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Original article

## SPORT AND INTEGRATION IN ITALIAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: THE SPORTS CLASS PROJECT

IVANA Matteucci<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract\*

**Objective:** The project was designed to foster social integration among elementary school children through the conventional teaching of sports values as well as sports activities and games.

**Methods:** Specifically, integration was measured using standardized tests administered to the teachers at the end of the investigation.

**Results:** We found an increased level of integration among 6/8 year olds in terms of socialization and participation in school activities as perceived by teachers. This finding points to the effectiveness of our intervention.

**Conclusions:** The development of skills using learning methods supported by the conventional communication of values, and their application in sport activities, proved to be important in boosting the perceived integration of foreign students, enhancing their ability to achieve a greater sense of sociality.

**Keywords:** Students, Social integration, Sport, Communication.

### Introduction

With the task of educating future citizens, school clearly plays a crucial role in the general inclusion of foreigners in society. Facing the epochal change that is sweeping through our society, with the ever stronger presence of foreign students in the classroom, schools must necessarily come up with organizational and managerial measures to deal with this transformation. The growing percentage of foreign students leads to the emergence of a range of problems, big and small alike, which are often likely to "overshadow the wealth of positive potential at the level of cultural and human enrichment, inherent in the encounter of different cultures" (MIUR, 2011: 14).

In Italy we have the highest number of students without Italian citizenship in elementary school: 283,233 foreign students in the 2015/2016 school year, 10% of the total of elementary school student population (MIUR, 2015a). For a long time statistical analyses highlighted the small percentage of foreigners in secondary school compared to their over-representation in the elementary school student population. However, the situation has now changed due to the increase in second generation immigrants in the Italian school system, as well as to the continuous arrival of teenage immigrants through family reunification programs. In recent years, the distribution of foreign students across primary and secondary education has therefore come to resemble the distribution of all students in the overall school population. The greater similarity between the

distribution of Italian and foreign pupils across grade levels reflects Italy's transition to a stage of progressive stabilization of migration flows. However, the presence of foreigners in Italian elementary schools remains significant.

An analysis, based on questionnaires administered to parents, teachers and students, carried out by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research, with the aid of the Directorate General for elementary education (MIUR, 2015b), showed that the presence of foreign students is viewed positively. Indeed, the results show a decided openness and friendliness among respondents (*Table 1*).

PARENTS	TEACHERS	STUDENTS
a) growth/cultural enrichment (knowledge of traditions, habits and customs of foreign countries)	f) growth/cultural enrichment (knowledge of traditions, habits and customs of foreign countries)	k) growth/cultural enrichment (knowledge of traditions, habits and customs of foreign countries)
b) acceptance of and respect for those who are different	g) respect for different mentalities	l) new friends (knowledge of new games and entertainment)
c) ability to socialize	h) equality	m) prejudice reduction
d) increase in sensitivity and solidarity	i) increased sensitivity and solidarity	n) knowledge of a new language
e) easy to learn a new language	j) greater ease in learning a new language	o) increase in sensitivity and solidarity
		p) observation and acquisition of a different view of life

**Table 1: Ranking of the positive aspects related to the presence of foreign students in school (Source: MIUR 2015b)**

<sup>1</sup> Department of Communication Science, Humanistic and International Studies (DISCUI), "Carlo Bo" University of Urbino, ITALY

E-mail address: ivana.matteucci@uniurb.it

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In this analysis, the initial and understandable uncertainty and closed-mindedness of the students, gradually gives way to learning and discovery. It is at this stage that physical education can and must play a key role, together with the implementation of specific educational activities aimed to foster the mutual understanding of different cultures. Multiethnic schools increase students' sense of solidarity and sensitivity, fostering more supportive attitudes towards those living in difficult situations. Naturally, problems do arise, and among the negative aspects highlighted by teachers, parents and students, is the slowdown in the pace of teaching, but, above all, communication difficulties, which inevitably occur, and may lead to foreign students isolating themselves (Table 2).

