

BEYOND STATISTICS: YOUTH SPORTS DROPOUT AS AN EDUCATIONAL ISSUE OLTRE LE STATISTICHE: IL DROP OUT SPORTIVO COME QUESTIONE EDUCATIVA

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ABSTRACT

English

This qualitative research, based on interviews and focus groups with teachers, coaches, parents, and young people, explores the dynamics of youth sports dropout. Motivational, relational, family, school, and economic factors emerge as key influences. The study suggests rethinking sport as an educational and inclusive space, valuing well-being, the right to play, and pedagogical strategies to foster long-term participation.

Italiano

La ricerca, con approccio qualitativo basato su interviste e focus group con insegnanti, allenatori, genitori e ragazzi, esplora le dinamiche del drop out sportivo in età evolutiva. Emergono fattori motivazionali, relazionali, familiari, scolastici ed economici che influenzano l'abbandono. Lo studio propone di ripensare lo sport come spazio educativo e inclusivo, valorizzando benessere, diritto al gioco e strategie pedagogiche per favorire la partecipazione a lungo termine.

KEYWORDS

Inglese: sports dropout, developmental age, education, sport pedagogy.

Italiano: abbandono sportivo, età evolutiva, educazione, pedagogia dello sport.

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Introduction

Relevance of the phenomenon of sports dropout during the developmental age

Practice of sport in the developing ages represents a key experience in the growth of a person, which can contribute not only to physical health, but also to emotional, relational, and cognitive development (Bailey et al., 2009; Eime et al., 2013).

Through sport, children and young people acquire, in fact, basic skills and learn the importance of rules, of cooperation, of the management of emotions, of the acceptance of defeat, and of self-esteem, skills that are essential for the exercise of an active and informed citizenship (Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007).

However, despite the evidence on the psychoeducational benefits of sport, abandonment of sport in early ages – dropout – is an increasingly widespread phenomenon, and it is particularly prevalent in the 8- to 13-year-old age group, that is, during the preadolescent phase, where it is most commonly observed.

Based on a national survey in Italy (Pisaniello et al., 2024), the dropout rate of youngsters from sports activities in the age bracket of 6-14 years has been rising consistently, and at around the ages of 11-13 years, it is going to reach its highest and most prominent peaks. These peaks occur when young people are expected to face new school requirements, changes in their bodies, and increased social demands.

Multiple international studies confirm the same trend. Crane and Temple (2015), after conducting a systematic review of the literature, found that approximately 35-45% of children involved in organized sports drop out before the age of 13, and most of them do so permanently. The reasons behind these dropouts are complex. Then they are interrelated: among them are the lack of enjoyment of the sports, conflicts between the relations, the pressure of the high results of sports, low motivation, school and family commitments, economic restrictions, and, recently, the growing importance of digital technologies in the daily life of young people.

Specifically, the research for the present period (Twenge et al., 2018; Rideout et al., 2021) also shows that children aged 8 to 13 spend over 6 hours per day on average

just in front of screens, hence the time that these children dedicate to structured physical activity is directly decreased. In the view of Pisaniello et al. (2025), digital technologies embody a challenge, both symbolic and temporal, to traditional sports because they provide immediate, personalized, and low-effort experiences, which, for recognition and a sense of belonging, may attract more adolescents.

The situation is critical, even more so in the Italian context, where, according to ISTAT data (2022), only 34.5% of Italians regularly practice sports. The number is more frightening for minors: only 28% of young people between 11 and 14 years old regularly participate in sports, while those who prematurely stop practicing sports exceed 45%. Inequalities in territory, society, and gender exacerbate the problem: in the southern regions of Italy, there are fewer opportunities for sports; girls face cultural obstacles related to gender stereotypes; and low-income families cannot afford registration fees, equipment, and transportation costs (CONI, 2021; Eurobarometer, 2022).

Sport dropout during developmental age is, therefore, a priority issue in education, which

concerns not only the sporting world but the entire educational system. The cessation of physical activity at such a critical moment of growth can lead to significant psychophysical health issues, as well as problems with self-esteem, social inclusion, and bodily literacy. Motor competence, as Whitehead (2010) puts it, is the prime educational right, and its loss may hinder the future well-being of an individual.

