

## **SERVICE LEARNING. AN INNOVATIVE MODEL FOR PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHER TRAINING**

### **SERVICE LEARNING. UN MODELLO INNOVATIVO PER LA FORMAZIONE DELL'INSEGNANTE DI EDUCAZIONE FISICA**

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#### **Abstract**

Physical education is the most effective means of providing all children and youth with the skills, attitudes, values, knowledge and understanding for lifelong participation in society» (Unesco, 2013, p.6). The degree courses in Motor and Sport Sciences for the training of future EF teachers must adopt innovative methodologies, capable of promoting situated, experiential and practical learning in real life situations and in the social dynamics of the culture to which they belong. The Service Learning (SL) pedagogical-didactic model, capable of effectively combining the promotion of meaningful learning and civic engagement in trainee teachers in its proposal as a service to the community, has been receiving considerable attention in recent years. The article aims to present the Service Learning model and its application in university courses for Physical Education teacher training, through an analysis of best practices implemented in international academic contexts.

«L'educazione fisica è il mezzo più efficace per assicurare a tutti i bambini e i giovani le competenze, le attitudini, i valori, la conoscenza e la comprensione per la partecipazione alla società per tutta la vita» (Unesco, 2013, p.6). I corsi di laurea in Scienze motorie e sportive deputati alla formazione dei futuri insegnanti di Educazione Fisica devono volgere lo sguardo a metodologie innovative, capaci di promuovere un apprendimento situato, esperienziale e pratico calato nelle situazioni di vita reale e nelle dinamiche sociali della cultura di appartenenza. Il modello pedagogico-didattico del Service Learning, capace di coniugare efficacemente la promozione di apprendimenti significativi e di impegno civico negli insegnanti in formazione, nel suo proporsi come servizio alla comunità, sta ricevendo in questi ultimi anni un'attenzione particolare. L'articolo si propone di presentare il modello del Service Learning e la sua applicazione nei corsi universitari per la formazione dell'insegnante di EF, attraverso un'analisi di best practice implementate in contesti accademici internazionali.

**Parole chiave:** Service Learning, Educazione fisica, Università, impegno civico

**Keywords:** Service Learning, Physical Education, University, civic engagement

#### **1. Introduction**

The UNESCO Guidelines for Quality Physical Education (2015) are an important call to action for policy makers to invest in ensuring a better quality of PE provision from the early years of schooling. UNESCO declares that «Physical education is the most effective means of providing all children and youth with the skills, attitudes, values, knowledge and understanding for lifelong participation in society» (Unesco, 2013, p.6). For this reason, it is necessary to focus on motor literacy, as PE is the only curricular subject that contributes to the integral development of the person, as it makes possible the simultaneous acquisition of motor skills, the development of life skills and the transmission of values. It therefore represents an important possibility for the acquisition of the skills necessary to meet the challenges of the 21st century (Commission of the European Communities, 2008). Indeed, UNESCO (2015) reminds us «that regular participation in quality physical education can improve a child's attention span, enhance their cognitive control and speed up their cognitive processing» (p.6). «The learning experience offered to children and young people through physical education lessons should be developmentally appropriate to help them acquire the psychomotor skills, cognitive understanding, and social and emotional skills they need to lead a physically active life» (p. 9).

It is therefore a relational space in which to develop and practise social skills and promote values; a tool for overcoming stereotypes and inclusion; and an opportunity for active lifestyles and lifelong participation in physical activity. Unesco (2015) reminds us that globally, many of the main causes of death are linked to non-communicable diseases (NCD) associated with physical inactivity, such as obesity, heart disease, stroke, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases and diabetes.

The situation in Italy is worrying. This is attested by the data of the ISTAT survey (2019) concerning the two-year period 2017-2018, according to which about 2 million and 130 thousand children and adolescents are overweight, equal to 25.2% of the population aged 3-17 years (28.5% in 2010-2011). Strong gender differences emerge with a wider prevalence among males (27.8% vs. 22.4%).

In the 9th Report on Obesity in Italy by the Istituto Auxologico Italiano (2021), confirming the results of the ISTAT survey, Italy is placed among the countries with the highest rates of childhood obesity. Data on physical activity and movement from the "OKkio alla salute" survey by the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (Nardone, Spinelli, Buoncristiano, Lauria, Pierannunzio and Galeone, 2019) show that there is still a lot to do in terms of promoting healthy lifestyles in our country and that schools seem to be one of the contexts that feels this responsibility the most. With regard to the promotion of movement, in fact, 93% of schools plan to strengthen motor activity and 29% intend to involve the family in these initiatives.

