

EUROPEAN POLICIES: SPORT, INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND THE INTEGRATED SYSTEM. HOW TO RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC CRISIS¹

POLITICHE EUROPEE: SPORT, EDUCAZIONE INCLUSIVA E SISTEMA INTEGRATO. COME RISPONDERE ALLA CRISI PANDEMICA COVID-19

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Abstract

European policies highlight the challenges Covid-19 has posed to both the sporting world and to physical activity and well-being, including for marginalized or vulnerable groups. One of the strategies adopted to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on the sport education sector, requires an *integrated system* which aims to develop the culture of sport in particular among students with disabilities. This model in turn is structured around the following dimensions: Sporting federations and organizations; Professional sport ecosystem; Supporting physical activity; Research and policy guidance; Promoting positive educative and social attitudes and behavior. This paper intends to contribute to a systematic reflection imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic in relation to the main educational policies just mentioned, and in particular around the need to review the inclusive and sustainable dimension of sport in the school curriculum, especially for students with disabilities.

Le politiche europee affrontano le sfide che il Covid-19 ha posto al mondo dello sport, all'attività fisica e al benessere soprattutto per quanto riguarda le persone vulnerabili e a rischio di esclusione. Una delle strategie che è possibile adottare per mitigare l'impatto del Covid-19 sull'educazione sportiva, consiste nell'individuare un sistema integrato che miri a sviluppare la cultura dello sport a favore degli studenti con disabilità. Tale sistema si articola attorno alle seguenti dimensioni: Federazioni ed organizzazioni sportive; Ecosistema sportivo specializzato; Sostegno all'attività fisica; Attività di ricerca e politiche dello sport; Promozioni di atteggiamenti e comportamenti educativi e prosociali. Il presente articolo

¹Paragraphs 3 and 4 in this paper have been drafted by M.V. Isidori, paragraphs 1, 2 and 5 by A.Santelli.

vuole contribuire a proporre una riflessione sistematica sulle necessità di rivedere la dimensione inclusiva e sostenibile dello sport all'interno dei curricula scolastici.

Keywords

Sport, Inclusion, Disability, Education, Integrated System

Sport, Inclusione, Disabilità, Educazione, Sistema integrato

1.Introduction

Persons with disabilities experiencing intersectional and multiple discrimination as a result of their gender identity, age, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, origin, location and legal status will carry a heavier burden of the immediate and long term economic and social consequences of the pandemic. In routine circumstances, persons with disabilities are less likely to access health care, education, employment, to participate in the community, and are among the most marginalized in any crisis-affected community.² With respect to the Covid-19 pandemic, social and physical distancing measures, lockdowns of businesses, schools and overall social life, which have become commonplace to curtail the spread of the disease, have also disrupted many regular aspects of life, including sport and physical activity. European policies highlight the challenges Covid-19 has posed to both the sporting world and to physical activity and well-being, including for marginalized or vulnerable groups. They further provide recommendations for Governments and other stakeholders, to support the safe reopening of sporting events, as well as to support physical activity during the pandemic and beyond. Sport is a major contributor to economic and social development. Its role is well recognized by Governments, including the Political Declaration of the 2030 Agenda, which reflects on “the contribution sports make to the empowerment of women and of young people, individuals and communities, as well as to health, education and social inclusion”.

In order to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on the sport education sector, it is necessary to implement an *integrated system*, which aims to develop the culture of sport in particular among students. This model, in turn, is based on the following six dimensions: Sporting federations and organizations; Professional sport ecosystem; Supporting physical activity; Research and policy guidance; Technical cooperation and capacity development; Promoting positive

² In Italy people with SEN (Special Educational Needs) attributable to disabilities or to a condition of functional limitation and reduction of personal autonomy (washing, dressing, eating alone, etc.) and autonomy in carrying out typical daily activities (preparing meals, shopping, using the telephone, taking medicines, etc.), are about 3 million and 150 thousand (5.2% of the population) (ISTAT 2021).

