

Physical education teaching in Italian primary school: theoretical lines and operational proposals

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Abstract

Background and Study Aim For the new reform to be applied in the best possible way, it is a priority and useful to promote the development of knowledge on the organization and methods of teaching/learning in physical education in primary school. This study aims to search for a new didactic organizational model for physical education in primary school, starting from the theoretical lines, showing the contrasts of the significant aspects and the uniqueness of heuristic learning, with a consequent theoretical and argumentative elaboration of operational proposals.

Material and Methods For this purpose, an accurate survey of the scientific literature has been analyzed, highlighting the critical issues that characterized the various proposals and attempt to implement physical activity and sports education courses in primary school over the years, up to the recent legislative innovation.

Results The path of the definition of physical education in primary school was marked by stages that did not always enhance the educational and training dimension of the motor and sports experience, making the school discipline assume a marginal and optional role in the face of an extracurricular practice characterized by a widespread organization and more capable of intercepting and responding to the physical exercise and sport needs of society. This complex situation has only generated confusion without solving the problem of the absence of physical and sporting activity in the 5-10 age group, as required by the World Health Organization and the European Union, by adequately and uniquely qualified teachers. It is now useful to promote the development of knowledge on the didactic organization of the primary school, on the different teaching/learning methods in physical education, to contextualize the scope of the new legal provision to the current legal framework.

Conclusions The study highlights the value of a new approach in teacher training that aims to ensure the acquisition of key competence, according to the Recommendation of the European Parliament. This perspective can be easily realized by using a core curriculum uniformly applied at the national level.

Keywords: sport and health, teaching method, didactic organization, physical education training

Introduction

Physical education in primary school in Italy is one of the ten teaching disciplines of the curriculum established by the Ministry of Education. After a resolution of the collegial bodies and decisions of the school manager, it is subject to the actual provision of teaching like the other disciplines in compliance with the legal framework [1]. For some time, there has been discussion on the compulsory teaching of physical education in primary school by specialist teachers, provided with the required qualification to achieve the objectives relating to health, the adoption of correct lifestyles, physical well-being, the achievement of motor skills, to learning transversal to knowledge related to the body and movement and, finally, to social skills through sports practice [2]. The recent legislative

innovation, introduced by article 103 of the 2022 Budget Law [3], which provides for specialist teachers to teach physical education in primary school, has rekindled the debate that had timidly taken shape on the occasion of the government bill n. 992/2018, which already provided for the introduction of the specialist teacher of physical education in primary school to guarantee “real and qualified teaching to children through suitable and targeted interventions from the point of view of motor development, but not only, also to produce effects on the plan of learning, prevention and socialization” [4]. The formulation of article 103 has detailed the methods of implementing this innovative measure for primary schools and is therefore imminently applied by the Italian Ministry of Education. To this end, it is, therefore, a priority and useful to promote the development of knowledge on the organization and teaching/learning methods in physical education in primary

school so that the new reform can be applied in the best possible way. Therefore, the methodological choices in Physical Education must be deepened and analyzed according to the peculiarities that characterize the fundamental theoretical approaches to motor control and learning, according to the specific learning objectives and skills development goals to be achieved at the end of primary school. Specifically, the two main approaches to motor learning (the cognitive and the ecological-dynamic approach) generate teaching methods that materialize in the spectrum of reproductive and productive teaching styles [5], directives and non-directive [6, 7] in teaching mediated by the teacher and mediated by the student [8], in an executive variability that the teacher must wisely and consciously guide.

Hypothesis. Highlighting the educational and training valence and the influence of different didactic approaches on motor learning, we want to open a critical scenario on the current organizational model for physical education in primary school.

Purpose. This in-depth study aims to highlight a new didactic organizational model for physical education starting from the theoretical lines, showing the contrasts of the significant aspects and the uniqueness and unrepeatability of heuristic learning with consequent elaboration theoretical argumentative of operational proposals.

Material and Methods

Data sources and search strategy

For this purpose, archival research was conducted by analyzing regulatory and professional documents to derive the most significant, logical and rational deductions. Archival research intends to highlight the critical issues that characterize the various proposals and attempts to implement physical activity education courses in Italian primary schools over the years, up to the recent legislative innovation. For the purpose of searching the available literature, the following databases were used: Scopus, Scholar and Web of Science. Searching was performed using the following terms (individually or in combination): teaching method, physical education, primary school, and motor learning.

