

## EDUCATIONAL INTENTIONALITY IN SPORT AS A DROP-OUT PREVENTION STRATEGY

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Review paper

### Abstract

The aim of this article is to highlight the importance of implementing educational interventions which, through the practice of sports activities combined with educational intentionality, promote the acquisition of Life Skills and responsible behavioral models contributing to Drop-out prevention. Starting from this perspective, the idea is to rethink the training of sports professionals not only from a technical point of view, but also by focusing on the educational intentionality and on the development of more socio-emotional skills, allowing to improve their communicative-relational skills and to lay the foundations for a pedagogy of sports orientation intended as an educational, cultural and social strategy for the whole community.

**Key words:** sport, drop-out, education, life skills.

### Introduction

The World Health Organization believes that teaching Life Skills is essential for the balanced development of children and adolescents' personality, as a preparation for their future life (WHO, 1993); furthermore, it considers sport a context within which they can develop. Life Skills are those intrapersonal and interpersonal skills related to the cognitive, emotional, relational and social skills; they can be developed and trained through sports practice, are useful for performance and are applicable in other everyday life areas, like family, school, friends and work.

Although the benefits of sport are widely recognized, for some years now, there has been a decrease in sports practice already at an advanced age in many countries, giving rise to the phenomenon of Drop-out, i.e. the early abandonment of the sports career.

While it is true that sport represents a favorable context for educational purposes, it must be borne in mind that the educational potential of sport does not lie directly in sport itself, but depends on who proposes it and on the way it is proposed. The acquisition of Life Skills, values and social norms is part of the educational processes for which it needs conscious choices that, based on the attitudes and behaviors of adults, are oriented towards young athletes.

With a view to reducing the phenomenon of youth sports drop-outs, some studies have revealed critical issues related to the lack of dialogue, listening and communication between the world of adults and young people, which make it increasingly difficult to establish a truly educational relationship (Bellingreri, 2008; Galimberti, 2007; Frasca, 2001; Morin, 2015, 1999), and on which a series of reflections and actions for improvement should be focused.

Furthermore, we can also observe the lack of educational coherence, of the ability to convey confidence through authoritativeness, together with that of welcoming and understanding the needs of young people; these abilities should be peculiar to the world of adults (Maulini, Migliorati, Isidori, 2017).

The world of sport, as an educational agency, represents a tool potentially capable of developing the psychosocial and physical dimensions of individuals (Maulini, 2014, 2012, 2006), and it is important that all the professional figures involved are aware of and understand the multiple motivations leading to dropping out of sport, in order to organize and manage youth sport appropriately for those who take part in it, and contributing to the implementation of policies related to health too.

Sport professionals need to assess and re-evaluate the educational potential of youth sport interventions by means of sports programming models, useful to promote the acquisition of Life Skills and to reduce the risk of *Drop-out*.

Therefore, the organizational and training model of sports clubs should be reviewed, since it is essential that sports professionals become aware of the educational potential of sport on the basis of their specific knowledge, contributing not only to ensure a better future for their athletes, but also to give greater social value to sports experiences; all this by means of the teaching of skills that are both useful for sports performance and for life.

### Sport *Drop-out*

In the field of sport, the term Drop-out identifies the abandonment of a sports activity that occurs "when young athletes end their sports career

prematurely, and before having reached their peak performance (Cervello, Eduardo, Esearti, Guzman, 2007).

When we speak of the abandonment of sport we are actually referring to a rather heterogeneous phenomenon; in fact, it is not possible to search for a single reason and classify it as the most important one, because it would also be difficult to make comparisons between the results obtained due to the fact that variables such as age, gender, skill level, environment and sport are not always equivalent (Enoksen, 2011; Carlin, Salguero, Marchez, Garcés, 2009).

There are two forms of drop-out, one voluntary and one involuntary.

Involuntary drop-out is a phenomenon not necessarily linked to a loss of motivation or due to a choice determined by the will of the individual. Indeed, there are forms of drop-out experienced as forced choices (Sarrazin, Guillet, 2001), such as when an athlete suffers a serious injury, gets removed from the team, and when external resources are lacking and do not allow him/her to continue the activity (e.g. lack of financial means or suitable facilities and equipment).

