

## EDUCATION TO SCHOOL INCLUSION THROUGH SPORT

**Davide Di Palma, Antonio Ascione and Salvatore Napolitano**

*Parthenope University, Naples, Italy*

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### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this research is to highlight the contribution that sport can provide, in an educational context, for an inclusive development of subjects with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in the school context. To date, there has been an evolution from the goal of school integration to that of inclusion, which has also been highlighted in the new concept of SEN that, by now, is no more only methodical and opens up, in a mostly pedagogical and educational key, to the phenomenon of inclusion. In this respect, sport, thanks to the many inclusive benefits it can bring, sport is the most suitable educational tool to be adopted at school level too.*

**Key words:** *sport, education, SEN, inclusion, school.*

### **Introduction**

Sport has a formative, educational and, above all, inclusive value for every person, regardless of his age, gender, and presence or absence of a disabling physical or mental condition. To date, the school context has as its main objective that to promote the phenomenon of inclusion, overcoming the concept of integration. In this perspective, the concept of Special Educational Needs (SEN) evolves to the benefit of a perspective that goes beyond the mere recognition of special need, only in the presence of a physical or mental disability of medical type. In this regard, this contribution is intended to offer pedagogical and educational reflections to promote inclusion at school level for all those who are part of the new dimension of SEN. In this perspective, sport is proposed as a tool able to educate to inclusion, thanks to the many benefits it generates to the so-called "weak" categories.

### **From the concept of integration to that of inclusion**

The legislative process that has allowed the Italian school to abandon special or differential education, and to orient itself towards an educational integration process, in an inclusive perspective, has been marked by important legislative steps. The most significant ones are circumscribed in the twenty years from 1971 to 1992. Until the 1960s, to name a certain category of students (the current disabled) there was a varied terminology: "Abnormal, subnormal, irregular, impaired" and so on. Well, these pupils, because of their abnormalities, could be educated and trained, but in special structures and differential classes, in environments made just for them (Canevaro, 2007). So the person with a deficit, being him not normal ("abnormal", "subnormal" or "disabled"), could not have the same treatment of an "ordinary" students but was allowed to attend segregating structures. Only after the 1970s, years that have seen great changes in costume, society, family, culture and politics (Basaglia's Law dates back to 1978), it came the end of segregation and the

beginning of integration also at institutional level. With Law nr.118/71, civilian invalids could be enrolled in the schools attended by non-disabled people (it is the beginning of the integration that, at that time, somebody defined as "wild"), but the real integration started with law nr.517/77. It must be acknowledged that it finally gave full implementation to arts. 3, 34 and 38 of the Italian Constitution in the school system, placing Italy at the forefront than all other European countries. A ruling of 1987 issued by the Italian Constitutional Court recognized the right of education also for students with disabilities in higher education; then the Framework Law 104/92, which constitutes the current indisputable point of reference for all, was issued (Medeghini et al., 2013). Law nr. 104 speaks of a "handicapped" person, meaning a person who has "a stabilized or progressive physical, psychic or sensory impairment which causes difficulties in learning, relationship or job integration, and which determines a process of social disadvantage or marginalization." Thus, students with deficits cease to be considered abnormal or disadvantaged, but only subjects who, while facing "difficulties in learning and establishing relationships ...", are not discriminated at all at human or social level, according to the principle of equality guaranteed by the Italian Constitution, which not only affirms "equal social dignity ... without distinction ... according to personal conditions", but commits the Republic to "remove the obstacles ... which ... prevent the full development of the person and the actual participation of all workers in the political, economic and social organization of the country. " The new denomination of "disabled person" not only unifies the varied terminology used in the past ("abnormal, subnormal, irregular, disadvantaged," etc.) but clearly states that the person is handicapped and not impaired; so it is not the mere presence of the deficit that produces the handicap. The deficit originates disadvantages in terms of learning, relationship and communication; if there were not these difficulties or they would be reduced, the student would not be in a