Research Objectives and Educational-Pedagogical Context

On account of these factors, the study intends to work through the dropout phenomenon from a youth educational perspective, which would involve hearing the accounts of the young people and the adults who support them both in the educational and sports areas. The main point is to qualitatively comprehend the people's motives, relations, impeding thoughts, Moreover, there are probable ways of dealing with them to create not only more diverse but also sustainable educational models.

The study draws on the analysis of:

Focus groups were carried out with more than 100 children and youngsters aged 8 to 13, from primary and secondary schools, with a broad geographical and sociocultural representation.

To explore perceptions, educational practices, and proposals for improvement, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 adults, including coaches, teachers, sports managers, and parents.

Both surveys were processed through NVivo-style thematic coding, which significantly highlighted the principal issues of the phenomenon and its educational implications. The combination of qualitative data provided a rich, diverse, and contextualized view of the problem, which aligns with the hermeneutic-interpretative approach characteristic of qualitative pedagogical research (Mortari, 2007).

The main theoretical point of view is that sport during growth should not be understood as the only manifestation of achievement or competition, but rather an educative and relational sphere, where body, feelings, rules, and relations between people become the main characters of the integration process of personal identity. Hence, the coach's role is not only that of a technical expert but rather an educational mediator; the team is not simply a group of individuals, but a place of belonging and socialization; lastly, the sporting experience goes beyond the performance to identify with an identity narrative, capable of reflecting and shaping the growing individual's experiences.

The objectives of this research are structured along four main lines:

Investigating the root causes of the phenomenon of sports dropout during childhood, moving beyond reductionist and individualizing approaches to grasp the underlying systemic, relational, and cultural dimensions;

Restoring centrality to the voices of those involved in youth sports-children, parents, and educators-by enhancing their perspectives, expectations, and needs through a narrative and participatory approach;

Developing educational proposals aimed at preventing dropout, recognizing the strategic role of schools, families, and sports organizations as co-responsible educational actors;

Contributing to the promotion of a culture of sport understood as an educational and social right, capable of fostering inclusion, motivation, and personal and collective transformation.

The study is part of a consolidated international research line that recognizes the centrality of pedagogy in sport, transcending the traditional dichotomy between physical activity and cultural education and valorizing the body in motion as an educational tool (Arnold, 1997; Kirk, 2010; Digennaro, 2023). From this perspective, combating dropout from sports is equivalent to promoting practices of active citizenship, relational well-being, and educational justice, in line with an inclusive and transformative educational paradigm.

1. Theoretical Framework and State of the Art

1.1. Psychosocial Determinants of Sports Dropout

The phenomenon of youth sports dropout is a complex and multifaceted dynamic, caused by the interaction of individual, relational, institutional, and cultural variables. To analyze the latent reasons that induce children and adolescents to abandon sports, a theoretical approach that is integrated and can entail the subjective dimension of experience alongside the features of the educational and social environment in which the activity occurs, as well as the organizational modalities peculiar to the sporting context, is needed.

One of the major acknowledged theoretical models that can be used as a basis for identifying the motivational dynamics of sports dropout is the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which is considered the most important among others. This theory indicates that the satisfaction of three fundamental psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—forms the basis of voluntary and long-term engagements in sports, for example. If the needs are not met effectively, intrinsic motivation will lose its strength, and the activity will be perceived as something forced, frustrating, or meaningless.

The risk for dropping out in youth sports is, therefore, raised by the occurrences that diminish the young athlete's feeling of ownership, obstruct the recognition of progress in the skills of the athletes, or happen in non-inclusive or poorly supportive relational environments. The sporting experience in this respect is directly related

to how the education-sports system creates conditions that allow for the development of motivation and identity.

As confirmed by the testimonies collected in focus groups, the theoretical perspective presented above also reflects the view of the implemented theory of the adolescents: a significant number of them say that they stopped engaging in sports because they got bored, the training was always the same, and they felt they did not have the right skills.

