

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: TOWARDS A CRITICAL SPORTS PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT. So-called “Bologna Process” has reformed national education systems in Europe and introduced the figure of a general teacher in primary schools and kindergartens. This has also happened in Italy, where early childhood educators and primary teachers are trained in University departments of Educational Sciences to become general educators and teachers in both Kindergartens and primary schools without any specific training, for example, in physical/ sports education. This lack in the preparation of kindergarten educators and primary school teachers is causing a decrease of interest for the teaching of physical activity and sports education by kindergartens educators. Usually, an educator who has scarce or not-enough developed competencies in a specific subject matter of the curriculum does not like to be involved in such a kind of activities. The consequences of this can be seen in the reduction of the level of physical and motor competencies and skills in the children attending kindergartens. Starting from this genesis, the primary aim of this paper is to reflect upon the consequences of the new reform of European educational systems on the teaching of physical activity in the kindergarten and early childhood, and upon the educational challenges they imply for teachers. In conclusion, will show the key role that the general teacher with specific competencies and skills in physical and sports education can play, along with family, to foster physical and sports education in early childhood and sketch a possible model for teaching it.

Keywords: *childhood, physical activity, education, teacher, kindergarten*

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Introduction

Bologna Process has identified in pre and primary school teachers' education one of the main strategic actions to reform the educational system of European countries and operate a different kind of changes in education and professionalization of educators and teachers. The importance of pre-school teachers as key factors to put these changes into place is testified by the interest of European Education systems in fostering their education through new educational actions aimed to increase teachers' level of professional qualification. Actually, in all Europe, pre-school teachers' and kindergarten educators' training takes place at a higher education level, mainly in universities. This also happens in Italy, where kindergarten's teachers are trained in university departments and attend second level master's degree courses for teaching.

In Italy and other Mediterranean countries, Bologna Process has allowed going beyond the limitations of old education models used for the training of teachers and improved their education regarding quality and knowledge. To be clear, the process has allowed situating the qualification of kindergarten's teachers at the second cycle level of European education system and recognized the importance of these agents who enhance the quality of childhood education as crucial factors for the development of European and Italian society.

Moreover, the new education models used for the training of pre-school and primary school teachers are helping them to root their practices in a more scientific pedagogy addressed to the early education of children. These new models are giving particular attention to the integration of educational research and its methodologies in the teaching practice. The new training models are carried out so to help pre-school teachers develop into specialists capable of using all methodologies of educational research and apply them into their every-day teaching practice. Action-Research, Experimental Research, Intervention Project management and design methodology, or similar to Reggio-Emilia Approach methodologies, Donald Schön's Reflective Practitioner Model are only some of the many methodologies these teachers are trained in.

There is no doubt that Bologna Process has significantly reinforced the scientific dimensions of individual training for the pre-school teacher and helped her/him to integrate the methodologies and methods of the educational research in the professional practice. This integration is aimed to help teachers develop skills capable of giving a response to the new challenges occurring in contemporary education and professional performances. These challenges are, mainly: the critical interpretation about the educational reality; the

identification of problems dealing with contemporary childhood education; the development of a research attitude opened to reflection on knowledge and challenges related to the context of teachers' professional reality.

However, this increasing in the quality of pre-school teachers' education about what it refers to the didactics of all subject matters taught in the pre-school curriculum, it has not been reciprocated with an enhancement in the quality about the teaching of physical activity and sports education. For example, in Italy, the need for training a pre-school teacher provided with general competencies and skills in all subject matters of the curriculum had led to leave out by the educational departments of most of Italian Universities the training for specific motor and sports competencies in the teachers. From the results of a survey conducted in Educational departments of Italian Universities, it has emerged that more than 90% of future pre-school teachers attending the master's degree course for qualifying as pre-school teachers don't attend any specific course or carry out any educational activity (Isidori, 2017). Therefore, they don't enhance their skills and competencies for the teaching of physical activity or sport education in the pre-school. Consequently, when they become teachers working in kindergartens, they tend not to get their pupils involved in physical and sport education activities.

