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S Physical Education for Italian School Children during the Totalitarian Fascist Regime

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Abstract Recent general and educational historiography suggests that, under Mussolini, physical training was viewed as a key instrument for disciplining children's ideas and values as well as their bodies, and thus for inculcating them with fascist ideology. In this essay, I trace the evolution of the regime's totalitarian educational project in relation to the teaching of physical education in primary schools, a novel topic and heuristic perspective that has been typically overlooked by historiographers. To this end, I analyse national

legislation, school curricula, ministerial circulars, and teachers' manuals and journals, examining developments in physical education for school-age children in terms of both its pedagogical or ideological meanings and the teaching methods adopted.

Keywords Italian fascism, childhood, 20th century, Italian schooling, physical education

The Topic and My Heuristic Point of View

This paper explores physical education for Italian children during the totalitarian fascist regime (1922–1943), a topic that speaks to two crucial issues in the history of education under European totalitarian dictatorships: childhood and the body. Indeed, as we know, totalitarian experiments with political and ideological education were initiated during childhood – a life stage that was believed to be marked by purity in that it was uncontaminated by past experience – and drew on physical training as a key means of shaping the desired “new man” (in the case investigated here, the new Italian man). Specifically, I present a study of physical education as an elementary school subject during the fascist period, following recent heuristic perspectives on the history

of schooling (see Chervel, 1998; Viñao, 2006 and, in relation to Italian research in this domain, Polenghi, 2014).

The Mussolini regime “used, above all, youth organizations” – and especially physical activities – to control and fascistize children by inculcating them with “new values, attitudes and beliefs” (Ponzio, 2015, p. 4; on this theme, see also La Rovere, 2002). This agenda was mainly pursued in extra-curricular settings, but elementary schools played a key role too. Indeed, they were seen as a sort of bridge between children and the fascist organizations, especially in the domain of physical training.

Analysis of national legislation, school programs, ministerial circulars, and teachers’ journals and manuals enables us to trace the evolution of physical education as a subject on the elementary school curriculum, also indicating whether and how “school culture” – in terms of both educational ideas and teaching practices – was influenced by the ideological meanings of the body promoted by the regime’s broader educational project and propaganda.

The Tradition of Gymnastics in Italian Elementary Schools and the Neo-idealistic Reform of 1923

Physical education became a compulsory subject in Italian primary schools in 1878. Broadly speaking, both the first school gymnastics programs of 1878 and the second ones introduced in 1886 might be defined as adaptations for schoolchildren of exercises devised by the German gymnastics movement.

Physical activity for primary children consisted of methodical group exercises to be performed at the teacher’s command. Simple body movements designed to regiment the school group – such as line-ups, marches, jumps, climbing, exercises with basic gymnastics equipment, and structured games – could be performed in the gymnasium, schoolyard, or school hall. Other easier exercises – such as standing up, standing on tiptoe, arm movements, clapping, and so on (known as “gymnastics among the desks”) – could be executed in the classroom. Hence, during the reformist period under liberal governments following Unification, gymnastics combined two purposes: educating schoolgoing

boys and girls to be disciplined citizens, in keeping with the ideals of nation building, and improving their health, as per the recommendations of positivist medicine (Alfieri, 2017, pp. 99–166).

A similar approach was reflected in the gymnastic school programs of 1893, which however omitted the acrobatic and choreographic aspects of the methodical exercises, placing greater emphasis on the health goals of physical education and, above all, on its ludic value. Accordingly, games were now recommended to take up two thirds of the lesson-time assigned to physical training. These programs remained in force over the following years, but in practice were not applied, due to a lack of preparation on the part of teachers, the conservative spirit of contemporary educational theory, and, above all, the rising tide of nationalism in the early twentieth century (Bonetta, 1990, pp. 133–147). Another key contributing factor was the lack of suitable indoor and outdoor spaces for physical training; this meant that gymnastics were almost exclusively practiced in the classroom (Brunelli & Meda, 2017). The status of physical education in secondary schools was not much better, especially after the World War I.

The failure across the Italian school system to implement a proper gymnastics program was noted by Giovanni Gentile (Ferrara, 1992, p. 218), the famous neoidealist philosopher, who, after being appointed Minister of Education in the first Mussolini government, managed to introduce a wide-ranging school reform in 1923 (Charnitzky, 2001, pp. 93–188). In March of the same year, Gentile founded the ENEF (National Institute for Physical Education), with responsibility for the physical training of adolescents and youths, a brief that included the management of physical education in secondary schools and the training and recruitment of specialist instructors (Ponzio, 2009, pp. 20–28).