disadvantaged situation. It follows that the deficit in itself does not cause the handicap, but it is the contextual conditions that causes it; Hence the proper diction of student "in a condition of handicap" and not "bearer of ...." that suggests a constitutive feature of his person. Today with the ICF (international classification of functioning, disability and health) we speak of limits to the social participation, and no more of a handicap. We speak of disability that can originate also from contextual and environmental reasons, considering the global nature and the complexity of the subjects' functionalities. Therefore, since 1977, school is called to implement not only the inclusion, or the mere socialization in the presence, but the integration in the school of all, where a unicum, an integer, a whole, is achieved (Pavone, 2010). So the integration is a process constantly open to seek reconciliation with the whole, by creating constantly new learning situations and relationships that will bring out the various abilities, not the compared disabilities. But what about inclusion? The term inclusion extends this recognition to students with any difference, thus not referring only to certain categories such as those with disabilities or those who find difficulties, but involves all students.

Over the past few years the number of students with various types of difficulties has increased considerably, which are not attributable to the main classifications of the ICF, but require teachers to make interventions "adapted" to their peculiar characteristics that result from their particular situation. A situation of "difficulty" which does not fall within the parameters of the WHO classifications (the ICF is one of the most important classifications), it cannot be "certified", and thus have a functional diagnosis that allows the child to follow an ad hoc "educational path". With the Prime Ministerial Decree n. 185 of February 23, 2006, the rules for the certification of disability for the purposes of school integration have changed in a "restrictive" way, since support activities are addressed only to students who have a stabilized and progressive physical, mental or sensory impairment. It follows that students who have not severe or progressive deficits cannot be helped further with the presence of the supporting teacher: it happens that both they and their teachers live difficult experiences; the first because they see no advantage in going to school, and the second find difficulties in dealing with and managing situations that they consider "unusual" (Ianes, 2005). Students with these and other difficulties, but that are not always "recognized", are identified by the acronym SEN (Special Educational Needs).

### **The "inclusive" concept of Special Educational Need (SEN)**

The expression Special Educational Need (SEN) refers to the adoption of the Ministerial Directive of December 27, 2012, entitled "Intervention tools for students with special educational needs and territorial organization for school inclusion."

The directive itself indicates briefly its meaning: "The area of school disadvantage is much bigger than that referred explicitly to the presence of deficits. In every class there are students who submit requests for special attention for a variety of reasons: social and cultural disadvantage, specific learning disorders and/or specific developmental disabilities, difficulties arising from the lack of knowledge of Italian culture and language because of different cultural groups of belonging". It comprises three broad sub-categories: disability; specific learning disorders and/or specific developmental disorders and socio-economic, linguistic or cultural disadvantage. The directive contains important information on the intervention tools. In particular, it highlights the need to develop an individualized and personalized path, including through the drafting of a personalized didactic plan, which can be individual or referred to all SEN children in the class, a plan that serves as an in-itinere working tool for teachers and that has the function of informing families about planned intervention strategies. It may contemplate compensatory instruments and dispensatory measures provided for by the implementing provisions of L. 170/2010 (M.D. n.5669/11) and the adoption of an inclusive and learning-centered didactics (Ianes, 2005; 2006). On March 6, 2013, the MIUR (Italian Ministry of Education and Research) circular nr.8 was issued, which, from the outset, insisted on the need for an educational project that must be suitable for all the students with special educational needs, including those who have cultural, personal or social disadvantages.

