

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Field hockey as a means to improve personal, social and learning skills

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### ABSTRACT

As a result of the current social, cultural, and political social change of the last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the new century, it is necessary to guarantee the acquisition and development of specific life skills. In this regard, the World Health Organization (WHO) introduces the so-called life skills and LifeComp, that is, the set of social, cognitive, and personal skills. Through motor and sports education, it is possible to structure paths of personal and social growth, considering the development of life skills. This paper analyzes the link between the development of life skills and LifeComp and the motor and sports activities planned in a structured manner, with a particular focus on the teaching methods of field hockey and team sport, which are particularly suited to the development of the psychosocial skills of younger people.

**Keywords:** life skills; LifeComp; motor and sports education; sport values; personal and social well-being

## 1. Introduction

In light of the scientific implications between life skills and motor and sports education<sup>[1]</sup> the key role assumed by life skills and LifeComp in every field of life is evident<sup>[2]</sup>. Life skills are distinguished from those techniques related to a specific sport discipline, as they can be developed and made transversal in every area of their life, succeeding in solving a problem<sup>[3]</sup>. Self-awareness, emotion management, stress management, empathy, effective communication, effective relationships, problem solving, decision-making, critical thinking, and creative thinking are the ten life skills identified by the WHO. Their development contributes to the improvement of one's perception of self-effectiveness and self-esteem, improves one's perception of oneself, and, thus, life skills play a significant role in the promotion of mental well-being and the prevention of mental distress<sup>[4]</sup>. Life skills involve a range of personal and relational skills, representing basic cognitive, emotional, and relational skills that contribute to the promotion of the development of self-management in relationship with the rest of the world in order to positively and consciously face the events of our existence. The WHO<sup>[5]</sup>, with the aim of supporting and accompanying people in the learning process throughout their entire life span, recalling the concept of lifelong learning, introduces the concept of life skills-based education (LSBE), strengthening the relevance of the acquisition and development of life skills. The learning of the latter can be addressed to young people and adults by transforming knowledge, attitudes, and values into real skills. "Knowledge" becomes "Know-How". In order to encourage the learning of life skills, experience must be the

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founding element of the whole process, which is why sport and motor activity are suited for their acquisition<sup>[5]</sup>. Therefore, LSBE is an effective approach to intervene both on the development of children and adolescents and on people in general during the entire span of their existence<sup>[6]</sup>. In fact, learning and developing psychosocial and emotional skills and all those ones identified in life skills means improving personal but also professional well-being. Therefore, the development of these skills has a fundamental role for personal and social well-being and allows you to live life with awareness, as a protagonist, in order not to suffer events passively, thanks to the development of skills that, as said, foster self-management and situations that must be faced daily. Therefore, when we talk about well-being, we cannot ignore the reference to “The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion<sup>[7]</sup>, born during the 1986 conference of the World Health Organization and considered the basic document of health promotion. The Ottawa Charter regards health as a process that allows individuals and communities to increase control over “health determinants” and thus to live a healthy, active, and productive life<sup>[8]</sup>.

In this regard, the World Health Organization<sup>[9]</sup> through the following definition, has indicated health as “a state of complete physical, psychological, and social well-being and not a mere absence of disease or infirmity,” and, following a similar vision, the Ottawa Charter<sup>[7]</sup> states that:

Health promotion is the process that enables people to increase control over their health and improve it. Health is therefore a positive concept that values personal and social resources, as well as physical abilities; therefore, health promotion is not an exclusive responsibility of the health sector but goes beyond lifestyles and points to well-being.

Therefore, according to the Ottawa Charter<sup>[7]</sup> in order to promote health promotion, the World Health Organization recognizes life skills as lifelong learning and development skills that are essential to guide people in making health-oriented choices. Hence, the attention given to life skills highlights how they are fundamental for man to achieve personal and social well-being, managing to face the demands and challenges of everyday life. Alongside the life skills, since 2020, LifeComp has developed useful and decisive skills to strengthen resilience and manage challenges and changes in personal and professional life<sup>[10]</sup>. LifeComp covers three major areas: Personal, social, and learning to learn, each of which contains three specific skills, LifeComp is characterized by nine skills that can only be acquired by making students aware and active in the learning process.