Typical phrases like "I was not having fun anymore," "training was always the same," or "I did not feel good enough" not only show how the gradual breakdown of a sense of fun and motivation is frequently the main symptom of disaffection but also indicate that the sporting event, when it stops giving satisfaction and becomes a heavy duty, young people usually lose their interest, sometimes they do it silently and slowly, thus they can be gone without showing their disengagement.

An additional important reason for this is a shift into competitive sport, which usually takes place at the age of 10-12 years. At this point, the enhanced training load, the focus on results, the existence of an internal team selection mechanism, and the comparison with higher-performing peers can negatively impact the identity of those kids who do not have the ambition to compete, leading them into a profound identity crisis. The transition from an activity perceived as a game to a performance-oriented practice may be confusing and separate the kids from the group. As one coach said: "When competitiveness comes, some kids start to feel that they are not in the right place. They do not want to train as hard anymore; they would rather do something else or have some time with friends" (Interview Coding, 2024).

The relational aspect is a very sensitive one among others in the sports context and is often underestimated. A lot of youth can talk about experiences of exclusion, favoritism, pressure from coaches or parents, dysfunctional group dynamics, and sometimes even bullying. Those who gave up sport after being "made fun of for their physique" or because "the coach always made the same players play" are typical examples of such cases. As Holt et al. (2008) underline, the social climate of sport is just as important as the technical skills: an empathetic, cooperative, and safe environment can bring about resilience and continuity of practice; on the other hand, a context that is perceived as hostile, competitive, or selective can lead to quicker processes of disaffection and abandonment.

Therefore, dropout should not be seen as only a "lack of will" by the young person, but rather as a response that is suitable for a setting that no longer provides the person's deepest relational, expressive, or identity-related needs. Here, recent literature highlights the need not only to address the issue of sports dropout but also to acknowledge it as a symptom of systemic criticalities in youth sports education models (Kirk, 2010; Digennaro, 2023).

1.2. The Role of Digital Technologies and Youth Culture

An increasingly important factor in the analysis of sports dropout in childhood is the impact of digital culture on the behaviors, expectations, and lifestyles of children and adolescents. In recent years, the daily use of digital devices—such as smartphones, tablets, consoles, and social media platforms—has become pervasive among younger generations, profoundly redefining their ways of socializing, entertaining, and learning (Twenge et al., 2018; Livingstone & Third, 2017).

According to data from Common Sense Media (Rideout et al., 2021), adolescents spend an average of over seven hours a day on non-school-related digital activities, often in solitary and passive contexts. This finding also raises significant questions regarding sports participation: time spent in front of screens represents time taken away from physical movement, in-person socialization, and experiential exploration of space. In this sense, digital is configured as a form of "symbolic competition" with respect to sporting activity, as it intercepts and satisfies needs for entertainment, connection, and recognition through alternative channels, characterized by greater immediacy and less physical and emotional commitment.

The qualitative data emerging from this research confirms the outlined picture. Many adolescents report preferring digital activities such as smartphone use, watching videos, or playing console games in their free time to spending time with friends or participating in sports training. Recurring expressions such as "sports are tiring," "I prefer to rest after school," or "my friends are all online" highlight a significant shift in leisure time patterns. Adults' testimonies are also emblematic: "The phone is the main competitor to sports today," "New generations seek quick, effortless experiences" (Interview Coding, 2024).

However, the issue is not limited to a mere temporal competition between digital and sports activities; it also affects the qualitative dimension of the experience. Social networks, in particular, trigger mechanisms of constant comparison,

performance anxiety, and fear of judgment, factors that can amplify insecurities and inhibitions, especially in adolescence. Nesi and Prinstein (2015) have highlighted how prolonged exposure to digital content can negatively impact body image, contributing to the avoidance of activities that involve physical visibility, such as sports.

At the same time, it would be reductive to adopt a demonizing view of technology. Recent studies (Staiano & Calvert, 2011; Borriane et al., 2021) show how, when used consciously and thoughtfully, digital technologies can be a powerful tool for promoting physical activity. Gamification, personalized training, and the social dimension of specific platforms—such as Strava, Zwift, Just Dance, Ring Fit Adventure, MyFitnessPal, or Nike Training—help make physical activity more engaging, trackable, and rewarding.

