BEYOND THE PITCH AND THE SCREEN: CONVERGENT MECHANISMS OF AFFECTIVE SELF-EXCLUSION IN SPORT AND DIGITAL PRACTICES AMONG ITALIAN PRE-ADOLESCENTS. A MIXED-METHODS INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

Pre-adolescent disengagement from organised sport and withdrawal from digital social environments are usually treated as separate concerns. We argue they often share a common affective grammar rooted in perceived inadequacy. Drawing on the Italian project Non Fermateci, the study combines a survey of 8,933 pupils aged 8-13 with two focus groups in primary school. Quantitative analysis tests self-exclusion drivers — "I didn't feel cut out", "I didn't feel involved by coach or peers" — across age, schooling level and family structure, deliberately setting aside the gender axis already addressed in a previous paper. Thematic coding of focus groups traces how the same grammar resurfaces in image manipulation, refusal to be photographed and the silent presence of unrecognised SEN. Motivational deficit, as teachers commonly read it, frequently masks an inclusion failure with affective and digital implications.

KEYWORDS

Affective self-exclusion; digital affective literacy; special educational needs.

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1. Introduction

The question of who takes part, and who quietly stops taking part, is among the oldest in inclusive education. Italian schooling has answered it, on paper, more generously than most: half a century of full inclusion has placed every child in the ordinary classroom and made participation a right rather than a concession (Ianes, Demo & Dell'Anna, 2020). Yet presence is not participation, and the distinction is the one on which the inclusive tradition has insisted from the start, where the unit of analysis is the barrier a setting raises rather than the deficit a child carries (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). A child can be enrolled, seated, counted, and still withdraw — from the game in the gym, from the group photograph, from the chat where everyone else is talking. This paper is about that second kind of absence: the one that does not show up in attendance registers because the child is physically there, and the one that special and inclusive pedagogy is least equipped to read when it wears the mask of choice.

We approach it through two settings that are rarely studied together. The first is organised sport, a domain in which dropping out among children and pre-adolescents has been documented at length. Systematic synthesis of that literature shows disengagement to be multi-determined — enjoyment, competing time demands, the climate set by coaches and peers — with perceived competence recurring as one of its most stubborn threads: children leave, in large part, because they come to feel they are not good enough (Crane & Temple, 2015). Self-determination theory sharpens the point, tracing persistence and dropout to whether a child's basic needs for competence and, crucially, relatedness are met or frustrated in the activity (Deci & Ryan, 2000), a frustration shown to predict withdrawal in adolescent athletes (Calvo et al., 2010). The second setting is the digital social environment, where a parallel withdrawal has been described in a different vocabulary. Children learn, gradually and unevenly, to read the opportunities and risks of social platforms (Livingstone, 2014), and some of that learning turns inward: the editing of one's own face before it can be seen, with experimental and correlational work alike linking the manipulation of one's images to how the body is perceived (Kleemans et al., 2018; McLean et al., 2015; Perloff, 2014; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016), and the small daily refusals to appear at all. Among Italian pre-adolescents specifically, the use of filters and editing apps to alter one's appearance has been associated with lower body satisfaction (Digennaro, 2023; Digennaro & Iannaccone, 2025) — a finding from the same population and research milieu as the present study.

Our argument is that these two withdrawals are not as separate as the literatures that house them. Beneath the dropped sport and the untaken photograph runs a common affective grammar, and its first person is always the same: I am not cut out for this; I would not be wanted here. Read in the register of special pedagogy, that sentence is not a statement about the child. It is a statement about what a setting has made the child feel — a barrier to participation that has been internalised and then misrecognised as a preference. The distinction matters because it is the distinction on which inclusive pedagogy turns. The inclusive-pedagogical approach asks not what is wrong with the learner who falls away, but what the ordinary environment affords or denies, and it extends what is available to everyone rather than arranging something separate for the few (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) — the same logic that animates universal design for learning, where access is built into the setting from the outset rather than retrofitted for those who fail to fit it (CAST, 2018). To call a child's retreat self-exclusion is therefore to risk the very move the field exists to resist: relocating in the individual a failure that belongs to the relation.

We keep the term, but under tension. Self-exclusion names the phenomenology accurately — the child does experience the withdrawal as her own, often as a reasonable accommodation to a world that has not made room — while the analysis insists on reading that experience back to its relational and pedagogical sources. This is also where the affective and the special meet the unrecognised. Italian inclusion, for all its reach, continues to struggle with needs that are never formally identified: the child whose difficulty is read as character, as laziness, as a quiet temperament, and who therefore receives neither certification nor the pedagogical attention that would follow it (Ianes, Demo & Dell'Anna, 2020; D'Alessio, 2011). The national framework for special educational needs makes the gap structurally visible, since it entrusts the recognition of non-certified needs to the class council's own pedagogical judgement (MIUR, 2012), and the Italian tradition of speciale normalità has long argued that the answer lies in transforming the ordinary response rather than multiplying separate ones (Ianes, 2006; Cottini, 2017). Affective self-exclusion, we suggest, may be one of the few visible traces such children leave. A reason for leaving that a teacher hears as motivational deficit may be the surface of a special educational need that the school has not learned to see.

