

STORIE DI CORPI IN PANDEMIA: L'ESPERIENZA FRANCESE DI GLOBAL ETHNIK COME “FACILITATORE DEL PROGETTO DI VITA

STORIES OF BODIES IN THE PANDEMIC: THE FRENCH GLOBAL ETHNIK EXPERIENCE AS A “FACILITATOR” OF THE LIFE PROJECT

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Abstract¹

It was decided to carry out an exploratory research activity using the semi-structured interview method (Mantovani, 1998) with the following request: “Describe your experience related to African dance during the lockdown period”. Twenty semi-structured interviews were carried out with young French adults with Down Syndrome, members of the Global Ethnik association as intermediate level African dance performers. The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants, and then transcribed verbatim. It was decided to carry out a content analysis of the interviews by adopting the Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as a theoretical and methodological foundation with specific reference to the constructivist epistemological paradigm (Charmaz, 2005). The thematic analysis was supported by the use of the Nvivo software (Richards, 1999). The participants, involved in the exploratory study through a snowball sampling (Corbetta, 2014) including 10 men and 10 women, were aged between 20 and 32 years.

Si è scelto di realizzare una ricerca esplorativa, avvalendosi dello strumento dell'intervista semistrutturata (Mantovani, 1998) adottando la seguente sollecitazione “Narra la tua esperienza connessa alla danza africana durante il periodo di lockdown”. Sono state realizzate venti interviste semi-strutturate con giovani adulti francesi con sindrome di Down, membri dell'associazione Global Ethnik, quali danzatori di livello intermedio. Le interviste sono state audio-registrate con il consenso dei partecipanti e poi trascritte parola per parola. Si è deciso di effettuare un'analisi tematica delle interviste adottando la Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) quale substrato teorico e metodologico con specifico riferimento al paradigma epistemologico costruttivista (Charmaz, 2005). L'analisi tematica è stata supportata dall'uso del software Nvivo (Richards, 1999). I partecipanti, coinvolti nello studio esplorativo attraverso un campionamento a palle di neve (Corbetta, 2014), di cui 10 uomini e 10 donne, hanno un'età compresa tra i 20 ei 32 anni.

Keywords

life- project; pandemic; lockdown, sport; disability
progetto di vita, pandemia, lockdown, disabilità

1 Il contributo è stato concepito e progettato da entrambi gli autori. D. Tafuri è autore dell'introduzione e V.P. Cesarano è autrice dei paragrafi 1, 2 e 3 e delle conclusioni.

Introduction

Since 1981, every 3rd of December we celebrate the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. This event, introduced in 1981 to promote the rights and well-being of persons with disabilities, led the United Nations to adopt, in 2006, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This document reaffirms the rights of people with disabilities, the principle of equality and the need to ensure their full and effective participation in the political, social, economic and cultural spheres of society, taking the necessary measures to identify and eradicate all those obstacles limiting the respect of these inalienable rights. Today's pandemic situation seems to complicate even more the realization of the rights of the disabled, which are crucial to fulfilling the core promise of the 2030 Agenda: "leave no one behind" by building a world in which all people can enjoy equal opportunities, participate in decision-making processes and actually benefit from economic, social, political and cultural life. Measures to counter the risk of Covid-19 infection have strongly affected the "health" of people with disabilities. This is not just a matter of "body health", but, as the World Health Organization has recognized, it involves a "state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not simply the absence of a disease or an infirmity" (WHO, 1948). Achieving this state of well-being for people with disabilities entails many critical issues. Services to foster the growth and development of people with disabilities are often insufficient, and continue to embrace a medicalized and orthopedic paradigm. The provision of residential care for people with disabilities is highly uneven across the Italian territory: from health and care facilities, aimed at providing treatment and rehabilitation services (the so-called nursing home for the disabled), to services of a social or socio-assistance nature, such as housing and family-type communities or group-apartments. It is no longer possible to wait any longer to deal with the many long-outstanding critical issues, now exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic. The Coronavirus pandemic has further highlighted old and new problems, placing people with disabilities - and, in particular, those with intellectual disabilities and neurodevelopmental disorders, together with their families - in an extremely difficult situation. A situation that demonstrates the delay in the implementation of the principles on which the 2030 Agenda is based, which refers to a strengthening of national healthcare services and the improvement of all those facilities that may enable an effective access to services for all people. In Italy, people with disabilities are the first to suffer from shortcomings of the health system, have less access to education, fewer economic opportunities and reach higher poverty rates than non-disabled people. The causes of this discomfort have been known for some time: lack of services, limitations in the access to information technology, justice and transport, and inadequate or dilapidated infrastructure. Many (and sometimes too many) are the obstacles that people with disabilities and their families must overcome every day. But this is not enough. People with disabilities are also at greater risk of violence: disabled children are four times more likely to experience violence than non-disabled children. Disabled adults are more likely to experience violence too. The risk factors stem from stigma, discrimination and ignorance, as well as from a lack of social support for their caregivers. A situation that, as the Italian National Institute for Statistics (ISTAT) data from March to June 2020 confirmed, got worse during the lockdown period. The pandemic demonstrated that there is still a long way to go to fully understand the human rights model of disability enshrined in the UN Convention, and thus to fully implement its provisions.

