

WORKING CONDITIONS AND SELF-PERCEPTION OF COMPETENCE OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHERS. A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION

CONDIZIONI DI LAVORO E AUTOPERCEZIONE DI COMPETENZA DEGLI INSEGNANTI DI EDUCAZIONE FISICA. UN'INDAGINE QUALITATIVA

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Abstract:

The paper reports the results of a qualitative research that investigated the outcomes of a quantitative study (Tul, Leskošek, Kovač, Tafuri & Maulini, 2022) regarding Physical Education (PE) teachers' self-perception of competence with respect to the structural conditions and equipment of school gyms. These findings revealed that equipment seems to have a greater influence on self-perception of competence than the structural condition of the gymnasium. These findings were explored through the semi-structured interview technique involving 10 PE teachers. The analysis of the contents of the interviews generally confirms the results of the quantitative research (Ibidem), however, it emerges that both the equipment and the structural conditions of the spaces, influence in equal measure the self-perception of competence of the PE teachers.

The survey shows, among other things, that equipment in school gyms is lacking and, in some cases, completely absent. With regard to this, the respondents believe that the expression of their competence also depends on their ability to adapt to the situation.

Il lavoro riporta i risultati di una ricerca qualitativa che ha approfondito gli esiti di uno studio quantitativo (Tul, Leskošek, Kovač, Tafuri & Maulini, 2022) relativo all'auto-percezione delle competenze degli insegnanti di Educazione Fisica (EF) rispetto alle condizioni strutturali e all'equipaggiamento delle palestre scolastiche. Tali esiti hanno rilevato che l'equipaggiamento sembra

influenzare maggiormente l'auto percezione della competenza rispetto alle condizioni strutturali della palestra. Tali risultati sono stati esplorati attraverso la tecnica dell'intervista semi-strutturata che ha coinvolto 10 insegnanti di EF. L'analisi dei contenuti delle interviste conferma in generale i risultati della ricerca quantitativa (*Ibidem*), tuttavia, emerge che sia l'equipaggiamento che le condizioni strutturali degli spazi, influenzano in pari misura l'autopercezione delle competenze degli insegnanti di EF. Dalla stessa risulta, tra l'altro, che nelle palestre scolastiche l'equipaggiamento è carente e, in alcuni casi, completamente assente. Rispetto a questo dato gli intervistati ritengono che l'espressione della propria competenza passi anche dalla capacità di sapersi adattare a tale situazione.

Keywords: teachers, self-perception competences, physical education, school gym, equipment

Parole chiave: insegnanti, autopercezione competenze, educazione fisica, palestra scolastica, equipaggiamento

Introduction

Competences in education and training have been studied for many years, both at a general level and at the level of specific disciplines. The European educational network Eurydice has subdivided them into general and specific skills, highlighting their transferability characteristics in different work contexts (European Commission, 2012). Transferable competences are defined as soft skills as opposed to professional hard skills, which are the specific technical and professional competences of a given profession. Soft skills are personal attributes, personality traits that determine the development of intrapersonal and interpersonal competences (Communicative Skills, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills, Team Work, Life-Long Learning & Information Management Skill, Entrepreneurship skills, Ethics, Moral & Professional, Leadership Skill) and that enable the best expression of hard skills by transferring and adapting them in the context in which one works (Ahmad, Kisno, Ahmad Tohir, Mintarsih, Sobry, & Mufid, 2021; Pachauri & Yadav, 2014).

With respect to the perception of one's own competence, many researches highlight that it is influenced by the beliefs that teachers have about their work and that these affect the quality of teaching and the relative performance of students (Casolo, Coco, Frattini, Vago, & Andrea, 2019; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007; European Commission, 2012; Bandura, 1977). Another important factor is self-efficacy as it contributes, together with teacher motivation, to the achievement of required goals (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007).

Less explored, instead, is the area that investigates the relationship between EF teachers' self-perception of competences in relation to a particular and complex teaching-learning environment such as the gymnasium.

Some research has shown that the lack of equipment would seem, on the one hand, to stimulate creativity in the use of space, especially in an organisational sense (Smith & Leng, 2003) while, on the other, limiting inclusion practices (Herold & Dandolo, 2009), lesson organisation (Smith & Leng, 2003) and the choice of content and working methods (Kougioumtzis et al., 2011).