Voluntary drop-out, on the other hand, depends on the will of the individual, and can be divided into two subtypes (Petlichkoff, 1992):

- 1) The willingness to devote oneself to other commitments considered more important (e.g. family, school or professional), or having simply greater interest in other sports activities (Jiménez, Cervelló, Calvo, 2006); in this case the subject can be considered satisfied with his/her sports experience.
- 2) Giving up sports activity as a result of excessive pressure on the athlete, or when the coach adopts a communicative and relational, self-referential, autocratic, and sometimes aggressive style, or simply because of a lack of success. This second form of intentional dropout tends to be characterized by a deep dissatisfaction, which can lead to forms of dissatisfaction with physical activity and sport in general.

The motivations that drive children and young people to practice a sport are different, like having fun, improving one's own (sport-specific) skills, being in a group and forming a team, doing something useful for sports purposes, getting excited about the competition, exercising (improving conditional skills), learning new skills and winning, or for aspects related to the competition (the desire to compete and challenge others) (Enoksen, 2011). There is a close relationship between each of these aspects, so if even one of them decreases in intensity or disappears, the others will most likely fall as a

result (Pizzuto, Comotto, Bonato, La Torre, Piacentini, 2013).

On the other hand, what favors the Drop-out is the loss of motivation and interest in general or for the specific sport; the decrease or absence of fun; the stagnation of performance and the failure to learn new skills; an excessive pressure from the outside (from coach, mates and family); the inadequacy and unpreparedness of the coach; the little time available for sport; the need to practice more sport activities; a favoritism from the coach in the team; too much emphasis on winning; the training facilities; a state of burnout.

The early abandonment of a sports career, before an athlete has been able to fully express his or her potential, can therefore be conditioned by a combination of several factors that we could summarize in four categories:

- 1) Technical issues - lack of fun, lack of success, competition stress, boredom/ monotony, sports injuries, excessive fatigue, high levels of competitiveness.
- 2) Improper interpersonal relationships - Coach/Athlete (excessive misunderstandings), Coach/Parent and Parent/Child (lack of support or excessive burden of parents' expectations), among Teammates (group/team cohesion difficulties and internal conflicts).
- 3) Social context - school difficulties, lack of time, adolescent crisis, other prevailing interests, incompatibility with studies, economic crisis.
- 4) Logistical/organizational sports context - difficulty in reaching the facility, inconvenient hours, high costs, inadequate environments, and facilities.

However, are we sure that this drop-out is mainly due to insufficient motivation for sport and commitment by adolescents, or that it is due to their feeling "betrayed" by sport?

The phenomenon must be subjected to causes which concern not only the inability of the sports system to renew itself, to provide new and more exciting models and to take into account the many "offers" of a society that has profoundly changed in its needs; it also concerns the fact that the world of sport is made up of and dominated by adults. A sports system with its rhythms, interests and exasperations that feeds discomfort and produces sports maladjustment and uneasiness, generating in young people the estrangement from the activity as a result of the accumulation of sports toxins.

More and more frequently, very young people are subjected to greater workloads, to early specialization, to having to withstand the tension of increasingly high level competitions, to having to develop an elite performance through increasingly

strenuous training in order to manage difficult competitions (Gambetta, 1989; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2000; Wiersma, 2000; Baker, 2003; Petlichkoff, 1992; Sarrazin, Vallerand, Guillet, Pelletier, Cury, 2002; Molinero, Salguero, Tuero, Alvarez, Marques, 2006; Delorme, Chalabaev, Raspauld, 2010).

Competition is an integral part of the sports experience, but a sport that educates to healthy agonism always encourages to give the best of oneself and not to fight to destroy potential opponents (antagonism). Frequently, people focus too much on performance and on evaluating the result reached "by fighting" an opponent, instead of focusing on skills and comparing them with their own personal improvements. The opponents are always worthwhile because, without any confrontation and competition with them, it is not possible to discover and improve one's own value. The highest gift that sport can give us is not always victory, but the awareness of how much we are worth and we could be worth, therefore of our limit at individual and team level, and of our strength. In addition, coaches with little communicative, empathic and socio-relational skills provide little social-educational contribution, producing contrary effects by increasing the motivation to abandon sports practice.

