

Paths of Social and Educational Growth in the School through Physical Education

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Abstract

The school system should guarantee a didactic proposal in the field of motor and sports sciences, such as to stimulate the development of the principles and skills in the young student, necessary for a complete and healthy growth. In this regard, this research work identifies the main educational objectives that should be achieved within pre-school and primary schools, and proposes two educational and didactic strategies useful for this purpose.

Keywords: *Motor and Sports Activities, Educational-Didactic Strategies, School System, Game, Competition.*

Introduction

The literature on the subject of motor and sports sciences in the school has been able to prove, both through empirical and observational research, and by means of a rigorously scientific evaluation from the Eighties to today, a progressive decline of coordination skills and physical efficiency, such as strength and motor skills in children and young people due to an ineffective didactic proposal. An educational strategy in the field of physical and sports activity at school level, in order to be more appropriate to the child / young guy, should certainly give the student the possibility to solve the task through an individual research. However, in order for skills to be acquired within the appropriate time frame, by choosing appropriate didactic styles from the most prescriptive (on-command learning) to the most heuristic (learning-by-discovery) one, it will need to apply the right balance between repetition and change and between different methods in the research process so as to generate a change and variability of practice. It is well known how children, especially the little ones, need not only repetitions but also changes to not get bored and to not acquire rigid automatisms. We also believe how much the practice, the replication of the correct and appropriate form of a skill, in addition to frequent teacher feedbacks, can raise the level and give high definition to the performance. Undoubtedly, repetition leads to stability and reduced mental effort; conversely, change leads to flexibility and greater involvement of higher cognitive functions. But the repetition aimed at the solution of the task will not always have to be the same; the search for other countless solutions of a given task will be stimulated by changing the solution process of the task itself. Therefore, educational strategies cannot always be the same; it needs to grapple with the idea of manipulating every work session by alternating repetitions and changes, stability and flexibility, and providing valuable problem-solving opportunities.

Thus the best way would be that to alternate repetition and change, stabilization and destabilization of movement patterns. In this regard, after analyzing the different school objectives to be pursued in the field of motor and sports sciences, some effective didactic strategies are proposed, based both on the acquisition of motor skills through game, and on the stimulation of sports activity by developing competitive spirit.

Objectives and goals of an adequate Didactic Offer for Motor and Sports Activities at School

Obviously, depending on the level of education, the didactic proposals and the related training objectives that are to be pursued vary; these will be analyzed, although briefly, in relation to pre-school and primary schools, which are the most important training places for the development of motor and sports skills in young students.

Pre-school

Children become aware of their own body, using it from their birth as an instrument of self-knowledge in the world. Making movements is the first factor for learning: seeking, discovering, playing, jumping, running at school is a source of well-being and psycho-physical balance. The action of the body brings to life emotions and pleasant sensations of relaxation and tension, but also the satisfaction of controlling gestures, in the coordination with others; it allows experiencing the potential and limits of one's own physical skills, while developing awareness of the risks of uncontrolled movements. With their own bodies children communicate, express themselves with gestures, transform themselves, put themselves to the test; even in these ways they perceive the completeness of their own self, consolidating their autonomy and emotional security. The body has expressive and communicative potentialities, realized in a language characterized by its own structure and by rules that the child acquires through specific learning paths: motor experiences allow integrating the different languages, alternating word and gestures, producing and enjoying music, accompanying narratives, favoring the construction of the image of oneself and the elaboration of the bodily pattern. Informal, routine and daily life activities, life and outdoor games are just as important as the use of small tools and instruments, free or guided movement in dedicated spaces and psychomotor games, and can be an opportunity for educating to health through the awareness of proper nutrition and personal hygiene. Pre-school aims at gradually developing, in the child, the ability to read and interpret messages from one's own body and that of others, by respecting and taking care of it. It also aims at developing the ability to express oneself and communicate through the body to improve its perceptive and knowledge skills, the ability to orientate oneself in space, move and communicate according to imagination and creativity.

