

## FROM PARALYMPICS TO UNIFIED SPORT: A SOCIO-CULTURAL AND PEDAGOGICAL REVOLUTION

### DALLE PARALIMPIADI ALLO SPORT UNIFICATO: UNA RIVOLUZIONE SOCIO-CULTURALE E PEDAGOGICA

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#### **Abstract**

Starting from the analysis of some documents drafted by international organizations (Council of Europe, Unesco, etc.) that define sport as a fundamental human right, this article traces the birth and historical evolution of the Paralympic movement and the radical transformation of the relationship between disability and sporting activity. Specifically, it investigates the contribution of Paralympism in the transition from the rehabilitation paradigm to the competitive one, through which sport has gone beyond the medical dimension, creating an inclusive socio-educational space capable of valuing differences and revolutionizing the way of interpreting and experiencing disability. Following the guidelines on inclusiveness provided by the PNR 2021 and the Horizon Europe 2021-2027, this paper analyses the strengths and weaknesses of paralympism and highlights the innovative paths of unified sport, which is experiencing the concrete possibility of realizing situations of authentic sharing and integration.

Partendo dall’analisi di alcuni documenti redatti da organismi internazionali (Consiglio d’Europa, Unesco, ecc.) che definiscono lo sport come un diritto fondamentale della persona, l’articolo ripercorre la nascita e l’evoluzione storica del movimento paralimpico e la radicale trasformazione del rapporto tra disabilità ed attività sportiva. Nello specifico, viene indagato il contributo del paralimpismo nel passaggio dal paradigma riabilitativo a quello competitivo, attraverso il quale lo sport è andato oltre la dimensione medico-sanitaria, creando uno spazio socio-educativo inclusivo capace di valorizzare le differenze e di rivoluzionare il modo di interpretare e di vivere la disabilità. Seguendo le linee guida sull’inclusività fornite dal PNR 2021 e da *Horizon Europe 2021-2027*, il lavoro indaga i punti di forza e le criticità del paralimpismo e mette in luce gli innovativi percorsi dello sport unificato, che sta sperimentando la concreta possibilità di realizzare situazioni di autentica condivisione e integrazione.

**Key-words:** Sport, Disability, Paralympics, Inclusivity, Sharing, Unified sport.

**Parole chiave:** Sport, Disabilità, Paralimpiadi, Inclusione, Condivisione, Sport unificato.

## Introduction

Sport, understood as an essentially human practice capable of responding to countless individual and social needs, has been fully recognized by a series of international bodies as a fundamental right of the person, regardless of psycho-mental conditions physical and socio-economic (Isidori & Benetton, 2015). The perspective outlined in Article 1 of the *European Charter for Sport*<sup>1</sup>, drawn up in 1992, is in line with that of the International Charter for Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport, adopted in 1978<sup>2</sup> by UNESCO, which states that:

“Every human being has the fundamental right to physical education, physical activity and sport, without discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, economic or any other basis” (UNESCO, 2015, p. 3).

Point 1.3 is also decisive in the Charter, which stresses the need to ensure inclusive opportunities in sport for people with disabilities, women, children and the elderly, and paragraph 1.6, which states that every person must be free to carry out such activities according to his or her needs and aspirations. While some documents drawn up by international bodies focus on the dimension of law, others tend to emphasize the socio-educational role of sports practice. Particularly relevant in this regard are the challenges outlined in the *White Paper on Sport* (Commission of the European Communities, 2007), which assigns sport the task of contributing to the improvement of public health, the enhancement of the educational offer of the various educational agencies, the promotion of sustainable development, the fight against racism and, finally, the implementation of policies aimed at social inclusion and equal opportunities. In this text, moreover, accessibility and participation in sport are taken as criteria for analysis and evaluation of social integration.