In Italy, starting with Law 107/2015, a process of strengthening physical education has begun which has led, with the recent Budget Law 2022 (Law 234/2021, articles 329 and 338) and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR<sup>1</sup>), to the entrusting of motor education, which until now was entrusted to non-expert teachers, to specially trained teachers, in the final two years of primary school. This teaching is finally recognised as necessary to achieve the

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<sup>1</sup> The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRP) 2022 can be consulted at <https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/PNRR.pdf>.

objectives of the PNRR concerning the promotion of behaviours and lifestyles conducive to harmonious growth, health, psycho-physical well-being and the full development of the person, recognising motor education as an expression of a personal right and a cognitive learning tool (L. 234/2021, art. 329).

This requires the use of physical education teachers in schools who are trained in the development of healthy habits and lifestyles. PE needs training models and specific teaching and research methodologies so that it can really contribute to the development of teachers' competences to promote health in the new generations. It is therefore necessary to rethink physical education in schools as a social subsystem that is embedded in a broader context of social and health issues. This implies a civic commitment on the part of those involved in PE. Therefore, university training must turn its attention to innovative methodologies capable of training future PE teachers, proposing situated, experiential and practical learning dropped into real-life situations and the social dynamics of the culture of belonging capable of meaningful learning (Chiva-Bartoll, Salvador-García, & Ruiz-Montero, 2018). This is to ensure the development of the ability to transfer, apply and generalise the skills learned in the course of study, to reflect on their own way of teaching in order to build a sense of personal competence through a critical, value and ethical analysis referring to the different social situations in which they will find themselves working (Schön, 1987; 1983; Kolb, 1984; Dewey, 2014).

Among the training models, Service Learning (SL) is receiving particular attention in recent years for its demonstrated effectiveness in developing cultural competence and promoting civic engagement (Bruening et al., 2010, 2014) as it combines meaningful learning for trainee teachers and community service. At the university level (Butin, 2006; Zlokovic & Polic, 2013) it can be integrated into the academic curriculum of students and aims to develop their skills in real-life contexts, promoting general learning through structured processes of reflection on the service experience, thereby improving students' critical capacity, the development of civic education skills and bringing social benefit (Domangue & Carson, 2008; Prentice & Garcia, 2000). This last aspect corresponds to what is defined as the third mission of universities (ANVUR, 2013), i.e., "the set of activities through which universities enter into direct interaction with society, alongside the traditional missions of teaching (first mission, based on interaction with students) and research (second mission, in interaction mainly with the scientific or peer communities). With the Third Mission, universities come into direct contact with subjects and social groups other than the established ones and thus make themselves available to modes of interaction whose content and form are highly variable and context-dependent" (p. 559).

SL has been used for several years now at an international level also by sports universities for the training of future PE experts who will work both in the school and extracurricular context to prevent and fight the so-called diseases of well-being, that is, non communicable diseases (NCDs) associated with physical inactivity, such as obesity, heart diseases, stroke, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases and diabetes; psychological and relational (e.g. the Hikikomori and Neet phenomena and the various forms of juvenile deviance) eating disorders, to foster the development of soft skills and to promote health as a collective good and a prerequisite for the country's development.

This paper aims to introduce the SL training model and its possible application in university courses for PE teacher training through an analysis of best practices implemented in international academic contexts.

## **2. Characterising elements of Service Learning**

In the SL pedagogical and didactic proposal, the dimensions of learning and service are presented together to those who experience them, giving life to a virtuous circularity that facilitates both the promotion of meaningful experiential learning and the articulation of service activities useful to the community (Furco, 1996). It is precisely in this mixture of educational aims and operational methods based on participation, collaboration and even cooperation, even on the didactic side, that the particularity of this approach to knowledge and training lies.

Each SL experience is characterised by three fundamental elements that distinguish it: the valorisation of learning never detached from the curriculum of the students involved, the promotion of solidarity-based interventions based on service activities to a specific context and, finally, the active participation of all the actors involved in the promoted SL action: students, teachers/tutors, citizens and institutions (Tapia, 2006; Fiorin, 2016; Miatto, 2021).

From a conceptual point of view, the definition of SL today presents itself in a composite form, eluding a single plan of signification. This allows us to glimpse, in its applications, multiple interpretations that intend, from time to time, SL as a learning technique, a teaching technique, a specific pedagogical approach (Furco, 2003; Muscarà, 2018). At the heart of SL actions there is certainly the exchange and transfer of school and academic practises that enhance real-world learning contexts, instead of mere bodies of theoretical knowledge (Tapia, 2006; Serrano & Roig, 2018).

