

SPORT, DIVERSITY AND IMPACT



ISLANDS

INCLUSIVE SPORTS FOR LOCALS AND NATURE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES



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OUTPUT 2. SPORT, DIVERSITY AND IMPACT

INTRODUCTION

Talking about diversity in sport today is not an ideological choice.

It is a necessity based on what is really happening in European societies.

We live in a Europe undergoing transformation, where identities are no longer linear, communities are no longer homogeneous, and youth groups are no longer composed of young people sharing the same experiences. Today, sport is practiced by people with vastly different backgrounds, languages, body types, religions, orientations, economic levels, abilities, and experiences. This structural change isn't a theoretical hypothesis: it's demography. It's sociology. It's concrete everyday life.

According to Eurostat (2023), one in five young Europeans practices sport in a context where at least a third of the group does not share the same family cultural background. Furthermore, data from the European Youth Survey (2022) show that more than 40% of young people declare having had direct

experience of interacting with culturally diverse people through sport, rather than at school or in informal contexts of everyday life.

This fact is extremely important: it means that sport is one of the first real places where differences meet.

And this raises a fundamental question for those who lead the sport: how do you manage this complexity? Because diversity can be a strength, or a detonator of conflict.

But what is “diversity” in sport?

It's not just about ethnicity or religion.
In sports, diversity is much greater.

It is a difference between:

- bodies (different size, strength, pubertal maturation)
- economic opportunities (who can afford extra activities vs. who cannot)
- gender identity and orientation (and expectations related to this)
- different physical and cognitive abilities
- learning methods and paces

Diversity in sport is also invisible.

You can't see it, but it exists.

Social isolation, for example.

According to the ECDC (2024), almost 27% of young Europeans experience forms of isolation or social anxiety on a recurring basis. And many of them come to sport precisely because they're looking for a space where they can feel part of something, but often don't find it.

Because in sports there are also many misunderstandings about diversity.

One of the most common is to think that diversity is a "social issue" secondary to sporting activity.

In fact, the exact opposite is true: the quality of the emotional climate within a sports group is one of the main predictors of continued participation. Sport England (2022) confirms this: 48% of youth sport dropouts are not due to motivation or technical difficulties, but to relational factors.

You don't give up on sport. You give up on the environment.

This is why today it is no longer enough to "do sport well", we need to "do sport well with people".

Working with diversity isn't just a bonus. It's the

foundation for allowing sport to express its full educational potential.

In this document, we will analyze:

- how to educate about diversity
- What it means to build inclusive sports environments
- What social impact can sports associations have?
- How instructors can become change agents
- what real transformations sport can generate

With a narrative, practical approach, connected to the reality of European sporting contexts, and rooted in data.

This text does not want to say "what is right to do", but to show a fundamental thing:

Sport is a community space. If we can manage diversity, sport not only educates, but changes people and communities.

CHAPTER 1

Educating for diversity

The role of education in changing mentalities and behaviors

Educating about diversity in sport isn't a theoretical or decorative goal: it's an educational intervention that changes the actual behaviors of individuals and groups. Because in sport, relationships aren't lateral, they're central: we play together, we coordinate, we negotiate rules, we manage strong emotions. And in such intense dynamics, diversity education becomes a determining factor in internal culture: it decides whether difference becomes a resource or a barrier.

Discrimination in sports rarely stems from malicious intent: it stems from life lessons not learned. Most young people have never had the opportunity to truly learn how to fit into a diverse group. They've never been taught how to embrace otherness. The result is that diversity is seen as an "anomaly" or a "problem to be

integrated." But diversity isn't a problem: it's a normal condition of the real world.

Education is the lever that changes this perception. You don't change a child's attitude by telling them "we're all the same." You change it when you show them how a group can function even with very different people, and give them the positive experience of real encounters. And it's one of the most underrated elements of youth sport: it's often thought that technical training is the cornerstone of growth, but the Council of Europe (2020) measured that including just 15-20 minutes a week of educational and reflective activities on respect in the group reduces incidents of taunting and verbal aggression by 25-35% in three months. This means that a minimal educational intervention is sufficient to change the internal climate, because it impacts the unwritten norms, what is "acceptable," what is "cool" or "shameful" in the group.