In today's society, inclusion is one of the fundamental issues in the educational field and represents a political, economic, social, cultural and educational challenge. This also emerges from *PNR 2021*, which, referring to the *Horizon Europe* (European Framework Programme for Research and Innovation 2021-2027)<sup>3</sup> scheme, places the theme of inclusiveness among the six major areas of research and innovation (MUR, 2020) with the aim of developing a multidisciplinary and integrated approach aimed at reducing inequalities, injustices and social exclusion.

In this perspective, those who work in the world of sport are called to focus attention on its educational potential (Sibilio, 2005), so that the playful practices. They can be configured as places for sharing experiences and enhancing the abilities of each one (Di Palma, Ascione, Cassese & Tafuri, 2017; Moliterni, 2015). For this reason, it is necessary that sports contexts demonstrate flexibility in response to the complexity that characterizes the interaction of differences (Ceruti, 2018). As Casolo states (2018, p.18):

“Adaptation and inclusion are concepts that should be addressed to all subjects of the educational context, to different genders and ethnicities, to different ages, to different levels of abilities and

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<sup>1</sup> The updated version of the European Sport Charter, drawn up by the Council of Europe in 1992 and revised for the first time in 2001 and for the second time in 2021, is available at: <https://rm.coe.int/recommendation-cm-rec-2021-5-on-the-revision-of-the-european-sport-cha/1680a43914>.

<sup>2</sup> The updated version of the International Charter for Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport, drawn up by UNESCO in 1978 and revised in 2015, is available at: [https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000235409\\_ita](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000235409_ita).

<sup>3</sup> Information on the Horizon Europe (European Framework Programme for Research and Innovation 2021-2027) is available at <https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europeen>.

disabilities. Adaptation and inclusion understood as characteristic traits of every didactic and educational action must become possible in all practical proposals of movement and in all forms of human movement, sport game and competitive sport of elite”.

When we talk about sport and inclusion we refer to a series of situations of marginality (Magnanini, 2018), related to gender, sexual orientation, different socio-cultural backgrounds, disability, a social disadvantage The Court of First Instance held that the Commission had failed to fulfil its obligations under the Treaty. In the awareness of the complexity that characterizes the integration processes within sports contexts (Tafari, Di Palma, & Raiola, 2017), in this article we chose to deepen the relationship between disability and sport, investigating the forms that the latter has taken over time in relation to the pedagogical issue of social inclusion.

### **1. The birth of the paralympic movement: from the therapeutic-rehabilitative paradigm to the competitive one**

In the vast panorama of physical-sports activities related to the context of disability, it is possible to trace two macro-areas of intervention partially interconnected: one that is expressed in specific practices for people with disabilities and the other that experiences new sports situations, aimed at integrating everyone in a common and shared dimension. In both cases, the combination of physical activity-disability refers to the concept of AFA (Adapted Physical Activity), which derives from the English acronym APA (Adapted Physical Activity). It is intended as an interdisciplinary field of study and research that aims to create the theoretical and practical assumptions so that “everyone”, regardless of their psycho-physical conditions, can take part in physical activity-To achieve the benefits deriving from them (Milani, 2020). The APA movement has continued the work undertaken by some US educational institutions, which, since the 1950s, began to develop “Adapted Physical Education” (APE - Adapted Physical Education) programmes for pupils with disabilities (Bertagna, 2004). Studies and initiatives in this area are coordinated by the International Federation for Adapted Physical Activities (IFAPA) which was established in 1973 with the aim of encouraging cooperation between countries and promoting scientific research and practical experience in the fields of sport, physical education, rehabilitation, dance, play, fitness and more generally, The European Commission’s Green Paper on Sustainable Development and Sustainable Development (2008). In addition, IFAPA collaborates with a number of international organizations, including the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), the Special Olympics International and the International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education (ICSSPE), speaking in the field of sports training in formal and informal, special and integrated contexts (Farinella, Mosso, Leonardi, 2016).