PARENTS	TEACHERS	STUDENTS
a) slowdown in the curriculum	c) slowdown of the curriculum	d) communication difficulties
b) communication difficulties		

**Table 2: Ranking of the negative aspects related to the presence of foreign students in school (Source: MIUR 2015b)**

The potentially decisive role of sports and time spent in the gym is evident here: body language is a universal language, and it has the great ability to break down communication barriers between people who do not speak the same language or belong to the same culture. Running after a ball, playing a game together, sharing in a team achievement, or helping a teammate in need, all have the power to make children feel like an integral part of the group, accepted and loved. In fact, in the questionnaire parents, teachers and pupils were asked to indicate what would be the most useful initiatives to promote the integration of foreign students, and many cited the need to increase extracurricular activities, particularly sports, thus promoting integration, communication and sharing.

Some studies have shown that there is a direct relationship between physical activity and social integration (Arjona et al., 2012; Benke and Roth 2002) and between social-relational capital and physical activity (Ionescu, 2011; Larsen, Strong, Linke, 2014).

In particular, Ionescu's investigation highlights positive values such as friendship, brotherhood and fair play, which form the basis of the social behaviors required in physical education classes. The sports environment seems to be characterized by the presence of attitudes geared towards communication, understanding and acceptance. According to Behnke and Roth (2002),

to achieve intercultural learning, which means learning to respect the differences in others, we need a social education so that students can change how they view others, in particular those who are different.

In this sense, physical education plays an important role. Through sports games, children learn to take on and to switch roles, and this ability helps them to accept other customs and lifestyles. Sport practiced properly helps to build confidence and self-esteem, which is crucial for children and teenagers who find themselves disoriented and insecure in a new environment and culture.

Lleixa and Soler (2004) state that sport is an extraordinary tool to facilitate communication and encounters between cultures. It can help children to understand and respect different ideas and ways of life and thinking of young people from other countries. The game is one of the main points of bonding between children of different ethnicities (Velázquez, 2001). These claims are supported by an investigation carried out in Spain (Ruiz-Valdivieso, Barajas, Zagalaz-Sanchez, Zagalaz, 2012), which aimed to establish whether it is possible to improve the integration of immigrant students through physical education. By analyzing student opinions, the researchers tried to determine whether there was a higher level of integration during physical education classes compared to other areas of learning. They found that sport can become a spontaneous and fruitful process of organization based on the values of friendship, respect, participation, tolerance, self-monitoring and self-realization (*ibidem*: 27).

Other studies (Heinemann, 2002; Zagalaz, Pantoja, Martínez, & Granados, 2008; Makarova, Herzog, 2014) also confirm that physical education is especially appreciated by immigrant students, confirming the beneficial relationship between integration and physical activity. One of the explanations for this phenomenon, in addition to the social and aggregative nature of sports, lies in the fact that integration and socialization among students from different countries during sports activities, is even possible when the participants do not share the same language. Body language is universal, preceding verbal language, and it is an essential vehicle of knowledge and acceptance of others, especially for those students who are part of a new community.

Very recently several authors (Carter-Thuillier, López Pastor, Gallardo & Fuentes, 2017) have emphasized the crucial role played by school in producing social changes that facilitate the integration of foreigners. Elementary school, in particular, has always played a key role in promoting social maturation processes among children. Indeed, the game, in all its forms, is the

main tool to teach children the alphabet of social cooperation. The six-year-old who is just starting elementary school, is still in the stage of identifying with their parent of the same sex, and they are still projecting onto themselves: the first social behavior among schoolchildren is facilitated by sports games. Physical activity and sports are the most significant experiences in elementary school when children relate with their classmates. In practice, it is important to offer sports activities that allow the largest possible number of relationships in order to facilitate the smooth transition from the egocentric stage to socio-centrism. The scholastic environment is already in itself conducive to socialization and therefore ideal for promoting the inclusion of subjects who are different in terms of their ethnicity and culture.

### Methods

A range of tools can be used for the realization of the communication project. Some are more traditional and explicitly designed to provide and disseminate information, namely brochures, booklets, magazines, posters, etc... On the other hand, other more unusual tools, such as the organization of events, exhibitions and discussions, rely on creativity and emotions to be more effective.

