

Disability Management in the School System

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Abstract

The number of disabled people in the world is in constant growth and, in line with this trend, in Italy, there has been a significant increase of students with disabilities within the school system. This phenomenon represents a critical social issue that needs to be managed in the best way. In this regard, the purpose of this paper is to propose the implementation of disability management approach to pursue the scholastic inclusion. It also identifies in sport activity the optimal tool to implement the principles of this management model in the school, in order to achieve the inclusion objectives.

Keywords: Sport; Disability Management; Scholastic Inclusion; Disability.

Introduction

To date, disability represents one of the main social, health and economic critical issues of global importance. It is estimated that over one billion people in the world live with some form of disability. About a fifth of them, equal to more than 200 million individuals, are seriously disabled and are thus forced to face a series of significant difficulties and critical issues in everyday life. Moreover, the percentage of disabilities in the World is constantly increasing due to the progressive ageing of the population, and the consequent increase of individuals affected by chronic-degenerative diseases (WHO, 2001). In Italy there are 4.1 million disabled people, about 1 million of whom are represented by those with a severe form of disability. Specifically, also students with disabilities have increased significantly and constantly in the last decade in all school orders. In fact, it has increased from almost 120,000 units ten years ago to over 230,000 registered in the school year 2014-2015 (MIUR, 2015). Unfortunately, this increase cannot be seen as a sign of greater integration for students with disabilities into the school system, or rather as their better social inclusion; in fact, school inclusion is a concept that goes beyond the mere increase in enrollment in schools (Canevaro, 2007). On the contrary, the growing presence of disabled people within the national school system means that it is necessary to use an optimal management model able to guarantee the highest integration level, both in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. In this regard, we propose the implementation of the model of "Disability Management" in the Italian school system: an innovative approach, already consolidated in countries such as Canada and the U.S., which aims to build, manage and organize solutions that support the autonomy of the persons with disabilities in different social spheres of everyday life, especially in relation to the world of work and in their relationship with different stakeholders. It is also assumed that sport represents the means through which the dictates of this management approach produce positive social effects also at school level, like in the employment sector. In fact, in this way, this model would be easily applicable to the school environment as it is aimed at helping remove the barriers that hinder the inclusion of any disabled person. It is also clear that schools should be the first context in which the dictates of this management approach should be assimilated; all this in order to lay the foundations for obtaining results that are sustainable over time and that can pursue first of all the main objective of the social benefit arising from the inclusion of the disabled, and then the potential economic benefit resulting from the training of a productive and autonomous human resource for the labor market, and therefore for the entire economy.

1. Some important data on disability

In the new multi-prospective view of disability, it is qualified as a health condition in an unfavorable environment. Thus, it is the environment itself that takes on a crucial role, being able to represent a barrier or an enabling factor. This is understood in a very broad sense, including the sphere of the family, social and health care context, the social and employment policies and especially the school system of a country. The presence of students with one or more forms of disability in the Italian educational system has increased considerably in recent years. From the data of the “Integrated Surveys on Schools” carried out by the MIUR (the Italian Ministry of Education), it emerges that already in the school year 2014/2015 there were 234,788 students with disabilities, equal to 2.7% of the total number of students attending school. If we compare this data with that recorded in the last decade, we can see an increase equal to 39.9%. This growth is even more important if we consider that the total number of students attending the school system, in the same period, was characterized by a decrease, albeit slight (-0.4%). The national educational system is made up of state schools and state authorized schools, private schools and schools managed by local authorities. In this regard, if we analyze the school system by taking into account the management model, we can see that, in the period under consideration, students with disabilities attending state schools increased by 40.6%, thus reaching about 219 thousand units in the school year 2014/2015. Non-state managed schools registered a growth of 30.8% compared to the 2004/2005 school year; in state authorized schools, in particular, the number of students with disabilities increased by 62% (MIUR, 2015). The incidence of disabled students on the total number of students attending Italian schools has increased overall and progressively; in fact, in the school year 2014/2015 this percentage was around 2.7%, while in the school year 2004/2005 it was equal to 1.9%. On the contrary, if we examine the distribution of disabled students in the various school orders, we can observe that they are concentrated mainly in primary and lower secondary schools. According to the data collected, 9.5% of students with disabilities are registered in kindergartens, compared to 18.3% of total students attending that school level; 37% of them are in primary schools, compared to 31.9% of total students; 28.5% of them are in lower secondary schools, compared to 19.6% of students attending that school level; 25% of students with disability certification are in lower secondary schools, compared to 30.3% of students in total (MIUR, 2015).