In the physical sciences and sports “adapt” means adapting activities to the needs and requirements of individual subjects, intervening on the environment, tools, exercises, regulations and safety criteria (Bertagna, 2004), to make physical practices accessible to all. In this sense, teaching programming, both in the organization of training and in the management of competitive confrontation, is based on the theoretical principles of individualization and sharing, differentiation (D’Alonzo, 2016) and cooperation (Bertini, 2005). They characterize the emerging pedagogical paradigm of inclusion (D’Alonzo, 2018). As Cazzoli states (2008, p. 66):

“The ‘specialty’ becomes ‘normality’, not denying one’s identity, but elevating individual differences and specificities as opportunities for growth for the whole community. From this point of view, diversity changes connotation, it is no longer the negative, pathological element, but becomes

a structural element of the social system and the engine of positive changes and growth of all the components of society”.

Research within the APA has highlighted the benefits of introducing physical activity in the lives of people with disabilities (Montesano & Russo, 2017; Morsanuto & Cassese, 2018). They attach not only to the sphere of physicality but also to psycho-emotional, cognitive (Morsanuto & Tafuri, 2017) and socio-relational (Madonna, 2019). Sport, in fact, allows on the one hand to improve their possibilities of movement and to structure a positive image of themselves, and on the other to increase self-esteem, resilience (Magnanini, 2018), personal autonomy and self-control, especially through the experiences of socialization and participation (Bertini, 2005).

The development of the APA sector has created the conditions for the exercise and physical-sports activities to be practiced by all, therefore not only with the perspective of integrating people with disabilities but also shaping the various exercises on the specific needs of each individual. Despite the valuable contribution provided by the Adapted Physical Activities, the decisive shift from the therapeutic-rehabilitation paradigm to the sport was accomplished thanks to the birth of the Paralympic movement (Masala, D'Egidio, Cassese, & Mannocci, 2016) which initiated the participation of people with disabilities in competitive events at various levels.

The beginnings of the Paralympic movement are to be found in the action of Ludwig Guttman, a German neurosurgeon, who moved to England during World War II and worked at the “National Spinal Injuries Centre” of the Stoke Mandeville hospital (Bertini, 2005) in one of the first European centers for the treatment and rehabilitation of people with spinal injuries, in particular former soldiers seriously injured during the conflict. Guttman introduced into the rehabilitation protocol of his patients a series of sports activities opportunely modified, understanding that the physical-sports practice in a playful-recreational and competitive not only facilitated the process of psycho-rehabilitation. It also improved the quality of life and facilitated the overcoming of post-traumatic disorders (Fonzo, 2021). Guttman organized on 28 July 1948, the day of the opening ceremony of the London Olympics, the first Stoke Mandeville Games for athletes with disabilities, former members of the armed forces (Sgambelluri, 2012). The event had great resonance especially in the health sector and several European and non-European doctors began to insert sports activities in the therapeutic-rehabilitation paths of patients suffering from spinal injuries. In 1952 the Games invented by Guttman took on an international character, but the real turning point was in 1960, when the Italian doctor Antonio Maglio, follower of the German neurosurgeon, realized the ninth edition of the event in Rome, which today is considered in all respects the first edition of the Paralympic Games (Sgambelluri, 2012). Maglio also had his first experiences with soldiers who had suffered serious spinal injuries and amputations of the limbs during military service (Saitta, 2018). At the end of the war, the Italian doctor, specializing in neurology and psychiatry, became a consultant to Inail (National Institute for Occupational Accident Insurance) and “consecrated” his life to the care of paraplegics and myeloses, carrying out “an authentic scientific and cultural revolution” (Saitta, 2018, p. 24). The Paralympics, which today have achieved extraordinary popularity and media attention, have, in fact, contributed decisively to the transformation of the way of seeing and interpreting disability (Purdue & Howe, 2012). However, the Paralympic logic presents important limits from a pedagogical-sporting point of view, as it omits the inclusive paradigm, “ultimately creating, once again, opportunities for segregation and exclusion” (Magnanini, 2009, p. 188). The events related to the Paralympic movement are, as the term highlights, “parallel to the Olympics”, and are located in a very distinct space, which follows the separatist scheme “sports of ‘series a’ and ‘sports of series b’, ‘sports for the skilled’ and ‘sports for the disabled’” (Magnanini, 2009, p. 189). To overcome the complex challenge of inclusion it is necessary to recover the educational and recreational potential of sport, experimenting with interventions aimed at the integration and unification of the various categories and the enhancement of diversity (Cassese & Raiola, 2017).

