

# *Sport as a Tool for Inclusion and Sustainability in Secondary School: A Qualitative-Quantitative Analysis*

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## *Abstract*

Sport promotes social inclusion and sustainability in schools. This mixed-method study, conducted in a secondary school in Naples, examines the impact of an innovative sports program on inclusion and sense of belonging, aligned with the UN 2030 Agenda. A total of 100 students participated, with an experimental group engaging in cooperative sports and a control group following traditional physical education. Results showed improved peer collaboration and a 15% increase in belonging and 12% in inclusion in the experimental group. The study highlights the role of structured sports in fostering cohesion, well-being, and inclusive school communities.

*Keywords:* Social inclusion, Sustainability in education, Cooperative sports didactic, Sense of belonging, Inclusive physical education

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## **Introduction**

Social inclusion and building sustainable communities represent fundamental challenges in the contemporary educational context. Schools, as environments of formation and growth, have a responsibility to promote educational practices that encourage the active participation of all pupils, regardless of their individual and social characteristics (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). In this framework, sport, understood as structured and collaborative

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physical activity, can play a crucial role in fostering social cohesion, reducing inequalities and promoting sustainability values (UN, 2015).

Numerous studies highlight the educational potential of sport in the school context. According to Bailey et al. (2009), participation in sports programmes not only promotes physical health, but also the social and psychological development of students. Sport can promote the integration of students with special educational needs and increase their self-esteem and sense of belonging to the school community (Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000). In addition, Côté and Fraser-Thomas (2007) point out that playing sport in school can promote the development of social-emotional skills that are essential for adult life.

This study aims to investigate the role of sport in building inclusive communities in a secondary school in Naples, specifically exploring the sense of belonging and integration among students. The research falls within the theoretical framework of inclusive education (Slee, 2011) and community pedagogy (Wenger, 1998), paying particular attention to the benefits of sport in facilitating positive relational dynamics among peers (Holt et al., 2017).

The study aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda, specifically:

- Goal 3: Health and well-being, promoting healthy lifestyles through physical activity (World Health Organization, 2018).
- Goal 4: Quality education, ensuring equal learning opportunities and reducing barriers to schooling (UNESCO, 2020).
- Goal 10: Reduce inequalities by promoting the integration of students from diverse backgrounds and fostering mutual respect (Coalter, 2013).
- Goal 11: Sustainable cities and communities, creating more inclusive and participatory school environments by sharing sports spaces and strengthening social relations (Spaaij, 2013).

Several studies have shown that sport can be an effective tool for promoting active citizenship and sustainable development (Schulenkorf, 2012). Indeed, the practice of sport not only improves students' quality of life but also contributes to the formation of values such as cooperation, respect and inclusion (Donnelly & Coakley, 2002). According to Fraser-Thomas et al. (2005), well-structured physical activity programmes can foster a sense of belonging and trust among peers, which are fundamental to creating more cohesive school communities. In particular, physical activity promotes psychological well-being and reduces the risk of social isolation among adolescents (Eime et al., 2013). The opportunity to share common goals through sport helps students develop meaningful relationships and overcome cultural and language barriers (García Bengoechea et al., 2017). According

to Putnam's (2000) theory of social capital, collective participation experiences, such as sport, foster the creation of strong social networks, which are essential for the well-being of communities.

In light of these considerations, this study aims to analyse how sport can contribute to building more inclusive and sustainable school communities, focusing on students' sense of belonging and integration.

## Methods

The aim of this study is to analyse how the practice of sport can promote the construction of inclusive and sustainable school communities in a secondary school in Naples, with particular attention to the sense of belonging to the peer group and the integration of students. The research fits into the theoretical framework of inclusive education (Booth & Ainscow, 2011) and community pedagogy (Wenger, 1998), assessing the impact of sport on relational dynamics and social cohesion processes.

