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"WHEN EVERYONE LEAVES, HE KEEPS TRYING" PERCEPTIONS OF SPORT TALENT IN MOTOR SCIENCE STUDENTS. REFLECTIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS DOWNSTREAM OF A FOCUS GROUP APPROACH

"QUANDO TUTTI VANNO VIA, LUI CONTINUA A PROVARE" PERCEZIONE DEL TALENTO SPORTIVO IN STUDENTI DI SCIENZE MOTORIE. RIFLESSIONI E IMPLICAZIONI PEDAGOGICHE A VALLE DI UN FOCUS GROUP

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Abstract

Recognizing talent in its various forms and knowing how to read its correlated specific needs has become an emerging theme in the special pedagogical debate (Pinnelli, 2017). Despite a shared multifaceted definition of Giftedness, in 2002, Persson already pointed out the absence of research on the identification of athletic talent and nowadays in Italy, there is still a lack of teachers' identification tools of sport talent. In order to adapt the Scale for Identification of Sport Potential (SISP) (Platvoet et al., 2015) an exploratory step was the analysis of stakeholder representations through a Focus Group. This study describes the perceptions of sport talent of seven coaches enrolled in a motor sciences university course. The questions are anchored on the Model of Talent Development in Physical Education (PE) (Bailey and Morley, 2006) and the SISP factors covered. The study suggests important implications in the identification practice. Future research could explore the perception of élite coaches and PE teachers.

Riconoscere il talento nelle sue svariate forme e saper leggere i bisogni specifici ad esso correlati è divenuto un tema emergente nel dibattito pedagogico speciale (Pinnelli, 2017). Nonostante una definizione condivisa e multidimensionale della plusdotazione, già nel 2002 Persson segnalava l'assenza di ricerche sull'identificazione del talento dal punto di vista atletico e oggi in Italia mancano ancora gli strumenti di identificazione del talento sportivo per gli insegnanti. Lo studio si propone di presentare le prime fasi per l'adattamento di uno strumento rilevato in ambito internazionale per l'identificazione del talento sportivo: la Scale for Identification of Sport Potential (SISP) (Platvoet et al., 2015). Al fine di adattare la scala SISP un passo esplorativo è stata l'analisi delle rappresentazioni di un gruppo di stakeholder attraverso un Focus Group. Questo studio descrive in particolare le percezioni del talento sportivo di sette allenatori iscritti a un corso universitario di scienze motorie. Le domande erano ancorate al Modello di Sviluppo del Talento nell'Educazione Fisica (PE) (Bailey e Morley, 2006) e ai fattori SISP trattati. Lo studio suggerisce importanti implicazioni nella pratica di identificazione e nell'utilizzo dello strumento. La ricerca futura potrebbe esplorare la percezione degli allenatori d'élite e degli insegnanti di educazione fisica.

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Key-words

Talent identification; sport talent; perceptions

Identificazione del talento; talento sportivo; percezioni;

Introduction

Nowadays the process of talent identification in sport relies mainly on physical ability, overlooking the multidimensionality of this specific form of talent (Platvoet et al., 2016; Gray & Plucker, 2010; Vaeyens, Lenoir, Williams, & Philippaerts, 2008). This one-dimensional approach does not allow for consideration of a significant number of potentially talented children and, as a result, they are often overlooked and never have the opportunity to realize their potential (Abbott & Collins, 2002).

Prieto-Ayuso (2020) conducted a systematic review on the contribution of physical education to identifying and taking charge of sport talent. In particular, they noted that teachers can use different methods and instruments for talent identification. As stated by Velásquez (2010), the school context is the most suitable place to begin the identification process "as this is an environment where it is possible to ensure the participation of the child in sports activities for several years. In this social environment, it is likely to discover and perceive potentialities that are not known but that are in the child, which would allow monitoring and control over time to assess the evolution of these capacities" (p.150).