It is a matter of placing the student at the center and making him able to face personal and professional experiences in order to achieve personal balance and full well-being. Therefore, considering what has been said, we cannot fail to consider the importance of life skills in the world of motor and sports education, which becomes a driving force to encourage their acquisition and development. In this regard, the present work aims at analyzing how it is possible to achieve learning and therefore the development of life skills and LifeComp through sport and sport education, making a particular reference to the discipline of field hockey, whose teaching practices are based purely on playful methods<sup>[11]</sup>, and how this approach can lead to the acquisition of LifeComp. Therefore, this paper, whose theoretical starting points can be traced back to the European legislation underlying life skills<sup>[4]</sup> and the LifeComp<sup>[12]</sup>, and to the fundamental and universal values recognized for sport regarding the playful approaches related to motor learning and the specificities of methods used in the specific area of field hockey<sup>[13]</sup>, aims at making a contribution about the effectiveness of a structured programming of motor and sports education in order to achieve the acquisition and development of life skills and LifeComp.

## **2. Motor and sports education: Tool to develop life skills and LifeComp**

The World Health Organization<sup>[4]</sup> in the official document *Skills for Life* has defined ten essential personal skills—competences to be learned, especially in the contemporary world—in order to live a life oriented to personal and professional health and well-being, living, therefore, as protagonists, harmoniously with themselves and with others. According to the definition of the WHO (1992)<sup>[4]</sup> life skills are a set of personal and relational skills that allow you to manage everyday life and relations with the rest of the world. They are “social and relational skills that allow children to effectively address the needs of daily life, relating confidently to themselves, others, and the community”. These can be learned in every context of life and, in particular, are related to five areas of operation: (i) cognitive; (ii) behavioral; (iii) emotional; (iv) social; and (v) moral. Ten competences have also been identified: (i) self-awareness; (ii) emotion management; (iii) stress management; (iv) empathy; (v) effective communication; (vi) effective relationships; (vii) creativity; (viii) critical sense; (ix) making good decisions; (x) solving problems. Therefore, the acquisition and development of life skills foster the transformation of knowledge and values into dispensable skills; “knowledge” becomes “Know-how” in every circumstance, with a positive consequence compared to the perception that we have of ourselves and that others have of us, thus raising the levels of self-efficacy and self-esteem. According to the report, the term skills for the WHO covers:

All those skills and competences that need to be learned to relate to others and to address the problems, pressures, and stresses of everyday life. The lack of such socio-emotional skills can cause, in particular in young people, the establishment of negative and risky behavior in response to stress. To teach young people the skills for life, it is necessary to introduce specific programmes in schools or other places dedicated to learning<sup>[4]</sup>.

In this context, it is clear how school represents a privileged place to learn life skills, within which it is possible to structure a path of personal and social growth, and above all, through motor and sports education.

It becomes a non-formal setting for learning the necessary skills for life and a place where children and young people can put themselves at stake in a structured path that generates a profound change, preparing them to face life effectively. For the WHO, in fact, “Life skills are the focus of every prevention program aimed at promoting the welfare of children and adolescents, regardless of the context”<sup>[1]</sup>. According to the indications of the WHO, it is a matter of structuring an educational plan capable of acquiring knowledge, skills, and competences, necessary for life that help people become citizens, real protagonists of their lives, able to assume roles, and able to live independently<sup>[14]</sup>. Therefore, a structured program of motor and sports education makes possible the acquisition and development of life skills and LifeComp<sup>[1]</sup>. Therefore, as regards LifeComp, the European Union has published the LIFECOMP FRAMEWORK (2020)<sup>[15]</sup> defining them as “skills that can help people become more resilient and manage challenges and changes in their personal and professional lives in a changing world”. These skills can be acquired through formal and non-formal education and are connoted as a set of skills transferable to all spheres of life, helping to raise the quality of life of the individual. So, when we talk about LifeComp, inevitably, we talk about skills for life. In this sense, it is possible to identify three specific areas, identified as three LifeComp Framework (2020)<sup>[15]</sup> descriptors:

- Personal: self-regulation; flexibility; well-being;
- Social: empathy; communication; collaboration;
- Learning to learn: growth; critical thinking; learning management.