With respect to structural weaknesses, studies have found that they have a negative impact on the quality of work (Hardman, 2008), the design and implementation of the EF curriculum, with all the consequences related to job satisfaction and burnout (Baykara & Orhan, 2020; Grammatikopoulos, Tsigilis, & Koustelios, 2007; Kroupis, Kouli, & Kourtessis, 2019; von

Haaren, Schäfer, Pels, & Kleinert, 2019). Adequate equipment therefore has a fundamental importance for students' motor-educational experiences in the EF context. In Italy, some of the main studies on the quality of physical education have recorded the complete absence or unusability of school gyms (Maulini, Migliorati & Isidori, 2018; Maulini, Migliorati, Isidori & Miatto, 2016; Maulini & Ramos, 2013). From the Ecosistema Scuola survey (2021), it appears that in Italy school buildings equipped with gyms are only 48.9%.

Out of a school population of 1.4 million students, more than half, therefore, do not have the possibility to practice EF in their school or to be able to do so in suitable spaces specifically intended for this purpose (Ecosistema Scuola, 2021).

25.7% of school leaders interviewed as part of the OKkio alla Salute research (2014) stated that schoolyards are not suitable for EF, as well as 17.5% of school gyms. The same research indicates that 13.1% of schools do not have their own gym (Nardone, Spinelli, Buoncristiano, Lauria, Pierannunzio & Galeone, 2018).

The present study starts from the results of a recent quantitative research (Tul, Leskošek, Kovač, Tafuri & Maulini, 2022) that investigated the relationship between self-perception of EF teachers' competences and the different conditions of the working environment, intended in a structural sense. The research, through the administration of a questionnaire to a sample of EF teachers from the Friuli Venezia Giulia and Veneto regions (N=484 EF teachers), highlighted that:

- both the equipment and the size of the spaces influence the self-perception of EF teachers' competences;
- teachers working in more spacious gyms perceive their degree of competence in the didactic, pedagogical and organisational areas to a greater extent than their colleagues working in smaller gyms;
- teachers working in adequately equipped gyms perceive themselves as more competent than their colleagues working in less equipped gyms;
- finally, it was found that the degree of equipment of the gym has a greater influence on the self-perception of competence than the structural conditions of the gym itself.

These quantitative results were the starting point for the present research, which has set itself the objective of investigating, within a qualitative methodological framework, the motivations for the results that emerged from the previous quantitative study regarding the relationship between teachers' self-perception of competence and the conditions of the space designated for teaching EF.

1. Methodology

In order to achieve the objective of the research, the qualitative methodology was used through the technique of semi-structured interviews with privileged witnesses that involved 10 teachers of EF (5 secondary schools and 5 secondary schools). This technique allows, in fact, to know the motivations for actions and, therefore, the values and guiding principles, as well as, the perceptions and meanings attributed to the reality and contexts in which the interviewee works (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2015). Participants were selected according to strategic and personal criteria: individuals with adequate knowledge, particular communication skills, willing to collaborate with the researcher. The interviews lasted an average of one hour and

were preceded by a presentation to the participants of the quantitative findings from the research by Tul, Leskošek, Kovač, Tafuri & Maulini (2022).

A group of experts was employed to check the validity of the study, its comprehensiveness and consistency with the research objectives, and to select and attribute expressions to the different categories together with the researcher in order to improve the reliability of the results obtained. This made it possible to clarify excessively subjective tendencies when selecting, collecting and interpreting data, avoiding falling into partial or arbitrary attitudes (Guba, 1981; Santos & Guerra, 1999).

The analysis of the contents of the interviews was carried out using the paragraph as the textual unit of analysis, starting from 4 general theoretical categories

1. self-perception competence in relation to soft/hard skills;
2. self-perception of competence in relation to gym equipment;
3. self-perception of competence in relation to gym structural aspects;
4. equipment vs. gym structural aspects in the self-perception of competence.

The results are presented below.

2. Results

After the presentation of the results of the quantitative research (Tul, et al., 2022), the respondents expressed their general opinion about their self-perception of their competence in terms of soft skills and hard skills in relation to the conditions of the spaces and the equipment in the school gyms where they work.