In this sense, SL presents itself as an opportunity for education through experience in which the students involved are engaged in structured and intentionally designed activities that respond to human and community needs (Jacoby, 2009), understanding such pedagogical and didactic practice as a good in itself, aimed at producing also on a moral level, a good for the student and the community.

An attempt to reconstruct the minimum elements that articulate the pedagogical and didactic experience of SL emerges from the work of the Research Group on Moral Education of the University of Barcelona that, with the aim of constructing a rubric for monitoring the single actions that together constitute each SL activity, has highlighted, on a descriptive level, the elements that characterise a SL activity: basic, pedagogical and organisational (GREM, 2014). In this categorisation, the basic elements are understood as those that cannot be lacking and outside of which, the proposed activity cannot be properly defined in terms of SL, but, depending on the case, can be articulated in terms of internships (Mortari, 2017) or service-volunteering initiatives (Fiorin, 2016). These include the following elements:

- the identification of basic needs manifested in a specific context that require the implementation of actions capable of providing improved responses in terms of social justice and the quality of life of people in their contexts;
- the presence of a concrete service activity, as a set of altruistic responses to identified needs capable of producing a good. This is real work that the participants carry out in a

planned and altruistic manner, offering them a concrete opportunity for learning by doing;

- the clarification of the ethical dimension underlying the service action, which looks at the possible positive effects on the social and civic involvement and their significance. It is essential that the participants, in carrying out the actions envisaged, become aware of the value they bring to the community precisely because of their contribution;
- the dimension of learning as the spontaneous or guided acquisition of knowledge, skills, behaviour and values through multiple and activating modalities such as, for example, participation in practice, observation, collaborative and/or cooperative activity, research.

The elements defined by GREM (2014) that distinguish the SL in its pedagogical characterisation recall, on the other hand, the formative dimension that characterises its proposals at a process level. These elements have to do with:

- participation understood as a complex relational dynamic that refers to the planning, realisation and evaluation elements of the SL experience in which the learners involved actively participate through proposals, decision making, collaborative management, realisation of actions aimed at a common objective. Learner participation requires a strong involvement also from adult tutors called to plan tasks, create spaces and mechanisms for participation, delegate responsibilities, encourage personal and collective initiative;
- group work as an intentional process proposed to encourage the meeting and exchange among peers oriented to the development of the envisaged SL activities. It has a formative purpose as it fosters interpersonal relationships and affective ties, as well as nourishes collective exchange and enrichment;
- reflection as a specific moment of elaboration and explanation of the lived experience that leads to new insights and knowledge;
- accompaniment as a set of actions of restitution, confirmation and recognition aimed at supporting the personal paths of the protagonists of the service activity;
- evaluation as a process for learning about the development of the activities, for the introduction of corrective design elements, the identification of the factors that contribute to the achievement of the results, also at the personal level of the participants.

Finally, with regard to the organisational elements that characterise SL activities, the logistic and institutional aspects are related to:

- the constitution of an organisational partnership understood as a collaboration agreement between two or more institutions: at least one social agent that provides the opportunity for the service and at least one training agent that provides the project with participants and the will to make it a learning process. The partnership allows the optimization of each institution's resources through joint work, exchange of knowledge and actions to promote positive institutional and social transformation;
- consolidation, as a slow transformative process through which a formal and/or non-formal educational institution learns, tests, integrates and consolidates a SL project.

This element requires planning in order to establish criteria, tools and spaces to monitor and make evident the status of the process.

Thus defined in its essential elements, the SL today presents itself as a valid pedagogical and didactic proposal for tertiary education able to go beyond the traditional classroom contexts, offering students a fervid opportunity to trespass, opening towards the re-signification of the academic and learning experience, the commitment to solidarity and the promotion of training contexts concretely open to respond to community needs. Such a way of theoretical-practical training in the university context allows, in fact, to give life to enriching training opportunities in terms of values and possible actions, enabling each participant of the SL action to learn from the experience, as in the auspices of Dewey, one of the inspiring fathers of this model (Dewey, 2014).

### **3. Service Learning. An innovative training model for PE teachers**

PE is a "potential source of experiences of solidarity and social transformation" (Rubio, Campo, Sebastiani, 2020); a tool capable of triggering an educational process aimed at sportification of society and culture and improving health, well-being and quality of life (Isidori, 2017).

