

Practice of football and life skills learning: an empirical study

Uprawianie piłki nożnej a rozwój umiejętności całozyciowych: badania empiryczne

Introduction

During the 1990's the World Health Organization (WHO) identified a set of abilities for adaptive and positive behaviors that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life, defining them as life skills (LSs). In particular, LSs are psychosocial competencies and interpersonal skills that help people make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathize with others, and cope with managing their lives in a healthy and productive manner [see WHO, 1993, 1997].

The link between the practice of sports and LSs learning has been the objective of various studies conducted in different contexts with different subject groups, suggesting that the practice of sports can be regarded as an experience that favors LSs learning [Camiré et al., 2009; Curry and Maniar, 2003; Danish et al., 1995; Danish et al., 2004; Goudas et al. 2006; Gould and Carson, 2008; Hodge and Danish, 1999; Hodgson and Sharp, 2000; Holt, 2008; Holt et al., 2008; Jones and Lavalley, 2009; Larson, 2000; Smoll and Smith, 2002; Whitley and Gould 2011]. Other studies have highlighted the link between the practice of sports and some specific LS, such as creative thinking [Memmert et al., 2010], leadership [Gould and Voelker, 2010], and self-awareness [Wiersma and Sherman, 2008].

However, the practice of sports does not per se ensure LSs learning [Danish et al., 2005; Gould et al., 2009; Papacharisis et al., 2005], which is indeed the outcome of the interaction among the characteristics of individuals, of their families and of the context in which sport is practiced [Gould et al., 2007; Jones and Lavalley, 2009; Mahoney and Stattin, 2000]. For this reason, too, structured programs have been developed to increase probability for sports practice to be really able to promote LSs

learning [Petitpas et al., 2005], such as the Sport United to Promote Education and Recreation [Danish, 2002; Danish et al., 2003], the Personal-Social Responsibility Model [Whitley and Gould, 2011], and the Teaching Responsibility Through Physical Activity [Hellison, 1995].

No research has to date been conducted in Italy on the theme of LSs learning through sports. Such research would instead be very valuable both to promote a deeper awareness of the educational role of those dealing with sports and to avoid that spending review policies, made necessary by the current economic crisis, lead to a further limitation of the already scant investments in youth sports.

With the general aim of filling this gap the descriptive study presented here was intended for two specific objectives: (a) to understand whether the youth regard as playing soccer in the juvenile section of a FC as a useful experience to learn LSs as defined by the WHO, and (b) to verify whether differences exist among LSs learning as reported by subjects that can be explained in terms either of belonging to a professional or amateur FC or the players age grouping. Since different lists of LSs have been proposed in the course of time, this study was based on the model proposed by the WHO in the Skills for Health paper (2003), where ten LSs were identified: interpersonal communication; negotiation/refusal; empathy building; cooperation and teamwork; advocacy; decision making/problem solving; critical thinking; increasing personal confidence and abilities to assume control, take responsibility, make a difference, or bring about change; managing feelings; managing stress.

Materials and methodology

Participants

The study was conducted involving all the athletes ($N = 589$) belonging to the youth sections of two Italian football clubs (FCs), a professional one (50.8%, $n = 299$) and an amateur one (49.2%, $n = 290$). Athletes were all males, and their age ranged from 8 to 20 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 13.42$, $SD = 3.89$). Athletes from 8 to 14 years (58.6%, $n = 345$) played in a non-competitive league, while athletes from 15 to 20 years (41.4%, $n = 244$) played in a competitive championship.

Informed consent to participation was requested and obtained from all participants of age and from parents of minors participating in the study.

Measures and procedure

The study was performed from a qualitative perspective and was based on the use of focus groups [Krueger and Casey, 2000]. Focus groups, lasting from 75 to 90 minutes, were conducted in meeting rooms of the FCs by an interviewer and an observer. Between 6 to 8 boys in the same age range participated in each focus group. Altogether, 46 focus groups in the professional FC and 40 in the amateur FC were conducted. The interviewer and the observer were the same for all groups.

Participants were presented with two cue questions. The first was “You belong to [...] FC. Apart from learning how to play football, do you think that this experience made you learn other things? If so, what?”. Kinds of learning reported as an answer to the first question were written on a flip board, with the name of respondents who said them. When all answers to this first question had been written, the interviewer presented the second one, that was “[Name], you have just said that while playing football in the [...] FC you could learn to [...]. May you give me an example of a situation in which you could learn to [...]?”. This second question helped the researcher to better understand the learnings achieved.