2. Inclusive management organization in the school system

Can the situation described above, characterized by a considerable increase, be interpreted as a sign of greater “inclusion” for students with disabilities in the school system? Or better, can it be seen as a sign of their better social integration? It is clear that the answer to the proposed question is negative; school inclusion is a concept that goes beyond the simple (albeit significant) increase in the number of students enrolled in schools. In fact, it should be measured out with information describing both the human resources deployed and the presence of accessible school facilities (Canevaro, 2007). It is the result of a long and irreversible process characterized by pedagogical, cultural and social value. The right to study is guaranteed by constitution; in fact, school is open to all, and all citizens, regardless of their personal situation, have equal social dignity. School inclusion is a key principle, a cultural awareness that requires the willingness and the ability to promote initiatives, projects to improve the efficiency of the school service for disabled students, and curricula capable of actively involving the various local stakeholders in the initiatives. In order to respect the meaning of “inclusive school”, the latter should be able to identify all special educational needs, whether diagnosed or not, and to assess the real necessity in terms of human and infrastructural resources to provide effective and adequate solutions. In pursuing the objective of the so-called “special nor-

quality” for the educational success of all students, school should also pay particular attention to the support, and especially to the enhancement, of the various forms of diversity, disability or disadvantage (Ianes, 2006). It is important for school inclusion to be considered a two-way phenomenon: it does not have to consist in adapting the behavior of disabled students to the “school system”, but it must require the latter to understand and accept the behavior of people with disabilities, in order to exploit their potentialities. Moreover, with the aim of pursuing a sustainable path over time rather than one that constitutes an end in itself, it is essential to implement integrated school-work programs, which make possible and tangible the transition from the didactic and educational project to the more general “life project” for students with disabilities.

In view of the above, the growing number of disabled students is a critical issue that needs to be managed both effectively and efficiently, in order for it to turn into the opportunity to train an ever-increasing number of disabled people characterized by a level of autonomy, and especially self-esteem, such as to make them productive resources for themselves and for the entire socio-economic system. In this regard, by exploiting sports activity, the application of the innovative managerial approach of Disability Management is hypothesized also in the school context, in order to implement the concept of inclusion.

3. Disability Management Model and Sport

As a preliminary step, it seems appropriate to describe the specific features and the origin of the model of Disability Management to bring out the strong correlation with the school system, and then to show how sport, by embracing the principles of this approach, is the best way to promote the inclusion of disabled students at school. With the aim of evolving the international managerial culture towards a greater attention to the problem of inclusion of disabled people in the workplace, in 2002, the ILO (International Labor Organization) introduced the “Code of practice on managing disability in the workplace”. This “code” includes a set of practices and guidelines with the aim of making workplaces and various facilities more inclusive by eliminating the barriers limiting access to work for disabled people; at the same time, it proposes the adoption of management policies that take into account diversity. Although mainly oriented towards the labor market and companies, however, the document foresees that governments shall play a fundamental role in supporting, encouraging and promoting policies and actions aimed at providing more opportunities, and consequently greater inclusion for people with disabilities. As a result, there is a clear reference to the need to adopt an efficient management policy, called Disability Management, in order to effectively benefit from the inclusion of disabled people in every social sphere. Hence the close correlation with the school context, and the possibility of assimilating its fundamental concepts in order to effectively achieve the goal of school inclusion. This managerial model aims at reconciling the interests of the company with the worker’s needs, disabled or ill subject, to work not only for an economic reason, but also to satisfy an irrepressible need for identity and integration through and into the working environment, just like schools aim at reconciling the students’ needs with their own interests (Shrey, 1996; 2011; Geisen, 2015;). Indeed, especially in the school system where the student’s aims are to be educated and trained and where the purpose of school is to fulfil these tasks, such a management approach could more easily allow for the pursuit of secondary objectives, such as the need for identity and the growth of self-esteem.

Disability Management was first theorized in the 1980s through different economic-management and organizational disciplines, and only spread into a few countries such as Canada, the USA and Northern Europe, while in others such as China, Japan and France it has only recently been examined. In Italy, the change in the theoretical and practical approach characterizing the social protection system in recent decades, which has seen the transition

from paternalistic state assistance to greater empowerment of the beneficiaries of the measures (the so-called Workfare), has offered new horizons for the dissemination of the Disability Management tool. The culture of inclusion and equal opportunities supported by Disability Management is also a lever to fight poverty; in fact, if it is true that poverty feeds disability and that disability, in turn, feeds poverty, we could reverse the trend of this vicious circle. In some cases, driven by the need for productivity and profit maximization, companies are not able to seize the greater opportunities that lie behind such a management approach. The model supports the following: it needs to convince oneself that it is the job, and thus not the worker, that must be suitable, since each person is characterized by certain features that, if not properly integrated and tailored to the business context, can cause problems and consequently an increase in costs (Shrey, 2011). This concept is extremely applicable in the school context where, since it can disregard the economic constraint, it could and should be as suitable as possible to welcome the disabled persons, by valuing their peculiar characteristics, with the aim of promoting integration and limiting individual and collective social criticalities. In fact, it is clear that an incorrect management of disabled people within the school context constitutes a potential “social cost” for the whole group of students, and therefore for the whole “school system”.