In the educational context, the challenge is to integrate digital technologies into the promotion of well-being, developing hybrid environments in which technology does not replace physical activity, but enhances its educational value. This is the case, for example, of school projects that combine physical education and media education, or extracurricular workshops that integrate outdoor activities and digital skills. Only through these approaches will it be possible to overcome the "screen versus sport" dichotomy and build educational bridges between youth culture and the culture of exercise.

One of the challenges of modern education is effectively utilizing digital technologies to create a more engaging and effective learning environment. It is important to develop hybrid environments where technology does not substitute physical activity but, at least, is of some educational value. For instance, projects in schools that combine physical education and media education or even workshops that mix outdoor activities and the latest digital skills are perfect examples. The so-called "screen versus sport" dichotomy cannot be solved unless these kinds of approaches are implemented. Not only will it be possible to break down the walls between youth culture and the culture of exercise but also to make educational bridges.

1.3. Gender Inequalities and Structural Barriers to Access to Sports

In the context of youth sports dropout, the gender inequalities narrative is central around the social and structural barriers that determine young people's access to,

participation in, and continuity in sports. A bulk of the international research (Guillet et al., 2006; Eime et al., 2015) has been pointing out that girls face more challenges in sticking to sports than boys of a similar age, especially between 11 and 14 years.

The contributing factors to this disparity are several and linked to each other: male sports domination in media; gender stereotype characters in family and school; fewer and less accessible sports activities for girls; and the nonexistence of safe and friendly spaces. The research from the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) states that 87.4% of girls aged 11-17 years do not engage in physical activities at the level recommended as a minimum, while the respective figure for boys is 77.6% (de Jesus et al., 2023). The difference has far-reaching implications for public health, educational equity, and the fostering of a conscious and inclusive body culture.

This provides a clear indication from the gathered data that these processes are central to the study. The interviews explain gender identity as a key factor behind the issues faced by the participants, such as boys being denied the opportunity to do activities traditionally seen as being of a feminine nature, girls being prohibited from joining groups, and parents using traditional models to decide what sports their children should practice. From the focus groups, it appears that the belief that "some sports are not for girls" and "girls are less capable of competitive sports" still holds ground in some places and among some people.

In addition to these significant problems, we encounter economic and material barriers, including a shortage of sports facilities, high activity costs, transportation logistics issues, and a lack of inclusive initiatives in marginalized areas. As one sports manager noted in an interview: "Youth sport is increasingly less democratic. Only those who can afford it participate" (Interview Summary, 2024). This is a statement that reflects a significant part of the truth: most of the time, access to sports is seen as a privilege, rather than an absolutely available right.

Addressing the issue of fairness in youth sports would therefore involve a radical and very profound rethinking of its place in education and society. It implies understanding it as a good that belongs to no one, a good that can embrace people regardless of their gender, background, and economic status. It also implies employing and coaching instructors who are adept at diversity management, who

can identify distress, develop an individual's potential, and construct truly inclusive learning environments.

2. Methodology

2.1. Qualitative Approach and Research Design

This research is situated within the qualitative-interpretive paradigm, which acknowledges the heuristic value of narratives, subjective representations, and educational contexts in understanding social and educational phenomena. This methodological approach matches perfectly the pedagogical perspective, as it enables us not only to see the event (sports dropout) but also to understand how and why this experience is lived, interpreted, and given meaning by those involved (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Mortari, 2007).

Qualitative methodology, in this case, should not be seen merely as a technique for collecting data but rather as an epistemological choice that recognizes the complexity of experiences, the singularity of life histories, and the situated dimension of the educational processes. In the case of sports dropout, it means that one should not concentrate solely on the causes but instead opt for a contextual and dialogic approach, which would allow the researcher to reflect on the multiple ways in which young people's experiences, as well as the views of the adults who are with them in sporting, academic, and family journeys, are shared.