Usually, it can be assumed that educators or teachers who have no or not-enough developed competencies in a specific subject matter of the curriculum tend not to like to be involved in the specific activities relating to that (in our case, physical activity and sports education). Because of this, one can easily deduce that this can cause a lowering of the level of physical and motor competencies and skills in the children attending kindergartens (Bernardi, Krug, 2008). Moreover, it is easy to think of other and more devastating consequences deriving from this lack of involvement in physical and sports activity on the future development and growth of the children (Telama, Yang, 1998).

In this study, we reflect on the key issues dealing with the teaching of physical activity in the pre-school to identify a pedagogical model capable of helping the pre-school teacher develop her/his competencies and face the challenges emerging from contemporary early childhood education (Carlson, 2016). For this reason, to carrying out this research, we have used a hermeneutical methodology. This methodology has focused on the following main steps: a) description and interpretation of the existing scientific literature and situation related to physical activity for early childhood in the kindergarten; b) a penetration of the reasons that brought the existing situation to the current form (analysis of problems this situation implies); c) a possible agenda for improving a more effective teaching of physical activity in

kindergartens by identifying main strategies and competencies areas to carry out and develop by pre-school teachers; d) evaluation of how to put the model into practice (Louis, Lawrence, & Keith, 2007).

Characteristics of physical and sports activity for early childhood education

The lack of specialized teachers and educators in Italian kindergartens determines, consequently, the incorrect use of physical education and sports activities in kindergartens. To be clear, this lack does not allow the implementation of all potentialities, both healthy preventive and social, of this kind of educational activities (Torres-Luque et al., 2016). Actually, physical activity in childhood education moves between health and fair play; that is to say, between the achievement of goals dealing with healthy nutrition and lifestyles in children and those related to social values and play/game. We know that physical activity is an integral part of the growth and development for all children. In infancy and early childhood, physical activity plays a fundamental role in the psychosocial, bodily and mental development of all children. In the kindergarten, physical and sports education is usually performed through informal both individual and group activities self-initiated. These activities provide the child with the opportunity to experience her/his own body in a wide range of ways. These ways allow the child to develop the specific set of motor skills essential for the adoption of a healthier lifestyle and future participation in sports activities (Miragaya, 2017).

The health benefits of physical activity for children include the prevention of both overweight, obesity and cardiovascular disease; improvement in skeletal health; enhancement of heart functions, and better psychophysical health. In the kindergarten, physical activity represents the perfect environment where to help children develop physical skills for a healthy lifestyle and lay the foundations for regular physical activity participation into adulthood. The commonly identified adult health problems have their entire genesis in the pediatric years of pre-school education.

Physical activity combined with a balanced diet based on sound nutritional practices represents a valid option in the prevention of chronic diseases in the child. One of the primary function of early physical activity is to teach children the educational principles of a balanced diet to control overweight and obesity. The recognition of the importance of physical activity as an educational means to the health and well-being of children is of paramount importance in early childhood education, and pre-school teachers are required to cooperate with families to use this mean in the best feasible way.

Well-being and health express one of the main objectives of early childhood education in which they become more and actual because all main essential values for life are no longer taught exclusively in the school but in all children's life course by several educational agencies. This calls for a pedagogical effort by the pre-school teacher, who must focus on well-being as a permanent search for better teaching of the values of physical activity and sports education. For this reason, the development of the competencies in physical activity for well-being and health must be milestones in pre-schools teachers' education (Wright, Stork, 2013). Without these competencies, it will be impossible to think of an effective childhood education in European kindergartens.

To be clear, health and well-being are umbrella terms which contain emotional and ethical experiences such as happiness, satisfaction, and the harmonious balance of mind and body; that is to say, all the main objectives that early education has to achieve and that gives sense to it. As well-being is an individual experience, physical activity can help children face all main problems associated with contemporary living in a technified and media-dominated world, which can lead them towards a non-active lifestyle.

In using physical activity as a tool for the well-being of the child, the pre-school teacher must use it as a means for self-implementation and self-actualization (Martin, 2001). Her/his intervention in the kindergarten consists of identifying prerequisites, and helping children develop abilities and sharing experiences, providing them with external conditions, arranging and preparing learning situations, and motivating them to enjoy the values of playful physical activity and sports education.

What pedagogy of physical activity for early childhood education?