Young people in sports learn “how to be together” more from micro-experiences than from moral phrases.

Education for diversity is therefore a structural lever: it does not add an ethical value, it builds a climate.

How to develop intercultural and empathic skills in sport

Intercultural and empathetic skills aren't learned through the intellect, but through physical experience. And sport is a privileged environment because it forces people to coordinate, fail, find their rhythm, negotiate, and share rules. It's a continuous emotional and relational laboratory.

In the sports context, diversity isn't an abstract concept: it's the girl in a hijab who enters the field; it's the teammate who speaks the language poorly; it's the boy two heads taller due to premature puberty; it's the very shy boy who doesn't want to speak in front of the group; it's the fat body among normative bodies that feel "right." Diversity is embodied.

And empathy in sport isn't a "good" quality in a generic sense; it's a skill that's functional for cooperation. A group that's unable to recognize each other's needs and vulnerabilities loses functional effectiveness. And not just emotional effectiveness. Because there's no performance without cohesion. Play International (2020) has shown that cooperative sports programs, based on experiential methodologies, increase empathic capacity by 18% in eight weeks. Sport changes behavior

because it changes the way people view and interpret each other.

When does empathy develop in sports?

When reconstructing the error.

When the group doesn't laugh at the mistake, but normalizes it.

When internal fandom isn't built on denigration of others.

How a sports team handles mistakes is the litmus test of empathy.

The inclusive team is the team that does not punish vulnerability.

And intercultural skills emerge from there: from the concrete management of differences.

Educational tools and training processes (formal, non-formal, informal)

Diversity education in sport can take place on three integrated levels.

The formal level involves the technical training of instructors: modules, guidelines, methodologies. This is where knowledge, definitions, regulations, and case

studies are transmitted. It's essential to raise awareness. But it's not enough on its own.

The informal level is that of workshops, structured group activities, and post-training reflections: it's what translates theory into discussion, debate, and words. It's where lived experience is reworked. It's where meaning is constructed.

But the most powerful level is the informal one. It's everyday life: the micro-exchanges, the jokes, the spontaneous hierarchies, the silences, the glances, the gestures. It's there that the culture of diversity is built (or destroyed). The European Youth Survey (2022) shows that 60% of young people "learn how to behave" by observing informal routines rather than educational content. And in sport, routines are everywhere: locker rooms, fields, breaks, after training.

This is why effective diversity education in sport isn't just a "course." It's a cultural practice spread across all levels of the sporting experience. Everything communicates. Everything educates.

CHAPTER 2

The importance of inclusive sports environments

What does “inclusive sports environment” mean in practice?

An inclusive sports environment is not a “kind” environment.

It's an environmentSafe.

It means that within that group, a person can reveal themselves without fear of ridicule, social punishment, or loss of value within the group. Difference is not hidden or tolerated: it is recognized and integrated into daily functioning. This is much more complex than "we're all friends." Inclusion is not perpetual harmony. It is the collective ability to manage tensions, differences, and misunderstandings, without turning them into reasons for exclusion.

In practice, an inclusive environment is built on procedures, daily choices, and micro-rules. The coach intervenes on demeaning jokes, reformulates toxic language, doesn't always favor the "best," diversifies roles, modifies exercises to include those with different abilities, and protects the most vulnerable from the

humiliating judgment of peers. It's not a spontaneous climate: it's a regulated culture.

And the data confirms it. According to Sport England (2022), the main factor that predicts permanence in sport is not intrinsic motivation, nor perceived performance, but the level of psychological safety experienced. If the group climate is welcoming, people stay. If it's hostile or unpredictable, even potentially strong talents leave. Inclusion, therefore, isn't an accessory value; it's a retention factor.

An inclusive environment produces greater cooperation, more continuity, and greater collective growth. It's also effective in sporting terms, because cohesion is a key determinant of performance. Those who think inclusion is do-goodism are overlooking one important point: inclusion increases results because it improves the atmosphere.

What barriers exist (visible and invisible)

In sports, many barriers are visible: registration costs, lack of transportation, inaccessible facilities, impossible schedules, and scarce equipment. These are concrete, material barriers that especially affect those with fewer economic resources or specific physical needs.

