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## VALUES AND MODELS IN SPORT. SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL REFLECTIONS

### ABSTRACT

*Sport can be studied as a lens onto social turns, as it underlines lifestyles and behavioural patterns. Sporting activity can be identified as a social product and an instrument of culture (Isidori, 2009). Sport expresses an educational dimension and disseminates values (Porro, 2006). In its White Paper on Sport, the European Commission notes that sport is a «growing social and economic phenomenon which makes an important contribution to the European Union’s strategic objectives of solidarity and prosperity» (European Commission, 2007, p. 2). This definition recognizes that sport is a source of values and active citizenship. Sport therefore expresses a clear ethical and moral value, as is also shown by the results of research we conducted in 2011 with a representative statistical sample of 3,169 students from Piedmont (Italy) aged between 9 and 11 years (Grimaldi, 2011). Sports activities can therefore significantly contribute to the education of children and adolescents, encouraging the socialization process through experiences that involve peer groups in particular.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Sport, values, education, behavioural patterns*

### 1. INTRODUCTION: SPORT PRACTICES AND PROMOTING VALUES

Sports activities contribute to training and educating children and adolescents and foster the process of socialization through social experiences involving the young person’s peer group in particular.

Sport is not only a pleasant activity to be carried out in one's free time or practised at competitive or even professional levels, it is also a vehicle of growth and for promoting

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values. It is a highly educationally significant activity that fosters the development of cognitive, emotional and social skills, an activity at the forefront of promoting individual and collective well-being and health.

The research we present here aims to focus on sport in the pre-adolescent age group, with the aim of investigating the educational values, norms and rules transmitted (Grimaldi, 2011). The project that led to producing this work on values and patterns in sport is a quantitative study complemented by a qualitative component. The research was able to draw on the specialised knowledge of experts from different disciplinary fields who contributed at different stages of the process: general and communication sociologists, pedagogues, methodologists, psychologists, doctors, teachers, champion athletes and sports journalists.

## **2. THE SOCIAL ROLE OF SPORT: BEHAVIORAL PATTERNS AND THE TRANSMISSION OF VALUES**

Sport may be considered a practice that touches on different aspects of everyday life: from the physical activity itself to the enjoyment of sport activities and individual or collective participation in leisure time, and the impressive attention sport garners from the media. The phenomenon of sport constitutes an area of considerable social significance and can be identified as a total social fact, a collective phenomenon that is sensitive to social change (Porro, 2006). In illustrating this point, Laura Balbo underlines the increasing visibility that sport enjoys in the transformations taking place in postmodern society: from changes in the organisation of leisure time to new directions in health and well-being, lifestyles and consumption (Balbo, 2001). It might even be argued that we live in a sport society: sport represents a popular and widespread form of cultural participation, a universal cultural heritage that overcomes the barriers of language, religion and political borders (Isidori, 2009). Sport practice embodies an important educational level, representing as it does an effective instrument for disseminating values and behavioural patterns based on good social practices and for developing networks of solidarity and inclusion at the local level with a view to preventing and combatting situations of disadvantage and deviance. The European Commission underlined this provision in its White Paper on Sport (2007), highlighting that the practice of a healthy sporting activity constitutes "a social and economic phenomenon of growing importance, which contributes significantly to achieving the strategic objectives of solidarity and prosperity pursued by the European Union" (p. 1). Sport is recognised as a source of values and a means of exercising active citizenship; in this perspective, the document offers a number of guidelines and action strategies for strengthening the role sport plays in education and training.

In 2011, the European Union published the first three-year work plan (2011-2014) with the communication "Developing the European Dimension in Sport", the first strategic document on this sector since the Lisbon Treaty came into force. This paper highlights the potential and social role of sport in contributing to the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy, as a tool for education and training – with the Erasmus+ programme having been launched along these lines – and as a means for preventing and combatting violence. Sport is identified as bringing about health benefits and actively participating in the fight against doping while also promoting social inclusion and gender equality.

The second work plan (2014-2017) draws attention to the link between sport and society, seeing as sport is a healthy form of physical activity that entails volunteering activities, creates employment and serves as a vehicle for education and training.

The new EU Plan for Sport (2017-2020) identifies three priorities: the integrity of sport (fighting doping, good governance, combatting corruption, the protection of minors), the economic side of sport (initiatives to foster innovation in sport and meet the challenges of the digital single market) as well as sport and society. The latter encompasses several aspects: the role of the media, the role of coaches, education in and through sport, social inclusion, sport and health, sport and environment, and sport diplomacy.

