

The sport association as an educating community: a phenomenological-critical framework through the empirical lens of the university internship

L'associazione sportiva come comunità educante: un quadro fenomenologico-critico attraverso la lente empirica del tirocinio universitario

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Abstract

This theoretical paper conceptualises Italian sport associations as non-formal educating communities, addressing the pedagogical silence surrounding them. Drawing on qualitative data from a longitudinal observation of curricular internships in sport sciences, the essay proposes an integrated framework to overcome the reductionist paradigms dominating sport sciences. By synthesising Bertolini's phenomenology, Dewey's experience, Mortari's care, Freire's critical consciousness, and Nussbaum's capabilities, the study outlines the conditions for sport to become a practice of freedom, highlighting internships as vital bridges for professional identity.

Keywords: sport associations, educating community, internship, professional identity, sport pedagogy, phenomenology

Il presente contributo teorico concettualizza le associazioni sportive italiane come comunità educanti non formali, affrontando il silenzio pedagogico che le circonda. A partire dai dati qualitativi emersi da un osservatorio longitudinale sui tirocini curriculari nelle scienze motorie, il saggio propone un quadro integrato per superare i paradigmi riduzionistici che dominano le scienze motorie e sportive. Sintetizzando la fenomenologia di Bertolini, l'esperienza di Dewey, l'etica della cura di Mortari, la coscienza critica di Freire e l'approccio delle capacità di Nussbaum, lo studio delinea le condizioni affinché lo sport diventi una pratica di libertà, evidenziando il tirocinio come ponte vitale per la costruzione dell'identità professionale.

Parole chiave: associazioni sportive, comunità educante, tirocinio, identità professionale, pedagogia dello sport, fenomenologia

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1. Introduction

The Italian sport system presents a profound pedagogical paradox. According to the latest institutional data, the network of organised sport comprises 107,804 amateur sport associations and societies (ASD/SSD, the Italian legal designations for non-profit grassroots sports clubs), engaging 12.3 million registered members and employing over 470,000 sport workers (Istituto per il Credito Sportivo e Culturale & Sport e Salute S.p.A., 2025). This formidable infrastructure constitutes the most extensive non-formal educational network in the country. Yet, despite its scale and the inherently formative nature of motor activities (Cereda, 2019), the associative sport context remains almost entirely invisible to systematic pedagogical reflection, frequently relegated to a mere sociological or economic datum.

Recently, critical institutional shifts have challenged this theoretical vacuum. The 2023 amendment to Article 33 of the Italian Constitution (Repubblica Italiana, 2023) formally recognised the educational, social, and psychophysical well-being value of sport in all its forms. Concurrently, the comprehensive reform of the sport sector (Decreto Legislativo 28 febbraio 2021, n. 36) has redefined the structural and employment dynamics of sport associations, notably introducing the formal recognition of professional sport workers and kinesiologists (Repubblica Italiana, 2021). While these milestones acknowledge the educational potential of sport, they risk remaining empty rhetoric if the pedagogical community does not actively conceptualise the conditions under which an ASD can genuinely operate as an educating community.

To bridge the divide between theoretical discourse and the empirical reality of sport associations, this paper adopts an observational standpoint grounded in a decade of coordinating curricular internships for undergraduate students in Exercise and Sport Sciences (L-22 degree class) within the Italian academic system. Over the past ten years, overseeing placements across a network of more than 200 affiliated ASDs has provided extensive insights into the daily educational dynamics of these contexts. Education in the realm of motor sciences must be understood not as the mere transmission of physical skills, but as an intentional and strategic social action aimed at holistic human development (Cereda, 2023d). However, this intentionality is frequently challenged by the performative and commercial logic pervading modern sport.

Driven by the necessity to overcome reductionist views of the sporting body, this study is guided by three primary research questions: (1) How can the sport association be pedagogically theorised as an educating community? (2) What integrated theoretical framework can guide this conceptualisation, shielding sport from purely instrumental or commercial logics? (3) What role does the curricular internship play as a pedagogical bridge translating university training into reflective associative practice?