The convergence of the two settings is the study's distinctive claim, and its evidential shape must be exact. We do not argue that sport and digital withdrawal share a cause that can be estimated; we argue that they share a mechanism that

can be recognised. The survey measures how widely the affective account is given and how it distributes; the focus groups let us watch the same grammar form in children's own words. The weight of the convergence rests, by design, on the qualitative reading, and we have tried not to let the title's promise of "mechanisms" be cashed out as a statistical claim the numbers do not support.

A word on what this study deliberately does not do. The same dataset has already yielded an analysis organised around gender (Pisaniello, Digennaro & Spulber, 2024). To avoid retracing it, we set the gender axis aside entirely and ask instead whether affective self-exclusion sorts children along axes untouched by that earlier work — their age, their level of schooling, the size and shape of their household, the time their afternoons leave for anything, and whether sport is part of family life at all. The result, anticipated here, is largely negative: the affective account is named by about half of the disengaged children and is predicted by almost none of these circumstances. That flatness is not a disappointment. It is the empirical reason to stop looking for the explanation in a child's demographic position and to start looking for it where inclusive pedagogy has always located it — in the relation, the climate, the gaze that decides in advance who belongs.

The study therefore pursues three questions. First, how prevalent is affective self-exclusion as a self-reported account of disengagement from organised sport, in both its drop-out and its non-practice forms? Second, does that account vary across non-gender background axes in any way that would justify a structural explanation? Third — and this is the question the survey hands to the focus groups — when the same children speak about their digital lives, does the affective grammar of perceived inadequacy reappear, and in what forms?

2. Materials and Methods

Research design

We worked from a qualitatively-driven convergent design (in the QUAL + quan notation; Morse & Niehaus, 2009; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), where the qualitative strand carries the analytic weight and the survey supplies the context against which it is read. The choice was not a matter of convenience. Survey data tell us how often perceived inadequacy is named as a reason for leaving sport and how it distributes, but almost nothing about what the experience feels like from the inside; the focus groups do the opposite. Reading the two together lets us ask

whether the same affective signature — the sense of not being cut out, of not being wanted in the group — recurs once the field shifts from the pitch to the screen.

Integration therefore happens at the level of interpretation, not of estimation. We do not model the survey and the focus-group material jointly, and we make no claim that one causes or predicts the other. What we put forward is a structural parallel: self-exclusion from organised sport, measured on the survey side, and self-exclusion from digital social life, reconstructed on the qualitative side, are treated as two surfacings of one mechanism. The evidential footing of the two strands is uneven by design — a survey of several thousand respondents alongside a two-class case study — and we have tried to keep that asymmetry visible rather than smooth it over.

Participants and sampling

Survey strand

The quantitative material comes from the Italian Non Fermateci project, a study of sport practice and drop-out among children aged 8 to 13. The questionnaire was delivered both online, through Qualtrics, and on paper in schools and sports clubs, and administration was kept deliberately neutral: respondents were told the aims of the research and nothing more, so as not to steer their answers.

A distinction between returned and analysable responses governs every figure that follows. The platform recorded 8,933 returned questionnaires, but a substantial share of these were opened and left largely unanswered — a quarter of the file shows little or no progress beyond the opening items, the typical attrition of an online instrument administered to young children. Applying the project's validity criteria — a respondent within the 8–13 age range who completed the core questionnaire — yields an analytic sample of 6,783 pupils, and it is on this sample, not on the 8,933 returned forms, that all descriptive and inferential results rest. We keep both numbers in view: 8,933 describes the response burden the project carried, 6,783 the cases it can actually speak from.

Within this analytic sample, the self-exclusion items are routed by practice status, so the base for the central construct is smaller still and is reported in full. Among children who answered the practice-status question, the large majority were currently practising, 937 had practised and then stopped — the drop-out subsample — and a further group had never taken up sport. The drop-out self-exclusion items were answered by between 766 and 793 children, the non-practice

item by 531; every inferential statement about affective self-exclusion is anchored to these figures, repeated in the Results so the denominator is never in doubt.

Residual item nonresponse inside the analytic sample is handled by complete-case analysis on each cross-tabulation, with the relevant denominator stated each time; we do not impute values we cannot justify, and we return to the limits of this choice in the Discussion.

