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Il programma finlandese *School on the Move*: politiche e strategie di attuazione per l'Italia

The Finnish *School on the Move* programme: policy-making and implementation strategies for Italy

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to analyse from scientific and policy viewpoints the Finnish Schools on the Move program inferring strategies and actions applicable to the Italian case.

The article presents, through a fact sheet, the actual Finnish situation about physical activity policies and research. The analysis of the updated scientific literature about the results is complemented by the description of the program's background and current design.

From scientific point of view the article, beyond the literature review, is based on a documentary analysis on interviews (n=2) with key informants and field observations (n=3) of schools participating in the program.

Presuming that there are not comprehensive models that can be transferred from a country to another, the article emphasizes, for the Italian case, the actions feasible at short term, changing rules at school level, those achievable at medium term, changing organization at community level, and those requiring deeper cultural and legislative modifications.

At policy making level, it is plausible that some programs and actions of the Finnish program would be costless in Italy: some depend on a better destination of already available resources, several are possible through inter-sectors policies; all the strategies and actions, however, require to be assessed and monitored through researches entrusted to a university network in collaboration with sport and public health institutions and organizations.

Obiettivo dell'articolo è di analizzare, dal punto di vista scientifico e delle politiche, il programma finlandese *Schools on the Move* deducendone strategie e azioni applicabili al caso italiano.

L'articolo presenta, in sintesi, la situazione finlandese attuale riguardo le politiche e la ricerca sull'attività motoria. La descrizione del programma e dei presupposti è accompagnata dall'analisi della letteratura scientifica relativa ai risultati. Oltre alla letteratura, sul piano scientifico l'articolo si basa sull'analisi documentaria, su interviste (n=2) a testimoni privilegiati e su osservazioni dirette (n=3) di scuole incluse nel programma.

Assumendo che non esistano modelli complessivi che possano essere traslati tra Paesi, l'articolo evidenzia, per il caso italiano, le azioni attuabili a breve termine, cambiando i regolamenti scolastici, quelle ottenibili a medio termine, modificando l'organizzazione a livello scuola-territorio, e quelle che necessitano di profonde modifiche culturali e legislative.

A livello della costruzione a attuazione delle politiche, è verosimile che alcune azioni del programma finlandese non inciderebbero sulla spesa: alcune dipendono da una più adeguata destinazione delle risorse disponibili, diverse sarebbero possibili attraverso politiche inter-settoriali; tutte le strategie, tuttavia, richiedono una valutazione e un monitoraggio da assegnare alle università in rete con le istituzioni della salute pubblica e le organizzazioni sportive.

KEYWORDS

School on the Move program, physical activity, policy-making, implementation.
Programma *School on the Move*, attività motoria, politiche, attuazione.

Introduction: a fact-sheet about Finland

Some synthetic information about the themes discussed in this article are here provided to explain the reasons, the development, the findings and the conclusions of this article.

Since the nineties, Finland has been very active in physical activity (PA) enhancing strategies; several programs were released at national, provincial, and municipal levels.

The university and research system about sport and physical activity is very rational and simple: only the University of Jyväskylä runs doctoral studies and releases University degrees for Physical Education (PE) teachers while several Sports' centres releases specific bachelor's and master's degrees as well as vocational training in the field.

The political organogram contemplates elections only for the National and Municipal levels while the Regional is composed by representatives of the Municipalities. The administrative system is based on six Regional State Administrative Agencies (*Aluehallintovirasto*) and fifteen Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (*ELY-keskus*) responsible for the regional implementation and development tasks of the central government.

The 311 Municipalities own and maintain the schools providing also salaries for teaching and administrative staff. The compulsory comprehensive schools in Finland host pupils aged 7 to 16 (1st to 6th grade primary school, 7th to 9th grade middle school).

The sport system, following several changes in the last years, is divided in public and associations sectors.

In the public sector the Ministry of Education has the leading role of the sport organization in Finland. It coordinates the whole field of sport in the country and is responsible for the state funds in the national budget. At regional level sport affairs are coordinated by the six Regional State Administrative Agencies whose sport units take mainly care of delivering the state funds to the municipalities for programs and facilities. At local level the role of the municipalities has proved to be crucial as organizer and creator of opportunities for sports and physical activity services. The administrative levels and sectors put in practice a very intensive cooperation (K. Kuusela, personal communication, February 16, 2016).