To address these inquiries, the argument proceeds from the concrete to the theoretical and back. It first examines the current pedagogical silence surrounding sport associations, contrasting it with the abundance of sociological literature. It then synthesises observations from a decade of internship coordination to identify recurring field patterns. Subsequently, it constructs an integrated pedagogical framework—weaving together the phenomenological epistemology of Bertolini, Dewey's continuity of experience, Mortari's ethics of care, Freire's critical consciousness, and Nussbaum's capabilities approach. Finally, the paper concludes by discussing how the curricular internship can operationalise this framework, transforming the ASD into a genuine space of educational possibility and professional identity formation.

2. The pedagogical silence around sport associations

The centrality of sport associations within the social fabric is indisputable, yet their characterisation as intentional educational communities remains largely undertheorised. While the sociological and economic dimensions of these organisations have been extensively mapped, a specifically pedagogical framework capable of interpreting the Amateur Sport Association (ASD) as a *Lebenswelt*—a life-world of educational significance—is frequently absent. This theoretical void persists despite the growing recognition of sport's societal role, suggesting a disconnect between the functional analysis of sport structures and the lived educational experience of their participants.

2.1 Sociological abundance, pedagogical void

European literature on sport clubs offers a robust sociological and economic portrait. Extensive comparative studies have analysed voluntary sport organisations as producers of social capital, democratic participation, and health benefits (Breuer et al., 2015; Nagel et al., 2020; Seippel, 2006). In Italy, this “sociological abundance” is exemplified by recent institutional reports which meticulously quantify the sector's impact: 32 billion euros in value added, constituting 1.5% of the national GDP, and a substantial employment base (Istituto per il Credito Sportivo e Culturale & Sport e Salute S.p.A., 2025). However, these analyses predominantly focus on outputs (participation rates, economic value, health metrics) rather than processes (how education occurs).

This focus risks reinforcing what Coalter (2013) termed the “myth of automatic benefits”—the assumption that participation in sport inherently leads to positive developmental outcomes without the need for specific pedagogical intentionality. Furthermore, historical analyses of sporting bodies suggest that so-



cietal norms have traditionally framed the athletic body as an object of performance or aesthetic display, rather than a subject of educational becoming (Cereda, 2023c). Consequently, the sport association is frequently reduced to a service provider for physical activity or a technical pipeline for talent identification, overshadowing its potential as an educating community where cultural values and identities are negotiated.

This caution is also supported by recent scientific literature which confirms that organised youth sport may generate psychological, social and health-related benefits, but only under specific relational, developmental and organisational conditions. Systematic evidence indicates positive associations with self-esteem, life satisfaction, belonging, prosocial behaviour and interpersonal skills, particularly in inclusive and well-structured team sport contexts (Wade et al., 2026), while longitudinal meta-analytic evidence supports small-to-medium effects on physical activity, health and well-being, body composition and mental ill-being (Bengtsson et al., 2025). At the same time, the PYD-Sport literature highlights that developmental outcomes cannot be assumed as automatic consequences of participation, since they depend on the quality of the sport climate, adult-youth relationships, peer relationships, parental involvement and person-environment interactions (Holt, 2025). These findings reinforce, rather than weaken, the pedagogical argument advanced here: sport is not automatically educative; it becomes educative when the associative environment intentionally organises experience, relationships and participation.

2.2 Coaching-as-pedagogy: a necessary but insufficient step

Attempts to bridge this gap have emerged primarily within the field of sports coaching. Scholars have long argued that coaching is fundamentally a pedagogical act (Jones, 2006), advocating for holistic approaches that transcend the physical domain (Cassidy et al., 2023; Light & Harvey, 2019). While these contributions are vital, they often remain confined to the dyadic relationship between coach and athlete or the instructional mechanics of the training session. They rarely extend to theorising the association itself as a pedagogical environment.