Not only has the process of inclusion been slowed down in these difficult times, but it has been necessary to reaffirm what was hoped to be obvious, namely that even people with disabilities have the right to live like all the other human beings. The worldwide percentage of deaths from Covid-19 related to people with disabilities ranges from 19% to 72%, depending on the country. It is worrisome that the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), when referring to states that adopted protocols for deciding who can have access to intensive care treatment, had to reaffirm that "People with illnesses and disabilities have a chance for life, and must be helped like any other citizen of our global community". On

a closer perspective for us, the European Parliament (motion for resolution 2020/2680) noted that “in some member states, people with intellectual disabilities have been denied medical care, confined to institutions in conditions of social isolation, without being able to be visited by their families or return to their homes, and that discriminatory triage guidelines have been introduced”. To conclude, we could affirm with certainty that the pandemic has proved the actual situation to be like a house built on sand, and that the excellent principles of inclusion were designed for a society that was culturally unprepared and scarcely sensitive to disability. No regulation will be sufficient to bring about real changes in a social substratum that could be marked by high efficiency, productivity, performance skills, and the enjoyment of goods with high levels of achievement. Forecasts for the near future will not improve without a deep change. The concern of the most attentive observers is now focused on the effects that the pressure from the crisis will generate in terms of difficult job finding, economic poverty, and social isolation for a category of people who is already so fragile. Based on this, it was decided to explore the African dance sports experience carried out by 20 young French adults with Down Syndrome at the Global Ethnik association.

1. The corporeal dimension of disability

Alongside these issues, Covid-19 has shed light on the theme of the corporeal dimension of disability, relegating the “vulnerability” of the bodies of disabled people to further isolation, and separating physical well-being from the psychological one, since social networks and social, health and educational services supporting and promoting the quality of life of disabled people have been lacking. This vulnerability should be linked to the lack of interventions from a bio-psychosocial perspective during the emergency caused by the pandemic.

The conceptual elaboration of the body - which travels through different paths of knowledge as a historical-cultural construct (Mariani 2005, Frasca 2006), as widely demonstrated by interdisciplinary studies - has been increasingly affirmed also in the pedagogical-specialist reflection (Zappaterra, 2010). The corporeal dimension in disability emerges as a dimension that diachronically sees an evolution from exclusion, marginalization and concealment in the past, to a recognition as an unavoidable dimension of the development of the self today, of the formation of identity, and of the formative and relational processes of the disabled person. This growing affirmation of the corporeal dimension perfectly coincides with the evolution of the image of disability; an image that only recently has been freed from negative images, limits, difficulties and suffering (Zappaterra, 2010). Mythology, classical literature, medieval iconography and the philosophical reflection of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries show a denied, devalued and concealed image of the disabled body for being sick, weak and deformed, and therefore stigmatized and placed *ex limine* with respect to the ideological-cultural space of the city (Foucault 1976). In ancient and medieval times, the body of the disabled became the object of stigmatization, of a negative stigmatization. All those with physical or mental deficits were excluded from ordinary social life and condemned to a state of permanent marginalization, as Goffman and Fratini - in the specific case of disability - remind us (Goffman 1963, Fratini 1997). If we take a look at the images, we can see that mythology and ancient literature present us with the emblematic figure of a sick body, that of Philoctetes, the warrior narrated by Homer and the protagonist of the Sophocles’ tragedy, who was cruelly abandoned on the island of Lemnos by Odysseus and his companions, because a serious leg injury condemned him to a state of handicap. Philoctetes was a disadvantaged person, his body no longer responded to the Aretaic model of the *καλός και αγαθός*, of the beautiful and the good - especially, to quote Rosella Frasca’s studies - of the agonistic Aretaic model (Frasca, 2006). The body deformity or weakness was assimilated to a personal or ancestral guilt, to be paid with infanticide (the Cicero, the Taygetos for the Greeks and the Tarpeian Rock for the Romans, are sadly famous places in this regard) or with the less (but still) violent practice of the exposure, the abandonment. Since they could not scientifically explain the presence of a deformed body, they appealed to explanations with no scientific foundation (Zappaterra 2003). In ancient Rome, for example, the pre-Romulus Leges