The school context has a strong influence on the development of sport potential, it is an important reference for children and the PE teacher emerges as the most important significant adult (Fernández-Rio & Méndez-Giménez, 2012; Velásquez, 2010; Gutiérrez & García Ferrol, 2001; Gutiérrez, 2000) representing a key element in the identification of sport talented pupils (Bailey & Collins, 2013; Morley & Baley, 2006, Gulbin, Oldenziel, Weissensteiner, & Gagné, 2010; Thomas & Thomas, 1999), especially in those situations where children don't have the opportunities to realize their potential out of school.

According to Prieto-Ayuso (2020) analysing the studies of Kirk et al. (2000) and Abbott & Collins (2002) but also on the studies of Medranda, Pérez & Castillejo (2016) physical education has always had a strong connection to sports performance, however, similarly, in the school context "the criteria for identifying the talented pupils in PE was exclusively based on physical elements and performance" (Prieto-Ayuso, 2020, p.12).

One model that goes beyond this one-dimensional vision of talent and looks at sport talent in a multidimensional way is the Bailey and Morley *model of talent identification and development in PE*. Bailey and Morley model has its roots on Gagné's differentiated model of giftedness and talent (DMGT, 2010) and describes sport talent through these different dimensions:

> Psychomotor ability (which is revealed through movement and the physical performance of skills);
>
> Interpersonal ability (which is exhibited in social contexts, and is the basis of leadership, teamwork and similar concepts);
>
> Intrapersonal ability (which underpins an individual's capacity for self-control, self-efficacy and emotional intelligence);

> Cognitive ability (which is shown in tactical settings, as well as knowledge and understanding of central physical educational concepts);
>
> Creative ability (which is evidenced when learners respond to challenges and tasks with fluency, originality and sensitivity to problems).
>
> (Bailey & Morley, 2006, p.215)

Starting from the theoretical background of the Bailey and Morley model, an interesting tool for talent identification was developed by a group of researchers in Nijmegen. The authors of the Dutch university showed that, according to the perceptions of physical education teachers, a child's sport potential is expressed by six capacities: Work Attitude, Sport Learning Capacity, Motor Capacity, Creative Capacity, Interpersonal Capacity and Intellectual Capacity.

The effort of the authors was to set up a unique scale for sport potential for teachers on the basis of these perceptions: the Scale for Identification of Sport Potential (SISP) (Platvoet, Elferink-Gemser, Baker, & Visscher, 2015). *Work attitude capacity* describes the positive attitude of achievement. A person with a sport talent has a strong commitment and is goal oriented. *Sport learning capacity* refers to "a child's potential to develop in sports" (p.69) expresses in speediness, agility or ability to master new movements. Having excellent *Motor Capacity* is fundamental in the identification of sport potential. This skill refers to "e.g., good balance skills, jump capacity." (p.68). *Creative capacity* in sport talent refers to the use "of unusual, original and innovative solutions for movement problems." (p.69). *Interpersonal Capacity* is another element necessary to excel in sport talent. It refers to the positive influence that an athlete can bring to their social environment. Finally, with *Intellectual capacity*, the authors refer to intelligence in terms of responses to the high perceptual and cognitive requests in sport activities. According to their study, for example, being a smart student in the classroom is correlated to being a sport talent.

1. Objective

In order to validate the SISP scale, this work aims to detect the representations of sport talent in a group of privileged witnesses and compare these representations with those shown in the identified scale.

It is useful to underline that for the structure of this work, that means for the comparison between the characteristics that emerged in the focus and those reported by Platvoet et al. (2015) two versions of the Scale for Identification of Sport Potential (SISP) are considered: the original with 66 items and the short version, following the factor analysis, with 27 items.

2. Procedure

In order to adapt the Scale for Identification of Sport Potential (SISP) (Platvoet et al., 2015) an exploratory preliminary step was the analysis of some stakeholder representations through qualitative techniques, in particular the analysis conducted was descriptive through the use of a focus group.

2.1 Sample

The survey sample was made up of "privileged witnesses" (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990) who were familiar with the subject of talent, therefore a group of seven coaches from different sports (Football, Boxing, Taekwondo, Rugby) was selected.

