

The promotion of the European LifeComp model through the physical activity and sport

La promozione del modello European LifeComp attraverso l'attività fisica e sportiva

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to identify and highlight the importance of physical and sports practice as an integral and fundamental part of educational processes, to develop Life Skills. Through enhancing the body as a tool, and with the help of educational sports practice, it is possible to implement effective strategies that can be adopted to address the various problems people encounter in daily life. This can help them understand and manage their cognitive, emotional and relational skills and develop resilience and personal empowerment that can be used for life.

Keywords: Life Skills; Sport; Body; Lifestyles.

Sintesi

Lo scopo di questo lavoro è quello di individuare e mettere in evidenza l'importanza della pratica motoria e sportiva quale parte integrante e fondamentale dei processi educativi, soprattutto nell'ottica dello sviluppo delle Life Skills. Attraverso la valorizzazione e l'utilizzo dello strumento del corpo, e con l'ausilio della mediazione educativa della pratica sportiva si possono mettere in atto strategie efficaci che le persone possono adottare per affrontare i diversi problemi della vita quotidiana, conoscere e gestire le proprie competenze cognitive, emotive e relazionali e sviluppare le capacità di resilienza ed empowerment personale utili lungo tutta la vita.

Parole chiave: Abilità di vita; Sport; Corpo; Stili di vita.

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1. Introduction

In a constantly changing environment, being able to learn and possess life skills is essential to meet the challenges of everyday life.

Over the past years, the dramatic changes in global economies have coincided with transformation in technology. These have an impact on education, work and personal life. Life Skills are important to be able to cope with the increasing pace and change of modern life (Roodbari, Sahdipoor, & Ghale, 2013).

In this context, teaching Life Skills is essential for the promotion of healthy development, and for preparing individuals to deal with changes in life circumstances.

The World Health Organization defines Life Skills as “the abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life” (WHO, 1999, p. 3).

Life Skills can enhance productivity, efficacy, self-esteem and self-confidence. Moreover, the effective and appropriate utilisation of the skills can assist in communicating effectively and developing coping and self-management tools that may help to lead a healthy and productive life (Pellegrino, & Hilton, 2012).

Life Skills, also called skills for life, are a group of psychosocial competencies and interpersonal skills that help people solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build relationships, empathise with others and cope with and manage life in a healthy and productive manner (Jenaabadi, Nejad, Mostafapour, & Haghi, 2015).

Unicef (2019), Unesco (2015) and WHO (1993) list the ten core life skill strategies and techniques as:

- problem solving;
- critical thinking;
- effective communication skills;
- decision-making;
- creative thinking;
- interpersonal relationship skills;
- self-awareness building skills;
- empathy;
- coping with stress;
- emotions.

In accordance with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (de Paula Arruda Filho, 2017) and the New *LifeComp Framework* (2020), *Personal, Social, and Learning to Learn* are a crucial set of competences that apply to all aspects of life. They can be acquired through formal, informal, and non-formal education and can help people to thrive in the modern day.

Physical education and sport practice use a range of competencies that can be attributed to skills for life. Through group dynamics, they allow people to embrace multiple perspectives simultaneously and develop positive and versatile behavior. Moreover, they are essential to effectively addressing transitions that current affairs impose on us, from technology, globalization, environmental emergencies (Bortoli, Vitali, Tommasini, & Robazza, 2015).

Within this framework, the regular practice of physical activity and sport is a great way to develop Life Skills. There are many advantages to this learning, both practically, on the

field, and off the field. Life Skills are the set of personal and relational skills that support self-management in our relationship with the rest of the world. It means being able to positively face our lives and carry out the range of basic cognitive, emotional and relational skills (WHO, 1993) that coping strategies, resilience and empowerment are rooted in (WHO, 1986). In 1993 the WHO produced the document *Life Skills Education (LSE) in Schools* and in 1994 the *Life Skills Education for Children and Adolescents in Schools* by identifying schools as the ideal place for effective interventions and planning. Its intent was to highlight the importance of supporting people throughout their lives in an effective way, so that they can tackle various daily problems. Integrating the development of transversal skills to curricular disciplines contributes not only to the educational success of the student and to strengthen the promotion of good health, but it encourages the construction of identity. They promote “the perception of self-efficacy, self-esteem and trust, playing an important role in promoting mental well-being by increasing motivation to take care of ourselves and others, preventing mental distress, behavioral and health problems” (WHO, 1993, p. 66).

