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## THE EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL IMPACT OF SPORT IN INCLUSIVE AND COMMUNITY-ORIENTED CONTEXTS

**Prof. Edidiong Grace Etuk**

Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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### **Keywords:**

Motor Education,  
Inclusion, Educational  
Integration,  
Disability and Sport

### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper explores the role of motor and sports activities as vital tools for fostering social inclusion and promoting holistic well-being. Recognized for their educational and formative value, such activities transcend age, gender, and physical or mental conditions, making them universally accessible and impactful. An inclusive approach to sport emphasizes education and participation at all levels—from early physical education to specialized athletic practice—ensuring that every individual, regardless of ability or background, can develop and thrive.*

*Particular attention is given to the participation of individuals with disabilities or those facing social, economic, or psychological disadvantages. In these contexts, sport becomes a transformative space for identity recognition and community integration. This perspective marks a shift from traditional, performance-centered paradigms of sport towards a more inclusive, value-based model that centers on personal growth, social cohesion, and respect for diversity.*

*Moreover, the integration of sport within educational systems reflects a broader European commitment to leveraging physical activity for community development, as formalized in EU policy since 2007. Team sports, in particular, embody key social principles such as cooperation, respect for rules, and the pursuit of collective goals, mirroring the fundamental aims of education itself. Thus, sport is not merely a leisure activity, but a structured, pedagogical process that nurtures civic values, self-discipline, and mutual respect.*

*Ultimately, motor and sports education must be fully incorporated into educational strategies, including special pedagogy, to cultivate inclusive environments that support the development of every individual's full potential—especially those from marginalized or disadvantaged groups.*

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### **Introduction**

In contemporary educational discourse, motor and sports activities have emerged as pivotal tools not only for physical development but also for fostering inclusion and social cohesion. These activities carry a formative and educational significance that transcends demographic boundaries, offering valuable benefits to individuals regardless of age, gender, socio-economic status, or the presence of physical, cognitive, or psychological disabilities. In this context, motor-sports activities are increasingly being recognized for their potential to support

inclusive education and serve as a strategic means of countering marginalization and promoting the holistic development of individuals (Gomez & Sgambelluri, 2013).

The transformative potential of motor and sports activities lies in their dual capacity: on one hand, they foster individual growth, resilience, and self-esteem; on the other, they cultivate social skills, cooperation, and empathy within a collective setting. Such activities are particularly significant in educational environments where diversity is the norm, offering a structured yet flexible means for individuals to

interact, learn, and thrive together. Physical education, when implemented inclusively, encourages students to recognize and value differences, thereby reinforcing the principles of equity and mutual respect.

From a policy perspective, the social and educational dimensions of sport have gained increasing recognition at the European level. Since the late 1990s, and especially following the 2007 Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, sport has been acknowledged not merely as a recreational or competitive endeavor but as a strategic sector capable of contributing to social inclusion, lifelong learning, and civic engagement. The EU has emphasized the importance of sport's educational function and its alignment with broader social objectives, especially through volunteerism and community-based initiatives.

### **1. Pedagogical and didactic aspects of sport**

The socio-educational connotation of motor-sports activity is now promoted internationally as a tool for inclusion. It also accompanies a reshaping of the concept of health in compliance with the indications of the World Organization of Holiness (WHO) which, therefore, leads to understanding sport as an educational strategy aimed at acquiring correct lifestyles.

In its inclusive purpose, at the level of international organizations, there are numerous declarations and initiatives promoted to recognize and spread the educational importance of "sport for all".

In relation to this, education to the practice of sport represents a path that winds at different levels, from the initial motor education to the introduction to sport and its specialized practice, on a continuum that allows everyone, without prejudice and distinction of any kind, to place himself and proceed according to the maturity of his function (Nuangchalerm & Prachagool, 2010). If the promotion of a "sport for all" is rooted in a conception of sport that goes beyond the purely competitive-professional one, the practice of sport by people with disabilities, or with any other form of physical, social, economic or psychological "deficit", needs a paradigm that lays the foundations for the

recognition of the entire identity and social inclusion. It is necessary to grasp the elements that reorient the operation of a subject towards horizons of a necessary normalization, placed at the base of the educational processes and inclusion of people, throughout the life span (Whitehead, 2013).

