

Preventing of Early School Leaving: Sport as Protective Factor

Carmen Palumbo, Antinea Ambretti and Cristiana D'Anna

Department of Human, Philosophical and Educational Sciences, University of Salerno, Fisciano Salerno 84084, Italy

Abstract: The study aims to highlight the contribution of sport as a tool for preventing early school leaving and developing psychophysical well-being. School, territory and sports association can, with appropriate institutional partnership actions, implement training interventions in this sense. Through an analysis of the scientific literature we want to highlight the important value of sports practice especially in school age. Organized sports activities contribute to the development of skills related to socio-relational well-being. Full awareness of one's own cognitive and social skills allows improving self-perception. Sport, therefore, becomes a tool for preventing and contrasting early school leaving, a real protective factor that limits the decrease in motivation to school attendance and favors school performance.

Key words: Sport, school, early school leaving, psychophysical well-being.

1. Introduction

The primary objective of the entire school system is to ensure educational success, ensuring the right to study and education throughout the life cycle. Early school leaving is a real threat, as an indicator of the full implementation of this right; it represents a serious and complex problem. Growth and employment are strongly linked to this phenomenon, which inevitably affects the productivity and competitiveness of a country, also fomenting poverty and social exclusion. It is a complex issue that embraces different dimensions of social life, not only related to socio-economic aspects at the macro level, but also related to micro aspects. Personal factors, motivations related to individual aspects and to the family context or the different learning difficulties, as well as those related to the organization of the school system, including the project of personalized educational paths, are only a small part of the many aspects to consider to counter or at least try to reduce the seriousness of the problem.

The strategic framework for European Cooperation, Education and Training [1], has defined several objectives to be achieved to improve the quality of the education and training system. On the base of these objectives in the wide framework of the Europe 2020 strategy, the priority of reducing the dropout rate was highlighted, with the aim of reducing the average rate to 10%. Eurostat statistics show a slight improvement in the values recorded in recent years in the European scenario (from 11.9% in 2013 it went to 10.6% in 2018). This parameter refers specifically to ELET, (Early Leaving from Education and Training), such as the number of young people who do not finish secondary school or professional education cycles. Unfortunately, Italy is among the five European countries with the highest school dropout rate. From the report approved by the Court of Auditors in Italy the school dropout rate averages 14.5%; in recent years the financial resources allocated and provided by the state in favour of initiatives aimed at contrasting the phenomenon, have increased. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [2] in the report *A Look at Education* indicates in our country a rate of young people, who do not attend school and do not work, of 24%. The

Corresponding author: Cristiana D'Anna, PhD student, research fields: physical activity, sport science and disability, motor control and learning.

data, together with those found in the international surveys of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), highlight a scarce level of basic skills in young people.

The development of social skills and the improvement of school performance play a fundamental role in the prevention of early school leaving and it is for this reason that the new European Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning [3] defines the knowledge, skills and attitudes to be achieved, which are fundamental training goals to prepare children for future life and prepare them for lifelong learning. The OECD-Pisa report of 2018 highlighted a marked gap in the amount of school time of Italian fifteen-year-olds compared to the average of other students from other countries; the data also show an evident relationship between school attendance and student's results, with lower scores associated with a high number of absences. As just outlined, the concept of early school leaving is very wide and difficult to define as it is extremely complex and multifaceted [4]. In Italy, both the ELET and the drop-out are frequently indicated with the term "leaving" (or early leaving), expanding the concept to a series of problems that have as a common denominator a low motivation to attend school and to continue their studies. To answer to this problem of multifactorial origin, an integrated action is needed by all the actors involved in the system, which obviously goes beyond the school by expanding to the family, the territory and all the stakeholders. The school has its role in recognizing the causes internal to its organization and in interacting with the outside through a systemic and integrated approach. Various studies and researches, through the promotion and testing of interventions aimed at preventing and reducing the problem, believe that it is essential: to deal with the issue with a systemic approach; to create inter-institutional connection and integration agreements between education, training and work systems; to plan actions aimed at contrasting dropout on a structural level [5].

