

Strategies for Inclusion: Physical Education and Life skills

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Abstract: Preparing people for life through teaching oriented towards the development of life skills, provides a guide that allows individuals to find the resilience and motivation they need to live everyday life with courage, curiosity, confidence, accepting the uncertainty and unpredictability of today's world as a value and not just as a condition, nor even as a threat. The contribution of physical education is fundamental for the overall education of young people and children and its educational value acquires all the more social relevance when its effects can also be transferred to other contexts of life. Therefore, the present work focuses on the importance of life skills education and on the contribution offered by the School and in particular by physical education for the development of social, emotional and thinking skills in students, in order to prepare young people to become dynamic citizens able to face the challenges of everyday life in a positive and adaptive way.

Keywords: Learning; Academic achievement; School; Educational context; Special pedagogy.

1. Introduction

Globalisation and technological innovation, in particular the information society event, have led to new scenarios regarding the possibility of access to information and knowledge. However, at the same time these phenomena have determined the need to adapt one's skills to an increasingly "liquid" social context (Bauman, 2000) that requires appropriate knowledge and technical skills, but also and above all the ability to know how to collaborate, mediate, resolve conflicts and communicate in the most effective way (Roodbari et al., 2013). In addition, the time of crisis we are going through due to the pandemic and post-pandemic has largely demonstrated how necessary it is to be able to respond positively and proactively to the challenges, difficulties and complexity of certain situations in order to achieve personal and social well-being (Pragholapati, 2020).

The school is now assigned the task of structuring training proposals that arise from an interpretative principle of social reality (Shek et al., 2021), through the implementation of educational paths oriented towards the acquisition by students of self-awareness and responsibility towards their status as a child: *"citizen, responsible worker, participant in social life, able to assume roles and functions autonomously, able to face the vicissitudes of existence"* (WHO, 1993). One of the fundamental tasks of the school is, in fact, to *"form young people capable of facing the challenges of life through individual maturation*



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that allows forms of coexistence that are satisfactory for the individual and society" (Malizia, 2009). The importance of the development of Life Skills is part of this educational process.

In the school context, promoting life skills means teaching young people to develop their basic cognitive, emotional and relational skills, through the acquisition of adaptive and positive behavior, aimed at transforming knowledge, attitudes and values into real skills that can be used effectively in every circumstance of daily life (Marmocchi et al., 2004).

Life skills are defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as the set of *"social and relational skills that enable the person to effectively cope with the demands and challenges of daily life, developing positive and adaptive attitudes, in the relationship with their environment and culture and thus maintaining a high level of psychological well-being"* (WHO, 1993).

It is clear, therefore, that the competences that can be included among the Life Skills are innumerable and the nature and definition of Life Skills can be differentiated according to the culture and the context of reference (Merrell & Gimpel, 1998). Despite this, the WHO has identified a core competency consisting of ten competencies. They are represented by: (i) Decision-making; (ii) Problem solving; (iii) Critical thinking; (iv) Creative thinking; (v) Effective communication; (vi) Effective interpersonal relationships; (vii) Self-awareness; (viii) Empathy; (ix) Emotion management; (x) Stress management.

These skills appear to be closely connected to the person's learning and growth processes (Pillai, 2012) and can be grouped according to three areas of functioning: (i) emotional (self-awareness, emotion management, stress management); (ii) cognitive (decision-making, problem-solving, creativity, critical thinking); and (iii) social (empathy, effective communication, effective interpersonal relationships) (Gould & Carson, 2008). In fact, where the development of Life Skills is lacking, there would be an increase, particularly in young people, of negative and risky behaviors (drug addiction, smoking, alcoholism, etc.) (Puspakumara, 2011), in response to stressful events (Botvin et al., 2003).

This appears to be closely in line with the indications of the International Agencies dealing with social development which reiterate the need *"to ensure that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to adequate learning and life skills development programmes"* (UNESCO, 2015). In line with the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda (de Paula Arruda Filho, 2017) and the new *"LifeComp Framework 2020"*, it becomes strategic to consolidate *"personal, social, learning to learn skills"* in order to help individuals become more resilient and manage the challenges and changes that life holds. Life skills play, in this sense, a crucial role in promoting the development of social-emotional and metacognitive skills. The task of the Educational Institutions is to implement these objectives *"to build more and more a school that is an instrument for social, economic and environmental sustainability"* (P.D.L. 1576), providing concrete initiatives that are a reason for the implementation of tailor-made strategies and practices to promote these skills and contribute to the growth of active citizenship.

