

SUPPORT THE TRAINING OF STUDENTS WITH SLD IN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT THROUGH LABORATORY TEACHING

SOSTENERE LA FORMAZIONE DEGLI STUDENTI CON DSA IN AMBITO SCOLASTICO ATTRAVERSO LA DIDATTICA DI LABORATORIO

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ABSTRACT

During adolescence, students are faced with multiple processes of growth and formation of their own person. In this situation, the building of self-esteem plays a crucial role, and the school should take care of facilitating this process; in particular, for students with specific learning disabilities (DSA), the educational and socio-relational difficulties encountered at school level can have a negative impact on youth's emotional sphere. In this regard, the purpose of this work is to evaluate the possibility to improve self-esteem in subjects with SLD through an innovative educational laboratory focused on motor-sports education.

Durante l'adolescenza, gli studenti si trovano a dover affrontare molteplici processi di crescita e formazione della propria persona. In tale situazione la costruzione dell'autostima ricopre un ruolo cruciale e la scuola dovrebbe occuparsi di facilitare tale processo; in particolare, per gli studenti con disturbi specifici dell'apprendimento (DSA), le difficoltà didattiche e socio-relazionali riscontrate a livello scolastico, possono avere un impatto negativo sulla sfera emotiva dei più giovani. Scopo del presente lavoro è quello di valutare la possibilità di migliorare l'autostima nei soggetti con DSA attraverso un laboratorio didattico innovativo incentrato sull'educazione motorio-sportiva.

KEYWORDS

Self-Esteem, School, Innovative Education, Self-Concept
Autostima, Scuola, Didattica innovative, Concetto di sé

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Introduction¹

Lower secondary school is one of the main formal educational contexts where a student develops and matures both from an educational point of view, and from a personal and social-relational one. This context plays a crucial role in guiding young people towards sound educational growth, and in consolidating the basis for tomorrow's students and individuals. Therefore, one of the most important elements to which should be paid attention is the care and positive stimulation of self-esteem. Nowadays, it represents a factor that, over time, triggers critical mechanisms in School, University and the professional domain, and throughout life too. This clearly becomes even more relevant when dealing with students with specific learning disorders (SLDs) who, unfortunately, experience numerous difficulties in the school environment and in everyday life. In this regard, through an experimental didactic proposal, we will reflect on how much the educational sciences sphere, in their motor and sports dimension, can act as a driving force for the improvement of self-esteem in students, especially in those with SLDs. Indeed, we believe that this proposal should become a pedagogical tool on which the school system, first and foremost at lower secondary school level, should focus for educating present and future generations, unlike what happens today on a practical level.

1. The concept of self-esteem at a psycho-pedagogical level: a literature review

Studies on the concept of self and self-esteem have been given considerable attention in psycho-pedagogical literature. The notion of self is defined as that set of elements to which a person refers to describe himself or herself. It covers all knowledge about the self, such as name, race, preferences, beliefs, values, and physical descriptions. Self-esteem, on the other hand, is an evaluation of the information contained in the concept of self and is related to personal beliefs about one's own abilities and skills, social relationships, and future achievements. Self-esteem is determined by objective and subjective information, referring to three types of Self:

- Real Self: is the objective assessment of one's own competence;
- Perceived Self: is the evaluation of the real self, which hardly ever coincides with it;
- Ideal Self: how the subject wishes to be; the ideal self is influenced by culture and society.