Physical activity does not directly lead to well-being, but it provides opportunities to enrich children's everyday life making it more satisfying and fulfilling. As a promoter of these opportunities in the kindergarten, the teacher plays a fundamental role. Therefore, to play this role, she/he must be capable of framing her/his action within the theory and principles of an early childhood phenomenological pedagogy. The principles of this specialized (sports) pedagogy as a tool to promote well-being in the child can be summed as follows.

1) Sports pedagogy applied to early childhood must orient education towards both activity and experience. Sport conceived of in broadly sense offers children the possibility to attain well-being through active and playful experiences, which start from the body as a dynamic center of energy and

power. Experience acts as a set of activities that allow children to establish insights and permanent habits towards the searching and experimenting with healthy lifestyles. Sports pedagogy shows the best way towards well-being, offering the child, in its several and various forms and levels, situations which can make understandable and available the meaning, value and effect of the human movement. In the early childhood education, physical activity and sport are fields for both education and socialization.

2) Sports pedagogy must use the body, movement and play/game as a means to provide the child with physical and social experiences. Sports pedagogy is committed to providing children with immediate bodily experiences through movement, play, and game. Among the experiences related to their emotional self and physical condition, the possibility to experience the world as the environment around must be highlighted as one of the most important goals of childhood education (Ayoub, 2005).

3) Sports pedagogy has to use playful physical activity for helping children understand that well-being experienced through their own body is always a social and communicative experience. The principal and specific task of physical activity as a means to well-being for children is to provide early social experiences, social contact, and interaction, providing typical situations of that context (earlier forms of games and competitions). That is to say, teaching children to take part in contests, and to win or lose, to act cooperatively, to find friends, to know where one belongs.

The main aim of physical activity for children is to use all activities dealing with the sport to build a bridge between the body of the child and the social interaction, communication, and inclusion (Gomez, 2001). Through these earlier forms of physical activity and games performed in the kindergarten, children can actually integrate themselves into a social system of partnership and communication possibilities. Also, through them, they can start to gain not only social experiences, self-awareness, and self-fulfillment, but also the feeling of belonging to a group, and respect for (and from) others, and start to learn earlier skills for future and more complex social interaction (Gabbard, 1988).

Physical activity and its challenges for pre-school teachers

Actually, physical activity plays a central role in effective prevention, treatment, and management of many diseases. The dramatic increase in obesity and overweight in the childhood highlights the need for a better taking awareness of the role of physical activity in weight management. Early childhood and infancy is, among the growing years of a child, one of the most

critical periods when the risk of onset and persistence. An insufficient level of physical activity during the growing years is the major contributing factor to overweight and obesity (Barnett et al., 2016).

The fight against overweight represents a crucial challenge that requires specific efforts by the kindergarten teacher. In the pre-school, the teacher has to promote strategies capable of emphasizing a playful perception of physical activity and make children's families aware of the importance of this kind of activity for their daughters and sons. This lack of awareness and inaction can be very pronounced in both families and the children. One of the main concern could be that many children do not participate in appropriate levels of physical activity. We know that a low level of habitual physical activity along with poor eating behaviours in children are significant determinants of obesity. The persistence of these conditions actually perpetuates what one can call the "vicious cycle" of limited physical activity and experiences, non-active behaviours and poor eating habits.

Therefore, the pre-school teacher has to develop coordinated and systemic educational actions capable of coupling both prevention and promotion through playful physical activities in the kindergarten. Children, along with their parents, need to appreciate the importance of healthy, playful and enjoyable physical activity and use it as a platform for their growth and development (Everhart, 2003).

The educational intervention of the teacher has not to be focused only on the physical activity in the kindergarten but be combined with sound nutritional practices. This kind of intervention requires specific competencies that pre-school teachers must develop since their training years in the University. To be clear, family's attitudes, the encouragement of family-based physical activity, and the use of adequate and practical strategies to facilitate the engagement of children in the physical activities are other crucial challenges for the pre-school teacher. This challenge has to face with the lifestyle of contemporary society, in which the use of new media can determine a low level of engagement in sport and physical activity by children.

Action areas should include multi-strategy and multi-setting intervention programs; community-wide communications programs; national coordination of prevention effort; and – finally – an appropriate and sustained training of pre-school teachers in the University. All children should be physically active daily (for a minimum of 60 minutes). Physical activity opportunities for children must be part of their daily life and be taken through the play, physical education in the kindergarten, the sports and games, active transport (by walking and cycling to school), recreation, and exercises. The activity must be undertaken in within the family, school, and broader community settings (Schneider, Lounsbury, 2008).

