approach this activity need to recalibrate certain personal and relational aspects. Sport undoubtedly has a high social impact, an aspect that has been emphasised and highlighted in more recent years, although as early as 1938 Hutzinger, in *Homo Ludens*, claimed the centrality of the sporting game. However, with G. Magnane (Besozzi, 2005) it became clear how the sport is an expressive manifestation, a lifestyle, a behavioural model and above all a communicative and relational vector.

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More generally, one can speak of leisure time as a response to human needs, needs that go beyond the necessity of commitment and the obligations of daily cadences, to find in it a new dimension capable of accommodating personal expectations free of constraints and necessities, a dimension emancipated from apprehensions associated with habitual lifestyles (Canevaro,2007). Considered from this perspective, sport is not only pure and simple physical exercise, but also liberation from the logic of the usual and routines: it can represent a new social and communicative space, where it is possible to experiment and redefine oneself in alternative ways, given the extent of its impact on various aspects of life with which it intersects and connects.

The complexity of the sport phenomenon thus allows it to be framed as a system, particularly in the more extensive configuration of an open system, which has the prerogative of connecting and communicating with the environment, which is the context in which it manifests itself and expresses itself, interacting with it through a flow and exchange of resources and information, indispensable for growth and evolution, not only of the system itself, but above all for the individual with whom the system interacts. Similarly, the individual can also be considered an “open” system, since exchanges with the environment are both indispensable for maintaining its state and essential for increasing its content and increasing its complexity (Carlini,2012).

This general set-up certainly creates the conditions for an effective flow that facilitates access to and exchange of prerogatives and characteristics, which enable the subject to grow and evolve. Sport, as an open system and social phenomenon, is able to effectively support and address different psychological, developmental and training circumstances and aspects of the individual, contributing to the rebalancing, development and enhancement of the qualities and resources of each individual. In the light of this, we can frame it as an essential element, a multidimensional, dynamic and playful environment, suitable for intensifying self-awareness and body awareness. It is therefore an educational and formative tool, the influence of which is particularly evident in the social aspects it stimulates and realises. Socialisation' is a process that, in a nutshell, transmits “information” in a variety of ways, through which an individual's inclusion in a community is realised or perfected, and this occurs through a dynamic interchange between the individual and the environment.

This suggests that sport, given its general characteristics, can certainly be likened to a concrete tool of socialisation: the social drive it exerts is testified to by the choral nature of participation in its events, but, in a particular and more significant way, its elements of sociality emerge with greater evidence, concretely affecting the individual, when the latter is inserted in the sporting environment and its operational space, where new experiences, new skills and new relationships are experienced. Those who actively participate in the world of sport certainly have new and stimulating experiences but, in particular, it is thanks to the socialising component, i.e. through the sharing of goals and the construction of new perspectives of interpersonal correspondences, that an inclusive mechanism of collective participation is realised, creating an environment where new opportunities for learning, growth and cohesion are experienced while respecting individuality. Physical activity and sport are

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a source and driver of inclusion, a privileged tool for the inclusion of minorities and groups at risk of marginalisation and exclusion, thus representing a means of prevention of social distress.

Sport has several important functions. It supports community and social behaviour, continuously reinforcing and enhancing its inclusive value, and these aspects, linked to movement and physical activity, are extremely important in the life and evolution of every individual, as they represent a valuable resource, an important opportunity for the development of skills and abilities, as they support and enhance aspects of cooperation and sharing. The inclusive aspect of sport, in this sense, makes it possible to eliminate any differences between individuals, guaranteeing respect for the abilities and qualities of each one, contributing to the development of a person's motor aptitudes, in relation to their affective, cognitive and social aspects. In the context of sport and those who participate in sport, inclusion naturally recalls the concept of belonging, which equates to a state of fairness and interpersonal equality that intuitively extends to all individuals, and regardless of any kind of difference or diversity present between them. This means that it does not exclude, but, on the contrary, envisages and tends to build a context within which the diversities that are inevitably present in every social sample under consideration can coexist. To include, in the social meaning of the term, means to ensure the inclusion of every individual within a context, regardless of the presence of even limiting differences between the included elements. It thus represents a fundamental mechanism because it puts everyone on an equal footing, preserves personal individualities, and at the same time, leaves their potential and modes of expression untouched (Doucette, 2021). In the sporting sphere, but of course not only in this, it is an essential mechanism because it gives all subjects the possibility of being able to tackle their own educational pathway, indulging and preserving individual peculiarities, constituting a solid relational network in diversity. The purpose of the inclusion project in sport is basically to guarantee the complete inclusion of the individual, supporting and sustaining paths of growth and evolution through activities that generally lead the individual to a greater awareness of his or her own potential and to a strengthening in the interpersonal and relational spheres. Inclusion, in this sense, refers to a diminution of the disharmonies and differences that exist between included individuals, caused by the presence of diversity, thus bringing the context into conformity and adequacy.