The SL, as previously introduced, in its being a flywheel for the promotion of civic engagement, is founded on the principle of reciprocity, as it has the dual purpose of fostering student learning and responding to a concrete community need, proposing itself as a "win-win" model (Cervantes & Meaney, 2013; Cress, 2005) for students, universities, educational institutions and communities (Lee, Bush, & Smith, 2005). For this reason, it can be usefully promoted in the training of PE teachers, as it allows them to actively participate in learning, applying the theoretical concepts acquired and implementing the technical-practical activities experienced during the university course (Buchanan, Baldwin, & Rudisill, 2002; Furco & Billing, 2002) in projects directed at responding to particular social needs, in the school and extracurricular communities of the territory, thus enhancing traditional teaching methods (Lee, Bush, & Smith, 2005).

Examples include project activities directed to:

- promote active lifestyles to counteract sedentariness or unhealthy lifestyles;
- foster inclusion in groups at risk of social exclusion (Rodríguez-Gallego, 2014) or in need of specific educational actions (Gil-Gómez, Moliner-García, Chiva-Bartoll, & García-López, 2016; Richards, Eberline, Padaruth, & Templin, 2015; Corbatón-Martínez, Moliner-Miravet, Martí-Puig, Gil-Gómez, & Chiva-Bartoll 2015; Wilkinson, Harvey, Bloom, Jooper, & Grizenko, 2013);
- reducing risk behaviour in young people.

With respect to the latter example, as highlighted by Lleixà, & Ríos (2015), SL can be used to implement already validated models of positive youth development (Holt, 2008) that use EF and sport to promote the development of personal and social responsibility (Hellison, 1995; Escartí, Pascual, & Gutiérrez, 2005); social and moral education (Cecchini, Fernández Losa, González, & Arruza, 2008); social inclusion (Cruz & Petersen, 2011; Lleixà & Soler, 2004); conflict resolution (Capllonch, Figueras, & Lleixà, 2014; Fraile, López Pastor, Ruiz Omeñaca, & Velázquez Callado, 2008); and life skills development (Danish, 2002).

These possibilities show how the SL intervention transforms the learning experience into a link with community service (Carson, & Raguse, 2014). It represents a form of community empowerment that "involves individuals acting collectively in order to better influence and control the determinants of health and the quality of life of their community" (Maulini, 2006, p.36), triggering that "general process of reinforcement, growth and empowerment of individuals and the community so that they become increasingly capable of fulfilling their social function" (WHO 1998, p.6).

Service learning involves students from the initial design phase and throughout the research process that accompanies project implementation "asking and refining questions, discussing ideas, making predictions, designing plans and/or experiments, collecting and analysing data, drawing conclusions, communicating their ideas and findings to others, asking new questions" (Blumenfeld, Soloway, Marx, Krajcik, Guzdial, Palincsar 1991, p.26).

This exchange between teachers and students during the planning, implementation and evaluation phase of an SL project, being a practical and collaborative experience, allows to reinforce the theoretical concepts and assess the students' ability to apply what they have learnt helping them to use and enhance their resources and increase their self-esteem (Higgs, 2002). For this reason, this model, in addition to improving students' knowledge and skills, favouring learning situations that favour a practical approach to the understanding of theoretical concepts (Lee, Bush, & Smith, 2005), as foreseen in the MSc courses, is also useful to develop in future PE teachers the fundamental research skills to detect needs, monitor and evaluate teaching-learning processes. These competences move between the use of Mixed Methods Research and critical-reflexive approaches (Maulini, Fraile Aranda, Isidori, & Miatto, 2021). Indeed, Chiva Bartoll's (2019) systematic review on the use of Service Learning in university education for PE and Sport Sciences highlights precisely the use in many implementations of the mixed methods of needs analysis and process monitoring and evaluation.

Furthermore, the use of critical-reflective processes before, during and at the end of the service learning experience underpins the model itself. Lee, Bush, & Smith (2005) suggest the use of tools (questionnaires, focus groups, logbooks, interviews) to develop in the learners involved in the experience the capacity for critical thinking, analysis, synthesis and evaluation of what they have learnt, what has worked and what should have been part of the process (Moorman, & Arellano-Unruh, 2002).

Studies that have examined the use of SL in PE teacher education have found that, although a general procedure is defined, ranging from diagnosis, to planning, implementation and evaluation of the SL process (Puig, 2015; Rubio, Campo, & Sebastiani, 2020), the flexibility/versatility of application of this model allows it to be easily adapted to different contexts (Cervantes, & Meaney, 2013; Chiva-Bartoll, Ruiz-Montero, Martín-Moya, Pérez López, Giles Girela, García-Suárez, & Rivera García, 2019) and integrated both as a general programme in the Degree Course and in specific curricular areas.