In primary schools, on the other hand, gymnastics continued to be the responsibility of class teachers. The new general curriculum for primary schools – issued in November 1923 – largely confirmed the gymnastic programs of 1893. The new guidelines for teachers stressed the health benefits of physical training and, above all, the educational value of games, discouraging choreographed group routines. Team games were to be viewed as a means of getting to know the pupils'

personalities, fostering solidarity among them, and strengthening the bond between pupils and teachers, who were supposed to occasionally join in as “teammates”. Scout troop activities were also recommended, as were nature walks (*Programmi di studio*, 1923, pp. 337–338).

These programs were developed by Giuseppe Lombardo Radice, a professor of Education who served under Gentile as Director of Primary Schooling at the Ministry of Education. According to Lombardo Radice – whose perspective was informed by neoidealist philosophy, but also influenced by some of the ideas of the progressive education movement – physical training should be experienced as a joyful activity and – along with drawing, music, singing, folklore, and dialectal varieties of speech – serve to foster the children’s spontaneity (Ostenc, 1981, pp. 75–89).

Clearly, the text of these gymnastic programs also made a few references to disciplining the pupils, even comparing schoolchildren to soldiers. At the time, however, this was a legacy of the nineteenth-century gymnastics tradition and not yet an expression of fascist ideology; the references to discipline attest Lombardo Radice’s intention to revive patriotic education among Italian children as part of his broader educational project (Chiosso, 2019, pp. 119–153).

Nevertheless, something was already changing in Italian elementary schools. Since 1922, Dario Lupi, an early supporter of fascism and undersecretary at the Ministry of Education, had been introducing new school rituals. The most important of these was the school ceremony of saluting the flag, to be venerated – in Lupi’s words – as a “new Eucharist” (Gentile, 1993, pp. 60–63). Such were the early beginnings of the new political religion of fascism and accordingly of a process of fascistization of the Italian school system.

Indeed, Fascist party leaders soon began to criticize Gentile’s reform. In June 1924, Lombardo Radice resigned from his ministerial role, but his journal *L’educazione nazionale* defended the reform measures, including Radice’s physical education curriculum for primary schools (Lombardo Radice, 1924; Ottorino, 1926).

The Opera Nazionale Balilla

When the fascist movement developed into a dictatorship in 1925, physical training became a central focus of its political program. The Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB) was set up in 1926¹. According to its founding legislation, the ONB was to have special responsibility for the welfare of young people, as well as for their physical, moral – and consequently political – education. The new organization set out to sign up all Italian boys and girls in the course of a few years. Members were divided into sections based on their age.² There were also hierarchical subgroups – *squadre* [squads], *manipoli* [maniples], *centurie* [centuries], *coorti* [cohorts] and *legioni* [legions] – named after the various units of the Ancient Roman army. In practice, the ONB was a paramilitary organization. In their spare time (and especially on Saturdays), large numbers of boys and girls in uniform would perform choreographed gymnastic displays and participate in military parades and other public ceremonies. Group play was organized, too; the boys played at war with toy muskets, the symbol of fascist militaristic ideology for childhood. The ONB was also tasked with providing both academic and non-academic assistance to the youth: under this heading, it provided school materials and organized summer camps, especially for poorer boys and girls (Betti, 1984; Ostenc, 2019).

As stated above, the ONB was an expression of the regime's project to create a "new man" – who was healthy, virile, bold and daring – and a "new woman" – who was healthy, strong and ready to become a prolific mother and faithful wife. For this reason, the ONB's core mission was physical education. In 1927, the organization's periodic bulletin

1 Balilla was the popular nickname of a child-soldier who had become famous as a patriotic hero during the Unification of Italy.

2 Initially in 1926, there were only two boys' sections: the *Balilla* for 8- to 14-year-olds and the *Avanguardisti* [Avantgardists] for 14- to 18-year-olds. In 1927, two new female sections were set up: *Piccole Italiane* [Little Italians] for younger girls aged 8–14 years and *Giovani Italiane* [Young Italians] for teenage girls aged 14–18 years. In 1933, the ONB added two final sections for younger children aged 6–8 years: *Figli della lupa* [Sons of the she-wolf] and *Figlie della lupa* [Daughters of the she-wolf].

stated that: “Solving the problem of physical education means addressing the entire educational problem, it means revisiting the entire Italian school system” (Di Donato, 1984, p. 191).

Indeed, in the same year, the ENEF was dissolved and the ONB was given the sole charge of all physical education in schools. In 1928, the Fascist Male Academy of Physical Education was founded to train male gym teachers for secondary schools; a counterpart female academy was set up in 1931 (Ponzio, 2009).

