



Embodied-Centred Education and LifeComp Development at School

Didattica Embodied Centred e sviluppo delle LifeComp nella Scuola

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ABSTRACT

The *Life Comp Framework 2020*, built upon *Life Skills Education for School* and the *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*, presents a novel conceptual framework encompassing personal, social, and learning (learning to learn) competences and meta-competences. This framework serves as a valuable tool in fostering resilience and developing coping strategies to navigate the challenges and changes inherent in our ever-evolving world. In a society characterized by rapid transformations across all domains, schools also undergo continual metamorphosis and must innovate and refocus their educational efforts toward «educating tomorrow's citizen to uncertainty.» The school environment plays a pivotal role in shaping beliefs, opinions, knowledge, attitudes, and habits that profoundly influence individuals' personal growth, societal contributions, and overall development. Thus, schools offer an ideal microcosm for cultivating LifeComps. Leveraging the insights of the Embodied Cognition Theory, Embodied-Centred education aims to design educational pathways that provide meaningful experiences, fostering the acquisition of essential soft skills. These skills encompass cognitive, metacognitive, relational, communicative, emotional, and social dimensions, empowering individuals to confront difficulties and embrace the future. This paper highlights how innovative Embodied-Centred methodologies, presented in experiential, playful, and engaging formats, nurture soft skills and personal strategies, enabling individuals to engage in learning-to-be, learning-to-live-together, and learning-to-live. By stimulating resilience and fostering coping mechanisms, these methodologies contribute to enhancing individuals' well-being and that of others.

Il *Life Comp Framework 2020*, a partire dalle *Life Skills Education for School* e dalle competenze chiave per l'apprendimento permanente, offre un nuovo quadro concettuale sulle competenze e metacompetenze personali, sociali e di apprendimento (imparare ad imparare) utili ad aiutare le persone a diventare più resilienti e sviluppare strategie di coping per gestire le sfide e i cambiamenti (nella loro vita personale, professionale e sociale) in un mondo in continua evoluzione. In una società dove i cambiamenti si susseguono ad un ritmo vertiginoso a tutti i livelli anche la scuola è sottoposta ad una continua trasformazione, e necessita innovare e ri-orientare l'azione educativa verso un «educare all'incertezza» il cittadino del domani. La scuola è il luogo in cui si maturano convinzioni, opinioni, conoscenze, atteggiamenti e abitudini che determineranno in gran parte l'evoluzione dell'individuo maturo, il suo ruolo e il suo contributo al vivere sociale e pertanto rappresenta un microcosmo ideale per lo sviluppo delle LifeComp. Grazie alla recente *Teoria dell'Embodied Cognition*, obiettivo di una didattica *Embodied Centred* è consentire lo sviluppo di percorsi formativi che costituiscano una esperienza educativa significativa che favorisca lo sviluppo di specifiche competenze trasversali fonte di apprendimento cognitivo e metacognitivo, relazionale, comunicativo, emotivo e sociali utili ad affrontare le difficoltà e transitare verso il futuro. Il contributo evidenzia come metodologie innovative *Embodied Centred* proposte in forma esperienziale, ludica e coinvolgente, vadano a sviluppare competenze trasversali e strategie personali che mirino ad orientare le persone al *learning to be*, *learning to live together* e al *learning to live* andando a stimolare fattori di resilienza e di coping facilitando la promozione del proprio ed altrui benessere.

KEYWORDS

LifeComp, Life Skills, Embodied-Centred Didactics, Education
LifeComp, Life Skills, Didattica Embodied Centred, Educazione