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Among the earliest definitions of self-esteem is the one developed by James (1890) according to which a person's self-esteem is determined by the relationship between perceived self and ideal self. According to James, the greater the distance of the perceived self from the level of the ideal self, the lower the level of self-esteem a person will experience. In other words, self-esteem results from comparing successes achieved and corresponding expectations: $\text{Self-esteem} = \text{Success/Expectations}$. The formula developed by James (1890) links self-esteem to the person's attained successes, but neglects to consider the effect of environmental factors. Thus, it is regarded as a unitary psychological characteristic, independent of life contexts. However, by interacting with the individual, environmental factors contribute to improving or worsening his or her performance too. Indeed, the concept of the self stems from how we are treated or viewed by others; what others think of us. Namely, the image of us that is reflected, slowly becomes what we think of ourselves. By contrast, others are also influenced by how we judge ourselves, and tend to see us as we see ourselves. Further studies have examined self-esteem in multidimensional terms and have highlighted interpersonal relationships, environmental control skills, emotionality, academic success, family life, and bodily experience as the most important factors when dealing with self-esteem (Harter, 1985; Marsh and Holmes, 1990). According to Bracken's (1993) definition, *"self-esteem is a learned, multidimensional, context-related behavioral and cognitive pattern that is based on an individual's expressed evaluation of past experiences and behaviors, influences his or her current behaviors, and predicts his or her future ones"*. According to Galimberti (2006), self-esteem corresponds to *"the consideration an individual has of himself/herself"* and this consideration is expressed through an attitude, a cognitive evaluation or a set of self-addressed affections. Each person values things about himself / herself differently. Already William James (1890) expressed this idea quite well: *"I, who for the time have staked my all on being a psychologist, am mortified if others know much more psychology than I. But I am contented to wallow in the grossest ignorance of Greek. My deficiencies there give me no sense of personal humiliation at all. Had I 'pretensions' to be a linguist, it would have been just the reverse."* Self-esteem comprises three different aspects: the cognitive aspect, consisting of each person's views of himself/ herself regarding his or her physical appearance, emotional and social life, knowledge, profession, morality, the achievement of set goals and hence self-realization; the emotional aspect, determined by the emotions a person feels toward himself/herself, such as affection, indifference, hostility; and finally the behavioral aspect, i.e., the person's attitudes toward himself/herself (self-respect, satisfaction of his or her needs, health care). Self-esteem has been shown to affect (Campbell, & Lavallee, 1993):

- cognition;
- motivation;

- emotions;
- behavior.

Rosemberg et al. (1995) distinguish global self-esteem from specific self-esteem, defining the former as an overall judgment of one's own worth, which derives from the relationship between one's aspirations for success and the skills he or she has actually acquired (a concept that can be linked to that of self-efficacy, as expressed by Bandura, 1996). The latter, on the other hand, is a judgment that concerns a particular domain of self-evaluation (physical, intellectual, moral, social, and so on). It is related to the individual's level of self-acceptance and self-respect, and is marked more by emotions than by rationality. General self-esteem does not necessarily correspond to the sum or average of various specific self-esteems. Indeed, there are those who, while reaping successes in some areas, suffer from a fundamental and generic self-loathing; this occurs because people assign different levels of importance to each area. Therefore, the more important it is for a person to be able to rate himself/herself well in a given area, the more that specific self-esteem will affect (positively or negatively) his or her global self-esteem. Since the concept of self and self-esteem are necessarily related to the important aspects of life, a person's global self-esteem will depend on the various contexts in which he or she acts, but especially on the importance he or she attaches to each of the components.

According to Galimberti (2006), self-evaluation, which is the basis of self-esteem, can express itself as overvaluation or undervaluation deriving from a consideration of self that differs from that of others, or is distorted in relation to the actual situation. Having high self-esteem is one of the clearest signs of psychological well-being, and positive self-esteem is considered the central factor of good social-emotional adjustment. Indeed, having good self-esteem makes people more confident, more desirable in the eyes of others, and helps them respond appropriately to the challenges and opportunities of life. It cannot be said that high self-esteem determines good performance or, conversely, that good performance is the cause of high self-esteem, but it is likely that causality acts in both directions insofar as the impression about one's own performance influences one's self-evaluations. At the same time, the beliefs an individual has about himself/herself have a strong impact on the effectiveness of his or her performance. People with high self-esteem, before undertaking any activity, solving a problem, or facing a test, generally appear confident and are sure about their good chances of success. In fact, they often have a history of previous good performance behind them that fuels their expectations. For such people, difficult situations and tests are stimulating, a challenge to be taken up in order to prove their worth to themselves and others.

The achievements of people with high self-esteem will be far more numerous and of a higher level than those of people with low self-esteem, because of the degree of commitment and persistence they put into their goals. People with low self-esteem find themselves in the opposite situation: before each test, they feel anxious and worried, have many doubts about the outcome of their efforts, have no confidence in their abilities; past experience does not suggest favorable predictions to them, and so they already envisage the moment when they will have to face the umpteenth failure. They often turn out to be overwhelmed with anxiety if their first attempts are unsuccessful, and they are unable to persist in their efforts. Low self-esteem then leads to the vicious cycle of having negative expectations which consequently affect our performance and lead us to experience failure. This in turn negatively affects self-evaluation and results in a further lowering of the level of self-esteem. Low self-esteem can strengthen disturbing behaviors and prevent motivation for change by creating a spiral in which negative behavior causes a social reaction that, in turn, strengthens symptomatology and rejection of change (Corbo et al., 2004). Semeraro et al. (2020) and Villani et al. (2021) both emphasize the close relationship between SLD and low self-esteem resulting from repeated experiences of failure. This is precisely what stimulated the spirit behind the research discussed in this paper, in an attempt to frame an educational experience to be introduced into the school system that can positively stimulate the students' level of self-esteem, paying particular attention to those with specific learning disorders.