Over the same period, the ONB also came to have more direct influence on gymnastics programs in elementary schools, and especially more direct authority over elementary school teachers. Indeed, in 1929, the organization came under the control of the Ministry of Education (*Regio decreto-legge*, 1929).

At that time, the minister of education, Balbino Giuliano, remarked: “Now, physical education has been restored in the new schools which [are] the forge of national education” (1930). Indeed, elementary school gymnastics programs were now delivered by the ONB itself; they were devised by Eugenio Ferrauto, a famous “gymnasiarch” who was the right-hand man of ONB’s president, Renato Ricci (Finocchiaro, 2013).

As we can see from an official gymnastics manual for teachers published by the ONB in 1931, the exercises prescribed were not strikingly different from those of the liberal tradition, but they bore new ideological meanings. For example, all physical activities in elementary schools were meant to start and end with the Roman salute, a practice that, together with the imposition of triple marching by Minister Giuseppe Belluzzo in 1928 (Del Nero, 1988, p. 114), established a direct parallel between physical education classes in elementary schools and paramilitary displays. The same manual advised teachers not to neglect their most talented pupils, but nevertheless to prioritize the needs of the group because all students were required to attain a median level of physical competence (O.N.B., 1931, p. 14). Nevertheless, in keeping with the previous tradition, Ricci and Ferrauto rejected any spirit of competition and athleticism (Ferrara, 1992, pp. 242–244). Not surprisingly therefore, sports and pre-sports activities were severely neglected in elementary schools.

By the early 1930s, the fascist regime was devoting increasing effort to fostering the large-scale practice of physical activities in Italy, including the provision of gymnasiums and sports fields³. In parallel, the fascistization of elementary schooling was also going from strength to strength. In 1930, the so-called “*Testo unico di Stato*” [*Universal State-prescribed Textbook*] was introduced as “a vehicle of ideological and political propaganda” (Sani, 2008, p. 323). Similarly, the ONB continued to act as bridgehead for fascism within the elementary school system. As early as 1927, the Ministry of Education had initiated a recruitment campaign for the fascist organizations, aiming for: “As many Balillas and Little Italians as there are children in elementary schools” (Del Nero, 1988, p. 91).

However, in addition to this successful striving for quantitative gains⁴, the regime also worked on bringing about qualitative improvements in physical education. The ONB offered summer courses in physical education for elementary teachers (Ibidem, pp. 119–120) and allowed them to take leave of absence to attend the above-mentioned Fascist Male Academy of Physical Education (*Regio decreto-legge*, 1931).

Indeed, in 1932, the journal *La scuola fascista* argued that the “teacher of the future” would be “the academist” and hoped that “teacher selection would be based on physical criteria, like in the army”, given that “weakness of the body is an expression of moral weakness” (*Ufficiali dell’ONB*, 1932). This suggests that physical education had become, more so than in the past, a means of ideologizing elementary school teachers and of fostering a politicized and militaristic spirit in schools.

This same spirit also permeated the general elementary school curriculum introduced in 1934, which may be viewed as a truly fascist program because it stressed the role of schools in involving children

3 In Italy, gymnasiums and sports fields numbered 502 in 1928 and 4,199 in 1933 (Ferrara, 1992, p. 241).

4 In 1927, there were 405,954 youths enrolled in the *Balilla* and 128,000 in the *Piccole Italiane*; by 1932, the former group numbered 1,427,318 and the latter 1,184,424 (Charnitzky, 2001, p. 520).

in the regime's rituals and organizations (Catarsi, 1990, pp. 108–119). Although no changes were made to the gymnastics syllabus at this time, physical education was embedded in the pedagogical debate about elementary school education both prior to and following introduction of the new curriculum.

The key point under discussion was the following: was the new general curriculum so different from the 1923 program developed by Lombardo Radice? (Catarsi, 1990, pp. 108–114); and, thus, should the relationship between school and the ONB be made even closer? Openly fascist intellectuals proposed merging the two institutions. An editor of the magazine *La scuola fascista* wrote that the aim of the “universal program” was “to militarize the students of the fascist nation” (G. M., 1935); another wrote that the aim of the new program of schooling was to “educate the schoolboy-balilla”, “a unique concept”, because – he said – “1923” was “faraway” (Alla, 1935). Nevertheless, the same journal also carried divergent, albeit less mainstream, opinions. For example, the author of another article maintained that school and ONB fulfilled different functions: school was called to pursue primarily intellectual goals, while the task of the ONB, as “a fiery horse”, was to prepare pupils to be bold soldiers for the nation (Celsi, 1935).

At least implicitly, this debate concerned the ideological meanings of physical education – as conveyed by the ONB – and the influence of these meanings on everyday teaching-learning activities in schools.