Within this dense network of interventions, which puts in place multiple resources at various levels in order to face the problem of early school leaving, the organized sports activities takes on a space of great importance and effectiveness, both in school (curricular and extracurricular) that out of school contest.

In the light of this evidence, the aim of this study is to highlight the contribution of sport as a tool for preventing early school leaving.

A brief theoretical framework that defines the problem by tracing possible lines of intervention is followed by an analysis of the scientific literature which highlights the importance of sport and recreational activities organized in the fight against early school leaving through numerous studies and research.

2. Dispersion: From the Definition of the Problem to the Planning of the Interventions

The etymology of the word "dispersion" derives from the compound verb "disperse": dis + spread, but more commonly dis + lose. Both verbs, intransitively also mean "to skid", "to vanish" as for example the clouds vanish, disperse. In this case, as early school leaving we can count:

- school drop-out or interruption of further studies;
- not approach to the school even of the first courses after compulsory school;
- school failure;
- lowering of school performance.

The key point is that the motivation for early school leaving, while previously it was attributed now to one cause, now to other, depending on the rampant or prevailing opinions at that particular historical moment, today is believed to have a multifactorial origin and therefore derives from a set of causes. These causes are:

- the family they come from, not so much if the family has few economic means, but above all if it has a low socio-cultural level;

- the lack of relationships;
- the lack of suitable facilities for a good teaching intervention;
- the age of didactic methods, not suitable for this new reality of school more marked failures;
- the own stories of the student that lead him to exclude himself from the group, to demotivate himself or to join small groups or individuals with similar problems; stories that talk about the disintegration of the family, of the personality and therefore the impossibility of entering the school context;
- learning difficulties and conditions of disability;
- the separation of the school with reality outside its walls and in the many social aspects.

The causes described are particularly approximate of the plan on which to orient oneself in order to find a bank. They demonstrate, in fact, that there is a close link between the socio-cultural level and the student's academic success and that it is necessary to prevent the problem by putting into practice multidimensional and innovative actions that can respond to the different forms of the phenomenon. The interventions to be implemented are not easy because they presuppose an update of the operators in the training and education section, therefore a change in culture and the use of the facilities available to educators. To do this, the first resource is the institutions which, at a territorial level, have the right to intervene both on the structures and on the teaching staff. This involves the sphere of the so-called extended training system, capable of creating new orientations and new learning styles and which are above all flexible enough to include targeted, if not personalized, activities. Therefore it is essential to create interrelationships between school, schools and the local area. Paradoxically, only by creating an intervention network (from institutions to territorial structures, family, and teachers) it will be possible to act on personal curricula and the social and family situations that led to the dispersion of student with real intellectual abilities, but stifled by their own personal

and/or social experience. Proposals to stem early school leaving or failure:

- organization of sporting activities involving both students and educators;
- spread of games between groups that accustom the student to share the rules of a community;
- offer of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary recreational activities;
- meetings with workers from various sectors who can communicate the way forward for a certain type of realization and offer their experience as an example of the possibility of reaching a job position through the school.

The ultimate goal is:

- to revive the will to go back to school;
- to make students understand the spirit and usefulness of school life;
- to offer the opportunity to understand what a passion can arouse and therefore a motivation to improve and grow within the school and then civil society;
- to find out what they are passionate about through the different activities.

3. Sport and Early School Leaving: Literature Review

Several studies in the literature highlight the fundamental role of sport in the overall development of children and adolescents. In particular, an Australian research has found a strong relationship between attendance in extracurricular activities, school attendance and motivation to continue studies [6]. The study shows that the trend in school attendance is more continuous and assiduous for students who participate in extracurricular activities than those who do not participate. This protective effect, associated with adherence to extracurricular projects already identified by previous studies [7], is often positively correlated to the general dedication of the subjects in school activities (constancy, interest, initiative).