Moreover, the capacity of practitioners to adopt a pedagogical stance is hindered by the dominant epistemological orientation of their training. As highlighted in recent critical reviews, the academic landscape of Exercise and Sport Sciences in Italy is heavily skewed towards a “biomedical drift” (Cereda, 2025b). Curricula and research priorities disproportionately emphasise physiological mechanisms and performance metrics, often at the expense of sport pedagogy and social sciences (Burgess et al., 2025). This reductionist imprint leaves future professionals—and by extension, the associations they inhabit—ill-equipped to



conceptualise their work in broader educational terms, perpetuating a technocratic view of the profession (Cereda, 2023a).

2.3 The Italian specificity and the legislative turning point

The pedagogical silence is particularly critical in the Italian context, currently undergoing a major structural shift. The sport system, historically anchored in a federal model reliant on volunteerism, is transitioning towards a more regulated framework. The recent reform of the sport sector (Decreto Legislativo 36/2021) has formally introduced the figure of the “sport worker” and the professional kinesiologist, mandating contractual protections and recognizing professional qualifications (Repubblica Italiana, 2021).

While this legislative advancement provides necessary legal recognition, it creates a new tension. As voluntary associations grapple with increased bureaucratisation and labour costs, there is a tangible risk of commercialisation, where the “logic of service” replaces the “logic of association” (Enjolras, 2002; Fondazione Terzjus ETS, 2024). Without a strong pedagogical mandate, the professionalisation of operators might simply lead to more efficient technical instruction rather than enhanced educational quality. Exceptions to this theoretical silence exist, such as Borgogni’s (2020) work on the educational intentionality of public spaces and Maulini’s (2019) pedagogical perspective on coaching. However, a comprehensive framework that integrates these insights into the daily life of the ASD—interpreting it as a non-formal community of practice with its own associative, voluntary and privately governed logics, rather than as a simple extension of the school—remains to be fully constructed. The discrepancy between the educational potential sanctioned by the Constitution and the practical reality of associations calls for a renewed theoretical effort, one that situates the sport association not merely as a venue for physical activity, but as a primary site of human formation (Cereda, 2019).

3. A decade of curricular internships in sport associations: observations from the field

The theoretical gap highlighted above is not merely an academic abstraction; it manifests vividly in the lived experience of students transitioning from university lecture halls to the complex reality of sport associations. This section draws upon observational data derived from the coordination of curricular internships for the Bachelor’s degree in Exercise and Sports Sciences (L-22) at a major Italian university. This vantage point, spanning from 2015 to 2025 and involving over 1,200 student placements, offers a distinct empirical lens through which to examine the pedagogical dynamics of Italian Amateur Sport Associations (ASDs). It is not



presented here as a quantitative study, but as a reflective synthesis of field patterns that ground the subsequent theoretical framework.

For this reason, the empirical lens used in this article should be understood as heuristic and theory-generating rather than experimental or representative. The internship materials are mobilised to identify recurring educational patterns and tensions, not to infer causal effects or to generalise statistically to the whole Italian sport association sector.

3.1 The L-22 internship system and sport associations

The curricular internship in Italian Exercise and Sport Sciences programs is a mandatory component designed to bridge the theory-practice divide (Cereda, 2019). Typically comprising 125 hours of supervised practice, it requires students to navigate diverse professional settings, ranging from schools and clinical rehabilitation centres to fitness facilities and sport associations. Longitudinal data from this specific context indicate that approximately 35–40% of all internships are conducted within ASDs or SSDs (*Società Sportive Dilettantistiche*, amateur sports limited liability companies). This substantial proportion underscores the ASD not just as a peripheral option, but as a central pillar of professional socialisation.

However, recent comprehensive analyses of internship outcomes reveal that the learning experience is highly context-dependent (Cereda, 2025c). While internships in clinical or fitness settings often focus on technical competencies like assessment and exercise prescription, placements in sport associations frequently demand a broader, more relational set of skills that students often feel less prepared for. The internship thus becomes a critical “boundary zone” where the academic focus on biomedical performance collides with the social and educational realities of the field.

3.2 What students encounter: four recurring patterns

Based on a retrospective thematic analysis of qualitative documentary data—specifically intern logbooks, final self-reflection reports, and minutes from academic supervision meetings—four recurring phenomenological patterns emerge that characterise the educational encounter within ASDs. This analytical process, guided by an autoethnographic and reflective practitioner lens (Schön, 1992), allowed for the categorization of unstructured field observations into the following pedagogical themes.

