

## E.U. COMMISSION'S AND SCHOOL'S ROLE IN SPORT PRACTICE

**Consuelo Diodati**

*Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science –  
University of Teramo, Italy*

**Abstract:** *In contemporary societies the amount of people who do not practice sports is growing, as a multifactorial phenomenon. To face such a problem different socialization agencies can play an important role in stimulating people to stay active: the school, the family, and the medical basic district, but even the state itself can cooperate at stimulating the importance of sport, also through advertising promotion campaigns, as well as by law and incentives. Its relevance has become such that the European Commission is working on a consistent set of initiatives dedicated to sport and physical activity, as great contributors to the health and well-being of European citizens. Interviews on this topic were conducted with sports teachers. School and sports are, in fact, important vehicles for educating young people and promoting universal values, such as peace, loyalty, health, inclusion, gender equality, and democratic and sustainable growth, but they can't be left alone. They need to be better sustained by legislation.*

**Keywords:** *sport practice, youth, school, European Commission*

### 1. Sports practice decreasing

Liquid societies are implied in a phenomenon of non-participation of the subjects, which also involves sports activities. In this context, all socialization agencies can play a decisive role in stimulating people to stay active. School, in particular, has an important role in educating young people towards loyalty, democracy, and sustainable growth. Of course, the school can't be left alone, but accompanied by families, medical basic district and the government themselves, can be the bearer of an approach aimed at stimulating the importance of sport, also through advertising promotion campaigns, as well as by law providing incentives of various kinds.

Italian schools have always oriented their didactic physical education programs on fair play in sport as in society, and related values, even where possible by making connections with famous athletes or ex-athletes to reinforce the message. In all classes attention is paid to the key skills of citizenship, on fair play, such as respect for the game, the partner, and the rules, therefore it is an educational and training didactic for boys and girls; during the student championships they implement this fair play, everyone likes to win, but the aim is teaching them to win honestly.

The need to reiterate these elements becomes necessary because sporting practice implies the will to assert oneself through competition, in a situation in

which the means to satisfy this desire to win decreases and as Merton (1949) says there is not enough discredit of illicit means to achieve certain results, pervaded by the myth of the good guys who always win in the end, in a competitive dynamic, little inclined to compassion for the loser.

Sport in itself is also oriented towards sustainability, in particular sport as an outdoor activity and as a means to intercultural dialogue. At the institutional level, there have been consistent sets of initiatives aimed at promoting sporting activity, supported by the European Union, the European Week of Sport itself, promoted by the European Commission oriented from the belief that sport and physical activity contribute to the health and well-being of European citizens –the basis is the decrease in physical activity practice– as well as the promotion of values such as sustainability, peace and loyalty. The relationship between body and physical activity can be considered an essential expression of social facts, a space of corporeity as a struggle against limits, of the self and relationship making a space of unwritten culture, and even more importantly in liquid/global societies a process of reappropriation and construction of identities. Over time, instead, the lack of sports participation has become more accentuated and, in the Italian case, neither the number of sports facilities nor the number of practitioners has increased significantly; in particular, mass sports practice appears to be little encouraged, if not discouraged and professional sport is exalted as a predominantly televised passive spectacle. The multi-purpose survey of the Italian National Statistical Institute notes that the lack of sports practice in Italy is a growing phenomenon to the point of speaking of physical inactivity or general sedentary lifestyle for both sexes (evidencing their increase after the COVID-19 pandemic).

**Table 1 – Italian Lack of Sport Practice**

Anno	M	F	GAP
2013	38.0%	54.0%	16.0%
2017	51.0%	71.0%	20.0%
2022	62.0%	70.0%	8.0%

\* Istat, 2021.

Despite the great potential of sports in individual well-being, there are increased difficulties in the involvement in its practice, in particular concerning young people. The pandemic has worsened the condition of a sedentary lifestyle confining them in their houses, locked inside their problem, mostly alone, and without any motivation to go out or play sports. Though different in each country, the percentage of young people playing sports is widely low (Smith, 2023).

**Table 2 – Age and Sports Practice**

AGE	15/24	25/39	40/54	55
%	54.0%	42.0%	32.0%	21.0%

\* European Commission, 2022.

Of the 45.0% of Europeans who do not play sports, many are young people, who should not have major time constraints that would prevent them from playing sports. 15/24 years old exercise or practice sports with some regularity, only in 54.0% of cases. This percentage decreases with advancing age: from 42.0% in the age group between 25 and 39 years to 32.0%, between 40 and 54 years old, falling to 21.0% among people aged 55 and over. Overall, the Euro-barometer shows that respondents who regularly exercise for recreational or non-sporting reasons do not form the majority in any EU Member State. Among the many initiatives to stimulate people to greater physical activity, there's also the European Week of Sport, an event that extends to the entire European continent and all organizations, associations and sports communities, both amateur and competitive. The *Healthy Lifestyle 4 All* is an initiative launched in September 2021 as a two-year campaign to link sports and healthy lifestyles to health, food and other policy areas. The aim is to promote healthy lifestyles, across generations and social groups, highlighting how everyone can benefit from activities that improve health and well-being. The initiative is open to sports movements, public authorities and civil society organizations.