For this reason, on the one hand, Disability Management would be committed to seeking diversified solutions that emphasize the strengths of students with disabilities, and on the other, to spreading an organizational and school culture free from prejudices and discriminatory feelings. Sports activity and the whole sports sector, to be understood both in social, recreational

and economic terms, can represent an excellent tool to pursue it. In fact, an analysis carried out by Cottingham et al. (Cottingham et al, 2014) showed that sport represents an opportunity for the development of disadvantaged communities, like that of disabled people, and added that it should be organized and managed in relation to this opportunity. In this regard, the key role of public managerial policies in support of this sector is highlighted, in order to generate social and economic benefits just like it is happening in the English, Canadian, Scottish and Northern Irish contexts, albeit in a less incisive way. In particular, organized sport is an efficient strategy for young people with disabilities to achieve social outcomes. In fact, disabled sportsmen and sportswomen in the school age, in the USA, have developed a greater self-esteem and above all a higher degree of autonomy, compared to disabled people of the same age group and who do not practice sport (Beyer, Flores & Vargas-Tonsing, 2009). In perfect agreement are the results of a study on sports activities for disabled students carried out in Australia, which reiterates the increase in autonomy by students practicing sports activities, with equal disabling conditions, sex, age and level of education (Sotiriadou & Wicker, 2014). In addition, literature highlights the increase in practical skills by a group of people with mental disabilities undergoing sports activities, compared to a group of non-practitioners. Obviously, all this cannot ignore the need in the Italian context to propose and implement policies to encourage the practice of sport in the presence of different forms of disability and in different social contexts, including that of public education. Further confirmation of the positive effects that sports activity is able to generate towards disabled people, if managed through the guidelines of Disability Management, comes from the world of events, and in particular from the Paralympics. Thanks to this event disabled people have emerged, and towards them, a strong sense of awareness of their condition and of the possibility of achieving success in life through sports expression (Legg & Steadward, 2011). has developed. Therefore, it transcends the concept of disability as a limit, and allows the disabled person being a sports and consequently social, economic, active and productive resource. At the same time, through the promotion of sports activities organized according to

the principles of the above-mentioned managerial approach, perhaps also through recreational and amateur events, schools could enhance its resources, especially those represented by disabled students. In fact, an optimally-managed motor activity has always been an element capable of improving the learning and relational skills of young students. An efficient and effective management should not be limited to sports events, but should be exploited in all those expressions of sport and physical activity that can, and should, involve disabled people, especially within the school environment that represents the largest catchment area of young disabled people; it is precisely on them that it needs to focus attention to pursue a sustainable social benefit over time. For example, in this regard, by applying the managerial theory of Disability Management, a first and key step towards school inclusion would require that the various sports facilities within the schools should be free from architectural barriers, and should be organized and managed by a professionally appropriate and trained staff to support disabled people. By implementing high-performance management policies for managing disabled students in the Italian school system, the benefits that sports activities can already bring to these subjects, and consequently to the entire community, both socially and economically, can be generated and amplified (Legg & Steadward, 2011).

Conclusions

More than one billion people in the world suffer from disabilities, which accounts for about 15% of the world's population, and about 80% of which lives in so-called developing countries. In Italy, the number of disabled people has exceeded 4 million, and the phenomenon is constantly growing due to the ageing of the population associated with an increased onset of chronic degenerative diseases, which are strongly disabling factors. In line with the general trend, the number of students with disabilities in the Italian school system has increased exponentially in recent years too, becoming a critical phenomenon that needs to be managed in an optimal way. In this regard, the importance of the innovative model of Disability Management has been discussed, bringing to light how sport for disabled people in the school context, if effectively managed, can represent the means through which to pursue the social and economic objectives that this management approach already generates in other sectors, such as employment. As a matter of fact, by means of sport, disabled students reach a much higher degree of self-esteem and autonomy than those who do not practice it, which clearly facilitates school and also social inclusion, up to even favoring a future inclusion in the world of work with bidirectional socio-economic benefits. For this reason, thanks to sport, disability management applied to the school context could make disabled students autonomous, active, satisfied and productive human resources for the whole society, as much as possible.

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