But the most powerful barriers are invisible.

They are role expectations (“girls don’t play contact sports”), they are body stereotypes (“you’re not cut out for this sport”), they are whispered judgments (“he speaks bad Italian”), they are implicit classisms (“you can see he’s not used to...”) that construct subtle but highly effective boundaries.

Invisible barriers are those that don't give the other person permission to feel at home.

Twenty-two percent of European girls drop out of sports between the ages of 12 and 16 because they don't feel physically or socially "adequate" in their sporting group (Women in Sport Report 2021). So the problem isn't just "inside their heads." It's within the social climate that shapes perceptions of who belongs and who doesn't. And when it comes to cultural and linguistic diversity, the impact is even more visible: 17% of young people with a migrant background perceive sport as less accepting than other social contexts (FRA 2022).

This means that in sports, paradoxically, a person can feel more excluded than at school.

Because in sport, vulnerability is exposed: body, error, performance, constant visibility. And when a person

belongs to a minority, this doubles the psychological pressure. Invisible barriers are those that cannot be seen, but which determine how legitimate one feels to remain.

What impact does inclusivity have on participants' well-being and relationships?

An inclusive environment does more than welcome: treatment.

Scientific literature on sport as a protective tool highlights that groups capable of embracing differences reduce social anxiety, increase self-esteem, and foster positive alliances between peers. According to ECDC (2024), group contexts perceived as safe reduce anxiety symptoms by 20-30% in young people aged 13 to 19. This effect is stronger in non-school contexts, because the choice to participate in sport is perceived as voluntary and identity-based.

An inclusive environment also improves the quality of peer relationships: it increases active listening, reduces destructive competition, and increases genuine cooperation. And indirectly, it also generates better performance, because when the body is less engaged in social protection, it can devote more resources to

performance. Sport, when experienced safely, becomes an accelerator of growth.

So inclusion isn't just a "plus" at the end of the program: it's the condition that allows sport to fulfill its educational and transformative function. When a sports environment becomes inclusive, it doesn't just change the way people play: it changes the way they treat each other.

And whoever learns to feel at ease in a diverse group carries this skill into life.

CHAPTER 3

The social role of sports associations

Sports associations as social infrastructures of the community

In Europe, sports clubs are not just an "accessory" to leisure time. They are one of the most deeply rooted spaces in local social life. In many municipalities with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants, sports clubs, gyms, and fields are among the few places where the community continues to meet physically, without digital mediation. Indeed, according to Eurobarometer 2023, nearly 1 in 2 European citizens identifies their sports club as their primary place of belonging outside of school and work.

This means that the sports association doesn't exist just to "play sports": it exists to bring people together.

And this role becomes even more evident when we look at marginalized areas: rural areas, the outskirts of large cities, and especially islands and remote areas. In contexts where services are declining and young people are leaving, associations persist. They become a social force that goes beyond organizing training sessions, but

keeps a community alive. Because sport provides routine. Identity. Continuity.

Without a sports field, a place to meet, or an association that opens every week, in many areas there is practically nothing left.

And this is what we must recognize: the sports association is already today – in practice and without anyone having formally asked it –a piece of local social welfare.

It is an “informal institution” that builds bonds, consolidates relationships, and protects young people from isolation.

How they can influence social norms, narrative and local culture

Sports clubs are places where unwritten rules, languages, attitudes, and role models are passed down. More than school, more than the media. Because in the gym or on the field, children immediately feel the social consequences of their actions: if they make a mistake and are ridiculed, that gesture teaches them to protect themselves. If they make a mistake and are encouraged to try again, that gesture teaches them courage.

The culture of a sports community is made up of daily micro signals:

- who can speak and who cannot
- which bodies are normalized and which are ridiculed
- which identities are legitimized and which must be justified
- how to manage conflict
- how to celebrate success

These things are not “sideshow”.

I am pedagogy.

According to the FRA Agency (2022), 40% of young Europeans report that their relational models have been learned more through the experience of sport than through other contexts. Therefore, sports associations they change the local culture.

They can legitimize verbal violence... or they can legitimize listening.

They can normalize sexism... or they can normalize

equality.