Educational objectives

The child fully lives his corporeity; he perceives its communicative and expressive potential, develops ways of acting that grant him a good autonomy in managing the day at school. He recognizes the signs and rhythms of his own body, the sexual and developmental differences, and adopts proper self-care, hygiene and healthy eating practices. He feels pleasure in the movement and experiments with postural and motor patterns, applies them in individual and group games even with the use of small tools, and is able to adapt them to environmental situations at school and outdoors. He controls the execution of the gesture, assesses the risk, and interacts with others in movement games, music, dance, and expressive communication. He recognizes his own body, its different parts and represents the still and moving body.

Primary School

In the first educational cycle, physical education promotes the knowledge of oneself and one's own potentialities in a constant relationship with environment, others and objects. It also contributes to the development of the student's personality through the knowledge and awareness of his own body identity, as well as the continuous need for movement as a constant care of his person and his well-being. In particular, "being comfortable with oneself"

recalls the need for the curriculum of the education to the movement to foresee experiences aimed at consolidating healthy and correct lifestyles, as a prerequisite for a personal culture that values motor and sports experiences (even the extracurricular ones) for preventing hypokinesia, overweight and poor food habits, motor skills involution, early sports practice abandonment and use of substances that induce addiction. Motor and sports activities provide students with opportunities to reflect on the changes in their own body, to accept and live them serenely since they are an expression of a person's growth and development process; they also offer opportunities to reflect on the values that the self-image assumes in the comparison with the peer group. Motor education is therefore an opportunity to promote cognitive, social, cultural and affective experiences. Through the movement, with which a vast range of gestures are realized, ranging from facial expressions to dance and the most varied sports performances, the student can learn about his own body, and can explore the space, communicate and interact with others in an adequate and effective way. Gaining motor skills and having the possibility of experiencing the success of one's own actions are a source of gratification; they stimulate the student's self-esteem and the progressive broadening of his experience, enriching it with new stimuli. Motor and sports activity, especially when it makes experience victory or defeat, contributes to acquiring the ability to modulate and control one's own emotions. Through the motor dimension, the student easily expresses communicative requests and different kinds of discomforts which he is not always able to communicate through verbal language. Physical activity practiced in the natural environment represents a key element for an integrated educational action, a determining factor for the training of the future world citizens respectful of human, civil and environmental values. Participating in motor and sports activities means sharing group experiences with other people, promoting the inclusion of students with various forms of diversity and enhancing the value of cooperation and teamwork. In fact, game and sport mediate and facilitate relationships and "encounters". Sports activity promotes the value of respecting agreed and shared rules, and the ethical values that underlie civil coexistence. Teachers are committed to conveying and making children live the principles of a sports culture that leads to the respect for themselves and their opponents and to loyalty, a sense of belonging and responsibility, the control of aggression, and the denial of any forms of violence. Motor experience must be characterized as "positive experience", highlighting the student's ability to act, making him constantly a protagonist and progressively aware of the motor skills acquired.

Educational objectives

The student acquires self-awareness through the perception of his own body, and the mastery of the motor and postural patterns in the continuous adaptation to the contingent spatial and temporal variables. He uses body and motor language to communicate and express his own moods, also by means of dramatization and rhythmic-musical and choreutic experiences. He experiences a plurality of experiences allowing him developing game-sports skills, leading him to a future sports practice too. He also experiences different technical gestures in a simplified and progressively more complex way. He acts while respecting the basic safety criteria for him and for others, both when making movements and while using tools, and conveys this ability in the school and extra-school environment. He recognizes some essential principles, related to his own psycho-physical well-being, which involve the care of his own body, a correct diet and the prevention of the use of substances leading to addiction. He understands the value of the rules and the importance of respecting them within the various games and sports occasions.