In the research design, two primary methods for collecting data were combined:

Gathering the views of children through focus groups aged 8 to 13 years

Conducting semi-structured interviews with sports educators, teachers, club managers, and parents

The aim was to compare different sources (Patton, 1999) for an enriched reading of the data by identifying similarities and differences among the various stakeholders' voices of the youth sports ecosystem. Such triangulation not only contributes to the strengthening of the ecological validity of the findings but also to the recognition of the divergences in the discourses that provide disclosure of the areas of conflict, the underlined by the grey areas and the unrecognized by the quantitative research perspectives that are the most frequent ones of the ignored by the research literature of youth sports.

2.2. Participants and Context

The research was conducted in Italy between 2023 and 2024, in collaboration with schools, sports clubs, and association networks nationwide. The overall sample included:

- 113 children and youth (53 females, 60 males), participants in 12 focus groups held in primary and lower secondary schools;
- 35 adults (coaches, physical education teachers, sports managers, and parents) were interviewed individually or in small groups.

Participants were selected through purposeful sampling, aimed at ensuring maximum diversity in terms of age, gender, geographic origin, sporting experience (active, interrupted, never started), type of discipline (individual or team, competitive or amateur), and educational role.

The decision to involve children and preadolescents responds to the need to enhance their voices and the meanings attributed to the sporting experience, according to a child-centered approach (Christensen & James, 2008), which recognizes minors as competent social actors. The focus groups were conducted in familiar school environments, using playful and dialogic methods that encouraged free expression, including narrative and graphic stimuli (drawings, stories, open-ended questions).

Interviews with adults allowed us to explore the systemic and relational dimensions of the phenomenon, gathering the perceptions of those who support young people daily in their sporting and educational journey. The variety of profiles ensured a plurality of perspectives—technical-didactic, pedagogical, organizational, and affective-parental—contributing to the construction of a polyphonic and contextualized understanding of sporting dropout.

All participants provided written informed consent; for minors, authorization from their parents or legal guardians was also obtained. The project adhered to the ethical guidelines for educational research, with a particular focus on protecting privacy, anonymity, and fostering a non-judgmental space for dialogue.

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Activities to gather data spanned six months, during which the procedure was handled with the intention of creating a relational climate characterized by trust, active listening, and genuine communication. The focus groups, which lasted between 60 and 90 minutes on average, were recorded in their entirety and subsequently transcribed. For the semi-structured interviews, both in-person and virtual, a flexible thematic framework was applied that revolved around the main themes addressed by the interviewees, including witnessed or experienced dropout events, perceived motivations, educational relationships, the impact of digital technologies, logistical and financial obstacles, and suggestions for improvement.

For data analysis, the thematic coding (thematic analysis) method was used to significant effect, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and supported by the software NVivo (version 14). This software was instrumental in the systematic structuring of over 250,000 words of transcripts, thereby easing the process of identifying common patterns, significant differences, and problematic areas. The process for analysis was organized into five main stages:

- Familiarization with the data: analytical reading of the transcripts and annotation of first impressions.
- Initial coding: assigning labels to significant text segments (e.g., "boredom," "parental pressure," "excessive phone use," "lack of structure").
- Theme generation: grouping codes into thematic macro-categories (e.g., "intrinsic motivations," "structural barriers," "relational climate").
- Review and refinement: inter-coder comparison, checking for internal consistency of themes, and construction of a concept map.
- Interpretive narrative: writing the results in a discursive and pedagogically oriented format, integrating the participants' voices.

The use of NVivo ensured transparent and traceable management of the analytical process, reducing the risk of subjective interpretations and promoting greater hermeneutic depth. Comparison of the coding performed by different researchers also ensured intersubjective validation, thereby strengthening the overall credibility and reliability of the research.

2.4. Validity, Limitations, and Prospects

As is typical in any qualitative investigation, the validity of the interpretative model is at the core of this study, which does not focus on the statistical generalization of the results but rather on the deep, contextualized, and situated understanding of the phenomenon in question. The work's principal accomplishments are reflected in the abundance of testimonies gathered, the blending of different sources, and the application of stringent textual analysis instruments that enabled the researchers to unravel the dropout of youth sports in a multifaceted and nuanced manner.