Regiae declared that whoever killed a deformed infant was not criminally punishable, on condition that he did it at the infant's birth, and therefore immediately: *cito necatus... ad deformitatem puer*. The condition of the disabled and the insane is also well represented by the *Narrenschiff*, the "ship of fools" that in, the late Middle Ages, sailed up the rivers of the Rhineland and the Flemish canals, transporting the disabled from one city to another. This "liminal situation of the mad", as Foucault defined it (Foucault 1976), is to be understood in its strict sense, but also in a metaphorical perspective within the ideological-cultural space marked by the city line. It is therefore a paradigm of the conception of the handicap that existed in the imagination and in social dynamics until the beginning of the Modern Age. In this period, an approach to disability, based on anatomico-physiological knowledge, began to take shape. This approach placed the use of the senses in the foreground, and was influenced by Condillac's sensory philosophy and Berkeley's studies on perception (Trisciuzzi 2003), which influenced Jean Marc Gaspard Itard's well-known pedagogical experience on the wild boy of Aveyron, as well as Seguin's experience on the education of the "idiots", but also Charles De L'Épée's less well-known experience in the field and the birth of sign language for the deaf, in which the body is the main character as it turns the simple gesture into a "sign" or *chereme*, where the hand, the face, the torso and the body as a whole become communicative mediators. Or just think about Valentin Haüy's experience, the scholar and forerunner of the Braille method, who first introduced the use of the haptic dimension, i.e., *tactility*, as a vicarious dimension with respect to the deficient sense, i.e., the sight (Zappaterra 2003). Certainly, in this era, there was an instrumental use of the body of the disabled person. It was common to expose the disabled in order to move people to compassion and raise funds for their livelihood (Michael Mellor, 2008). Iconography often shows disabled children or adults begging for alms in the churchyards or in specific places in the city, as we can see in Jean-Frédéric Schall's painting of the *Jeune aveugle du Pont Neuf*, the blind child on the Pont Neuf in Paris, or in Hieronymus Bosch's and Pieter Bruegel's paintings. Attitudes towards the disabled began to change from the Modern Age onwards, and harsh repression of begging and vagrancy was unleashed in all European countries. Literary works of the time, like novels, *fabliaux* and *picaresque* novels, describe the disabled as shiftless idlers, expressing a changing social attitude which was no longer willing to the fatalistic acceptance of disability. The Twentieth century provided a great tribute to the reevaluation of the body thanks to studies on psychomotricity, the contribution of neuroscience, the study of brain-mind-body connections, and especially the emergence of a scientific approach to the study of different types of disabilities. Worthy of mention is Maria Montessori's contribution (along with Giuseppe Ferruccio Montesano's one, as well as the one provided by their teacher Sante de Sanctis) and her scientific pedagogy, where the underlying strategy relied on sensorimotor stimulation, on touching and manipulating letters to help even mentally retarded children learn to read and write (Montessori 1909). This highlighted the role of the body in the development of potentialities and in the formative processes of the disabled person; an important role testified by studies in the field, also thanks to the autobiographical methodology, by people with disabilities who narrate the priority role of the body in the process of diversity acceptance, no longer felt as a stigma but accepted and shown as one of the essential characteristics of the self (Trisciuzzi et al. 2006). The process of identity building begins with the body, since the intrapsychic and internally-socialized self-image of people with disabilities today is nourished by a self-perception that flows through a body which is no longer the object of negative stigmatization, as evidenced by the trends of a recent "culture" of disability. In the evolution that the body / disability combination has gone through during the Twentieth century, and that is currently going through today, we chose to propose two topics: firstly, the role played by the body starting - almost paradoxically - from the studies carried out on the type of disability that mostly affects the body and compromises movement, namely infantile cerebral palsy or cerebropathy. Adriano Milani Comparetti's contribution (brother of the more famous Don Milani), a figure of excellence in the field of infantile cerebral palsy, is fundamental in this field: the scholar, a doctor and pedagogue at the same time, revealed the more social and socializing aspect of movement and motor training. He