Knowing and declining LifeComp, together with life skills, allows teachers and, in particular, instructors to plan activities consciously, managing and monitoring the teaching-learning process, taking into account the

initial evaluation phase, intermediate, and final<sup>[16]</sup>. Therefore, through a process of conscious and structured education, more in detail through motor and sports education, you want to develop self-regulation, awareness, the ability to communicate and collaborate, the ability to manage uncertainty, and the ability to the ability to generate well-being—all skills related to the concept of LifeComp and life skills. From a motor and sports point of view, for the development of life skills and LifeComp, we must consider two aspects: the first concerns the physical education school, meant as the first possible field of experience to be acquired through motor education (context of formal learning); the second concerns the competitive aspect of motor education (non-formal learning context). As for the first aspect, it is important to reflect on what elements characterize school physical education in order to achieve life skills and LifeComp, whereas the greatest influence on life skills in physical education and school sport lies in the quantity and quality of youth participation in structured training exercises, in accordance with their interests in physical and psychological training<sup>[17]</sup>. and that the students give different importance to the different competences for life, besides the fact that the didactic strategies used by the teachers for the development of the same competences for life are decisive<sup>[18]</sup>. Therefore, the importance and impact of the role of the physical education and physical activity programme in schools for children and young people as a training for social skills<sup>[19]</sup> is underlined, as is the need for both political and practical change in these programmes, to have a school motor activity of greater impact<sup>[20]</sup>. Hence the need to consciously structure a motor education program that becomes a valid and potential tool through which to learn, develop, and apply life skills and LifeComp<sup>[21]</sup>.

As regards the competitive aspect of motor education, there are several studies that support the fundamental bond between sport practice and the transfer of life skills<sup>[22–24]</sup>. Therefore, it can be said that in the field of motor sports, it is possible to structure the training in relation to the achievement of life skills without neglecting the objectives of technical learning, as well as by structuring a different coaching activity in order to achieve life skills. It should be noted that through motor and sports education, the values inherent in sports practice become a channel through which it is possible to acquire life skills while also fighting social exclusion<sup>[25]</sup>. Leveraging the relationship between life skills and sport, sport motor education programming will need to orient and worry about how to train life skills through sport<sup>[26]</sup>, on how to create structured learning environments to better guide coaching practices<sup>[27]</sup>, and positive youth development practices applied to sports activities. In support of this, reference is made to the European Union text on the development of LifeComp, which aims to provide scientific support, based on empirical evidence, to the European policy-making process<sup>[15]</sup>. In fact, it highlights the importance of the intervention of the educational motor and sports in support of the development of life skills, precisely because, until the mid-sixties of the last century, the current skills of citizenship were similar to the abilities of knowing how to read, write, and account.

The school of the last century was also divided, if we want to have a clear distinction, between knowledge towards high schools and skills towards technical and professional schools. The knowledge learned at school and also the know-how of school were sufficient both to the world of work and to the problems of daily life in a society with not very tight rhythms as the current ones and rather mechanical demands by the world of work. Consequently, according to the current cultural and social scenario, the changes of the last decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the new century have led to a disruptive acceleration of social, cultural, and professional processes. All this can be traced back to the spread of information technology, but especially the phenomenon of globalization. In this scenario, formation, in a general and institutional sense, can no longer be the same as both school and work preparation, and it is precisely in this panorama that at the beginning of the nineties of the last century, the WHO introduced the so-called life skills. Taking up the definition given by the World Health Organization itself, the term life skills means all those skills and competences that it is necessary to learn in order to relate to others to deal with problems and the pressures and stresses of daily life;