The examples provided were listed on the board by means of keywords. Whenever new learnings, different from the ones already reported, emerged from answers to the second question, they were added to the learning list on the flip board, together with the athlete’s name and the example provided. Before the focus group was finished the interviewer asked participants whether they wished to add something, and wrote new answers to both the first or the second questions on the board.

Analysis

The answers provided by the participants were recorded on tape and later transcribed to digital file. The content analysis of the text was performed by means of a paper-and-pencil technique [Corbin and Strauss, 2008].

At first, a database with learnings emerged from the two questions was created (e.g. “I learnt to use nonverbal communication”). The coding of participants’ answers was performed separately by each researcher and the two outputs were later compared to get a conclusive coding for each answer. Whenever disagreement arose, the case was discussed with a third researcher – an expert in education – so to reach a meeting of minds.

The learnings were then compared to the ten LSs considered in order to associate them. Also in this phase researchers have firstly worked independently, the association proposals were later compared and, in case of disagreement, discussed with a third researcher.

Finally, for each LS both the number of learnings merged into it and the number of participants reporting to have learnt it – classified according to FC belonging and to age range – could be identified. Some descriptive statistics were performed and the chi-square test was employed to analyze significance of differences.

Results

Data analysis has allowed the identification of 67 learnings. Among them, 64 could be classified within the ten LSs. The other three learnings concerned the field of nutrition (e.g. “I learnt to follow a right diet”). The 64 learnings merge into the 10 LSs as shown in Table 1. The LS that gained the most learnings is increasing personal confidence and abilities to assume control, while the last rank is taken by critical thinking.

Looking at the percentage of participants who reported to have reached at least one learning among those merged into each LS, we get a slightly different ranking (see Table 2): the highest ranking is taken by skill for managing feeling while the bottom end is taken by critical thinking skill.

Table 2 presents also data relative to the percentage of participants according to FC and to age range. The data analysis relative to FC, although no significant difference appeared as for the total number of learnings reported by subjects from the two subgroups ($\chi^2_{[1, N=589]} = .67, p = .41$), showed that professionals had more frequently learnt the managing feelings and increasing personal confidence and abilities to assume control skills while amateurs had more frequently learnt the cooperation and teamwork, empathy building, negotiation/refusal and critical thinking skills. Similarly, although no significant difference appeared as for the total number of learnings reported by subjects from the two age range ($\chi^2_{[1, N=589]} = 2.55, p = .11$), examining single learnings, it can be noted that participants aged 8–14 had more frequently learnt the increasing personal confidence and abilities to assume control skill, while participants aged 15–20 had more frequently learnt the negotiation/refusal skill.

Table 1. Number of learnings emerged per each life skill

Life skill	n	%	Learnings
			example of learning acquired (“I learnt to ...”)
Increasing personal confidence and abilities to assume control	13	20.3	“... understand my weaknesses and to find opportunities to progress”
Interpersonal communication	10	15.6	“... use non-verbal communication to make myself understood when words cannot be used”
Managing feelings	9	14.1	“... think rationally even when I am very cross”
Cooperation and teamwork	8	12.5	“... prioritize the group's objectives rather than mine”
Managing stress	7	10.9	“... relax before a situation that scares me”
Advocacy	6	9.4	“... believe in the possibility to reach a goal and to spur others to do the same”
Empathy building	3	4.7	“... understand when another boy feels a negative emotion and try to make him regain his good mood”
Negotiation/refusal	3	4.7	“... exchange views with adults expressing my opinions”
Decision making/problem solving	3	4.7	“... facing a difficulty, to find solutions different from those already unsuccessfully tried out”
Critical thinking	2	3.1	“... not to be influenced by the majority if I think differently”
Total	64	100.0	

Table 2. Percentage of participants who reported learnings relative to each life skill

