



Sport participation as an educational tool and a means of promoting physical, mental, and social well-being

La pratica sportiva come strumento educativo e di promozione del benessere psicofisico e sociale

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ABSTRACT

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Sidentop (1998) argued that an adequate and effective learning process in Sport Education¹ should lead to the development of competent, aware, and enthusiastic student-athletes². In short, this means that boys and girls should learn to compete with fairness, respect the rules and their opponents, and become enthusiastic ambassadors of sports participation. However, over the past two decades, there has been considerable evidence highlighting the limited educational and developmental impact of sport education on young adolescents. Several factors have contributed to this situation. For example, access to quality sport education is not always equitable, as socio-economic and geographical factors often limit the opportunity for only a minority of young people to participate in sports activities within an appropriate educational framework. One of the main issues in inadequate sports environments is the excessive emphasis on competition, even in the early stages of sports participation, which typically occurs during pre-adolescence. This leads to the development of a results-driven culture that places significant performance pressure on young student-athletes. Unfortunately, this approach to sport education tends to overshadow almost entirely the physical, psychomotor, and social benefits associated with quality sports practice. In addition, numerous scientific studies have also linked this approach to the teaching of sport education in schools (Kirk, 2009; Quennerstedt, 2019; Cereda, 2023). The natural consequence of this scenario is the development of limited interest in sports among those who have not yet developed or consolidated a competitive attitude and skills. As a result, there are increasing levels of early dropout from sports, a phenomenon that is becoming more widespread among many boys and girls (Back et al., 2022). Dropping out of sports during youth has negative effects on the development of basic skills and competencies (Kolunsarka et al., 2025) and leads to significant challenges in adopting an active lifestyle throughout their lifespan. Unfortunately, as with many other aspects of sports practice (e.g., access to sports disciplines, sports clothing), gender differences are also evident in this case, with girls being disproportionately more affected than boys. Last but not least, the negative effects of this phenomenon affect physical and mental health of school-age boys and girls. For instance, levels of physical activity among adolescents are steadily declining, with both the frequency and types of activities, as highlighted by national and international monitoring systems, falling far below the standards recommended by the World Health Organization. On a social level, the absence of quality sport education unfortunately contributes to the adoption of inappropriate behavioral patterns (e.g., bullying) and the glorification of negative aspects associated with sports, such as stadium violence and match-fixing, which are entirely contrary to the virtuous pro-

cess Sidentop envisioned through an adequate educational process. Therefore, it is clear that we must rethink the educational model linked to sports practice to promote harmonious and healthy development for young people, ensuring inclusivity and enabling everyone to fully benefit from sports participation.

On September 20, 2023, the Italian Parliament approved an amendment to Article 33 of the Italian Constitution, introducing the following reference to the practice of sports: “The Republic recognizes the educational, social, and psychological well-being value of sports activities in all their forms.” This amendment has definitively established the right to sports in Italy, acknowledging the educational and social role of sports practice, which unequivocally goes beyond its more commonly recognized, established, and often negative performance-oriented perspective. The potential impact of what is now enshrined in the Constitution is significant, provided that all institutions and communities of practice involved in the sport participation context can translate this normative event into effective actions. This includes, for example, promoting sport education that emphasizes fun and inclusion within youth sports as positive factors for personal growth. Therefore, learning environments and educational programs should be developed to align the psychological and social dynamics of adolescents participating in sports competitions with trajectories of growth and development. In the opinion of the author, it is essential that physical education teachers and youth coaches receive adequate training and updates in both developing appropriate training and educational programs and in recognizing signs of stress and burnout preventively to avoid dropout. It is also important to support gender equality by promoting female participation in all sports and creating equitable learning and competition environments in terms of both gender and skill levels. Thus, if we interpret what has been established by Parliament as a starting point rather than an endpoint, it is essential for the Italian academic community—especially those focused on sports education—to direct their scientific interest specifically toward the threefold perspective recognized in sports activities: the educational, the social, and the promotion of individual well-being. Researchers and scholars in the fields of motor and sports education can indeed support this new perspective on sports practice through their research experiences and the increasingly significant third-mission activities they are called to undertake in their academic work.

Building on these premises, this special issue of the section dedicated to Physical Education and Sports in the European Journal of Research on Education and Teaching (i.e., *Formazione & insegnamento*) aims to provide a space for analyzing the current scientific and institutional context, discussing educational and training intervention models, sharing best practices, and presenting empirical studies primarily focused on the three main areas introduced by the amendment to Article 33. The response from the Italian community focused primarily on physical education and sport pedagogy has been authoritative in terms of authorship. It is widespread at the national level, high in quality regarding content, and extensive in quantity, as confirmed by the 22 manuscripts that

1 In this document, sport education refers to the educational activities provided by schools through physical education and offered in settings aimed at introducing young people to sports, such as the youth sectors of sports clubs.