the lack of such socio-emotional skills can lead, in particular in young people, to the establishment of negative and risky behaviors in response to stress<sup>[4]</sup>. Therefore, these changes and needs have consequently drawn attention to the unavoidable need to change course in the educational field by changing the focus of attention from specific knowledge and skills to key competences, specifically what concerns “the ability to cope with a task by managing to set in motion and orchestrate its internal resources, cognitive, affective, and volitive, and use the external resources available in a coherent way”<sup>[28]</sup>. In this regard, it refers to the reference to the 2007 Lisbon Treaty by which the European Union defines a strategy for education and training that covers the entire life span of European citizens based on the development of common and permanent key competences for learning throughout the life of the citizens of the European Union. So, in order to develop Life Skills and LifeComp through a synergy of different operators and sectors of education, formal and non-formal, we talk about educational projects, which need structured programming. In other words, using the logic of design basically means realizing a product, a unitary task, first analyzing educational needs, keeping in mind more perspectives of evaluation, including self-assessment, and bearing in mind the general behavior of the student<sup>[29]</sup>. Therefore, an educational program is prepared that considers the student/athlete in a global way, integrally enriching every area of his life, so that motor education can become an instrument through which we put ourselves in the game and in which the student is an active subject of the learning path<sup>[30]</sup> placing at the center the importance of experience for every type of learning expected<sup>[31]</sup>. Therefore, the objective of the psycho-pedagogical programming of the motor and sports activity, is to give real concreteness to the activities, linking them to life situations so that the skills acquired in sport can be effectively transferred to other cultural environments from early childhood<sup>[32]</sup>.

### **3. A concrete example: Field hockey**

In reference to the classic dichotomy between knowledge and ability, it also emphasizes attitudes, such as the disposition and mentality to act or react to ideas, persons, or situations that give alongside knowledge and skills the definition of competence as a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Therefore, in light of what has been said, it is clear that motor and sports activity is an educational tool that allows the acquisition and development of skills not only in sports but those necessary for life<sup>[6]</sup>. This is possible starting from the premise that motor and sport activity is a model of values, and it is through the transmission of the latter that one wants to give concreteness and transversality to educational-sports activities. Therefore, more precisely, values are deeply rooted beliefs that guide our actions, they are transmitted by the context that surrounds us, by the relationships we create, and also, and above all, by sports practice. The main educational values that derive from sports practice range from respect for collaboration to a sense of belonging and integration. Discipline, perseverance, self-esteem, and the management of stress and emotions are just some of the values universally recognized in sport<sup>[33]</sup>. Among all the values mentioned above, however, is certainly the educational value of sport, the one of greatest interest for the acquisition and development of life skills. It is possible to say that in recent years, physical activities have fully re-entered the educational sciences, considering the psycho-pedagogical principle according to which sport and physical activities are carriers of extraordinary educational potential. Therefore, the objective of the psycho-pedagogical programming of the motor and sports activities is to give real concreteness to the activities, linking them to life situations so that the skills acquired in sport can be effectively transferred to other cultural environments from early childhood<sup>[32]</sup>. Indeed, the current and complex structuring of society requires the creation and organization of educational environments that lead to the learning of skills, and the sports movement can be the driving force behind the acquisition of these objectives.

In fact, organizing a competition, defining roles and times, and planning strategies of play and therefore of action are real intellectual skills that are transferable in any context<sup>[4]</sup>. Part of the skills acquired through