Focus-group strand

The qualitative material was generated in two intact fifth-grade classes, 5A and 5D, of a single Italian primary school, some forty-five children in all. Class 5A was split into two parallel focus groups run by two different facilitators, which gave us a built-in comparison of how the same prompts were handled and coded by independent observers; class 5D was conducted as one group of twenty-three. Sampling was by class unit rather than by individual: a complete, naturally occurring group, in keeping with a case-study logic. We treat the two classes as an instrumental case and not as a miniature of the Italian school population, and no inference is drawn from them to that population.

A note on positionality is owed here. The facilitators were known to the school and worked within an inclusive-education frame; this shaped what they noticed — relational withdrawal, children who would not be photographed — and we have tried to read their notes as situated observations rather than neutral recordings.

3. Instruments and measures

Survey instrument and the non-gender axes

The Non Fermateci questionnaire covers the respondent's profile, how and how often they practise, why they practise, why they stopped, and why they never started. One constraint governs the choice of predictors. The gender axis of this same dataset has already been analysed and published (Pisaniello, Digennaro & Spulber, 2024); to avoid overlap, gender does not enter our analysis as an explanatory variable at any point. The axes we retain are background variables unrelated to gender: age, school level (primary against lower-secondary), household size as a proxy for family configuration, average afternoon study time, and the family's own relationship to sport — whether close relatives practise, used to practise, or never have.

Self-exclusion is captured through four items. For children who had dropped out: "I did not feel cut out for the sport I had chosen", "I did not feel involved enough by the coach", and "I did not feel involved enough by my teammates". For those who had never practised: "I do not feel cut out for it". Each was recorded on a three-point scale — explains, partly explains, does not explain — and we report the "explains" and "partly explains" responses both on their own and combined, since for an affective reading the partial endorsements are themselves informative. The two relational items, coach and teammates, move together closely and are combined into a single relational-involvement-deficit index; we flag the aggregation rather than fold it in silently.

Focus-group protocol and coding

The focus-group protocol was organised around three thematic areas: children's use of social media and digital devices; attitudes towards sharing personal images; and practices of image editing, filtering and self-presentation. Open-ended prompts were used to encourage children to narrate experiences, opinions and emotions in their own words. The facilitators adopted a non-directive approach, avoiding evaluative comments and encouraging multiple viewpoints.

The material was analysed through reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Meaningful units were first coded openly and subsequently grouped into broader categories and themes.The coding process resulted in nine thematic categories: device access and use; online socialisation; generational perceptions and platform choice; privacy, safety and family rules; image manipulation and self-perception; emotions associated with online exposure; critical awareness and self-regulation; exclusion and self-exclusion; and group dynamics.The analysis proceeded in several stages: familiarisation with the transcripts and field notes; open coding of meaningful units; grouping of codes into preliminary categories; development of broader themes; comparison across the two classes; and final interpretation in relation to the quantitative findings and the theoretical framework of inclusive pedagogy.

To strengthen the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis, several strategies were adopted. First, the two-facilitator design in one class allowed comparison between independent observational notes and coding interpretations. Second, the coding process distinguished between recurrent themes and single illustrative episodes, avoiding overgeneralisation from isolated cases. Third, the analysis included both verbal data and interactional indicators, such as silence, hesitation, non-participation and peer reactions, which were treated as meaningful elements

in the study of affective self-exclusion. Finally, researcher reflexivity was explicitly considered, acknowledging that the facilitators' inclusive-education perspective shaped the attention given to relational withdrawal, visibility, vulnerability and unrecognised educational needs.

The two-facilitator setup in class 5A provided an opportunity for analytical comparison between independent field notes and coding interpretations, enhancing the credibility of the interpretive process.

Analysis

The quantitative work is descriptive and associational. We cross-tabulate each self-exclusion item against each non-gender axis and test the associations with the chi-square statistic, falling back on Fisher's exact test wherever expected cell counts drop below five. Two of the axes are sparse at their margins — household sizes of two and of more than five among drop-outs, and the youngest age bands — and there we collapse categories (household size into ≤3, 4, and ≥5), reporting the original counts alongside so the reader can see what was merged. No gender variable enters any cross-tabulation or test.

On the qualitative side the analysis is reflexive thematic analysis, working from codes up to the nine categories. We are careful with single occurrences: a child who uses filters to make himself look worse rather than better is reported as an illustrative case, not as evidence of how common such use is. The same restraint applies to the facilitators' mentions of uncertified special educational needs, which we present as anecdotal field signals deserving attention, never as an incidence rate.

The two strands are then brought together by triangulation. We trace one affective signature — perceived inadequacy — across both: as a stated reason for leaving sport in the survey, and as relational withdrawal in the focus groups, where it shows up in retouched images, in the refusal to be photographed, and in the children who simply say nothing. The convergence is offered as a reading of a shared mechanism, not as a statistical bridge between two datasets that were never designed to be joined.