The aim of the *Sports class* project was to promote the social integration of foreign students through a project involving sports and physical activity. The project was organized on two levels: on a didactic level regarding the communication of the social values associated with sports using traditional communication tools such as posters (*Sports Poster: Brothers-in-Sport*), and a practical applied level regarding the organization of sports events (*Sports Game: Integration-Relay*). Sports activities were organized and run by qualified personnel, recent graduates in Sport, Health and Physical Exercise. The activities were held in a gym for one hour per week (four hours per month) for four months during the 2015/16 school year. Altogether, 400 children from four different schools were involved.

The theoretical work that was done in the classroom to support the real physical activity in the gym was crucial, as it provided the students with a framework of rules and basic principles to help them get the most out of fun educational hour in the gym. In this regard, the following basic principles were considered to warrant particular attention and hence posters were created as a guide for the children's behavior during the activities. A simplified version of the principles, values and rules was designed for the children.

These are the main principles:

- Right to sport: sport as a prevention tool against social unrest and mental and physical illness must be a right for all.
- Promotion of diversity and uniqueness: natural differences regarding one's country of origin, color, language and culture are keys to individual betterment/improvement and enrichment.
- Sports citizenship: sports should ensure inclusion and equal access opportunities at all levels and in every kind of sports league.
- Respect: practitioners and sports clubs must refrain from any conduct that might harm the physical integrity and moral dignity of opponents.
- Sports fraternity: the language of sports is universal and transcends borders, languages, religions and ideologies. Sports have the ability to bring people together by encouraging dialogue and acceptance.
- Sportsmanship: sports practitioners and associations need to actively cooperate to promote fair play.
- Non-violence: practitioners and sports clubs must reject physical and verbal violence, opposing behaviors which result in or incite violence.
- Compliance with common rules: the rules are the same for everyone, regardless of an individual's ethnicity or culture.
- Role awareness: the role of the teacher is crucial in the process of transmitting the values of sports to children and young people.

The simplified version for children is ideal for display in the classroom or even better in the gym. Simple language combined with images was used to immediately capture the children's attention and etch these basic concepts in their minds (Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3).