coined the syntagm “social rehabilitation” to refer to the positive aspects of movement in itself, carried out outside the clinical setting, in every sphere of life of the disabled person (Milani and Comaparetti 1982). Therefore, the motor activity of the person with cerebral palsy will not only benefit from the technical-rehabilitative intervention tout court, but will also have a positive effect on the more general structuring of the subject’s personality, in a holistic approach to the person that made Milani Comparetti a forerunner of reflections on the inclusion of disability of the Nineties, though he operated between the Fifties and the Eighties (Trisciuzzi 2005). A further focus on the corporeity/disability binomial can be found by delving into the educational value of sports practice for people with disabilities, and the social and cultural phenomenon of the Paralympic Games. The pedagogical-specialist field, which traditionally has investigated mainly the worlds of school and disability in childhood, in fact, is increasingly broadening today - in line with what is expressed in the recent “UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities” - to the problems that emerge with regard to work integration, the right to leisure and free time, and basically to the search for an adult identity by the disabled person. Therefore, within this broadened horizon of perspective of the Special Pedagogy studies we can include and investigate the formative value of the body dimension, the educational and social value of sport for the disabled, and the *raison d’être* of the Paralympic Movement as a social and educational phenomenon. Without wishing to retrace the complex events and the movements that led to the current configuration of the Paralympics, we can rightfully affirm that these events are nothing more than a part of the history of the social inclusion of the disabled, the one that concerns their “sports page”, a history marked by the contribution of extraordinary personalities who, in a pioneering way but with an indelible mark, opened up new dimensions to disability, starting precisely from the body (Zappaterra, 2010). A curious analogy can be noted in this regard between Sir Ludwig Guttmann’s work and figure - President of the International Stoke Mandeville Games Federation and Father of the Paralympics - and Antonio Maglio, father of the Italian Paralympics, thanks to whom, in 1960, the annual Stoke Mandeville Games were moved to Rome to coincide with the XVII Olympic Games. Both Guttmann and Maglio shared a belief in the therapeutic value of sport, in the “sports therapy” as the most natural form of rehabilitation for it can improve concentration, motor coordination, muscle weakness and spasticity; however, above all, both of them recognized the emergence of that playful and competitive dimension in the disciplined use of sports practice that animates the will of the disabled person, going beyond the traditional methods of physiotherapy and exercising those moral and volitional resources that disability has often humiliated (Guttmann 1977a, Arrigoni 2008). Not by chance, *Spirit in motion* would later become the motto of the Paralympic Movement. In this regard, we know how much Guttmann insisted on the importance of sport as social reintegration, and on the need for a deeper understanding, in society and culture, between non-disabled and disabled people (Guttmann 1977b). The corporeity of the disabled person in sport shows positive images of full integration, dynamism and social participation, such as those offered by Oscar Pistorius or Natalie Du Toit. These positive images, in which the corporeal dimension is in the foreground, like a real breakthrough even because of mediatization, can help produce a new vision of disability, allowing to develop the understanding that it transcends individual singularity since diversity, even in the body, intrinsically and transversally characterizes the human being (Zappaterra 2008). In conclusion, I agree wholeheartedly with Candido Cannavò’s words (who died not long ago) dedicated to the Paralympic phenomenon. As he wrote: “I didn’t dare to imagine [...] that Paralympics would take off so well to become today the most advanced beacon of cultural growth in the world” (Arrigoni 2008).

