

Original Article

Reflections that know of “new normal”: the complex role of physical educators during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The contribution of this study is a reflection on the physical education teaching and learning processes in primary school throughout COVID-19 pandemic. In this difficult time, the role of physical education has been more than ever an important instance for all students to channel the accumulated negative emotions. Due to the legal limitations related to COVID-19, the practice of physical and sport activities during school time has encountered several difficulties. The group-based games, which are mainly represented by sharing and being together in a group, had to give way to individual games played by the place in a condition of social distance with a distance of 2 meters to the right and left, front and back for each student. In this scenario, the outdoor space has become a learning environment in which to combine the educational model of outdoor education with the educational learning aims of physical education. It was possible to carry out outdoor activities and help children in the management of negative and stressful emotions related to the pandemic by means of outdoor education. Children had feelings of anger at the difficulty of understanding this negative event, but they had also feeling of suffering and disappointment. The observance of the anti-COVID-19 rules represented by the use of masks and social distancing has contributed to live a suffering period. For this reason, the psychophysical benefits related to physical activity were significant. For this aim, the use of outdoor-based educational activities has allowed to the teachers to reach learning aims related to the knowledge of the external environment.

Keywords: physical education, COVID-19, Outdoor education, Outdoor learning.

Introduction

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) classified the new coronavirus disease (COVID-19), that emerged at the end of 2019, as a pandemic. There have been several effects on the lives of millions of people worldwide given by the health emergency for COVID-19 and, as a consequence, extraordinary measures have been taken to contrast this pandemic. Behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and psychobiological responses, and preventive measures that have been imposed by governments to limit contagion, such as social isolation or the use of safety devices, have affected the lives of every individual. The school context, in particular, has lived and is still living a particularly complex historical time. Girls and boys, and teachers and parents found themselves in a new reality very difficult to understand and manage.

The suspension of the regular teaching-learning activities has required the rethinking of teaching approaches and the redefinition of the methods of teaching-learning by means of online platform. As a consequence, the limits for the students to participate in a fundamental socio-educational context (i.e. the school time) represented a significant issue for their processes of socialization needed during the to the growth paths of each. In addition, new terms have been introduced in the common language, first of all *lockdown*.

The imposition of lockdown worldwide represented the closure at home, signified the distance from the dearest affections (grandparents, uncles, cousins) and started a process of communication characterized exclusively by the use of new technologies.

The most direct contacts were represented by video calls realized by means of the use of applications such as: Zoom, Skype, Meet. Students have discovered a new way to “go to school”: the use of online learning platforms. By means of these platforms students followed lessons until the end of the previous academic year (i.e. 2019/2020) and, in several countries, they started the lesson of the new year in the same way. Even if, during the initial stage, the use of these technologies was well received by the students, sometimes as a game, the prolongation of the pandemic has led to the extension of online activities until the end of the 2020 year. According to this situation, the psychological relapses were different. In this study we initially described the effect of the aforementioned limitations to the physical education (PE) activities during and after the first lockdown, and, in the final stage, we present a little survey about the psychological effect of these limitation on the students.

Methods

Physical education throughout lockdown

Rethinking teaching processes by means of teaching-learning methods via online platform was not easy. From the last March the teachers were projected into a novelty and technological-based teaching environment. It was difficult to transfer knowledge the learning aims related to theoretical disciplines, such as Italian, History, English. Furthermore, although the use of technological devices for teaching and or assessing physical education learning aims was sufficiently discussed in previous studies (Greco, Tambolini, Ambruosi, & Fischetti, 2017; Sgrò, Lo Bello, Lipoma, 2009; Sgrò & Lipoma, 2015; Sgrò, Nicolosi, Schembri, Pavone, & Lipoma, 2015; Sgrò, Mango, Pignato, Schembri, & Lipoma, 2017a), the complexity for carrying out the recreational physical activity in front of a screen or by means of online learning platform was very hard.