In the associations sector, since 2017, as result of the merging of the Finnish Sports Confederation "Valo" and the Olympic Committee, the Finnish Olympic Committee represents the whole field of organized sports from grassroots to elite.

1. The Finnish Schools on the Move program

1.1 Background

The programs aimed to enhance PA initially began in 1994 in the South-West Province having Turku as leading city. Those actions represent pioneering experiences from a scientific and political point of views integrating the levels and sectors of the public administration and involving NGOs and sport clubs. In 1995 was launched the national Fit for Life programme, which is still going on focussing on the enhancement of PA and health with all the ages and conditions.

In 2008 the National PA recommendations for children and adolescents were released setting at least one to two hours of PA, avoiding more than two hours

sitting at a time, limiting the screen time to two hours per day (Ministry of Education, Young Finland Association, 2008).

The new Sport Act, with a specific focus on supporting children's growth and development has been enacted in 2015.

The time allocation for PE is two hours (45'/hour) per week. Primary schools can add a third hour; in the middle and high schools, students can add more PE units. Throughout middle school boys and girls do PE separately (Yli-Piipari, 2014). PE teachers have a PE degree in middle and high school while class teachers deliver PE at primary school.

1.2 The project

The Finnish Schools on the Move programme (FSM – *Liikkuva Koulu*) was established in 2010 as a national action programme aiming to implement the 2008 National recommendations and to generate a physically active culture in Finnish comprehensive schools. FSM is a national project part of the Government program aiming to establish a physically active culture in Finnish comprehensive schools, it is funded by the Sport Unit of the Ministry of Education and Culture with lottery funding, organized with the National Board of Education, regional state administrative agencies, municipalities, schools and various other organisations. The aim of the program is to make school days more active; a significant role is attributed to the autonomy of the schools to design their own plans based on students' participation in formulating ideas and proposals. In 2017 Joy in Motion, a new physical activity and well-being programme for early childhood education joined the FSM programme. The objective of Joy in Motion is that every child should have the opportunity to take part in and enjoy PA and play every day (K. Kuusela, p.c., 2016).

The project began with a pilot phase in 2010 with 45 schools; in 2016 1833 were enrolled with a coverage, at national level, of the 75%, the 83% of the students (n=445.000) and the 84% (n=263) of the municipalities (Aaira, Kämpi, 2017).

Apart from funding, the support and resources received by the municipalities and schools are: national research and evaluation; different materials for the projects and tools for the planning; training courses, seminars at national and regional level; possibility to get mentor activities for free; co-operation networks; active meetings for teachers and parents at school; the access to the website <https://liikkuvakoulu.fi> with free guidance, evaluation form, feedback, information.

Examples of activities carried out in the FSM are: challenge students to come up with fun activities for school breaks; establishing recess activators: students organizing activities for their peers; adding a long activity-based school break in the school schedule; utilizing activity-based methods during classes; building or transforming facilities and school yards to encourage physical activity; putting standing workstations and gym balls instead of chairs; encouraging active school commuting.

The project is scientifically monitored by LIKES Research Centre for Physical Activity and Health.

1.3 Results and achievements

A quasi-experimental study aimed to investigate the levels of Moderate to Vigorous Physical Activity (MVPA) and sedentary time (ST) in 1-9 grade students of schools involved in the FSM during the pilot-phase (2010-2012), showed that

school day MVPA increased and school day ST decreased in the primary schools involved compared with the reference schools while no significant results were observed in lower secondary schools. However, these changes did not positively affect whole day MVPA and ST (Haapala et al., 2017a). These results led to adjustments and changes in the program in the following years.

According to the Interim Report 2015-2016, the 49% of the class teachers use in “all or most classes” activity-based methods during lessons, and 59% were using active breaks; in the 65% of the schools, school yards and surroundings are utilised in lessons other than PE. The 18% of the schools agree on practices to break-up long sitting times.