Ethics and data protection

Collection complied with Italian and European data-protection law — Legislative Decree 196/2003 as amended by Legislative Decree 101/2018, and Regulation (EU) 2016/679. Participation was anonymous, and the data were used only for non-

commercial research in aggregated form. Because the participants were minors, the survey was administered with school authorisation and under the consent arrangements of the institutions involved. Following the principle of data minimisation, direct identifiers and the technical metadata produced by the survey platform — IP addresses and geolocation among them — were stripped from the analytic file before any analysis was run, and the focus-group transcripts were anonymised as they were produced.

4. Quantitative Results

The analytic base

The quantitative results rest on the analytic sample defined in the previous section. Within it, the self-exclusion items separate two groups. The drop-out subsample — children who had practised a sport and then stopped — answered the three retrospective items on why they left; depending on the item, between 766 and 793 children responded. A second, smaller subsample — children who had never taken up sport — answered the parallel non-practice item, with 531 valid responses. Each figure below is reported against the subsample that actually produced it, and the three-level response scale (explains / partly explains / does not explain) is preserved, since for an affective construct a partial endorsement is not the same as a denial.

Affective self-exclusion is the most frequently named driver

The single item that most often accompanies leaving sport is the felt sense of not being suited to it. Among the drop-out subsample, "I did not feel cut out for the sport I had chosen" is endorsed by 52.8% of respondents — 29.5% saying it explains their decision and a further 23.3% saying it partly does — against 47.2% who reject it outright. No other drop-out reason in the questionnaire is named by so many children.

The relational items behave consistently with this reading. Insufficient involvement by the coach is endorsed, at least in part, by 37.5% of the subsample (16.5% fully), and insufficient involvement by teammates by 37.6% (16.1% fully). Because the two move together so closely, we combine them into a single relational-involvement-deficit index, on which 52.0% of drop-outs register at least a partial endorsement. Felt inadequacy and felt relational exclusion thus run side by side, each touching roughly half of the children who left.

The pattern is not confined to drop-out. Among children who never took up sport, "I do not feel cut out for it" is endorsed by 49.2% — 23.9% fully and 25.2% partly. Whether the disengagement takes the form of stopping or of never starting, an affective judgement of one's own inadequacy is present for about half of the children concerned.

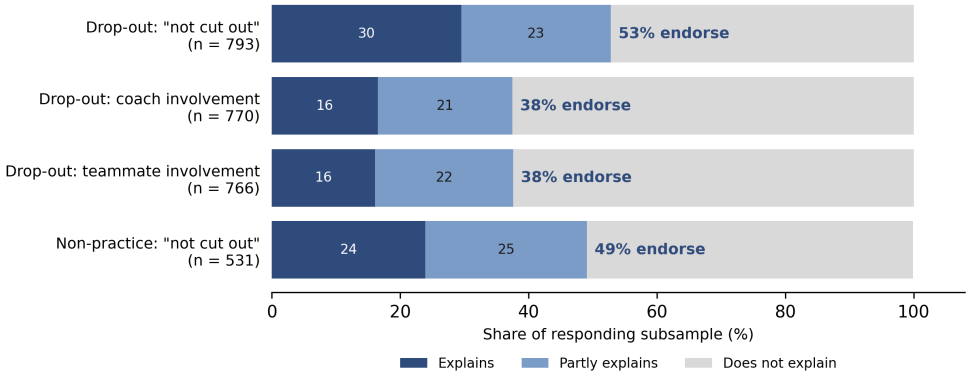


Figure 1: Endorsement of affective self-exclusion items

Prevalence without a structural address

The more telling result is what the affective driver is not associated with. We cross-tabulated each self-exclusion outcome against five background axes chosen for their independence from gender — age band, school level, household size, afternoon study time, and the family's own relationship to sport — and tested each association with the chi-square statistic, using Fisher's exact test where expected cell counts fell below five. Of the fifteen tests, thirteen returned no significant association, with effect sizes that are negligible throughout (Cramér's V between 0.005 and 0.07). The felt sense of not being cut out is reported at much the same rate by eight-year-olds and thirteen-year-olds, by primary and lower-secondary pupils, across household sizes, across study loads, and largely irrespective of whether sport is part of family life.