Learning and developing psycho-social and affective-emotional skills at school means improving personal but also professional well-being. Development and reinforcement of Life Skills require experience-based learning “and can be taught to young people (and adults) as skills that are acquired through learning and training [...] enabling the person to transform knowledge, attitudes and values in real capacities, such as knowing what to do and how to do it” (WHO, 1993, p. 7). The educational and social value is recognised and promoted internationally and is accompanied by an understanding of concepts of health and well-being, becoming increasingly important to the lives of all humans with or without disabilities (De Vita, & Rosa, 2018). Bodily mediation, living and inhabiting oneself facilitate the development of higher-order cognitive skills and, even more importantly, the fundamental social skills that are increasingly required and appreciated in work contexts (Cronin, Allen, Mulvenna, & Russell, 2018).

2. Life Skills and school

Physical education in school is a suitable environment for teaching Life Skills because they, along with physical skills, are learned in a similar way, namely through demonstration and practice (Danish, Forneris, & Wallace, 2005). Moreover, the most substantial part of the skills learned through physical activity and sport are transferable to other areas of life. They involve the abilities to perform under pressure, to solve problems, to meet deadlines and/or challenges, to set goals, to communicate, to handle both success and failure, to work with a team and within a system, and to receive feedback and benefit from it (Forneris, Danish, & Scott, 2007). Lastly, physical activity and sport are popular activities that involve society.

In a school setting, late childhood and early adolescence are critical moments of opportunity for building skills and positive habits. During this time, it is of paramount importance that children are developing the ability to think abstractly, to understand consequences, to relate to their peers in new ways, to solve problems as they experience more independence from parents and develop greater control over their own lives (Goudas, & Giannoudis, 2008). In this regard, learning skills plays a crucial role in children's growth process.

The WHO in 1997 drew up the document titled *Life Skills Education in Schools* in response

to the requests of various countries that were engaging in a fight against forms of addictive substances such as alcohol, tobacco and drugs, as well as discomfort and deviant behavior that was increasing among young people. In 1993 the WHO urged educational agencies to promote training that would equip young people to face the difficulties of life, particularly to be able to develop maturity, by producing Life Skills Education in Schools. For the WHO, Life Skills represent the fulcrum of any prevention program, aimed at promoting the well-being of children and adolescents, regardless of the context (Marmocchi, Dall'Aglio, & Zannini, 2004). If it is true that Life Skills are necessary and essential skills throughout life, it is also true that it is especially in adolescence, a period of enormous growth for individuals as well as a time to understand oneself, that these skills need to be monitored, implemented and enhanced.

The WHO supports Life Skills Education programs to develop skills among young people that lead to healthy lifestyles and physical, social and psychological well-being. The Life Skills Education in Schools document consists of two parts. The first part consists of an introduction to Life Skills for psychosocial competence, while the second sets out the guidelines for the development and implementation of Life Skills programs. The introduction highlights the relevant role of psychosocial skills in promoting good health. These are the skills that allow an individual to effectively cope with the demands of daily life and that give an individual the ability to ensure a state of psychological well-being and to act in an adaptive and positive way when interacting with others (Hassandra, & Gouda, 2010).

The importance of psycho-social skills is highlighted in the issues related to behaviors that demonstrate an inability to cope with stresses and strains in life. The promotion of psycho-social skills is an intervention that expands an individual's coping mechanisms. Prevention programs aimed at children and adolescents provide the teaching of Life Skills in a supportive learning environment. School is a suitable place for the development of understanding and attitudes in relation to health and, therefore, capable of influencing the behavior of young people (Hellison, 2003). Fostering the development of Life Skills in a school environment requires a restructuring of the traditional idea of the classroom and a restructuring of the approach of the teacher and class in regard to what school represents (Munsi, & Guha, 2014). This is possible by means of active methodologies, such as cooperative learning and peer grouping.

Numerous research has shown that to work in a group it is necessary to create a positive emotional environment. In other words, we need to foster a positive climate in which there is mutual respect that allows the sharing thoughts and feelings (Nasheeda, Abdullah, Krauss, & Ahmed, 2019; O'Hearn, & Gatz, 2002; Papacharisis, Goudas, Danish, & Theodorakis, 2005).

In the document, the school is identified as a suitable place for Life Skills education for the following reasons:

- its role in the socialisation of the younger population;
- the access of children and adolescents on a large scale;
- economic efficiency (existing infrastructures);
- experienced teachers already present;
- the high credibility of parents and community members;
- the possibility of short and long term evaluations.