## 2. Special Olympics and "unified" sport

The call to create situations of inclusion within sporting contexts, supported by both the scientific community and political institutions, was welcomed by Special Olympics, founded by Eunice Kennedy in 1968 (year of the First International Games in Chicago), with the aim of managing all physical-sports activities for people with intellectual disabilities. This international organization, which was recognized by the IOC in 1988, officially assuming the values and ideals of the Olympic movement, organizes every four years the International Olympic Games, summer and winter staggered by two years, in about thirty adapted sports. Unlike the Paralympic Games, characterized by selective dynamics linked to the logic of maximizing performance, Special Olympics, while focusing attention on people with intellectual disabilities, work in an inclusive perspective and design disciplines and events that can integrate everyone. In addition, within the events promoted by Special Olympics are enhanced the recreational-recreational and socio-relational aspects of sports, giving the competition a role far from priority, as everyone can access the races and each participant, regardless of the result, receives a prize.

In recent years, *Special Olympics* has been strongly promoting the *Unified Sport approach*, driver of *Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools*, founded in 2008 by U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, involving primary and secondary schools and universities<sup>4</sup>. In this way, through the partnership of important international organizations, such as Unicef, and some of the major professional sports organizations, such as NBA and UEFA, the spread of unified sports is encouraged and supported (recreational and competitive), both at school and out-of-school, through projects aimed at the inclusion of people with and without intellectual disabilities (the latter are called partners). Ultimately, in addition to the "traditional" disciplines, new sports games are emerging integrated, regulated and designed according to a series of principles that ensure the significant involvement of all participants. An emblematic example is *Unified Football* (which includes Soccer 11, 7, 5 and Beach Soccer), in which primary importance is the respect of the numerical relationship between athletes and partners, which in Football 11 is 6 to 5. Each member of the team, engaged for at least 30% of the match, must participate in the game and make their own contribution according to their abilities. The dominance behavior of one team over another and the lack of involvement of one of the participants are punishable, as the teams that compete on the field must have the same technical-tactical level. Athletes and partners share training sessions and matches, as well as individual preparation sessions, with the aim of simultaneously developing personal skills and team working skills.

The *Unified Sport approach* is currently one of the most important international reference points for the unified sports movement, both at the practical-organizational and scientific level. *Special Olympics*, in fact, is not limited to creating and spreading integrated sports events, but collects data and information with the aim of inserting their activities in a path of continuous research and evolution. To facilitate the circular process "theory-practice-theory" is fundamental the constant assessment of the inclusivity of the proposed activities, which should be inspired by the models of analysis of the quality of school inclusion (Cottini, 2017), involving on the one hand coaches, managers, parents and other participants (with and without disabilities).

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<sup>4</sup> Information on the history and initiatives promoted by Special Olympics International is available at: <https://www.specialolympics.org/our-work/sports/unified-sports?locale=en>.

### 3. Inclusive sport in Italy: networking

Italy, strong of the consolidated experience of school inclusion, proves to be at the forefront also in the field of physical activity and sports, in which it is carrying out a great network work between educational institutions, families, local authorities, national federations and the world of sports associations. With regard to the question of integration, the Italian school has already made, since the seventies, the courageous and pioneering choice of the inclusion of pupils with disabilities in “normal” classes. This is a concrete testimony to the importance of the participation of students with special educational needs in ordinary and shared school curricula (D’Alonzo, 2018). The sporting context can, therefore, rely on a solid and lasting experience, which has led, over the years, not only to the refinement of the regulations relating to training, but also to significant theoretical-pedagogical reflections and educational experiments, increasingly oriented towards an inclusive system. In this sense, the initiatives born from the collaboration between the various institutions concerned have shown that the assumption of a systemic and integrated approach is the most adequate and fruitful way to face the challenge of inclusion in the age of complexity (Cottini, 2017).

