

XI.

Sporting values in football youth teams: a complex system.

The case of Torino FC's youth sector

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Introduction

The aim of this research project¹ is to bring out the elements that make it possible to construct a positive organisational model based on the values of sport in competitive sports clubs such as those in football.

This introductory part is the appropriate place to illustrate the complexity not only of the environmental system in which the child is immersed but also those aspects which are present within this system and often incomprehensibly interwoven, often in contradiction with each other. Here we refer to Benson's quality of development², cited by Fraser-Thomas, Coté and Deakin³ in Ciairano's interesting work⁴ and which we briefly summarise as follows.

- 1 The project builds upon an extensive work previously coordinated by Renato Grimaldi (R. Grimaldi (a cura di), *Valori e modelli nello sport*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2011).
- 2 P.L. Benson, *All Kids Are Our Kids, What Communities Must Do to Raise Caring and Responsible Children and Adolescents*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1997.
- 3 J.L. Fraser_Thomas, J. Coté, J. Deakin, "I programmi sportivi per i giovani: un sistema per promuovere lo sviluppo giovanile positivo", in S. Ciairano, *Le attività motorie e sportive nello sviluppo degli adolescenti*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2008, p. 188.
- 4 S. Ciairano, *Le attività motorie e sportive nello sviluppo degli adolescenti*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2008, p. 188.

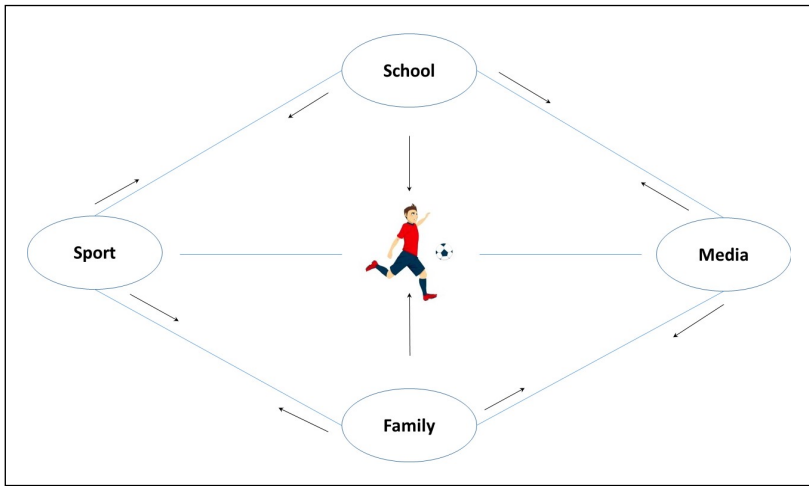


Fig. 1 – The complex system of educational, learning and play environments with the young player at the centre⁵

The author indicates the *external qualities* of an environment and the personal qualities which strengthen or hinder a child's sporting abilities. The former include the possibility of obtaining support (from school, parents, other adults, etc.), reinforcement (from the community, from the neighbourhood, from solidarity and from the social climate), becoming aware of limits and expectations (of the school, of the family, of peers, etc.), the use of time (invested in creative activities, in urban spaces and in other contexts). *Internal qualities*, on the other hand, include schoolwork (studies, reading, collaborations, etc.), positive values (which we will specifically deal with here), social competencies (plans, decision-making, interpersonal and cultural skills, resolving conflicts, etc.) and a positive identity (individual strength, resilience, self-esteem, sense of purpose, a positive outlook on the future).

The *sport system* (with its performance demands) allows today's youngsters to come up against (and in a certain sense forces them to put themselves to the test) other complex systems, often characterised by different dynamics and values, such as the *school system* (adaptation, difficulty), the *family system* (with its complex dynamics) and the *media system* (with its

5 Figure based on G. Farinelli, *Pedagogia dello sport ed educazione alla persona*, Perugia, Morlacchi, 2005.

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strongly “playful” power of suggestion). Today we clearly see, in all of its dramatic implications, the problematic link between the spaces and times (both material and mental) of competitive sport, of school activities and the influence of the media, which often causes moments of crisis in the management on the part of children and youngsters of their daily lives and the choices that will accompany them in their future. For obvious reasons, all of this may also regard players registered with the youth sector of a professional club.