Regarding school yards and infrastructures, only the 15% of the headmasters declares not to have modified school facilities to make them more active; the 46% of the schools improved attractiveness of the yards and the 63% has a playing field and other areas for PA; the 87% of the students spend their breaks outdoor and in the 29% of the schools they can use the gym.

The active mobility to and from the school is encouraged in the 57% of the schools and the 63% has bicycle racks and helmet storage.

The 88% of the primary schools’ pupils takes part in the PA programme, the 22% in secondary schools, the 54% overall. The 37% of the schools cooperate with local clubs to organize sport activities.

About students’ participation in planning and delivery of activities, in the 45% of the schools trained students act as recess activators for their peers, in the 52% of the schools the uses and improvements of school yards have been discussed with students; in around 40% of the schools, students participate in planning the activities. The 48% of the schools implement a long recess during school day and the 51% of the schools had a sufficient provision of goods and equipment to be used during recesses.

Concerning staff agreement and wellbeing, the 92% of school staff think that the program contributes to enjoyment at school, 83% that contributes to a more peaceful learning environment, the 35% that promotes teachers’ wellbeing, the 31% that increases workload (Aaira, Kämpi, 2017).

With the aim to write the 2016 Report Card, a panel composed by 20 experts from several organizations¹ was in charge to assess the grades for nine indicators related to PA on Finnish children and youth. The working group assigned letter grades according to the following grading scheme (based on the proportion of children or institutes achieving the selected benchmark for each indicator): A = 81% to 100%, B = 61% to 80%, C = 41% to 60%, D = 21% to 40%, and F = 0% to 20%. The process followed the Active Healthy Kids Canada PA Report Card protocol (Colley, Brownrigg, Tremblay, 2012). The grade assigned to each single indicator was: 1) Overall Physical Activity Levels = D; 2) Organized Sport Participation =C; 3) Active Play = C; 4) Active Transportation =B; 5) Sedentary Behaviours =D; 6) Family and Peers =C; 7) School =B; 8) Community and the Built Environment =B; 9) Government =B. The assessment was based on data measured since 2010 and published in both national research reports and international

1 LIKES Research Centre for Physical Activity and Health, University of Jyväskylä, UKK Institute for Health Promotion Research, KIHU—the Research Institute for Olympic Sports, National Institute for Health and Welfare.

peer review journals. Results also include unpublished information from the most recent studies conducted in 2014 to 2016 led by the components of the working group. Since the first Finnish Report Card was published in 2014, the data have been updated with the results of a range of national (LIITU) and local surveys (Tammelin et al., 2016).

2. The research

The author's qualitative research had been carried out through semi-structured interviews and observations using grids (Borgogni, 2012) and field notes (Emerson, Fretz, Shaw, 2011)

2.1 The interviews

The semi-structured interviews were administered to Dr. Tuija Tammelin, LIKES Research Director jointly with Dr. Eino Havas, LIKES Director, on the 21st of October 2015, and MSc. Keijo Kuusela, Senior Officer, Sports Affair, South-Western Finland Regional State Administrative Agency, on the 16th of February 2016. Background information were also provided by Prof. Kimmo Suomi, Professor of Sport Planning at the University of Jyväskylä, and Dr. Anna-Katriina-Salmikangas, Senior Researcher at the same University,

The interview with Dr. Tammelin and Dr. Havas focussed on four main topics: their point of view on the organization of the project, the aims, the methods, the researches. For what regards the scientific part, they provided articles and reports.

Dr. Havas role in the project is administrative and political – having contacts with the Ministry – but he is also part of the advisory board. Dr. Tammelin role is, since the pilot phase in 2010, head of research staff composed by 15 researchers and other specialists.

Concerning the organization of the project, Havas highlighted the role of the National Board of Education, which ensures that all the operations are done according to the general norms and rules of the schools. A very important aspect is that FSM has a very strong political support, not only because it is part of the priorities of the actual government program but, above all, because this is the third government that is backing the FSM with increased funding. Beforehand, for long time sport organization have been cooperating with schools to deliver sport but, often, sport and educational cultures had been in conflict and, moreover, there were no systematic researches on interventions.