2. Self-esteem in the school context and the relationship with specific learning disorders (SLDs)

Besides being a basic component of mental health, self-esteem appears to be closely associated with academic achievements (Pope et al., 1988). Most educators consider positive self-esteem to be the central factor in good social-emotional adjustment. This correlation is even stronger when looking specifically at young people's evaluations of themselves as students (their school self-esteem). There is no certainty that high self-esteem leads to good grades, or that the opposite is true, but it is likely that causality acts in both directions. Self-esteem is an important aspect of a young person's global functioning: it is related to various areas, among which we can include psychological health and school performance (which are interactive). It is also closely related to one's attributional style, that cognitive process through which one tries to attribute a cause to events, to interpret facts occurring in the environment.

In the psycho-pedagogical field, efforts are being made to study those individuals whose academic performance is lower than their actual chances of success, and to understand what could be expected of them on the basis of their abilities and skills. The situation of these students is referred to as "scholastic

underachievement". This disorder affects about 16% of students, and thus concerns the gap between actual and potential academic performance. Typically, these individuals have low esteem with respect to their school abilities and a low concept of self. They are often afraid of both success and failure; they make negative judgments about school and teachers, claiming that they are not understood, and they complain all the time. A distinction can be made between situational underachievement, occurring when school performance temporarily falls below the expected level, and chronic underachievement, in which performance below true potential lasts for a long period of time (Avalle, 2009). Some authors consider self-esteem as a threshold variable: its effect may not be as strong or significant on academic success when it is at or above average levels, but it seriously inhibits perseverance, confidence, and school performance when it is at low levels. Regardless of assumptions about the direction of causality between low self-esteem and academic success, it is essential highlighted that, when self-esteem is particularly low, efforts be made to boost it before undertaking any remedial teaching (Gurney, 1988). Despite the lack of reliable research data, a crucial factor to remember is the great importance a young person attaches to positive feedback from the significant people in his or her life; every glance, comment, and action they make has the power to contribute to his or her concept of self and sense of self-worth. Teachers are in an excellent position to raise the self-esteem of their students, but in the case of those with difficulties in this area, they will be given a rather arduous task, which will require a specific and constant approach.

A classroom environment that encourages active confrontation and shows such students that their contributions have value and are respected, will serve to greatly accelerate this process. Since the sense of lack of self-worth is an acquired behavioral pattern, it can certainly be unlearned, and for this reason, teachers must develop skills to devise teaching approaches that can be adapted to meet the huge diversity of individual needs within their classrooms. What has been analyzed becomes even more relevant when framed within the context of lower secondary school, where every student is going through a period of transition (both at school and on a personal level), and when it is aimed at students with specific learning disorders (SLDs). It should be recalled that SLDs are a heterogeneous group of disorders, with a neurobiological origin, that affect basic learning, particularly the automatisms related to reading, writing and calculation skills. They are characterized by a gap between the performance in the testing of these skills compared to the expected performance for the educational and intellectual level (discrepancy criterion) (Cappa et al., 2012). Based on this assumption, the fundamental role of the teacher and his or her educational action becomes evident. Cornoldi et al. (2018) pointed out that "*sensitive and prepared teachers can do a lot to help SLD students achieve their educational goals and limit emotional problems which may undermine self-esteem*". In this regard, we illustrate below a didactic

experiment that focused on the activities of a motor and sports education laboratory in the lower secondary school context. The experiment involved a sample consisting of 20% of SLD students and aimed at improving their level of self-esteem both in the school context and in that of everyday life.