One of the hypotheses of this research is based on the fact that the four systems to which we have referred (1. sport/club/team/coach, 2. school, 3. the family and 4. the media) can co-exist and actually reciprocally reinforce each other. This hypothesis is also supported by the scientific literature on the subject in question, on condition that strong ties of exchange and sharing between the various parts in play are created. In this regard, the reader is also referred to papers by Martelli⁶, Bandura⁷, Kohlberg⁸, Farnè⁹, Kanters¹⁰, Isidori and Fraile¹¹ and Perissinotto¹².

1. The research project

The purpose of the present research project was to study four teams of boys born in 2001 and 2002 in the Torino FC youth system, their families, managers and coaches with a specific exploratory aim: to examine the relation between the boys and the aforementioned systems: sport (football in this specific case), the family, school and the media.

6 S. Martelli, *Sport, media e intrattenimento: emozioni in/controllate e struttura sociale emergenti*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2011.

7 A. Bandura, *Self-efficacy in changing societies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University press, 1995.

8 L. Kohlberg, *The philosophy of moral development: moral stages and the idea of justice*, San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1981.

9 R. Farnè (a cura di), *Sport e formazione*, Milano, Guerini, 2008; R. Farnè (a cura di), *Sport e infanzia: un'esperienza formativa tra gioco e impegno*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2010.

10 M. Kanters, “Parents and youth sports: the good, the bad and why we need them, Research update”, *Park & Recreation*, December, 2002.

11 E. Isidori, A. Fraile, *Educazione, sport e valori*, Roma, Aracne, 2008.

12 A. Perissinotto, *Sport e comunicazione: teorie, storia, scenari*, Milano, Mondadori Università, 2012.

A short questionnaire/interview¹³ was administered to examine their relationship (with opinions and attitudes through the recounting of episodes and anecdotes) with the abovementioned systems, while values were classified as in Table 1.

Values	Classification
1 Esteem for others 2 Solidarity 3 Sociability 4 Sincerity 5 Respect for the ideas of others 6 Respect for authority 7 Respect for others 8 Sense of responsibility 9 Forgiveness of others 10 Honesty 11 Non-violence 12 Multiculturalness 13 Loyalty 14 Justice 15 Generosity 16 Trust in others 17 Willingness to listen 18 Willingness of help 19 Friendship 20 Tolerance	<i>Social values</i>
21 Spirit of sacrifice 22 Spirit of risk 23 Self-realisation 24 Perseverance 25 Courage	<i>Personal values</i>
26 Being famous 27 Having a lot of money 28 Taking care of physical appearance 29 Having a career, being successful	<i>Mixed values (with reference to the media)</i>

Table 1 – Classification of values into social, personal and media values

13 The semi-structured interview was administered to the boys by the researchers through a questionnaire which was subsequently “uploaded” online using the Qgen system (www.farnt.unito.it/trincher/qgen/). For more information, see the original version in Italian.

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As can be seen, the first group of values is termed *social* because they require interaction with others in order to be developed and acted out. The second group, personal values, primarily relates to capacities directly connected to the self of the child. The third specifically centre upon media representation of sport. Of course we must not think that these three classes are clear-cut and final, as depending on the occasion each value may fall under one of more of the other classes identified. Our boundaries, based on logical reasoning, are not the only ones possible, but are those which in this research enable us to provide a more effective interpretation of the information collected.

As mentioned above, this paper will illustrate the results obtained from the brief interview with the adults (which was also uploaded to an online questionnaire with a summary of the responses) administered to them in order to examine their relationship with their sons/students in relation to the systems mentioned by recalling episodes correlated with the link with the systems described above¹⁴.

