

SPORT-EDUCATION AS A CATALYST FOR INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to highlight the importance of the sport-education pair, and then to focus on the need to develop an inclusive educational approach through sports activity.

Sport is intended to become an integral part of any individual's training and education process, and, thanks to its social potential, it can be an added value for the inclusive development of the whole community, from young people to older ones.

Keywords: Sport; Education; Disability; Inclusion; Adapted Physical Activity.

Introduction

Sport has a formative, educational and, above all, inclusive value for every person, regardless of his age, gender, and presence or absence of a disabling physical or mental condition.

In this regard, it is increasingly important that sport can be seen in an educational perspective so as to support a process aimed at the social inclusion of any form of diversity, from disability to the individual' socio-economic conditions.

In this perspective, the sports activities themselves, as well as the adapted physical activity, become a tool able to stimulate the education to inclusion, and promote a variety of social, psycho-physical, educational, economic (and so on) benefits for those categories considered as "weak" in any aspect.

Sport from an educational perspective

Sport has gained more and more importance over time, becoming a tool for education and training. In Europe, the primary requirement of sport was related mainly to the desire to set up a management and legal framework regulating Sports Law, in view of the importance of this sector in the field of economy, with more than 15 million people employed, and a contribution to the total employment in the EU that is more than 5.8% (Di Palma, 2014). The social and educational perspective of sport has, in fact, gained importance only since the late 1990s, becoming one of the European priorities in 2007 when the Treaty of the Functioning on the European Union established that the latter had to contribute to the promotion of the European profiles of Sport, taking into account its specificities, its structures based on voluntary activity and its social and educational function (European Commission, 2007).

"Sport", without distinguishing between individual or group sports, is in all the information received daily by the child, the teenager and the adult.

The new research patterns in the field of education have long insisted on the need for a complete education of the individual at intellectual, motor, affective, social, physical and bodily level. It is no coincidence that the role and importance of sport, for example, in the didactic and training offers of the Anglo-Saxon universities, is already a well-established reality (Mari, 2007, Farinelli, 2005).

The aspects, the notions and the didactics of sport should be therefore normally integrated into those of arts, economy and politics, thus becoming part of the educational action in order to train the students to become effectively and efficiently perfect and fully trained social figures.

Sport refers to a system of values that are highly compatible with the system of values of education; Among them, for example, there are: personal overcoming, dialectics of the individual and the group within the team, participation in a social reality with its own rules that must be necessarily learned and then applied, and feeling of belonging to a community (Di Palma et al, 2016).

To the calmness of the "work carried out" the sportsman opposes the search for something more, both from his body and from his actions; In fact, in his performance, he tends to reach the limits of his possibilities to highlight and explore all the virtualities he feels in himself (Raiola et al., 2016). Isn't it one of the main goals of education? To educate means also "to lead out of ...", "to bring farther", to try to go beyond one's own limits in an attempt to improve oneself to overcome already lies in us, to create new possibilities and create a new man. Sports school can serve as a model for the school in this area tout court (Isidori, 2012; Isidori & Fraile, 2008). Thus, sports training and intellectual training find the same ways of realization.

The classical situation depicts the family that constitutes for the child a differentiated environment for the age, class and status of each of its members, while the child at school is in a peer group animated by an adult. Unfortunately, this peer group is nothing but an ensemble of subjects that don't feel part of a group with its own life, its dynamics, its structure, its evolution, and so school is not able to fulfill the role of socialization and training that it should ensure for a complete and effective education.

Sport, in particular that performed in team, is one of the most powerful forms of this socialization: every member has his role to play, his place and function, and he is there to bring benefits to all; The individual is in a relationship with the others, acts in relation to others and his personal value is at the service of the community; Hence the dual concern of self-perfection to be an active part of the group, and of better serving the community of belonging. What described above fully represents one of the fundamental aims of education: to develop the individual in his individual and social components, to make him a citizen with a personal wealth to be made available to the society; this confirms even more the educational value of sport (Di Palma et al., 2016; Light & Dixon, 2007).