These results are coherent with the studies of Eccles and Barber [8], who through longitudinal research have found that participation in extracurricular activities is a predictive indicator of university attendance. The sense of belonging to the school is also greater in students who constantly participate in extracurricular activities [9, 10]. The association between participation in extracurricular activities and some school performance indicators seems to be linked in particular to the sense of belonging and the relationship in the peer group. Some studies believe that the activities carried out in the peer group, especially in adolescence, are strictly correlated with the frequency and participation in the lessons and with some development indicators [11, 12]. The recreational and sporting activities that take place outside the school context occur mainly in the company of peers who participate in the activity. Several other studies also believe that peer interactions that occur during this shared leisure time influence a teenager's selection of friends [13, 14]. Meeting new people and having spaces for sharing among peers is one of the main motivations that encourage students to participate in sports activities; in addition, the raising of the sense of realization and self-efficacy benefits from this bond of friendship and sharing that is realized in the context of peers.

Sport, in fact, not only affects the improvement of personal factors (self-perception, self-esteem, self-realization, etc.), but creates learning contexts that offer great opportunities to experience positive interpersonal relationships [15].

Cote and Hay [16] suggest that sport creates favourable conditions for the development of social skills such as cooperation, affirmation, responsibility, empathy and self-control.

All these life skills, which are stimulated and put into action in the contexts of organized sports activities, contribute to the promotion of educational values and adherence to the rules of social coexistence, useful and advantageous in the world of work.

Discipline, dedication and adherence to the rules are traits that emerge strongly in young athletes who practice competitive sport [17]. Several studies on high school students have shown that participation in sports is positively correlated with school grades, school attendance, adherence to additional courses, time spent on homework, educational aspirations during and after high school and college attendance [8, 18, 19].

4. The Sport as a Tool for Preventing and Combating the Phenomenon

The study of the school drop-out, of its existence and diffusion in the various school orders can give us original interpretative keys relating to the social changes of Italian students and to the metamorphosis, which over the centuries have characterized physical activities and the recognition of motor and sport activities as an educational value.

The analysis of the relationship between school dropout and sports practice requires a hermeneutic effort that highlights the intrinsic potential of motor sports activities in contributing to the construction of a specific training course, aimed at promoting the reintegration into the social school community of the pupil "who drop out of school". This multidimensionality of the motor-sports phenomenon requires a reconsideration of its original peculiarities, as motor activities and sport can convey ideological, scientific, ethical and democratic principles capable of influencing trends, behaviors and lifestyles.

An established literature describes sport and recreational motor activity in general, as the mediating possibilities of the phenomenon of early school leaving, capable of highlighting two main areas of the problem, that relating to the subject "who is dispersed" and the relative one system which is the cause of this dispersion, which produces, and which therefore "disperses" the minor one [20]. In this context, sport urges the acquisition of indispensable prerequisites to access to more mature forms of cognitive and social

physiological skills and competences. In each sport-motor activity the combination of a whole set of “criteria” is expressed which regulates the performance of a specification capable of satisfying the body’s natural predisposition to movement, to contact with the surrounding environment through the ability to use the own body “in the forms of social aggregation that each context tends to prefer and indicate as best and recognized” [21]. The diffusion of sports and movement activities in general is an educational choice in which the educational community, the primarily the school, puts in place to encourage the internalization of ways of acting, imagining and symbolizing [22] to materialize the personal and social access of the individual and the community of reference.

According to Parlebas[23], sport, is a mirror in which social and cultural events are reflected, as well as the integration of cultural codes and alphabets of a mainly motor character, which each subject uses according to original and specific methods, leaving a synthesis of socio-cultural aspects to be highlighted: *“The motor behavior comprehends people both in an individual and global way, in their motor-physical, emotional affective, cognitive, socio-relational and expressive aspects”*. Each motor activity, be it sporting or motor, must be interpreted as an overall phraseological system, where the components, logically ordered in the different states, composing a real kinesiological grammar [24] thus giving meaning to the motor experience of who acts. It is worth mentioning that the corporeal dimension as a polysemic reality is the receptacle of the individual sense of the self, of one’s most personal feelings and aspirations, as well as that entity to which others respond in a special way because of their uniquely human qualities.