One of the most significant examples is certainly that of Baskin (integrated or inclusive basketball), born in a school in Cremona from the collaboration between parents and teachers and developed thanks to the networking work between the various institutions and associations in the area. In this original discipline, inspired by Basketball, participation is open to players with and without disabilities, women and men, without division into categories. The six members of the team are classified according to five roles, representative of the level of functional ability, and in each team there must be a balanced composition of each role. This choice has implications both for the management and organization of the team by the coaches, who must ensure the participation of athletes with various degrees of ability, both for the athletes themselves, as everyone makes a specific and indispensable contribution to the game. The regulation also provides that there are four areas of finalization of the attack action, so in addition to the two “traditional” baskets, at half court, there are two other side areas with a double basket (one of 2.20 m and one of 1.10 m). The mention of Baskin, which has aroused great interest in the international arena, is due, on the one hand, because it testifies to the positive collaboration between the school, the sports associations and the various agencies of the territory (Magnanini, 2009), and, on the other, because, managing to guarantee full accessibility and participation to people with and without disabilities, it represents a model for research in the educational-educational field (Tatulli, 2015).

Another important experience involving the school and the sports sector is that of the Student Championships, organized by Miur (Italian Ministry of University and Research) with the collaboration of Sport and Health Spa, the Italian Paralympic Committee (CIP), the National Sports Federations (FSN) and local authorities. Starting from the 2019/2020 school year, in the technical project of the Student Championships aimed at secondary schools of first and second grade, great attention was paid to students with disabilities, promoting participation in competitive events and activities of curricular and extra-curricular preparation. The main changes compared to previous years concern the reduction of the categories of disability from 6 to 2 (physical disability - HF - and blind - B1), resulting in the integration of all other pupils with disabilities in some individual disciplines;

the introduction, in experimental form, of Integrated Mixed Basketball tournaments and Integrated 5-a-side Football; and finally, the inclusion of regional and interregional tournaments of Baskin, Sitting Volleyball and Goalball<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> The Technical Project of the A.S. Student Championships 2019-2020 can be consulted on the following website: [https://www.miur.gov.it/documents/20182/1306025/PROGETTO+TECNICO+Campionati+studenteschi+2019-20\\_DGSIP\\_V.pdf/f8bef615-f3c1-7eb6-182e-7841b9ca46ea?version=1.0&t=1574678232776](https://www.miur.gov.it/documents/20182/1306025/PROGETTO+TECNICO+Campionati+studenteschi+2019-20_DGSIP_V.pdf/f8bef615-f3c1-7eb6-182e-7841b9ca46ea?version=1.0&t=1574678232776).

A further step forward has been achieved through the School Project of *Special Olympics Italy*<sup>6</sup>, which has implemented the *Guidelines for the school integration of pupils with disabilities* (4/9/2009 note MIUR 4274) signing a *Memorandum of Understanding with the MIUR*. The Project, addressed to all school orders and grades, provides for an education to inclusion, exploiting the potential of sports. Specifically, training courses are proposed for teachers on the issues of integration, recreational and educational situations of collaboration and sharing between pupils with and without disabilities and pathways to volunteer activities. The main objective of the *Special Olympics* is, in fact, to promote the knowledge and understanding of diversity to enhance it as a social resource.

These initiatives, born from the synergy between the sports sector and the school sector, are fundamental because, in addition to representing experimental laboratories of new disciplines and new ways of holding competitive events, contribute to the development of the integration of pupils with disabilities, physical and intellectual, in physical education activities, a discipline that, due to its specific characteristics, has developed a certain delay compared to the inclusive policies of the Italian school (Milani, 2020; Brienza, 2009).