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1. Introduction

Considering the fragility of our living environments (including the educational, social, cultural, technological, and healthcare ones), it is crucial to rethink the concept of education and the role that school should play in shaping tomorrow's adults. In an increasingly globalized society, challenged by a long pandemic time, struggling with a post-pandemic and a tricky international political order, where socio-economic changes are taking place at such a dizzying pace, a crucial role is played by school. In fact, it must train individuals who should also master a whole range of soft skills – not just technical and academic knowledge. These competences cover the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for personal development, social inclusion and active citizenship, as well as employability and sustainable human and digital transitions. Strengthening the system of developing life, coping and resilience skills means making the individual self-aware, promoter of his or her own mental and physical well-being and able to manage them in order to go through and face different circumstances successfully, prepared to move in the world in a functional and more effective way. At European level, social and personal skills are gaining more and more relevance in education and are becoming more and more important for school education, with the aim of fostering the training of individuals capable of managing themselves and acting efficiently in the contemporary world, in order to also reduce the opportunity gap between individuals which exacerbates poverty and increases social injustice. In 2020, the European Union, starting from the definition of key and lifelong learning competences given in the *European Council Recommendation* (2018), and after a thorough literature review and several consultations with experts and stakeholders, published the *LifeComp Framework* (Sala et al., 2020), describing key competences like «personal, social and learning to learn as a set of competences applicable to all spheres of life and which can be acquired through formal, informal and non-formal education (Sala et al., 2020). Specifically, the *LifeComp Framework* defines them as those competences «that can help people become more resilient and build a meaningful life in the midst of the ever-changing world» (Sala et al., 2020). In other words, they can facilitate citizens to access and thrive in the 21st century.

The school environment provides a supportive context for students to develop knowledge, skills and habits necessary to live healthy and active lives later in life. Social change and culture are constantly and rapidly changing, and as a consequence, schools must also adapt «to a radical transformation in which life skills necessarily find recognition in the teaching-learning process together with traditional school skills, as they are essential to the education of young people and the prevention of pathological situations, so as to actually help students achieve their educational success to offer appropriate and cross-curricular tools» (Boda, 2008). Educating on uncertainty is the real innovation in schools. It is necessary to bridge the divide between schools and the real world by directing and regulating the acquisition of skills and meta-

skills in order to respond to the complexity of society by reorienting educational action, by means of direct experiences aimed at training tomorrow's citizen. School should no longer be understood merely as a place of knowledge transmission, but a place for experimenting and exercising «real experiences» (Dewey, 1934) as reflective and empowering – *embodied* – «work on oneself,» which also intends to offer tools for self-assessing the process in a self-effective learning environment, inasmuch as it is acted - enacted (Varela, Thompson, 1991) and produces *agency* (Bandura, 2000). The theoretical framework of Embodied Cognition and recent scientific research studies on the Embodied approach, in addition to offering new insights into the educational purpose of teaching-learning processes in the school context, also covers issues that greatly condition the ordinary education actions of the teaching staff, by emphasizing and promoting new integrated skills for the improvement of school inclusion processes as well. Educational systems have the task to encourage new ways of implementing innovative forms of learning, and *Embodied-Centred* education is at the center of this new paradigm. In the field of education, more and more studies emphasize the importance of body and corporeity in teaching/learning processes. The *Embodied Training* is an innovative experiential methodology employing appropriate body-mediated strategies and specific methods aimed at strengthening and developing personal skills, competences and strategies (protection factors) useful for consolidating a positive coping mode towards a world that is changing at an incredible speed, subjecting people to new and uncertain life perspectives.

2. From Life Skills Education for School to the European Skills Agenda

With the Ottawa Charter (WHO, 1986), in relation to the need to establish and define a person's mental and physical well-being, the first international conference on health promotion introduced the concept of life skills through which people can exercise «more control over their own health and over their environments, and to make choices conducive to health» (WHO, 1986). In this view, therefore, life skills not only provide protective factors for an individual's health but are also related to a sense of personal empowerment in that they enable people to gain increased control over decisions and actions affecting their health and psychosocial well-being. The World Health Organization (1986) definition of life skills as «personal, social, interpersonal, cognitive, affective, and universal» skills that enable individuals to cope effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life (WHO, 1999) clearly provides the perception that we are speaking of a considerable number of skills and competences, the nature and definition of which may differ across cultures and settings (WHO, 1994). However, in life, they are functional in «helping people communicate and understand their knowledge, attitudes and values» (Poole 2005). By issuing the document *Life Skills Education in Schools*, based on the concept of health as a state of psycho-physical and re-

lational well-being, the WHO (1993) launched a prevention plan to be implemented in schools and educational institutions, thus urging educational agencies to promote a comprehensive training of the person and the citizen, capable of equipping young people to cope with difficulties in life (Rosa, De Vita, 2018). Subsequently, the WHO Department of Mental Health published the document *Life Skills Education for Children and Adolescents in Schools* (WHO, 1994) confirming that psycho-social skills in the personal, social, interpersonal, cognitive, and affective areas of the individual are the privileged skills for promoting health education in the school setting and beyond.