(a) *The Relational Ecology*. Unlike the transactional nature of commercial fitness centres, ASDs are frequently experienced by students as dense relational net-



works. The “logic of association” fosters an environment where interactions are informal, multigenerational, and often driven by shared passion rather than profit (Cereda, 2023b). Students report that technical competence alone is insufficient; success depends on navigating this ecology, building trust with parents, volunteers, and athletes. This observation aligns with findings that effective mentorship in these settings relies heavily on interpersonal connection and “shared investment” rather than mere technical instruction (Cereda, 2023b).

(b) *Formative Disorientation*. Students often enter the internship with a “scientific practitioner” identity, heavily influenced by their biomedical academic training (Cereda, 2025a). They expect to apply protocols for performance optimisation. Instead, they encounter heterogeneous populations—children, the elderly, individuals with disabilities—where performance is secondary to participation, enjoyment, or social inclusion. This mismatch creates a productive “disorientation,” challenging students to re-evaluate the purpose of their discipline beyond the reductionist view of the body-as-machine (Cereda, 2023a).

(c) *Variability of Supervision*. The quality of the learning experience is inextricably linked to the supervisor’s pedagogical competence. Observations confirm that where supervisors adopt a “dual professional” role—acting as both technical experts and educational mentors—students report significantly higher satisfaction and skill acquisition (Cereda, 2023b). However, in many ASDs, supervision is inconsistent, sometimes delegated to volunteers without formal pedagogical training. This variability highlights the urgent need for professionalization frameworks that prioritize educational skills alongside technical ones (Cereda, 2025c).

(d) *Seeds of Professional Identity*. Despite—or perhaps because of—these challenges, the internship in ASDs often serves as a catalyst for professional maturation. Students frequently move from a rigid adherence to theoretical models towards a more flexible, context-sensitive professional identity. They begin to perceive themselves not just as trainers, but as educators capable of fostering “physical literacy” in its broadest sense—psychological, social, and physical (Cereda, 2026).

3.3 The internship as a “disorienting dilemma”

Framed through Mezirow’s (2000) lens, the internship in a sport association functions as a “disorienting dilemma.” The clash between the students’ performative expectations and the complex, often unstructured reality of the ASD forces a critical re-examination of their assumptions about sport. It is within this cognitive and emotional dissonance that the potential for transformative learning lies. However, for this transformation to be educational rather than merely frustrating, it requires a robust pedagogical scaffold. The ASD cannot simply be a place of “doing”; it must become a place of reflective practice, supported by an intentional theoretical framework that validates the educational dimensions of sport work.



4. Toward an integrated pedagogical framework

The patterns observed in the field—relational density, formative disorientation, supervisory variability, and identity negotiation—underscore the inadequacy of purely biomedical or technical models to capture the educational essence of the sport association. To theorise the ASD as a genuine “educating community,” it is necessary to move beyond fragmentation and construct an integrated framework. This section proposes such a synthesis, weaving together five distinct but complementary theoretical threads: the phenomenological intentionality of Bertolini, the continuity of experience of Dewey, the ethics of care of Mortari, the critical pedagogy of Freire, and the capabilities approach of Nussbaum. Together, these perspectives provide the scaffolding for a pedagogy of sport that is embodied, relational, critical, and transformative.

4.1 Educational intentionality and the embodied subject: a phenomenological perspective

At the foundation of any educational endeavour lies the concept of intentionality. Built on the phenomenological pedagogy of Piero Bertolini (1988), education is not a causal process but an intentional one, rooted in the *Lebenswelt* (life-world) of the subject. In the context of the sport association, this means shifting the focus from the “objective body” (*Körper*)—measurable, trainable, and functional—to the “lived body” (*Leib*)—the body as the zero-point of orientation and experience.