The human being, in fact, acts based on a thought, an intentionality, and his action is expressed through intelligent behaviors of adaptation to everyday life situations, work, sports and leisure.

Motor and sports education allows to satisfy in a productive way some needs of man related to the gaming experience: movement, competition and group and team life. In addition, from the earliest years of age, those who perform regular physical activity, from group or individual sports to outdoor games or pure physical-motor activity, show greater confidence in their possibilities, are led to greater self-esteem, ease in social relationships, greater tolerance of stress, and are less likely to manifest disorders such as anxiety and depression, automatically stimulating inclusive processes (Arvanitis, 2018).

Several studies have shown how the constant practice of sports or motor activity produces beneficial effects on different functions that impact both at an inclusive level, but above all on the personal and relational sphere: learning, development of cortical areas and functions and academic performance. The performance of motor and sports activities for the disabled person, or who is in situations of physical, economic or social disadvantage, represents the exaltation of his abilities, albeit residual, and of what he can do, in a world that always reminds him of what he is not able to be and what he lacks. Carraro (2004), in fact, states that "moving towards inclusion means allowing all those who approach motor and sports practice to reach a basic level of technical skills, to feel pleasure in the commitment and effort produced and not to be excluded as less suitable" (Ghedini, 2009). In this sense, the introduction to motor and / or sports practice of subjects who present intellectual and / or mental, relational, social problems, etc., aims to promote social integration, inclusion, self-esteem and prevent the risk of onset of chronic-degenerative

diseases and improve the quality of life. What has been analyzed thus highlights the importance of promoting sports and motor activity also in the school context, at any level, so that the inclusive objective is pursued towards those who are characterized by the request, implicit or explicit, of Special Educational Needs (BES) (Holly, 2020). Sport represents a fundamental element on an emotional, social and inclusive level, consisting of a multidimensional, dynamic, playful environment suitable for intensifying the awareness of oneself and one's body. Integration and inclusion are the objectives, sport is the vehicle, because it assigns to each one a precise role in a collective context, such as the school context that manages to break down the barriers and walls that are created outside, because in sport we are all equal. Sport is characterized by having the same rules for everyone regardless of the ethnicity and culture of the individual; It represents a neutral field of confrontation capable of putting everyone on the same level. The process that led to the integration of disabled people into sports was long and very tortuous (Haegeler & Suterland, 2015). Initially, competitive sports were forbidden to the disabled and there is news of the first competitions in which they were able to participate only around 1920. Only after the Second World War there was a greater opening due above all to the large number of war invalids, which favored the spread of sporting activity with therapeutic purposes. In 1960, in Rome, the first Paralympics were held thanks to Dr. Antonio Maglio, who understood that some sports could be able to prolong the life expectancy of patients, improve lifestyle by promoting the social inclusion of disabled people. Subsequently, in 1974, there was the birth of the National Association of Italian Paraplegic Sports (ANSPI) which, four years later, became the Italian Federation of Handicapped Sports (FISHa), which was annexed to CONI in 1981. In the following years, many individual federations were born merged into the Italian Federation of Disabled Sports (FISD) in 1990, an event that allowed to give equal dignity, in sports, to physical, sensory, intellectual, and relational disabilities. The circle was closed in 2005 with the birth of the C.I.P. (Italian Paralympic

Committee) that is the confederation of Paralympic sports federations, recognized as a public body in 2015.