3.An Experimental Didactic Proposal: Motor-Sports Education to support the development of self-esteem in students

The experimental teaching proposal consisted of a laboratory activity carried out during out-of-school hours. It focused on a motor-sports education laboratory lasting 6 hours per week, divided into 3 meetings of 2 hours each on alternate days, for a total duration of 4 months and a total amount of 96 hours. The protocol for the laboratory activities simply followed the Italian Educational Ministry's framework for motor and sports sciences, but positively modified the "time" variable in the didactic design. The context of the research was a lower secondary school, specifically characterized by a small number of hours allocated to motor and sports education. The research involved 8 scholastic institutes and included 2 homogeneous groups, an experimental and a control group, each comprising 50 students including 10 with a mild specific learning disorder. The experimental group (EG) took part in the laboratory activity in addition to the teaching hours dedicated to motor-sports education, while the control group (CG) did not take part in the experimental proposal, practicing the motor-sports educational activities in the standard school program. Both groups underwent a specific evaluation procedure in two distinct periods: before the implementation of the laboratory activities and when they ended. The assessment instrument adopted was the Multidimensional Self-Concept Scale (MSCS) developed by Bracken (1993). The assumption of underlying this test is that self-esteem develops in a structured way according to learning principles: it is a learned response style that reflects the individual's evaluation of his or her experiences. Self-esteem evolves in many overlapping and interrelated contexts; the author considered those closest to young people and evaluated the following components of self-esteem:

- *Interpersonal relationships*: family members, teachers and peers are the groups of people with whom the young person interacts on a regular basis. Interpersonal self-esteem is influenced by the positivity of social relationships.
- *Environment control competence*: subjects succeed or fail in their attempts to effectively operate in their environment, solving problems and achieving goals.
- *Emotionality*: emotional reactions occur when behaviors are reinforced or punished. As they develop, young people learn to recognize, evaluate, describe, and control their emotions.

- *Academic success:* in this context, the young person evaluates his or her successes and experiences in all school-related situations.
- *Family life:* refers to each individual on whom the individual depends for his or her care, safety, and education.
- *Bodily experience:* people receive continuous direct and indirect feedback regarding their bodily situation. Other people's reactions and the young person's beliefs about his or her bodily characteristics contribute to forming his or her bodily self-esteem.

These specific dimensions are interrelated and, by overlapping, they represent global self-esteem, which is the focus of the model. Since it can easily be administered and interpreted, this test is considered suitable for the age group under consideration and for SLD subjects. The items, which are simple and concise, involve choosing between the following alternatives:

- Absolutely true = 4 points;
- True = 3 points;
- Untrue = 2 points;
- Absolutely untrue = 1 point.

Since the scales include both positive and negative items, opposite procedures were necessary for determining the scores. The classification of self-esteem corresponding to standard score ranges was:

- > 135 Extremely positive;
- 126-135 Very positive;
- 116-125 Slightly positive;
- 86-115 Average;
- 76-85 Slightly negative;
- 66-75 Very negative;
- < 66 Extremely negative.

The results were collected from both groups as average aggregate data on both the entire sample and specifically on the SLD student group; in addition, both individual and global self-esteem were assessed.

The results of the experimentation carried out are illustrated below (Table 1, 2, 3):

Table 1 - Assessment before the administration of the educational protocol of the Motor-Sports Laboratory.

Component	Self-Esteem Score of the EG	Self-Esteem Score of the SLD Students in the EG	Self-Esteem Score of the CG	Score of the SLD Students in the CG
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Interpersonal Relationships	89	78	91	79
Control competence	79	69	80	67
Emotionality	99	80	100	83
Academic success	77	64	78	63
Family life	102	88	99	87
Bodily experience	96	96	92	91
GLOBAL SELF-ESTEEM	90,3	79,17	90	78,33

Table 2 - Assessment after the administration of the educational protocol of the Motor-Sports Laboratory.

Component	Self-Esteem Score of the Sample Group	Self-Esteem Score of the SLD Students in the Sample Group	Self-Esteem Score of the Control Group	Score of the SLD Students in the Control Group
Interpersonal Relationships	104	90	92	81
Control competence	93	83	81	67
Emotionality	108	93	99	82
Academic success	90	80	78	64
Family life	111	97	102	89
Bodily experience	128	123	93	91
GLOBAL SELF-ESTEEM	105,67	94,33	90,83	79

Table 3 - Change in Self-Esteem between ex-ante and ex-post evaluation.