A first example of the application of this model to PE teacher training is the action-research conducted by Chiva-Bartoll, Peris, & Piquer (2018), on the implementation of a SL project in the Body Expression Didactics course, in the Bachelor of Arts in Education, with the aim of fostering the acquisition of social skills and attitudes in future teachers and providing a direct service to children with motor difficulties in the university social environment. The design of

the SL programme included the design and implementation of practical sessions of motor and expressive games by university students to develop part of their curricular knowledge. The impact of this SL implementation was evaluated through the use of a mixed research method that resulted in a significant improvement in the social skills and attitudes of PE teachers. These included group consciousness, implication and group organisation and communication skills. A second study (Chiva-Bartoll, Pallarès Piquer, & Gil-Gómez, 2018), also carried out through the use of a mixed research approach, shows the effectiveness of a SL programme, implemented at the Spanish University Jaume I, for the development of an "effective personality" in trainee PE teachers.

A third example is in the study by Franco-Sola and Figueras (2020), which presents an SL experience in the course of "Education through body and movement" in the Primary Education degree course of the Facultat de Psicologia, Ciències de l'Educació i del Deporte of the Ramon Llull University of Barcelona, in collaboration with the Hospital Centre of the Guttmann Institute, specialised in the medical-surgical treatment and global rehabilitation of people with motor functional diversity. The authors designed the event entitled "Muévete y... Verás!", which involved the organisation of a day of cooperative and inclusive PE games with the participation of several primary schools in the area. The results demonstrate the effectiveness of the SL methodology in promoting the cognitive, emotional and social dimensions of learning, as well as developing respect for social differences and responsibility towards the community, the ability to work in groups and the skills for personal development. Franco-Sola and Figueras (2020) qualify this methodology as a driving force for essential learning in PE teaching practice, such as decision-making, application of corrective measures, adaptability, conflict management and feedback (p.123).

Finally, a further example can be found in the qualitative study carried out by Lleixà, & Ríos (2015) who analysed the implementation of a socio-educational intervention, using the SL model, in the psychiatric unit of the Modelo Prison in Barcelona where an PE programme takes place annually with the participation of students from the University of Barcelona. The results show the effectiveness of physical and sporting activity in the development of personal and communicative skills that favoured the socialisation of the prisoners; while, in the university students, the SL programme allowed the contextualisation of learning.

These studies show that the use of SL in university training for PE teachers represents an excellent opportunity not only to test technical-professional skills but also to develop essential soft skills such as leadership, problem solving, critical thinking and aptitude for reflection (Capella, Gil & Puig, 2014; Mumford, & Kane, 2006), which are necessary to operate effectively as PE teachers (Wilkinson, et al., 2013; Miller, 2012; Huffman, & Hillyer, 2014). It should be noted that these activities benefit both the school and extracurricular contexts to which the service is directed. Therefore, a tight relationship between the training experience and the community might be achieved through the SL approach.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The studies considered highlight the successful design and implementation of SL pedagogical and didactic paths that involve students, teachers and territory in a transformative action, giving examples of possible applicative opportunities. Moreover, the aspect of interest widens to the

utilisation of SL within academic curricular courses for the training of PE teachers, in particular in foreign universities, demonstrating the real training potential that such an approach guarantees, when intentionally designed, to the promotion of meaningful learning responding to the real needs of the community in which they have been implemented.

The nature of PE with regard to the applicability and adaptability of its contents in real situations, together with the versatility of the SL pedagogical and didactic model, represent elements that allow to glimpse multiple spaces of use that make this combination congruent on the pedagogical and didactic side, and promising for the development of practises.

Scientific studies related to the implementation of SL practises in the training of PE teachers in the degree courses in Motor and Sport Sciences in Italy remain underlined. Also in the light of the recent legislative and financial changes regarding PE, it is pertinent to propose a greater development of this innovative model in the degree courses devoted to the training of PE teachers in primary and secondary schools. This would allow the strengthening of the educational proposal, both in terms of teaching and research activities, and of the real connection of universities with the community in order to be more open to the outside world to meet the needs of the communities "through the valorisation and transfer of knowledge" (ANVUR, 2013, p.559), thus responding to the Third Mission of universities and to UNESCO's call to ensure a better quality of PE proposal.

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