educative and social attitudes and behavior (Mamak et Al. 2020). Several strategies have been proposed to empower sporting activities, especially within the Next Generation EU, and the European Structural Funds (2021-2027). Particularly important are the measure introduced in the PNNR and in the Erasmus+ 2022, the EU program for education, training, youth and sport. The implementation of Erasmus+ program will also continue to help sports organizations and clubs in recovering from the effects of Covid-19 pandemic. Major sporting organizations have tried to reduce the spread of the virus. For example, FIFA has teamed up with the World Health Organization (WHO) and launched a ‘Pass the message to kick out coronavirus’ campaign led by well-known football players in 13 languages, calling on people to follow five key steps to stop the spread of the disease focusing on hand washing, coughing etiquette, not touching one’s face, physical distance and staying home if feeling unwell. Other international sport organizations have come together to support one another in solidarity during this time, for example, through periodic online community discussions to share challenges and issues. Participants in such online dialogues have also sought to devise innovative solutions to larger social issues, for example by identifying ways in which the sport world can respond to problems faced by vulnerable people who normally participate in sporting programs in low income communities but who are now unable to, given restriction to movement. The closure of education institutions around the world due to COVID-19 has also impacted the sports education sector, which is comprised of a broad range of stakeholders, including national ministries and local authorities, public and private education institutions, sports organizations and athletes, NGOs and the business community, teachers, scholars and coaches, parents and, first and foremost, the – mostly young – learners.

2. Sport policies for inclusion: the principles of the so-called Integrated system as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic

Governments, political entities, and other key stakeholders should ensure the provision of capacity development and technical cooperation services to support the development and implementation of national policies and approaches for the best use of sport to advance health and well-being, particularly in the age of COVID-19 (Technical cooperation and capacity development). European governments and the sporting community, including the sporting education community, should guidance on individual and collective measures to counter the

pandemic COVID-19³. Measures must be taken to reach communities that have limited access to the Internet and social media and that can be reached through cascading the sport education pyramid from the national/ministerial level down to the provincial/municipal level, from the national physical education inspector down to the teacher, from the national sport federation down to the clubs. Sport education is a powerful means to foster physical fitness, mental well-being, as well as social attitudes and behaviors while populations are locked down. International rights and values based sport education instruments and tools, such as the International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport, the Quality Physical Education, Policy package and the Values Education through Sport toolkit remain highly relevant references to ensure that the many online physical activity modules that are being currently deployed comply with gender equality, non-discrimination, safety and quality standards (Promoting positive social attitudes and behavior. Governments and intergovernmental organizations may provide sports federations, clubs, and organizations around the world with guidance related to safety, health, labor and other international standards and protocols that would apply to future sport events and related safe working conditions. This would allow all stakeholders to work cooperatively as a team with the objective to address the current challenges and to facilitate future sports events that are safe and enjoyable for all (Sporting federations and organizations).

The sport ecosystem, comprising of producers, broadcasters, fans, businesses, owners, and players among others, need to find new and innovative solutions to mitigate the negative effects of COVID19 on the world of sport. This includes finding ways to engage with fans in order to ensure safe sport events in the future while maintaining the workforce, creating new operating models and venue strategies (Professional sport ecosystem).

Governments should work collaboratively with health and care services, schools and civil society organizations representing various social groups to support physical activity at home. Enhancing access to online resources to facilitate sport activities where available should be a key goal in order to maintain social distancing. However, low-tech, and no-tech solutions must also be sought for those who currently lack access to the internet. Creating a flexible but

³ WHO - World Health Organization (2015). Physical activity strategy for the WHO European Region 2016–2025.

consistent daily routine including physical exercise every day to help with stress and restlessness is advisable (Supporting physical activity).

The European system, through its sports policy instruments and mechanisms such as the Intergovernmental Committee for Physical Education and Sport, as well as through its research and policy guidance should support Governments and other stakeholders to ensure effective recovery and reorientation of the sports sector and, at the same time, strengthen the use of sports to achieve sustainable development and peace. Scientific research and higher education will also be indispensable pillars to inform and orient future policies (Research and policy guidance). Sport cities model represents a structured approach developed thanks to the role played by several political institutions within different territories.

3.Sport activities at school. A real tool for inclusion in critical conditions?

For empirical studies, inclusive education is based on the fundamental right of all learners to access to their basic learning needs, and to encourage their personal development to the fullest extent (Savino et Al., 2015; Sibilio et Al., 2008). Inclusive education moreover considers the diversity of backgrounds and abilities to be a learning opportunity rather than a barrier. It is an integral and indispensable part of the general education for children who need special education. At the same time, it is an ideal area where cooperation, appropriate competition, personal and social responsibility are taught, and also where games and physical activities are promoted to gain active and healthy life skills (Mamak et Al., 2020; Viciania et Al., 2019; Neville et Al., 2019). International research shows that children with special educational needs are still not accessing or being fully included into educational programs within mainstream schools (Neville et Al., 2019). This problem of inclusion is particularly acute when it comes to SEN children accessing high quality physical education, and the research evidence shows the signs of a double-bind here: SEN children are disproportionately affected by social-emotional, behavioural, health conditions related to physical inactivity, and exclusion from physical activities (Bloemen et Al., 2015); physical activities teachers, however, often lack the knowledge, confidence, or pedagogical training to adapt their lessons in ways that would suitably include them (Rekaa et Al., 2018).