Several studies have shown that participation in sporting activities can promote school integration and improve students' emotional well-being, contributing to a more equitable and welcoming environment (Eime et al., 2013). In particular, Putnam's (2000) theory of social capital highlights how collective participation experiences, such as sport, can strengthen social bonds and foster peer support. Furthermore, Coalter (2013) highlights how physical activity structured from an inclusive perspective can reduce educational inequalities and promote active citizenship.

In light of these premises, this study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of an innovative motor education programme based on cooperation and inclusion in comparison to the traditional competitive model, thus contributing to the discussion on educational strategies to foster equity and social inclusion in schools.

### - *Research Design*

The study adopts a qualitative-quantitative approach to analyse the impact of sport on school inclusion and the sense of belonging among students in a secondary school in Naples. The aim is to understand how the practice of sport influences relational dynamics and the perception of inclusion within the school community. The integration of qualitative and quantitative methods allows for a more complete understanding of the phenomenon, avoiding the limitations that would result from using only one methodological approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

### - *Qualitative analysis*

For the qualitative analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both teachers and students, belonging to both the sample group (students involved in sport activities) and the control group (students not involved in sport activities). The interviews were constructed around themes related to perceptions of inclusion, participation in group dynamics and the role of sport in facilitating the building of social relationships (Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

In particular, the following aspects were investigated:

- Pupils' participation in group activities during sports lessons and in everyday school life, taking into account the role of sport in strengthening collaborative dynamics (Bailey, 2006).
- Perceptions of peer support and the role of sport in fostering positive interpersonal relationships, an aspect highlighted by studies showing that collective physical activity can improve social skills (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005).
- The sense of belonging to the school community, with a focus on the interaction between students of different abilities, socio-cultural backgrounds and levels of sporting performance, in line with the literature on sport as a tool for inclusion (Eime et al., 2013).
- Teachers' views on the contribution of sport to classroom cohesion and the reduction of episodes of exclusion or discrimination, in line with research highlighting the importance of sport in school integration (García Bengoechea et al., 2017).

MAXQDA software, a dedicated programme for qualitative analysis of textual data, was used to analyse the qualitative data. The analysis followed an inductive approach, identifying emerging categories from the interview transcripts, with a focus on the concepts of inclusion, active participation and social cohesion. The use of digital tools for qualitative analysis improves the accuracy of identifying patterns and recurring themes (Silver & Lewins, 2014).

#### - *Quantitative analysis*

The quantitative analysis was based on the administration of two standardised instruments to measure school inclusion and sense of belonging:

- Sense of School Belonging Scale (SOS): used to assess students' level of identification with the school community, perception of peer and teacher support, and level of involvement in school activities (Goodenow, 1993).
- Inclusive Processes Rating Scale (SVPI): used to measure perceptions of school inclusion by analysing dimensions such as active participation in lessons, relationships with peers and perceptions of equity and accessibility of educational activities (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

Questionnaires were administered to both groups (sample and control), before and after the observation period of the sports activities, to assess any changes in levels of inclusion and sense of belonging. The use of validated psychometric instruments allows for reliable data that can be compared with previous studies.

The data collected were analysed using inferential statistical techniques, with the aim of identifying any significant differences between groups and verifying the impact of sport on perceptions of inclusion in school. Quantitative analysis was conducted using SPSS software, which enabled statistical tests to measure the effectiveness of the sport intervention on perceptions of inclusion (Field, 2018).

The integration of qualitative and quantitative methods allows for a deeper and more comprehensive view of the phenomenon under study, combining the interpretation of individual experiences with measurable and objective data. This approach allows for triangulation of findings and strengthens the validity of conclusions (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

- *Participants and sampling*

The study was conducted in a secondary school in Naples, specifically in a second grade class, with the aim of examining the impact of sport on inclusion and the sense of belonging to a peer group.

The sample consisted of 100 pupils aged between 11 and 14, 40 of whom were from abroad. In addition, 10 physical education and humanities teachers participated in the study with the aim of observing and evaluating inclusion processes within sport and school dynamics.