The concept of inclusion starts from a reference model in which society is seen as a community on a human scale, and this must be seen as a commitment to respecting the needs and requirements of all, appropriately organising learning environments and related activities so as to enable each individual to participate in life and acquire skills in the most active, autonomous and useful way possible. This model is realised through inclusion, complementing and refining the concept of integration, where integration is defined as the result of a series of processes that serve to make an individual a member of a community. However, the latter mechanism also mirrors the individual's own ability to adapt to the host community, so the risk, at least theoretically, is that the process itself will not be fully completed and that insertion will be only partial, insufficient or altogether exhausting for the individual. In

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any case, becoming part of a certain context does not inevitably mean adhering fully and completely to it, if it appears too distant from one's peculiarities.

These considerations fully justify the need to put in place suitable means to enable each person to benefit from educational tools suited to his or her needs without being constrained to adapt, and in this sense, the principle of inclusion is a suitable mechanism. The practice of physical exercise and sport are correlated to an aspect and image that should be mentioned, which is represented by the existence of a peculiar context that is typical of the sporting sphere and the community that revolves around it, a context that is inevitably reflected on the individual who is included in it (Spinelli,1997). A context can be defined and considered as a scenario, a field, in which contents are realised and meanings are conveyed, which are reflected on the elements within it, conditioning their modes of expression: this means that, in one way or another, the context influences the individual's behaviour.

In our case, perhaps more appropriately, we could speak of context in the sense of the environment or sphere in which individuals act, which includes cultural aspects and the normative framework that delineates its boundaries, representing the backdrop against which events and relationships develop. There is no doubt that the context associated with the world of sport and physical activity is often characterised by properties and qualities rich in meaning related to connectedness, solidarity and community, and characterised by a strong educational and pedagogical value. Sporting contexts, therefore, are expressed through motivating and supportive elements, within a system of rules and roles, which rather than binding, on the contrary, delineate a privileged space in which there is a confrontation of personal capacities, which channels relationships on a plane of positive reciprocity, favouring the sharing of intentions and perspectives. In other words, it is a context characterised by common constructive confrontations that, in addition to benefiting relationships, have a pedagogical and social impact that grows the individual personality and gives the individual greater confidence in his or her own abilities. Given that sport has different and important functions, from a motor, psychological and social point of view, it is extremely important in the life and evolution of every person, and in particular, in conditions of special educational needs, such as for SLDs, it can be a valuable and important resource in their growth and evolution. Sport and physical activity, in addition to possessing elements and characteristics of great support in different areas, contexts and situations, plays an equally important role on a social and pedagogical level through its ability to foster the growth and development of the individual, respecting characteristics and peculiarities and supporting, through the body and movement, the realisation of educational and inclusion goals.

Conclusions

Sport is a far-reaching global phenomenon that has become practically widespread thanks to its competitive and spectacular aspects that involve not only the athlete but also the spectator. In recent decades, there has been an