2. Descriptive analysis of the results

As already mentioned in the introduction to this paper, we shall present a descriptive analysis of the information, highlighting a number of details that enable us to begin to sketch out the educational needs that emerge from the youth teams of a professional football club. Naturally this initial exploratory approach does not set out to draw conclusions or offer definitive formulas on how to manage the dynamics that are created by the interaction between the young footballer and the “educational systems” which we introduced as part of the theoretical framework.

The boys. The sample consisted of 75 boys with an average age of 11.48. Their favourite player (the one chosen with the greatest frequency) is Cristiano Ronaldo, the Real Madrid attacker. The top three role models are foreign (in total 44 out of 77 play for foreign clubs); in addition, only 4 preferences (all for the same footballer) were accorded to a player in the respondents’ own team. Only one of the players chosen no longer plays: this

14 The full version of the questionnaire used is available in A. Parola, *I valori sportive nei settori giovanili del calcio: un sistema complesso*, C. Coggi (a cura di), *Valori in Form-Azione*, Lecce-Brescia, Pensa Multimedia, 2014, pp. 241-287.

means that the boys concentrate above all on players who are currently playing for Italian or overseas teams.

As can be seen from Figure 2, the values which most typically characterise the boys' favourite players are, in order: "spirit of sacrifice", "sense of responsibility", "honesty", "non-violence", "courage" and "sociability" (occurring more than 10 times); according to the classification illustrated in Table 1, the most frequently chosen value type was "personal", i.e. "spirit of sacrifice" (together with "courage", chosen 12 times), while the remaining choices were all "social" values. We should add that none of the "media" values appears among the most frequent (the most frequent one in the list is "having a career and being successful", occurring 10 times).

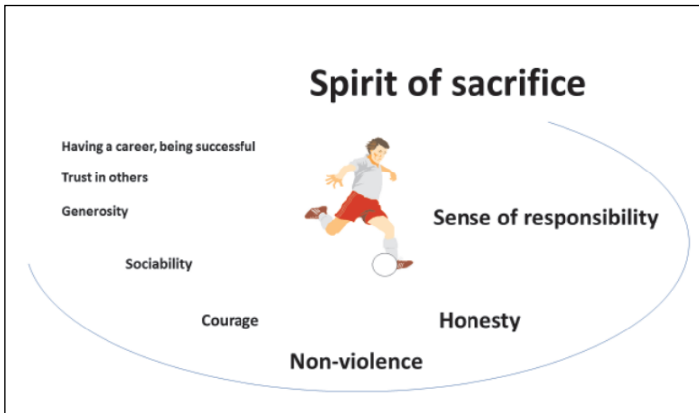


Fig. 2 – The values expressed here by the boys' favourite players represent 50% of the distribution of frequencies. With reference to Table 3 the frequency of the value is directly proportional to the size of the letters of the value

The first value, "personal", stands out significantly from all of the others. In addition, to complete the picture, 6 are *social* values (82), 2 are *personal* values (40), and 1 is a *media* value (10) (see Table 1).

The following step illustrates the comparison between the values of actual and ideal coach, according to the sample of boys considered.

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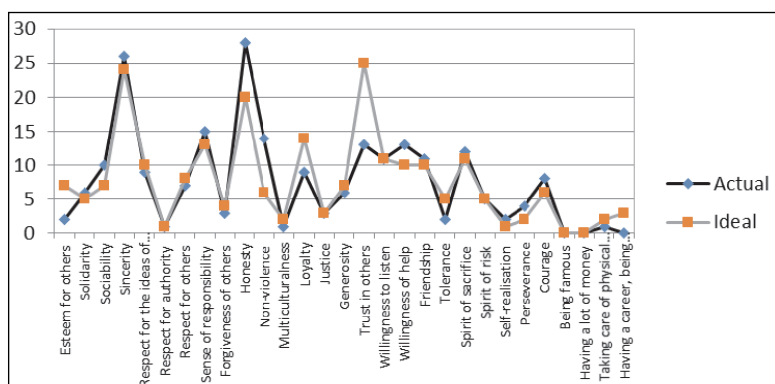