The greatest commitment of a Sports Coach/Educator is not so much to build motivation in children and young people, but to avoid destroying the intrinsic motivation of the sport they already possess, favoring the experimentation of their autonomy and self-efficacy. The figure of the sports professional can play an active role in the motivational involvement of young athletes by interacting with them, implementing appropriate behaviors (both in training and in competition), creating a harmonious and serene educational climate, enhancing individual talents, encouraging collaboration and solidarity among the elements of the team, promoting healthy spirit of competition and fair play, and employing ecological communication.

The sports professionals must be a point of reference and a model of identification for their athletes, both at sports and human level. They must not be an authoritarian but authoritative leader, must not be excessively permissive, must be an empathetic leader, a charismatic motivator, an enthusiastic and facilitator of processes. When the adult sportsmen are aware of all this, they help (or rather 'train') the young athletes to express the best of themselves at sports level. Sport, as well as sports professionals, should not be an obstacle to personal fulfilment. On the contrary, they must favor it.

### **Life Skills: The skills to live effectively**

The Ottawa Charter (WHO, 1986) states that at the basis of the principle of Salutogenesis (Antonovsky, 1987) there is a close connection between health

promotion and Life Skills, defining them as "the skills that lead to positive and adaptive behavior, enabling the individual to cope effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life...". (WHO, 1993).

In educational contexts and in the whole educational community in general, starting from school to sport, the World Health Organization provides for a program addressed to young people, with the aim of increasing and encouraging autonomy, and strengthening specific individual and social skills. In 1993 the World Health Organization launched a prevention plan supporting the promotion of Life Skills Education (WHO, 1993) in schools and educational institutions, based on the concept of health as a state of psycho-physical and relational well-being.

Subsequently, in support of the increase in education programs, the document Life Skills Education in Schools (WHO, 1993) was issued, highlighting the fact that many young people are not "equipped" with Life Skills because "their family and culture would no longer be suitable to pass them on, recalling the "importance of recovering the ways to convey them", and urging educational agencies to promote a training able to enable young people to face the difficulties of life, in the framework of a holistic maturation of the person and of the citizen. Afterwards, with the publication of the Life Skills Education for Children and Adolescents in Schools (WHO, 1997) the psycho-social skills of the personal, social, interpersonal, cognitive and affective area of the individual have been considered privileged competences for the promotion of Health Education in schools.

Life Skills are based on Bandura's Theory of Social Learning (1977) theoretical model, which means that learning is an active process enabling the elaboration and structuring of experience, rather than a passive process of information transfer. The World Health Organization has identified ten Life Skills (WHO, 1993):

1. Self-awareness - includes recognition of our 'self', our character, our strengths and weaknesses, desires and dislikes. It means being aware of ourselves.
2. Coping with emotions - involves recognizing emotions in ourselves and others, being aware of how emotions influence behavior. Coping with our emotions allows us to choose our actions, making us act instead of react to stimuli.
3. Coping with stress: recognizing the sources of stress in our lives and its causes, taking action to reduce them and trying to go back to a state of psycho-physical well-being.
4. Empathy - the ability to imagine what life is like for another person, through active and concerned listening.

It means putting oneself in each other's shoes, even in unfamiliar situations.

5. Effective communication - means that we are able to express ourselves, both verbally and non-verbally, in ways that are appropriate to our cultures and situations; involves transferring a message in a comprehensible way (without external and internal interference) and making sure that the message has been received through a feedback.
6. Interpersonal relationship skills - help us to relate in positive ways with the people we interact with. It means having a correct approach without prevarication or submissiveness, in the mutual respect of the other, of his/her own ideas and needs.
7. Critical thinking - ability to analyze information and experiences in an objective manner, evaluating advantages and disadvantages together with the different elements conditioning behavior. It means knowing how to think for oneself.
8. Creative thinking - creativity allows to find original solutions to respond adaptively and with flexibility to the situations of our daily lives, by analyzing the different possibilities of solving them. Thinking about possible alternatives and having original ideas to find solutions makes it easier to get out of difficult situations.
9. Decision making - teaches how to actively make decisions to deal with different situations, through a healthy assessment of different options and what effects these different decisions are likely to have. Being aware of mastering one's own life means taking risks and responsibilities by accepting the consequences of one's own actions.
10. Problem solving - ability to identify and deal with problems in a positive and constructive way, by satisfying rational, practical and emotional needs (Marmocchi, Dall'Aglio, Zannini, 2004).

