

## **ATTENTION AND REFLECTIVITY IN P.E. TOWARDS GENDER EQUITY AT THE TIME OF COVID-19**

### **ATTENZIONE E RIFLESSIVITÀ IN P.E. VERSO L'EQUITÀ DI GENERE AL MOMENTO DEL COVID-19**

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#### **Abstract**

During the Covid-19 pandemic schools face a peculiar situation that forces the realization of a different education, a distance learning, that discriminates particularly Physical Education among other subjects. In this situation, since it is no longer possible to carry out the usual sport related content, Physical Education teachers have to face more transversal situations where good practices and a fair education towards gender can come to surface. The psychophenomenological contribution, also taking into consideration evidence appeared in literature (P. Vermersch 2019), underlines the importance of keeping up the focus of teachers towards social justice issues and specifically gender ones. From strategies of involvement of mixed classes, forced to body distance and to static postures in space, the Physical Education teacher can avoid the drift of attention to sexed bodies through reflective processes, mainly self-reported, and attention to gender relations.

Nel tempo della pandemia Covid-19 la scuola affronta una situazione particolare che impone l'attuazione di una didattica diversa, a distanza, che tra tutte le discipline discrimina in modo sostanziale l'Educazione Fisica. In questa situazione, in cui non è più possibile realizzare i soliti contenuti riferiti agli sport, gli insegnanti di educazione fisica si trovano di fronte a situazioni trasversali dove possono emergere buone prassi per una educazione equa rispetto al genere. Il contributo, prendendo anche in considerazione evidenze emerse in letteratura, di stampo psicofenomenologico (P. Vermersch 2019), mette in luce l'importanza di mantenere il focus attentivo degli insegnanti sulle questioni della giustizia sociale e in particolare di genere. Dalle strategie di coinvolgimento della classe mista, costrette alle lontananze dei corpi e alla staticità delle posture negli spazi, l'insegnante di educazione fisica può evitare la deriva dell'attenzione ai corpi sessuati tramite processi riflessivi, principalmente autoriferiti, e di attenzione alle relazioni di genere.

#### **Keywords**

Pandemic, gender differences, physical education, justice, reflectivity

Pandemia, differenze di genere, educazione fisica, giustizia, riflessività

## Introduction

Speaking of the body is particularly difficult in a time like the current one, when it is sacrificed, almost anesthetized, in restricted space-time experiences, both from a physical and a social point of view. The body is seen more and more as an image (Manuzzi, 2006): classrooms, domestic environments, remote social relationships mediated by innovative instruments and methodologies, but also masking a smile or a sadness.

Pedagogy and didactics must be realized in this reality, with these “forced” bodies one must teach, inspire interests, realize learning. Faced with the “half-length” culture mediated by a screen and “distanced”, the drift of the bodies is a real risk. Anchoring oneself to “non-simplifying but still possible” categories of thought (Manuzzi, 2006), such as the category of difference, allows us not to forget that in front of the screen “there is no men or women, neutral subjects, universal masculine, but a man or a woman, a boy or a girl”, in that context that we are “always, sexed bodies, characterized by a gender difference”(Manuzzi 2006 pag. 121). This can be pedagogically helpful in not losing the sense of the three-dimensionality of the body which now appears to us, instead, in two dimensions (Manuzzi 2006). Students and teachers’ resilience will allow them to face an obstacle whose size cannot be measured, there will be the “resumption of a possible development after a traumatic laceration” (Malaguti 2005, p. 11), but at this time maximum application is required, even in the field of imagination and creativity. Now more than ever, didactics is taking on the shape of a ‘situated action’ (Striano, 2012) and of a ‘situated learning’ (Rivoltella et al., 2013) which requires new roles and commitments from students and teachers. It is already time to think about the possible recovery work, left by the void of last year. We are thinking about how the future of teaching will be, about new tools and skills for teachers who can respond to the training needs of the “Covid generations”.

The experience of the months spent in lockdown, away from school desks has somehow upheld the absolute primacy of the action of socialisation and the networking opportunities that the school offers in presence, of being in the “here and now”. At the time of drafting this contribution, the ghost of the “remote class” reappears stronger than ever, with an indefinite deadline. Educational institutions must therefore begin to make accurate choices, also going beyond contingency. This is not about disciplinary content, this time it is really the relationship that needs to be supported and relaunched.