Fig. 3 – Graph comparing boys’ “actual” and “ideal” coach

The two profiles are rather similar, which indicates that the *coaches* of these two groups approximate the representation of the coach that the boys would like to have. It is interesting to examine the characteristics of this model in more depth. As can be seen from Fig. 3, the positive profile of the ideal coach is concentrated above all upon the values of sincerity, sense of responsibility, honesty, loyalty, trust in others and spirit of sacrifice (personal). These values are mainly social. The values of “sincerity”, “trust in others” and “honesty” emerge in a more significant manner. The values of honesty and trust in others are the ones which diverge the most between the two types of coach: while in the first case the boys’ actual coach is associated more frequently with the value of honesty, in the second case it is their ideal coach who most embodies trust in others. Except in a few cases, media values figure in neither of the two profiles.

In the “negative” profile of the actual coach (in reference to the least frequently cited values) the values of esteem and forgiveness, multiculturalness, tolerance and self-realisation (personal value) are absent: from this point of view the two profiles are once again very similar.

With regard to the phrases and episodes recounted the coach is described as loyal, frank, decisive, attentive and meticulous, an educator and a motivator.

The descriptive analysis stage that follows regards school. Figure 4 compares the profiles of the boys’ actual and ideal schools.

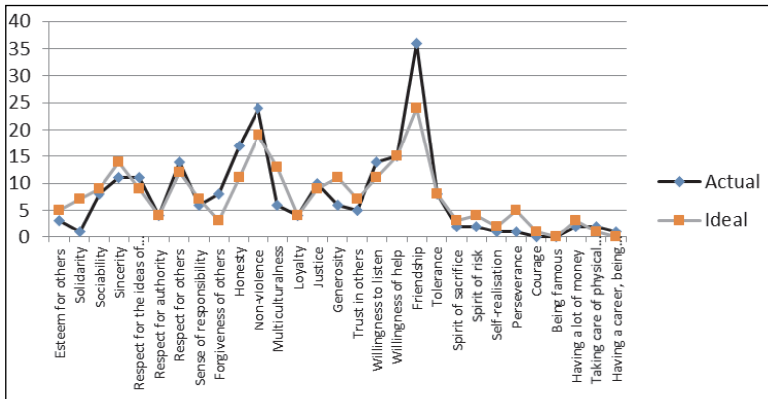


Fig. 4 – Graph comparing boys’ real and ideal schools

As can be seen, the two profiles provide us with an image of the boys’ actual school that includes above all “friendship”, “non-violence”, “honesty”, “willingness to help”, “respect for others” and “willingness to listen” (all “social” values). The profile of their ideal school does not diverge much from it, except in the distribution of the frequencies in almost all of the values mentioned: it is interesting to observe the accent on “multiculturalness”, “solidarity”, sincerity”, “generosity” and “perseverance” (the only “personal” value among the most frequent).

With regard to the phrases and to the episodes recounted that describe school, we can observe that, in contrast to the coach, for whom they essentially feel esteem and affection, the boys also permit themselves negative judgments, with some cases in which the two aspects are both present in their judgment. In addition to confirming the main values chosen from the list, school (in the positive sense) is represented using adjectives relating to the teaching and relational aspects, while the negative judgments emphasise a dislike of teachers, injustices, strictness, boredom, fatigue and the presence of bullying. They also evidence a school that is *inclusive*, *indulgent* and *understanding* and one which is experienced as a *family*.

The survey continues with the young footballers’ parents. Fig. 5 shows a comparison of the two profiles: their fathers mainly embody the values of “sincerity”, followed by “generosity”, “spirit of sacrifice” (“personal value”), “loyalty” and “honesty”, while the boys’ mothers exhibit above all “generosity” and “sincerity”, followed by “honesty”, “willingness or help” and “forgiveness of others”. According to the graph, the fathers are more sincere and loyal, make greater sacrifices and are more courageous, while the mothers are more responsible, honest, generous and indulgent.