The Fascist Youth Movement *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio*

In the late 1930s, Italian colonial expansion, an aggressive foreign policy, and increasing industrialization made it even more urgent to foster a strong spirit of moral, political, economic and racial unity across the fascist nation. Young people continued to be viewed as the point of departure for advancing this agenda. In 1937, a new Italian youth movement, *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio* [*Italian Fascist Youth*] (GIL) was

founded⁵. This organization was directly controlled by the Fascist party and reflected the regime's ambition to build up an all-pervading totalitarian educational system (Ponzio, 2015, pp. 152–170). Hence, a new school reform was prepared in 1939 by Giuseppe Bottai, the education minister. The so-called School Charter was inspired by fascist corporatism and designed to ensure greater continuity between school and the GIL (Charnitzky, 2001, pp. 440–469). The outbreak of the war prevented application of the reform, but not the spread of its spirit, which, in relation to elementary schooling, particularly emphasized the value of vocational and, once again, physical training.

In 1940, Ferrauto drew up new gymnastic programs for elementary schools with an accompanying set of guidelines for teachers. The ideological underpinnings of this curriculum were expressed in the motto: “Believe, obey, and fight”, one of the most widely circulated slogans produced by the fascist propaganda machine. There were also explicit references to the relationship between physical education and “preserving” the Italian race (Ferrauto, 1940, Vol. I, pp. 5–12), in keeping with the provisions for the defence of the race that had been introduced in Italian schools in September 1938 (De Fort, 1996, pp. 450–455).

The proposed regime's approach to teaching physical education in elementary schools was now a robust blend of subject-specific goals, ideological contents, health awareness, and elements of play, as illustrated by the sample class presented in the manual: a short warm-up game followed by miming exercises, a group walk, simple regimental exercises, running and marching, further basic exercises, and singing (Ferrauto, 1940, Vol. V, p. 28). Of especial importance were the miming exercises, consisting of body movements imitating the motion of animals and natural phenomena (such as the wind or waves), but especially seafaring activities (rowing, swimming), agricultural labour (the farmer sowing, mowing, digging and hoeing) and other occupations such as those of bell-ringer, carpenter, knife grinder, weaver, or driver

5 As is well known, the *fascis lictoriae* (in Italian *fascio littorio*) were ancient Roman symbols of the authority of magistrates and symbolized strength and aggressiveness through unity.

(Ferrauto, Vol. VI, pp. 41–68). In Ferrauto’s opinion, these routines fulfilled physical and health goals, along with educating the children for real life and preparing them to contribute to the development of a powerful and hardworking nation (Ibidem, p. 71), in keeping with Mussolini’s ideal of the “harmonious collective” (Gentile, 1993, p. 52).

Yet, although these clearly ideological meanings were associated with all school gymnastics programs by 1940, the actual exercises – as earlier noted – were not majorly different from those of the previous tradition. Indeed, the actual implementation of physical education in elementary schools continued to be more or less the same as in the past. This is also attested to by the contents of proposed physical education programs submitted by teachers to competitions organized by the GIL (P.N.F., 1942a; 1942b). Such methodological continuity was especially reflected in the persistence of classroom gymnastics, mainly due to the continued lack of facilities in Italian school buildings, despite the regime’s efforts to build new gymnasiums and sports fields.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we might say that during the fascist period elementary school pupils continued to perform exercises that were very similar to those taught to the generations of the liberal era, especially in terms of classroom gymnastics. Nevertheless, the regime undoubtedly emphasized the value of physical education, increasingly imbuing it with ideological meanings. Gymnastics became a sort of Trojan horse through which fascist youth organizations went about imposing their own conceptions of the body and influencing the broader school culture as they advanced their totalitarian and militaristic educational project.

Efforts to defascistize the primary curriculum after the collapse of the regime also affected physical education. In new physical education programs introduced in 1945, teachers were urged to avoid “all forms of military-style authoritarianism” (*Programmi, istruzioni e modelli*, 1945, p. 375), while the new guidelines for teaching physical education in the second half of 1940s were aimed at dismantling the fascist ideological apparatus (*Programma di Educazione fisica*, 1946).

Yet, the strong ideological imprint of fascism went on conditioning the Italian educational *imaginary* over the following years, slowing down the shift towards more innovative forms of teaching physical education in elementary schools. Indeed, in 1959 – thirteen years after the birth of the Republic and, thus, in the newly democratized contest – the famous gymnasiarch Eugenio Enrile wrote: “The pairing of physical education with fascism survived. In the immediate post-war period, teaching gymnastics meant giving way to political nostalgia and summoning ghosts” (1959, p. 116).

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