Difficult historical times like this one lead to closure and to a departure from social issues. It seems like all there is the pandemic. Unfortunately, this is not the case. This contribution aims at drawing the teacher’s reflection on the relational dynamics of gender that deal with active citizenship and politics, in the perspective of the “sexed body” whose representation belongs to all students (Contini, Fabbri, Manuzzi 2006). Constant and selective attention to the gender variable is important to the management of all the relationships that exist in a class group, which is within a triangulation of the educational situation “teacher-pupils-content” (Baldacci, 2012).

Lowering the threshold of reflection on the gender variable will have the repercussions on relationships in the present (transfer) and in the future (life skills) that every man and woman will have to build with other men and women (Contini, Fabbri, Manuzzi, 2006). In addition, assuming it is a solved question, risks consolidating stereotyped educational practices and further fueling inequalities (Parri, Ceciliani 2019; Ghigi 2019).

In the current pandemic-COVID19 situation, some topics, such as gender, may seem less important (Couchot-Schiex et al., 2009) in the face of the urgent needs to be solved (innovation and technological adaptation, distance learning, respect for primary prevention<sup>1</sup>).

The socio-political sense that the perspective of gender equity offers, equality, thus risks being overshadowed. The pandemic seems to have emphasised inequalities (Nuzzaci et al., 2020), therefore thinking about gender in a perspective of equal opportunity, at this exact time, also

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1 Distancing, using a facemask, sanitization of tools and environments....

means going beyond the categories, the built hierarchies. It means not forgetting what is there, not denying differences and stereotypes, living in a present that, albeit limited by the health situation, keeps the connection with reality. The objective, therefore, is not only to “not get infected”, but to propose a contextualized teaching, which supports the learning of pupils (Ghigi, 2019). In this situation, the gender issue can become key to educational success. It can keep open some scenarios that were already current before the pandemic, such as the relationships between individuals and equality between people. The attention of teachers, therefore, must be drawn towards the equality of gender relations even at a distance, on sexed bodies that lived the social dynamism typical of structured contexts, such as a class. The class always has a heterogeneous connotation, it is made up of men and women, boys and girls. The school should foster a work of gender emancipation (Combaz and Hoiban, 2008) with learning and development experiences that help being together, where by ‘being together’ we do not mean just physical proximity but also a relationship of equality and cooperation.

It is a question that opens up to the sense of universal justice of all men and all women. The search for equality, free from performance constraints, must start from teachers’ reflective practices in order to affect the hidden curriculum<sup>2</sup> (Striano, 2012; Isidori, 2008). It is precisely the reflection on the hidden curriculum that highlighted the presence of predominantly male programs in physical education (Penney, 2002), characterized by a motor-competitive model rather than a playful-relational model, or based on classic clichés of activities, sports and practices in favor of one or the other sex, which are imagined however neutral by the teacher. While teachers show an interest in the problem, the solutions implemented are often themselves stereotyped proposals (Guérandel, Beyria, 2010). In addition, gender in physical education is a topic which still deserves attention and research. (Parri,

Ceciliani 2019)

Therefore, greater reflection is necessary on the mechanisms involved (Couchot-Schiex et al., 2009) as well as embracing new analysis plans. The proposal coming from psychophenomenology (Vermersch, 2002) for example, studies the attentional dynamics of teachers and the strategies implemented to promote interaction between males and females. In particular, we will highlight one research (Patinet-Bienaimé, Cogerino, 2011) which underlines how different ways of organizing and making groups interact, can differently direct the attention of teachers on gender and gender roles. Gender thus becomes key to understanding actions of equality and coexistence.

## **2. The pandemic and reflecting on gender in Physical Education.**

Starting from the feminist visions of social relations (Missana, 2014), gender can be understood from a sociological point of view, as referred above, as the leading category of the difference between men and women that organizes society. The unquestionable biological differences, engraved in the physical body, are led to a binary sexual division of behaviors, roles, but also powers, hierarchies, orders, rules that are functional to society itself. The psychological point of view (Di Vita, 2002) emphasizes the naturalness of the differences and the related hierarchies of roles and tasks, with value attributions usually in men’s favour. It is not an obvious task to reflect on the mechanisms that reproduce gender differences to which the body has been educated since the beginning of life and to consider pupils with their sexed bodies.