If life skills can be defined as the skills necessary to respond to the challenge of everyday life, it is easy to understand how physical activity and sport represent an effective vehicle for the development and promotion of these skills (Gould et al., 2007). In the school context, in fact, physical education seems to have a fundamental role in the promotion of psychosocial competences as it is able to influence motivation and the ability to behave in a healthy and positive way (Catalano et al., 2004). Through physical education it is possible to promote educational experiences capable of stimulating circular relationships between the factors of motor performance, motor

skills-abilities and positive social behaviors, which can be used in different contexts and capable of developing the motivation to learn (Colella, 2011).

In addition to the competences shared with other disciplines, physical education has characteristics and peculiarities that can translate the knowledge, attitudes and values acquired through the discipline into concrete skills and actions that can be transferred into everyday life. The ability to set goals, take responsibility for one's actions, make choices in situations of psychological pressure, and have leadership skills, control emotions, and manage one's time well, are just some of the skills that physical and sporting activities can convey (Weiss et al., 2007).

Physical education, therefore, if supported by a solid pedagogical orientation, represents a privileged didactic setting for the learning of bio-psycho-socio-affective skills and competences (Bortoli et al., 2015). In this sense, the body and its kinesthetic manifestations play a fundamental role in the evolutionary and formative process, they contribute to the growth and global maturation of the subject by promoting the awareness of the value of the body and the conquest of autonomy, the construction of personal identity and the acquisition of skills. The educational choices of the School, therefore, must necessarily take into account the value of the body and movement as a means of formative action (Casolo, 2011).

2. Physical Education and Life Skills Learning

Physical education is one of the school disciplines that contributes significantly to the formation of personality, social relationships and the acquisition of life skills. It is considered fundamental for the harmonious development of the personality and for the formation of citizens capable of expressing themselves and relating in today's world, so much so that it has been defined as a *"hinge discipline between the scientific, communicative and expressive, relational and citizenship fields"*. The primary objective of physical education is, in fact, to promote the growth of physically educated people through the acquisition of skills, i.e. motor skills, knowledge, socio-affective behaviors and motivations such that they are urged to adopt healthy and physically active lifestyles based on awareness of the body self.

This orientation frames the discipline in a holistic approach, which identifies among its main purposes the physical, cognitive and social development of children, together with the promotion of a healthy lifestyle, assigning it the role of a privileged tool for the structuring of personality, social relationships and for the acquisition of the life skills necessary throughout life (Sibilio, 2002).

It is for this reason that physical education is proposed as an essential element for integrated growth. It follows that, through a conscious pedagogical orientation aimed at proposing significant motor experiences and the acquisition of new skills, it is necessary to promote an adequate motor planning that correlates with a coherent pedagogical intentionality, in order to adequately define motor action and to attribute a fair value to it (Iavarone, 2015). Therefore, education through the body and movement cannot be linked to didactic strategies related only to doing but must also and above all be realized in a condition linked to the deeper meaning of being an acting person in the environment.

Starting from these assumptions, the school must become the ideal setting in which to build a didactic of motor activities that looks at the educational conception of the body and movement understood as a factor of promotion not only of the aspects of self-construction but also as an educational exercise for the acquisition of healthy lifestyles that allow to improve the well-being and health of the individual (Gomez Paloma, 2009). In this sense, it becomes necessary to integrate in teaching

practice both the purely physical and socio-relational aspects of development, in order to allow a global taking charge of the psycho-physical health of the subject.

Physical education must necessarily become essential to the formation of young people. In fact, it contributes to their growth both in structural terms and to the formation of the Self that concerns the body, its potential and its limits, its position in physical space, its perception in relation to others, its image. Physical education also plays a crucial role in directing motivation to improve one's individual skills and self-determination in achieving psycho-physical well-being (Bailey, 2006). Therefore, it not only has the educational value that contributes to the development of motor skills, abilities and competences, but also and above all the value of all those activities that, through movement, contribute to the structuring of identity and awareness of the potential of one's body (Danish et al., 2020).

Physical education conceived and experimented in this way puts into practice a didactic that becomes a tool for the metacognitive development of the body and mind, in a framework in which the subjects can recognize themselves in body and movement. The education of the body and movement is therefore aimed at a training process capable of allowing learners to achieve an ever greater awareness of their body in movement in order to obtain that intrinsic pleasure and the achievement of cultural, social and expressive factors that identify the value aspect of motor activities (Cronin et al., 2018). It follows that the educational process, as a whole, represents the tool through which the individual gives shape to his or her personal identity, integrating all those knowledge, skills and competencies that allow him or her to live and mature an increasingly complete self-awareness. The body and movement are, therefore, two fundamental elements of the individual and social dimension in the personal development of the individual, it follows that physical activities provide a special contribution to the creation and strengthening of skills that can be used in other contexts of life (Pesce et al., 2016). In particular, within the didactic path of physical education, due to the specific experiential characteristics of the discipline, the curriculum helps to develop transversal skills capable of making students capable of transforming the knowledge, attitudes and values acquired into real skills, i.e. "what to do" and "how to do it" in every life circumstance.

