INCLUSIVE SPORTS AND BEST PRACTICES

SPORT INCLUSIVI E BUONE PRATICHE

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ABSTRACT
This study presents a basketball-based motor program to promote school inclusion of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). The project involved 30 students aged 11 to 13 in 30 afternoon sessions. Pre- and post-intervention questionnaires and motor tests revealed average improvements of 20% in attention, collaboration, self-esteem, and space-time organization. The program encouraged well-being and active participation in the educational context.

Lo studio presenta un percorso motorio basato sulla pallacanestro per favorire l'inclusione scolastica di studenti con Bisogni Educativi Speciali (BES). Il programma ha coinvolto 30 ragazzi tra 11 e 13 anni in 30 incontri pomeridiani. Questionari e test motori somministrati prima e dopo hanno evidenziato miglioramenti medi del 20% in attenzione, collaborazione, autostima e abilità spazio-temporali. L'intervento ha favorito il benessere e la partecipazione attiva nel contesto educativo.

KEYWORDS
Special Educational Needs (SEN), inclusion, basketball, sport, best practices.
Bisogni Educativi Speciali (BES), inclusione, pallacanestro, sport, buone pratiche.

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1. Introduction

Inclusion (Ianes & Zagni, 2024) is a phenomenon that influences contemporary society. It emerges as the result of participation, support, and the contribution of countless variables that characterize and define various types of relationships, including those within family, social, school, or sports contexts.

An inclusive path, implemented through appropriate methodologies and the use of best practices, essentially aims to ensure the full inclusion of individuals within a context. This requires the use of a wide range of tools and, in the planning phase, a thorough knowledge and analysis of the individual and cultural conditions to be addressed. In other words, inclusion seeks to reduce disharmony and differences among individuals to be included.

The inclusion paradigm refers to a conceptual model in which society is viewed as a human-scale community. In this vision, sport serves as a privileged vehicle for promoting the right of individuals to be considered equal to others, while still recognizing their differences. Procedural efforts aim to respect the needs and requirements of all individuals. This involves organizing learning environments and related activities in a way that allows everyone to participate in the life of the group, class, or team. The goal is to promote the acquisition of skills in the most active, autonomous, and meaningful way possible.

Inclusive activity (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002) expands the educational perspective. It moves beyond, yet still draws on, the previous model of school integration, where integration was seen as a process aimed at making an individual part of a community. However, this approach also requires the individual's ability to adapt to the host community. For this reason, equating inclusion with integration remains problematic, as the two represent fundamentally different approaches.

These considerations clearly highlight the need, in the educational field, to implement appropriate tools that allow each child or young person to benefit from educational resources suited to their needs—without requiring them to adapt to the needs of others. In this sense, the principle of inclusion is essential. Communities are structured in different contexts—family, social, school, and sports—but among them, the school environment, particularly during the developmental and post-adolescent stages, is where phenomena of inclusion, exclusion, marginalization, and conflict are most strongly amplified.

School inclusion must therefore address educational emergencies by developing appropriate didactic responses in suitable learning environments.

The concept of inclusion (Banks et al., 2015) finds its fullest expression within the school environment. Schools are places of transition, where minors can meet their needs for protection and autonomy, discover their potential and abilities, and explore both self-knowledge and knowledge of the world. Together with the family, school plays a fundamental role in the cognitive and emotional development of children and adolescents. It represents a privileged space for socialization and the development of individual autonomy (Bailey, 2006).

In this growth environment, various dimensions converge within Special Educational Needs (SEN), overlapping and intersecting: the perspectives of teachers, parents, peers, and the child. To conduct a comprehensive and accurate analysis of SEN in the pursuit of inclusive objectives, it is essential to gather information on the child's relationships with peers, teachers, and parents. This enables a global—and above all circular—understanding of the situation.

A forward-looking and alternative perspective allows inclusion to be pursued through interventions involving the collaboration of multiple systems—family, school, social, and sports. These efforts support transitions from cooperation to competition and from exclusion to involvement.

According to the Italian Ministerial Directive of December 27, 2012, SEN include all students who, even without a formal diagnosis, experience learning or inclusion difficulties due to disabilities, specific developmental disorders (such as SLD and ADHD), or social, cultural, and linguistic disadvantages. The directive promotes inclusive education for all through personalized learning plans, the use of compensatory and dispensatory tools, and collaboration among teachers, families, and local support networks via the territorial support centers (Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito, 2012).

During development, individuals face numerous everyday challenges, often perceived as failure or frustration. Consequently, they tend to evaluate their own abilities by observing peer behaviors, particularly those related to movement and social interaction. The ability to perform these activities effectively often determines whether predefined goals are achieved.