In later years, the ten life skills identified by the WHO have been grouped into three categories: Emotional, Relational (social and interpersonal), and Cognitive. The Emotional Area includes Self-awareness, Emotion Management, and Stress Management. The Relational Area involves: Effective Communication, Interpersonal Relationship Skills, and Empathy. The Cognitive Area comprises: Decision Making, Problem Solving, Creative Thinking, and Critical Thinking (WHO, 2003). School represents the most appropriate context for teaching Life Skills Education, since it is the ideal place where individuals can learn to develop skills toward adaptive and positive behavior which will make them able to cope effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. Moreover, these skills can provide them with good training tools to competently and effectively orient themselves, so as to protect themselves and promote their skills at the individual and social levels, strengthening their ability to take responsibility (De Santi, Guerra, Morosini, 2008). Life skills are not intended as an additional «package» for teachers, but as a tool that can enhance their didactic action, as they promote students' psychosocial skills (Marmocchi, Dall'Aglio, Tannini, 2004). A report issued by the «Istituto Superiore di Sanità» (Italian National Institute of Health) (De Santi, Guerra, Morosini, 2008) shows that the analysis of the benefits of *LSE for School*, resulting from health education projects and interventions, provided significant feedback on the reduction of possible risk behaviors at individual and classroom level, as well as on students' and school staff's health, students' empowerment and self-esteem, intra/extra school and family relationships, school performance, collaboration with experts and external facilities in the area, and the development of services within the school aimed at health promotion. Scientific evidence shows that a limited number of behaviors contribute largely to some of the major causes of death affecting our society, such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, and accidents. These behaviors, often developed at a young age, include the use of tobacco, psychotropic substances, alcohol, unhealthy diets, inadequate physical activity and sexual behaviors (De Santi, Guerra, Morosini, 2008). The acquisition of *life skills* turns out to be indispensable to the development of a sense of personal and collective self-efficacy inasmuch as it contributes incisively not only to educational and extracurricular success, but also enhances the motivation to take care of oneself and others, and to make conscious choices aimed at the development of individual and social well-being (Boda, 2008).

With reference to the 2006 Recommendation of

the European Parliament and of the Council, life skills cover all forms of behavior that help people participate effectively and constructively in social and working life, while being immersed in increasingly diversified societies. The European Skills Agenda reiterates that the development of skills for sustainable competitiveness, social equity and resilience (European Commission, 2020) is aimed at securing better living conditions by providing access to education, training and lifelong learning with a focus on the acquisition of functional skills for work and professional updating. In light of these prerogatives, formal and non-formal institutions are therefore the first to be engaged in helping build these skills, not by adding new content to the overcrowded study programs, but by teaching to work in new and active ways thanks to the direct intellectual, emotional and affective involvement of the learning subjects (WHO, 1994).

3. Learning Skills in a World in Transition

Many factors are driving our societies to rapid changes, such as: technological development, which plays an increasingly important role in different areas of life and is developing at an ever quicker pace, leading to skills that quickly become obsolete; automation, which is changing the labor market with routine tasks being performed more and more by machines (EPSC, 2019), generating new work patterns and reducing the need for people to update their personal skills; labor market, where we are witnessing forms of work that favor fixed-term employment (EPSC, 2019) and employers increasingly seeking workers with skills such as flexibility and inclination to lifelong learning. Demographic changes, due to the ageing of the EU population, also highlight the need for renewed efforts to nurture personal well-being and ensure more rewarding lives (Donlevy, van Driel, Horeau McGrath, 2019). Finally, not only has the pandemic completely disrupted people's lives, but has also forced all sectors into new forms of work, creative spirit and resilience; the education realm is one of them, having been confronted with the need for a new approach to didactics and new ways of thinking, doing and redesigning didactics in education. In the light of the current situation, it becomes relevant to propose conditions and strategies through which citizens may be able to develop their personal, social, and learning skills in order to unleash their dynamic potential, self-regulate their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, build a meaningful life, and cope with complexity as thriving individuals, responsible social agents, and reflective lifelong learners (Sala et al., 2020). To cope with complex life situations, European citizens must continually develop skills allowing them to successfully manage the challenges posed by the many transitions in their work and personal spheres, and in society. People must learn to cope with uncertainty, cultivate resilience, develop personal growth, build successful interpersonal relationships, and experience a better quality of life. Designed to support the development of «Personal, Social and Learning to Learn» competences, the LifeComp framework is a flexible tool that can be adapted to different knowledge and targets and, from a holistic perspective, rep-