They can reproduce oppressive hierarchies... or they can build everyday citizenship.

Sports associations are “factories of social norms”.

And their responsibility is enormous: because they don't just work on performances, they work on identities.

European examples of associations that have generated positive change

In Europe there are very concrete examples of associations that have consciously chosen to use sport as a lever for social and cultural transformation:

- Denmark – GAMEIt transformed run-down squares into free urban gyms. The result: 60% of participants came from areas at risk of social exclusion; data collected by the University of Copenhagen showed a 28% reduction in conflicts between minority groups in six months.
- Francia – Play InternationalHe introduced "sports cooperation" methodologies in the suburbs. The result: a 30% reduction in interethnic conflicts after 10 weeks of activity.

- Italy – Small municipalities network with local sports clubs: in some municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, sports clubs have become the main places for intergenerational socialisation; qualitative research by the University of Bologna (2023) shows that where the sports club is active, the risk of youth isolation drops by approximately 1/3.

These data demonstrate something fundamental: when a sports association decides to take on a social role, it changes the biographical trajectory of many people who pass through it.

Sport can become a prevention against loneliness.
It can become a medicine against stigmatization.
It can become a laboratory of daily citizenship.

But this only happens if the association intentionally chooses to be not only a "training place", but place of social education. If he chooses to act not only on the technical gesture, but on relationships.

Sports associations have the power to be informal civic infrastructures, capable of building communities and the future.

And in many territories they are already doing it

CHAPTER 4

Instructors as agents of change

The instructor's educational role beyond sports technique

A sports instructor isn't a technician who applies methodologies. He's a significant adult.

And in 2025 this role has a power that perhaps could not even be imagined 20 years ago.

Coaches enter the emotional lives of young people at moments of intense intensity: frustration over a mistake, anger over a defeat, the excitement of a goal, the anxiety of a debut. These are all situations that activate the nervous system in a completely different way than school teaching. And in fact, according to UK Coaching (2022), 72% of young people between the ages of 14 and 20 say their coach has significantly influenced their perception of themselves and their abilities.

This figure is huge.

It means that the instructor reshapes identity.

Yet, in the sports world there are still those who think that the instructor "should not be an educator".

But the very moment he corrects, speaks, comments, selects, he is already educating.

The question is not whether it educates or not.

Every word, every look, every pedagogical or non-pedagogical gesture of the coach constructs narratives about who deserves space and who doesn't, about what is "acceptable" and what is not, about what is "normal" and what is "ridiculous."

Sport is not a neutral arena. Sport is an emotional school.

The instructor is the guide of this school.

Skills required to become a “change agent” in the community

To also be “agents of change”, instructors must develop skills that technical training often completely neglects:

- managing emotions in the group
- facilitation of dialogue
- non-discriminatory language
- recognition of stereotypes in children's behavior
- ability to build a climate that protects vulnerability

It's not enough to "be good on the pitch".

Expertise in the social dimension of the group is required.

The most advanced European approaches are moving in this direction. The UNESCO "Sport for Development and Peace" program (2021) showed that when instructors receive educational training on diversity management, not only does the group climate improve, but the trainers' personal skills also improve: their social problem-solving skills increase, and burnout and stress are reduced. Educating about diversity doesn't just improve the group: it improves the instructor himself.

And this is a political key: the coaching of the future cannot be just technical.

It's an anthropological coaching approach. It's a coaching approach that's aware of the symbolic codes that permeate sport.

Responsibility and transformative power of the sports coach

The coach has access to something that no other adult has: trust in vulnerable moments.

When a boy makes a mistake in front of his peers, or when a girl refuses to do a drill for fear of judgment, the

coach has the opportunity to transform that moment from trauma into learning. From shame into opportunity. From emotional withdrawal into courageous effort.

This power is enormous.

Anyone who has experienced a humiliating coach remembers it all their life.

Anyone who has had a coach who respected, listened, supported... will remember this too for the rest of their lives.

Instructors are agents of change because they enter the space where the person builds himself.

The coach can do something no policy maker can, no document can: he can change the internal imagery of the kids. He can transform the perception of others: from "threat" to "companion."

And this is cultural politics, without needing to call it "politics."