However, it is still necessary to point out some methodological limitations that this research must take into account. The sample, while it ensures a substantial heterogeneity, cannot be considered a representative one of the whole Italian youth population. Also, the voluntary nature of participation contributed to the inclusion of more thoughtful and socio-emotionally engaged individuals. Lastly, the absence of longitudinal follow-up restrains the capacity to track the development of the individual trajectories over time and to pinpoint any alterations in experiences and choices.

Even with these limitations, the results give strong support to educational research and have potential use for planning and designing training interventions for inclusion, prevention, and promotion of well-being. The choice of methodology has fostered us to bring to light the narratives that are most of the time overlooked, thus, not only acknowledging their epistemological value but also recognizing the interpretative complexity of a phenomenon that is still frequently underrated by being presented simply as numbers or through the lens of stereotypes.

3. Results and Discussion

Data analysis from focus groups of children, interviews of parents, teachers, and coaches has provided an intricate and multidimensional representation of the phenomenon of sports abandonment during childhood. The decision to use a qualitative approach opened the door for a deeper investigation of the relational, motivational, and cultural dynamics that lead to the choice to give up sports, thus, broadening the subjective experiences and multiple to increase the validity scope of the interpretative findings, the results were supported through triangulation with quantitative data from questionnaires administered in previous nationwide

studies conducted between 2023 and 2024. This combination enabled us to identify links between the newly uncovered findings and the general trends, providing a more ample and situated comprehension of the phenomenon.

The results are presented in three thematic subsections:

- The motivations expressed by young people, with particular attention to emotional experiences, perceptions of competence, and group dynamics.
- The perceptions of adults highlight the tensions between educational expectations, performance pressures, and structural limitations.
- The educational proposals that emerged aimed at preventing dropout and promoting an inclusive, participatory, and sustainable sports culture.

The testimonies included in the focus groups point to the various factors that lead to young people's turning off sports. The most commonly cited reasons can be linked to three main interpretative categories: the disappearance of delight and playfulness, the arrival of interpersonal problems, and the rivalry with other matters, especially those connected with digital culture.

Numerous kids and teenagers mentioned that sports, which had initially been a game, had eventually lost the fun aspect. Several times, the young people used the phrases "I was not having fun anymore," "it was always the same," "I could not wait for training to end" to signal the change of the sports experience into one that is perceived as both varied and obligatory. Such a view is deeply connected with the practice of competitive models at an early stage, the monotony of the training sessions, and the overemphasis on performance.

According to Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), the non-satisfaction of the basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness is the primary source of negative motivation. The youngsters who are not feeling like main characters of their own lives, do not see the progress of their skills, or have not yet found a positive relational environment in the team, usually witness that their intrinsic motivation decreases, which in turn fosters the disengagement and, frequently, the dropout phenomenon.

3.1. Reasons for dropping out expressed by children and adolescents

The qualitative evidence from the focus groups aligns well with the numbers presented in the study "Determining factors of sports dropout among young scholars: a cross-sectional analysis in the 8-13 year-old age group" (2024). According to this research, the main reasons for sports drop were: loss of interest (38.3%), boredom (28.1%), peer pressure (25.6%), and perceived over-demanding schoolwork (21.5%).

One important thing to mention is that the average age at which dropouts occur is between 10 and 12 years, which corresponds to the transition to preadolescence, and often marks the beginning of competitive activity. Even in focus groups, this stage is referred to as a "break" moment where the rise of expectations, the increase of performance anxiety, and the depletion of the physical body cause a change from the previous state of being to one of disaffection and discomfort.

Another area of significant concern is the relational dimension. One of the main points raised in the focus group discussions was the feeling or experience of being left out of the group, having no friends in the team, coaches' favoritism, and parental pressure. A few of them mentioned instances when they were mocked because of their bodies or performance. For instance, one girl said, "They made fun of the way I ran, and no one ever stood up for me." Another said, "The coach always chose the same players. I was only there to make up the numbers." These psychosocial interactions are supported by the quantitative data, where the "lack of positive relationships" and the "absence of friendships in the sports group" are two of the most significant factors leading to girls who seem to be more affected by the risk of dropping out (59.6%) compared to boys."