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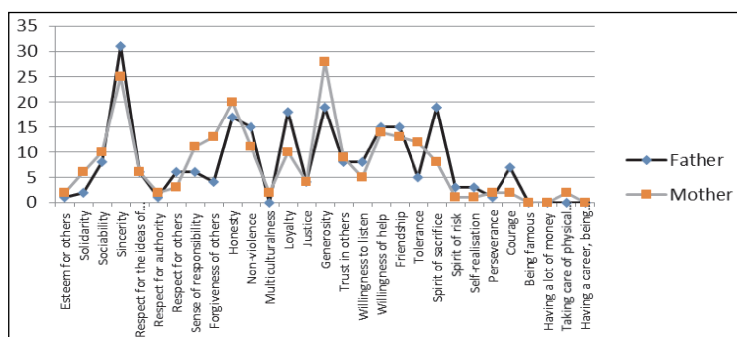


Fig. 5 – Graph comparing mothers and fathers

With regard to the phrases and the episodes recounted that describe the boys’ parents, the fathers confirm the choices made by the respondents and, in addition are available, altruistic and generous. Essentially what emerges is the figure of the father who is present in his son’s sporting life. The boys’ mothers are seen as good, available, generous, fair and altruistic, more available to help in their son’s everyday life and to give their attention to the “indirect echoes” of the emotions that stem from their most profound experiences.

The survey continues with the analysis of the description proposed by the boys about themselves and their values. Fig 6 shows some values, which were not expressed as the most important in the graph about parents, such as “friendship” (this value appears to be the most important), “sociability” and “respect for others”.

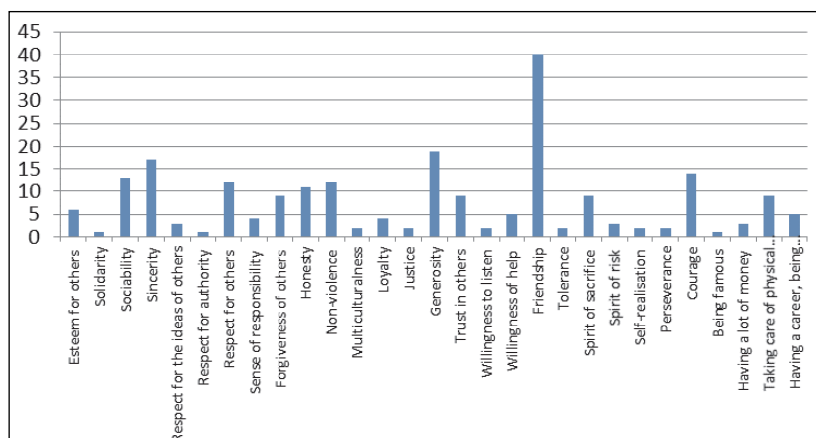


Fig. 6 – Boys’ self-observation based on the values listed

From the boys’ brief phrases and episodes describing themselves, a positive, self-celebratory and partially critical image emerges. They confirm the values of friendship, helpfulness and generosity. However, they also show a “darker” side: being deceitful, lazy, arrogant, restless, shy, sensitive, untidy, impatient, aggressive, touchy, difficult. The young footballers spoke above all of episodes connected to an emotion, and to circumstance in which they put a value “into play”.

Lastly, before moving on the parents’ perspective, we shall deal with the issue of the media. As can be seen from Figure 7, the boys reverse the situation, identifying with ease those values which can be more intuitively associated with newspapers, television, video games and digital contexts in general. The most frequently chosen values are “having a lot of money”, “being famous”, “having a career and being successful”, “non-violence” and “justice”.

In relation to the qualitative aspects, the situation is quite controversial: the positive value is accounted for by a judgment based on enjoyment and interest (especially video games, frequently chosen), on play, on the capacity to instruct and educate (above all with regard to Internet) and on the capacity to stimulate emotions and motivate, while the negative value emerges with the attempt to distinguish between good and bad media, or between different consumption behaviours.