The motivations that drive individuals to engage in physical activity (Duda et al., 1995; Vitale & Weydahl, 2017) and sport are varied and subjective. They may include the desire to understand motor patterns and perform well, to compete

with others, to have fun, to feel part of a group (Di Onofrio et al., 2019), or to overcome personal limits.

In this regard, best practices were adopted to develop inclusive sports activities, with a focus on promoting group collaboration through basketball. These practices aim to strengthen relationships and enhance self-esteem.

One of the main reasons people choose to engage in physical activity is the gratification of body kinesthesia. This refers to the satisfaction experienced in moving one's body and feeling the efficiency of major physiological systems, particularly the locomotor system. It involves perceiving one's muscles as strong, active, and capable of producing harmonious and effective movement.

Sport and physical activity also have a profound influence on stress and anxiety management, the reduction of depression, the regulation of interpersonal skills, and the development of self-esteem (Bandura, 2000). They contribute significantly to achieving psychological and relational balance.

Sport helps individuals rediscover and value new parts of themselves. It enables them to redefine their identity and strengthen their ability to cope with difficulties, problems, and everyday challenges. The value system of sport is not incompatible with the educational value system. On the contrary, it fosters a dialectical progression from individuality to team dynamics. It promotes participation in structured environments governed by shared rules and nurtures a sense of belonging to a community.

2. The socio-pedagogical dimension of sport in the inclusive path

Play has long been regarded as a recreational activity reserved for children and adolescents. However, numerous scholars have also highlighted its significance in adulthood. The specific benefits of play include activating the major body systems, fostering relationships with others, and stimulating the prevention of health issues typical of the aging process. These features identify play as an activity inherently tied to the human condition.

The importance of play cannot be reduced to a simple quantitative or qualitative classification. Rather, it lies in a combination of physiological, psychological, educational, and relational factors that emerge during the act of playing. These elements play a crucial role in the developmental process during the formative years. They provide a sense of security, help define personal identity and offer opportunities to test levels of autonomy.

Play is thus an effective learning tool with a multidimensional function. It engages the whole person in social interaction while fostering motor, emotional, and relational skills. The spontaneity that play encourages enables developing individuals to connect with people and objects around them, stimulating both interest and participation.

The developmental process can initially be supported by spontaneous play. This can then evolve into guided activities, eventually leading to participation in structured motor and sports activities. Play serves as the first bridge between the child and reality. Group play promotes inclusion from a pedagogical perspective (Di Palma & Di Lorenzo, 2024).

Among sports, basketball is particularly notable for its high variability. This is due to the unpredictability of its game phases and the open skills that athletes must master quickly and accurately. Basketball is a situational sport (Calvo et al., 2010) in which every second brings change. The game evolves continuously through technical and tactical offensive and defensive actions, often without interruption, aside from pauses dictated by the rules.

The unique characteristics of basketball effectively stimulate the major body systems. They help enhance psychophysical balance while emphasizing core elements such as passing, shooting, and collaboration (Erculj & Strumbelj, 2015).

Especially among young people, basketball supports learning. The body becomes a powerful mediator of knowledge, contributing to the development of motor and cognitive skills, a sense of teamwork and competition, self-organization, and self-management. It also supports cognitive processes essential for identifying and applying effective solutions to challenges.

Promoting these qualities in growing individuals positively influences their psychological development. It encourages a more adequate understanding of social dynamics, supporting inclusion and alignment on both a physical-technical and emotional level (Liperini & Testi, 2017), the latter being a fundamental dimension of sport.

The emotional spectrum that sport can evoke is vast, ranging from joy and enthusiasm to discouragement and disappointment. Emotional experiences vary widely. Thus, self-control, effective emotion and stress management, and a healthy level of competitiveness become essential attitudes to be transferred to the sports field (Molisso et al., 2019). In this sense, sport represents a privileged context in which individuals learn to listen to, recognize, and manage their emotions.

3. Best practices

Attention to the proper development of personal characteristics led to the adoption of best practices aimed at identifying a sport capable of providing educational, training, and technical value within a growth path oriented toward inclusion.

Best practices should contribute to the creation of more inclusive and safer sports environments for both boys and girls. They must also address key issues such as the prevention of abuse, the support of resilience among all participants, and the promotion of a healthy and protective sports culture. The protection of children in sports—and of adults as well—is not only a necessity, but also a moral and legal imperative. It is essential to uphold the right to grow, learn, and enjoy oneself in a sporting environment that respects diversity and, above all, the human being as such (Montesano et al., 2013).

After evaluating various possibilities, a hypothesis was formulated to study students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) within a team sports context. The chosen sport was basketball, as it allows for the progressive development of technical skills and spatial awareness—both essential for achieving positive competitive outcomes. In addition, it facilitates the development of disciplinary concepts such as timing and spacing (Montesano & Tafuri, 2017). These become evident through the correct execution of individual and team fundamentals, which are acquired after learning concepts such as front, back, left, right, above, below, proximity, movement, and succession.