The beneficial outcomes of physical activity and sports games have important implications for practice in early childhood education settings. Early childhood educators understand that physical development is important and encourage it in the children under their care. However, it can frequently happen that they are unaware of relevant teaching strategies, do not understand the centrality of movement in child development, and tend to employ inappropriate measures for promoting children's physical activity status and progress. For sure this is due – as stressed above – by a lack of their preparation and training.

Principles for the development of pre-school teachers' competencies in physical activity

Pre-school teachers should be trained, since the time of their education in the university, for the development of specific skills aimed to be more efficient in the planning and promotion of physical activity and movement. These competencies should help teachers to plan structured activities that are based on children's needs and interests and offer a variety of movement patterns by using their partial movement skills to scaffold more complex or purposeful skills. Moreover, teachers should have competencies to select or modify equipment to produce semi-predictable outcomes, planning activities that accommodate individual differences, including readiness, deficits, and diversity.

The pre-school teacher has to be capable of integrating physical activities with other domains of learning and to set up the environment. Effective teachers must consider the environment and the way it can be structured and utilized to optimize the physical activity experiences of children. In this regard, the environment must be conceived of as a set of opportunities and means aimed at facilitating increased physical activity and offering a wide range of affordances, maximizing not only existing resources but including manufactured and natural features and adding new components. The teacher has to set up the play space and equipment to enhance opportunities for children to be safe and active. This environment must be consistent not only with children's varying abilities and interests but also providing multiple levels of complexity by facilitating unstructured play (Temple et alii, 2016).

This unstructured play has not to be directed and controlled by adults in the situation but by children, their interests, and imagination. The facilitation of unstructured play can be achieved through sportscasting (for example, narrating play in real time), responding to children's activity, extending play tasks by boosting children's perception and participation; participating (we refer here to the teacher) in child-initiated play as a collaborator, reinforcing and extending

emerging skills in child-initiated play, facilitating participation of children of all abilities and supporting social interactions among children (Rigney, Felbermeyer, 1995).

Moreover, the pre-school teacher must facilitate structured play through demonstrating specific actions in ways that present movement challenges, identifying and sharing the activity's purpose, reinforcing redirecting, and refocusing children's efforts toward the activity's goals by using language specific to movement literacy and allowing children to make self-referenced adaptations (Braithwaite, 2014).

Teachers, through purposeful movements throughout the space, providing equitable feedback and encouragement, utilizing effective eye contact, vocal inflection, as well as facial expressions, and communicating emotional support, must master the interaction teacher-child. Structured activities should also challenge children to use a range of motor skills and adapt them to their level of maturation, motivation, and experience.

Conclusion

At least, teachers in early childhood education settings should exercise keen observation and study the play interests of children and their families, determining the existing motor skills of children and planning experiences addressed to specific deficits, facilitating greater social participation and conversation, and scaffold play experiences. Regarding in-service education and professional development, the competencies and skills identified in this study should help early childhood teachers become more efficient and better prepared to promote physical activity in the kindergarten. Bologna Process has provided pre-school teachers with highly qualified competencies in general but also determined a lack of the specific background, training, and pedagogical skills in the area of physical activity/education.

For this reason, it is necessary to reinforce the curriculum of pre-school teachers' education through modules aimed at teaching them how integrating such strategies into their daily practice (Tsangaridou, 2017). The pedagogical model should help teachers, families, and institutions which working closely with early childhood centers promote children's physical development by integrating this framework into their efforts to support healthy development and sound educational experiences for all children. There seems little doubt that healthy habits originate in childhood and physical activity is a means to their sound development. There is much debate about the mature of early-childhood physical activity program, whether they

should be mostly exploratory and supervised by teachers who provide support, encouragement, and reinforcement, or they should be aimed at developing specific skills in the child. Actually, there is not enough evidence to decide what is better to solve the issue. However, what is essential is to provide all pre-school teachers, since their training years, with the best competencies and commitment to teaching children to be engaged in physical activity and play activities as key activities for enriching their educational experiences and growth as human beings

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