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FOSTERING PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN ITALIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL: THE *SBAM!* PROJECT IN APULIA BETWEEN RESEARCH DATA & EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

PROMUOVERE L'EDUCAZIONE FISICA NELLA SCUOLA PRIMARIA ITALIANA: IL PROGETTO REGIONALE *SBAM!* TRA DATI DI RICERCA E PROSPETTIVE EDUCATIVE

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Abstract

Physical Education in Primary School is a curricular subject that can significantly contribute to both the health development and to the education of correct eating habits and active lifestyles for years to come. The SBAM! Project has already planned a three-year intervention (2013-2016) in the first annuity and a second intervention, still ongoing (2019-2021), aimed at promoting the quality of physical education in the Primary School, involving subjects attending from the third to the fifth class of some schools in Apulia. Starting from the data obtained in the first annuity, the article presents the educational perspectives that are desirable to be implemented in the current annuity, to be considered as data on which to systematically analyze future projects on the promotion of motor and sports activities at school.

L'educazione fisica nella scuola primaria è un ambito curriculare che può contribuire in maniera significativa sia allo sviluppo in salute sia all'educazione a corrette abitudini alimentari e stili di vita attivi anche per gli anni a venire. Il progetto SBAM! ha già previsto un intervento triennale (2013-2016) nella prima annualità e di un secondo intervento (2019-2021), tutt'ora in corso, volti a promuovere la qualità dell'educazione fisica nella Scuola Primaria, coinvolgendo soggetti frequentanti dalla terza alla quinta classe di alcune scuole della Puglia. A partire dai dati ottenuti nella prima annnualità, l'articolo presenta le prospettive educative auspicabilmente attuabili nell'annualità in corso, da ritenere quali dati su cui analizzare in maniera sistematica anche futuri progetti in tema di promozione delle attività motorie e sportive a scuola.

Keywords

Physical Education; Didactics; Teaching; Primary School; Motor Activities

Educazione Fisica; Didattica; Insegnamento; Scuola Primaria; Attività Motorie

1 The manuscript is the result of a joint work of the Authors to attribute as follow: Sergio Bellantonio wrote the paragraphs *1. Introduction* and *2. Promoting Health at School. An Innovative Way to Foster Physical Education* and Dario Colella wrote the paragraphs 3. *The Apulia Experience: The SBAM! Regional Project* and *4. Conclusions: Between Research Data & Educational Perspectives.*

1. Introduction

Although a traditional way of understanding the school still supports learners to separate knowledges, it is worth reiterating that such a point of view it is at the disadvantage of a systemic vision of man, life and world, which serves as a prelude to the construction of a complex thought and living (Morin, 1991). For these reasons, the urgency to rethink methodologies, methods, techniques and strategies – as well as educational programmes – needs a set-up that takes the necessary complexity in the light that a mind accustomed to dissect to excess the real runs the risk of losing its global sense (*Ibidem*). From this perspective there is the need to propose integrated educational approaches that are part of different horizons of meaning, such as neuroscientific, psychological and pedagogical (Geake, 2009; Rivoltella, 2012; Rosati, 2005; Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2010), with the aim to interconnect the body with mind, brain and education (Sousa, 2010).

Emphasising this kind of perspective also in didactics contexts can be an educational opportunity capable of making the learner active builder of knowledges. Bodily factors constitute an essential part of cognitive processes. For this reason, the paradigmatic shift we have witnessed over the last decade is that we have considered corporality as the underlying factor of the structuring of our mind. All this has fostered the budding of new and original research paths such as *embodiment*. Because of this mind cannot be reduced to mere brain (Clark & Chalmers, 1998; Damásio, 1994; Wilson, 2002).

According to this perspective human learning can only depend from experience that, first of all, is sensory-motor, which means that doing and thinking are literally hooked on an environment made up of physical structures, but also of senses and meanings that relate to the latter (Rosch, Thompson, & Varela, 1991). In the end, the processes of understanding, therefore, are not managed exclusively on a symbolic side, but at the intersection among the sensory-motor, cognitive and emotional-affective components that characterize the uniqueness of human being.

2. Promoting Health at School. An Innovative Way to Foster Physical Education

Since WHO (World Health Organization) has expanded and gradually re-examined its perspectives (1948, 1978, 1986), we have seen a paradigmatic shift about health, illness, disease and physical education. From a pathogenic model interested in the analytical and parcelled study of the causes of disease, we have shifted towards a salutogenic model (Antonovsky, 1996) promoter of behaviours capable of fostering health, therefore, in order to discourage risk factors, lifestyles, bad habits and behaviours that can harm individual and social wellbeing. Although health is nothing more than the result of a continuous fluctuation between wellbeing and illness, which is the reason why the research of a constant balance between the two poles of the *continuum* constitutes an experience life-long, life-wide and life-deep.