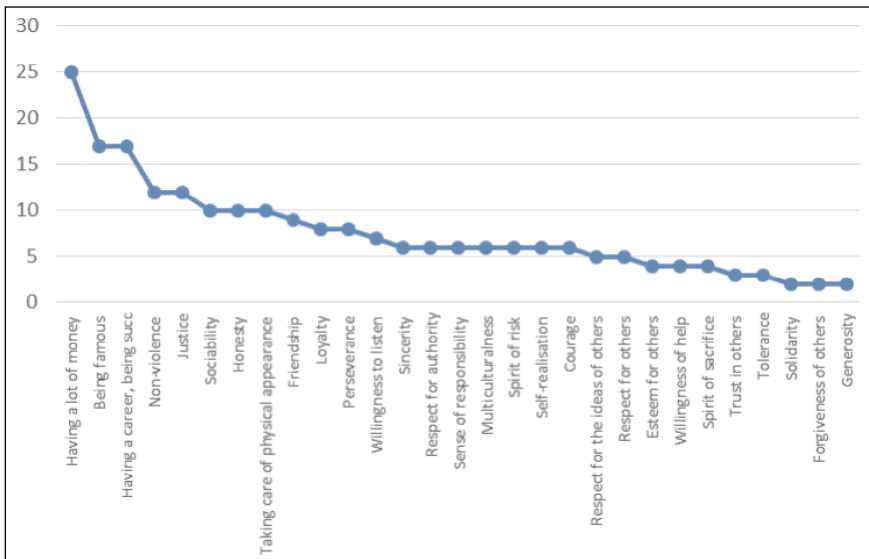


Fig. 7 – Values connected with experience with media

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Parents. In this exploratory research, only one parent per couple was involved, the one who most frequently brought their son to training (43 fathers, 26 mothers and 5 “other” unspecified respondents).

As far as the representation of the “footballer-son” is concerned, we decided to divide the descriptions, based on the types of responses, into two main categories: a “balanced” profile (58% of the sample of fathers) in which the child emerges as a player who tends to enjoy himself and put certain values “into play”, and an “accentuated” profile (42% of fathers) characterised by very strong emotions, a high level of passion, great expenditure of energy, and so forth.

In the descriptions of the mothers, in addition to the two profiles described above (41% “balanced” and 27% “accentuated”), a third category emerges, which we term “critical” (32%) and which is absent from the descriptions of the fathers. This aspect relates to what the son “should be” and “should do”, to the fact that he still has to grow, to work hard elsewhere too, to be more constant, and should not get angry if he makes a mistake.

With regard to the “student-son”, parents responded positively in 69% of cases, while 31% adjudged their son’s performance as student to be unsatisfactory. It should be noted that fathers consider their son’s relationship with school more positively (36 out of 43 consider it to be good or very good), while the mothers, who are closer to the world of education and aware of the boy’s actual performance, are more critical (14 out of 25 describe a picture of greater difficulty).

The representation of school evidences a fairly clear position for fathers and mothers alike: it comes before everything else. From the fathers’ point of view, in some cases a critical judgment of the institution emerges, one which highlights organisational aspects, shortcomings, the workload imposed on their son and the uselessness of the qualification. The mothers, on the other hand, were in agreement regarding its importance above anything else. The episode regarding school highlights a relationship that is sometimes good (efficient communication, good teachers) and sometimes problematic.

With regard to the child’s relationship with the media, a fairly clear picture emerges: sports programmes on TV are the most attractive, especially football-based video games played on consoles and sometimes on other devices such as tablets and smartphones. It is interesting to note that parents complain of excessive use of media in only 17% of cases. Parents mentioned the question of critical thinking and educational needs in just a few cases and were usually not particularly concerned (an aspect which was subsequently disproved in the phrases and episodes recounted).

The episode highlighting the child's character focuses upon his positive qualities and problematic aspects: only a third of parents recounted an episode in the true sense, while two thirds described their son in general terms using adjectives like stubborn, lively, introverted, mature, altruistic, etc. The episodes "proper" feature a young footballer who consoles and soothes his teammates, who is generous, enthusiastic, with a strong personality, helpful, humble, persistent, but also absent-minded, shy and in one specific case, without emotions. Almost all of the parents, nevertheless, recounted positive episodes or in any case episodes which had a positive outcome in the end.