2. The reality of Global Ethnik in the French context: exploring African dance experiences in the period of the pandemic

In the face of a society that is still discriminating, in the national and international context, it is often the associations that take care of the life project of the disabled, implementing many activities that meet the needs of sociability, professional integration, and the opportunity to

engage in hobbies and sports activities. The latter emphasize the corporeal and relational dimension. In this context, we understand sport as a possible mediator of contemporary culture, able to generate especially valuable and relational needs (Russo, 2013). Therefore, sport is considered a social event (Fraile Aranda, 2012), permeated with positive values, and thus capable of generating social inclusion paths. The sense of identity is closely related to the idea of one's own body and to the acceptance that one has of it, playing an important role also with respect to what one feels capable of doing or not (Gomez Paloma, Sgambelluri, 2012). The educational power of sport lies in its power to consolidate one's own sense of self-efficacy, and to facilitate personal empowerment (Visentin, 2016). Studies carried out at international level (Radzevicinè, 2007; Samsonienè et al., 2008; Saebu, Sorensen, 2011; Jaarsma et al., 2013), by comparing groups of subjects participating in sports activities with groups of subjects not involved in sports, showed that the formers are more independent in terms of movement, have higher levels of social participation and a better quality of life than the latter. Therefore, having a positive effect on both the physical and psychological spheres of athletes, sports activity has an impact on the whole construct of *Quality of Life* (Shalock, Verdugo Alonso, 2006). It directly influences the domains of physical well-being, personal development and social inclusion, acting indirectly on those related to emotional well-being and self-determination (Giaconi, 2015).

Based on this, it was decided to explore the African dance sports experience carried out by 20 young French adults with Down Syndrome at the Global Ethnik association.

Founded in 2005, the French association Global Ethnik delivers dance and percussion classes, dance workshops and programs. The association is also involved in choreographic creation of contemporary African dance, and develops cultural activities in an interdisciplinary artistic context, offering also animation shows. Since 2015, the association has also been organizing African dance workshops for adolescents and young adults with Down Syndrome, and for their families. Young disabled people are involved in African dance performances and projects in schools, to promote the inclusion of differences through the art of African dance. During the pandemic, African dance activities were first held online and then in open spaces.

As a result, it was decided to explore the African dance experience, during the lockdown following the COVID-19 pandemic, carried out by 20 young French adults with Down Syndrome.

Considering this scenario, it was decided to carry out an exploratory research activity using the semi-structured interview method (Mantovani, 1998) with the following request: "Describe your experience related to African dance during the lockdown period". In a semi-structured interview the topic of the research is provided by the interviewer, but the subject is given complete freedom to choose both the contents and the sequence; the contents to be explored are requested by the researcher, but are not proposed as a series of questions. Rather, they are a reminder of the themes to be paid more attention to, to be resumed, to be deepened or to be proposed at the end of the interview if the subject has not dealt with them spontaneously. Therefore, the theme gets expressed, the subject speaks freely, and the interviewer uses the non-directive techniques, where the sequence and the slant of the theme are freely chosen by the subject (Mantovani, 1996). Twenty semi-structured interviews were carried out with young French adults with Down Syndrome, members of the Global Ethnik association as intermediate level African dance performers. The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants, and then transcribed verbatim. It was decided to carry out a content analysis of the interviews by adopting the Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as a theoretical and methodological foundation with specific reference to the constructivist epistemological paradigm (Charmaz, 2005). The thematic analysis was supported by the use of the Nvivo software (Richards, 1999). The participants, involved in the exploratory study through a snowball sampling (Corbetta, 2014) including 10 men and 10 women, were all aged between 20 and 32 years.