As Tammelin maintained, the aims of the program are about a cultural change, «we do not have programs to offer schools» but they organize the program according to the activities and methods LIKES identified after the pilot phase; this is the reason why the participatory, bottom-up processes involving school staff and students are so important.

In fact, about the methods, one of the key role is given to activity agents (or activators) who are in charge to propose active games during recesses. The participatory planning is very important for the success of the program: there is one teacher coordinator at school level and one employee of the municipality in charge of the programme. They customize the program to their context involving staff and students avoiding an overload of work and refusals by the more conservative teachers.

But the program's aims look also at the time and spaces out of school areas for example promoting active school commuting. Walking and cycling are already common ways to get to school in Finland; there are seasonal variations but around the 90% of the students commute independently by adults if they live within three km. from school; over three km. there is a decrease considering also that over five km. the school bus is free. This is the reason because FSM promotes active mobility without proposing any structured activity.

The interviews' last point was about the general approach with a specification on the role of PE teachers who are involved in the program as the other teachers, «but this is not a PE program», the emphasis is, in fact, on «the significance of physical activity for different functions, personal results, schools and social aspects and general welfare»; the health is not the main priority for schools but a positive natural consequence of active lifestyles; class teachers are motivated not as care-givers but on «how to make physical activity supporting teaching and learning».

The interview with Mr. Kuusela focused on four main themes: the history of the programs concerning the improvement of PA in Finland; data about PA levels; the Finnish school on the move project; and the infrastructures for PA at school.

To simplify the treatise, the part concerning the history of the programs has been synthesized in the Introduction and the part concerning FSM in the paragraph 1.2. Kuusela stressed the concern in Finland about the decrease of PA levels in kids, the increasing screen time, the growth of the costs to practice sports (e.g. Ice Hockey) for the families, the drop out from sport regarding youth, and the decrease of youth physical performances. Finland is the best country among those investigated in HBSC survey (WHO-Europe, 2016) for level of MVPA among 11y/o kids (34% of the girls and 47% of the boys do at least 1hour per day – Italy 8%/17%) dropping sharply in the rank among 15 y/o adolescents (15%/22% – Italy 5%-11%). At the same time the performances in the Cooper test dropped from the seventies according to Finnish Defence Forces repository (Santtila et al., 2006). The main reasons why Finnish adolescents aged 13-15 do not want to practice sport are the motivation for sport or PE at school, other hobbies, no guidance or sports facilities in the neighbourhood, the facts that physical activity is too sporty; the main reasons for doing PA are the fun, the health, the shape, the fact that it is muscle strengthening, refreshing, and allow to meet friends. According to Mr. Kuusela, the problems for organizing fruitful lessons at school lie on the students' restlessness, in the lack of peaceful working atmosphere, in the lack of learning motivation of students, and in the difficulty of the relations between the institution and parents. The schools are becoming less equitable because if the amount and quality of PE classes and the PA programs decreases, those who have the opportunity to practice outside school are favoured. The interviewed mentioned also the scientific literature to support his thoughts about possible solutions: more physical activity during the normal schooldays makes the learning environment more pleasant and peaceful; social and physical factors promote and improve the learning of cognitive skills and also the success at school; the atmosphere has a great influence on peaceful learning environment, on teasing and annoying and also on pleasant atmosphere at school; physical activity is linked to students' well-being in many ways, e.g. physical activity reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression, and develops motor skills and physical functionality (Kuorme, Carlsson, 2010; Haapala et al., 2017b; Tammelin, Syväoja, Bugge, Froberg, 2017).

Coming to the last point, Mr. Kuusela underlined as one of the “secret” of the success of the FSM and of the high levels of PA in Finland lie on the quantity and

quality of the infrastructures. The strategic decision to plan and build school yards as neighbourhood sport facilities (*lähiliikuntapaikat*) is taken considering the needs not only of the school but also of the area: this is a very important aspect considering that the preponderance of school yards in Finland is not fenced and open to everyone's use. The planning is carried out through a cross-sectorial collaboration in the municipalities and through a participatory process involving users and stakeholders; the infrastructures are co-funded by the state through the Regional Agencies and by the municipality.