The representation of the world of football shows a clear gender difference: the fathers demonstrate a certain affinity, while the mothers are extremely critical, much more so than we expected: essentially, the pleasure of seeing one's own son happy does not make up for the large commitment that they have to make during the week, while grappling with one of the most important aspects of the life of the boy, which is also connected to their concern about an uncertain professional future.

The figure of the coach fares excellently, in a representation that describes a multi-faceted role which goes far beyond what is normally demanded of a professional figure who expresses his competencies on the field and in managing the "changing room": generally, as well as being expert and highly qualified from the technical point of view, he is the reference point for the young footballers and is an educator (sometimes a good father).

The episodes recounted highlight a number of amusing circumstances, indicating an essential balance between moments of "seriousness" and moments of "fun and relaxation". The fathers stress the coach's ability and his handling of the player's emotions, while the mothers lay emphasis on the human and relational aspect.

Finally we come to future expectations. In this regard we identified four different categories of response. The first relates to the role of motivator and the belief in stimulating the boy to pursue a sporting career, the second has to do with the priority of education, the third concerns the paramount importance of their being happy and of their developing "as people" (independently of school and sport), while lastly we identified a neutral response which does not include any elements of the preceding categories (for example "don't know" or "other").

Coaches and managers. In the comment which we shall expand upon below, we bring together the two professional figures (two coaches and five managers) as in this specific context we are not so concerned with making comparisons as with giving a voice to roles within the club. The reader is referred to other research for a more specific discussion of the role of the

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coach. The questions we asked them concerned anecdotes linked to the values observed within the system that we have described.

In relation to the *action of the adult* (himself) the anecdotes illustrated the importance of the boys' feedback over time, their serenity, respect for their age, humility, group building, respect, friendship and honesty. The *action of the boys* was described especially in terms of willpower, solidarity, sensitivity to weaker players, the capacity to give up their place to a teammate, responsibility and the capacity to console a teammate after a mistake. The *internal values* focus on the club's "human potential", the choice of not considering the boy's career a priority (at least at this age), his growth, confidence, conduct and behaviour (which are observed also in their checking of the boys' school reports), inner strength, the club's long-standing values, the commitment of everyone concerned (the club, boys and families), the importance of the group and healthy competition.

With regard to the influences stemming from the young footballer's "life contexts, coaches and managers agree on the following opinions:

- his *character* must consist of autonomy, awareness, persistency, good relations with teammates, capacity for self-control, an already-solid foundation and willingness to make sacrifices;
- in relation to *school*, the boys' studies are the first thing, along with the importance of controlling their progress and difficulties, their usefulness also in the game of football, the need to understand the value of sport in the life of the boy with a view to a reciprocal self-completion and of side-by-side progress at school and in football;
- the *family* should create a climate of collaboration (this is often what can "tip the balance"), guarantee the necessary support (mothers are more involved emotionally while fathers enter into the merits of the technical matters), maintain the right distance, allow the boy to isolate himself from "disruptive voices", ensuring greater autonomy for him and avoiding creating too many expectations;
- the *club* is attentive to the boys' needs and offers solid foundations, it has an excellent coordinator, is conscious of the commitment that football demands of families, encourages dialogue, considers the climate in the changing room important, pays attention to the "signals" that herald potential problems, promotes the idea that victories are everyone's and gives importance to the process of growth that boy will achieve over the years;
- the *media* can have a negative influence and even be "devastating"; social networks are "oppressive" and can be disruptive (an episode of bullying

is mentioned); they represent “powerful environments” which can even “overwhelm”, although at that age “they still don’t think about it”; TV specifically influences behaviour and creates models that induce children to emulate them and to recognise and identify themselves with “false myths”.