All participants held a secondary school diploma. Most of them were engaged in internship or placement activities. The generative research question underlying the qualitative analysis was produced from the formula expressed by Glaser (1998) "What's going here?", which in the case of the research presented here, was articulated as follows: How does the experience of

African dance of young adults with Down syndrome unfold in the context of the French association Global Ethnik? The analysis of the corpus of the texts included an initial or open coding phase, analyzing the texts line by line with reference to the “all is data” formula underlying a Grounded-type methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This coding phase led to identifying the nodes, i.e., those themes, concepts and topics highlighted by the researcher while reading and exploring the content of the research materials. In a subsequent step, the nodes were merged since some of them were found to be overlapping with each other, and were then further reduced. In the focused coding phase, a series of macro-categories were identified through a process of re-labeling of the first labels. For each macro-category the nodes that contributed to their definition were identified and categorized. Such work of classification and aggregation of the nodes for formulating the macro-categories was carried out with the support of the Nvivo software by generating Sets, intended as “conceptual containers” allowing to group those concepts afferent to the identified macro-categories. A more in-depth analysis of these Sets will be presented in the following paragraph.

3. Analysis of the macro-categories

The macro-category “African dance as self-discovery” refers to the meanings attributed by the participants to African dance as a discovering of identity, inasmuch as African dance makes it possible to undertake a journey towards discovering oneself, one’s own talents and resources, as well as one’s own limits: “African dance has helped me understand who I really am and what I want to be in my future”; “Since I have been practicing this sport, I have realized that I am really good at dance, I know how to practice a sport, whereas I thought I could not practice any before”; “Thanks to African dance, I am working a lot on my coordination limits and I am learning how to keep up with the rhythm”. The possibility of continuing to practice African dance during the pandemic facilitated the creation of a space and a time to discover and re-discover one’s way of being in the world, and the corporeal dimension of this being in the world by exploring the fears towards one’s own body, perceived as fragile in the face of Covid- 19 but also capable of expressing these same fears through African dance, which then became the object of shared reflection during African dance classes: “When everything was normal, I never had time to think about myself, but when I was at home after dancing because of Covid-19 restrictions, I began to think about myself and how I behave with my family and friends, and I want to improve this; “ I am so afraid that this virus can weaken my body and that of the ones I love; “ Our teacher made us perform exercises and asked us to make our fears dance, so as to get them out of our body and our head”; “ Often, after classes, we talk about how we are experiencing this virus, our emotions. It helps me because, if I understand my fears, I can fight them, and I also feel stronger to do what I want to do in the future.”

The macro-category “Socio-relational dimension of African dance” refers to the role played by African dance as a socio-relational tool that makes it possible to experience relationships with others, to build friendship networks among young people with Down Syndrome and among their families, and to develop relationships with all members of the association, making it possible to build social networks that support social-relational and emotional development: “ When I was not practicing this sport, I was shyer with others, I used to prefer being alone and having fun by myself. Now everyone tells me that I am different, perhaps because I have friends to talk to and do things together now”; “Before my friends were my mother, father and brother; then, with African dance, I have become friends with my trainers and the other dancers. Before the pandemic, we used to go to restaurants together and organize trips, while now we can only see each other during classes, but we also text and see each other on video calls”; “My parents have become friends with all the other parents and with the team of the association, and I like this because we have managed to share many beautiful experiences together. I hope that this will last after Covid-19”.

The macro-category “African dance as a sport to fight stereotypes and prejudices” refers to the experiences of the participants who see African dance as a tool allowing them to confront

the stereotypes and prejudices linked to the condition of disability, making it possible to turn their gaze from disability - understood as inability and fragility - to the person who experiences disability as an existential condition: “When I dance in front of the audience I feel that people look at me not because I have Down syndrome, but because I am a dancer and I can do it well”; “I don’t like it when someone treats me as if I were not able to do things, and fortunately, my trainers don’t treat me like that, they rather make me train because they know that I can improve”; “I don’t like it when others stop and look at me because I have Down Syndrome, but I like it when I perform and people don’t just see my disability; they see what I am as a dancer, they feel my energy”; “I am not ashamed of being a person with Down Syndrome, even if others think that it means being retarded, also because, by dancing, I show them that a person with Down Syndrome can do well what he or she likes”. The Global Ethnik association organizes disability awareness meetings in schools, in which young dancers with Down Syndrome share their life stories after dancing, and this allows them to represent themselves to others beyond their disability: “It’s nice to show our choreography at school, so the kids not only learn about African dance, but learn more about people like us, they learn that we are and we want to be treated like everyone else”. “I like to talk about myself with other kids from various schools, this helps me feel more confident when I talk about myself in public and, in this way, I help other kids like me who are often discriminated against just because they have a syndrome”; “I miss the meetings we used to have in schools because, in addition to being together, we would also do something useful to give messages about our lives, so that everyone could understand that we are all different”.