As a matter of fact, among those interviewed in the Euro-barometer survey 74.0% of those who practice a sport note how it improves their professional and studying behavior, which increasingly depends on a type of skill that is acquired slowly and through constant practice; similarly, the importance of quick reflexes and self-confidence is growing, all elements that develop with a certain degree of relaxation ability that sport helps to build and maintain (Décamps et al., 2012).

It must also be underlined that sports sociology studies originated in the United States and refer to racial minorities (which are very present in sports), professionalism, amateur practice, loyalty, and media pressure. The values linked to the psycho-physical health of the subjects emerge only as a second instance, as do those of solidarity, peace, sustainability, etc.

The European Union has an important role in promoting such values and sports participation, in fact, the Euro-barometer survey absorbs these assumptions, highlighting how the main reason why one carries out physical activity is the desire to improve one's health, followed by the desire to feel fitter and to find methods of relaxation, physical and mental well-being; all elements promoted by the Commission during the European Week of Sport.

Half of the practitioners express the desire to exercise outdoors, a desire which is supported by the Commission's efforts to make sport and physical activity properly greener and more sustainable; elements for which interventions by state bodies are necessary for the construction or maintenance of open public spaces.

According to those interviewed in the Eurobarometer research, the main obstacle to practising physical activity is a lack of time, followed by a lack of motivation or simply the absence of interest in the sport. In response, the *Health Life Style Commission Campaign* is committed to carrying out awareness-raising projects on the importance of a healthy lifestyle for all generations and social groups, including longitudinal studies on sports practice trends.

On the other hand, there's a high trend in exalting professional sport mostly as a televised passive spectacle since season tickets and tickets for live sporting events continue to concern a minority of the population and are not exactly safe. These elements develop projective sporting voyeurism, pushed to the point where those who simply watch sports from their sofa delude themselves into thinking they are sportsmen.

The prevailing problem in this way is that the potential of sport as a relational, participation, contact and closeness activity in compliance with civil rules, as well as a process of maintaining health, is completely underestimated. The absence of sporting activities during the COVID-19 pandemic has further affected the possibility of enjoying activities, as well as their quality (many are those who choose to continue sports at home), where the support of state bodies was practically nil, especially in terms of implementation. The message conveyed was to consider sport secondary to the emergency.

On the other hand, there are a whole series of physical skills that –staying at home and with excessive use of cell phones, computers, Play Stations– are less used and can become problematic: back problems (of varying degrees up to scoliosis); overweight problems; poor exposure to sunlight, therefore vitamin D deficiency; mobility and walking problems (children who no longer know how to run and walk correctly). These elements are also accompanied by a rapid epochal change and redefinition of everyday life.

The determined experience of time and space is non-linear and the very sense of duration and distance, the perception of which had been made liquid by information through television and by the widespread use of high-speed means of transport, is completely altered.... – Do one thing at a time and everything in its time, and – A place for everything and everything in its place. They are two precepts of traditional culture that have lost all rules and perhaps their very meaning since new electronic devices have deconstructed the mental categories on which they were based... Until decades ago, space and time were conceived as absolute entities, external to the actor<sup>1</sup>.

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1. Faggiani G., 2012, p. 105.

## The research

The investigation of the phenomenon of school's role in educating young people about sports importance has used a qualitative methodology, by in-depth interviews with high school sports teachers to personally discuss the topics in a relaxed context; these have highlighted how in the school context, fair play and the values of sport are always included in the didactic programming of motor sciences, with attention to the key skills of citizenship, respect for the game, for one's partner, for the rules, therefore it is educational teaching and training for the kids, who implement this fair play during the student championships. Furthermore, the research was carried out always keeping in mind the data emerging from international tendencies (Carson et al., 2016).

The results show how in the opinion of those interviewed at school, the children understand this educational discourse very well, whereas, at a sporting level, particularly in football, the situation is more problematic, there is more competition, more careerism, more money and it may seem that the values are neglected, to the result; an element that is difficult to find in other sports team (least of all in volleyball, as there is no physical contact, but not even in basketball or rugby). They are important elements because children grow at school not only on an educational/cultural and educational level but also on a sporting one. In fact, in sports championships, the school aims above all at participation and where victory comes it must be deserved fairly precisely by being within an educational context. There is a student championship platform on which to register, but it is up to the teacher to reward the boy/girl who stands out for fair play, for which a prize has been established in student competitions, among all the regions of Italy who participate: helping a teammate or hugging each other even after losing a match.