Physical education cannot exempt itself from this consideration and not implement a work

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2 The hidden curriculum refers to lessons that are learned, around such things as the transmissions of norms, values, attitudes, or beliefs that are conveyed in a non-open way in the classroom and by the operation of schooling. Jung, J., Ressler, J., Linder, A. (2018), Exploring the Hidden Curriculum in Physical Education. *Advances in Physical Education*, 8(02), 253.

of continuous pedagogical enhancement of sexed bodies as a creative and original part of the person, rather than consolidating archaic norms and values. Unfortunately, physical education must pay for a long dependence on the world of sports. This world is notoriously male dominated and characterized by a vision of the functional and performative body, generated by male cultural assumptions of the social structure, naturalized in the body itself together with value judgments (Baratta 1999; Missana 2014; Leguil, 2019).

### **3. Physical Education**

In this delicate pandemic time, physical education, even more than other disciplines, bears the consequences of distancing and the necessity of avoiding contact with other people and objects. Spaces, rules, expressions and languages need to be rethought. On the other hand this is also an optimal time to divert the attention from the usual contents (skills to learn, activities to organize, ...) and direct energy towards the gender issue.

In physical education, the social and cultural dimensions of gender differences are often overshadowed or hidden by obvious physical and biological differences. The result is often a gender discrimination in men's favour, thus creating and sustaining inequality in physical education (Brière-Guénoun et al. 2018), while educational performance has been widely recognized as in favor of females (Tamanini 2007). Today, the forcing of a slower time, of a more limited space, can help to reflect more on the value of the contents offered in physical education, on teaching methods, group interactions, evaluation, elements that all seem to generate and incorporate gender stereotypes (Couchot-Schiex, 2007). Dealing with gender now in the classroom implies paying attention to relationships that are established in a complex dimension, that of a physical education class during the pandemic. Even in the 'remote' mode, the bodies are sexed. The difference is that the teacher enters the house of the pupils. The bodies become more and more images. The environment is filled with other people, family members, parents, siblings. The spaces are no longer institutional. Here other laws apply, those of the home and of primary socialization.

The pandemic can give time to focus attention on the models proposed to pupils, the language used, the ways of handling incorrect or intolerably sexist behaviors, the repertoire that pupils await to be recognized male and female.

It will be possible to reflect on the theme of an equality free from conditioning of performances, thanks to a careful analysis of the hidden curriculum. Without this reflection, the focus on gender beliefs can continue to naturalize differences. The relationships between males and females reduced to natural behavioral patterns, natural diversity of skills and abilities (Isidori, Fraille, 2008) hide problems related to the appropriateness of the curriculum (Isidori, 2008) or to the way of managing lessons (Couchot-Schiex, 2005). Lowering attention and reflection on these issues risks justifying the stereotyped practices on gender, on equality or inequality (Brière-Guénoun et al., 2018).

### **4. The heterogeneous context of the class**

Researchers in France (Patinet-Bienaimé, Cogerino, 2011) show that teachers are interested in gender, however often the solutions implemented include stereotypes. Of particular interest is the contribution of these researches on the function of vigilant attention (Mouchet et al. 2011), and the relationship between the management of mixed class groups and the subjective perception of the teacher: in terms of gender equality, it is the subjective perception of teachers that leads to the definition of didactic situations and to the creation of groups in physical education lessons.

The question of mixed classes is certainly not addressed here with the intention of questioning it, but rather in the analysis of the male-female relationships that arise from it, according to the methods of management and positioning of the teacher towards vigilant attention of gender

inequalities (Terret et al., 2006; Couchot-Schiex, 2007). The teacher manages the mixed group according to their own way of perceiving and seeing and consequently draws attention to the equality of the sexes. The type of organization-management of the group will determine a more or less vigilant type of attention on gender equity (Nicaise et al., 2007). In physical education, the era of separate teams, male and female, has long been closed (MPI, 1990) and its echoes should now be silent, however even this should not be taken for granted. The mixed group, contrary to what one might believe, does not in itself guarantee gender equality. This is even more true in physical education, affected by theories and performance practices deriving from the world of sports (Coakley, J. 2004; Penney, 2002).