Life skill	Football club					Age range			P
	total ^a	profes- sional ^b	amateur ^c	$\chi^2_{(df=1)}$	P	8-14 years ^d	15-20 years ^e	$\chi^2_{(df=1)}$	
Managing feelings	33.4	40.8	25.9	9.83	.002	30.4	37.7	2.26	.13
Increasing personal confidence and abilities to assume control	30.4	35.1	25.5	4.46	.03	34.8	24.2	5.28	.02
Cooperation and teamwork	27.8	19.4	36.6	15.58	<.001	27.0	29.1	0.23	.63
Interpersonal communication	26.1	28.8	23.4	1.59	.21	24.3	28.7	1.03	.31
Managing stress	16.8	16.4	17.2	0.06	.80	18.0	15.2	0.67	.41
Empathy building	12.2	8.4	16.2	7.43	.006	13.9	9.8	1.95	.16
Advocacy	9.5	9.0	10.0	0.15	.70	9.0	10.2	0.22	.64
Negotiation/refusal	7.3	5.0	9.7	4.34	.04	4.3	11.5	9.95	.002
Decision making/problem solving	6.8	5.4	8.3	1.85	.17	5.5	8.6	2.02	.16
Critical thinking	4.1	1.7	6.6	8.55	.003	3.8	4.5	0.17	.68

^aN = 589, ^b n = 299, ^c n = 290, ^d n = 345, ^e n = 244.

Discussion

With reference to the first research objective, the present study confirmed that the practice of sports in the youth section of a FC is perceived as a helpful experience to learn LSs [Forneris et al., 2012]. Moreover, the study allowed us to ascertain that some LSs are more likely to be learnt, particularly those linked to coping [Papacharisis et al., 2005; Perlman and Goc Karp, 2010], to self-management [Jones and Lavalley, 2009; Wiersma and Sherman, 2008], and to interpersonal relationships [Curry and Maniar, 2003; Whitley and Gould, 2011].

These results, together with the evidence that both the professional and the amateur contexts were able to analogously promote learning of such competence, confirmed the importance of sports-based programs aimed at supporting education in the socially disadvantaged groups, which have less schooling and a more difficult access to educational institutions.

With reference to the second research objective, relative to possible differences as for kind of learning acquired in the two FCs and the two age ranges taken into account in the study, some significant differences emerged. Members of the professional FC more frequently report to have acquired LSs linked to coping and self-management, while members of the amateur one more frequently report to have acquired LSs linked to interpersonal relationships. These data can be explained taking into account the different educational models proposed by coaches and collaborators of the two FCs: in the first case mostly oriented toward performance, toward relationships in the second one. The fact that participants aged 8–14 have more frequently learnt the increasing personal confidence and abilities to assume control skill, whereas participants aged 15–20 have more frequently learnt the negotiation/refusal skill, can instead be explained taking into account the different developmental phases of the two age ranges: more centered on the construction of one's personal identity in the case of younger participants, more on the assumption of an adult role in case of older ones.

Conclusions

The present study permitted to confirm the link between the practice of sports and LSs learning also in the Italian context. In light of this potential,

sports must be regarded also in Italy as a top priority field of investment – together with school – for youth education and personal growth.

Among the limits of the study we remark that it has conducted only in the context of football (involving two FCs with only male players), and that conditions that may promote or reduce LSs learning through the practice of sports have not been investigated. For this reason further research should be conducted in the contexts of other sports, and should also provide for the identification of the factors that may influence LSs learning, such dispositional variables, coaching style and parents' attitudes.

This study has various practical implications. On the one side, it will be important to spread its results into the field of training initiatives directed to coaches and FCs managers, with the aim of making them aware of the fact that the practice of sports is not just an opportunity to learn athletic skills but also to acquire LSs significant for the development of the young athletes, and to help them develop relationships able to favor LSs learning [Gould et al., 2007]. On the other side, the design of educational programs aimed at young athletes will be useful to offer them the opportunity to re-elaborate – preferably with the help of psychologists – the learnings that the practice of sport allows them to acquire and their value for the life as a whole, favoring transfer from one life domain to another [Brunelle et al., 2007]. Finally, families should also be sensitized in order to direct their expectations to contribute (and not to hamper, as in situations of parents overinvolvement with the presence of excessive expectations of success towards the children [cfr. Hellstedt, 1995]) the actual realization of LSs learning through sports [Jones and Lavalley, 2009].