Sport is therefore a contemporary medium, performing numerous tasks and conveying multiple messages. In relation to this point, it is worth noting that the influence exerted by new media exponentially amplifies the number of potential users of sporting events and that it is becoming increasingly evident in the public perception of sport that it includes a "mediated" component, with noticeable implications not only on an economic and cultural level but also on a political level, for example with regard to the organisation of sporting events on the national or international scale. Media outlets therefore have a very significant impact on sport and sports phenomena currently represent a considerable segment of the cultural industry and contemporary culture itself (Tirocchi, 2011).

The documents and literature largely agree that sport entails positive values, therefore, but we must not run the risk of settling for a simplistically positive interpretation of the messages it conveys: contemporary sport may also be critiqued for its tendency to invade multiple spheres of human action, spreading a world view centred on competition, extreme rationalization, and the primacy of technique, profit, efficiency and health. In studying values in the sport sphere, it is possible to identify three different categories of values that can be transmitted through sport: pure values, non-values, and mixed values (Isidori, 2009). Pure values guarantee respect for the dignity of the person, contributing to individual development. Non-values represent the negative dimension of pure values, such as violence, narcissism, consumerism, hedonism, sexism, racism, and victory at all costs; these non-values push sport to resemble the production processes typical of economic globalization (Guttmann, 1994). Mixed values, on the other hand, have a neutral character, that is, they can become pure values or non-values depending on the way they are presented and made to evolve by social and educational actors.

- Indeed, sport is an instrument of culture and as such it reflects the basic values of a given context, thus becoming a social product (Isidori, 2009): it is a great resource at the disposal of individuals and the community, since it effectively carries out important educational actions, promoting human development with a view to balanced individual development based on exercising active and participatory citizenship. Sport activity, therefore, may be a key element in post-modern education, helping to increase people's awareness and participation and promote the full realization of active and aware citizenship beginning from early childhood.

### **3. SPORT AS SOCIAL CAPITAL FOR RAISING AND EDUCATING NEW GENERATIONS**

Pierre De Coubertin, a French pedagogist and educator who promoted the introduction of sport in schools, strongly supported a focus on the educational principles of

sport. In 1896, he inaugurated the first modern era Olympics in Athens and was decisive in developing and spreading the universal attitudes of the true sportsperson and the set of values that have come to be known as 'fair play'. The specific transmission of values and models is also highlighted by the European Code of Sports Ethics (1992), which provides a solid framework for combating the internal and external pressures that seem to undermine the traditional foundations of sport today by defining positive roles and social responsibilities. The Fair Play Charter drafted by the International Fair Play Committee (CIFP, 1975) through the various European and Italian delegations recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) underlines the educational potential inherent in spreading correct sporting practice. We can affirm that sports activities do not have the sole purpose of favouring the attainment of specific techniques or psychophysical well-being; in a less formal way, they also serve to disseminate the social capital that allows people to develop and maintain trust-based relations, cooperation and reciprocity (Donati, 2000). As James Coleman (1990) states, in fact, social capital is not an entity in and of itself, but rather the product of various elements that make it possible to understand certain aspects of the social structure and to facilitate the actions of individuals. The studies Roberto Cartocci (2002) has conducted show that social capital is higher in adolescents who have a framework of values to which they refer and who are engaged in association-type activities, including participation in sport groups where they may share a cultural model with other participants.

One of the benefits of practicing sport is, in fact, that of fostering ties that often extend beyond the sporting context per se to become relationships of not only entertainment and fun but also true friendships, so much so as to have educational, constructive and even preventive value in situations of social-relational suffering. The school, family and sports groups in which adolescents often participate in their spare time not only spread and consume cultural capital, they also represent a form of heritage and a social capital resource, that is, a relational asset that can establish a supportive climate, producing positive models and patterns of behaviour and generating forms of self-control. It is also interesting to draw on the considerations presented in the volume *Ragazzi in Europa fra tutela, autonomia e responsabilità*, edited by Colozzi and Giovannini (2003), in which scholars from various European countries analyse how pre-adolescents and adolescents spend their leisure time. The authors find that European boys and girls mostly stay at home (either their own or friends' houses), giving rise to what is known as bedroom culture, i.e. the culture of spending time in one's own room to use technological devices. Practising a sporting activity may thus help the new generations, absorbed by television programs and other activities which are potentially harmful on a personal and interpersonal level, avoid this risk of socio-relational aridity. What then are the advantages of sport practice aimed at bolstering "social capital" as well? In their analysis of extra-school activities including sport, Eccles, Barber, Stone and Hunt (2003) identify the following advantages:

- to internalize social, physical, and intellectual skills that can also be used in school;
- to build social networks of peers and adults who may become reference points;
- to belong to socially recognized and valued groups;
- to engage in a variety of individual and group challenges.