Which considerations can help this reflection? Let's see some of them:

- Belonging to a mixed group is something that subjectively has strong implications, such as that of feeling exposed to gazes or judgments coming from members of the other sex, rather than of the same sex, especially if, because of stereotypes, the situation is characterized by the presence of a dominant group and a dominated one (Couchot-Schiex, 2007; Hills and Croston, 2012).
- In physical education, the dynamics that revolve around the fear of judgment on skills and physical appearance, refer to normalizing stereotypes of a well-built, attractive or efficient body. The possibility of feeling up to the situation and in line with the physical standards of beauty (females) or living up to the competition (males), affects the different motivation of both of them (Garett, 2004; Davison, 2000). Physical education represents a particular and very delicate educational framework on these issues (Jackson, 2002).
- Physical education in mixed groups poses problems for teachers regarding the attitudes, diversity of experiences and physical qualities of males and females (Terret, Cogérino, Rogowski, 2006). Has the teachers' imagery, certainly oriented in favor of gender equality (Artus, 1999; Bulea Bronckart, Bronckart, 2012), with the attached values of cooperation, altruism, respect, responsibility for roles, really found its concrete expression in a teaching that guarantees fairness and respect for the sexes in daily educational activities?
- The didactic contents, with a strong sexed connotation, propose activities and sportive approaches gathered from sports of medium-high-level media attention: collective and combat sports have a male connotation while gymnastics or dance have a female connotation, with the exception of neutral sports such as climbing or swimming or athletics (Benhaïm-Grosse, J., 2007). The dependence of physical education on sport, historically men-dominated, determines the value and connotation that it should have for the gender issue.
- The risk of confusing the clear biological differences as the natural order of things, supports the social stereotypes of gender differences which, in physical education, also thanks to the influences of the sports world, risk being interpreted as gender equality if taking in consideration result or performance as the only indicator. This obviously unbalances the educational approach in favor of boys.

Teacher training in the form of a reflective workshop (Mortari, 2003) for Physical Education teachers should be oriented on these issues, in order to identify, in light of the needs of current generations and of particular moments such as the current pandemic, ways and strategies to address the long-standing problem of gender discrimination in the world of physical activity and sports.

## 5. Teaching Physical Education to mixed-sex classes

A possible answer, or at least an indication of good practice, comes from a French research carried out with the technique of the experience explicitation interview<sup>3</sup> (Vermersch, P. 2019),

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3 The explicitation interview aims at verbalizing the action, paying attention to the precise

which allows the evocation of experiences to be brought to consciousness, understood in phenomenological terms, through the verbalization of the lived experience, the “mis en evocation” (Faingold, N. 2011; Mouchet 2014). Four forms of class organization emerge from the research, linked to contexts, practiced by teachers in different ways according to their subjectivity and considered by teachers themselves in support of forms of equality between sexes. On each of these forms, the vigilant attention to gender equality is differently oriented (Bulea, Bronckart 2012; Patinet-Bienaimé, Cogérino, 2012).

1. “*Mixité ensemble-séparée*” (Patinet-Bienaimé, Cogérino, 2011). The teacher mainly considers the differentiation of the program. They carry out tasks, exercises, separate activities, also using a division of spaces, which therefore become spaces dedicated to gender, in which the relationship between males and females decays. The teacher shifts his attention from one space to another, between different activities, often lacking reciprocity, with the risk of having to control many variables, to the detriment of attention on the gender issue, reinforcing the imbalance in favor of males and the stereotyped acceptance of girls’ lower performance (Goffman, 1977; Faure, Garcia, 2003).
2. “*Mixité banalisée*” (Patinet-Bienaimé, Cogérino, 2011). Starting from the idea that the two sexes are complementary, the teaching that is implemented is considered fair because it is the same and it includes mixed groups, but without specific gender-specific teaching attention. In this case, male dominance usually occurs on which the teacher does not or barely intervenes.
3. “*Mixité recherchée*” (Patinet-Bienaimé e Cogérino, 2011). The group is mixed, males and females play together, the teachers try to create situations of equity. Since the activities are often in favor of males (ball or team games), action is taken on the modification of the rules in favor of females, a situation that Patinet-Bienaimé and Cogérino (2011) define “égalité compensatoire”. The disparity is thus accentuated, with the need to adapt the situation as if one were facing a disability. The focus in this case is on the presence of a mixed group that plays, there is no reflection on the criteria for identifying the behavior of males or females.
4. “*Mixités réfléchies*” (Patinet-Bienaimé, Cogérino, 2011). The teacher first reflects on the criteria to be used in groups, on the situation and gender dynamics in the class group. The action is preceded by a research and forecast of discriminatory situations that can be created. The knowledge and awareness of the dynamics that are established between males and females in physical education, requires vigilance, for example, on the dominating attitude of males and / or on the consequent adoption of engagement strategies for females.

