

## Special Pedagogy and Educational Sport

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### Abstract

*The true source of pedagogy is education and responds to specific needs. Special pedagogy interprets the science of diversity, through a "functional" educational path to training needs. It is a constant search for methodologies and educational techniques that make it a "research science" as well.*

**Keywords:** *Special pedagogy, Down syndrome, educational sport, disabled, special educational needs.*

The term “pedagogy” is ancient and it presupposes knowledge of an educational method and the target of this method, the child. It is implicit that the terms pedagogy and child are inextricably linked, because a correct teaching method necessitates an adequate knowledge of the target of this teaching, Thus the term pedagogy evokes links to developmental psychology. It is not possible to educate a child if one does not know the child’s mental and emotional frame work, the structures that allow him to become a social and cultural human being [1].

Pedagogy and education are therefore linked in a reciprocal relationship where one outlines theoretical foundations and the other concretely builds upon this, even when specific educative needs occur in certain cases. Pedagogy complements education and vice versa: one conditions the other. As hinted by A. Rosmini “theory is the art of Science, as practice is the art of education” (2). Education is targeted at the person and is an integral part of his existential journey [...], orients him to interiorize values that render his existence virtuous, by acting within a civil and cultural context, whilst contributing [...] to his ongoing growth (3) (2).

The same thing happens within pedagogical research when one reflects on general educational principles but is

faced with specific cases too with special needs. This becomes “special pedagogy” (SP). This discipline does not confront specialized needs from a negative viewpoint, but rather aims to research specific responses to specific needs of specific people with the purpose of achieving the ultimate goal of pedagogy, which is a persons’ education. Fundamentally pedagogy is education or the science of education that illustrates functional needs. Based educative pathways, researches technical educational methods and becomes not a one off science but rather a science of continuous research [3].

It uses inputs from a variety of other disciplines and interacts with them outlining education as being its ultimate goal.

However, in special pedagogy (the object), research never changes, as the focus is on improving the educational relationship for a specific population (actor or subject), and offers targeted responses tailored to people with learning deficits or disabilities. Sometimes this “disability” does not lie within the individuals’ learning capabilities, but rather in social, architectural, and psychological barriers that may pose a greater obstacle to learning and may condition anyone temporarily or permanently, even though certain groups of people such as children, the elderly, and the disabled are more easily influenced [4].

SP focuses on special educational needs of the disabled, and on the particular requirements of the educational relationship that are necessary for reaching educational goals. Special needs education is required for all those subjects, be it for genetic or functional reasons, that require approaches different from standard, because these subjects simply have a different mental or physical development compared to the non-impaired population. SP abandons the notion of “normalising” any subject or wanting to bring them “up to speed”, but rather embraces the prospective of bringing the full potential out of a special needs subject, and does not view the person as “disabled” or worse still “retarded”. SP does not wish to eliminate a deficit, but proposes educational strategies to render the subject autonomous and self-conscious, capable within their limit, of functioning in a daily socio-cultural setting without the constant feeling of exclusion, thus revolutionizing the notion that a disabled person is disabled for life [5].

In the past, rarely were people with mental deficiencies treated with respect. In addition, the environment in which they lived was far from protective, and the disabled hadn't always the same civil rights as the rest of the population. In the general public, often people with Down Syndrome (DS) were referred to as “mongoloids” and the attitude was that these people would always have been dependent on others for the duration of their lives. Only in the last century, as science came to the forefront over magic, have attitudes towards DS gradually changed. A significant and steady progress has been made in recent decades thanks also to the commitment of parents of DS children (and other disabilities), fighting to guarantee rights and equal opportunities on par with or hitherto reserved to “normal” children.

Following such strong standpoints, notable progress was made in Biomedical and behavioural sciences, and particularly for those affected by Trisomy 21 syndrome (alias DS).

Today, the attitude is that these special persons have an intrinsic human value, and can contribute and live in today's society developing capabilities which allow them to fulfil daily duties that in the past fewer people thought possible.

DS persons in particular, have demonstrated their ability to be responsible, reliable and work as hard or more than non-affected colleagues. They have emotions just like any human being, joys and sorrows, preferences and dislikes, and why not even personal follies.

They are happy if life smiles at them, but become sad and frustrated if they feel offended or treated as second class citizens. Their growth within society no longer calls for their segregation or exclusion, and they no longer need institutionalization, nor need to be avoided, but they can actively participate in social life with their quaint sensitivity and sweetness, fully conscious of certain limitations that they may have [6].

People with DS deserve respect, and teach us that the intrinsic values of basic human relationships are much more valuable than variations in human capabilities. We should accept and love people for what they are, and not for their capabilities. DS children are a precious resource laden with untapped potential and primed to be liberated. In this sense, they are perfect candidates for the right opportunities provided by special needs educational and recreational programmes. To fully understand a Trisomy 21 person, to provide them with education and knowledge, leads us to an unexpected interior world which enriches all stakeholders.