The macro-category “African dance as a strategy for fighting isolation during the pandemic” makes it possible to highlight how and to what extent the possibility of practicing African dance during the lockdown phase represented, for the interviewees, a strategy for dealing with the feelings of isolation triggered by the lockdown phase, making it possible not only to continue to live in their own social network (both online and in the presence of others) but also, and above all, to take care of their own psychophysical well-being through sports activities: “During the first lockdown period I felt very lonely, I missed dancing and my friends in the association, and I was afraid that it would have taken too long to see them again. Thankfully, our teacher organized online lessons and then those in the park. I didn’t feel lonely anymore”; “Knowing that I could still have my sports appointment helped me cope with isolation, and helped me continue my diet without letting myself go”; “I miss the hugs and kisses with my dancer friends so much, but I feel lucky because we can still see each other, even if wearing masks, and do what we like most. Moreover, I let off steam when I dance and I feel better afterwards. Although it has been difficult not to have a normal life, at least the association has helped us continue to feel alive thanks to African dance”.

Conclusions

After exploring the macro-categories through a theoretical coding process, it was possible to identify the Core Category, i.e., the central category, identified according to an inductive process by means of a hierarchical work on the categories which emerged from the data. The Core-Category that emerged from the analysis of the data was defined as “African dance as a facilitator of the life project”. Participants highlighted how this sport primarily supports the construction of their own identity, since the sense of identity is closely linked to the idea of one’s own body, to its acceptance and to the development of empowerment. In line with the scientific literature, the interviewees reported that sport is actually an opportunity for recovering self-confidence and encouraging the consideration of themselves and their existence, in full agreement with the assumption of inclusion (Isidori, 2012). Furthermore, the analysis of the content of the interviews makes it possible to reflect on the relational and inclusive dimension of the African dance discipline, insofar as it is in “relational contexts that somatic otherness is realized in the social sphere and, consequently, in the social imaginary” (Quatera, 2018, p.183). It is the body of the ‘other’ the first dimension that we identify in a relationship, and it is the

body that is endowed with cultural meanings and values, in which motor skills are communicative channels (Gomez Paloma, 2012; Quatera, 2018): “physical-sports activities are an expression of human corporeity and ability, historically characterized by a strong cultural value” (Tintori, Cerbara, 2017, p.43). Therefore, sport reflects the elements of our social life (Quatera, 2018), and so it can have an important influence on those that are the attitudes of inclusion/exclusion (Tintori, Cervara, 2017) arising from the attribution of meanings to differences. The participants reported the importance of being at the forefront of the fight against stereotypes and prejudices about disability. Sport itself affects the “social representations of the community, potentially helping reduce the stigma and discrimination associated with disability” (Visentin, 2016, p.24). Telling one’s own story to other young people not only through words, but also through the practice of sports dance, and showing one’s own talents, makes it possible to overcome the idea of disability as an immutable condition, unable to reverse its starting points, forever entangled in the “structural parabola that constitutes it” (Canevaro, 2008). Through the practice of African dance, the denied self-determination is challenged, activating this process to such an extent that this dance becomes a facilitator supporting the choices within one’s own life project, and helping to reflect on it. Moreover, in critical periods such as that of the pandemic, it turns into an experience that educates to resilience, developing the ability to cope with the emotional experiences associated with the lockdown, tolerate the frustrations associated with it, promote individual and social responsibility, and strengthen the ability to establish long-lasting and meaningful social relationships, thus keeping young people with Down Syndrome away from the risk of isolation and social marginalization enhanced by the pandemic. As a result, continuing to practice African dance during the lockdown period seems to have facilitated, from an ICF perspective (WHO,2001), the psychophysical balance of the functioning of the young people interviewed, coping with the suspended time and the reconfiguration of the living spaces that characterize the Covid-19 pandemic.

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