## **6. From the reflective workshop to vigilant attention.**

In the pandemic moment, all strategies must be reviewed. The peculiarity of this time forces us to stir away from conventional canons, it prevents us from implementing the same activities (such as team sports), it forces us to find other meeting points in the didactic activities carried out online. The “common diversity and thoughtful diversity” strategy can be implemented in an environment that is no longer technical-performance related but cognitive-relational, in which performance is no longer linked to sports performance but to other forms of bodily expression that can finally unite males and females in a distant, intense and reflective cooperation. Just at

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knowledge of the rational procedures that the subject activates to implement the task. The explicitation interview is the subject of study by the national research group GREX (Research Group on Explicitation) and at the CNRS (Center National Recherche Scientifique, Paris). See Vermersch P. Describing the work – Italian edition curated by Cesari Lusso V. and Iannaccone A. 2019, Carocci Faber ed.

this juncture, you can check the quality and skills such as collaboration, determination in the critical moment, sharing the activities to be proposed in the house, the interaction between males and females. It is precisely these experiences that can generate reflections that are suitable for understanding that physical education, when normality will be re-established, can be implemented in different ways and with different contents, which absolutely must not depend on the obsolete repetition of usual sports, as if body and movement were only attributable to these.

Before elaborating the engagement strategies for a “fair empowerment” of pupils, it is necessary to direct the reflection not only towards innovative teaching actions, but also towards the habitus of systematic attention to gender dynamics in physical education. Teacher’s space for reflection has been identified by various authors in the form of a reflective workshop divided into several steps that follow each other, referring to one another (Mortari, 2019; Patinete et al., 2011; Lee et al. 1994).

It is possible to outline a training course in four phases:

- initial personal reflection, a questioning on the generative process and on the conceptual frameworks of the topic addressed, freed from more or less conscious ideas and pre-conceptions. Thinking about your own stereotypes, ideas, values, while also addressing your professional biography with a critical spirit. Thinking about oneself, about personal history, about how gender is interpreted or how it has never been interpreted, can be the first real step to address the topic, once and for all;
- participatory reflection, therefore not about the boys and girls, but with and for the boys and girls and valuing the verbal and non-verbal relationships and interactions which can affirm the power of one or the other group; self-regulating corrective feedback and communications both in a qualitative and quantitative sense in a balanced and non-discriminatory way between the two sexes; favouring the continuous negotiation of choices and decisions between children, in order to create a habitus for discussion and comparison in a collaborative and trusting climate; acting with educational firmness on sexist and homophobic attitudes;
- intermediate reflection, to verify the achievement of the set objectives that will be aimed at enhancing all the specificities, even those “not very sportive” in the classical sense, taking into account all the possible profiles in a class group and promoting cooperative strategies also in competitive activities.
- final reflection, to observe oneself and the personal ways of acting in the lived context and with reference to gender.

## Conclusions

According to the ancient popular proverb “not all evil comes to harm”, the pandemic caused by COVID19, the need to apply distance learning, are forcing the school world to review its procedures for students’ involvement. Physical education, in particular, is perhaps the discipline that suffers more than others from the lack of in person teaching, because it is the body in presence that guarantees the true essence of the practice. This temporary distance requires a modification of the contents and also a renunciation of classic activities, usually sports, which have always been the focus of teaching in physical education. In this situation the categorizations related to gender identity and the idea of performance and competition, can open up to a reflection on the diversity between male and female in order to start breaking down these long-established stereotypes.

It is a matter of moving away from the temptation to categorize gender identities, as well as subtracting them from scales of values, judgments, conditioned by gender stereotypes and especially coming from the secular sport culture, which, centered on purely biological differences in performance, confuse this diversity with gender equity.

At this time, when working means simplifying, eliminating competitions, comparisons, per-

formances, the most formative aspect of the discipline can emerge. Starting from the criteria on class organization, with respect to the presence of males and females, as indicated by several studies, through a reflective workshop teachers can deepen their beliefs and positions with respect to gender equity in physical education and sport.

Precisely this paradigm, extrapolated from a performance context typical of the sports world, should be dismantled in the educational approach that should characterize physical education. It is not a question of denying differences, but of putting them in context, avoiding binary gender classification criteria and looking at the real situation, at the practice implemented, without any ambition for generalizations and schematizations. Perhaps, it is precisely in this moment of deprivation, due to the pandemic, that we can find the time to investigate further, within the teaching staff, this important issue that has been addressed or never resolved.

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