In fact, we can read that "in this new and broader perspective, the Personalized Didactic Plan can no longer be understood as mere examination of compensatory and dispensatory instruments for SLD students; It is rather an instrument in which to include, for example, didactic and educational projects tailored to the minimum levels expected for the skills acquired (including many SEN students with no diagnostic certification), policy instruments useful to a greater extent than compensation or dispensations, which are purely didactic-instrumental». Then the Circular provides explanations on students with cultural, personal and socio-economic disadvantages, which represent also the innovative part of the SEN Directive: "The aim is also to draw further attention to that area of the SEN affecting the socio-economic, linguistic and cultural disadvantage". The directive, in this regard, remembers that "every student, continuously or for certain periods, may have special educational needs, or for reasons of physical, biological, physiological or even psychological and social reasons, which require that schools provide adequate and personalized answers." In order to avoid the risk of generic applications, the Circular continues by affirming that: «Students with disabilities are in an increasingly varied context, where the traditional distinction – disabled students/non-disabled students – does not fully reflect the complex reality of our classes. Indeed, it is appropriate to take an educational approach,

for which the identification of students with disabilities is not based on any certification, which is certainly useful to a range of benefits and guarantees, but at the same time risks enclosing them in a narrow frame. In this regard, also on a cultural level, the WHO's ICF diagnostic model is relevant. Relying on the operating profile and context analysis, the ICF model helps identifying the student's special educational needs (SEN) regardless of exclusionary standardizations. In this sense, every student can have special needs: physical, biological, physiological or psychological and social, which require that schools provide adequate and personalized answers".

The importance of the ICF classification, but also the need not to "circumscribe" the student with disadvantage/difficulty/disorder in a "narrow frame" is stressed, because it would limit his inclusion process in the classroom context (Canevaro, 2010). In this perspective the focus is not on deficit conditions, but on other teaching and organization forms that already include in them all the supports and aids needed to meet the different students' requirements. This does not mean putting aside the specificity of the individual, confounding them in a generic discussion on the differences; Indeed, these assume greater significance and meaning when they appear as personal ways to act and address the learning and relationships situations, requiring significant and convincing answers from the school and its teachers. So the inclusion recognizes that attention to the diversity of the disabled students made evident the diversities that make up the normality and the many special education needs that differentiate the various students, making the everyday reality of doing school increasingly challenging.

The perspective of an inclusive and valuable school is the following: making sure that all these diversities feel included, not "enclosed" in a context (Canevaro, 2006). For this to happen, it needs to create opportunities to meet with each other. It is obvious that school, in an integrated educational system, plays an important and essential role. First and foremost, teachers are required to gain new awareness on the development of thought and its educability. It is necessary to enhance the way, or rather, the ways in which to learn, by modulating the teaching activity for dealing effectively with such complexities. This means knowing better about learning, sharing the interpretation of the needs, the most appropriate methods and strategies to meet them. The teaching profession entails, in fact, the possibility/need to "learn to learn", since the complexity and problematic nature of the educational action stress a constant openness to new interpretations of the experience, to new and different operating modalities, new knowledge and skills, in a lifelong learning perspective. In this regard, sport and motor activities are proposed as educational tools able to develop a range of inclusive benefits suitable to the school context too (Mari, 2007; Light & Dixon, 2007).

### The inclusive benefits of sport

Human actions are the effect of a thought, an intentionality, and are expressed through intelligent behaviors of adaptation to daily life, working, sports and leisure situations (Di Palma et al, 2016). Sports practice, in particular, allows satisfying productively some human needs related to the game, movement, competition and group life experience, dimensions that are realized in sport. Physical activity is certainly a fundamental tool for improving residual potentialities in all grades of disability and SEN requirement (Wilson and Clayton, 2010):

- In severe situations: it improves the autonomy in movements and the recognition/awareness of sense-perception data about the physical behaviors adopted;
- In moderate severe situations: it facilitates the acquisition of basic motor skills and their proper use in school, relationship and sports training life;
- In less severe situations: it allows for the acquisition of more complex motor skills that may enable the practice of sporting activities.