Component	Self-Esteem Score of the Sample Group	Self-Esteem Score of the SLD Students in the Sample Group	Self-Esteem Score of the Control Group	Score of the SLD Students in the Control Group
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Interpersonal Relationships	+ 15	+ 12	+ 1	+ 2
Control competence	+ 14	+ 14	+ 1	0
Emotionality	+ 9	+ 13	- 1	- 1
Academic success	+ 13	+ 16	0	+ 1
Family life	+ 9	+ 9	+ 3	+ 2
Bodily experience	+ 32	+ 27	+ 1	0
GLOBAL SELF-ESTEEM	+ 15,37	+ 15,16	+ 0,83	+ 0,67

Final didactic-pedagogical remarks

The most striking aspect that emerges from the analysis carried out is certainly the marked difference between the average levels of self-esteem of the two groups analyzed compared to the specific level that characterizes the SLD student component. The low self-esteem of SLD students that emerges from the research may denote a sense of inadequacy, associated with the perception of unmanageability of situations and a devaluation of one's own abilities. The resulting maladaptive style is mainly reflected in school performance. The subject experiences the perception of the role enacted, often unconsciously, with varying levels of malaise, and a vicious circle takes shape whereby the young person, labeled as "incapable", feels this attribution, experiences it with suffering and consequently adopts behaviors marked by a sense of opposition, rejection and frustration. Indeed, following direct and indirect environmental feedback, young people acquire response patterns which embed past experiences, are consistent with them and, to some extent, influence future behaviors. Moreover, since the awareness of being wanted, understood and accepted by the peer group plays a crucial role in the construction of a good concept of self, and the shaping of one's identity, we can conclude that the low social competence of SLD students also influences their self-perception.

The frustration that results from being excluded from the peer group, perhaps precisely because of the scholastic difficulties caused by one's learning disorder, triggers a mechanism whereby the more the young person is isolated, the less opportunity he or she has to practice and build a repertoire of social skills, and the more the rejection by the peer group becomes consolidated. This allowed us to point out an important critical issue which the school system, as the main place of education for young people, is called upon to respond with effective educational and socio-pedagogical initiatives. Moreover, the stage of life experienced by the lower secondary school age group is characterized by powerful and crucial changes:

teens strive to find their place in the world; they must understand and learn to express their thoughts and make their voices heard. The changes to which a teenager is subjected affect several areas: the body that gradually loses its childlike features, the relationship with his or her peers, including those of the opposite sex, and the previously acknowledged reference points. This situation can lead preadolescents to feel inadequate: they no longer recognize their bodies and adopt behaviors contrary to those they manifested a few years earlier. Therefore, it is easy for a young person during adolescence not to have a high self-esteem and to feel inadequate at all times regardless of the context in which he or she interacts, be it school or any other place in which he or she relates to others. In this regard, the experimental laboratory initiative, by focusing on the enhancement of motor-sports educational offers, made it possible to observe considerable improvements within the sample group on all components of self-esteem, both in the SLD students' component and in the global consideration of the entire peer group.

The educational contribution offered by the motor and sports experience was corroborated by a comparison with the control group, which, by not joining in the laboratory activities, did not show any significant change in the 4 months spent undergoing the traditional school offer. On the other hand, the tools to get to know one's body better, to learn to listen to and understand it, and thus to increase one's self-confidence, can be obtained by practicing motor and sports activities. Such activities can teach us how to commit oneself to a goal and how to overcome and accept defeats and disappointments (Bacchetti, 2010; Coco, 2015; Cunti, 2016; Sgambelluri & Vinci, 2020). During adolescence, teens emerge from the protective sphere of childhood and try to create their own identity in the adult world, a new identity that also arises from the birth of a new self-image. It was precisely because of the acceptance of this new image that it was possible to assess to what extent motor-sports practice plays a relevant role in allowing the adolescent not only to gain a new bodily identity, suited to his or her upcoming adult status, but also a chance to become aware of this new reality and thus to overcome the subjective feeling of alienation arising from the coexistence of the childlike soul with the adult body (Antonelli & Salvini, 1978; Benetton, 2016; Cecilian, 2018; Naccari, 2003; Tafuri & Peluso Cassese, 2018). Through motor and sports education, carried out in the school context, the group of SLD students and the entire sample were equipped with the useful tools to cope with everyday life as well.

The positive change in global self-esteem, evident in all the group components, provided for an improved control of emotionality, a greater ability to socialize with the peer group, greater tolerance to frustrations and appropriate control of relational dynamics with the peer group and in the family context. Therefore, what has been analyzed in this research activity emphasizes the importance of considering the motor and sports element as a fundamental educational tool at the service of the school system, especially the at lower secondary school level. This is

further strengthened if we focus our interest on the results achieved by SLD students, where the components of self-esteem, and consequently global self-esteem, improved to the point of being within the normal range, providing a concrete opportunity for growth for these students from both the academic and personal perspectives.

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