The students were selected on the basis of their participation in school sports programmes and divided into two groups:

- Control group (50 students): continued with traditional physical education classes, following the standard school curriculum.
- Sample group (50 students): participated in an innovative motor education programme, characterised by structured sports activities with a specific focus on inclusion and cooperation.

Both groups included 20 foreign students to ensure an equal distribution of cultural diversity and to assess possible differences in integration processes between the control and sample groups. This aspect was crucial for analysing the role of sport as a tool for social inclusion and for understanding whether and how physical activity can facilitate interaction between students from different cultural backgrounds.

The students' inclusion in the study was based on specific criteria:

- Attend the seventh grade of the school under study.
- Not failing at school, in order to ensure homogeneity in the level of cognitive and emotional development of the participants.

- Being of foreign origin (in the case of non-Italian students), but having lived in Italy for at least one year and having a minimum level of knowledge of the Italian language that would allow them to participate actively in sports activities and social interactions.

The study took place over 8 months, with 6 hours per week dedicated to sports activities.

## **Description of the educational intervention**

The educational intervention was structured to analyse the impact of sports practice on the sense of belonging and school inclusion, with a clear differentiation between the activities carried out by the sample group and the control group. Both groups participated in 6 hours of motor activity per week for a period of 8 months, with different teaching methods to assess the effectiveness of an innovative approach based on cooperation and inclusion compared to traditional motor education teaching.

### *- Control group: traditional physical education*

The control group followed a motor education programme in accordance with ministerial guidelines, with a predominantly technical and performance focus. The activities were structured in modules dedicated to the development of individual motor skills and the practice of codified sports, without an explicit focus on inclusion or the strengthening of relational dynamics among students.

Suggested activities included:

- Individual and team exercises aimed at improving basic motor skills such as running, jumping, throwing and motor coordination, with a gradual progression in difficulty (Bailey, 2006).
- Traditional sports modules focusing on the technique and rules of sports such as athletics, football, volleyball and basketball. Lessons focused on competition and individual performance, with moments of competence testing through games or specific skill tests (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005).
- Motor assessment tests, used to monitor students' progress in different physical skills and compare them with standardised parameters provided by the school curriculum (Eime et al., 2013).
- Stretching and relaxation activities, integrated at the end of the lesson to promote muscle recovery and physical well-being, in line with the World Health Organization recommendations on physical activity for adolescents (World Health Organization, 2018).
- The approach used in the control group was based on transmissive teaching, with a central role for the teacher in directing activities and

assessing progress. Pupil interaction was mainly limited to moments of team play, with no explicit focus on developing interpersonal skills or creating an inclusive climate.

- *Sample group: innovative inclusive physical education programme*

The sample group followed an innovative physical education programme based on a cooperative and inclusive approach, in which physical activity became a means to promote cooperation, mutual respect and a sense of belonging to the school community. The programme was divided into four main areas: cooperative games, inclusive sports, leadership workshops and guided reflection.

*Tabel 1 - Inclusive Physical Education Programme*

<b>Areas</b>	<b>Description of teaching activities</b>
Cooperative and inclusive games	<p>The first weeks of the programme were devoted to socialisation and cooperative games, with the aim of breaking down barriers between pupils and creating a climate of trust. Among the activities proposed were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team games with modified rules, where scoring depended not only on winning but also on cooperation between participants, such as ‘multi-touch football’ (where each player must touch the ball before scoring) or ‘volleyball without elimination’ (Spaaij, 2013).</li> <li>• Team-based motor pathways, in which students, divided into groups mixed by ability and cultural background, had to work together to complete physical challenges (Coalter, 2013).</li> <li>• - Activities inspired by Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU), a method that emphasises understanding the game and the ability to make decisions in a sporting context, rather than just technical execution (Kirk &amp; MacPhail, 2002).</li> </ul>
Inclusive and adapted sports	<p>The programme integrated traditional sports with adapted variants to ensure equal participation of all pupils, regardless of their level of sporting ability. Some key activities included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rotating Role Football, where each player had to take on a different role during the game (goalkeeper, striker, defender), which</li> </ul>