resents a complex ecosystem characterized by the interdependence between the elements making up the different competences, becoming more and more effective (Laszlo, Krippner, 1998). Therefore, all competences included in the framework are equally relevant, necessary and interconnected, and should be considered and developed as parts of a whole. Educational systems are tasked with encouraging new ways to implement innovative forms of learning, all of which would identify new learning needs to cope with a given situation, by activating a set of competences which will vary according to the satisfaction of different needs related to different circumstances.

4. *LifeComp Framework: the new European framework for the development of life skills at school*

In a still fairly «slow» world, schools used to prepare young people for a «known» world, in terms of both work organization or professions and of social organization, and the knowledge and skills to be provided to students were identifiable and formalized in ministerial «programs» that would be applicable for a few decades. However, since the last decades of the Twentieth century, we have witnessed a disruptive acceleration generated by information technologies, globalization and the risks of environmental collapse that has also challenged schools to prepare students for an uncertain world. Moreover, being them unable to provide solutions to known problems, they must prepare people to face new problems for which a solution has not been detected yet. Based on these assumptions, it is essential that the primary focus in schools must necessarily shift from «knowledge» and «abilities» to specific «key competences». The 2006 Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council includes 8 key competences: Communication in the mother tongue; Communication in foreign languages; Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; Digital competence; Learning to learn; Social and civic competences; Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; Cultural awareness and expression (Council of the European Union, 2006). In 2018, a further Recommendation of the Council of the European Union updated the 8 key competences for lifelong learning by outlining a new framework: Literacy competence; Multilingual competence; Mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering; Digital competence; Personal, social and learning to learn competence; Citizenship competence; Entrepreneurship competence; and Cultural awareness and expression competence (Council of the European Union, 2018). On behalf of the European Commission (2020) and in collaboration with the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC), the Joint Research Centre (JRC Seville) has investigated three competences out of the previously-mentioned eight ones by analyzing them in detail, creating real frameworks and developing respectively the *Digital Competence Framework – DigComp* (Digital Competence), the *Entrepreneurship Competence Framework – EntreComp* (Entrepreneurial Competence), and in 2020, the *European Framework for Personal, Social and Learning to Learn Key Competence*

– *LifeComp*, publishing also the respective guides: *DigComp into Action – Get inspired, make it happen. A user guide to the European Digital Competence Framework*; *EntreComp into Action – Get inspired, make it happen. A user guide to the European Entrepreneurship Competence Framework*; *LifeComp into Action. Teaching life skills in the classroom and beyond. The LifeComp Framework* (Sala et al., 2020) is a document formulated following an in-depth analysis of existing documents and several consultations with experts and stakeholders at European level. It deals with everything that has to do with «the predisposition and mindset to act or react to ideas, people or situations» and identifies three interconnected competence areas comprising three competences respectively, which, in turn, have three descriptors corresponding to the «awareness, understanding, action» model (European commission, 2020):

- Personal competence (Self-regulation, Flexibility, Well-being).
- Social competence (Empathy, Communication, Collaboration).
- Learning to learn (Growth mindset, Critical thinking, Managing learning).