2.2 The observations

I have been carrying out numerous semi-structured and not-structured observations around Finland. The more pertinent to the scope of this article were carried out at Valkeavuoren Comprehensive School in Kaarina on the 21st of August 2013, and at Kaisaniemi Comprehensive School in Helsinki on the 8th and 10th and of April 2015. I report here a synthetic description of the observations. I used field notes (Emerson, Fretz, Shaw, 2011) and pictures as reporting methods.

Kaarina is a municipality near Turku with about 32.000 inhabitants. I had the opportunity to spend the whole day at school invited by the PE teacher Tuija Kusela having the possibility to meet the dean and teachers, receiving documents and observing many aspects of the educational organization. My specific observation was focused on active behaviours beyond PE classes.

Almost at the beginning of the school year, the weather was sunny with a temperature of 12° at 8 am and 22° at midday. PE classes were delivered outdoor.

The large majority of pupils reached the school by themselves walking or cycling (it is not allowed to cycle unaccompanied in the first grade). Pupils commute actively, even with different percentage, throughout the year. Many pupils arrived at school beforehand classes, asked for a ball to an adult supervising the ground and started playing football for around 10 minutes. During the day, at different times for primary and middle school, every 45 minutes pupils came out the building to play in the large and not fenced schoolyard supervised by administrative staff; for each classes a couple of "activity leaders" wearing a sport bib were engaged in proposing active games. Pupils were specifically trained to especially involve more inactive mates. This happened five times along the day. Pupils go out for break with any weather condition; usually not when the temperature is over minus 20°.

Helsinki is the capital city of Finland with a population of 642.000.

The weather on the 8th of April was clear with a temperature of 7° at 8am and 8° midday; on the 10th was partly cloudy with a temperature of 2° at 8 am and 11° at midday.

I observed for the entire days the two school grounds of Kaisaniemi Comprehensive school: the first fenced court is in the front and is used as main entrance by the side of the city centre, it is without furniture; the second, in the rear of the building, is a declivity shared with Kaisaniemi public park with some playing furniture. The observations were notable. In the rear ground, the large majority of the younger children was playing both using and not using the furniture in proper or unusual ways. What was astonishing were the occurrences and micro-occurrences happening in the front court: children got out the main door and, without any regulation, order, or suggestion given by adults, went to a depot taking out hoops, stilts, and balls playing with them, catch-and-hide or other games. Almost none of them was standing or not being active emphasizing the

role of a cultural and, more precisely, educational disposition towards being active (Eichberg, 2010).

Reflecting on the data from an Italian perspective, the Finnish situation concerning PA is almost astonishing for Italian standards. Many aspects, in fact, of the Finnish lifestyles catch the attention at an overall glance: the diffusion and quality of the sport facilities, the integration between neighbourhood sport facilities and school playgrounds, the active commuting, the active breaks and recesses at school, the number of children and youth physically active in the public space, and, eventually, the overall attention given to PA and sport. Just to mention that the kids I observed had the opportunity, considering, commuting, pre-school play, recesses and breaks, to be active for at least one hour per day only throughout school time and without considering PE lessons.

3. Implementation strategies and actions for Italy

This paragraph presents the strategies and actions that can be undertaken in Italy ranked according to author's evaluation of feasibility hypothesizing a range of time in which they could be accomplished: short term (one to two years), for instance changing rules at school level; medium term (three to five years), changing organizational aspects at community level; at long term, including changes and provisions needing deeper cultural and legislative modifications. All the programs and actions envisage a participatory approach and a period of training for those engaged: pupils, adults operating inside and outside the school, parents and relatives. The following actions focus particularly, but not exclusively, on primary and lower secondary schools.

3.1 Short term

This section deals with programs and activities connected with the organization of the school timetable, the school rules, and of the roles of those taking part.

The first two actions do not involve any change in school timetable.

Probably the simplest action is to propose active break during the classes as already arranged in some schools in Italy and as provided by some of the teachers who attended the postgraduate course on "Organization and management of integrated territorial actions for the promotion of health and active lifestyle" organized in Cassino in the last years.