	<p>promoted empathy and awareness of others' difficulties (Shields &amp; Bredemeier, 2009).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mixed sports tournaments, such as basketball and volleyball, where teams were heterogeneous in terms of ability, gender and nationality, promoting cooperation between students from different backgrounds (García Bengoechea et al., 2017).</li> <li>• Motor problem-solving exercises in which small groups had to solve collective physical challenges, such as carrying heavy objects or overcoming obstacles as a team (Holt et al., 2017).</li> </ul>
Leadership workshops and peer tutoring	<p>Shared leadership moments were introduced to develop students' sense of responsibility and active involvement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active roles in teams, such as captain, motivator or strategist, which changed on a rotating basis to allow each individual to develop social and team management skills (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005).</li> <li>• Peer tutoring, in which students with more sporting experience helped peers with difficulties, promoting collaborative learning and reducing inequalities in participation (Smith &amp; Sparkes, 2016).</li> <li>• Role-playing activities in which students simulated sports situations to reflect on the dynamics of fair play, discrimination and inclusion (Donnelly &amp; Coakley, 2002).</li> </ul>
Discussion and guided reflection	<p>A central aspect of the intervention was the inclusion of moments of reflection after the sports activities, in which students analysed their own experiences and group dynamics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Post-activity debriefings with guided discussions on topics such as the importance of working together, overcoming cultural barriers and accepting differences (Schulenkorf, 2012).</li> <li>• Meetings with athletes and inspirational figures who shared experiences related to inclusion in sport, stimulating discussion and debate (Côté &amp; Fraser-Thomas, 2007).</li> </ul>



## Results

### - *Quantitative results analysis*

The analysis of the quantitative data made it possible to assess the impact of the innovative sports programme on school inclusion and students' sense of belonging. In order to obtain a clear picture of the effects of the intervention, standardised questionnaires were administered to both the sample group that participated in the innovative programme and the control group that followed the traditional physical education curriculum. The statistical analysis, carried out using SPSS software, made it possible to compare the pre- and post-intervention results, using significance tests to determine the significance of the observed changes.

The results showed significant differences between the two groups. In the control group, the changes recorded were minimal: the sense of belonging increased by only 2 per cent, while the perception of inclusive processes showed an increase of 1.5 per cent, suggesting that the traditional PE model did not have a significant impact on school inclusion. In contrast, the sample group involved in the innovative programme reported significant improvements. The sense of belonging increased by 15%, signalling greater involvement and identification with the school community. Perceptions of inclusive processes also increased by 12 per cent, highlighting how the approach adopted encouraged more active participation and better integration of pupils.

The comparative analysis between the two groups confirmed the statistical significance of these differences ( $p < 0.05$ ), demonstrating that the innovative sports programme had a positive impact on perceptions of inclusion and the building of a more cohesive environment. These findings are consistent with a number of studies that highlight the central role of sport in developing inclusive and participatory school environments. According to Bailey (2006), sporting activities promote the social and emotional well-being of pupils by creating opportunities for interaction and strengthening bonds with peers. Eime et al (2013) also highlighted how sports participation improves social inclusion, developing a sense of community and cohesion among students. Previous studies, such as those by Fraser-Thomas, Côté and Deakin (2005), confirm that well-structured physical activity programmes promote the development of social and interpersonal skills, helping to create a more equitable and welcoming school environment.

Other research has shown that physical activity plays a key role in fostering a sense of belonging. Goodenow (1993) pointed out that involvement in shared activities increases perceptions of social peer support, while Smith and Sparkes (2016) emphasised that sport can be an effective

tool to promote the empowerment and inclusion of students with social difficulties or disabilities. The approach taken in this study also fits with the inclusive education perspective proposed by Booth and Ainscow (2011), who emphasise that active participation is an essential element in ensuring equitable and accessible learning for all students.