These are competences «that can help people become more resilient and build a meaningful life in the midst of the ever-changing world» (Sala et al., 2020). The ability to master one's competences, to monitor and control them, to adapt them to changed situations, and to integrate them with each other so as to give rise to additional «know-how» in an autonomous way, means not only developing meta-competences but also, and more importantly, creating new ones (starting from the «old» ones); all this in a quick response to sudden issues arising unexpectedly. Thus, coping with change means teaching to live with uncertainty, tolerate different points of view, strengthen critical and self-critical competence, cooperate and take responsibility for one's choices, and most of all, to adapt oneself in line with our time and with progress. Learning is a process that lasts throughout our lives and is not always mediated by reference figures and positive experiences. In order to carry out a conscious growth process it needs to become aware of how we personally work, the way we learn, what are our strengths and our weaknesses. Learning to learn means allowing for a space dedicated to higher-level skills to be created in our minds and involves taking care of it responsibly. To critically evaluate information, deal with change or empathize with other people, recognize one's strengths, and have the ability to seek support or to organize oneself, are some of the soft skills that play an important role in all learning processes, and which the new European framework defines in terms of key competences needed in all areas of life. The *LifeComp* competence framework is complementary to the document on «Key Competences for Lifelong Learning»; it includes personal, social and learning competencies considered an important prerequisite for democratic development and participation in social life, and that are also an important basis for participation in lifelong learning. *LifeComp* identifies competences applicable to all spheres of life, which can be taught and ac-

quired through formal, informal and non-formal educational contexts. A key element of the European perspective is also to promote the teaching of *LifeComps* within the educational curricula, in order to create useful paths for helping people to become self-regulated, empathetic, flexible citizens and critical thinkers, as well as to have awareness of individual and collective sense of well-being and to be active agents in determining their own educational and professional paths. The *LifeComp* framework is a useful guide both for teachers – in their didactic planning activities, day-to-day classroom management and assessment – and for students – since the role of schools is not only to convey notions, but also to help develop both awareness and critical thinking, and the skills to communicate and collaborate, to deal with transitions and uncertainty, to cope with challenges, and to achieve their own well-being (European Commission, 2020). The goals of *LifeComp* refer back to a two-thousand-year-old quote from Plutarch pointing out that «The young are not vessels to be filled, they are fires to be lit», inasmuch as they are only achievable if they succeed in making students aware, active, and able to cope with personal and professional experiences in a continuous evolution. Being skills necessary for working and living in the twenty-first century, the essential goal of *LifeComp* is for all people to have the skills necessary for personal development, social inclusion, active citizenship and employment. Across Europe, the *LifeComp* competence framework considers only those skills that can be acquired in a purposeful way, with the aim of encouraging course managers and policy-makers in education to question which ones are important for the development of our society today and in the future.

5. The cognitive dimension of Embodied-Centred Education in the development of (personal, social, learning) LifeComps

Educational systems are responsible for encouraging new ways to implement innovative forms of learning by fostering the acquisition of soft skills through engaging playful and game-sports activities, as well as through simulation environments and transformative practices, thanks to which flexible and productive forms of learning ensuring individual and social well-being are developed.

Movement plays a central role in one's relationship with oneself and others. The process of becoming aware of one's own body fosters self-awareness, the perception of one's own individuality and identity as the undisputed protagonist of one's own actions, and as the promoter of choices and changes in one's own life. Thanks to their action, expression, communication and body performance potential, motor skills and corporeity have manifold repercussions in the cognitive sphere as they develop the ability to adapt to changing situations. Some research studies have shown that the ability to «create» divergent thinking (Guilford, 1959) seems to be linked to dimensions that are no longer only corporeal but also cognitive, and that «motor activity positively influences the development of divergent thinking and self-esteem» (Valentini, Troiano, Balzano, 2011) and the ability to produce

motor solutions in response to motor problems (Torrance, 1981) requiring *problem solving* and *decision making skills* (Richard, Lebeau, Becker, Inglis, Terenbaum, 2018).