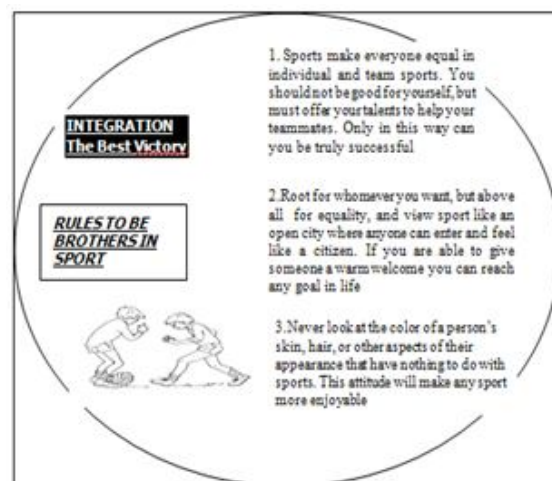


Figure 1

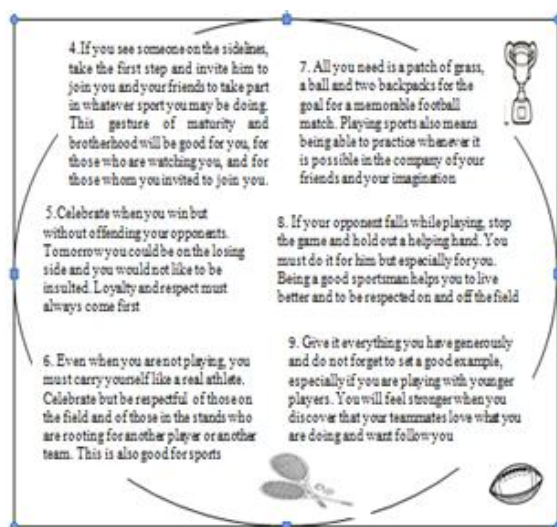


Figure 2

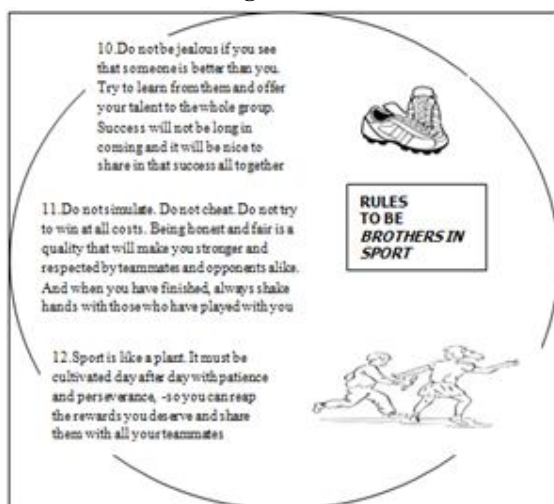


Figure 3

The sports posters present the core principles/values of sports by stating a set of rules fostering social integration, which must be followed in order to be *Brothers-in-sports*.

1. Sports make everyone equal in individual and team sports. You should not be good for yourself, but must offer your talents to help your teammates. Only in this way can you be truly successful.

2. Root for whom ever you want, but above all for equality, and view sport like an open city where anyone can enter and feel like a citizen. If you are able to give someone a warm welcome you can reach any goal in life.

3. Never look at the color of a person's skin, hair, or other aspects of their appearance that

have nothing to do with sports. This attitude will make any sport more enjoyable.

4. If you see someone on the sidelines, take the first step and invite him to join you and your friends to take part in whatever sport you may be doing. This gesture of maturity and brotherhood will be good for you, for those who are watching you, and for those whom you invited to join you.

5. Celebrate when you win but without offending your opponents. Tomorrow you could be on the losing side and you would not like to be insulted. Loyalty and respect must always come first.

6. Even when you are not playing, you must carry yourself like a real athlete. Celebrate but be respectful of those on the field and of those in the stands who are rooting for another player or another team. This is also good for sports.

7. All you need is a patch of grass, a ball and two backpacks for the goal for a memorable football match. Playing sports also means being able to practice whenever it is possible in the company of your friends and your imagination.

8. If your opponent falls while playing, stop the game and hold out a helping hand. You must do it for him but especially for you. Being a good sportsman helps you to live better and to be respected on and off the field.

9. Give it everything you have generously and do not forget to set a good example, especially if you are playing with younger players. You will feel stronger when you discover that your teammates love what you are doing and want follow you.

10. Do not be jealous if you see that someone is better than you. Try to learn from them and offer your talent to the whole group. Success will not be long in coming and it will be nice to share in that success all together.

11. Do not simulate. Do not cheat. Do not try to win at all costs. Being honest and fair is a quality that will make you stronger and respected by teammates and opponents alike. And when you have finished, always shake hands with those who have played with you.

12. Sport is like a plant. It must be cultivated day after day with patience and perseverance, so you can reap the rewards you deserve and share them with all your teammates.

Hence, we have set out the theoretical concepts that form the basis of this project which aims to promote social values such as integration and diversity. This is an indispensable prelude to the physical-play phase in which the principles we have laid out are applied. Sociomotricity (Parlebas, 1992) and the groupal dimension are the cornerstones for the sports activity promoting the integration of foreign children.



Sociomotricity theory reassesses sports and games, which come to be viewed as socially important educational activities. When children take part in such activities they gradually open up to others and come to understand and respect their point of view, overcoming their own self-centeredness. Sport becomes the principal means to help the student develop general behavior patterns that determine social behavior.

In sociomotor intervention the complex interactions between motor, sensory and cognitive functions are analyzed, viewing the child as a complete person, who manifests and realizes themselves through the fullness of their action in the world: in using objects and space, representing themselves through movement and play, interacting with each other. The development of socialization is one of the most important aspects in sociomotricity. Over the past few decades the concept of sociomotricity has undergone a gradual transformation in the field of education. It is no longer viewed as just a means of rehabilitation but has come to be seen as an original educational experience, where children can experience play and improve not only their motor skills but also their social and communicative abilities.

In integrating the various functions of sociomotricity (promotional, educational, preventive), sociomotor interventions enhance the game, which places the child in an interpersonal relationship in a group dimension.

The sociomotor intervention has the following basic aims:

- wellness and health for all the children
- integration of interpersonal differences
- de-stigmatization of subjects who are different
- de-ghettoization of deficits and personal problems.