Life Skills Education in Schools (WHO, 1997) highlights the fact that many people are not *equipped* with Life Skills because the family and the culture they belong to are no longer

suitable for passing them on and have forgotten the importance of doing so. Life Skills are referenced to the model Social Learning Theory of Bandura (1977), which means learning an active process. This allows the elaboration and structuring of an experience and not a passive process of passing information. The person is not the one who passively suffers the influences of the environment, but the one who does everything possible to increase their level of self-efficacy by obtaining knowledge and skills to cope and manage different and problematic situations. As Bandura (1977) argued “most human behaviors are learned through the observation of patterns: by observing the behavior of others, we form an idea of how a new behavior can act, and on subsequent occasions this observed experience will serve as a guide for a possible action. [...] People who consider themselves highly effective act, think, and feel differently than those who perceive themselves as ineffective. They create their own future, instead of simply trying to predict it” (p. 165).

The acquisition of Life Skills is therefore based on a type of learning centered on active participation, a basic principle that engages people in a dynamic process of teaching and learning in schools. The strategies used to facilitate the active involvement of pupils concern small group work, brainstorming, role play, games and debates (Ziglio, Hagar, & Griffiths, 2000). In the acquisition of Life Skills, group learning is essential because it is in the group that many social interactions occur and this can be used to create situations in which it is possible for members to learn, share experiences and experience Life Skills together. This model favors cooperation, communication, tolerance and understanding of one's own needs and of others and can allow the recognition and enhancement of individual and social skills (WHO, 1997). Life Skills Education aims to develop self-efficacy and empowerment in the individual by playing an important role in promoting psychological well-being. The promotion of psychological well-being contributes to the motivational drive of taking care of oneself and others, as well as the prevention of mental disorders and the prevention of behavioral and health problems (WHO, 1997).

3. Motor activity and Life Skills

The skills that use the mind and body should be taught in conjunction with and through physical activity and sport (Pesce et al., 2016). In other words, it is essential an *education through the physical* as opposed to an *education of the physical* is adopted.

To promote personal growth through physical activity and sport implies recognizing that these are a metaphor for enhancing competence, not just as an end in themselves. In this regard, the lasting value of a sport experience lies in the application of the principles learned through participation and then transferred to other life areas (Peters, Kok, Ten Dam, Buijs, & Paulussen, 2009).

Petitipas et al. (1995) argued that positive development should happen when younger people are engaged in a desired activity within an appropriate context, when they are supported by caring adult mentors and a positive group or community, when they are learning to acquire skills which are important for managing life situations; and when they are benefiting from the findings of a comprehensive system of evaluation and research. From birth, each of us is able to learn and learn also through movement in the surrounding environment with an “active exploration that allows us to implement the knowledge of the world and to develop relationships of a physical, psychic, cognitive, affective type and emotional with it and with other individuals” (Brockman, Fox, & Jago, 2011, p. 2). The WHO believes that movement is a very important learning channel not for motor skills but

also cognitive, relational, emotional skills. This is why it constitutes one of the fundamental factors for maintaining people's health. Corporeity and movement are the ways to learn Life Skills (WHO, 2003).

Corporeity involves the many dimensions of the body: biological, psychological, emotional, affective, expressive, relational, cognitive, social, spiritual, personal. Motor activities and sport involve the activation of all body dimensions including personal development and growth, reinforcement of identity, collaboration and communication, reflective thinking, creative thinking, civic sense, pro-social behaviors, autonomy and self-management, of their health and well-being (Casolo, 2011). It is the expression of our *existential posture* and represents our actual *being there*. Emotions, thoughts, sensations, moods are expressed through movements, postures, gestures, voice and silences. The body is the most acute and sincere informer of ourselves. It reveals who we are, what we feel / perceive and what we live. It is the place where the natural interdependence between body, mind, heart / emotions is achieved, where the material and immaterial dimensions meet, touch and interpenetrate (Colella, 2011). Corporeity is how we relate to others and the environment, experience listening (understood as the ability to *feel-feel*), structure the capacity for dialogue by increasing awareness of one's resources and learn styles useful for effective communication.

A transfer of skills allows the elaboration, transformation and reuse of previously learned motor skills, not only into new motor skills and awareness, but also into other skills that pertain to the five areas of functioning involved in the positive development of young people: social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral and moral (Gomez Paloma, 2009).

Physical activity can help, support, increase and boost the levels of autonomy, self-esteem and emotions of any subject, even in a situation of social difficulty (Holt, 2016).

The relationship between physical activity and mental health, especially the management of negative feelings, has received extensive attention from researchers (Chekroud et al., 2018).