motor and sports activities are clearly useful outside the sport and are also acquired through a team sport such as field hockey, which becomes a concrete example to support what has been said. In detail, field hockey traditionally is a team sport also classified as a situation sport; it requires large and complex skills to adapt to the continuous and different situations that the dynamics of the game present, all in a very short time<sup>[34]</sup>. In the training of the young Hockiest, it is of fundamental importance to consider the educational context in which his skills are formed and perfected. This is characterized by three significant aspects: competitiveness, cooperation, and creativity. With the first aspect, we try to exalt the attitude to oppose others; with the second, to enhance the game as a moment of collaboration and group; and with the third, to promote a full expression of the personalities of the boys. The practice of hockey contributes decisively to defining the lifestyle of people, and young people in particular. There are, in fact, multiple factors and motivations that lead people to dedicate themselves to the sport itself. The educational values inherent in such teamwork can make a decisive contribution to the education and training of young people, supporting the development of motor, cognitive, emotional, and relational skills and imparting values such as self-respect and the concept of solidarity<sup>[35]</sup>. The practice of this sport is therefore an opportunity to foster creativity and emotional investment, supporting the processes that lead to self-control, the development of self-esteem, and initiative. Exactly in line with the LifeComp policy mentioned above. It is in this perspective of transaction, especially of skills as well as contexts, that motor learning and the forms of teaching a team sport such as field hockey can become fundamental for the acquisition of LifeComp through sports practice<sup>[36]</sup>. The model in question for the learning of field hockey proposes a didactic progression through the proposal of simplified and multi-purpose games: “Instead of solving problems by teaching only closed skills, we need to provide problems that need to be solved in order to for every child to learn when, where, and why a technique needs to be applied”<sup>[11]</sup>. Simplified games represent a facilitated version in the form of play of the complex actions of hockey 11 vs. 11. “At seven, eight, or nine years old, a child cannot play under the rules and spaces of adults. It is not him who must adapt to the game; it should be the opposite. At that age, the child must be free to play, have fun, and be the protagonist of the game”<sup>[13]</sup>.

Proposed are child-friendly situations that adapt to the physical and cognitive abilities of the child himself, facilitating the correct execution of technical gestures in a serene environment of guided discovery. The latter is one of the teaching methods that follows the style of non-directional teaching and, therefore, the inductive orientation alongside problem solving and free exploration<sup>[37]</sup>. In the case of guided discovery, the student is expected to solve a problem situation individually and liberally, with the obligation to comply with certain constraints and restrictions dictated by the teacher in the framework of a series of objectives that they intend to pursue<sup>[8]</sup>. The advantages are the urge for spontaneity and creativity in young athletes, where everyone participates according to their resources and possibilities. Moreover, the interaction between experiences is encouraged, comparing them with those already lived. Among the disadvantages is evidently the risk of slowdowns in the learning of motor skills, the difficulty of controlling the workload, and the need to formulate in a clear and synthetic way the demand for work. The cornerstones on which the Horst Wein method<sup>[13]</sup> is based are first of all to use an adapted competitive model, that is, the whole competition system for the basic activity must be revised and modified to adapt it to the real abilities of children. An example is to start with exercises that involve three against three and then continue with four against four and so on. The eleven-to-eleven of hockey must be the last step of the course and only possibly after the fourteen years. The very structure of the matches must be reviewed. In this model, the types of games played must be different from the ordinary, as we will see later. The playful approach becomes the cornerstone of the project; the game is the main means of training, around which other educational activities and goal-setting are planned<sup>[38]</sup>.

Finally, the training approach must be progressive and planned, in which case the training path itself, as mentioned above, will be structured in a progressive way. Simplified games will be organized according to principles ranging from easy to difficult, from simple to complex. “Subjecting children to overly complex activities before they are ready only reinforces failure and frustration”<sup>[11]</sup>. The children’s hockey just outlined is the main exercise of the method of Horst Wein<sup>[13]</sup>. The game basically consists of a three-on-three, played with four gates and on a readjusted pitch for measures. In front of each pair of doors, from eight to ten meters apart, there is a shooting area, about five meters long from the bottom line. The characteristics of this exercise are intuitive and immediate; it validates the goals only within the shooting area; it does not use goalkeepers; and the side throw can be valid when driving the ball individually. The basic version of the game can easily vary, simply changing the game scenarios and consequently the possible learning<sup>[39]</sup>.

A concrete example of how field hockey is able to enhance personal skills and social inclusion is represented by the radically different backgrounds of certain teams, such as the Canadian national team, where there is a uniquely magical cross-cultural cooperation. In those situations, diversity is the strength of the team, and players from all kinds of other backgrounds can really be taught to respect other cultures. Diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion become huge opportunities for learning personal and social skills<sup>[40]</sup>.