In a social context characterized by fragile social ties and a crisis of belonging, sport may offer a great opportunity for growing and learning thanks to the involvement of coaches-educators whose training also includes relational issues and are well-equipped to focus on

the psychosocial well-being of young people through their developmental stages. It is therefore important to invest in the psycho-socio-pedagogical training of sports educators, given that they are strategic figures whose skills include spreading social capital through sport practice and therefore fostering the trust-based relations that lie at the foundations of young people's psycho-emotional development.

#### **4. VALUES AND SPORT: REASERCH AMONG PIEDMONT STUDENTS**

The location and timeframe of research is the Piedmont Region in the 2008-2009 school year, with 45,571 students aged between 9 and 11 years from the 209 primary and lower secondary schools in Piedmont as our reference population. The field survey, carried out in February 2009, involved a sample of 20 primary and lower secondary schools involving 3,169 pupils. The study made use of several tools. School leaders were given a personal data sheet on the activities and sports facilities in their institutes and the surrounding area. Students were asked to produce a drawing and a short composition regarding a sporting moment: both illustration and written composition are privileged tools that allow children and teenagers to communicate their thoughts, projecting emotions, feelings and worldviews. A total of 3,085 drawings and 2,977 valid compositions, i.e. written in a complete and comprehensible way, were collected and these constituted the subject matter for our analysis. The same students were then asked to fill out a questionnaire called Education and Sport. Finally, an educational initiative was organized involving Olympic champion Stefania Belmondo along with teachers and students, aimed at spreading a socio-educational model of sports practice understood as the transmission of positive values. This encounter was also aimed at modelling strategies for full self-fulfilment through a personal commitment to achieving objectives and, therefore, at containing aggressivity and preventing deviance and bullying.

Here we focus specifically on the main findings in terms of the values and models conveyed by sport as expressed by the pupils involved. The values investigated here are based on the model proposed by Vallerand and collaborators (1997) and Cruz and Boixadòs (1995). However, we have both expanded this model, on one hand, and adapted it, on the other hand, with a view to simplifying the instrument to match the age of respondents. For each value, the answers were grouped into two positive categories (important and very important) and two negative categories (unimportant and not at all important). Taking into consideration the grouping of positive values, the percentages that emerged were highly positive. Specifically, these concern the importance of: not disappointing others (80%), being consistent in training (94%), being with friends (83%), being loyal and behaving in the right way (97%), improving one's results (82%), helping others when in need (96%), winning (40%), accepting defeat (85%), listening to what the coach says (97%), avoiding injury (85%), and avoiding hurting others (95%).

More in-depth analyses, carried out by assessing the influence of nationality, gender and age group, show that the answers were strongly influenced by gender. Indeed, girls regardless of age find some values to be significantly more important than their male peers. These values include a sense of loyalty, obedience and respect for others. By comparing males and females in terms of two values, not disappointing others and being with friends, an interesting result emerged. Both values were reported as significantly more important for the male sex. In sport, girls seem to be less interested in other people's opinions. In addition

to the sphere of values, the questionnaire also allowed us to investigate the regulatory sphere: through the open question ‘write a rule you know’, we were able to identify the rules mainly introduced through the practice of sport. A list of categories was then formulated that includes almost all the prescriptions set out: technical, moral, players’ safety, and relational and strategic rules aimed at encouraging the targeted behaviour for achieving a “sports result”.

The skills acquired through sport therefore represent a wealth of resources that enable today’s young people, and will enable tomorrow’s young people, to deal more energetically with the various situations and difficulties they encounter in life. In fact, the educational dimension of sport is not limited to “helping the individual grow” in a healthy way, it also promotes the internalization of social and intellectual skills that may be used in different contexts, from purely scholastic settings to the contexts in which young people undergo socialisation. Courage, loyalty, perseverance and focus, but also the spirit of collaboration and the ability to identify and pursue goals to be achieved alone or collectively: the tapestry of aspects that comprise the sporting character of individuals in education is varied and rich, but it requires sport and human models to act as guides.

##### 5. CONCLUSION: SPORT AND INTERNALIZING SOCIAL SKILLS

The research presented here highlights that the educational dimension of sport is not limited to “helping the individual grow” in a healthy manner. Indeed, it also promotes the internalization of social and intellectual skills that may be used in different contexts, from purely scholastic settings to contexts associated with the process of socialisation. Traits such as courage, loyalty, perseverance and focus, but also skills such as collaboration and the ability to identify and pursue goals to be achieved alone or collectively: these manifold aspects comprising the sporting character of developing individuals are varied and rich, but they also require sport and human models that may serve as guides.

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