2 Young people and adolescents of school age involved in sport education programs in both school and extracurricular contexts, such as amateur or organized sports.

successfully passed the peer review process. As hoped, these contributions are strongly centered on the amendment to Article 33 of the Constitution and the key elements for the development of sports practice in Italy. Overall, the manuscripts cover four different themes.

A primary focus of the authors' work is the relationships and regulatory implications arising from the constitutional amendment. Specifically, two contributions discuss the impact of this measure on communities of practice and the intervention strategies that the government and all relevant stakeholders will need to implement to comply with the new constitutional requirements (Casolo & Coco, 2024; Lovecchio, 2024). Castaldo and Mango (2024), in contrast, examine potential regional challenges in applying Article 33 of the Constitution, with particular attention to the so-called "Southern Question". In terms of regulatory implications, Di Domenico (2024) emphasized the relationship between the amendment to Article 33 and the competencies associated with the professional profiles of Kinesiologists.

A second thematic focus of this special issue concerns the educational value attributed to sports participation. Maietta and Martiniello (2024) reflect on the educational significance of sports within training processes, offering readers a series of analyses that underscore the crucial role of sports in the development of individuals and communities. The same authors also introduce the topic of Dual Career, referring to educational process designed for student who are also high-level athletes. Monacis (2024) presented a Dual Career model based on the results of an orientation and tutoring project developed in Puglia, involving a sample of over 100 students from the province of Lecce. The contributions by Annoscia and colleagues (2024), Di Palma and Tafuri (2024), and Quinto and colleagues (2024) focus on teaching models for sports education in school contexts. The manuscript by Annoscia et al. (2024) explores the relationship between sports practice and physical literacy, highlighting this connection as a foundational element of the Long-Term Athlete Development model. Di Palma and Tafuri (2024) present the results of an action research project that employed the Sport Education model, introduced by Sidentop, to promote discipline among students. Quinto et al. (2024), meanwhile, report on a learning program developed using the Tactical Games Model, aimed at enhancing motor skills and tactical awareness related to net games in primary schools. Valentini and Sbarbati (2024) offer a systematic review of the literature on the integrated use of physical education and mathematics as an intervention strategy to promote games and sport practice and the development of decision-making processes in educational context. Finally, Pascali and Colella (2024) address the topic of sports for students with disabilities, emphasizing the strategic value of sports practice in fostering authentic and educationally inclusive environments.

The third thematic focus of this special issue relates to the social value of sports participation. Giurato (2024) compared three different models of social development through sports (i.e., Italy, Finland, and Brazil), emphasizing the importance of a holistic educational approach in promoting national social well-

being through sports. Invernizzi and colleagues (2024) addressed the training of teachers and coaches, highlighting it as a fundamental prerequisite for supporting multi-sport learning process that foster sustainable sports education. Sangalli and Borgogni (2024) presented preliminary results from a study on social distress among young adolescents, demonstrating the positive impact sports practice can have on boys and girls at risk of social marginalization. Ceruso (2024), meanwhile, examined the impact of e-sports on the new generation of adolescents, underscoring the popularity of this "alternative" form of sports practice and the need for intervention by government institutions, educational bodies, and industry stakeholders to ensure these environments uphold key values such as integrity, fairness, and privacy.

The fourth and final thematic focus of this special issue centers on the promotion of psychological and physical well-being through sports participation. The manuscripts addressing this theme span two contexts: the school environment and extracurricular sports. Pignato (2024) emphasized the strategic value of physical literacy as a key component in an educational process that supports psychological and physical well-being throughout life. Greco and colleagues (2024) presented the results of an empirical study which addressed the different effects of the same games-based protocols delivered in indoor and outdoor settings, highlighting the greater positive impact of the outdoor environment across all indicators considered. Feresin et al. (2024) investigated the relationship between mental well-being and sports practice among university students, focusing on gender differences revealed by a questionnaire. In the extracurricular context, Sannicandro (2024) underscored the value of innovative approaches to youth training, such as the ecological-dynamic approach, in developing football initiation programs that move beyond the excessive technicality often found in these settings. Mollame et al. (2024) conducted a similar study in which the training protocol was based on the Tactical Games Model, with results supporting its applicability for the multidimensional development (physical and cognitive) of young footballers. Altavilla (2024) analyzed the scientific literature to outline the physical determinants in the performance models of athletes in basketball, football, and volleyball. Finally, Coppola et al. (2024) reviewed the training methods used in youth volleyball, identifying strengths and weaknesses that emerged in the studies they analyzed.

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