The benefits of sports practice, therefore, extend beyond the development and enhancement of major body systems. They also influence behavior, attention, and concentration. Anamnesis and observation often reveal whether motor behavior reflects the proper acquisition of body schema and basic motor patterns, as well as coordinative and conditional abilities. These factors contribute to the construction—or redefinition—of motor identity, which is an integral component of personal identity.

SEN individuals (Cornoldi et al., 2015) often exhibit learning and/or relational difficulties (Novak, 2001), which may not be supported by a clinical or functional diagnosis. These difficulties must be addressed through diversified educational strategies that take into account areas of learning, personal experience, and significant life events. Such factors influence the entire course of a person's life and can shape either positive or negative interpersonal relationships.

4. Materials and methods

4.1 Participants

In line with the adoption of good training practices, a study aimed at promoting school inclusion was conducted on 30 students identified as having Special Educational Needs (SEN) (Eather et al., 2023). The sample included 18 males and 12 females, aged between eleven and thirteen years, all engaged in amateur-level basketball.

4.2 Study

The study was carried out over a total period of six months during the 2023–2024 school year. It included one month of observation and five months of active intervention. The working hypothesis was to assess the specific needs of the students (Cornoldi et al., 2005) and to design a motor program involving participation in team sports activities (Afacan & Kılıç, 2021) alongside peers without SEN.

4.3 Objectives

The primary aim of the project was to promote inclusion by encouraging participation in an inclusive sport (Block & Zeman, 1996; Vogler et al., 2000), with basketball selected as the primary activity. The objectives focused on fostering relationships and collaboration, developing motor skills, and enhancing self-esteem. Specific attention was given to the areas of coordination, space-time organization, and knowledge of sport and basketball (Messina, 2004; Ramsden et al., 2023).

4.4 Methods and procedures

The initial assessment consisted of administering a knowledge questionnaire and motor tests (Marella & Risaliti, 2007) to the SEN students. These tests aimed to evaluate their coordinative (Montesano et al., 2016) and conditional abilities, identify areas of difficulty, and design an effective motor program. Afternoon training sessions also involved, on a rotating and voluntary basis, peers not identified as SEN.

The methodology was based on developing a group motor path (Comoglio & Cardoso, 1996) designed to help students acquire both motor and transversal

skills. These included improvements in social interactions and performance in both sports and academic contexts.

At the outset, SEN students demonstrated difficulties in attention, self-esteem, and interpersonal relationships, particularly in the humanities (e.g., Italian). In terms of motor skills, they showed poor coordination, limited space-time organization, insufficient knowledge of sports, and difficulties working in groups.

At the end of the intervention, the same questionnaire and motor tests were re-administered to assess improvements. Ongoing trial data collected during the sessions were also included in the final evaluation.

4.5 Training

The motor program consisted of thirty afternoon training sessions (Weineck, 2000), each lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. The first four sessions focused on the theoretical and practical formation of sports groups. The following eight sessions were dedicated to the acquisition and development of coordinative and conditional abilities.

Exercises followed a "work in progress" approach, using gym circuits that alternated between coordinative and conditional tasks. These circuits, composed of various gym stations, aimed to develop eye-hand coordination, spatial organization, rhythm, dribbling and passing techniques, execution speed, and the endurance required for basketball. The equipment used included basketballs, cones, sticks, mats, elastic bands, and hoops. Each session concluded with shooting exercises.

Four sessions were allocated to free play and to the verbalization and transcription of emotions and skills acquired. Another four focused on learning the rules of the game and experimenting with the roles defined by basketball regulations.

The next six sessions emphasized collaboration and problem-solving in unexpected game situations. The final four sessions included simulated games and further reflection activities. These simulations were held in the gym using audiovisual tools (PlayStation), with games provided by the students. Students alternated in using the controllers within timed intervals.

After each simulation, coaches led a circle-time activity (Brandani & Rizzardi, 2005), inviting students to sit in a circle and reflect on the game phases, skills learned, and emotions experienced during the practical and simulated exercises. Each participant described their experiences, highlighting strengths and

weaknesses in performance and emotion management. An external observer recorded these reflections on a structured form.
At the conclusion of the program, the initial questionnaire and motor tests were re-administered to evaluate progress.

5. Data analysis and results

The collection and analysis of data were carried out at the beginning and at the end of the path. The initial information made it possible to draft the afternoon motor program, while the final information highlighted the progress of the SEN students, with an improvement of about 20% in the area of relationships and collaboration difficulties, as well as the strengthening of self-esteem and the reduction of motor difficulties.