With regard to the presence of an *expert/educator*, such a figure is deemed necessary and positive (on condition that he/she is on the same wavelength), oriented towards support and dialogue (often parents ask for help with difficult-to-manage episodes in the face of which they often feel inadequate), one that can safeguard and manage the image of the young footballer, foster his growth, instil serenity, represent a “connection” between the various teams (a vision of the whole is lacking); in any case the need for training is strongly felt, especially on the part of the managers.

Figure 8 shows the distribution of the choice of the values indicated.

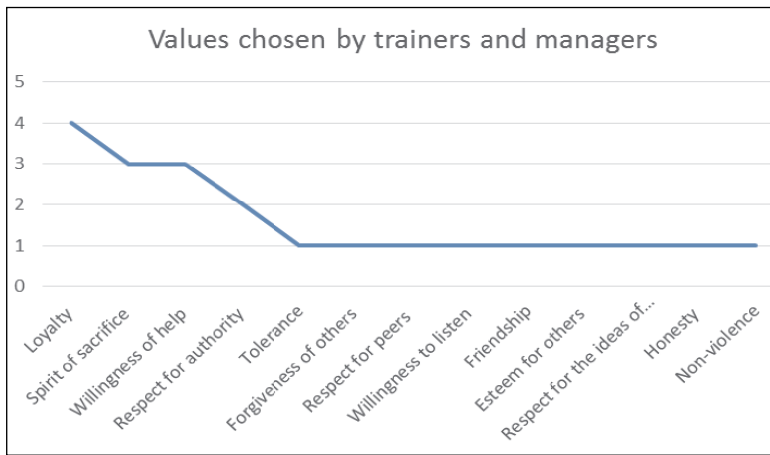


Fig. 8 – Graph illustrating the main values chosen by individuals with a role in the youth sector

As can be seen from the graph, the top 3 values (loyalty, spirit of sacrifice and willingness to help) account for almost half of the distribution (10 out of 21), two social values and one personal one.

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Conclusions

In general, the main values referred to, in order of priority, are: honesty (which is present 7 times in the columns of the table), sincerity (6), non-violence (5), willingness to help (5) and friendship (4). This summary highlights how certain values can become a part of the identity of a football club, which is not a walled garden but rather the result of its history and interactions between different environments.

We shall conclude with a number of brief observations:

- The young footballer exhibits difficulty in serenely managing his daily life, which is split between school and sporting commitments. Schools ought to show a greater degree of collaboration, by seeing physical education as being functional to learning in all subjects and to skills development; the family ought to be characterised by a sounder awareness of the systems that affect the identity and relational growth of their sons; sports clubs, in general, should make greater investments in terms of knowing about and working collaboratively within those systems; the media should be more responsible in the way it talks about sport and more vigilant towards the young recipients of its messages;
- in this regard it may be helpful to expand and develop formal, non-formal and informal training for coaches and managers, given their role in safeguarding the physical and psychological health of their young players;
- school and sport appear to speak different languages, as if between one system and the other there were a barrier that is too rigid to allow information to pass through it and thus enable clearer, more effective communication. The two worlds traditionally set themselves different goals, whereas in our view they ought to share common goals, both in relation to the specific aspects of their pupils' learning and by making provision for a growth of identity, linked to the development of subject and cross-disciplinary skills that can empower the athlete and student first, and subsequently the athlete and professional;
- the media represents a system that is antithetical to all of the other systems: specifically, the family represents them extremely frequently as just video games (as do the boys themselves); the school sees them as useful but dangerous tools, the sports club considers them viruses that risk having a profound impact on the life of the player; in this regard it is necessary to aim to develop greater awareness of the power of the media itself in order to construct a complex citizenship that can also help in

- terms of sporting/motor, technical/tactical and meta-cognitive development;
- parents are not totally aware of the value and educational systems that intervene in the life of their children, although they display a balance which becomes fundamental in the day-to-day management of the difficulties that arise every day;
 - lastly, educational research applied to sport constitutes an extraordinary opportunity to build awareness in the life contexts of the young footballer, by helping him in the complex tasks of physical, psychological and sporting growth.

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