It is necessary to intervene in a systemic and multicomponent way also in one of the training contexts par excellence such as school and starting from the early stages of the education cycle (Beets *et al*., 2016). From this perspective through the use of evidence-based educational practices that involve the different educational systems (Bailey, 2006; Messing *et al.*, 2019), it is possible that these activities become as real public health prevention measure (Ainsworth & Macera, 2018). From this point of view, some scientific evidence (Mosston & Ashworth, 2002) has found that the health promotion needs prevention activities but, even more, the educational construction of community of practices (Lave & Wenger, 1999) that support the development of a certain level of learned competence, hence the empowerment of the subjects. Knowledge is no longer to be considered as a set of learned theories, but the result of a situated learning (*Ibidem*), that is a consequence of the active participation of the subject within the environment and with the others.

Regarding school, the WHO (World Health Organization) has identified as a reference net-

work the so-called SHE (Schools for Health in Europe), namely as educational institutions that promote health by adhering to guidelines that are particularly sensible to a holistic development of the subject, which is equivalent to saying that, alongside the cultural growth, they also pay special attention to the educational needs. But which are the characteristics of the Schools that Promote Health? These are learning-teaching contexts which pay particularly attention to the promotion of the psychophysical wellbeing of the school and that transcend the fragmentation of project interventions through the promotion of multi-criteria and multi-perspective actions in daily teaching. An intra-systemic approach of this type, however, then needs to be hooked to an inter-systemic one, therefore that dialogues with the family, health and social services, to give answers and propose operational guidelines that are in line with the needs of the subjects and the environment in which they live. From this perspective physical education is seen as the connection between health and education, which is the reason why physical education is to be considered today as a fundamental curricular subject that can promote the educational development of proactive behaviours, already in childhood and adolescence (Kahn *et al*., 2008).

Such a perspective directly calls into question the educational contexts. If the attention has shifted from a state of fact (illness) to one hopefully achievable (wellbeing), then it is essential to put at the centre the quality of formal training contexts through the contribution of physical education in the school, which are real catalysts of change and guidance. It is a question of rethinking the learning-teaching settings in the light of the most emerging health and wellbeing needs of this millennium (Nordin, Jourdan, Simovska, 2019), through the implementation of renewed educational environments that are in favour not only of increasingly active lessons and that transcend different educational cycles (Watson *et al*., 2017), but also of more immersive school experiences in the environment, therefore increasingly ecological and outdoor (Mygind *et al*., 2019).

3. The Apulia Experience: The *SBAM!* Regional Project

SBAM! (Salute, Benessere, Alimentazione, Mobilità a Scuola - Health, Wellbeing, Nutrition, Mobility at School) is the three-year inter-institutional project supported by the Apulia Region, in collaboration with *MIUR (Ministero dell'Istruzione dell'Università e della Ricerca – Ministry of Education, University and Research)*, *CONI (Comitato Olimpico Nazionale Italiano – Italian Olympic Committee)* and the University of Foggia. The project aimed to promote healthy nutrition and physically active lifestyles, through the planning of curricular activities within the school, considered the ideal setting for interdisciplinary educational interventions concerning curricular physical education, nutritional characteristics of food and the promotion of home-to-school pathways (active transport), in order to prevent sedentary habits in Primary School children (Colella, 2018). The project included the following phases in the three years 2013-2016:

Project communication to Primary Schools and identification of classes and referring teachers

- Recruitment of experts
- Training of teacher referee of schools
- Teachers training
- Selection and training of specialist teachers
- Implementation of motor monitoring and related factors

The actions implemented have aimed to promote in children the awareness on the effects of physical education for the growth of the person, thanks to the organizational, educational and scientific contribution of educational agencies able to propose interventions in schools, paying special attention to the experts training in the field of motor and sports sciences.

The recent WHO (World Health Organization) guidelines (2010, 2016) – taking into account scientific evidence and best practices – strongly argue that excessive inactivity and sedentariness have negative effects on wellbeing of children and adults. These reasons prompt the WHO (World Health Organization) to advise the practice of at least 60 minutes a day of motor

activity, even subdivided into several periods of shorter duration distributed during the day.

Numerous national and international documents (European Commission, 2015, 2016) show that European children have low levels of moderate or intense activity (walking, cycling, active play) and these results highlight a drastic reduction in daily physical activity. Italy ranks last among European Countries, as Italian grandparents, parents, teenagers and children are among the least active in Europe (*Ibidem*). There are still significant differences in inactivity between North and South Italy, which is why the accession of the University of Foggia to the *SBAM! (Salute, Benessere, Alimentazione, Mobilità a Scuola - Health, Wellbeing, Nutrition, Mobility at School) Regional Project* was fundamental.