It is important to emphasize that in order for you to realize these benefits, sport must effectively counteract the negative phenomenon of doping, which, unfortunately, is in continuous expansion and can influence more easily "weak people" (Mazzeo et al, 2016). That said, children who perform regular physical activity (group or individual sports, outdoor games, physical-motor activities) show a greater confidence in their own possibilities, are led to a greater self-esteem, to facilitated social relationships, a greater tolerance to stress, and are somehow "safer" from any propensity to disorders such as anxiety and depression, fostering automatically inclusive processes (De Anna, 2007; Di Palma & Tafuri, 2016; Montesano, Tafuri & Mazzeo, 2016). Other studies have shown that the practice of sport or physical activity generates beneficial effects on several functions:

- Learning (best, 2010);
- Development of cortical areas and functions (Hillman, Erickson & Kramer, 2008);
- Increased physiological arousal (Murialdo, 2009);
- School performance (Farinelli, 2005; Isidori & Fraile, 2008).

Not less important, especially for the current generation of young people, the effects produced in maintaining mental health (Van Prag, 2008) and in the prevention of cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, hypertensive crisis, already present in children and often related to overweight/obesity affecting childhood (Eisemann, 2006; Przeweda & Dobosz., 2003). Several studies in literature (Alesi et al, 2014; Barr & Shields, 2011) show that the regular practice of PE and sport is beneficial for individuals with Down syndrome as it promotes social interaction, self-esteem, the mental and physical

health and prevents the risk of chronic diseases (Ordonez et al., 2012; Andriolo et al, 2010). The Australian Department of Health and Ageing recommends that children should practice at least 60 minutes of moderate high-intensive physical activity everyday (Selis, A., and Stocchino, 2006). Recent studies, however, have found out that the 58% of children with Down syndrome does not follow these recommendations. In contrast, only the 15-25% of children with normal development does not practice regularly 60 minutes of daily physical activity (Barr & Shields, 2011). These differences may be related to the lack of accessible recreational-motor programs, reduced physical skills (poor motor coordination, cardiac abnormalities, hypotonia), lack of interest, frustration and few collaboration from the families of children with Down syndrome. Alesi et al. (2014) showed that the regular practice of an integrated (family + operator) program of adapted physical activities (AFA) can improve motor and cognitive skills, such as reaction times and working memory in children with Down syndrome.

Therefore, the recreational-motor practice seems to positively influence the visual-spatial component in individuals with Down syndrome than the language, which is often more affected than the first component that is linked to the working memory (Lanfranchi et al., 2004). The adapted physical activity for the disabled person is the exaltation of his abilities (albeit residual), and of what he is able to do in a world that always reminds him of what he cannot be and what he needs. Carraro (2004) states that "aiming at inclusiveness means allowing all those who approach sports and motor practice to achieve a basic level of technical skills, to feel pleasure in the commitment and efforts generated

and not to be excluded as "less adapted"». In this sense, the starting up of motor and/or sports practice by subjects with intellectual and/or mental disabilities, in public and private environments, aims at promoting social integration, self-esteem, preventing obesity and improve life quality. What we have analyzed so far highlights the importance of promoting motor and sports practice also in school contexts, of any grade, and of pursuing the goal of inclusion towards those who are characterized by the express or implied request of special educational needs.

## Conclusion

Sport has a great potential in terms of social, educational and inclusive development, both for people without disabilities, and especially for those with Special Educational Needs. It was specified that hard training, exercise and willpower are the main factors contributing to the life success of people, but must not be undertaken the easiest path through pharmacological substances used for doping, that otherwise frustrates all the benefits at both the amateur and professional (Mazzeo, 2016). In addition, it was highlighted that sports and motor activity, in a broad sense, have a huge inclusive potential that should be made available also in the school context (Cottini, 2007; De Anna, 2005). This context must pursue, as more effectively and efficiently as possible, the assumption of the inclusion of all those subjects with a Special Educational Need, whether it is exclusively medical or not. In this regard, sport appears as the most appropriate potential educational tool, in connection with the many inclusive benefits found out, to satisfy this need both globally and in schools of any grade.

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Correspondence to:

Davide Di Palma

Parthenope University, Naples, Italy

E-mail: [davide.dipalma@uniparthenope.it](mailto:davide.dipalma@uniparthenope.it)