Moreover, sports practice must respect a certain number of rules that must be known and learned to apply; practicing a collective sport means respecting the rules of the game, organizing one's own conduct and that of the team within this institutional framework, which frontiers are known and which possibilities must be explored in order to know where one's own freedom begins and ends. Thus sport, in a fully educational perspective, contributes to understanding the need to have a rule for every human social activity, and the importance of accepting, learning and knowing how to apply and use it (Di Palma et al., 2016; Raiola et al. Al, 2015).

Through sport, new forms of relationships, exchanges and dialogue are developed and established; today, in fact, to train the human being in his entirety, to develop all of his virtualities, to create new possibilities in him implies that physical education and sports are integral part of education (Zhong-gan, 2005). Physical education and sport should not be considered merely as conditions for better psychic life, or as actions necessary for the good brain functioning; these are educational components that must be integrated in the contemporary educational action able to even introduce sometimes forms of educational action, which develop inclusive processes for disadvantaged social classes (disabled, ethnic minorities, poor people, etc.), totally absent in classical education.

Pursuing Inclusion through Sport

Over time, the changes in life and consumption styles of families, together with the access to sports practice of the weaker social groups such as old people, disabled, children, poor, etc., have given start to a real evolution of the meaning of sport that increasingly benefits the educational, inclusive and social value, downgrading the consideration of the competitive sports performance. In this perspective, starting with what a person is able to give or take, regardless of his physical or mental differences with others, sports encourages the consideration he has about himself and his existence, in full agreement with the assumption of inclusion (Farinelli, 2005; Gianfagna, 2007)

The social and educational dimension of sports movement is now well-established and promoted internationally in support of integration and inclusion phenomena, and is matched with a reconsideration of the concept of health that leads to understand sport as a plurality of practices that help configuring it as an educational strategy in the way the subject should live his leisure time (De Anna, 2005; 2007; Isidori & Fraile, 2008).

At the level of international organizations, there are many declarations and initiatives that recognize and disseminate the educational value of the so-called "sport for all".

Among these, we consider it important to mention the European Year of Education through Sport of 2004, established by Decision 2003/291/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of February 6, 2003. The reasons for this initiative recall the educational potential that sport can play in relation to the growth and development of individuals and to the development of civil society, also by promoting the social inclusion of marginal groups (Di Palma, et al., 2016; Isidori, 2012).

"Sport for all" requires a concept of sports activity as an activity carried out by the subject and based on a high maturity level of the motor functioning. The motor skills functioning, like all the other types of functioning, can manifest itself in ways that show its development and improvement, from the forms developed in childhood up to those own of the specialist sports gesture, aiming at its highest possible development made possible by the individual conditions (Guiggi, 2012; Light & Dixon, 2007).

In this respect, the education to sport represents a path that unfolds at different levels, from the initial motor activity to the initiation to sport and its specialist performance, on a continuum that allows everyone, without any kind of bias and distinction, to undertake it according to the maturity of his motor functioning (Bailey et al. 2009). If promoting a "sport for all" is rooted in a concept of sport overcoming that purely professional- competitive one, the sports practice for people with disabilities, or any other form of physical, psychic, social or economic "deficit" needs to be part of a paradigm that lays the foundations for the recognition of their identity and social inclusion (Mari, 2007). Therefore, in line with the evolution of the international debate on this subject, it is about grasping the elements that re-orient this operation towards horizons of normalization in the necessary special normality perspective, which is at the basis of the educational and inclusion processes, throughout these subjects' lives.

Positive consequences of Sport at Social and Inclusive level

The human being acts according to a thought, an intention, and his action is expressed through intelligent behaviors of adaptation to daily life, work, sports and leisure time situations (Di Palma et al, 2016). More specifically, sport can satisfy some human needs in productive ways, which are related to the game experience, to the movement, to the competitive spirit and to the group and team life. Physical activity is certainly a fundamental tool for improving the residual potentialities in all the degrees of disability and disadvantaged "situations", or in situations characterized by a form of "diversity" (Wilson and Clayton, 2010):

- In critical conditions: it improves the autonomy in movements and the recognition/awareness of sense-perception data about the physical conducts adopted;
- In average critical conditions: it facilitates the acquisition of basic motor skills and their proper use in school, relationship, sports training and daily life situations;
- In mild critical conditions: it allows for the acquisition of more complex motor skills that may enable the practice of sports activities.