Based on scientific evidence, regular physical activity plays a key role in relieving anxiety, depression and emotional disorders.

In this regard resilience may be an important factor in reducing depressive symptoms, internalising and externalising problems and lowering general psychological distress, which helps individuals to maintain healthy and stable psychological states (Gerino, Rolle, Sechi, & Brustia, 2017).

Resilience can be defined as “a person's capacity for adapting psychologically, emotionally and physically reasonably well and without lasting detriment to self, relationships or personal development in the face of adversity, threat or challenge” (Ebersohn, Eloff, Finestone, Grobler, & Moen, 2015, p. 220).

There is scientific consensus that physical activity may enhance one's level of resilience (Jaureguizar, Garaigordobil, & Bernaras, 2018). A growing body of literature has found that brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) levels increase significantly with physical activity, which protects neurons in the brain and hippocampus under stress, thus enhancing resilience (Russell, Zigmond, Dimatelis, Daniels, & Mabandla, 2014). Moreover, physical activity allows people to obtain an emotional experience that liberates them from repressed mental states and then plays a role in eliminating negative emotions. Therefore, people who participate in high levels of physical activity are more likely to develop resilience, manage their negative feelings (Borrega-Mouquinho, Sanchez-Gomez,

Fuentes-Garcia, Collado-Mateo, & Villafaina, 2021; Carriedo, Cecchini, Fernandez-Rio, & Mendez-Gimenez, 2020; Ho, Louie, Chow, Wong, & Ip, 2015) and have a more optimistic attitude and higher cognitive states. Likewise, they can face problems head-on and address them with positive emotions, so that they also have a higher sense of well-being, better mental health and a stronger ability to deal with difficulties (Chan et al., 2013).

4. Teaching strategies, methods and practical aspects to develop Life Skills

There are different activities that can be used to improve students' Life Skills. According to Prajapati, Sharma, and Sharma (2017), they include:

1. classroom discussions: representing activities that offer students the opportunity to learn and be trained in the practice of problem solving. Moreover, they allow students to develop their listening skills, assertiveness and empathy;
2. brainstorming: allows students to develop ideas in a quick and spontaneous way through stimulating the imagination and creativity;
3. role-playing games: a fun and engaging activity for the whole class. Moreover, they represent a good strategy to put into practice the abilities, helping to experience how to manage a real-life situation. For example, it promotes leadership;
4. team-work: represents activities that allow classmates to build relations, promoting team building;
5. educational games: create simulations and promote fun, active-learning and discussion. They require the combined use of knowledge, attitudes and abilities;
6. analysis of a situation: offers the possibility to analyze, explore and test different solutions. Moreover, it provides for working in a group, sharing ideas, developing new learning and giving points for reflection. For example, students can reproduce the exercises (postures and behaviors);
7. interpretative story-telling: helps students to develop their critical thinking and tell a story through the use of the body and movement. This activity allows students to draw parallels and make comparisons. It improves attention, concentration and listening skills.

As Yadav and Iqbal (2009) argued the implementation of the Life Skills' development program in the physical education curriculum represents an efficient strategy to promote students' psycho-physical well-being. It plays a crucial role in the improvement of coping strategies, self-efficacy and critical thinking, as well as in the enhancement of problem solving and decision making.

5. Conclusions

Preparing people to face the challenges of life through the development of Life Skills provides a guide that allows individuals to find resilience and motivation to live with courage, curiosity and trust. Development from physical activity and sport goes beyond learning new physical skills. Sport helps people develop better ways to cope with the ups and downs of life. When they play sports, children learn to lose. Being a good loser requires maturity and practice. Losing teaches children to recover from disappointments, cope with unpleasant experiences and is an important part of becoming resilient.

Playing sports helps to develop control over their emotions and channel negative feelings in a positive way. It also helps children develop patience and understand that it can take a lot of practice to improve both their physical skills and what they do in school. It has been shown that exercise stimulates chemicals in the brain that make you feel better. Therefore, practicing sports regularly improves the overall emotional well-being. There is a link between sport and self-esteem. Team support, a kind word from a coach, or achieving their personal best will help children feel better about themselves.

Playing in a team helps to develop many of the social skills they will need for life. It teaches them to cooperate, to be less selfish and to listen to others. It also gives a sense of belonging. It helps them make new friends and builds their social circle outside of school. An important part of playing in a team is accepting discipline. Playing sports means following the rules, accepting decisions and understanding that they could be penalized for bad behavior. It will also teach them to take directions from the coach, referees and other adults. Sport also teaches them teamwork.

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