From this social framework, Sport cannot be excluded in any persons' life, being deemed as an essential component of any human beings' personality. Following the Para-Olympic Committee's guidelines, whose legal representative Luca Pacalli, states that “... joining sport and disability signifies highlighting a virtuous pathway to undertake. Never as in the case of children with DS does sport signify triggering socialization skills necessary for integration, social interaction and personal growth. The frontiers which can be achieved are limitless, whereas regarding sporting performance the realms remain unexplored and with a high potential for surprise.

By practising Sport one demonstrates that one can reclaim control of one's' life, give it purpose, set goals and strive to achieve results. [...]. Doing sports as a disabled person means accepting a double burden requiring yet more commitment and effort, along with challenging prejudices held by others towards the disabled athlete” [7].

In a society where the space assigned to those considered as “different” or “less capable” is apparently still limited, DS people with their innate sensitivity teach us the true value of human relationships, and what is truly important, within a new dimension of sobriety, equilibrium and humbleness that redesigns social and moral scales, and induce us to consider the greater picture throughout our personal life journey [8].

In this sense, Pedagogy or the science of Education becomes more fine tuned and intimate, and, reveals how susceptible it is to ongoing theoretical, psychological, and teaching methods research, making the role of educational science even more fundamental.

The fundamentals of the Educational activity consist of the basic ability of the subject to communicate to or with the object, and to orient the recipient of education in relation to his environment, During motor development, the child's body develops spatial and motor perception, therefore any alterations during this stage can have long lasting and sometimes permanent consequences on general development. In the first three years of life, there is an inter-dependent relationship between motor and psychological development, as well as between cognitive and emotional development [9].

Science accepts that motor and cognitive development go hand in hand in everyone's wellbeing. According to the neural network theory, the brains' plasticity city allows it to be modelled in response to any learning, which of course includes motor skills. Using sport as a tool helps to educate the body through movement and play.

In this way, the person remains active, succeeds in understanding ones' functional resources, obtains an optimal posture, and learns how to propose oneself in one's own environment. Actively engaging the person means achieving this through ones proprioception and extra-sensory functions, adequately coached by the expert trainer, one gains a greater consciousness of one's sensations through constantly adapted perceptions and movements. It is through this manipulation and with the inclusion of behavioural strategies that the child leans and develops, and particularly through game playing.

The first motor experiences allow the child to evaluate movement and trajectory, to estimate velocity, to perceive rhythms, and to be aware of his position in relation to other objects in his surrounding environment. One can say that psychomotor development depends on movement because it is at the origin of formal human intelligence in adults. Learning occurs through dynamic communicative processes in which messaging is as important as the emotional colour of the communication. The level of personal involvement conditions whatever communication is established with the surrounding world and is a fundamental factor in a persons' general development. Success is gauged by how the person is capable of acting and interacting with any reality he may be facing, and which may be continually changing.

However, the concepts of "motor baggage", "motor memory" and "motor actions" cannot be considered as a simple accumulation of motor experiences because these unconsciously form spatial and temporal concepts that constitute the basis of future learning. The uni-laterality of the mind is subjected to the influx of an archaic motor and emotional component, in which every action receives an emotional tag. To use a motor memory for educational purposes consents one to start from a body's non verbal action, and thus by stimulating conceptual and logical understanding.

As a consequence, we must interpret the importance of motricity as an educational and evolutionary instrument, and as a fundamental component of psycho-pedagogy on which many other psychological theories originate from. However, the Italian educational system does not give adequate importance to this method of intervention. Neither is the possibility of using a motor approach, as an initial tool for developing necessary cognitive skills for educational teachings, the realm of Motor science educators. Using these techniques could synchronize learning of other skills too if favourable conditions are

present. The centrality of the body and its non verbal actions in the relationship with DS children makes motor actions precious tools for the achievement of educative goals. Physical education, Physical activity, play and recreation aimed at integration, all work as a rehabilitative unit for the goal of achieving personal autonomy and an adequate level of self esteem, and yet, are poorly used.

Teamwork is an essential element for the construction of individual educational plans composed of an adequate tailored teaching project with inter and multi-disciplinary goals.

Even in younger DS children, motor training can facilitate learning of inter-relational skills and how to respond to one's environment, with new means of communication and with the perception of one's internal and external world. Motor activities tailored to the capacity of those "differently-abled", are important educative instruments for evolutionary success. Not only do they favour cognitive development, but also become a motive of personal emancipation, enrichment and achievement, of confrontation with others, and an immediate measurement and perception of one's efficacy. Physical activity becomes a highly efficient educational tool particularly if the teaching goals are conserved.

So what could be the role of the PE teacher? He/She must acknowledge that his actions are undertaken within the concrete realms of the specific experience, and assigns significant importance to motor actions as a tool for bridging the gap between innate intellectual shortcomings in the disabled and their development and learning skills. Physical activity represents the will of the body to express itself, and movement a vital necessity throughout a humans' lifespan. Through motor training and activity, the disabled person, on a par with others, has the possibility of improving his/ her quality of life, muscular strength, resistance, velocity of movements, mental toughness and to overcome fatigue.