Table 1

Outcome	Axis	n	Test	p	V
Drop-out: not cut out	Age band	790	χ^2	.346	.052
Drop-out: not cut out	School level	793	χ^2	.891	.005
Drop-out: not cut out	Household size	791	χ^2	.687	.031
Drop-out: not cut out	Study hours	793	χ^2	.481	.056
Drop-out: not cut out	Family sport	746	χ^2	.441	.047
Drop-out: relational deficit	Age band	780	χ^2	.664	.032
Drop-out: relational deficit	School level	783	χ^2	.521	.023
Drop-out: relational deficit	Household size	781	χ^2	.503	.042
Drop-out: relational deficit	Study hours	783	χ^2	.538	.053
Drop-out: relational deficit	Family sport	737	χ^2	**.021**	.102
Non-practice: not cut out	Age band	529	χ^2	**.035**	.113
Non-practice: not cut out	School level	530	χ^2	.140	.064
Non-practice: not cut out	Household size	530	χ^2	.440	.056

Outcome	Axis	n	Test	p	V
Non-practice: not cut out	Study hours	531	χ^2	.462	.070
Non-practice: not cut out	Family sport	505	χ^2	.342	.065

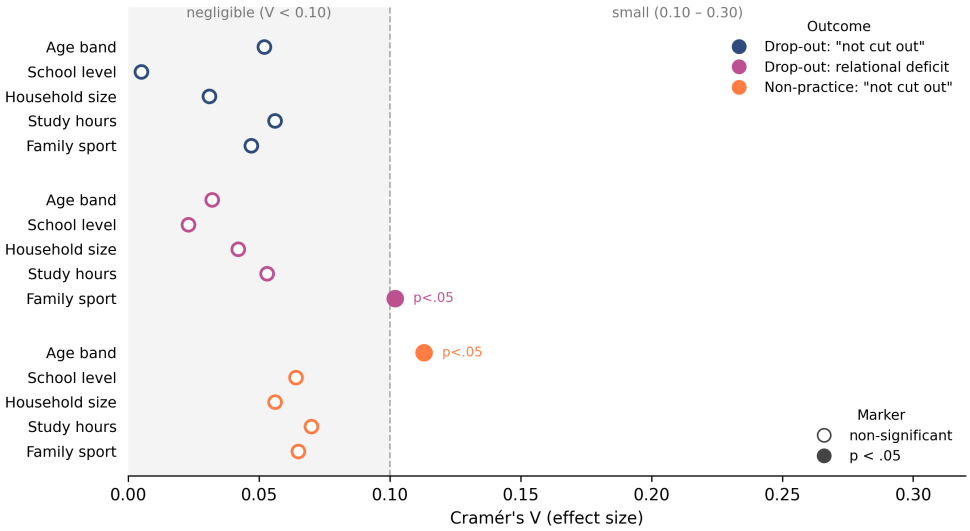


Figure 2: Self-exclusion by non-gender axis: effect sizes

Two associations cross the conventional threshold, and both deserve more caution than significance alone would invite. The relational-involvement deficit is somewhat more often endorsed by drop-outs whose family practises sport (56.7%) or used to (56.4%) than by those whose family does not (46.2%); the association is statistically significant (p = .021) but weak (V = 0.10). Among non-practitioners, the felt-inadequacy item rises with age, from 41.8% at ten to eleven to 54.2% at twelve to thirteen (p = .035, V = 0.11). Both effects are small, and neither survives correction for the fifteen tests performed: with a Bonferroni-adjusted threshold near .003, the two nominal results fall well short, and roughly one false positive is expected by chance across a battery of this size. We therefore read them as signals to be probed, not as established structure, and we return to the age gradient in the discussion.

What the survey can and cannot say

Read together, the survey results draw a clear boundary around their own reach. They establish, with comfortable subsample sizes, that an affective judgement of inadequacy — "I am not cut out for this", "I was not wanted here" — is the most widely shared account children give of their own disengagement from sport, in both its drop-out and its non-practice forms. They establish, just as clearly, that this account does not sort children by age, schooling, household or family sporting culture in any appreciable way. The driver is prevalent and, in structural terms, nearly flat.

That flatness carries a reading the survey cannot supply on its own but inclusive pedagogy can. An account of withdrawal that attaches to no demographic category is an unlikely candidate for something the child simply brings to the setting; it is far more plausibly something the setting does to the child, and does fairly evenly, whatever kind of child she is. The numbers, in other words, quietly close off the explanation a tired pedagogy reaches for first — that some pupils are just less motivated, less sporty, less suited — and turn the analysis back toward the relation and the climate, toward the gaze that decides in advance who belongs. Located there, "self-exclusion" stops being a fact about the child and becomes a question about the setting: not why this pupil withdrew, but what, repeatedly and across very different pupils, the setting gave her to withdraw from.

This is also where the quantitative strand reaches its limit and hands over to the qualitative one. A reason for leaving that is named by half the children yet predicted by none of their circumstances is precisely the kind of phenomenon a survey can count but cannot explain. To recover the mechanism — how perceived inadequacy is produced and managed, and where else in a child's life it is allowed to surface — we turn to the focus groups, where the same affective grammar reappears in an unexpected register: the digital one.