The ASD could be reconceptualised as a space where educational intentionality is explicitly declared and practiced (Cereda, 2023d). It is not enough for sport to “happen”; it must be directed towards the expansion of the subject’s existential possibilities. This aligns with recent calls to overcome the “biomedical drift” in Exercise and Sport Sciences (Cereda, 2025b) by reclaiming the pedagogical significance of movement. The concept of physical literacy serves as a crucial operational translation of this phenomenological stance (Whitehead, 2019; Cereda, 2026). Defining physical literacy as a disposition encompassing motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding provides ASDs with a vocabulary through which their educational mission can be articulated beyond mere technical instruction. Within this perspective, the coach assumes the role of educator and facilitates the subject’s meaningful engagement with the world through the embodied self (Caronia, 2018; Sibilio, 2017).



4.2 Experience and continuity: Dewey in the sport association

If intentionality provides the direction, John Dewey's (1938) theory of experience provides the mechanism. Dewey posits that education occurs through the reconstruction of experience, governed by the principles of continuity (every experience takes up something from the past and modifies the quality of future experiences) and interaction (the interplay between internal conditions and the external environment).

Applying this to the ASD helps resolve the tension between the "relational ecology" and the technical demands of sport. An association becomes an educating community when it ensures the quality of the sporting experience. Not all sport is educative; experiences that arrest or distort the growth of further experience are, in Dewey's terms, miseducative (e.g., burnout, early specialisation leading to dropout). The ASD should therefore be designed as an environment that fosters positive interaction, where the "logic of association" supports a continuum of growth. This theoretical lens validates the "relational ecology" observed by interns: the informal, supportive environment of the club is not a distraction from training, but the very condition for Deweyan interaction to occur. It frames the sport experience not as a series of isolated drills, but as a coherent narrative of personal development.

4.3 Care as relational posture: ethics in the coaching relationship

The variability of supervision observed in internships points to the critical role of the educator's posture. Luigina Mortari's (2015) philosophy of care offers a profound ethical grounding for the sport operator. Care, in this context, is not mere assistance or sentimentalism, but a rigorous "practice of creating time and space" for the other to flourish.

Applied to the ASD, this means redefining the coach's role from a producer of results to a practitioner of care. This involves specific gestures: paying attention, listening, and acting with competence and dedication. Unlike the "caring coaching" literature which sometimes risks sliding into paternalism (Purdy et al., 2016), Mortari emphasizes the dimension of self-care and reflexivity. The educator must care for themselves—cultivating their own professional identity and reflective capacity—in order to care for others (Cereda, 2023b). This perspective directly addresses the "variability of supervision" pattern: a supervisor who lacks this posture of care cannot effectively mentor an intern or an athlete. The ASD, therefore, must be a place where the ethics of care is institutionalised, valuing the relational quality of the coach-athlete interaction as highly as technical expertise.



4.4 Freedom and critical consciousness: overcoming the “banking model”

The “formative disorientation” experienced by students when their biomedical models clash with reality opens the door to critical pedagogy. Paulo Freire’s (1970) critique of the “banking model” of education—where knowledge is deposited into passive students—is particularly applicable to traditional sport coaching, where athletes are often treated as passive recipients of technical instruction.

An educating sport association must instead promote *conscientização* (critical consciousness). Sport should be a practice of freedom, not domestication. This involves challenging the structural inequalities and power dynamics often reproduced in sport (class, gender, ability) and encouraging athletes (and interns) to become active subjects of their own learning. This perspective aligns with critical scholarship in physical education (Kirk, 2020) and calls for a “problem-posing” approach to coaching (Cope et al., 2021; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013). By embracing this critical stance, the ASD transforms the “disorienting dilemma” of the internship into a moment of emancipation, empowering future professionals to question reductionist paradigms and advocate for a more inclusive and just sport system.

4.5 Capabilities and flourishing: a normative horizon

Finally, what is the ultimate goal of this educational process? While Freirean critical consciousness acts as the necessary cognitive and social prerequisite for emancipation, Martha Nussbaum’s (2011) Capabilities Approach provides a normative horizon for this liberated action: the goal is human flourishing (*eudaimonia*). Sport is not valuable merely for its utility (health, economic gain) but for its ability to develop central human capabilities—what people are actually able to do and to be.