The Apulia Region, in collaboration with the University of Foggia and the *CONI (Comitato Olimpico Nazionale Italiano – Italian Olympic Committee)* has decided to invest in promoting health through the enhancement of motor activities, to promote a sharing of the child's educational process and to achieve over the years a saving on health spending, improving the life of citizens and social inclusion, as well as supporting the development of sports tourism, the development of sports facilities and the stabilization of the regional sports system too (Colella, 2018). Regional policy, in fact, aims to strengthen the social role of sport, supporting its educational value, in order to integrate sports policies with socio-educational ones, fostering such best practices on the territory and promoting the inclusion and social integration of the weak sections of the population. Other important aims of the regional policy are to improve the quality of life of individuals and reduce the onset of pathologies, tourism and socio-economic through the quality of sport events that are useful to attract future investments.

In 2012/2013 the *SBAM!* activities were started and about 17,102 pupils, belonging to third classes, were identified. Students was followed in the next two years. The pupils involved resided in the provinces of Bari, Brindisi, Barletta-Andria-Trani, Foggia, Lecce and Taranto. 30 hours of physical education were carried out in each school-class with the presence of the expert and the curricular teacher. Pupils were offered several motor tests that included objective measures and two questionnaires to assess perceived self-efficacy (Colella, Morano, Bortoli, & Robazza, 2008) and perceived liking (Carraro, 2012; Carraro, Young, & Robazza, 2008) for motor proposals. Monitoring took place during the lessons and allowed to detect the stature, weight and body mass index, to assess levels of development of motor skills, psycho-affective constructs, perceived self-efficacy and activity liking, last but not least, to study the correlations among the different variables.

Data showed that *BMI (Body Mass Index)* has increased quite worryingly over the years and that motor performance of overweight and/or obese subjects is significantly lower than those of their normal-weight peers (Colella, 2018). In addition, a significant gender difference was shown in girls' motor performance compared to boys, where the former achieved lower motor performance than boys. However, the actions carried out in the project, through an increase in motor commitment and active breaks, also showed a positive trend in the evolution of motor performance, which is due to an increase in the moving experiences to which the project participants were subjected. This means that different forms of literacy need a cross-cutting approach that is geared towards the involvement of differenct educational agencies, primarily school.

In the end, it is important to emphasise the need to promote health promotion programmes in Primary Schools (but not only) through innovative educational strategies that prompt the integration of physical activity into formal and non-formal systems, with the aim to develop both motor skills and executive functions, enhancing individual differences to improve interdisciplinary learning processes according to a transdisciplinary view of knowledge.

4. Conclusions: Between Research Data & Educational Perspectives

Physical education, extracurricular motor activities and sport – with particular reference to Primary School – have entered the Agenda of National and Supranational Institutions driven

by policies on education in the right habits and measures to combat overweight and obesity. The *SBAM! (Salute, Benessere, Alimentazione, Mobilità a Scuola - Health, Wellbeing, Nutrition, Mobility at School)* Project (now is going on the 2nd Edition) showed great interest in the increase in children and young people living a sedentary lifestyle, with a particular focus on promoting and developing health prevention programmes, through educational opportunities based on physical education, thus reducing the time of physical inactivity, increasing the time of motor engagement, promoting integration between learning and evaluation processes.

The measures and actions require careful analysis of scientific studies and best practices in Primary School, highlighting that it is possible to carry out effective preventive action as long as the educational actions with the school-class provide interventions in different disciplines and thorough a synergic perspective (Errisuriz, Golaszewski, Bartholomew, 2018).

A much broader analysis would be needed, but it is necessary to recognize that many recent publications on motor activities carried out in school, educational manuals and websites, report a continuous expansion and review of the repertoires of motor competences, organizational modalities, use of specific tools, adaptations of motor tasks to individual differences, functional to the child's learning and motor development, but also matrices from which to identify new tasks of reality, interdisciplinary joints to promote motor skills.

Educational perspectives concern a careful analysis not only about the content but, above all, how and where to propose it, so that a positive agreement is proposed between the disciplinary structure and the cognitive structure of the learner. And today educational research, precisely on this subject, is confronted with scientific evidence from different fields, with particular reference to the theories of learning and neuroscience (Bortoli & Robazza, 2016). In conclusion it is important the choice of teaching styles and their modulation in the gym and in the expected learning environments (Mosston & Ashworth, 2002), to ensure the necessary links between the functions of the person and the factors that constitute motor competence.

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