It therefore emerges that within an institutional context sport can be promoted in line with the values of loyalty and well-being. For young people, however, peer pressure and support can be an important motivational force in long-term sports participation. The effect of this pressure is highlighted above all by the role played by friends. Where relative to parents, sporting activity is important but subordinate to other activities. In fact, of the 45.0% of Europeans who do not play sports, many are young people, who should not have major time constraints that would prevent them from playing sports. In reality, most international research highlights the substantial importance of parents or other reference adults in encouraging and supporting school-age children to regularly participate in sporting activities (Gustafson, 2006).

The paternal role, in particular, is crucial in initiating and supporting children in practising sports. If the family is supported by the group of peers/friends and the school in encouraging the boy/girl to continue sporting activity at a certain moment in life, the conditions for success in the chosen sport can be created.

As a result, sport becomes a source of pleasure, a means of self-satisfaction and maintenance of a long journey/desire for physical activity.

The body, moreover, becomes the means brought into play to compensate for a lack of symbolization processes, resulting from a broader condition of transformation of the person in developmental age, as well as of society as a whole, which equally implies the traditional agencies of socialization (especially family and school/universities). The results of the GPAQ (Global Physical Activity Questionnaire) and the IFIS (International Fitness Scale) questionnaire on the physical activity and nutrition of young people (20-25 years) showed a fair level of problems with eating habits, sleep, isolation, poor social life or sedentary one, until inactivity. These are elements that have undergone further problems during the Covid-19 pandemic to the point of identifying a Covidbesidy: abusive eating habits, consumption of comfort food, bad eating and sedentary lifestyle, which also translate into a set of inequalities in the fight against obesity. Excess weight in the pediatric age in Italy is equal to 36.0%, for overweight and 22.0% for obesity in the period 2020-22 (ISTAT, 2023). In this context, the School Canteen Observatory carries out a food education project with the European Union on children ages 6 to 11, since families no longer seem able to educate their children on these issues, as well and it happened with sustainability issues. Schools are now the main socialization agent on topics of collective interest. It is therefore essential to support them for education on the importance of sport and its values, through supranational legislation.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the commitment of the European Commission in trying to improve gender equality in sports, supported by the results of the Euro-barometer: in fact, the gender gap among those who exercise regularly remains in favour of men. An encouraging aspect is found, however, in learning that the majority of those interviewed in 25 EU Member States declare that they follow men's and women's sports competitions in the media with equal interest. The Commission continues to monitor the situation, regularly relaunching a Special Euro-barometer to test trends in participation in sports and physical activity, aimed at collecting data on levels of physical activity in the European Union and information on the different contexts in which people exercise. The Special Euro-barometer survey on sport and physical activity is based, in fact, on the answers to approximately 20 questions from 26,580 European citizens from all 27 Member States, to illustrate trends in participation levels, preferences and barriers to sport as a basis for future policies. The availability of new Euro-barometer results on trends in physical activity and sports participation will support European-level activities on the operational and policy fronts. The results should feed into the Commission's actions to promote sport, healthy physical activity and a healthy lifestyle throughout Europe. These issues are increasingly important seeing that stress among the young generation has become a significant concern, worsened by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic crisis and impacting their mental

and physical well-being. Sports and related relaxation techniques are great self-management strategies for facing stress in young people, who often encounter stressors from families and academic pressures, social expectations, and personal challenges. From this perspective, sports linked with relaxation techniques can represent a way to empower the young generation to manage stressful situations and provide opportunities for skill development, long-term stress reduction and overall well-being.

It seems then necessary for scholars to spread more about the under-estimated benefits of sports on these aspects to start projects to make sports part of the extracurricular activities of university students and other young people. The EU Work Plan for Sport (2021-2024), adopted by the Council, also builds on previous Eurobarometer surveys, allowing for comparative analysis over time as a basis for further policy development of sport at the European level. The #BeActive campaign was also designed in this perspective, officially launched on 23 June 2022: International Olympic Day, involving exemplary figures from the world of sport, with whom young people and beyond could identify, with attention to issues such as sustainability, inclusion, equality and healthy lifestyle (Biancucci, 1974) across Europe, including the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries, in the belief that sport and physical activity contribute substantially to the health and well-being of European citizens. This experience is a further attempt to respond and relaunch sporting activity, encouraging Europeans of all ages to lead a healthy and active lifestyle.

## Conclusions

In the conclusions, it appears relevant to underline the role of Institutions such as the European Parliament in the improvement of certain citizen activities, such as sports.