All participants held a bachelor's degree in motor science and were enrolled in a master's degree course in sports (5M, 2F). Informed consent was collected from all participants.

2.2 Focus Group Structure

The questions that guided the interview were anchored on the Model of Talent Development in Physical Education (PE) (Bailey and Morley, 2006) and the SISP factors covered. The first question was more exploratory and aimed at investigating the original ideas that come to mind when talking about a talented person, of sporting excellence.

> "Today we will address the issue of sports talent. I ask you to describe your ideas, perceptions about it, and what characteristics come to mind when talking about a talented boy to another person."

The other, more specific questions explored the characteristics of sport talent. Below is reported the original outline considering that the questions were appropriately adapted and reformulated during the focus group.

> "Considering a person with sports talent, I am referring to excellence in sports, what role do motor or cognitive skills play? How could you define them?
>
> "And the ability to learn sports, creativity, what role do they play? How could you define them?
>
> "Considering a person with sport talent, I am referring to excellence in sports, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, what role do they play? How could you define them?"
>
> "Considering a person with sport talent, I am referring to excellence in sports, how important is the attitude to success (achievement)? How could you define them?"

The focus group lasted 1 hour and 15 minutes.

Through a process of sharing and comparing (Morgan, 1998) the two moderators urged, throughout the focus, the participants to make the most of the subjective meanings of the terms and expressions they used in order to clarify their positions and compare them (Acocella, 2005). In this way, it was, therefore, possible to collect the many different meanings that are hidden behind the same term or expression.

2.3 Manual text analysis procedures

The audio recordings were transcribed for analysis, through the manual analysis of the text, the perspectives on sport talent were analysed. The transcribed texts of the focus groups were analyzed according to the Qualitative Content Analysis methodology (Schreier, 2012).

In order to facilitate reading and interpretation, the textual data collected were then systematically processed and recomposed by associating them with the individual categories. Therefore, a system of categories was obtained that describes some elements that characterize the six capacities investigated. These categories were then described through sub-categories and text fragments taken from the focus groups.

The most significant parts of the transcript were identified and a code/index was assigned to each one. The code categorized the sentences according to the six capacities (Work Attitude, Sport Learning Capacity, Motor Capacity, Creative Capacity, Interpersonal Capacity and Intellectual Capacity).

Subsequently, the contents of the texts were analyzed on the basis of the Qualitative Content Analysis approach (Schreier, 2012) through the Atlas.ti software. The analysis involved the use of categories generated with deductive methods and others generated with inductive methods. The deductively generated categories are linked to the literature and to the compared instrument (Scale SISP). The inductive categories emerged from the preliminary analysis of the focus transcript of the six participants.

2.4 Data analysis and discussion of results

For each question of the focus, "the relevant and significant fragments" (Decataldo, 2013, p. 158) were identified, i.e. parts of the textual corpus were the indicators emerged and that were based on rather prolonged interventions by one participant or a meaningful exchange between two or more participants.

Through the manual analysis and use of Atlas.ti it was possible to systematize the categories and obtain descriptive sub-categories.

The following table shows the categories, the number of codes, and each descriptor (subcategory/code) of the categories.

Category	N. of Codes	Code
Intrapersonal Capacity	9	appears arrogant / conceited self-awareness emotional self-regulation I keep getting involved live with success determination fun stress management during competitions manages not to get involved with personal problems during an activity
Interpersonal Capacity	3	he has faith in the coach and in his/her teammates leadership knowing how to collaborate with teammates

Motor Capacity	8	coordination kinesthetic differentiation force joint mobility motor precision proprioception resistence velocity
Creativity	8	breaking down canonical game patterns contextual adaptation courage creation of original solutions in a movement exercise has multiple solutions for one task invent a new technique A personal style of play
Work Attitude Capacity	7	self-criticism involvement commitment motivation do not settle for the result orientation towards a goal overcome obstacles, difficulties
Cognitive Capacity	3	anticipation attentional skills complex reaction times
Sport Learning Capacity	3	ease mastery search for new challenges / stimuli

Table 1 Deductive categories from literature and Inductive Categories emerged from the focus

Comparing the items on the Dutch scale with what emerged from the focus group, 21 out of 27 indicators on the SISP scale were reported as characteristics of sports talent in the short form.