## **2. Inclusion processes in schools**

The theme of inclusion, as argued so far, is certainly an issue that, especially in recent years, is crucial in the school context. Italy was among the first countries to choose the path of integration of pupils with disabilities in ordinary classes. We have therefore moved from a situation of complete exclusion to special schools intended exclusively for "different" children, to the integration of the same within the common classes up to the achievement of inclusion processes. Diversity cannot be considered an obstacle, but a fundamental resource for the whole class group and essential to promote learning processes. We can talk about inclusion only when everyone feels they are appreciated and their participation is not suffered but is instead welcome. The inclusive classroom is an important point of arrival for the school and the pupil with disabilities can take great advantage of the companion resource, an essential component not only cognitive, but also social and affective (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017). The inclusive school is the one that allows all students not only to feel part of the group to which they belong, but also to reach the highest possible level thanks to those differences that allow everyone's growth, through a process of great personal enrichment. Inclusive teaching aims to create an inclusive climate, first respecting and accepting these diversities. The teaching staff will have to try to adapt their teaching style, also modifying their ongoing strategies and, if necessary, find points of connection between the programming. It will also have to always try to develop a cooperative approach (trying, for example, to use innovative methodologies such as *cooperative learning* and *peer tutoring*), enhancing the forms of expression and favoring the creation of relational networks between school, family, health specialists and territorial services. At the center of an inclusive educational action there is always the person because we are talking about an education for everyone, which can only lead to personalization. Moving from the

logic of integration to that of inclusion does not simply mean making room for everyone, but it means putting each student at the center of all educational action by rethinking what the concept of curriculum is. Among the general principles of inclusion we have, first, the acceptance of diversity, the development of collaborative practices, the active participation of all and a school that becomes different, that is, that learns and promotes change and development. Starting from some regulatory references, we can certify that our school system was the first in Europe to introduce the generalized school inclusion of pupils with disabilities and was not limited to this. With the subsequent issuance of specific guidelines, it has also clarified the principles relating to the inclusion of pupils with SLD (Specific Learning Disorders) to the point of giving organizational indications on the inclusion of those children who are not certifiable neither with disabilities nor with DSA, but who have specific learning difficulties due to personal, family and socio-environmental disadvantage. The synthesis of these choices can be found within the Legislative Decree of 13 April 2017, n.66, *Rules for the promotion of school inclusion of students with disabilities*, where it is stated that inclusion concerns everyone and responds to different educational needs by realizing itself through specific educational strategies aimed at developing the potential of each, improving their quality of life through the commitment of all those involved, from the school community, to families to local authorities, to achieve the educational success of all. Inclusion therefore takes the form of a route to follow, starting from the construction of contexts populated by multiple diversities and therefore by special needs. Special pedagogy promotes the appreciation of these diversities that are unique and that concern individuals. In this perspective, motor-sports activity can constitute that specific context in which it is possible to really experience inclusive education. The sporting experience, formative from an educational point of view, becomes a precious opportunity for active participation and equality of opportunity for all people. Both the playful and the athletic-motor dimension, closely interconnected with each other,

give sport a high educational value. Within the motor-sports context we can identify a series of strongly educational elements such as: the continuous relationship with a reference adult, ie the coach; order, discipline, respect for the rules and others; teaching / learning of a particular sports discipline; the educational value of victory and defeat; the will to improve and motivation (Peacock, 2014).

On the cognitive level, we improve the knowledge of our body, the space that surrounds us, the management of time and speed, in relation to certain motor acts. On the physical level there are a series of benefits that concern the improvement of muscle strength, balance, motor coordination thanks. On a purely sporting level, technical knowledge in relation to the various sports disciplines and that of the regulations improves. On the psychological level, a sense of personal satisfaction is produced that favors discipline and training, leading to greater selfcontrol about emotional states. On the socio-educational level, levels of personal autonomy increase, with subjects who are more stimulated to perform acts aimed at a specific purpose.