## Conclusions

As we have seen in the previous paragraphs, the relationship between sport, education and disability has developed in various directions, producing a considerable increase in the possibilities of access of people with disabilities to physical-sports practices, which not always it has resulted in situations of concrete inclusion (Mura, 2009). Specifically, physical activities related to people with disabilities have taken two forms, the first of which can be summarized in the actions of the Paralympic movement, which has created specific sports contexts and adapted to the various conditions of disability, and the second is similar to the idea of unified sport, aimed at the integration of people with and without disabilities.

The path of unified sport has been welcomed both in Italy and internationally by various bodies and institutions, which have created a series of interesting experiences of sharing, integration and socialization through the exercise, demonstrating that inclusive sport is not a utopia (Magnanini, 2008).

On the contrary, it would be utopian to think that integrated sports disciplines can completely replace those divided into categories, increasingly pervaded by the logic of spectacularization and monetization of performance. Surely the spread of unified sports is very encouraging, as the organizations that manage these disciplines are not limited to the design and implementation of competitive events at various levels, but are concretely committed to the dissemination of the culture of inclusion within the sports world. For this action to be effective it is of fundamental importance that the unified sports movement, despite finding inspiration in the “traditional” sports model and collaborating closely with it, retains its specificity by constantly reaffirming its aims, which include agonism but do not completely coincide with it. Indeed, in order to be truly inclusive, unified sport must be able to combine unity and multiplicity, valuing differences and simultaneously shaping itself on the needs, potential, limits and expectations of people with and without disabilities. As Bertagna states (2004, p. 161):

“It is no longer a question, in fact, of integrating anyone into an abstract default normality that then translates into a propensity for uniformity, but to make the most of personal equipment, excluding any stereotypical mode of approach to the plurality of situations and performances that

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<sup>6</sup> Information on the history, statutes, regulations and events promoted by Special Olympics Italia can be found at: <https://www.specialolympics.it>.

characterize every human being. The diversity of each, in other words, a sign of a possible wealth for all when each was optimized and used, with creativity, as an intentional contribution to an ever wider inclusion and to an affirmation of itself more and more appropriate to that of others, in the world and in society”.

The real challenge is to achieve satisfactory experiences for everyone, avoiding that the involvement of people without disabilities is reduced to a welfare support and that can register, on the contrary, in a dynamic of cooperation, collaboration and reciprocity. In this sense, the design of unified events should include a pro-social education program and activities inspired by the principles of Cooperative Learning and Peer Tutoring (Cottini, 2017), which develop a positive and constructive interdependence (Benetton & Visentin, 2021). Precisely for these reasons, it would be desirable to strengthen the relationship between the Sport Sciences and Special Pedagogy, since the latter on the one hand provides models, methodologies and teaching strategies based on a theory of education attentive to the needs of each (D’Alonzo, 2018), on the other hand contributes to developing specific pedagogical skills in sports operators (De Anna, 2009).

Creating inclusive contexts means, in fact, giving “each one his own specific opportunities, the result of an alignment between personal characteristics, the resources of the context and subjective aspirations” (Benetton & Visentin, 2021, p. 90). This theoretical model, known as the “capability approach”, is not only supplanting the individual and social approach, but is also taking a step forward in the biopsychosocial approach promoted by the ICF (WHO, 1999). Using the multidimensional and dynamic concept of health, this approach analyses personal and environmental factors in relation to the functioning profiles of any person. The capability approach theory, formulated by Amartya Sen and optimized by Martha Nussbaum, expands the ICF model, because, in addition to jointly considering environmental factors and individual conditions, it focuses attention on what people can and can be, or on freedom and on the concrete possibility of choice, enhancing the dimension of self-determination (Nussbaum, 2012). In this sense, sport can be a valid instrument of social inclusion when, by designing shared activities, it puts the person at the center, recognizing the dignity and decision-making autonomy, and at the same time undertakes to bring back education “in places of marginalization, not only as an opportunity for education, but of existential project” (Magnanini, 2018, p. 56).

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