The main aim of the sociomotor project is to provide support for socialization and integration in groups. Children need to find a welcoming environment at school, to experience new alliances, to grow peacefully and consolidate their own identity: the sociomotor laboratories provide a particularly suitable space for the integration of children.

It is essential to foster the evolution of the group dimension through various elements:

- Creating a group setting: establishing the activity times and above all, the activity rules, which should be introduced in the initial phase. The children must be made to understand that the game is not a space where differences are highlighted, but rather, where the elements of equality and equal rights are emphasized, a space for each and every child. It is essential to be strict in enforcing the rules because this firmness creates a secure

environment, which will safeguard the most fragile or insecure children, as immigrant children who have just arrived in Italy often are. In a less secure setting these children might not have the courage to get involved with others.

- Getting involved: in discovering the sociomotor space, the child feels pleasure in experiencing their own body but also in sharing this moment with their teammates: exchanging a smile with a teammate enhances the experience and builds confidence. This "group movement" scares the most insecure children; those who do not have any friends may withdraw, slow down or act out in order to get attention. In fact, "the pleasure of the movement, to be fully experienced, must be shared" (Formenti, 2008).

- Differentiation: the sensory motor game will be transformed gradually into a symbolic game in which the children spontaneously express their inner world, through identification with fictional characters. These characters can have a wide range of characteristics: reserved, aggressive, omnipotent; they are a reflection of the children's inner needs. Hence, the first differences begin to emerge in a totally spontaneous way. The children themselves realize that others have completely different needs, and it is quite normal and even necessary that conflicts arise. The children are able to test their strengths, their ability take part in the game and to share a group experience.

- Integration: it can be considered the final aim of the group process, in which the children come to share a dimension characterized by a progressive movement away from selfishness. Each child, in addition to playing their role, will have to interact with others, so they will enhance their experience through new meetings and new plays.

Through these four steps, which simply foster children's natural curiosity and willingness to learn and try new things, children can come to naturally and spontaneously accept others.

An example of one of the project's practical sports activities elementary schoolchildren is called *Integration-relay*. From a technical and organizational standpoint the relay is quite free: as a relay, it must have various combined coordinative elements for children to explore and develop a range of different motor skills. It is important to organize more than one relay, for example, one without a ball to focus more attention on the motor skills of the running, jumping, crawling and rolling, and one with a ball to improve precision, motor coordination and other abilities.

The special feature of this relay lies in identifying at least one element that invokes the concept of integration using simple strategies or objects that remain etched in the children's

imagination, therefore enhancing the learning process. Such subjects or strategies might include:

- a) the use of flags of foreign nations instead of the baton;
- b) calling teams that participate in the relay with the names of various nations;
- c) creating heats with children of different nationalities and/or of second-generation, etc.;
- d) forming teams by combining different classes and different sections.

Among these strategies, in particular those described in points c) and d) have proven to be very effective, as they call for real direct contact with the foreign child fostering cooperation and participation among all the participants. It is essential to create mixed teams, but balanced by the presence of male and female schoolchildren of different nationalities and from different classes so that everyone can become acquainted with the experience of welcoming and integration.

## Results

The same questionnaire format was used to measure the results in every participating school. The questionnaire was administered to all the teachers involved in the project to verify whether the objectives were achieved. Feedback from those who work in the field is essential to understand whether the road taken was the right one, and if the ways in which the activities were organized were correct and consistent with the aims to be achieved. We chose to conduct a thorough analysis on a local level, and we distributed the questionnaire to a group of teachers who had directly participated in the project; hence, their assessment of the project activities is very reliable.

The survey aimed to gauge how effective the project was, particularly in elementary school, in improving the socialization and integration of foreign students. The questionnaire consisted of five questions with four possible answers (*Not at all*, *A little*, *Enough*, *A lot*). In addition there were two yes/no questions and two open-ended question, which asked the teachers which kind of difficulties they experienced, and which aspects of the project could be improved.