As evidenced by the sociologist Robert King Merton, social structures exert greater or lesser pressure on some members of society, to induce them to behave in a conformist manner, rather than non-conformist one and deduce that «certain forms of deviant behavior are as normal psychologically as conformist behavior is... every social group combines the cultural objectives it sets with a regulation, which draws its roots from customs and institutions, of procedures legitimate to strive for these objectives» (Merton, 1971, p. 300). In particular, he notes how the tendency to act in a non-conformist or delinquent manner varies depending on the institutional importance given to certain goals and their achievement, through the institutional means with which one is equipped to reach them. «An extreme case of this type occurs when the series of alternative procedures is regulated only by technical rules and not by institutional rules. In this hypothetical extreme case, any or all procedures that achieve the most important goal would be permissible» (ibid., p. 301). In sports, for example when the goal of

victory is stripped of its institutional accessories, and success is made to consist in 'winning the game', the use of means that are technically efficient although illegitimate is implicitly rewarded. Those who violate the rules would be aware of this but would have little incentive to do otherwise.

In line with such perspective, society itself would push subjects towards situations of role conflict since on the one hand it exalts the value of honesty, on the other hand, that of cooperation: the example is that of the task in class for which the value of honesty would require students not to copy or have others copy; meanwhile, the value of cooperation would imply mutual help, therefore, excessive pressure develops on the subjects to act according to expectations in which they have no actual involvement, leading to deviance rather than conformity (a very pertinent situation in some countries such as Italy or Russia and less so in other contexts, in which the sense of honesty prevails).

The value or meaning of one rather than the other appears obscure in its motivations, as in the recognitions; furthermore, the possible culturally accepted behavioral alternatives are strictly limited, so the margins for possible adaptation are affected by the same narrowness. Therefore, in some cases, the set of sacrifices that conformity to the rules entails is not supported in any way. The set of these needs can, also be exploited by the mass media in the methods of packaging sports news oriented towards psychological characteristics of transposition, specifically the readers' aggression and frustration, without any connection with competitive sporting activity. The tones are exaggerated and often refer to the mythology of heroes at war against occult forces, which in everyday life, men are unable to identify and fight well. The final result is a reduction of sport to a mere spectacle, an element of escape for an audience that has little or nothing to do with real sport, discouraged, surrogate, and experienced in an almost exclusively passive way (Biancucci, 1974).

Has exposed an essential role that can be played by schools as educational institutions, a bridge between private/family life and society, and a socialization agency still capable of transmitting the set of norms and values implicit in sports. 74.0% of those who practice a sport note how it improves their professional behavior, which increasingly depends on a type of skill that is acquired slowly and through constant practice; similarly, the importance of quick reflexes and self-confidence is growing, all elements that develop with a certain degree of maturity and that sport helps to develop and maintain. Some people, thus even if they are tired, go on to make further efforts to "get more tired", but the fact of doing it for themselves makes the difference, as a moment of reconquered freedom, escape from alienation, self-affirmation, of the ability to breathe and listen to the world around you.

Furthermore, many of the values of sporting practice can be traced back to those of peace and inclusiveness, gender equality, cooperation and loyalty, in es-

establishing a variety of relationships with the group (Appadurai, 1986). These are values that must be accompanied by a clear supporting regulatory framework.

Sport alone will not solve all our problems but, in addition to the obvious benefits for our health, it also has the unique potential to connect us and to make us feel part of a community. Sport has an important role to play in building cohesive societies, one of the greatest challenges for Europe today (Margaritis Schinas, 2022)

Learning and adaptation are found above all in the ancient practice of walking as the basic physical movement that constitutes humanity's first step on earth: by walking man realizes his growth, and he knows, he transforms physically and mentally. The environment itself changes through thoughts and actions, symbolic movements that communicate to others, and expressive forms in which the motor possibilities of the body - sport, dance, play - develop to the maximum, essential in an orientation towards democratic and sustainable growth. As quoted by the 1 art. Of the International Charter for Physical Education, Activity and Sports:

The practice of physical education, physical activity and sports is a fundamental right for everyone

1.1 Every human being has the fundamental right to physical education, physical activity and sport, without discrimination based on [...]

1.2 [...] must be supported by all government, sporting and educational institutions.

1.3 Inclusive, adapted and safe opportunities for participation in physical education, physical activity and sport must be guaranteed to all human beings, in particular (UNESCO, 2015).

The relationship between body and physical activity is essential as an expression of social facts, a space of corporeity as a struggle against limits, of the making of the self and relationships, a space of unwritten culture, and even more importantly in liquid/global societies as a process of reappropriation of the self and the construction of identities.

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