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Brunelle J., Danish S. J., Forneris T. (2007). *The impact of a sport-based life skill program on adolescent prosocial values*, *Appl Dev Sci*, 11(1), 43-55. doi:10.1207/s1532480xads1101_3
- Camiré M., Trudel P., Forneris T. (2009). *High school athletes' perspectives on support, negotiation processes, and life skill development*, *Qual Res Sport Exerc*, 1(1), 72-88. doi:10.1080/19398440802673275
- Corbin J., Strauss A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research*, (3rd ed.), Los Angeles.

- Curry L. A., Maniar S. D. (2003). *Academic course combining psychological skills training and life skills education for university students and student-athletes*, *J Appl Sport Psychol*, 15(3), 270–277. doi:10.1080/10413200305384
- Danish S. J. (2002). *SUPER (Sports United to Promote Education and Recreation) program: Leader manual*, (3rd ed.), Richmond, VA: Life Skills Center.
- Danish S. J., Forneris T., Hodge K., Heke I. (2004). *Enhancing youth development through sport*, *World Leisure Journal*, 46(3), 38–49. doi:10.1080/04419057.2004.9674365
- Danish S. J., Forneris T., Wallace, I. (2005). *Sport-based life skills programming in the schools*, *J App School Psychol*, 21(2), 41–62. doi:10.1300/J370v21n02_04
- Danish S. J., Petitpas A., Hale B. (1995). *Psychological interventions: a life development model*, in: S. M. Murphy (ed.), *Sport psychology interventions* (pp. 19–38). Champaign.
- Danish S. J., Taylor T. Fazio R. (2003). *Enhancing adolescent development through sport and leisure*, in: G. R. Adams M. Berzonsky (eds.), *Blackwell handbook on adolescence* (pp. 92–108). Malden, MA.
- Forneris T., Camiré M., Trudel P. (2012). *The development of life skills and values in high school sport: Is there a gap between stakeholder's expectations and perceived experiences?* *Int J Sport Exerc Psychol*, 10(1), 9–23. doi:10.1080/1612197X.2012.645128
- Goudas M., Dermitzaki I., Leondari A., Danish S. (2006). *The effectiveness of teaching a life skills program in a physical education context*, *EJPE*, 21, 429–438. doi:10.1007/BF03173512
- Gould D., Carson S. (2008). *Life skills development through sport: Current status and future directions*, *Int Rev Sport Exerc Psychol*, 1, 58–78. doi:10.1080/17509840701834573
- Gould D., Carson S., Fifer A., Lauer L. Benham R. (2009). *Stakeholders' perceptions of social-emotional and life skill development issues characterizing contemporary high school sports*, *JCE*, 2, 1–25.
- Gould D., Collins K., Lauer L., Chung Y. (2007). *Coaching life skills through football: A study of award winning high school coaches*, *J Appl Sport Psychol*, 19(1), 16–37. doi:10.1080/10413200601113786
- Gould D., Voelker D. K. (2010). *Youth Sport Leadership Development: Leveraging the Sports Captaincy Experience*, *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action*, 1(1), 1–14. doi: 10.1080/21520704.2010.497695
- Hellison D. (1995). *Teaching responsibility through physical activity*, Champaign, IL.
- Hellstedt J.C. (1995). *Invisible players: A family system model*, in: S.M. Murphy (ed.), *Sport Psychology Interventions* (pp. 117–146). Champaign, IL.