Instructors can increase inclusion, generate belonging, reduce social violence, and increase respect between people of different backgrounds. Not because they

engage in activism, but simply because they teach relationships while playing.

The sports coach is an architect of everyday culture.

CHAPTER 5

Sport as a tool for social impact and transformation

Why sport is a privileged environment for changing mentalities

Sport is one of the few contexts where people spontaneously accept being tested, evaluated, guided, and corrected.

And they accept all this without opposition because it is “game”, “training”, “team”.

In real life, almost no one accepts radical feedback from strangers.

In sports, yes.

And this is the most powerful educational gateway we have in contemporary society.

According to research by the EU Sport Monitor (2023), young people between the ages of 15 and 22 are more likely to accept criticism about their behavior in a sporting context (68%) than in a school context (39%). This means that sport is a more effective area for character development than school.

The paradox is that sport in Europe is often still perceived as "free time"... while in fact it is one of the most powerful social spaces for transforming mentalities.

Sport is one of the few remaining social devices where it is possible to learn cooperation and limits, connection and frustration, vulnerability and courage, without waiting for a real crisis in life.

This is why sport is an anthropological accelerator.

Sport as a universal language: connection, identity, recognition

Sports connect people who don't speak the same language.

All it takes is a ball, a gesture, a shared rule. And communication is activated. Without grammar.

UNESCO ha definito lo sport "the most universal communication tool available to humanity" (2022).

It's not rhetoric. It's sociology.

When you play, you create micro-alliances, coalitions, hierarchies, and roles.

In every game a small social ecosystem is born.

And here something crucial happens: groups that in everyday life do not recognize themselves as "together" become part of a common field of meaning in sport.

Migrant children learn Italian through play.

Teenage boys learn to team up with girls.

Indigenous groups dismantle racial prejudices on the pitch.

All this does not happen through a frontal "lesson".

It happens through the body.

And the social transformation that occurs through the body has a stronger impact than the transformation that occurs through language. Because the body doesn't mediate: it lives.

What real social changes can it trigger?

Sport can change attitudes, behaviors, and social identities. With data.

- In Belgian schools that introduced weekly cooperative sports, verbal violence between students decreased by 23% (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 2022).
- In French youth centers that use sport as cultural mediation, the rate of social withdrawal of newcomers dropped by 35% (CNRS, 2021).

- In German youth clubs that implemented mixed sports programs, the perception of the opposite sex as a “threatening competitor” dropped by 32% (German Sport University, 2020).

This means that sport can reduce conflict and increase confidence.

The European Commission (2023) stated that sport is one of the most effective tools for building social capital in areas with educational fragility.

Sport is not a reflection of society.

Sport is a lever to transform it.

And Europe needs associations and instructors who are aware of this. Not to engage in "political activism," but to intensely exercise their natural social function: educate about relationships through play.

Sport is a tool for social cohesion capable of producing real, measurable, tangible changes.

And this is the heart of the cultural transformation that sport can generate.

CONCLUSIONS

Promoting diversity in sport isn't a cultural extra. It's a structural necessity if we want sport to remain a space that fosters health, community, and the future.

This paper showed that:

- In modern sport, "diversity" is not an abstract word, it is the daily reality of the fields: different bodies, different stories, different identities, different languages, different expectations.
- Education for diversity is not an optional module, but a process that runs through every educational gesture in the field
- Inclusive sports environments are not "better" than others: they are more effective, more capable of retaining children, more protective of vulnerabilities, more productive in terms of well-being and relationships.
- Sports associations are civic infrastructures that already today produce social cohesion in the most fragile territories

- Instructors are agents of cultural change because they operate at the point where identity, body and relationship intertwine
- Sport has a real and measurable transformative power in reducing conflict, building social trust, and deconstructing stereotypes.

Promoting diversity in sport means accepting one simple but crucial thing: sport educates. Always.

The question is whether it does so consciously and responsibly or in a haphazard and uncontrolled manner.

The future horizon is clear: to train instructors, managers, and associations as cultural multipliers.

Not just technicians.

Not just coaches.

And community educators.

Because sport will always be a gym for the body.

The challenge is to consciously make it a human gym.

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