### **3. Sport and Physical Activity as tools for inclusion in the pedagogical process**

The real inclusion of students with disabilities at school, during motor and sports activity, is still a process in development and there are, unfortunately, several critical issues that do not allow it to be fully realized. Sport and, therefore, physical education at school, offer each student the opportunity to express themselves and communicate through the body, their way of being and one's own identity understood as a kind of Photography of personal experiences and experiences. Sport and physical education can unite, to bring people together. Especially These benefits concern the so-called sports education, that is, the sporting experience that is deviates from competitive or professional dynamics because, in that case, the risk is to result in the opposite effect of that relating to education (Coates & Vickerman, 2013). The guidelines for physical, motor and sports education activities in schools, issued by the MIUR in 2019, state that



sport requires the person to get involved in a total way, stimulating him to seek both the tools and the strategies suitable for address and overcoming your difficulties. This definition does not only refer to able-bodied children, but it applies to everyone, even for students with disabilities. And it is precisely in this direction that the school has the duty to develop the sports culture to ensure that students develop healthy values, those values that only sport can convey and promote constantly.

Through these values it is possible to improve aggregation, integration, and socialization both at school and in society (Bergamini et al., 2015). Everyone must actively participate in motor-sports activity, and it is right that disabled children are also protagonists of the action and not only present in the gym. The practice of sport, as previously stated, brings countless benefits. It allows, for example, to satisfy a series of typical human needs concerning the playful experience, the one linked to movement and being in a group, all achievable through sport. An extremely important factor is the improvement of residual potential in all degrees of disability, achievable through physical activity (Qi, 2012; Qi, 2018).

Obviously, in relation to the severity of disability, there are improvements of different kinds but, in general, there are important effects on the quality of life of these subjects. There are also several studies that show that the constant practice of motor-sports activity has important benefits both on learning and on academic performance. The model of sport that, over the years, has matured thanks to the history of Italian integration, is that of "integrated sport for inclusion". The peculiarity of this model is certainly to link the concepts of sport and inclusive education in an indissoluble way. The maturation of this model took place within the world of special school pedagogy. Special

pedagogy has allowed sport to be enriched from many points of view, with the aim of building an enhancing context that would allow a fair comparison between disabled people. Precisely in this context, a series of sports are inserted that can be traced back to a different model called "integrated sport". These particular sports are practiced by people with and without disabilities through some differentiations that allow everyone to play together (Green, 2019). The source of inspiration that allowed the birth of these sports is attributable precisely to those principles of the school integration system, of an all-Italian matrix, a system that has allowed people with disabilities to access and actively participate in the learning process within the classroom (Miola et al., 2021). Integrated sport, characterized by a fusion of sporting principles with principles related to special pedagogy, can be defined through a series of key elements: a) centrality of the person; (b) participation of persons with different health conditions; c) educational peculiarities; (d) roles defined on the basis of abilities and not disability; (e) flexible rules; f) recognizable and codified spaces and times; g) competitive spirit and healthy competition; (h) active participation and equal opportunities for all. The evaluation, through motor tests of what the subject can actually do at the motor level, is the basis of the attribution of roles that takes place by differentiation not changing the structure of the game, but managing to meet the needs of the individual with activities that are at their level and that push him to try to improve himself (Koh, 2021). Also in this case, we can find a parallel with Special Pedagogy. Inclusion is achieved when the pupil with disabilities is not removed from the classroom, but when he willingly accepts a task specially created for him and can also make his contribution by working in groups, within a

serene atmosphere where he is respected and considered. In integrated sport everyone trains following personal schemes but does so to give life, during the game, to a team game that will allow everyone to achieve success through the contribution of all. In summary, therefore, integrated sport is a set of organized motor activities, strongly educational and playful, which are based on a type of activity that is first of all cooperative and that aims to be also competitive to keep alive the original idea and the essence of sport. Everyone can participate actively and competently in this type of activity: people with severe disabilities, able-bodied people, men and women who, through the appropriate spaces, materials appropriate to the abilities and potential of each one, can see their abilities enhanced, actively participating and on the basis of equal opportunities through regulations that are always flexible.

There are therefore three key elements: accessibility, active participation and equal opportunities, i.e. the guiding principles of an inclusive society. An example of an integrated sport is Baskin (Inclusive Basketball).