The walking hockey revolution project is based on the belief that even if one individual is injured or lacking full mobility, he or she should still be able to play hockey. Therefore, several clubs across the UK joined the project. The idea was that, exactly as the name suggests, a person can play hockey while walking, thanks to the fact that it is designed to help people keep an active lifestyle regardless of age, health, and ability, as well as get those back into hockey who had to stop due to injuries or other reasons. Taking time to socialize, meet new people, or even build confidence is all part and parcel of taking part in this version of the game. Since its introduction, walking hockey has quickly spread, first to numerous clubs across the UK and then to several teams in New Zealand, Australia, the Netherlands, South Africa, Italy, and the USA<sup>[36]</sup>. Walking hockey is now played in about 15 countries.

In the Italian scholastic context, examples of good practices are hockey for wheelchair users and zone hockey<sup>[41]</sup>. Zone Hockey is an adapted version of hockey developed to be played as a 5-a-side game that can be played on a hard surface, on a quarter of an artificial turf pitch, or inside a sports hall.

Stories like that of the Canadian national field hockey team, the walking hockey revolution in the UK, and the Italian school are positive examples from the sport and physical activity ecosystem while outlining how sport organizations can update and improve their systems to encourage engagement from a larger population base.

## **4. Conclusion**

Health promotion is the process that empowers people to increase control over their health and improve it. To achieve a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, an individual or group must be able to identify and fulfill their aspirations, meet their needs, change their surroundings, or cope with them. Health is therefore seen as a resource for everyday life; it is not the goal of living. Health is a positive concept that values personal and social resources as well as physical abilities. So, health promotion is not an exclusive responsibility of the health sector but goes beyond lifestyles and aims at well-being<sup>[9]</sup>.

A motivational drive to take care of oneself and others is given by the promotion of psychological well-being, which also favors the prevention of behavioral and health problems and mental disorders<sup>[7]</sup>. Therefore, the lack of ability to cope with the tensions of life shows and emphasizes the importance of psychosocial skills, and motor and sports activities allow you to learn through movement. In this regard, the WHO<sup>[7]</sup> further stresses

the importance of movement, which is indicated as a remarkable learning channel that is not limited to the motor aspect but also extends to the cognitive, and therefore constitutes one of the fundamental factors for the maintenance of the state of health of people. Therefore, the movement is linked to what each of us is able to do by orienting ourselves in the surrounding environment, acting as an “active exploration that allows us to implement knowledge of the world and to develop physical, psychic, cognitive, affective, and emotional relationships with it and with other individuals”<sup>[42]</sup>.

For the learning of life skills, movement, and more precisely, corporeality and motricity, represent the elective means through which to realize a transfer of skills through which to transform and reuse learned motor skills into new skills and other skills related to the areas of functioning in development: social, behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and moral. Therefore, a structured educational program of motor and sports education in a stimulating learning environment is applied and applicable in educational and training projects, proposing itself as a pedagogical tool that uses body mediation. These are efficient and effective training models applicable to children, young people, and adults by promoting psychosocial skills. In order to promote health and well-being education, it is hoped that this approach and vision will become more widespread, moving from prevention to health promotion that increases the opportunity for people to have effective control over their health by raising the quality of life (q.o.l.)<sup>[43]</sup>. In conclusion, in general terms, studies on the subject of LifeComp in relation to sport activities and, more precisely, team sport, would seem to merit further study; therefore, starting from this contribution, it is intended to start a pilot project with young athletes, combining the chronological organizational practice of training in parallel with the design of skills in order to have a study with empirical relevance that develops further the starting assumptions, developing and adding a supplementary contribution to the link between life skills, LifeComp, and motor and sports activities.

## Author contributions

Conceptualization, FS and FT; methodology, FT; investigation, ES; writing—original draft preparation, FS and FT; writing—review and editing, ES. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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