In the context of the ASD, this means moving beyond performance metrics to assess how sport contributes to capabilities such as Bodily Health and Bodily Integrity, but also Senses, Imagination, and Thought (using the body expressively), Affiliation (social interaction and respect), Play (recreational enjoyment), and Practical Reason (forming a conception of the good) (López Frías, 2014; Darnell & Dao, 2017). This framework connects directly with the “seeds of professional identity” pattern. When interns see sport fostering these capabilities in diverse populations (elderly, disabled, youth), they begin to understand their profession not as “fixing bodies” but as “enabling lives.” The sport association acts as an educating community precisely when it functions as a capability-enhancing environment, removing obstacles to participation and actively cultivating the freedom to function in valuable ways.



5. The sport association as *comunità educante*: toward a synthesis

The integration of the theoretical perspectives outlined above provides a comprehensive blueprint for reimagining the Amateur Sport Association (ASD) not merely as a provider of physical activity, but as a genuine *comunità educante* (educating community). This synthesis addresses the fragmentation often found in Exercise and Sport Sciences by proposing a holistic model where intentionality, experience, care, freedom, and capabilities converge to shape the professional identity of the operator and the developmental trajectory of the athlete.

5.1 Integrating the five categories

The ASD realises its potential as an educating community only when these five theoretical strands operate in concert, forming a cohesive matrix. In this architecture, Bertolini provides the ontological foundation (the embodied subject); Dewey describes the educational process (continuity of experience); Mortari defines the ethical posture of the educator (care); Freire offers the critical methodology (dialogue and liberation); and Nussbaum establishes the teleological aim (capabilities and flourishing). Together, they construct a robust pedagogical model: a space where educational intentionality directs the quality of experience, sustained by a posture of care that fosters critical consciousness, ultimately leading to the expansion of human capabilities. This framework is not normative in a prescriptive or regulatory sense; nor does it transpose school-centred paradigms mechanically into the associative field. Rather, it is phenomenological-critical: it describes the conditions under which educativity may emerge within non-formal, privately governed and community-based sport settings, defending the ASD against the encroachments of commercialism and reductionism. If any element is missing—if care is absent, if experience is disjointed, or if critical reflection is suppressed—the ASD risks reverting to a mere service provider or a site of technical training, weakening the educational value that Article 33 recognises but does not by itself guarantee (Cereda, 2023d).

5.2 The coach/sport operator as pedagogical mediator

Central to this synthesis is the figure of the sport operator. No longer viewed simply as a technician or instructor, the operator is redefined as a pedagogical mediator. According to Jones (2006) and Cassidy et al. (2023), the coach mediates the interaction between the subject and the sporting environment. This role requires a sophisticated professional identity that integrates biomedical knowledge with pedagogical sensitivity (Maulini, 2019, 2025).



The recent legislative reform (D.Lgs. 36/2021), which formally recognizes the kinesiologist, offers a unique opportunity to institutionalise this role (Repubblica Italiana, 2021). However, a gap remains between the legal definition—often focused on contractual status and technical qualifications—and the pedagogical substance required for true educational work. While the law mandates “formazione” (training), it is often interpreted in technical terms. A pedagogical reading of the reform suggests that initial (undergraduate L-22 and postgraduate LM-67/LM-68 degree classes in Exercise and Sport Sciences) and continuous training (via federations and promotion bodies) must be reoriented to cultivate the “posture of care” and “critical consciousness” essential for the educating community, moving beyond the informal learning that currently dominates the field (Walker et al., 2018).

5.3 The curricular internship as pedagogical bridge

The curricular internship emerges as the structural keystone in this architecture. It is the tangible bridge connecting the abstract theoretical framework to the concrete reality of the ASD. As evidenced by the analysis of internship experiences (Cereda, 2025c), the placement acts as a privileged space for “legitimate peripheral participation” where students can safely navigate the “formative disorientation” of real-world practice.