From a Pedagogy viewpoint, a motor action should not be considered just as a movement per se, but rather should be precisely pin-pointed and evaluated over time, and finalised towards becoming a true educative and learning tool, because not only can it stimulate the subjects' physical a psychological facets, but it also forces them to enter ethical and social realms and form relationships.

In particular, motor activity in the disabled represents a real recreational value too, that creates motivation and effort which lead to normal life emotions such as joy and pleasure, and above all shared with others. It is an opportunity to recuperate contact with ones surrounding world and this represents one of the most important goals of exercise.

In this scenario, exercise and education are destined to constantly intertwine: education aims to transform the

potential of a person into the traits that form his/ her personality, and exercise aims at expressing ones personality through motor actions and play.

Today, fysical activity offers the disabled person the possibility to restart their bodies, giving it back its due importance. In this way, the disabled person ceases to think of his body as some sort of external entity to consign to others, but takes charge of it in person, restoring it purpose. Exercising and practicing sports can help one rediscover oneself and satisfy ones necessity for autonomy and independence [10].

Furthermore, Sport favours social interaction, nourishes dedication, stimulates courage, promotes loyalty, provides incentives for communication and promotes inter-relationships, the latter of which can originate and be consolidated through non verbal actions and codes. All this creates a “body dimension” and self-awareness in relation to others. Movement, and motricity become the stage where communication acts, and enrich interpersonal relationships and consequently create educational growth.

To facilitate this, one must use sport in function of the person, and not vice-versa. The environment in which sport is to be practised should be one that favours friendships, collaboration and team spirit, which create the basis of relationships. Results should only serve an incentive for one’s self-improvement. The roots of this positive approach to sport (and this applies to both to disabled and non-disabled persons) lie within the school, and in particular how exercise in that environment can be used as a form of education and as a promoter of personal life values in the first years of life.

Reiterating the concept: motor education aims to transform individual potential into the traits that ultimately characterize one’s personality, and to express personality through actions and game playing. For a disabled person. To practise sport offers him/her the chance to restart their bodies, restoring it a central importance. In this way he/shoe ceases to view the body as some sort of external entity to assign to the care of someone else, and through a sense of regained autonomy restores purpose to it [11].

Sport in DS must represent an activity for which becoming athletes brings benefits in terms of wellbeing, and as an activity that promotes emotions that can only be gifted to us from physical education. Any sport can become an instrument of social inclusion and a testimony to the motor prowess and motivational strength of those athletes affected by mental problems.

In every corner of our country (and not only ours) there are people that live and grow with DS, and they can reap the benefits of practising sports which allow them to emerge from daily routines, and fully express their untapped potential. By allowing everyone to believe in the advantages that sport can provide, and by actively

encouraging family participation through the provision of technical, medical and legislative reference points, can all help to better understand DS individuals, whatever their initial capabilities may be. In any case, it allows the individual to find their ideal dimension in the world.

These are the goals for which to strive for: from initial schooling on which then to build upon with a professional work oriented training, to a journey that enriches all stakeholders. In this way, it can be demonstrated that the barriers we erect when faced with a disabled person, are only the fruit of our “wrong” mental attitude, and that cultural stereotypes should be challenged and not fuelled.

The right to adequate schooling and particularly a special needs approach, concrete equal opportunities for entry into the labour market, and the possibility to play sports at a promotional, or why not, at a professional level are core necessary requirements to achieving a true personal autonomy for all age categories of DS people. Aside from the physical wellbeing it creates, every sports discipline brings with itself a healthy pinch of competitiveness, an opportunity to socialize and measure oneself with others as well as an opportunity to demonstrate one’s own value or capacity.

DS athletes are more than able to measure themselves alongside other DS athletes as well as with non-disabled ones [12].

The instructor must acquire knowledge and awareness of the dimension in which to operate, and attributes a concrete role to a given discipline when intervening on differently-abled subjects; is the disability linked to difficulties in learning or to developmental delay? Sensory-perceptual and motor activity plays a strategic role because cognitive and motor development, when analysed correctly, can provide precious knowledge which is fundamental to the psycho-physical development of the student. In addition, motor activity that is finalised toward sport practices, becomes an important tool for social integration because the educator creates strong bonds with the student and the surrounding world

“The magnificent diversity of similar” as the great French poet Jean Paul Claudel .narrates. “So after all this, Can you tell me what - we are all similar - means? Perhaps it means that we each resemble one another for the most part, but it might also mean that we are all little diverse from one another. We are identical in the sense that we are all humans, and, as such, we have a heart that loves, a brain that thinks, and Energy in our limbs to work and transform the world. However, being similar also implies that we are all diverse. We all have distinct capabilities, but no one is able to do everything. There are those more adept at speech, or drawing, those who are able to run or swim, and we could continue with other examples forever. All of us know our own capabilities. But perhaps not everyone is aware of an ability that not everyone

might have; that of love, and I don't mean of falling in Love, but that of teaching how to love and to love life [...]” [13].

For a person with Down's Syndrome who is deemed different, Sport can be the exaltation of his “residual” capacity or ability (or what that person “can” do), in a world that constantly reminds that person of what he/she is not able to be, and what he/she is perceived as being able to do.

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