Namely, the relational component plays a significant role in maintaining the motivation to participate in general: when one is missing, sport linkage is weakened and sometimes can even break down.

Moreover, the third theme that the participants raised was the competition between sports and digital interests. Many youngsters are very straightforward in expressing that they prefer activities that go with smartphones, video games, or social media because "these are more convenient," "you do not get sweaty," or "you can just be at home." Here, sport is still considered an activity of crisis, time consumption, and typical lethargy, hence being the most frequent victim of the trade-off with the young people's more passive, but more rewarding, free time.

This is also supported by the questionnaire data: a large percentage of students report that they would rather engage in other leisure activities (mostly domestic and digital) and that this is one of the reasons for their dropout. Free time is managed differently from before, and people are also changing culturally in their relationship with the body, movement, and face-to-face interaction.

3.2. Adult Perceptions: Coaches, Parents, and Teachers

Adult interviews conducted with people involved in youth education and sports programs offer a complementary—and sometimes contradictory—perspective on what the kids have said. In particular, coaches show a definite understanding of the troubles they face in keeping the energy levels up high in the 10–13 age group. Some of them talk of a "motivational crisis" connected with the psychophysical changes of puberty, others only limit themselves to complaining of the excessive rigidity of the sports system, which, by the early imposition of competitive models, is not always compatible with developmental needs: "With the arrival of competitive sport, we lose many kids. Not everyone is ready to handle the pressure."

Parents seem to be equally split in their views. Some of them hardly ever support the idea of dropout, attributing it to internal factors rather than external ones, such as school, technology, or laziness. In contrast, others do not hesitate to admit that they themselves are the causes of overpressure. A mother's statement is emblematic: "We wanted him to play soccer because we liked it, but he did not. In the end, he gave it all up." The remarks point out the double-edged nature of family expectations that, on the one hand, can be at odds with children's personal inclinations and, on the other, provoke such intense conflicts that disengagement becomes inevitable.

In the end, teachers are among those who most regret the poor integration between school and sports that usually leads students to make less fortunate choices regarding their studies and physical activities. A few teachers talk up the necessity of rejuvenating physical education and encouraging well-organized partnerships between schools and sports clubs, not only as a risk-reduction strategy for school dropout but also as a means of calming adolescent distress.

These perceptions are supported by quantitative data from the study "Determinants and reasons for participation and dropout in sports activities in Italy," according to which:

- 33% of adolescents dropped out due to compatibility issues with school commitments;
- 27.3% indicated a lack of personal motivation;
- 21.9% reported a lack of free time.

This evidence reinforces the qualitative interpretation that dropout from sports cannot be traced to a single cause, but rather represents the result of a combination of emotional, relational, and organizational factors. In particular, it clearly emerges that the lack of communication and coordination between family, school, and sport constitutes one of the principal vulnerabilities in young people's sports participation journey.

3.3. Educational Proposals and Prevention Strategies

Alongside the emergence of critical issues, the focus groups and interviews yielded a significant set of proposals, which can be interpreted as operational guidelines for a pedagogical rethinking of youth sports. Specifically, four strategic directions emerge as priorities for preventing dropouts and promoting an inclusive sports culture.

1. Making sport more inclusive and flexible. Young people want environments where they can have fun, experiment, and make mistakes without fear of judgment. Adults, for their part, emphasize the need for more solid pedagogical training for coaches, with adequate interpersonal and communication skills. The competitive model, focused on efficiency and results, is widely criticized as inadequate for the developmental and educational needs of young people.

2. Promoting integration between school, family, and sport. The fragmentation of educational contexts emerges as one of the main factors leading to disengagement. Some teachers propose the implementation of shared projects, school schedules compatible with sports activities, and extracurricular activities that promote physical activity. The goal is to build an educational community that supports the child in a coherent, synergistic, and continuous manner.

3. Ensure economic and territorial accessibility. Qualitative and quantitative evidence reveal strong concerns about the high costs of sports activities, which tend to exclude families with fewer resources. Some parents advocate for the

introduction of financial incentives, while others deplore the lack of facilities in small towns. A structural public investment is needed to make sport a genuine right, not a privilege.