Qualitative Results

From counting to recognising

The focus groups were not designed to corroborate the survey but to do what it could not: to show how perceived inadequacy is lived, managed and hidden when children speak about a part of their lives the questionnaire never touched. The two fifth-grade classes produced a corpus that the nine-category coding frame organises in full; here we follow only the threads that bear on the study's question, clustering the categories into four movements through which an affective grammar

of self-exclusion becomes visible. Throughout, single episodes are presented as illustrative — a way of seeing a mechanism, not of measuring its frequency — and the facilitators' impressions of children's difficulties are reported as situated observations, never as counts.

Withdrawing from one's own image

The first and most consistent finding is that a large part of these children decline to let themselves be seen. Across both classes, children explained that they do not publish images of themselves, and the explanation was rarely about privacy in the legal sense; it was about the self. They spoke, in formulations the facilitators heard repeatedly, of not liking themselves, of being afraid of the judgement of others, of preferring images in which they can barely be recognised. Photographs are sent only to close friends, kept inside small trusted groups, or not produced at all. Where the survey records a child saying I did not feel cut out for the sport, the focus groups record the same child, in effect, saying I would rather not appear. The grammar is identical: an anticipated verdict of inadequacy, acted on in advance by the person it concerns.

What makes this a pedagogical finding rather than a developmental commonplace is its relational shape. The discomfort sharpened, in the children's accounts, precisely at the point of exposure to others — when a relative posted a picture without asking, when an image might circulate beyond the child's control. The recurring demand was for consent and approval before being shown, a small insistence on holding the right to decide who sees them. Read in an inclusive key, this is not timidity to be coached away; it is a child negotiating the terms of her own visibility in a setting that does not, by default, grant her any.

Filters as the management of inadequacy

If the first movement is withdrawal, the second is repair. The manipulation of one's own image through filters was, by some distance, the most animated topic in both classes, and the children were precise about its uses: to look better in a photograph, to play, to try out a different face, to rescue an image they judged ugly. Filters add freckles, change eye and hair colour, smooth a face, add or remove features. Much of this is ordinary play. But a portion of it is unmistakably the work of making the self admissible before it is allowed to be seen — the same labour, conducted with different tools, as choosing not to appear at all. The experimental literature linking manipulated images to how the body is perceived (Kleemans et al., 2018) describes the outward mechanism; the focus groups show its inward face, in children who

retouch themselves privately and never publish the result, repairing an image meant for no audience but their own eye.

Two boundary cases, offered strictly as illustrations, mark the edges of this terrain. One girl declined filters altogether, saying she accepts herself as she is — a reminder that the affective grammar is not destiny and that some children hold a settled relation to their own image. At the other edge, a boy used filters not to improve but to worsen his appearance. We do not build an argument on a single child, and we resist any clinical reading. But the case is worth its place in the report because it shows, in its most legible form, what the quieter behaviours only imply: that the digital tools of self-presentation can be turned to confirm a negative self-perception as readily as to mask it, and that the affective stake is the same in both directions.

The silence in the room

The third movement is the one the survey is structurally unable to see, because it is the absence of a response rather than a response. In both classes the facilitators noted that participation was uneven: a small number of children carried the discussion while others stayed at its edge, and some did not speak at all. Among the reasons recorded were the want of a personal device — a child without a phone has little to contribute to a conversation about phones — and the presence of children with disability and with educational needs the school had not formally recognised. One child, named only as not responding, sat through the exchange without entering it.

Here the parallel to the sport data is at its most exact. The survey item I did not feel involved enough by the coach or my teammates describes a relational exclusion enacted on the pitch; the silent child in the focus group enacts the same exclusion in the classroom, and the two-facilitator design in class 5A lends the observation some weight, since both observers independently registered the same pattern of non-participation. The inclusive-pedagogical point is uncomfortable and central: a classroom conversation about digital life can reproduce, in miniature and in real time, the very exclusion it sets out to study. The children who say least about their online lives may be telling us most about how a setting distributes the right to take part.

It is at this junction that the study's most tentative and most important signal appears. Where a child's non-participation coincided with an unrecognised special educational need, affective self-exclusion was not a metaphor but a visible behaviour: the withdrawal that a teacher might log as shyness or low motivation

was, on the facilitators' reading, the surface of a need that had never been named. We present this as a qualitative signal and nothing more — it rests on the situated judgement of operators, not on assessment — but it is the signal that gives the paper its disciplinary stakes, and we return to it in the discussion.

Awareness, control and the limits of self-regulation

The fourth movement complicates any picture of children as passive. Several spoke with real critical awareness: they avoided TikTok because of what they had heard, masked their faces when they did use it, deleted their histories, set themselves limits, in one case staged a contest with a parent over who could stay off social media longer. A current of the corpus treats the platforms as dispensable — not needed when one is in good company, secondary to relationships lived face to face. This matters for the argument in two ways. It guards against reading every withdrawal as wound: some refusals to appear are competent, deliberate acts of self-protection, and an inclusive didactics must be able to tell the two apart. And it locates the educational task precisely. The children already possess the raw material of digital affective literacy — they notice, they judge, they regulate — but they exercise it alone, under family rules of widely varying consistency, without a setting that helps them read their own affective responses or recognise when another child's silence is not choice but exclusion.