All the papers and abstracts were evaluated to select potential papers to be included in the systematic overview. Relevant studies were considered after a detailed search if they met the criteria.

Type of study and analysis

Inclusion criteria. The analysis included theoretical and practical studies on motor learning approaches and the teaching of physical education in the Italian primary school.

Results

Only 20 articles met the inclusion criteria and were included in two paragraphs: one on the state of the art of physical education teaching in Italian primary school and one on the teaching styles in physical education; then concluding with a description of the desirable educational characterization of physical education in primary school through methodological proposals.

1 Teaching styles in physical education

The motor teaching-learning process in physical education has traditionally developed on models and practices marked by dualistic relationships (theory and practice, object and subject, mind and body, quantity and quality, etc.). This assumption affected teaching styles and the consequent approaches to learning that have been affected, and still are, by causal and linear visions and by prescriptive methodological-didactic systems. Teaching style means the modality of interaction between teacher and pupil to pursue certain educational objectives [15]. There is no teaching style par excellence, but it depends on the objectives, the type of task, the pupils, the context and the teacher. The available evidence suggests that the physical education teaching method is still linked to the traditional one based on a model's command, demonstration, and reproduction. The linear cognitive approach determines learning methods based on imitation and conditioning. These are learning based on the repetition of the task with predefined and inflexible organizational and environmental methods. Due to their predictability and repetitiveness, when skills are acquired, perfected, and automated, they produce an inversely proportional effect in terms of cognitive commitment (e.g., reduction of attention and motivation levels) [16]. With this teaching style, the teacher determines the motor task, the intensity, the duration, the constraints, etc. This educational-didactic approach is the one most used at school in physical education. Teaching is influenced by spatial and temporal constraints, spaces, equipment, reproduction styles, predefined tasks, and motor responses. In this sense, this learning modality only promotes the awareness of how motor skills are learned and not the transferability of these motor acquisitions in other disciplinary and extra-disciplinary areas [17]. The linear cognitive approach, despite the consolidated practices and the theoretical foundations in support, does not allow us to comprehensively understand the complexity of the mechanisms that are established in the realization of human movement, especially regarding the complex interaction between the individual and the environment and the circular relationship between perception and action, only understandable thanks to an ecological-dynamic approach [18].

On the other hand, the ecological-dynamic

approach is phenomenological. It describes the laws and principles on which the motor control system is based and is endowed with self-organizing properties [19]. For this approach, solutions to motor tasks appear to be the synthesis of attempts to solve the problems that arise from time to time in the environment. According to this teaching style, the teacher must limit himself to assisting the student in the autonomous search for motor solutions [20]. If the learning task is particularly complex, the teacher will not have to indicate in a prescriptive manner how to simplify motor execution but will have to modify the constraints of the environment. Self-regulation is the main element; it is, therefore, necessary to allow the free expressiveness of movement in interaction with others and within the limits of the context [21]. The ecological-dynamic approach also promotes motor learning in heuristic form through didactic experiences that are based on the variability of tasks, the modification of environmental constraints, and the appropriate use of feedback (intrinsic and extrinsic motivation) to develop original and creative motor movements [22]. The didactic proposal that the ecological-dynamic approach intends to pursue enhances learning by trial and error. Students explore new solutions to context-generated motor tasks by selecting the simplest, most immediate, and direct executive model. Consequently, even the decoding of stimulating situations in the environment becomes automatic, gradually discarding those that do not lead to the result, choosing the most appropriate ones to achieve the purpose [23].

2 *State of the art of physical education teaching in Italian primary school*

The current framework of the Italian primary school focuses on the figure of the generalist teacher, who teaches all disciplines except the discipline of religion [9]. This organizational model is consolidated in operational practices and provides for the assignment of a single weekly hour of physical education to the generalist teacher who, currently, does not possess any specific competence in the discipline, being in most cases a graduate in primary education sciences. A further step towards the “specialization” of teaching the discipline of physical education was made with the application of law no. 107 of 13 July 2015 (so-called “Buona Scuola” reform) [10]. This reform represented a valid attempt to institutionally introduce specialist teachers in primary school through “the use of generalist teachers with certified skills as well as teachers qualified to teach also for other levels of education as specialists”. Nevertheless, the “certified skills”, generically indicated and not declined in the specific cases, have increased the complexity, as the plurality deriving from the training models can produce the so-called “certified skills” from national and local sports bodies, from recognized training

bodies without, however, relying on the university which has the specific task of training. This generic nature has generated confusion, risking betraying one of the guiding principles of the reform, which, then as now, concerns the proposition of targeted interventions by adequately and uniquely qualified teachers through the degree courses relating to the master’s degree classes in motor science and sports (LM47, LM67, and LM68). Furthermore, even in the presence of these criticalities, there has been no evident sign to date of the application of the “Buona Scuola” reform concerning physical education, which, already using the strengthening staff, could have developed the objective of the “strengthening of sports disciplines and development of behaviours inspired by a healthy lifestyle”. Physical education in primary school, on the other hand, continued to be taught in a non-systematic way.