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exponential growth in interest and attention from the media, and in parallel, the number of competitive events has also increased, with these occurring throughout the calendar year without interruption. All of this obviously confirms and reinforces what is a fact: sport is so enthralling that it inevitably incorporates content that goes beyond its original essence, and ends up encompassing even less obvious meanings that, however, upon closer analysis, emerge clearly. The multiplicity of contents that sport encompasses, interfacing with the individual and his or her lived reality, inevitably generates unprecedented effects and connections with a vast array of circumstances, ranging from more general social aspects to a discrete influence on individual opinions, behaviour and perspectives. In other words, sport is a multidimensional phenomenon that manifests its impact in a variety of different contexts. Moreover, multidimensionality, viewed from a certain perspective, is a prerogative that endows it with ductility and flexibility, characteristics that naturally place it in a variety of contexts (Benediktsson, 2023). From this follows the possibility of using it as an operational tool in different areas of a different nature and with different purposes, in order to create more favourable and better manageable conditions. Sporting activity, therefore, is an essential component of an individual's physical, psychological and relational development. In more recent years, sport has taken on an increasingly important position in everyday life thanks to the widespread use of the media, which have made sporting events accessible to an ever larger audience, not least because of the intrinsic spectacular nature of competitions and sport-related events. However, sporting activity conceptually has a broader significance represented by the values that sport personifies, such as adherence to rules and respect for the opponent, a sense of discipline and the principle of healthy and fair competition. This evidence has expanded the meaning of sport, going beyond its natural boundaries and making connections of a social, psychological, pedagogical and even political nature. In 2001, the United Nations established the UNOSP (United Nations Office on Sport for Development and Peace), which ratified the importance of the key role played by sport, and also emphasised how the development of sporting activity can be a highly effective tool for overcoming political and ideological barriers. The message conveyed is that the concept of sport cannot be confined solely to its competitive, competitive and spectacular aspect, but must be recognised as a benefit with a high social impact that can also overcome ideological barriers. This conceptual approach is fully justified by the effects that the practice of sport can produce on the individual, not only in physical terms, but also in psychological and social aspects. The practice of constant and programmed physical exercise can improve an individual's mental well-being and stimulate potential and attitudes that are crucial for personal and relational growth (Besozzi, 2005). Motor activity, appropriately organised and planned, is capable of affecting the individual's behavioural outlook, because it is capable of directing his or her organisational strategies towards the set goal and objective. Physical activity amplifies the sense of self-efficacy, enhances the perception and awareness of being able to control one's own development, and improves and increases the ability to implement appropriate strategies to deal with particular conditions perceived as problematic.

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Sport also teaches one to objectively assess one's limitations, redefine them positively, and transform them into new and unprecedented abilities, so that it becomes possible to face difficulties and problems in a different light. In other words, taking care of one's physical and psychological well-being through sport allows one to modify and overturn one's life pattern from within. What has been said configures a conceptual framework that fully justifies the use of sport as a tool and operational support, both in the vast field of disabilities, and also in other circumstances in which there are individual difficulties, linked to certain and specific operational capacities that cannot be assimilated to a condition of true disability, as in the case of Specific Learning Disorders. In essence, it can be said that sport, given its prerogatives, can help support a wide range of behavioural and psychic aspects that are fundamental to the proper development of the individual with SLDs. There is abundant and clear scientific evidence that regular participation in physical activity is beneficial in individuals with learning disabilities (Stephens, Charnock, 2012), benefits that include increased motor and cognitive but also relational skills, which also translates into increased opportunities for social inclusion. Physical exercise induces positive effects on various structural components of the individual, such as self-efficacy, motivation, the perception of effectively controlling one's own development and social reality, and the ability to implement the most appropriate strategies at different junctures. Self-efficacy is the awareness of being able to handle circumstances and contexts, and to be able to operate in them in a timely and efficient manner. Awareness itself can help give rise to or consolidate motivations and goals where motivation, in particular, constitutes the "behavioural" aspect that induces the individual to achieve certain goals, thus representing the necessary element underlying any conscious personal choice.

Self-efficacy and motivation, therefore, in a fuller sense, also induce in the subject who practises sport an awareness of wanting to achieve fuller and more complete personal growth. The practice of sport, in essence, affects the way in which an individual perceives control over his or her own development and reality in the social context, giving rise to the cognition of being able to decide one's own actions and the ability to act actively on events, rather than attributing to unpredictability the possibility of achieving the intended result. This also gives rise to a greater capacity to manage stressful contexts and circumstances, or perceived as such. All this, finally, is further strengthened by sport's ability to transfer specific skills and abilities, the mastery of which translates into greater certainty and control of one's own means. However, on the other hand, it should be emphasised that individuals with SLD possess typical characteristics that distinguish their management assets. It is known, in fact, that they have greater problemsolving abilities, possess a more strategic and multidimensional view of facts, frame events according to different perspectives, reason dynamically using novel connections and identify original solutions characterised by the use of marked creativity. In confirmation of this, the characteristics listed have contributed to the emergence of competitive sporting excellences such as Magic Johnson, M. Phelps, Muhammad Ali who, despite having learning-related problems, have achieved remarkable sporting achievements.

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It is well known that physical exercise is able to promote the learning process in general (Besozzi, 2005), which in itself can be an important theoretical assumption that validates the use of sport as a compensatory tool in SLDs. Its value, however, must also be interpreted from a perspective referring to the way its principles are transmitted and transferred. Sport, in fact, disseminates its contents in a direct and dynamic manner, which makes the assimilation of rules and values more effective, inevitably producing, and in a natural way, a widely shared participation. The practice of sport, therefore, creates a privileged sphere for the development of human relations, fostering the process of personal growth of the individual with SLD, who is projected into a new dimension that is more in keeping with the real worth of his or her person.

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