These data amaze me.... I feel more satisfied with my work and my skills if I find myself working in inadequate contexts, in complicated conditions and I still manage to get results with the children because I have worked hard to find a solution, to structure an effective teaching proposal. This means that I am much more competent than someone who obtains the same results but operates in perfect conditions.

We all work in inadequate situations, after all, it depends on the passion everyone has for their work... but I firmly believe that when faced with certain situations everyone has to make their contribution. When it comes to proposals for such young children, I think everyone should do something, it is the moral duty of every teacher, for example by allocating the money from the Christmas market to Physical Education, in short, finding solutions... it is clear that everyone should be more or less in the same conditions, but this is something that we know is utopian...

I think that a teacher who wants to do something is good everywhere, even if it costs a lot of effort, a lot of research, a lot of hard work... You save yourself with experience, otherwise it's hard... You build competence by working...

The competent teacher could also be the one who, with limited equipment and a limited structure, manages to get the students to participate in the lesson with enthusiasm. I always had to be ingenious because I didn't have the equipment, but I honestly never thought that my skills depended on the equipment available... that is, I was satisfied with my work and my skills if I could manage situations where I didn't have the best equipment.

For me, the most competent teacher is the one who develops the best teaching proposal and therefore who leads children in disadvantaged conditions to learn better, because it means that he or she has structured a creative, stimulating teaching proposal, conceived among a thousand difficulties, which has led to positive results. The teacher's lack of adaptation to disadvantageous conditions means that he or she is unable to offer stimulating teaching.

With regard to the second category of analysis, self-perceived competence in relation to gym equipment, 9 out of 10 teachers stated that in school gyms it is insufficient or completely absent. Only one respondent, who teaches in a public school, is fully satisfied with the teaching resources equipment.

I have a car full of balls, I bring them with me, I take them from my sports club, because even if at the beginning they could be there, then they disappeared, and then they weren't taken care of, and instead the balls have to be cleaned, inflated, etc etc.

I have had negative experiences with gym equipment. I am convinced that a well-equipped gym makes it possible for me to offer the children something that is interesting, because the equipment makes it possible to motivate them, to interest them. If you can't organise something active and involving for them, you won't be able to give them a good lesson.

We PE teachers always have a lot of personal equipment, which often saves us...

With a well-equipped gym it is easier, because I can express my competences.

I let them try a bit of everything; you observe them and then propose. It is essential to let them explore the space that sport offers, to let them experience it. Our subject matter makes it possible to develop interdisciplinarity.

With respect to the category of analysis self-perceived competence in relation to structural aspects of the gym, the interviewees expressed the following opinions:

I taught in a school with a new gym that was very big, spacious but structurally inadequate. Glass walls that broke at the first kick, very high ceilings, very bad

acoustics, I had to secure the radiators using mats. In the end the gym has to be functional, that's important!

One year I taught in a school where there was no gym and if it rained you had to stay in the classroom.

If the gym is structurally adequate you don't have safety issues, which is a very important aspect. I am privileged because in my school, which is a private school, there is already a very good gymnasium and now they are building a new one, a spectacular, super-equipped gymnasium.

It was also important that I was involved in the design and development of the ideas.

Finally, the respondents were asked to make a comparison between the two aspects in order to understand whether one of the two had a greater influence on their perception of competence, as the results of previous research (Tul et al., 2022) had shown a greater influence of equipment on teachers' self-perception of competence than the area of the gym.

It's more important to have the right equipment than the right size of the gyms because if you have a big space, it might as well be a big gym, but if it's empty, it's a container with nothing in it and no matter how hard you work with all your imagination and desire not to repeat a lesson, you only get so far.

If you have the right structural and equipment conditions you can do your job and you can perceive yourself as more competent, you have a better self-esteem because you see that the students participate, they enjoy themselves, they always come willingly to class.

The perception one has of one's own work is obviously conditioned by the structure you have. I fully agree with that. If you have a small room with four pieces of equipment, however good you are, you are limited in what you can offer your students.

I believe that the two aspects (degree of equipment and structural characteristics of the gym) balance each other out. We should not take things in absolute terms. We cannot play volleyball with a new net and new balls if the gym is too small.

I feel more competent in a gym where I have the equipment for teaching, rather than a large unequipped space. The equipment has a good 50-60% importance compared to the size of the area.