Skills and Abilities Assessed	Initial assessment		Final assessment		
	Number of students	Difficulties in %	Number of students	Difficulties in %	% Difference Final - Initial
Attention	22	73,3	16	53,3	+20
Relationship	18	60	13	43,3	+16,7
Self-esteem	28	93,3	22	73,3	+20
Collaboration	21	70	14	46,6	+23,4
Coordination	19	63,3	12	40	+23,3
Space-time organization	24	80	21	70	+10
Group Work	22	73,3	15	50	+23,3

Table 1. Pre- and Post-Intervention Comparison of Assessed Skills in SEN Students

6. Discussion

Sport offers multiple benefits for personal growth. Primarily, it enhances physical well-being by reducing the incidence of diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disorders, and overweight, with positive effects on life expectancy. At the same time, these activities promote the development of relational skills, including collaboration, team spirit, and consideration for others. Moreover, sport provides an ideal educational context to foster individual and civic awareness, encouraging thoughtful decision-making and respectful behavior (Greco, 2024).

Several researchers have studied sport as a tool for inclusion and learning. According to Molisso and Tafuri (2020), sport acts as a global compensatory tool, promoting autonomy, self-determination, and self-awareness. Through motor activity, students with SEN develop greater self-efficacy, learn to manage their limitations, and transform difficulties into resources. Furthermore, it enhances emotional and relational skills, reducing the psychological discomfort related to academic challenges. A structured sports experience provides an inclusive environment that compensates for social fragility, fostering a positive redefinition of personal identity.

In this perspective, the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) model by Hellison (2011) is also relevant, having been successfully applied in educational contexts with at-risk students or those with behavioral difficulties. This approach, which integrates physical activity with objectives of personal and social responsibility, has proven effective in promoting rule compliance, self-control, collaboration, and behavioral reflection. TPSR allows work on both motor skills and relational and emotional dimensions, making it particularly useful in inclusive settings involving students with SEN.

An innovation of recent years is Baskin (Bodini & Capellini, 2010), a fusion of "basketball" and "inclusion." This sport features adapted rules that allow the active participation of people with and without SEN of all ages and abilities. Players belong to the same team and are placed in conditions that enable them to contribute meaningfully to achieving victory. Qualitative studies show that Baskin fosters prosocial behavior, empathy, and well-being among participants, while also improving motor, relational, and emotional skills—especially in students with disabilities. In 2006, the Baskin Association linked the sport to the Italian law on school inclusion for students with SEN, making it a recognized "best practice."

The present study conducted on 30 students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), within a structured and inclusive environment led by sound educational practices, demonstrated that a well-structured and targeted motor program can lead to significant improvements in relational and collaborative behaviors, as well as in the acquisition and expression of motor skills.

The comparison of data collected before and after the intervention showed an average improvement of around 20%. Peaks of over 23% were observed in collaboration, coordination, and teamwork. Attention increased by 20%, as did self-esteem. Moreover, relational interactions between subjects and space-time organization also improved, though to a lesser extent. In 2006, the Baskin

Association linked the sport to the Italian law on school inclusion for students with SEN, making it a recognized “best practice.”

The effectiveness of the research hypothesis is supported by the educational and sporting impact observed among the participants. Students with SEN showed better performance in technical fundamentals and in the development of game phases during matches. They also overcame inhibitions related to oral expression, demonstrated greater willingness to verbalize and write about their experiences, and showed a different attitude towards learning difficulties, which was also evident in academic subjects.

However, these results should not lead to the mistaken belief that the objectives were achieved easily. The percentage improvements observed must be interpreted in light of certain factors. In particular, 70% of the students with special educational needs involved had never previously participated in a systematically planned motor program involving group activities; they had only experienced recreational activities.

Regular participation in afternoon sessions and the awareness that the program was aimed at supporting learning and personal development—rather than evaluating performance—encouraged students with special educational needs to engage actively and without anxiety. The calm and supportive environment further contributed to the development of a consistent working pace, essential for effective problem-solving.

7. Conclusions

The study highlighted how a structured motor program centered on basketball and shaped by inclusive best practices can serve as an effective tool to promote school inclusion for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN).

The results showed significant improvements in relational, emotional, and motor-cognitive areas, with an average progress of 20% in the initially critical domains and peaks of 23.4% in collaboration and group work. These outcomes confirm the educational value of team sports, particularly basketball, as a means of encouraging active participation and overcoming socio-emotional barriers, especially when a non-evaluative approach is adopted and the learning environment is calm and motivating. The methodology employed, based on progressive sessions, shared reflection moments, and simulations, supported a conscious reworking of the acquired skills. It would be interesting to explore the

applicability of similar models to other inclusive sports, such as Baskin, or in out-of-school contexts.

In practical terms, the results of this study support the integration of sports programs designed according to pedagogical principles within regular educational curricula. Basketball, due to its collaborative and situational nature, stands out as a privileged activity for valuing diversity, promoting psychophysical well-being, and building genuinely inclusive educational environments.

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