Taken together, the four movements supply what the quantitative strand could only point to. Perceived inadequacy, prevalent in the survey and unattached there to any circumstance, here acquires a mechanism: it is produced at the moment of exposure to others, managed through the editing or withholding of the self, and enacted, in its gravest form, as a silence that the most vulnerable children — including those whose needs the school has not seen — fall into without anyone choosing to push them. The affective grammar of the pitch and the affective grammar of the screen turn out to be one grammar, recited in two places.

5. Discussion

A single claim, assembled from two strands

The study set out to test whether disengagement from organised sport and withdrawal from digital social life, kept apart in separate literatures, share an affective root. The two strands support a single claim. On the survey side, an affective judgement of inadequacy — I am not cut out for this; I would not be wanted here — is the most widely shared account children give of leaving or never taking up sport, present for roughly half of the disengaged and unattached to any

structural axis we tested. On the focus-group side, the same judgement reappears where the survey could not reach, produced at the moment of exposure to others, managed through the editing or withholding of one's image, and enacted at its gravest as a silence into which the most vulnerable children fall — a continuity consistent with what has been observed among Italian pre-adolescents, for whom image editing tracks dissatisfaction with the body it depicts (Digennaro, 2023).

We are deliberate about the evidential weight of that convergence: it is a recognition, not an estimate. The two datasets were not built to be joined, and the title's language of convergent mechanisms is cashed out qualitatively — one affective pattern legible across both fields — not in a statistical bridge between them. What gives the recognition its force is the negative quantitative result it rests against. A driver named by half the children yet predicted by none of their circumstances is not something a survey can explain from within; it is an invitation to look elsewhere, and the focus groups are where we looked.

The deficit gaze and the unrecognised need

The flatness of the quantitative result is, for special pedagogy, the most consequential thing the survey says. When a reason for withdrawal attaches to no demographic category — not age, not schooling, not household, not the family's own relation to sport — it becomes very hard to keep treating that withdrawal as something the child brings to the setting. The more economical reading is the one inclusive pedagogy has long urged: that the felt sense of inadequacy is produced relationally, by climates and gazes that decide in advance who belongs, and is then misrecognised as a property of the individual who carries it (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Self-determination theory names the relational ingredient with some precision — it is the frustration of the need to belong, as much as the need to feel competent, that turns a child away (Deci & Ryan, 2000) — and our relational-involvement items, endorsed by half the drop-outs, are that frustration in self-report. This is the precise point at which a tired pedagogy reaches for the language of motivation. The child who leaves the team, who will not be photographed, who says nothing in the group, is logged as unmotivated, shy, not sporty — and the log closes the case. Our findings suggest the case is not closed but misfiled. What is recorded as motivational deficit is frequently the surface of an inclusion failure, and the literature on sport dropout, which has tended to read perceived competence as a fact about the child (Crane & Temple, 2015), may have under-attended to how thoroughly that perception is a product of the setting.

The strongest disciplinary stake lies one step further in. Where, in the focus groups, a child's silence coincided with an educational need the school had never formally recognised, affective self-exclusion ceased to be a metaphor and became a behaviour one could watch. Italian inclusion, for all the reach of its full-inclusion model, continues to struggle exactly here — with needs that are never named, and so never met (Ianes, Demo & Dell'Anna, 2020; D'Alessio, 2011). The national framework leaves the recognition of non-certified needs to the pedagogical judgement of the class council (MIUR, 2012), which is precisely where a quiet child can pass unseen, and the tradition of speciale normalità insists that the remedy is a richer ordinary response rather than a separate track (Cottini, 2017). The contribution we offer, with all the caution a handful of situated observations demands, is to propose affective self-exclusion as one of the few visible traces such children leave: a behavioural signature, detectable in both sport and digital conduct, of a need that has slipped beneath the threshold of certification. We do not claim to have measured this. We claim it is worth learning to see.

Toward an affectively literate, inclusive didactics

If the withdrawal is relationally produced, it is also relationally remediable, and this is where the study's findings become a pedagogical programme rather than a diagnosis. Three orientations follow. The first is the discipline of reading silence. A classroom conversation about digital life, our focus groups showed, can reproduce in real time the exclusion it studies, with the most active children carrying the talk and the most vulnerable sinking out of it; an inclusive didactics treats the silent child not as the one with nothing to say but as the one the setting has given nothing to say from, and builds participation accordingly — the orientation the Index for Inclusion operationalises as the systematic lowering of barriers to participation for all (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). The second is the capacity to tell competent refusal from wound. Some children in our corpus declined to appear out of a settled, defensible self-protection — they avoided platforms, masked themselves, set their own limits — and an education that read every such refusal as a deficit would do real harm. Distinguishing the child who withholds her image from strength from the child who withholds it from shame is itself a pedagogical skill, and it cannot be exercised without attention to affect.