3. The transferability of skills: from the motor field to the life contexts

An aspect of life skills emphasized by several authors is the transferability of skills (Danish et al., 2005). In fact, for a skill to qualify as a life skill, it must be transferable to situations other than the one that was originally taught. It is precisely this transformative experience that allows us to educate through the body in movement with awareness, intentionality, motivation and competence. Physical education thus becomes respect for individual diversity through bodily action, in an effort to found an educational action that is lived in the unity of a circular and meaningful relationship between physicality and the acquisition of transversal skills (Camiré et al., 2012).

Goudas and Giannoudis (2008) trace the potential of physical education in the teaching of life skills to several factors that are based on the characteristics and peculiarities of the discipline. First, the authors highlight the existence of a positive correlation between the performance of excellence in sport and the achievement of personal excellence in life, determined above all by a mental attitude that favors such success in both domains (Danish et al., 1992). Secondly, many of the skills learned by participating in the practice of physical activity can be transferred to other life contexts. These skills include: the ability to express oneself under pressure, to solve problems, to meet deadlines, to take on challenges, to set goals, to manage both

success and failure, to be able to work with and in the team group. Sport is also a context capable of emphasizing training processes and performance just as it happens in school and in the world of work. Another peculiarity that sports skills and life skills have in common concerns the way in which they are learned, as both require demonstration, training and practice in order to be acquired in a stable and lasting way (Orlick, & McCaffrey, 1991). Finally, sport is a significant factor in the development of self-esteem and skills perception.

In light of the above, it is evident that the teaching of life skills is successful when it is taught as an integral part of the physical education curriculum (Yadav & Iqbal, 2009). It is, therefore, necessary to plan interventions aimed at learning these skills through teaching strategies that are at the same time functional to physical well-being and also relevant from an educational point of view. To this end, there are several activities that can be used to improve life skills in students. According to Prajapati, Sharma, & Sharma (2017), they are represented by:

1. Class discussions, which are activities that provide an opportunity for students to learn and practice problem-solving. They also allow students to deepen their understanding of the topic, develop listening skills, assertiveness and empathy.
2. Brainstorming: this is an excellent activity that allows students to generate ideas quickly and spontaneously, through an exercise to stimulate imagination and creativity.
3. Role-playing: In addition to being a fun and engaging activity for the whole class, it also provides a great strategy for practicing skills; it helps to experiment with how you might handle a potential situation in real life. For example, it is important to promote leadership and give young people the opportunity to practice roles that require control of a situation and assumption of responsibility. One way could be to take turns being the team captain or conducting parts of the warm-up phase.
4. Group work: these are activities that allow and maximize interactions between classmates, promoting team building and teamwork.
5. Educational games and simulations: promote fun, active learning, and rich discussion. They require the combined use of knowledge, attitudes, and skills. For example, learners may be allowed to choose the motor task on which to practice. This choice can be free or guided.
6. Situational Analysis: Provide the ability to safely analyze, explore, and test different solutions. They provide opportunities to work together in groups, share ideas, new learning, and give food for thought. For example, the athlete can be asked to reproduce the preparatory routines (attitudes and behaviors) usually used before the competition.
7. Interpretive Storytelling: Can help students develop critical thinking skills, creative skills, and interact to tell stories through the use of the body and movement. This activity lends itself well to drawing analogies or making comparisons. Improves attention, concentration, listening skills.

According to Yadav, & Iqbal (2009) the implementation of life skills development programs in the physical education curriculum represents an effective psychosocial intervention strategy for the promotion of students' social and mental health, as it plays an important role in strengthening coping strategies and for the development of self-confidence and emotional intelligence. as well as improving critical thinking, problem-solving and decision-making skills. Therefore, the significance and importance of life skills education to be integrated into the regular school curriculum

of physical education must be aimed at equipping students with adequate skills that enable them to face the challenges posed by the changing life situations of today's world.

4. Inclusive strategies for learning life skills

Every form of educational intervention starts from the ability to remove obstacles, focusing on functional skills and hypothesizing appropriate educational proposals. In order for the teaching of physical activity to be truly effective and inclusive, it is first necessary to carefully observe and evaluate the sensory-perceptual characteristics, the acquired and emerging skills and the main difficulties of students in order to organize and implement physical activity education courses in inclusive contexts (Bortoli, 2004).