Moreover, from the early years of age, those who perform regular physical activity, from group or individual sports up to simple physical-motor activities or outdoor games, in fact, show a greater confidence in their own abilities, develop greater self-esteem, establish social relationships easier, tolerate more stress, and are less inclined to disorders such as anxiety and depression, stimulating automatically inclusive processes (De Anna, 2007; Di Palma et al 2016). Other studies have shown that the constant practice of sports or motor activity has

beneficial effects on several functions that have an impact on both the inclusive, and especially on the personal and relational sphere:

- Learning (Best, 2010);
- Development of cortical areas and functions (Hillman, Erickson & Kramer, 2008);
- Increased physiological arousal (Murialdo, 2009);
- School performance (Farinelli, 2005; Isidori & Fraile, 2008).

Not less important, especially for the current generation of young people, are the effects generated in the maintenance of mental health (Van Prag, 2008) and in the prevention of cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, hypertensive crisis, already present in children and often related to overweight/obesity conditions affecting children (Eisnemann, 2006; Przeweda & Dobosz., 2003). Several studies in literature (Alesi et al, 2014; Barr & Shields, 2011) show that the regular practice of physical exercise and sport is beneficial for individuals with Down syndrome as it promotes social interaction, self-esteem and mental-physical health, and prevents the risk of chronic diseases (Ordóñez et al., 2012; Andriolo et al, 2010). The Australian Department of Health and Ageing recommends that children should enjoy at least 60 minutes of moderate physical activity daily at high intensity (Selis & Stocchino, 2006). Recent studies, however, have found out that the 58% of children with Down syndrome does not follow these recommendations. In contrast, only the 15-25% of children with normal development does not practice regularly 60 minutes of daily physical activity (Barr & Shields, 2011). These differences may be related to the lack of accessible recreational-motor programs, reduced physical skills (poor motor coordination, cardiac abnormalities, and hypotonia), lack of interest, frustration and little collaboration from the families of children with Down syndrome. Alesi et al. (2014) showed that the regular practice of a program of integrated (family plus operator) adapted physical activity (APA) can improve motor and cognitive skills, such as reaction times and working memory in children with Down syndrome. Therefore, the motor-recreational practice seems to have a positive impact on the visual-spatial component of subjects with Down syndrome in relation to the language sphere, often more damaged than the first component related to the working memory (Lanfranchi et al., 2012).

The adapted physical activity for the disabled person, or for who find himself in situations of physical, economic or social disadvantage, is the exaltation of his abilities (albeit residual) and of what he does, in a world that always reminds him of what he cannot be and what he has not available. Carraro (2004) states that "aiming at inclusiveness means allowing all those who approach sports and motor practice to achieve a basic level of technical skills, to feel pleasure in the commitment and efforts generated and to be not excluded for being "less adapted". In this sense, the initiation to motor and/or sports practice for individuals with mental, economic, social,

and other types of disabilities and/or problems, is intended to promote their social integration, inclusion, and self-esteem, prevent the risk of chronicdegenerative disease and improve their life quality.

What we have analyzed highlights the importance of promoting motor sports in the school context too, at any level, and of pursuing the inclusive goal for those who are characterized by the implied or expressed request for special educational needs (SEN).

Conclusion

This work has analyzed how sport, in its theoretical meaning in the educational practice, has a great potential in terms of social and inclusive development, both for the non-disabled subjects and especially for those who are in a situation of disadvantage and weaknesses. In this scientific contribution, sport and physical activity (especially the adapted one) have been identified as the main educational tools able to promote the development of collectivity towards the inclusion of others, especially those in critical conditions (disabled people, ethnic and racial minorities, poor people, etc.).

In addition, it has been brought to light the ability of physical and sports activities to generate important benefits, all different from each other (at social, economic, psychophysical, educational, and school level, etc.), for any individual regardless of his condition; Indeed, especially those who are in difficulty or in situations of need are able to develop sustainably skills and abilities through sport, in order to live their lives positively.

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