- *Qualitative data analysis*

Analysis of the qualitative data, conducted using MAXQDA software, made it possible to identify recurring patterns in students' and teachers' perceptions regarding the role of sport in school inclusion. The data revealed significant differences between the sample and control groups, both in terms of active participation and perceptions of the school community.

Pupils in the sample group showed a greater sense of belonging and a stronger connection with their peers: "Team activities helped me to get to know my peers better and to feel more accepted"(pupil, 13 years old). The inclusive physical education model favoured the creation of bonds, especially between pupils from different cultural backgrounds, as confirmed by a pupil of foreign origin: "Before, I felt a bit isolated, but now, thanks to sport, I have more friends and I feel part of the class". This confirms Eime et al.'s (2013) claim that sport facilitates the building of positive relationships in heterogeneous school contexts.

On the other hand, pupils in the control group reported more fragmented experiences: "We play together, but in the end everyone thinks for themselves and the best ones rule" (student, 12 years old). This reflects the limitations of a competitive approach which, as Shields and Bredemeier (2009) point out, can accentuate inequalities and limit inclusion. Teachers also observed a significant difference between the two groups: "In the group that followed the innovative programme, I noticed more cooperation and fewer episodes of exclusion" (PE teacher). Similarly, a humanities teacher emphasised the value of the collaborative methodology: "Working together in sport improved classroom dynamics even during lessons", in line with Bailey's (2006) findings on the link between sporting activity and school well-being. Another theme that emerged was the perception of peer support. Students in the sample group reported an increase in mutual help: "When we play sports as a team, we help each other and no one is left behind" (student, age 14). This finding is in line with studies by Fraser-Thomas et al. (2005), which highlighted the role of sport in promoting empathy and cooperation. In contrast, a more competitive dynamic was found in the control group: "Whoever is better plays, the others watch" (pupil, 13 years old), confirming what Donnelly and Coakley (2002) pointed out about the critical nature of an exclusively performance-oriented approach to sport.

The qualitative analysis also highlighted the importance of moments of structured reflection. Students in the sample group appreciated the debriefing after the activity: “Talking about how we felt after the game made us better understand the value of working together. This echoes Schulenkorf’s (2012) research on the importance of reflection in building inclusive communities through sport. Teachers also confirmed the effectiveness of this approach: ‘Devoting time to discussion made students more aware of the importance of inclusion’”.

Finally, foreign pupils reported an improvement in their school integration: “I can talk more with my classmates now and I feel more comfortable”. This finding is consistent with Coalter’s (2013) findings that inclusive sports activities promote active participation and a sense of belonging.

## **Discussion**

The results obtained confirm the central role of sport in promoting school inclusion and a sense of belonging to the educational community. The significant increase in perceptions of inclusion among students in the sample group highlights how an approach based on cooperation and adaptive motor activities can foster stronger relationships between peers, reducing phenomena of exclusion and social isolation (Eime et al., 2013). This is in line with pedagogical theories of cooperative learning, which suggest that working together in structured contexts promotes active participation and strengthens mutual support among students (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Slavin, 2014). In particular, the cooperative approach in sport allows individual differences to be valued and transformed into useful resources for developing collective skills and strengthening bonds of trust (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Social integration through the practice of sport was particularly important for students of foreign origin, who reported a greater sense of belonging than the control group. Indeed, physical activity facilitated the overcoming of language and cultural barriers and created opportunities for interaction that would otherwise be difficult to achieve in a purely academic context (Coalter, 2013; Jeanes & Magee, 2012). This finding is consistent with the assumptions of Putnam’s (2000) theory of social capital, according to which experiences of collective participation and positive interactions with peers contribute to the construction of support networks that are crucial for social integration. Furthermore, the inclusive dimension of sport emphasised by the programme enabled the competences of all pupils to be recognised and valued, regardless of their level of sporting