#### **4. Baskin: example of integrated sport**

Baskin is the quintessential example of integrated sport. It was born in a school in Cremona in 2003 thanks to the commitment and collaboration between parents, support teachers and physical education (Bodini et al, 2010). This collaboration soon spread throughout the surrounding area, giving rise to an important network and involving a large number of schools and associations. The success of Baskin led to the foundation, in 2006, of the *Baskin Onlus Association*, which is still today the reference point when referring to this type of activity. Baskin is a team sport that allows the simultaneous participation of children with disabilities and able-bodied. The term itself,

chosen to give a name to this particular sporting activity, derives from the fusion of two words: "*basketball*" and "*inclusive*". The starting point of this sport is that of basketball as well as the purpose, that is to score more baskets than the opposing team. Each team is made up of both disabled and able-bodied players, each driven to give his best to contribute to the victory of the team in which he plays. The peculiarity is to allow the participation of children with any type of disability, from cognitive to physical, provided they can succeed, even in an ingenious way, to shoot the basket. In the same way, among the able-bodied, there may be basketball players, sportsmen from other disciplines or even sedentary people who are not used to sports. In addition to this, the teams are also heterogeneous from the point of view of age and gender. All this is made possible by an extremely ingenious system of rules that allows the coexistence of many types of diversity, succeeding in the mission of including everyone while keeping intact the pulsating core of sport, that is the search for competition and that desire to give the maximum to be able to bring home the victory. In this way, even the able-bodied do not participate only as a charitable act towards disabled children: a sort of personalization of responsibility takes place, overcoming the spontaneous tendency to assume a welfare attitude because success really depends on everyone's commitment by highlighting the true value that diversity entails. As for adaptation, in Baskin it is carried out in four different areas:

- Adaptation of the material, through the use of several baskets: two normal, positioned in a similar way to what happens in the game of basketball; two more places laterally (one higher and one lower) and decidedly lower. In addition, even the ball can, appropriately, be replaced with another of different size and

weight, just to allow children with severe disabilities to shoot the basket and contribute to the assignment of important points for the final result;

- Adaptation of space, through "protected" lateral areas to allow shooting in the side baskets (high and low) mentioned above;
- Adaptation of the rules, through predefined roles that are assigned according to the motor skills of the participants. This system is the fulcrum around which integrated sport is concretely realized. The roles are numbered from 1 to 5 and have specific regulations;
- Adaptation of deliveries, through the possible assignment of a tutor, i.e. a player of the team who can accompany, directly or indirectly, his disabled companion when he is called to participate concretely in the game action.

In 2017 an important memorandum of understanding was signed between the MIUR and the Baskin Onlus Association aimed at guaranteeing a fruitful collaboration over time. Obviously, the aim is to take care of the inclusion of students with disabilities through motor and sports activities, strengthening cognitive, relational and above all value skills, favoring the educational success of all.

The aim is to collaborate in the development of the culture of social inclusion through interdisciplinary projects and experimental activities of motor activity, to be proposed during curricular or extra-curricular hours, to improve participation in the various activities of disabled pupils.

### Conclusions

In recent decades we have witnessed the emergence of a terrain of confrontation and a space for common construction that has seen the conjugation, on the educational level, of apparently antithetical scientific traditions: a new bio-educational paradigm of didactic

research based on the recognition of the relationship between mind, body, environment, artefacts and processes of knowledge.

The school is a dynamic reality, open to differences and that requires the teacher to act in an inclusive way, appropriately reshaping their educational actions. Educational institutions, also through motor-sports activities, propose a rethinking of the experience of "doing school" achievable through the recognition of the centrality of the person as a unique and unrepeatable being. The practice of motor-sports education in the didactic context offers the possibility to express the potential of each student, thus becoming an inclusive learning environment, where the teacher's task is to design teaching methods and strategies through a flexible approach that can be customized and adapted to each student. To this end, the role of corporeality in teaching and learning processes is emphasized, giving motor-sports activity a transversal character.

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