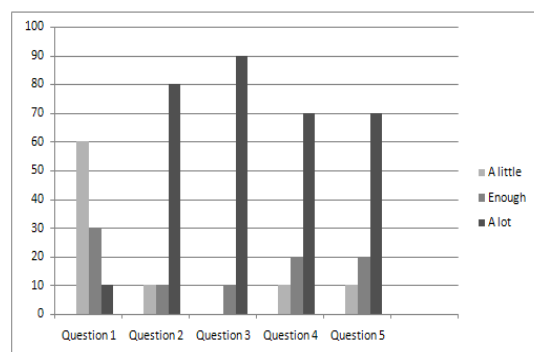
### Questionnaire for monitoring teachers participating in Sports Class Project

1. Have the Sports Class project activities helped to improve the physical education offerings in your school?
2. Has the participation of your school in the Sports Class project fostered socialization among students?
3. Do you have a positive view of the participation of your school in the Brothers-in-Sport educational activity

aiming to transmit the social values of sport to promote integration?

4. Have the proposed sports activities actually helped schoolchildren to become more aware of their foreign classmates?
5. Did you notice greater participation of foreign students during the Integration-relay game?
6. Have you experienced difficulties in implementing the Sports Class project?
7. If you have, what kind of difficulties?
8. Can you tell us about some aspects of the project that in your opinion could be improved?
9. Do you think it would be useful to expand the project to address all forms of diversity in the classroom as a way of preventing various social problems?

Based on an initial purely quantitative analysis of the graph (*Figure 4*), we can observe that there was a high level of satisfaction with the project. It is clear that, in the opinion of the teachers who were directly involved, the project was a positive experience. The most important finding that we can observe is that no respondents chose the *Not at all* option for questions 1 through 5: almost all of the respondents chose the options *Enough* or *A lot* with a clear prevalence of the latter.



**Figure 4. Percentage of answers to the first five questions of the questionnaire**

Analyzing the percentages of the responses to each question, we can observe that question 1 (Have the Sports class project activities helped to improve the physical education offerings in your school?) has the highest percentage of negative responses: the response *A little* constitutes almost 60% of the total. This is a significant finding, which appears to go against the general satisfaction with the type of activities carried out in the project, and suggests that, despite the validity of the initiative, the intervention was not considered

widespread or continuous enough to have a profound effect on an educational level.

The responses to question 1 may be related to the answers to open question 8 (Can you tell us about some aspects of the project that in your opinion could be improved?). Indeed, many teachers responded to this question expressing their desire to see greater involvement of the physical education expert, so that the project could become fully functional and achieve the goals it has set out. What seems to be lacking in the intervention is continuity. Even though the practical activities were held on a weekly basis, four hours a month of activities led by physical education experts does not appear to be enough.

It is important to reflect on the results obtained from question 3 (Do you have a positive view of the participation of your school in the Brothers-in-Sport educational activity aiming to transmit the social values of sport to promote integration?). This is the central question in the questionnaire if we consider the goal of our study: 90% of the respondents answered with A lot. We believe this result is very significant, even though the analytical sample is not large. The school recognizes the importance of transmitting the social values of sport to promote the integration of foreign students.

Regarding questions 4 and 5 on the relationship between sports games and the integration of foreigners, the games were viewed very positively. Combining several classes and promoting the relationship among children outside of the classroom offers a setting which appears to facilitate socialization between local and immigrant children. Most respondents answered both questions with A lot (70%).

Even the answers to question 2 on socialization in general, provides a very positive picture of the project (the answer A lot was selected by 80% of the respondents).

With regard to question 6 on problems encountered in the implementation of the project, some teachers reported some organizational difficulties in logistics, probably in connection with the use of the gyms, but they are clearly in favor of repeating the experience as a means of preventing other forms of social problems (question 9).

### Conclusions

Our investigation has confirmed the perceived value of sport in promoting values in line with the objectives of social tolerance and respect for others. The participating teachers have acknowledged that the sports activities in the project were effective in facilitating the integration of foreign children in the school.

The Sports class project, which relies on the unique ability of sport to foster both a child's sense of well-being and their sociality, is a path that we must continue to pursue. Sports offer a great opportunity to create better people from a social and relational standpoint.

Italian elementary school teachers have been shown to greatly appreciate the presence of qualified staff to teach physical education. This is because they do not think they have the necessary skills to teach this discipline, and because, on a purely practical level, they realize that doing physical activities in the gym with a class of children requires great deal of energy and constant attention, which is difficult to muster on a daily basis.

### Aknowledgements

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