A second action is to make active the usual recesses – I would say "anew" because this had been routine in the past – inviting pupils to exit classrooms and, preferably, in the school yard.

A third action is to lightly modify the school timetable to accommodate, at least, a second recess and to introduce activities pre and post school time or, where already existing, to make them more active.

A fourth action concerns the establishment of activity leaders and is twofold. The first, already experimented in Finland, involves the training of pupils' activity leaders having the task to propose active games to classmates during breaks and recesses and to support teachers. The second, ground-breaking, is to institute the position of activity manager among teachers and administrative staff: the task should be to overall plan a more active school life giving specific advices and customized solutions. This position could not imply any expense if named as a

part of a school “project manager” tasks (a position already existing in Italy) and/or involving the workforce needing the completion of their working hours.

The economic impact of the above-mentioned measures would be considerably low a part the investment to make school yard safe, attractive and PA enhancing; this crucial aspect can easily be within the budget of maintenance and requalification and compulsory in new schools’ building plans.

The major antagonists of these actions are cultural, above all concerning the mentalities of the job’s duties and responsibilities, and legislative, due the fear of accidents involving pupils. To deal with these aspects, a normative frame should be provided at national level helping the change of the rules at school level. Moreover, a participatory planning and training should be put in practice to change the schools’ syllabus and academic plan: a part school workers and pupils, the agreement of parents, trade unions and local stakeholders seem indispensable.

3.2 Medium term

This section presents programmes and actions needing specific provisions or laws triggering, if applied and managed through participatory planning, positive processes of implementation and monitoring.

A national strategy for the promotion of PA at school. This Strategy should be part of a national strategy promoting PA for all citizens, according to national recommendations, and focus on active lifestyles guaranteeing the *right* of each student to have at least two hours PE classes per week; these classes should be delivered by school teachers (trained class-teachers or PE teachers). Additional PE classes, PA or sport could be delivered also by trained external instructors on the frame of the schools’ educational plans.

The strategy has to be accompanied by national surveys whose management should be entrusted to a university network in collaboration with sport and health institutions and organizations.

The national strategy for the promotion of physical activity should include a plan for improving walking and cycling and, more specifically, a plan about school active and sustainable mobility; the recent provisions (Act on National Plan for Cycle Mobility² and Provisions for the implementation of sustainable school mobility³) should be part of the general strategy.

On this frame, community integrated actions should be implemented above all in the areas of the country where the third sector is weaker and where the social fabric is less sensitive.

A national sport act should be released, taking as examples some Regional laws, clearly defining the role of the Government, Regions, Olympic Committee, and Sport Organizations as well regulating the roles and mansions of the professionals involved.

2 Law n.2, 11th of January 2018 on cycle mobility

3 Law n.221, 28th of December 2015 on environmental sustainability

3.3 Long term

The only field requiring longer times is that of infrastructural changes regarding school buildings, sport facilities and infrastructures for active mobility. As discussed throughout the IMPALA.net EU funded project (<http://www.impala-net.org>) with the Italian network of stakeholders and with European colleagues, together with national action plans, an updated threefold classification of infrastructures for PA could be useful: sport facilities in strict sense, infrastructures for PA, and public spaces in which PA can be practiced including sidewalks and cycle paths.

Conclusions

According to social sciences idiographic approach (Bernard, 2012), there are no models to apply from a context to another. This is particularly appropriate when speaking about countries' comparisons.

The complexity, we would say the intricacy, of the Italian political, administrative, and university levels and sectors, is often a barrier to develop appropriate policies. Nonetheless, following a good-practice or, even better, a future-practices approach, it is advantageous to learn from successful experiences.

However, at policy making level, the article emphasizes that some programs and actions could be costless in Italy; some depends on a better distribution and destination of already available resources, several are possible through inter-sectors policies – already underway in some Italian Regions – all the programs and actions, however, need to be assessed and monitored through reliable, consistent, and interdisciplinary researches.

If the education, health, and wellbeing of our children through PA are overarching values, a State-led nationwide vision, strategy, program and actions are required.

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