The descriptors that emerged in the focus group overlapping with those of the SISP scale are indicated in table 2 which shows all the 66 items of the original version of the scale and the items of the 27-item scale (in bold) that emerged or did not in the focus group.

Comparing the data that emerged from the focus with the items of the 27-item SISP Scale, the 6 indicators that were not covered mostly concern cognitive/scholastic skills (grouped in the cognitive skills factor) or motor skills. In particular, reference is made to the items:

- has a high intelligence
- is one of the smartest (brightest) students in the class
- scores above average for most subjects in school

- often takes the initiative in group work
- has a good sense of balance
- has great jumping skills

However, some characteristics identified within the focus group have brought out some sports skills (taking risks, awareness of one's abilities, stress management during competitions, emotional self-regulation) reported in the original version at 66 items but then excluded in the short scale.

Alongside these characteristics, the participants in the focus identified others (trust, attention skills, fun, self-criticism, the personal style in carrying out certain sports activities or roles, a sense of fun while carrying out activities, knowing how to live with success and being able not to get involved in personal problems, appearing arrogant) neither reported in the short version nor the original version of the scale.

This aspect may be attributable to the fact that the participants in the focus are all coaches and not teachers of physical education and not carrying out a profession in the school would have brought a different perception of the phenomenon of sports talent compared to the sample of teachers used for the Dutch scale.

Furthermore, for the validation of the Dutch tool, the questions asked to the teachers referred to primary school children, each item on the scale was introduced by the sentence: "A 6-8 years old child with the ability to become an elite athlete in the future is a child who ...", in the focus group, on the other hand, the participants were asked to think of children and young people, indiscriminately.

While most of the talent indicators described in the 27-item SISP Scale are confirmed in the description of the elements characterizing the talent for the protagonists of the Italian focus group, on the other, substantial differences can be deduced.

First of all, the lack of a representation of talent is linked to purely scholastic characteristics as seen within the SISP scale.

Secondly, a further difference is a broad focus on the part of the participants in the focus on intrapersonal characteristics. Among the analyzed categories, the interviewed coaches found a very large number of sub-categories for the "intrapersonal characteristics" category (9) when compared with the others. Among the sub-categories identified, great importance was given to some metacognitive skills such as self-awareness of one's abilities, stress management during competitions, emotional self-regulation, characteristics considered in the original scale but which are not considered in the final version of the scale.

ITEM SISP FOUND IN THE FOCUS PRESENT IN THE SHORT FORM		ITEM SISP original and 27 items (in bold) NOT DETECTED IN THE FOCUS GROUP		ITEM SISP original FOUND IN FOCUS NOT PRESENT IN THE SHORT FORM	
1	**has rapid acquisition of (exercise)skills .**	10	often chooses difficult exercises	11	quickly understand a new game