4. Educate in the conscious use of technology. Technology should not be conceived as an antagonist to sport, but rather as a potential ally. Some participants suggest using apps, interactive games, and multimedia content to encourage physical activity and foster engagement. The goal is to build a bridge between the digital language of the new generations and the culture of the body, well-being, and in-person socializing.

Quantitative data also confirm the relevance of these directions. In the questionnaires, young people indicate as desirable elements: more friends (32.1%), more fun activities (28.7%), and more empathetic coaches (26.9%). The convergence of qualitative and quantitative data suggests that the key to combating dropout from sports lies not in increased performance, but in recognizing and valuing young people's subjective experience, their needs, their emotions, and their desire to belong.

Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

The phenomenon of youth sports dropout, as conceptualized after reviewing qualitative and quantitative evidence, manifests itself as a multidimensional process where subjective experiences, relational dynamics, and sociocultural conditions of the child's and adolescent's upbringing are tightly intertwined. Not so much as a result of an individual's lack of motivation, sports dropout is seen to be a leading symptom of a fractured education system. Increasingly, schools, families, and sports are operating without a shared vision centered on the child's welfare and comprehensive development.

The collective voices from focus groups and interviews equally show how important it is for the people concerned that they be recognized, heard, and allowed to take part. Young people ask not only that they be allowed to experience sport as a place for genuine expression, recreation, and discovery, but also that it not be treated purely as a performance to be demonstrated or a task to be attended to. The reference to play and the relational aspect of sports is in connection with a pedagogical viewpoint that acknowledges the body, movement, and interaction

with others as parts of one's personal growth and whole education (Parlebas, 2001; Whitehead, 2010).

Moreover, the abandonment of sports is not evenly spread. However, it has different impacts depending on factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, stage of development, and local resources. Girls are especially more sensitive to this issue as a result of a mixture of factors, including body insecurity, cultural impediments, the lack of role models, and the shortage of safe and friendly areas. These findings underscore the need for programs that prioritize social fairness and gender justice, aligning with the 2030 Development Agenda, as articulated by UNESCO (2015).

One more thing that cannot be overlooked is how the change of youth culture patterns and leisure time has been impacted by technology. The rise of digital interests as perfect substitutes for sports, besides the difficulty of harmonizing studies with physical exercises, calls for a deep-in-the-core change of how schools relate to the youth. The division between sport and technology is a pedagogical trap. What we need is a good integration that can draw the potential of both dimensions, educating students on the use of digital tools deliberately and creatively, which can also be a source of well-being and social interaction.

In this light, the pedagogical implications of the study are numerous and interrelated. Firstly, the pedagogical training of instructors, teachers, and parents has to be activated and promoted so that they can recognize the sporting experience as an educational process, and not only as a way that leads to performance, selection, or success. The culture of sport as an educational right, adequate to the developmental needs of young people, offering them protected environments, caring relationships, and opportunities for holistic growth, has to be brought to the fore.

Secondly, the dialogue and cooperation among the different educational stakeholders must be encouraged as part of the necessary measures. The schools, families, sports clubs, and local institutions need to collaborate to create personalized, accessible, and coherent programs, which are a continuous support for young people not only in everyday life but also during the moment of change, for example, moving from primary to secondary school or from recreational to competitive activities.

Firstly, the question of inclusive and sustainable National Sports should be dealt with seriously. What is implied here is the breaking down of all kinds of barriers,

such as economic and transport, so that every single person will be in a position to access sports. What is more, differences between individuals should be appreciated, and efforts should be made continuously to encourage educational planning. From this perspective, the problem of dropout from sports cannot be seen as an individual's issue, but rather as a sign that the education system either functions well or not at all.

To sum up, the research presented here advocates for a change in the paradigm: it is not about "keeping" young people in sports at any cost, but rather about the creation of sports environments that are genuinely educational and where they want to stay because they feel recognized, welcomed, and valued. It will only be in this manner that the abandonment phenomenon can be defeated effectively, and the return of sport to its initial function, that is to be a place of development, relationships, and citizenship, can be guaranteed.

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