ability, in line with Booth and Ainscow's (2011) principles of inclusive education. A key element that emerged from the qualitative analysis was the importance of structured reflection after sports activities. Debriefing stimulated students' awareness of the importance of collaboration and mutual respect, which helped to strengthen the effectiveness of the educational intervention (García Bengoechea et al., 2017; Schulenkorf, 2012). This approach, based on the development of social-emotional competences, finds further support in the literature, which highlights how reflection and self-evaluation are fundamental to increasing personal responsibility and sensitivity towards the group (Hellison, 2011). Indeed, moments of sharing and confrontation help students to internalise the values of fair play, empathy and mutual support, in line with Wenger's (1998) community pedagogy perspective. On the other hand, despite performing the same number of hours of motor activity, the control group did not show significant improvements in terms of perceived inclusion and sense of belonging. This evidence suggests that simply playing sport, if not structured with inclusion in mind, is not sufficient to promote positive relationships among students (Bailey, 2006). Previous studies, such as those by Shields and Bredemeier (2009) and Donnelly and Coakley (2002), show how a predominantly competitive or performance-based approach can sometimes exacerbate inequalities and create exclusionary dynamics between students of different abilities or cultural backgrounds. In contrast, models such as Siedentop's Sport Education Model (1994) show how structuring roles and responsibilities within a 'league' or collaborative sports project can develop a greater sense of belonging and participation. Teachers interviewed during the qualitative analysis highlighted how the innovative programme improved the overall school climate and fostered a more collaborative environment, even outside of PE lessons (Holt et al., 2017). The opportunity to take an active role, such as peer tutoring, encouraged students to develop leadership skills, personal responsibility and respect for diversity, characteristics that are recognised in the literature as fundamental to the success of inclusive education policies (Bean & Forneris, 2017; Donnelly & Coakley, 2002). Overall, the data collected supports the idea that sport, when designed and implemented in an intentional and inclusive way, can be an effective tool for building more cohesive and sustainable school communities, in line with the goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015). The convergence of quantitative and qualitative evidence reinforces the validity of the conclusions, highlighting how collaborative sporting activities adapted to the needs of all students can promote equality of opportunity, improve psychophysical wellbeing and stimulate relational skills that are fundamental to active citizenship (Siedentop, 1994; World Health Organization, 2018).

## Conclusions and implications

The results of this study confirm that sport can be a powerful tool for promoting social inclusion and sustainability within the school environment. The adoption of an educational approach based on cooperation and the development of interpersonal skills has been shown to foster a greater sense of belonging among students, contributing to the building of a more cohesive and participatory community (Eime et al., 2013). These findings are in line with the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN 2030 Agenda, particularly Goal 4 (Quality Education), which aims to ensure equal learning opportunities and reduce barriers to school participation (UNESCO, 2020).

The increase in perceptions of inclusion among the students in the sample group highlights how inclusive structured sport can contribute to the reduction of educational inequalities, consistent with Goal 10 (Reduce Inequalities) of the 2030 Agenda (Coalter, 2013). In particular, experience has shown that cooperative physical activities and adapted team games can facilitate the integration of students from different socio-cultural backgrounds, thus reducing phenomena of marginalisation and isolation (Schulenkorf, 2012).

Another important aspect that emerged from the study is the role of sport in promoting the mental and physical wellbeing of students, supporting Goal 3 (Health and Wellbeing) of Agenda 2030 (World Health Organization, 2018). Students involved in the innovative programme showed greater active participation and more positive attitudes towards peer relationships, confirming the value of sporting activity as a means of building self-confidence and improving the quality of school life (Bailey, 2006).

From the point of view of educational implications, the study suggests the need to integrate sport methodologies based on cooperation and inclusion into school curricula, rather than a traditional competitive model. In addition to fostering the development of students' social and relational skills, this approach can contribute to building more sustainable and participatory school environments, in line with Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), which promotes the creation of inclusive and accessible spaces for all (Spaaij, 2013).

Finally, evidence suggests that educational institutions should invest in teacher training programmes to promote the use of sport as a pedagogical tool for social inclusion. Adopting an educational model that values physical activity experiences as tools for learning and personal growth could be a significant step towards a more equitable, inclusive and sustainable school system (Donnelly & Coakley, 2002).

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