Despite all the difficulties, the teachers were not abandoned. Several scientific Societies, such as the SIEMeS - Italian Society of Physical and Sport Education, have held the teachers by the hand, guiding them, sending materials and tools useful to allow children to continue to make movement "at home". The teachers followed professional courses by means of online training, webinars, and each available resources with the aim to provide adequate lessons for their child throughout these new procedures (Raiola et al., 2020). For what concern the PE lessons, the training, although short and forced, allowed teachers to ensure that students could work at home by transforming a home space into a small gym space. Carpets, sofas, music, empty bottles, and a lot of imagination were used to guide students to movement through the game. The main focus of these lesson remained the development of fundamental movement skills because they were clearly identified in previous study as the basis for physical and health literacy and for promoting the students' participation in sport-based extra-school activities (Schembri, Quinto, Aiello, Pignato, & Sgrò, 2019; Sgrò, Quinto, Messina, Pignato, & Lipoma, 2017b; Sgrò, Quinto, Platania, & Lipoma, 2019). In this new educational context, the relevant role of scaffolding on motor development recognized in previous study (Fumagalli, Tortella, Coppola, & Sgrò, 2020; Tortella, Schembri, Cecilian, & Fumagalli, 2020a; Tortella, Schembri, & Fumagalli, 2020b) was sustained by the teacher, who represented a model for the screened-cover children. All these changes were proposed because students, as known, left the support in their physical and cognitive development of the extra-school activities (Greco, Cataldi, & Fischetti, 2019; Sannicandro, 2020).

From the psychological point of view, the lessons carried out during this time affected the emotional dimension of the students in several ways. First of all, the children were catapulted from the school at home, from the face-to-face lessons to online learning platform. This sudden event, if in the initial stage it was experienced as an atypical holiday time, immediately it became a reality characterized by uncertainty and concern. In this precarious condition, children are found without educational material because it was left in the classroom, with the suspension of all school activities planned. All these issues had a strong impact on the emotions of children. Government prevention measures to combat COVID-19 have forced individuals to maintain social distancing, this prolonged long-term condition has led to seeing the "other" as an infected potential and therefore dangerous to health. Many children have been afraid to meet other people outside their family. This condition has been emphasized when they came back to school after the lockdown phase.

In addition, many families have found themselves out of work, this condition has brought many tensions in families that children have not experienced positively. Uncertainty and concern have characterized this particular year. Someone had to face also the negative experience of positivity at COVID-19 of a family member, and in the most serious cases even of a hospitalization of a family member. In these situations, the following emotions and conditions were experienced: the fear was a lot; the feeling of being alone; the isolation in the same house; the possibility not to go to the hospital to visit their loved ones; the fear of infecting the elderly of the family. Someone also experienced the painful of the loss of a loved one to whom he could not give even the last farewell.

All these elements have contributed to the birth of many negative emotions in both children and adults. In adults the most common disorders are linked not only to the pandemic, but especially to the long period of social isolation. Anxiety, panic, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, insomnia, digestive problems as well as depressive symptoms and post-traumatic stress were the issues recognized the most after the first phase of lockdown (Leigh-Hunt et al., 2017; Rogers et al., 2020). According to Cacioppo and Hawkey (2003), a prolonged period of isolation can negatively affect physical and emotional health, altering sleep and nutritional rhythms, as well as diminishing opportunities for movement.

Back to school: Physical education vs COVID-19 limitations

As reported in the Italian National Indications for the Physical Education Curriculum, this discipline must: "enhance the physical and sports experience (first cycle of education) as a prevention of hypokinesia, overweight and bad eating habits, involution of motor skills, early abandonment of sports and use of substances that induce dependence" (D'Elia, 2020). In addition, as specified in the 2018 ministerial document "National Indications and New Scenarios" Physical Education constitutes a "discipline of connection between the scientific fields (knowledge of one's body, its functioning, physical movement, correct lifestyles, etc.), communicative and expressive, relationship and citizenship" (Raiola, D'Elia, & Altavilla, 2018). In September 2020, students returned to school, in an almost "normal" routine, but the aforementioned aims were very difficult to be reached for the

following reasons. All the imposed prevention measures for COVID-19 have been taken in schools. All the school staff had the obligation to keep the mask, the safety distance of at least 1 meter, and all the students had to follow the same measures. Anyway, even in this particular situation the children gave their best. In order to carry out physical activities, the lesson was carried out by using open spaces, when available, and the school gyms with the necessary distance inter-students.