The Pan American Health Organization (2001) and the World Health Organization (2003) then grouped them into three categories, namely that Emotional, Relational (social and interpersonal), and Cognitive.

- Emotional Area - Self-awareness, Coping with Emotions, Coping with Stress.
- Relational Area - Effective Communication, Interpersonal relationship skills, Empathy.
- Cognitive Area - Decision Making, Problem Solving, Creative Thinking, Critical Thinking.

Therefore, the psychological variables associated with the *Life Skills* are:

- *empowerment*, namely "the process by which people increase control over events that affect their lives." (Laverack, 2007; Zimmerman, 1999)
- *coping*, which is the set of psychological adaptive mechanisms of an individual in response to demands from the environment (Lazarus, 1991);
- *self-efficacy*, i.e. the individual's belief that he or she can modify his or her experience by controlling the surrounding environment (Bandura, 1996, 2000).
- *locus of control*, a way in which an individual explains events as being produced by self-dependent behavior (active internal control) or by external causes beyond his or her control (Rotter, 1966).
- *resilience*, which indicates the individual's ability to adapt to changes and stressful events in a safe and flexible manner (Odum, Barrett, 2005). It is the ability to cope with stressful events in the environment using personal resources, in order to reorganize one's own life situation positively (Malaguti, 2005).

*Life skills* learning programs for young people improve mental health and social skills, maintaining the beneficial effects even after many years not only for preserving health, but also for the development of the *Soft Skills*; they are increasingly required in the world of work as well.

### The educational sports game

"The primary objective of a 'culture of movement' is to use everyone's skills by combining physical activity, education, environment, well-being and citizenship rights" (WHO, 2015).

The European Council, through its Nice Declaration (2000), reaffirms the importance of sport as a "factor making for integration, involvement in social life, tolerance, acceptance of differences and playing by the rules" because, thanks to its highly educational and social function, human capital is strengthened.

Already from prenatal age, it is the body that allows the human being to meet the world, a necessary condition for "embodying experiences" and developing knowledge of oneself, others and the world.

Learning through movement is what each one of us is able to do from the moment of our birth onwards, while moving in the surrounding environment and performing an "active exploration that allows us to implement knowledge of the world and to develop physical, psychic, cognitive, affective and emotional relationships with it and with other individuals" (Meraviglia, 2012).

Movement is a very important learning channel at motor, cognitive, relational and emotional level, and therefore is one of the fundamental factors for preserving people's state of health.

Sport promotes participation, and the goal of motor and sports activity is to help people, who are different in terms of skills, age, culture and social class, to meet each other positively, by discovering, developing and enhancing their own skills. Motor activity can support, develop and increase the levels of autonomy and self-esteem of any person, even and above all of the disabled or those experiencing social difficulties (Altavilla, Tafuri, Raiola, 2014; Di Palma, Tafuri, 2016; Holt, 2016). When sport focuses on people and their potential, besides having a high educational value, it also plays a decisive role in the development of social, pro-social and inclusion skills (Rosa, D'Andria, 2020). Corporeity and Movement are the elective means in the learning of Life Skills. The sports game becomes a medium not only for the development of a harmonious psychophysical profile, but also for developing one's individuality in the group within which one cooperates in a constructive competition, understanding that the companions allowing someone to play are part of the same group of people which shares the same efforts, the same joys, the same disappointments, and the same victories (Rosa, Tafuri, 2019).

Sport encompasses educational features; in fact, it can be defined as a social container in which the social group is understood as a "dynamic system in which the members share a single destiny and the achievement of the same goal, not independently but through interaction and mutual exchange developed by a collective identity" (Lewin, Adams, Zener, 1935). Therefore, the sports game is a community simulator in which to interpret roles and functions; it is a preparatory path to life that strengthens the values of civil life. Accordingly, the playing field becomes an educational learning environment in which sport represents a considerable challenge that not only requires high levels of motivation, commitment and responsibility, but also a good development of the Life Skills; it therefore requires the right emotional, cognitive and relational skills aimed at personal management (WHO, 1986) and a good integration into society (Rosa, D'Andria, 2020).