The third orientation names the task the conference theme points to. The children already possess the raw materials of digital affective literacy: they notice, they judge, they regulate, much as the literature predicts they learn to read the opportunities and risks of social environments over time (Livingstone, 2014). What they lack is a setting that helps them turn that capacity on their own affective

responses — to recognise the editing of a face, or the choice not to appear, as something that can be talked about and shared rather than carried alone, and to recognise another child's silence as a matter of belonging rather than of temperament. There is, moreover, good evidence that schools can do this work: universal social-and-emotional learning programmes, delivered by ordinary teaching staff, produce measurable gains in children's affective and relational competence (Durlak et al., 2011). Affective literacy, on this account, is not a competence to be installed in individual pupils but a property of the inclusive setting, extended to everyone rather than supplied as special provision to the few — the same move, in the affective domain, that universal design makes in the cognitive one (CAST, 2018). Read in the register of citizenship, the stake is the right to take part and the right to be seen on one's own terms, in the gym and on the screen alike.

One tentative empirical thread deserves mention here. Among non-practitioners, the felt-inadequacy account grew more common toward early adolescence, a gradient consistent with the idea that perceived inadequacy hardens as a barrier to starting sport as children age. We flag it lightly: the association was weak and did not survive correction for multiple testing, and we offer it only as a hypothesis an affectively attentive curriculum might keep in view, not as a finding.

6. Limitations

The study's limits are intrinsic to its design and we have tried not to disguise them. The qualitative strand rests on two classes of a single school; it yields a mechanism to recognize, not a distribution to generalize, and nothing in it licenses claims about Italian children at large. Given the small and context-specific qualitative sample, the focus-group findings should be interpreted as analytically transferable rather than statistically generalizable. Their value lies in identifying mechanisms and meanings that can inform future research with larger and more diversified qualitative samples. The observations of unrecognised special educational needs are the situated impressions of facilitators, not the product of assessment, and must be read as signals for further, properly instrumented study rather than as incidence. On the quantitative side, the self-exclusion items are self-reports gathered after the fact and routed to subsamples in the hundreds, smaller than the survey total; the analysis is associational, the two nominally significant results are weak and do not survive correction, and no causal reading is available. The convergence between the strands, finally, is interpretive throughout — its persuasiveness lies in the legibility of a shared pattern, not in any statistical join. What the study offers instead is a way of seeing: a proposal that two absences usually explained apart are

better understood as one, and that the child who quietly leaves the field and the child who quietly leaves the frame may be asking the same thing of the adults around them.

7. Conclusion

This study began from a distinction that Italian schooling, more than most, has the means to honour and yet routinely loses sight of: that being present is not the same as taking part. Half a century of full inclusion has secured the first; the second remains a daily achievement, won or lost in the climate of a gym, a classroom, a group chat. What we have tried to show is that one of the ways children fall out of participation while remaining fully present is affective, and that it speaks the same language whether the field is sport or the screen. The felt verdict — I am not cut out for this; I would not be wanted here — is the most common account half of our disengaged children give of leaving sport, and it reappears, unprompted, when the same children talk about editing or withholding their own image and about the silences that settle over a conversation about digital life.

The contribution is twofold. Substantively, we propose that sport drop-out and digital withdrawal are better read as two surfacings of one affective grammar of perceived inadequacy than as the separate problems their literatures have made of them. Disciplinarily, we propose that this grammar is relationally produced rather than individually owned, that what teachers record as motivational deficit is often the surface of an inclusion failure, and — most tentatively, and most importantly for special pedagogy — that affective self-exclusion may be a visible behavioural trace of educational needs the school has never named.

None of this is offered as measurement. The convergence is a recognition, the special-needs signal an observation awaiting instrumentation, the quantitative pattern an absence of structure rather than a structure of its own. What the study delivers is a way of seeing, and an agenda that follows from it: a properly instrumented study able to move the unrecognised-need signal from impression to evidence; observational and longitudinal designs that watch the same children across both fields rather than inferring the link; and, hardest of all, classrooms in which affective literacy is not a competence audited in individual pupils but a property of the setting, extended to everyone — where a child's silence is read as a question about belonging, where the refusal to appear is met without being pathologised, and where the right to take part and to be seen on one's own terms is treated, on the pitch and on the screen alike, as the inclusive entitlement it already is in principle.

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