Having all the material to develop the activity, having the appropriate space, having everything that is necessary, it is clear that it greatly facilitates the task and improves the variety of the stimulus; with perfect surfaces, multi-purpose field I can expand my educational offer, then, certainly, diversify the educational proposal and better develop motor skills in children.

3. Discussion

From the analysis of the contents it emerges first of all the astonishment of the interviewees with respect to the results of the previous quantitative research, which indicated equipment as the most influential element in their perception of competence. In fact, the respondents consider it necessary and inevitable to find personal solutions to make up for the insufficiency or complete lack of equipment (by organising activities to find the funds to equip the gyms with teaching aids, or by acquiring instruments themselves or using those of the clubs they work for outside school working hours, etc.) and structurally inadequate spaces (e.g. by making them more secure).

These data confirm Smith & Leng's (2003) study according to which the lack of equipment would seem to stimulate creativity in the use of spaces; a concept that the interviewees indicate as an adaptive capacity necessary to be able to operate effectively as an EF teacher in most Italian schools and, therefore, to be able to design and propose a motivating didactic for the students. This ability is strictly linked, as one of the interviewees pointed out, to the passion for one's job and the moral duty of the teacher towards young students in a pathway of achieving educational objectives.

If this, on the one hand, makes us say that a good school is often the result of the responsibility and commitment that teachers put into their work, looking beyond the conditions of inadequacy and striving to find solutions, on the other hand, we can say that this behaviour is neither part of the technical-professional hard skills required of the EF teacher, nor is it completely within the soft skills, i.e., those transversal skills necessary to adapt effectively to the different characteristics of the work contexts in which one finds oneself operating.

To be transversally competent, in fact, does not mean to be able to overcome the inadequate structural conditions and equipment of school gyms, which should be guaranteed at a systemic-institutional level.

The equipment of the gymnasium emerged as a fundamental element for the expression of one's competence, as in the previous quantitative research. The possibility of having available the necessary resources to diversify and personalise the didactic proposal allows, in fact, a wider expression of one's disciplinary competences (Smith & Leng, 2003; Kougioumtzis et al, 2011) and feel more satisfied (Baykara & Orhan, 2020; Grammatikopoulos, Tsigilis, & Koustelios, 2007; Kroupis, Kouli, & Kourtessis, 2019; von Haaren, Schäfer, Pels, & Kleinert, 2019), succeeding in engaging and motivating students.

Along with equipment, the experts interviewed confirm the finding that a proportion of schools do not have their own gymnasium (Nardone, Spinelli, Buoncristiano, Lauria, Pierannunzio & Galeone, 2018) and, even if present, it is not always adequate and safe for teaching EF. We can draw an important suggestion from one of the respondents who teaches in a public school,

namely, that it would be appropriate to involve experts in motor sciences to design functional and safe gyms, responding to the teaching needs of EF.

Finally, in relation to the category equipment vs. structural aspects of the gymnasium in the self-perception of competence, the participants, unlike what emerged from the results of the quantitative survey (Tul et al., 2022), are mostly convinced that both the equipment and the structural conditions of the spaces are both necessary and decisive for the effectiveness of their educational action and influence in equal measure the self-perception of competence of EF teachers.

Conclusion

The results of the research, which we recall had the objective of exploring the motivations for the results that emerged from the previous quantitative research (Tul, et al. 2022), on the one hand, allowed us to better understand the Italian panorama with respect to the working conditions in which EF teachers operate, in terms of equipment and structural aspects of school gyms; on the other hand, they highlighted the strong connection that exists between working conditions and the perception of themselves as more or less competent.

The study also reveals the teachers' resignation to a situation of structural and equipment inadequacy of school gyms described by them as normal and inevitable, which they try to cope with by finding personal solutions that require effort, commitment, energy, passion, creativity and adaptability. However, transversal competences, and among these in particular critical thinking, problem-solving skills, creativity, leadership skills, etc., refer to the search for strategies aimed at adapting and transferring one's hard skills to new contexts or at overcoming unforeseen, unexpected situations, temporary, contingent, time-limited adaptation and do not refer to a permanent and standardised condition. A condition that would actually require a radical, deep, systemic intervention by the political actors who should guarantee safe learning spaces, adequately equipped and structurally functional to that particular teaching-learning process specific to EF

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