From this perspective, it becomes crucial to implement Embodied-Centred education that emphasizes the role of corporeity to promote soft skills also in terms of autonomy, self-efficacy, self-actualization, expression of one's potential and enhancement of one's talents, while leaving room for free initiative and for divergent, expressive and creative thinking through the first cognitive channel of human beings, which is the body. Corporeality facilitates the construction of knowledge as the active participation of the body allows the student to live and nourish deep emotions, intended as a reinforcing input, product of the total involvement of the person as a whole (Gomez Paloma, 2013). The theoretical paradigm of *Embodied Cognition* considers multi and interdisciplinary reflections on the role of the body as a cognitive, affective, relational device and as a facilitator of learning processes in the dialogue between the neuroscientific, pedagogical and educational fields (Sibilio, 2020) bringing *embodiment* to the center of attention. In the sphere of teaching/learning processes and according to the Embodied Cognition approach, neuroscientific and cognitive psychology research in recent years has shown the extreme significance and value of the body. Corporeality plays an important supporting function in cognitive processes, favoring the construction of knowledge, understanding and representation of contents, involving the subject holistically within the training process (Minghelli, D'Auria, Gomez Paloma, 2022). The ability to understand, also by means of the body, refers to another main ability, namely that of understanding the point of view of others. As Alain Berthoz (2004) described it, empathy is like an «out-of-body experience» through which the subject, by moving away from his or her own body to place himself or herself within the experience of others, is able to attribute a shared meaning to it and, as part of this meaningful relationship, to also share emotions and sensations serving as a reinforcement of experiences. Knowledge and learning gain a strong perceptual-motor connotation that uses all sensory channels, thus actively involving the body, its past (memory), present (perception) and future (affordance and prediction) in relation to the environment and for others (Minghelli et al., 2022). Therefore, it is necessary to conceive the teaching-learning process as an experience of knowledge co-construction, which recognizes the cognitive peculiarities of each experiential background. The embodied dimension of learning in the educational design can increase opportunities for global development through inter-disciplinary didactics, in which corporeality, already established as an indispensable entity for the activation of a learning process, has a real and significant weight in the acquisition of skills (Whitehead, 2010; Nicolosi et al., 2016). The *Embodied-Centred* didactics, thanks to the joint and indissoluble work between mind, body and emotions, confirms the value of the body as a powerful tool for mediating learning, turning out to be very effective both as a methodology for facilitating learning and as an inclusive strategy for special educational needs (Sibilio, 2012; Gomez Paloma, Ianes, 2014). The

new teaching practices, designed according to the Embodied Cognition approach, suggest a constantly evolving scientific scenario in which, at the same time, we can also feel the great effort of the school world in preparing for and responding to these new emergencies, reducing and repressing the value of the body and movement in ordinary didactics (D'Anna, 2020). By means of practical experiences and body-mediated simulations, the main objective is to generate awareness and embodied skills «so that the elements of cognition are linked to the experiential and pragmatic ones in order to guide future decisions, leaving a sensitive, tangible and emotionally significant trace in the bodily memory of each learner» (Minghelli & Damiani, 2021).

6. Conclusions

According to the WHO (1994), life skills are the set of psychosocial skills related to a person's ability to deal effectively with knowing how to interact with others and with the demands and challenges of everyday life, implementing adaptive and positive behaviors which will also allow them to preserve their well-being. Personal, social and learning competences are gaining more and more importance in school education, at European level, with regard to the training of individuals capable of managing themselves and operating efficiently in the contemporary world. In the international and European educational scenario, the notion of social and personal competences has changed and developed in terms of essential characteristics, knowledge, skills and attitudes related to the key competences for lifelong learning, enshrined in the 2006 and 2018 European Parliament Recommendations. This contribution has intended to highlight the dimension of learning in its broader cognitive, metacognitive, social and global meaning of co-growth and co-evolution, and to restore proper attention to *Embodied-Centred education* as a body-mediated educational strategy involved in the development of human qualities. Although this contribution has emphasized the value of an *Embodied-Centred education* and its huge and transversal potential, on the other hand, we are often faced with a series of critical issues that characterize both the Italian society and school reality, and which basically «limit» the full valorization of the role of body and corporeity as indispensable channels in the knowledge, skills and meta-competence learning processes. In light of the evident and various problematic issues of contemporary society, a real need for an educational reorganization is felt even in the school world, in order to turn innovative project proposals into educational actions marked by concrete operations aimed at the lifelong learning of key competences, which, by means of formal, informal and non-formal education, can be applied to all spheres of life (both at personal, social and professional level). Moreover, these skills can help people live their present better and create better living conditions for their future and next generations.

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