Almost 300.000 pupils with disabilities attend Italian schools. There are 176.000 support teachers (1.7 students for each teacher), 37% of whom do not have specific training. In the last two years,

the opportunities for pupils with disabilities to attend school have been limited due to the pandemic that made distance learning necessary. Between April and June 2020, over 23% of pupils with disabilities (about 70 thousand) did not take part in the lesson (ISTAT 2019-2020)⁴. Policies and interventions for school integration still suffer from the lack of technological tools: the provision of computer stations is insufficient in 28% of schools. Hence the criticalities configured by digital accessibility. Another critical aspect, regarding accessibility, is the presence of architectural barriers: only one school out of 3 is accessible for pupils with motor disabilities. Starting from this premise, it is important to clarify that the 75% of disabled people who play sports in Italy say that they are satisfied with their life and that sport has improved their perception of everyday life. Unfortunately, of the 3 million and 119 thousand severely disabled, 2 million still do not play sports and only the 2% are satisfied with this choice. With regard to developmental age, adolescence, and youth, 45.6% of disabled children, between the ages of 3 and 14, do sport regularly. The main limitation is given by the perception of one's disability, that is, by inner barriers but also by the presence of real objective barriers. On the other hand, 22% of children aged 11 to 20, without disabilities abandon sport. This percentage rises to 30% when it comes to girls. The most critical moment is the transition between middle school and high school, where the increase in school commitment required becomes the main reason for abandoning competitive sports among young people (*Id*).

Disabilities and long-term health conditions may limit meaningful participation to sport activities unless proper support is provided. Applying a nondisabled perspective such as using able-bodied or ableism to describe skills required in physical education may undermine and disrespect the value of disabled identity) (Björn, 2020).

Policy statements and empirical studies on the attitudes of teachers, and on the suitability of teacher education for inclusion have really only emerged over the last ten to fifteen years, however. Among the more pressing challenges in light of international consensus on the need for curricular reform to promote inclusion is the design of interventions which can expand the scope and quality of initial teacher training (ITT). The vast majority of teachers surveyed were not open enough to work with children with disabilities in the physical education and sports curriculum.

4.Sport opportunities for students with disabilities: European recommendations

⁴Indagine ISTAT sull'inserimento degli alunni con disabilità nelle scuole statali e non statali in Italia, anno scolastico 2020-2021

The means of physical education and sports applied in the classroom did not cause significant changes in the levels of the majority of the examined signs of physical capacity, both for boys and girls without and for those with special needs. This necessitates adequate changes in the curricula and the methods used in the school. Added to these weaknesses of the education system is the lack of attention to the promotion of sporting opportunities and the prevention of abandonment by students of sporting activity (D'Anna et Al. 2019). Sometimes, it can be very difficult for students to deal with both study and training. So, it may happen that students do not achieve the expected results.

School leaders should promote and support different sports opportunities and offer students the help they need. These activities could be tutoring services and credit assignment. Among the 'content analysis' strategies to facilitate inclusive educational practice through sport, it is important to point out the *'Promoting sport and enhancing health in European Union'*, while, as regard to the digital support, it must be mentioned the *'Increase Physical Activity Opportunities'* website (which contains some suggestions on how city institutions can help young people by offering them different opportunities for physical activity), and the *'New Guidance will enhance sports opportunities for students with disabilities'* which is conceived and designed in order to improve sports opportunities for students with disabilities.

Finally, among the main European funds we have ERASMUS + 2022 whose main areas/actions for cooperation are: Learning mobility; Cooperation between organizations and institutions; Support for policy development and cooperation; Actions Jean Monnet. Erasmus + 2022 has also defined its general priorities for action: Erasmus + inclusive. The program will offer greater mobility opportunities to students in school classes, higher education, vocational education and training, adult education and training, youth, *youth workers and sports organizations*, reaching new and more diverse student groups.

5. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had, and will continue to have, very considerable effects on the sporting world as well as on the physical and mental well-being of people around the world. There are factors that influence the implementation of policies, namely the objectives of the policies, resources, characteristics of implementing agencies, attitudes/dispositions of the implementers, communication between political and the environment. The European

recommendations seek to both support the safe re-opening of sporting events and tournaments following the pandemic, as well as to maximize the benefits that sport and physical activity can bring in the age of COVID-19 and beyond. In conclusion, the intervention of European policies with respect to sport education represents a fundamental and inclusive tool for pupils with disabilities especially in the current context of crisis. In the opinion of the authors such a context requires a necessary revision of teachers' training sensitive to the projective dimension of didactic, and also a review of the sport curriculum at school.

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