Over the years, we have witnessed the succession of various proposals and attempts to implement, also through special projects with the partnership of the Italian National Olympic Committee (CONI), and recently with the government agency “Sport e Salute Spa”, educational courses on physical and sporting activity [11]. After many years of curricular and special planning, culminating with the national project “Scuola Attiva Kids”, this year re-proposed with the ministerial circular of 22/09/2021, the application of the recent legislative innovation introduced by article 103 of the 2022 Budget Law is awaited [12]. These physical and sporting activity education courses, albeit systematic, did not involve all schools and all students, although they were well structured. Only recently have tangible and sustainable measures taken shape thanks to the determinations and resources of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), which makes it possible to implement physical activity in primary school through the introduction and mandatory of further 2 hours to be allocated to physical education, held by specialist teachers, without prejudice to the possibility of co-presence for classes that adopt full-time. Government bill no. 992/2018, approved only by the Chamber of Deputies, while already introducing the innovation of the specialist teacher, presented some problems/criticalities ascribed to the non-consideration of the organizational-didactic and methodological peculiarities of the primary segment of education, as well as of the teaching discipline and of teacher training, which made it difficult to apply without specific amendments. In summary, the primary school framework and organizational-didactic practices and methodological choices, common to all disciplines, were not considered [13]. The criticalities referred to in the government bill 992/2018 have been overcome by the current law; the formulation of article 103 has provided in detail the methods of implementing this innovative measure for primary school and is

therefore imminent application by the Ministry of Education. Specifically, the implementation of the legislation provided for the fifth class starting from the 2022/2023 school year and for the fourth class starting from the 2023/2024 school year, in paragraph 329 provides the introduction of physical education teaching in primary school, held by teachers with suitable qualifications and enrollment in the related competition class “Physical education and sports sciences in primary school.” Subjects with a master’s degree obtained in “Sciences and Techniques of Preventive and Adapted Physical Activities” (LM-67), in “Sports Sciences and Techniques” (LM-68), or in “Management of Sport and Physical Activities” (LM-47) can participate in the aforementioned insolvency procedures. According to the decree of the Minister of Education of 9 July 2009, those in possession of qualifications equivalent to the previous master’s degrees, who have also obtained 24 ECTS, acquired in curricular, additional, or extracurricular form in anthropological, psychological, and pedagogical disciplines, can also participate [4].

3 *The desirable educational characterization of physical education in Italian primary school*

For the new reform to be applied in the best possible way, it is a priority and useful to promote the development of knowledge on the organization and methods of teaching/learning in physical education in primary school. It is useful to start from the motivational cornerstones of the provision for a correct application of the law, which intends:

- respond to the emerging and urgent needs of the child population, especially in terms of health and well-being and education for correct and healthy lifestyles;
- make the educational offer of schools adequate both in qualitative and quantitative terms;
- bring Italy into line with European standards where the figure of the specialist teacher in the primary segment of education is quite widespread;
- adequately consider the guidelines of the World Health Organization on the benefits that physical activity brings to the body, its structures, and functions in a bio-psycho-social synthesis.

Therefore, the educational characterization of physical education must be related to the scientific foundations of the body, movement, sports, and recreational activity, the latter understood as mediators of learning and vehicles of educational principles [13]. Above all, the health aspects must be developed with the aim of psychophysical well-being and education for correct lifestyles. Therefore, the methodological choices in Physical Education must be deepened and analyzed according to the peculiarities that characterize the fundamental theoretical approaches to motor control and learning according to the specific learning objectives and

skills development goals to be achieved at the end of primary school [14]. It is, therefore, necessary to focus the action of scientific-cultural development on the teaching methods of physical education in primary school from a specialist point of view and, consequently, disciplinary methodology to address the peculiarities of the discipline in the primary segment and the problems connected to the three application levels of the reform:

- The teaching of physical education by the specialist teacher only in the fourth and fifth primary classes and, if necessary, parallelly to that of the generalist teacher. The law introduced, without changing the staffing of teachers, the compulsory teaching of physical education for at least two hours a week by specialist teachers only in the fourth and fifth primary classes; these two hours are added to the ordinary curriculum for classes that do not adopt full time, all in compliance with the current model of the “single teacher” who should continue to teach curricular physical education as already planned by the individual schools in the respect for one’s autonomy.
- Teaching in full-time classes with the joint ownership of generalist and specialist teacher. The co-presence will bring out further critical issues both in the co-planning and in the conduct and implementation of teaching activities when necessarily the generalist and specialist teachers will have to mutually adapt to find a design and operational balance in the application of teaching methods to prevent that physical education and motor skills are reductively generalist or rigidly specialist;
- teaching in the first, second and third primary classes by the generalist teacher who is, in any case, called to take into consideration the “body in motion” in teaching, both on an interdisciplinary and transversal level (life skills) and on a disciplinary level (for the achievement of specific learning objectives and goals for the development of skills relating to the body and its relationship with space and time; to the body and movement as an expressive and communicative modality; to play, sport, rules and fair play; health and well-being, safety and prevention).

Discussion

The didactic strategies to enhance heuristic learning and stimulate spontaneous solutions to motor problems are based on a single principle: exploiting executive variability or implementing a process of searching for motor solutions that pass through the continuous variation of gestures [24]. This means that it may be useful to carry out the process of solving a certain motor task by varying the speed of execution or by modifying

the environmental conditions. The variability of the practice is fundamental in quality motor activity for children. It is, therefore, necessary to understand this concept, make it enter our baggage as educators and apply it in the teaching of physical education [25]. Movement games are particularly suitable for developing physical efficiency and motor coordination [26]. Due to their characteristics of relative instability and continuous change of conditions in every playful moment generate an alternation of balance and imbalance. The practice of movement games allows the exploration of diversified motor areas, with procedures that favour the acquisition of skills and abilities essential to learn, in the future, both actions functional to everyday life and specific movement techniques, own of different sports disciplines [27]. To stimulate motor creativity, it is necessary to propose semi-defined tasks, i.e., activities in which the initial phase and the objective of the task are clearly explained, while the procedure for achieving the goal is not defined, and there is no single correct answer [28]. The indications given do not leave the child completely free but instead define his activity with few rules. This seems to facilitate the creative process, as, on the one hand, the difficulties related to understanding the task and its goal are excluded. On the other hand, the presence of the purpose stimulates the creative process, providing a theme around which to concentrate efforts [29]. The movement game also presents further perceptual and behavioural connotations, which guarantee its great educational value; it represents a particular way of organizing social relations, creating bonds, and living and understanding life.

The diversification, interchangeability, and alternation of roles between players in the game phases, typical of different playful contents in movement games, call for the development of the social skills essential to obtain a shared result [30]. The aim is not so much to invent new techniques or new exercises but to stimulate the development

of both the body pattern and the postural patterns and basic motor patterns in a varied way, without losing sight of the objective of improving physical efficiency for the health. The teacher may also decide to use pre-sports games (or game-sports), i.e. activities that have a relationship with structured sports activities [32]. With them, the educator can effectively offer children a multi-sports approach, which encourages learning new and multiple motor patterns and adapting those already learned in a context that offers the possibility of experimenting with a stimulating and entertaining approach. Finally, it is useful for children to become aware of the usefulness of working out in the gym and the possibility of transferring the skills they have learned to master [33]. For example, the teacher can guide reflection by promoting communication activities like techniques borrowed from psychology, such as focus groups, peer tutoring, circle time, etc. Through them, students can self-elaborate, self-determine and self-regulate in activities, replacing the prescriptive action of the teacher.

Conclusions

The historical excursus and the analysis of the school's programmatic documents and specific design experiences have revealed the need to proceed towards structuring dynamic ecological teaching methodologies that, through a heuristic approach, favour learning by trial and error. According to the European Parliament, there is a need to seek the value of a new approach in teacher training that guarantees the acquisition of key competencies [34, 35]. This perspective can be easily realized within the use of a core curriculum uniformly applied at the national level. The study should be submitted to those who may influence any consultations, the reference scientific and pedagogical societies, to verify whether the problems highlighted can be resolved with the recent regulatory prospect or some changes must be made.

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