- Hodge, K., Danish, S. (1999). *Promoting life skills for adolescent males through sport*, in: A. M. Horne M. S. Kiselica (eds.), *Handbook of counseling boys and adolescent males: A practitioner's guide* (pp. 55–71). Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Hodgson C., Sharp B. (2000). *National governing body awards: A strategy for success*, *JVET*, 52(2), 199–210. doi:10.1080/13636820000200115
- Holt N. L. (2008). *Positive youth development through sport*, New York, NY.
- Holt N. L., Tink L. N., Mandigo J. L., Fox K. R. (2008). *Do youth learn life skills through their involvement in high school sport? A case study*, *CJE*, 31(2), 281–304. doi:10.2307/20466702
- Jones M. I., Lavalley D. (2009). *Exploring perceived life skills development and participation in sport*, *Qual Res Sport Exerc*, 1(1), 36–50. doi:10.1080/19398440802567931
- Krueger R. A., Casey M. A. (2000). *Focus groups. A practical guide for applied research*, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Larson R. W. (2000). *Toward a psychology of positive youth development*, *Am Psychol*, 55(1), 170–183. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.170
- Mahoney J. L., Stattin H. (2000). *Leisure activities and adolescents antisocial behavior: The role of structure and social context*, *J Adolescence*, 23, 113–127. doi:10.1006/JADO.2000.0302
- Memmert D., Baker J., Bertsch C. (2010). *Play and practice in the development of sport-specific creativity in team ball sports*, *High Abil Stud*, 21(1), 3–18. doi:10.1080/13598139.2010.488083
- Papacharisis V., Goudas M., Danish S. J., Theodorakis Y. (2005). *The effectiveness of teaching a life skills program in a sport context*, *J Appl Sport Psychol*, 17(3), 247–254. doi:10.1080/10413200591010139
- Petitpas A. J., Cornelius A. E., Van Raalte J. L., Jones T. (2005). *A framework for planning youth sport programs that foster psychosocial development*, *TPS*, 19(1), 63–80.
- Smoll F. L., Smith R. E. (eds.). (2002). *Children and youth in sport: A biopsychological perspective* (2nd ed.). Dubuque, IA.
- Whitley M. A., Gould D. (2011). *Psychosocial development in refugee children and youth through the personal-social responsibility model*, *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action*, 1(3), 118–138. doi:10.1080/21520704.2010.534546.
- WHO (1993). *The development of dissemination of life skills education: An overview*, Geneva.
- WHO (1997). *Life skills education in schools*, Geneva.
- WHO (2003). *Skills for health*, retrieved from http://www.who.int/school_youth_health/media/en/sch_skills4health_03.pdf
- Wiersma L. D., Sherman C. P. (2008). *The Responsible Use of Youth Fitness Testing to Enhance Student Motivation, Enjoyment, and Performance*, *Meas Phys Educ Exerc Sci*, 12(3), 167–183. doi: 10.1080/10913670802216148.

SUMMARY

Background

The link between the practice of sports and life skills learning has been the objective of various studies conducted worldwide, but no research has to date been carried out in Italy.

Objectives

This study was aimed at understanding (1) if playing football in the youth section of a football clubs is considered a helpful experience to learn life skills and (2) if differences exist among life skills learned by subjects belonging to different football clubs or age groups.

Method

The study involved all the 589 athletes belonging to the youth sections of two Italian football clubs, a professional one ($n = 299$) and an amateur one ($n = 290$) and an amateur one. The study was performed by 86 focus groups. The answers provided by the participants were analyzed using a paper-and-pencil technique.

Results

64 learnings emerged that are related to life skills, particularly to coping, self-management and interpersonal relationships. Learning outcomes significantly differed as a function of the players age grouping and club status.

Conclusions

Results may favor the investment of economical resources in youth sports and the development of educational and sensitizing training aimed at coaches, managers, athletes and parents.

KEY WORDS: positive youth development, youth, moral development, self-reflection, attitudes.

STRESZCZENIE

Tło badawcze

Związek pomiędzy uprawianiem piłki nożnej a rozwojem umiejętności życiowych był celem wielu badań prowadzonych niemal na całym świecie, ale do tej pory nie przeprowadzono podobnych badań we Włoszech.

Cele badawcze

Opisane badania miały na celu zrozumienie (1), czy uprawianie piłki nożnej w sekcjach młodzieżowych klubów sportowych wspomaga rozwój umiejętności życiowych, (2) czy w różnych klubach sportowych i w grupach w różnym wieku rozwijane są różnorodne umiejętności życiowe.

Metoda badawcza

W badaniu wzięło udział 589 sportowców należących do sekcji młodzieżowej w dwóch włoskich klubach sportowych: profesjonalnym ($n = 299$) i amatorskim ($n = 290$). Badanie przeprowadzono w 86 grupach fokusowych. Respondenci odpowiadali pisemnie na pytania.

Wyniki

Wyróżniono 64 umiejętności życiowe, głównie dotyczące naśladowania, umiejętności kierowania samym sobą i relacji interpersonalnych. Zauważono różnice w wynikach uzyskanych w różnych grupach wiekowych i w klubach o różnym statusie.

Wnioski

Wyniki mogą potwierdzać konieczność inwestowania środków finansowych w kluby sportowe i rozwój systemu szkolenia i doskonalenia emocjonalnego trenerów, menadżerów, sportowców i rodziców.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: rozwój młodzieży, rozwój moralny, samorefleksja, postawy.