2	**likes to learn new movements .**	**15**	**often takes the lead in group work**	12	learns from one's own mistakes
3	**has strong perseverance**	20	has much respect of class mates	13	has well developed agility skills
4	**moves fluently**	21	has a good relationship with the teacher	31	has much strength in the thrunk (strong muscles in belly, back
5	**has well developed coordination between lower and upper body .**	22	is good in expressing feelings	32	has a good reaction force
6	**likes to work hard**	**23**	**has a high intelligence**	36	is able to achieve objectives in different ways
7	**is able to customize on changing situations**	**24**	**is one of the smartest students in a class**	40	if necessary asks for help when learning a skill
8	**quickly pick up clues**	**25**	**reports an above-average score for 90% of subjects at school**	41	has a good endurance capacity
9	**is constantly looking for new challenges**	26	prioritizes own interests	42	is well able to continue physical exercises
14	**has the capability to make class mates enthusiast**	27	has many peers	43	prioritizes interest of the team
16	**has the capability to cope with different persons**	**29**	**has a good sense of balance**	44	has a good strength in the arms
17	**possesses leadership skills**	**30**	**has a big jump capacity**	45	is aware of one's own limitations
18	**is a teamplayer**			46	is aware of one's own capabilities
19	**has the capability to cooperate**			47	is able to peak under pressure
28	**has good balance skills**			48	has the capability to communicate
33	**makes use of original solutions for movement problems**			49	quickly puts information into action
34	**makes use of unusual solutions for movement problems**			50	has a good understanding of games
35	**makes use of innovative solutions for movement problems**			51	often takes a correct tactical decision in game situations
37	**always tries to get the best out of himself**			52	has a good control of all fundamental movement skills
38	**works goal oriented**			53	in games, thinks one or two steps ahead
39	**has a desire to constantly improve**			54	is able to keep emotions under control
				55	is very well able to stay in control over nerves
				56	is well able to work independently
				57	is well able to sprint
				58	has good perceptual capabilities

				59	has a high operational speed while moving
				60	always wants to be the best
				61	has well developed eye-foot coordination
				62	has a flexible body
				63	is very curious
				64	takes risks
				65	has a good self-confidence
				66	is interested in sport and exercise

Table 2 Item Shortened (bold) and original SISP emerged and not emerged in the focus group.

3. Conclusion

This first exploratory analysis highlights some important elements regarding the practices of identifying sports talent, and in particular how professionals who daily work with young athletes perceive the talent and bring to light all those elements that are fundamental in the identification of potentially sport gifted students.

Coaches' representations encourage the possibility of validating the SISP Scale also for Italian teachers.

Among the descriptors of the SISP scale that emerged within the focus group, a particular mention should be given to the issue of commitment, a concept that we have seen to be particularly frequent within the analyzed discourses. For the coaches interviewed, commitment seems to be an essential feature in the development of sporting potential. A significant extract is provided below:

"As well as on a technical level also on a mental level, a difference in mental approach, for example the training ends, EVERYONE LEAVES, HE KEEPS TRYING. The talented boy remains after the training, he continues alone, he deepens and becomes better and better, only to break through". The aspect of commitment is well investigated in the literature on giftedness so that one of the most popular model of giftedness called the "Three Rings Model" (Renzulli, 1986) describes commitment as part of gifted behavior.

Another element that often returns in the representations of the participants in the focus is the theme of ease, according to which people with sport talent seem to perform motor gestures with ease, fluidity and confidence. The ease and speed in the execution of some technical gestures and in the progress within the development phases are also reflected in the sector literature starting from Gagnè's studies (Gagné, 2015).

However, numerous researches attest that sporting ability does not depend exclusively on purely motor characteristics and that a series of psycho-emotional and cognitive traits are also associated with athletic performance. Such traits include, for example, innate resilience to stress and several attitudinal factors, such as motivation, perseverance and personality dispositions (Issurin, 2017; Collins et al, 2016; Gould et al. 2001). It is interesting to highlight that among the aspects considered in the focus group, the personal style in carrying out certain sports activities or roles stands out, the sense of fun during the performance of the activities, the knowing how to live and manage success, being able not to get involved in personal problems, appearing arrogant, however, aspects not considered in the SISP tool. One among all is the *style of play*, which can be defined as a personal tendency in conducting certain movements, technical gestures, exercise a specific role or participate in a competition.

Furthermore, the sense of fun and happiness during sporting activity refers to that autotelic experience mentioned by the psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (2006, 1990) in his Theory of Flow, that is the feeling of gratification in carrying out a task or activity that goes beyond external rewards, but for the fun that the activity itself generates. This experience, according to the author, would constitute one of the personality traits of creative people and therefore could also be a highly descriptive element of sport talent. All these aspects that emerged in the focus, not covered in the SISP scale but in line with the literature on giftedness are worthy of further deepening for the Italian validation of the instrument.

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