Sport then becomes a valuable situation laboratory through which to offer a context of experiences by means of active participation, the willingness to try and understand one's own potential and one's own cognitive, emotional and relational skills (Rosa, D'Andria, 2020).

### **Sport and Educational Intentionality**

It is essential that the work of sports professionals is always supported by an educational intentionality which guides the technique and tactics of the sport to which they belong, making them useful tools for achieving the objectives of improvement, and

therefore of learning and growth of the person, as well as the widening of his or her social capital (Maulini, 2012).

In order for this educational potential inherent in sports activities to be implemented, it is necessary that sports operators set themselves "the objective of improving physical and mental conditions, and the development of social relationships" (Council of Europe, 1992).

Sport professionals must refer to new models for planning sports interventions by complementing the often excessive sports technicality with an educational intentionality (with the development of more personal pedagogical skills or with the support of external experts); this intentionality should implement educational strategies aimed at learning the techniques and tactics of the discipline, acquiring Life Skills, and developing personal and social responsibility (Maulini, 2014, 2012, 2006; Milani, 2010). All this in order to "relate motor-sports activities to the educational values and training processes of individuals" (Sibilio, 2005), aimed at the growth of people and the broadening of their human and social capital.

Generally, the activities encompass these features:

- They *promote* socialization and thus make it possible to broaden the social network of the individuals, allowing them to escape isolation and loneliness and creating a beneficial chain effect, implementing the opportunities for socialization and the possibility to access new human and tangible resources;
- They *encourage* the person's ability to cultivate a project by focusing on something positive, constructive and meaningful;
- They *develop* a sense of self-efficacy and nurture a sense of competence, because they allow individuals to dominate situations and develop new skills, helping them to feed the story of their successes and promoting self-esteem and self-confidence;
- They *facilitate* moments of relaxation of stress or psychic pressure caused by personal problems, removing the source of stress or the memory of the traumatic event" (Milani, 2010).

Sports professionals are those who practically facilitate the development of Life Skills and personal potentialities, by making their athletes experience and live them effectively; it is therefore essential to ensure that they are increasingly aware of both the quality and effectiveness of their communicative-relational approach, and are more and more inclined to adopt laboratory-experiential models, useful to prevent or reduce drop-out and youth discomfort through the construction of personalized educational interventions by means of sport.

It needs to continuously rethink the training of future sports operators and update that of those who have been working in the youth sports sector for a long time, in order to develop those pedagogical skills that can allow to:

- identify goals that value education through the development of Life Skills;
- acquire training strategies for the person and for groups, aimed at the learning-to-be and at the learning-to-live-together;
- make athletes responsible, using specific strategies;
- establish effective relationships with and between athletes, by fostering "ecological communication" (positive leadership);
- consider the sports environment a useful learning context for the development and enhancement of potentialities and talents;
- develop a Sports Training Action which encourages the acquisition of the Best Practices geared towards the development of Life Skills and the prevention of the *Drop-out*.

This will allow the sports professional to establish favorable dynamics to the positive development of young people (Maulini, 2006), and to the acquisition of life skills and responsible behavioral patterns with positive repercussions on personal health and community well-being through sports practice (Maulini, 2014, 2012, 2006).

## Conclusion

Some important factors in Drop-out prevention are the relationship that the coach establishes with his or her athletes, excessive technicality, performance focused solely on performance, early specialization and achievement of results at all costs, without considering the educational role that sport can have and the importance of integrating a person-centered educational intentionality. The perspective is to go beyond the educational intervention through sport tout court, foreseeing the possibility of a personalization centered on the matching between the different educational characteristics of the sports disciplines (Sibyl, 2005), and the interests and needs of individuals. For this reason, our reflection focuses on the need to implement educational-pedagogical-sports models that promote educational paths leading the individuals both towards the choice of the most appropriate sports discipline, and to the practice of those sports activities in which they try to promote their integral development and implement their capabilities.

Developing educational skills in sports professionals means laying the foundations for a pedagogy of sports orientation (Isidori, 2015), by facilitating experiential learning thanks to which they can use their resources and skills to develop those Life Skills within young athletes, and enabling the latter to respond to their educational needs by restoring or conquering a new condition of well-being.

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