The educational nature of physical activity and sport makes clear the need for it to be conducted in a way that respects the diversity of individuals, both to allow the widest participation and in respect of the peculiarities and specific educational needs of each one. If confined to educational terms and not oriented to achieving results at any cost, through the body and movement it is possible to promote the expression of the person in a pleasant and welcoming context, supporting the individual in the acquisition of personal autonomy and contributing to the development of self-awareness and self-esteem (Petitpas et al., 2004).

Person-centred physical activity can promote inclusive processes and individual cohesion in society, for both able-bodied and disabled individuals, as it allows each person to explore deep traits of self-interaction with the particularities and difficulties of the other and to undertake further meaningful experiences, such as, for example, interpersonal communication, cooperation, respect for the rules, solidarity, fairness, justice, increased motivation, encountering frustration and overcoming it. It is important to provide the student with visual examples and clear models of behavior, structuring space, time in a clear and flexible way, but the fundamental action, key to inclusivity, is to involve classmates through strategies of didactic mediation, tutoring and cooperative learning. Several solution strategies can be pursued for an effective inclusive physical education lesson (Sala et al., 2020):

8. Homogenization, creation of groups and teams with comparable motor skills (e.g. zone play);
9. Assignment of roles and tasks, assigned on the basis of individual motor skills and abilities;
10. Compensation, the partner participates by using auxiliary aids, preparing the corrective tools or individual adaptation of the rules during the execution (e.g. rafbball);
11. Use of diversity as a central aspect of physical activity and play; by consciously playing with differences, the attractiveness of the movements is strengthened by using one's own strength (e.g. the ability to hit the shuttlecock in the game of badminton counts, limited mobility/wheelchair);
12. Integration of fortuitous elements to overshadow differences (e.g., a basket or a goal is worth as much as the points scored by rolling the dice).

Educational action must be oriented towards fostering and supporting students, on the one hand, formative assessment processes such as the continuous reflection of representations and practices of inclusive action and, on the other hand, educational activities aimed at promoting cultural practices capable of co-constructing "inclusive cultures" in the school context (Patera, 2022). From this

point of view, inclusion aims to instill all those values of acceptance and inclusion to support the conscious development of how to act for life (Sgambelluri, 2011).

Every teacher must observe their students and read the messages that their bodies send through movement, the direct and free expression of every human being. The various activities that can be carried out during Physical Education lessons amplify the relational and communicative aspects of acting (assumption of roles, enhancement of moments of aggregation and collaboration, etc.), creating situations full of predictable and unpredictable aspects that cannot and must not escape. Starting from the assumption that each student needs, indifferently, adequate teaching proposals, the teacher must create the conditions of acceptance and collaboration such as to allow adequate participation in the activity (Smith & Nigel, 2006). Therefore, we must not be intimidated by what is different, we must not think that we do not have the tools to reduce differences, on the contrary, we must focus on the similarities and advantages of being different, designing strategies to enhance these differences. We should focus on students' fine motor skills and use movement to improve them. Physical Education must no longer be understood only as education of bodily movement, but as education of the subject through movement, in order to also intervene as a facilitator of school learning in subjects with special educational needs.

It is evident that it is not physical activity per se that teaches life skills, but a motor experience designed in such a way that its participants can transfer what is learned during school physical education hours to other life contexts (Hellison, 2003). In order for this transfer to take place, it is necessary to help children and adolescents to recognize and use the skills they have acquired through motor activities in other areas of life. Understanding what is needed to transfer the skills and means by which this can be done is crucial to equip students with the knowledge and skills to act consciously and responsibly in the face of the challenges of everyday life. It is with this goal in mind that programs for life skills education in schools have been developed within the physical education curriculum (Yulianto et al., 2023; Wijaya et al., 2023; Sonjaya et al., 2024).

In Italian schools, projects for the development of life skills are increasingly widespread, often of an experimental nature. The goal is to implement a structured and inclusive design that enhances extra-disciplinary skills. Starting from the 2022/2023 school year, life skills will become a subject of study in Italian first and second grade schools. It is a three-year experiment that, alongside citizenship skills, aims to improve students' educational success, to foster a culture of competence, to integrate disciplinary knowledge with fundamental skills for the challenges that life requires and that educates citizens aware of their abilities.

5. Conclusions

The current complexity that characterizes modern society increasingly imposes the need to look at the formation of future citizens not only towards the transmission of disciplinary educational content, but to equip the individual with tools for adaptation appropriate to the context. The same international organizations that deal with social development have long recommended supporting and developing, from early childhood, a series of skills that refer to transversal life skills and that make the individual capable of facing the challenges that life has in store for him in a pragmatic and resilient way. In this interpretative framework, the School represents the ideal setting where it is possible to implement an education that fully responds to the real needs of children and young people. Therefore, teaching life skills through physical education can create a more inclusive and sustainable learning

environment, especially with a view to protecting those subjects who, otherwise, would risk being potentially excluded.

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