Despite the difficulties both for teachers and students, physical activity was carried out at best, even if it was no longer characterized by group games, by being together, by socialization activities but only from activities carried out on delimited place and spaced from the others. The schools equipped with outdoor spaces used these spaces as learning environment. In times of difficulty, Outdoor Education (OE) was a good alternative for schools (Bortolotti, 2014, 2015; Joyce, 2012).

The OE is beginning to develop at a time when the up-to-date lifestyles were characterized by a massive shift away from concrete contact with the external environment, caused primarily by the processes of industrialization and urbanization, then reinforced by the appearance of mass media; as a consequence, the younger generations are currently defined by labels minted in reference to virtual reality, such as "digital natives" (Prensky, 2003).

Through educational courses carried out in the external environment, aimed at carrying out the teaching program, teachers continued to work in Outdoor Learning environment and they were able to promote fun and challenging physical and games activity throughout physical education lessons, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. - A frame of a physical education lesson performed in outdoor environment by applying restrictions related to the COVID-19.

Unfortunately, in the second part of October 2020, due to the worsening of data detected by the presence of COVID-19, students must also wear the mask during physical activity. Obviously, this further restriction has brought further difficulties into the school world.

Discussion and conclusion

As the Greek philosopher Aristotle reminds us, man is a "social animal", unable to live isolated from the others, since the absence of relationships removes the essential conditions for the development of personal identity and the exercise of reason. Although necessary to limit the spread of the epidemic, in fact, humans are not "designed" to manage long-term situations of this kind.

The reflections that emerge from the present work on physical education processes during limitations due to COVID-19 pandemic point to the lack of a necessary and adequate training for all physical education teachers in primary school to adequately face the related concerns and issues. Up to date, teachers lack the tools to deal with discipline properly. The most willing teachers take part in occasional training courses, or follow webinars proposed on the web, but clearly it would be necessary a path that allows to work better with the student population from 6 to 10 years. The teachers of physical education in primary school are not graduates in physical activity and sport sciences, therefore they often do not have the necessary experiences and knowledge to face the discipline. Teachers who have "guilt in educating" often do not feel "protected" in dealing with the activity either in indoor or outdoor environments, because whatever happens during the hour of physical activity becomes the responsibility of the teacher. Therefore, teachers often decide to not carried out physical activity.

Outdoor Education is often a good choice for physical activity in open spaces, in natural and healthy environments. In this particular historical time it was very useful to design the teaching activity in Outdoor Learning. Unfortunately, not all Italian schools have outdoor spaces that allow physical activity in outdoor and in safety.

On the contrary, when schools have the availability of usable outdoor spaces, it is the parents who oppose the development of outdoor teaching, because they do not feel protect the health of their children.

In addition, to ensure the distance limit necessary to prevent COVID-19 diffusion, schools have had to reinvent and use spaces for other purposes, transforming them into classrooms. Among the spaces used in an alternative way, the gym has often been included. Finally, we recall that with the latest measures of the Government, even during the hours of physical education children must wear the mask. In conclusion, today the normality that we are living is certainly not the normality to which we are accustomed. The sociality, the hugs, the carrying out of the didactic activities in presence and without distancing, the nuances of the emotions written on the face are not possible. Today, the normality doesn't taste like normal.

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Author contributions

R.S.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing-Review & Editing, and Supervision.

R.C.: Conceptualization, Literature Analysis, Writing-Original Draft Preparation.

P.T.: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing-Original Draft Preparation.

M.L.: Conceptualization, Writing-Review & Editing.

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