The Didactic Game Strategy to stimulate active learning

When proposing the activities, the teachers must privilege the motor game as an incredible learning tool that: develops the dimensions of personality and the cognitive and emotional-affective skills, educates to the civil coexistence, teaches how to manage the conflicts, develops perception skills, motor patterns and coordination skills, and trains the technical-tactical skills of the sports performance. Through different games, children learn to deal adequately with the many sport and life situations, i.e. themselves, others, rules, fun, victory, defeat, loyalty, mistake, selfishness, solidarity, joy, anger, challenge, risk, and fear. There are also some strategic guidelines to be adopted in the didactic proposal, according to the students with whom the teachers interact.

Last two years of pre-school - First and second primary school classes

If the psychological, physiological, motor and ethical characteristics of children aged between 4 and 7 are to be respected, no specific sport should be proposed. At this age, children must simply move by playing games. In the educational project, the types of games and their objectives must be specified.

Third, fourth, fifth primary school classes.

From eight years on, more than one sport can be practiced for at least two months, always proposed in a playful form, with the introduction of some technical elements and some typical rules of the sport introduced. So it is possible to indicatively introduce three different sports in the third class, three others in the fourth class and three more others in the fifth class.

First level secondary school - First and second classes

Sports activities can be proposed in a similar way to that described for the previous group, by raising the level of specialization: the experimentation can last at most four months, while preserving a training offer during the school year which includes at least two different disciplines.

At methodological level, the teacher must refrain from suggesting the game strategies, but on the contrary he will have to make the students find them, with the help of guiding questions facilitating the solutions of the problems, presented by the games themselves, in an increasingly autonomous way. The game success criteria must guarantee the experience of the success for all. The principle of inclusion must guide the educational action. This kind of sports activity would grant all children a basic "motor baggage" that would allow for a more effective acquisition of sports techniques (for any sport chosen). This didactic approach, respectful of the evolutionary stages of the little ones, allows for an introduction to a gradual motor and sports practice, avoiding early technical specializations; the latter are situations which are contributing to the early sports practice abandonment in Italy, as documented by several studies, and to the exponential growth of sedentariness.

Approaching Competition in a perspective of educational and didactic development

Teaching children to respect the limits and rules through games is an excellent pedagogical choice, not only from an educational and ethical point of view, but also from a sports perspective, since this favors the learning of technical gestures. In fact, whenever a player is allowed to foul the opponent and stop him, he is being deprived of the opportunity of learning to overcome it by using the technique. A child used to never foul players, as he grows up, can have a better technique as he has had many chances to put it into practice. Game and competitive sport are not in contrast at all. On the contrary, they are the presupposition and continuation of one another. To turn from game into competition, we must take into account a fundamental factor, i.e. the challenge, first of all with ourselves and then with the opponent.

Conceptually, educating to competitive sport consists in preparing the children for a challenge, i.e. in measuring themselves up with others while accepting equally the victory and the defeat. This is certainly not a simple road to undertake in the motor and sports educational path; in fact, it is a very difficult educational challenge, which must be developed in stages, with absolute attention paid and competence to be possessed by the adults. In the dynamism of the development age, the first step is to play to have fun and learn; the second stage is to learn a sport and then, whoever wishes and chooses it consciously and freely, there can be a competition. When proposing the activities in a competitive form the teacher must prefer the criterion of winning by competence (the victory goes to all those who succeed in doing what is established as a parameter), rather than the one that foresees the victory for the best absolute outcome. In the first case all or many people win, and the criterion used is inclusive; in the second case only one person wins, employing an exclusive principle. The knowledge of some methodological criteria of children's introduction to competition facilitates the instructors in their educational mission. Here we have some criteria:

- ***The challenge with oneself.*** The real challenge, the one that leads to competition, is to always engage in the game a little more than what one believes he/she can do. From this point of view, the victory or the defeat do not correspond with the objective of the outcome of a comparison with the other, but they are based on the personal experience of one's own performances and sensations. It is possible - and important - to experience success explicitly even without winning: the satisfaction comes from having been capable of an extra effort and from having improved personal records, regardless of the comparison with another person. Children must be taught mainly that the priority lies in the challenge with oneself, and that the comparison with the opponent comes after. A weak opponent can be overcome by playing badly and without having fun, and a stronger opponent can defeat us by playing very well. One can get last in a race while having improved his own record, or can win just because the others were very slower than him or took the wrong route. If we get children used to overcome their limits and employ it as a success criterion, they will soon acquire self-judgment ability, making them independent in assessing themselves without the need for external illusory recognition to increase their self-esteem.
- ***Accepting one's own limits.*** It is a fundamental step to get to compete. Clearly, it is up to educators to make the recognition of the limit acceptable and not traumatic. When the child begins to go beyond the phase of self-centered thinking and realizes that he is not the best, then the discomfort, the lack of self-confidence, the shame, the envy, the sense of powerlessness can take the upper hand. This often determines the abandonment of sports practice, other times the adherence to an external aspiration (usually of the parents) that, in order to be preserved, it must be continually strengthened by adult interventions that trigger (even unwittingly) a vicious circle leading to decreased self-esteem and autonomy in the child. On the other hand, recognizing and accepting the objective data that reality generates is essential for a healthy development. It is a painful but essential step to move from the magical world to the real one. Only by recognizing one's own limits a person can try to improve them, working actively in order for the goal to be reasonably pursued and sized at the level of individual resources available. To accept one's own limits (or deficit) the balanced supporting attitude of the adults of reference is crucial. As educators, we always try to enhance the commitment that everyone puts in improving one's own personal record; we encourage the set-up of teams in which the contribution is rewarded even by those less able ones, and we avoid encouraging the arrogance of the "winners". We make the discovery that someone else is better than us acceptable and less painful. We also make it clear that the best ones can be different in other

activities, because we are all unique. If our attitude is sincere, affectionate and trustful, every limit becomes acceptable and surmountable.

- **No need to cheat for lack of self-esteem.** The sports world is full of little and great scams perpetrated in order to win. Reflecting on their nature, and without starting here the reflection on the manipulation of professional competition (typical of many disciplines), we can conclude that they mainly result from the lack of confidence in one's own abilities. When one competes with a less able opponent he does not feel the need to cheat; doing it would mean recognizing that he has little self-confidence, that he is afraid of the other and that the latter is stronger than him. Helping children trust in their ability to make it, to overcome not so much the opponent but their own fear of losing, is a task - and a duty - of the adult. By paying attention to some students' inability to accept defeat, educators could grasp an important sign of discomfort to be faced at an earlier stage, especially in the school environment, in which competition never goes away. The competitors who do all that they can to not lose are still children who have not overcome the pain and shame felt when learning about their limits. As young people and adults, they keep acting to systematically avoid defeats. Their drama is always that of having to "pretend" to appear as winners, when they are actually confronted every day with a sense of inability and inadequacy that often goes beyond sports competence. This is matched with another more unfavorable condition, i.e. that of never being able to assess, by means of an authentic comparison, one's own abilities to start a path of personal improvement.

Conclusions

The school system needs an adequate training of students in the field of motor and sports disciplines since the very first years. Educating to motor and sports activity is a duty to be carried out in accordance with the development of a healthy community, and by adopting a person's overall training. In this regard, we outlined the main training goals that should be achieved in pre-schools and primary schools, where the student has the chance to assimilate concepts and develop skills in the motor and sports fields that will lay the foundations for his future educational background. This made it possible to advance some didactic proposals focused on the game and on the introduction to competitive sport, which would allow stimulating an effective didactics in the school system. The work is proposed as a basis for future research activities aimed at investigating, from an empirical point of view, the effectiveness of the strategies proposed in terms of educational and pedagogical progress in the physical and sports sciences, carried out at school.

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