From the beginning, the existence of an individual as a human being affects the way others treat him, and very soon the individual comes to consider his own body as special[25]. Current praxeological studies tend to make motor activity acquire a scientific statute,

for which motor behavior is observed, one tries to grasp, alongside the objective and observable manifestations of movement (movements, stops, feints, etc.) also the meaning of the experience that is directly associated with it (intentions, perceptions, mental images, projects, frustrations, etc.). It seems necessary to accept on a didactic-educational level the stimulus coming from the motor praxeology in order to interpret the movement in an educational key from a different angle. The teacher must have skills related to the various dimensions of the student’s personality and behavior, in order to be able to insert appropriate activities in his programming. Hence the need to define didactic proposals structured in relation to the “simplified” principle of deviation, to allow the teacher to solicit awareness of corporeality and related motor behaviors, choosing changing contexts and diversified conditions in the context of sports and motor activities. The deviation ensures that each pupil enriches his/her socio-motor skills through the diversified use of static and dynamic motor patterns, gradually increasing the level of stress and difficulty of execution required, so as to experience all possible motor opportunities in relation to the sport-motor proposal.

In this regard, Parlebas[26] has no doubts in believing that motor activities are a priority tool for educators, who must make pedagogical choices through prior knowledge of the consequences that different categories of motor situations entail”.

In this context, and given the aforementioned objectives, sport understood as a relational asset [27] should be considered as the main dimension to be observed and, above all, as the most effective intervention tool.

Even at an institutional level, interventions in the area and cultural changes to be transmitted to educators go through the promotion and facilitation of sport in the school and outside the school.

The use of sport as a didactic-educational tool takes on the connotation of social development, as it can not

only help to bring the missing student closer together, where properly followed and under observation of the teacher, but also in that it can spread the need at a social level care, health through exercise and a healthy lifestyle.

Even on a psychological level, exercising a sport can work to increase self-esteem, through awareness of the body and its physical possibilities, mental and social balance, personal courage. All this increases, at the same time, the sense of solidarity, integration in society and the importance of teamwork, making the student take on a vision of the school, not only cognitive, but also emotional and relational, therefore of comprehensive education of the person through the body and movement.

5. Conclusions

Sport has enormous potential to create favorable conditions so that everyone can feel welcomed, appreciated and guided in their path of development, education and health [28]. School, territory and sports associations can, with appropriate institutional partnership actions, implement sports promotion training. Particularly in the school context, the physical education teacher takes on a priority role, who can be the promoter of institutional agreements and synergies between school and sports associations, fostering the didactic continuity of sports practice also in the territory. The specialized teacher, thanks to his education, can also identify students' attitudes, predispositions, interests and needs to encourage starting to practice sports, channel and efficiently direct the choice of appropriate extracurricular activities.

In general, all those activities that contribute to the development of skills related to socio-relational well-being (both in relations between peers and in the educator-pupil relationship) should be strengthened; full awareness of one's cognitive and social skills allows to increase the sense of self-efficacy, self-esteem, generally improving self-perception;

these factors have a protective function that limits the risk of early school leaving and favors academic performance.

Although the article is the result of a common reflection by the authors, it should be noted that Carmen Palumbo has edited paragraph 2. Dispersion: from the definition of the problem to the planning of the interventions and paragraph 3. Sport and early school leaving: literature review; Antinea Ambretti edited paragraph 4. The sport as a tool for preventing and combating the phenomenon ; Cristiana D'Anna edited paragraphs 1. Introduction and 5. Conclusion.

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