For the internship to fulfil this function, it cannot be reduced to a bureaucratic requirement of “mere accumulation of hours”. It must be designed as a guided reflective experience (Schön, 1992), where the university tutor and the association supervisor collaborate to help the student decode the educational dynamics at play. The internship validates the ASD as a learning environment, transforming the student from a passive observer into an active participant in the educating community. It is here that the abstract concepts of capabilities and intentionality become visible, embodied practices.

5.4 Critical tensions

This synthesis must, however, confront the critical tensions inherent in the current Italian context. The post-reform landscape is characterised by increased bureaucratisation and economic pressure, which may threaten the volunteer spirit that sustains the “logic of association” (Fondazione Terzjus ETS, 2024). There is a risk that professionalisation could lead to a technocratic shift, eroding the relational time required for care and education. Furthermore, the absence of explicit pedagogical requirements for all sport operators (beyond kinesiologists) leaves a significant portion of the workforce—often volunteers—without the tools to act as



educators. Finally, the tension between the rhetoric of inclusion and the persistence of exclusionary practices in sport (based on talent, cost, or ability) remains a challenge that only a critical, Freirean approach can address. If Article 33 of the Constitution is to be more than a symbolic gesture, these tensions should be navigated with a clear pedagogical compass.

A further tension concerns the juridical and organisational nature of ASD/SSD. These organisations belong to a largely private and plural sector: beyond legal obligations concerning safety, labour, safeguarding and fiscal compliance, the State cannot simply impose a uniform pedagogical mission on their internal associative life. Consequently, the pedagogical framework proposed here should be read as an interpretative and professional device, not as a programme of institutional control. Its purpose is to make explicit the educational possibilities and responsibilities that already emerge within associative practice, while respecting the autonomy, diversity and historical specificity of sport associations.

5.5 Limitations and future research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the article is primarily a theoretical and reflective contribution: it does not present an experimental design, a systematic review or a representative survey of Italian ASD/SSD. Second, the empirical material derives from a situated observatory linked to curricular internships in one university context and to a specific network of affiliated sport organisations. Although the longitudinal span and the number of placements provide a rich field perspective, the findings remain context-sensitive and cannot be generalised statistically.

Third, the documentary sources informing the analysis—intern logbooks, final reports and supervision meetings—were originally produced for educational and reflective purposes, not through a prospective research protocol designed *ex ante*. Fourth, the voices of athletes, families, managers, volunteers and coaches are not systematically analysed here; their inclusion would be essential to validate the proposed framework from multiple stakeholder perspectives. Finally, the article draws on pedagogical paradigms originally elaborated in broader educational contexts and transposes them critically to non-formal sport settings. This transposition is heuristic rather than assimilative: it does not reduce ASD/SSD to schools, but uses pedagogical categories to interrogate the specific educational dynamics of associative sport.

Future research should therefore combine qualitative case studies, participatory action research and mixed-methods designs capable of examining how educational intentionality, care, critical reflection and capability development are actually enacted in different types of sport associations. Comparative studies across disciplines, territories and organisational models would also help clarify when and



under what conditions the sport association can function as an educating community rather than as a merely technical, commercial or administrative provider of sport services.

6. Conclusions

This paper has argued for the necessity of theorising the sport association as an intentional educating community to overcome the pedagogical silence that has historically surrounded it. By constructing an integrated framework drawing on Bertolini, Dewey, Mortari, Freire, and Nussbaum, it has outlined the theoretical conditions for sport to function as a practice of freedom and human flourishing.

The analysis, grounded in a decade of internship coordination and supported by recent empirical data (Cereda, 2025a; 2025c), suggests that the curricular internship is not merely an administrative step, but a vital pedagogical bridge. It is the locus where the “biomedical drift” of academia can be balanced by the “relational ecology” of the association, and where the abstract principles of education become embodied professional identity.

In light of the limitations discussed above, this framework should be considered a transferable but non-generalizable model for interpreting non-formal sport education. Future research should focus on empirical qualitative studies of the intern-supervisor relationship and participatory action research within ASDs to further validate and refine these concepts. Ultimately, the sport association emerges not as a static provider of services, but as a dynamic space of educational possibility—one that requires intentionality, care, and critical thought to fully realise its promise.

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