

Dialogic evaluation and inter-organizational learning: insights from two multi-stakeholder initiatives in sport for development and peace

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this manuscript is twofold. First, this manuscript explores how dialogic evaluation (DE), as a participatory evaluation tool, develops inter-organizational learning (IOL). Second, based on empirical analysis, the work provides pragmatic insights to support practitioners in implementing a facilitative framework grounded in DE for the increased uptake of IOL.

Design/methodology/approach – Two cases of multi-stakeholder partnerships in sport for development and peace (SDP) in Italy were analyzed and compared to explore whether and how the implementation of DE supported the development of IOL.

Findings – In both cases, applying a three-phase DE process supported several IOL outcomes, such as common knowledge, new innovative solutions development and transfer of new acquisitions. Indeed, DE promoted three key IOL objectives: the emergence of latent relational dimensions and issues to bridge multiple levels; intra- and inter-redefinition and intersection of boundaries; awareness of relevance and usefulness of what was accomplished during the partnership. This paper also discusses some practical insights for DE methodology implementation to activate IOL.

Originality/value – This research contributes to the understanding of an effective IOL by developing synergies from network interactions. Moreover, the researcher applied a novel methodology, DE, in IOL's research domain, focusing on a different context and setting such as SDP.

Keywords Inter-organizational learning, Organizational learning, Dialogic evaluation, Participatory evaluation, Sport for development, Knowledge processes, Sport for development and peace

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Inter-organizational learning (IOL), which refers to networks, knowledge and competencies forged by entities that operate to accomplish a shared objective (Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek *et al.*, 2019), is becoming an increasingly relevant theme, and its potential is relevant not only for private organizations (Brix, 2021) but also for different organizational sectors, including sport for development and peace (SDP). SDP is a social movement that uses sport as a tool to promote non-sporting outcomes, such as socialization, economic development of regions and states, social inclusion, intercultural exchange and conflict resolution (Lyras and Welty Peachey, 2011). Within SDP, countless projects emerged from multi-sectoral partnerships that involve several organizations (NGOs, sports federations, local governments, international agencies, etc.) in joint project actions (Straume, 2019). This peculiarity traces back to the global tendency to increase collective impact projects through IOL (Kania and Kramer, 2011), making SDP particularly receptive to IOL topics.



The study of IOL has been applied to several fields, such as tech organizations and supply chains (Eiriz *et al.*, 2017; Galati *et al.*, 2016), tourism industry or start-up and entrepreneurial ventures (Anand *et al.*, 2020); however, to a lesser extent, research efforts focusing on IOL in SDP remain scarce.

Indeed, SDP provides a new field with different forms of collaboration to investigate the topic (Beeby and Booth, 2000; Broekel *et al.*, 2014; Peronard and Brix, 2019).

This work analyses two cases of multi-stakeholder partnerships in SDP and underlines how DE, as a specific form of participatory evaluation based on dialogue, may accelerate and strengthen IOL.

Our paper contributes to the emerging research in IOL, as highlighted in Anand *et al.* review (2020). Specifically, our research answers the call for exploring how synergies can be achieved from network interactions to enable complex learning, which has become a central IOL issue in terms of strategic decisions and knowledge transfer (Broekel *et al.*, 2014; Holmqvist, 2009; Peronard and Brix, 2019; Wegner and Mozzato, 2019).

Theoretical background

Inter-organizational learning: a theoretical framework

“IOL refers to networks of relationships forged by entities that operate to accomplish a shared objective” (Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek *et al.*, 2019, p. 274). In IOL, common knowledge generation relies on knowledge integration from different organizations and the heritage base of a given organization (Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek *et al.*, 2019). IOL creates opportunities and outcomes that individual organizations cannot leverage and achieve by themselves (Bruneel *et al.*, 2010; Peronard and Brix, 2019). That is, IOL may lead to new, unexpected solutions through the combination of diversified competencies and knowledge. However, IOL underlines critical challenges for organizations, including changing the way things are usually done, developing an overall organizational culture, where employees and groups are made aware of the connections between familiar and new, and encouraging open and constant discussion (Lucas, 2010).

Thus, IOL is a multilevel contextual process. It starts with individual practitioners sharing experiences, information, successes and failures, subsequently leading to team learning and ending in organizational learning (Rupčić, 2021). The process could also work in reverse. Specifically, inter-organizational knowledge exchange first stimulates individual and team learning, providing an opportunity for IOL if knowledge is later successfully transferred into organizational routines and practices (Rupčić, 2021). Consequently, IOL could be slower than organizational learning or IOL because it requires both content and process adjustments, involves various kinds of entities (with different strategic orientations and aims) and entails a conscious re-thinking and validation of organizational behaviors, competencies, norms and values (Liu *et al.*, 2021; Lucas, 2010; Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek *et al.*, 2019). In addition, not all parties involved in this process may share the same interest and motivation, contributing to making it even slower and weaker (Rupčić, 2021). In other words, the learning process (including transfer and reuse) in inter-organizational projects should not be taken for granted because the involvement of multiple organizations may imply the effort to deal with different kinds of issues: incongruent goals, overlapping areas of responsibility, forms of tacit knowledge, unequal expertise levels and different organizational cultures shaping professionals' behavior and work representations (Ajmal and Helo, 2010; Jones and Lichtenstein, 2008; Liu *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, the key challenge for IOL is to establish a coordinated, shared and safe space, where organizations and professionals could build a common ground to maintain commitment and a high degree of absorptive capacity (Zahra and George, 2002), transparency (the degree to which an

organization is cooperative and discloses knowledge) and overall trust (Eiriz *et al.*, 2017; Klein *et al.*, 2020; Peronard and Brix, 2019; Rupčić, 2021). Inter-organizational sharing and creation of knowledge require the joint management of several aspects (Eiriz *et al.*, 2017) that can be clustered as follows: formal and informal balanced contacts, fluid communication and information exchange, sharing of resources, joint development and participation in managerial processes and decisions and alignment between organizational cultures. According to Anand *et al.* (2020), these elements represent strategic dimensions that need to be considered to initiate and manage IOL processes.

For all these reasons, DE can represent a valid methodological approach to support IOL processes.

Particularities of dialogic evaluation

The evaluation may be defined as the systematic collection of information to understand the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of various actions, including multi-stakeholders interventions in the field of health, education, psychology or organizational development (Engelhardt, 2019). The evaluation process generally entails some key methodological steps (Dallago *et al.*, 2004):

- the planning of the evaluation design (definition of the evaluation objectives, indicators and tools);
- the implementation of evaluation design; and
- the usage of the evaluation results for program improvement.

The implementation of such steps varies according to the diverse evaluation paradigms guiding the researchers. In some cases, researchers adopt a realistic paradigm. Within this orientation, evaluation is seen as a tool to measure the objective variations of specific benchmarks through the experimental design (Dallago *et al.*, 2004).

In other cases, the researcher can adopt a constructivist approach. Within this paradigm, the concept of “objectivity” lies in the context and is relevant to the evaluation design. This second orientation defines evaluation as a tool to explore the results of a program based on the agreement between diverse stakeholders (Green, 1997, 2001). This implies sustaining intersubjectivity in the construction of the evaluation data. Constructionism is based on the assumption that the meanings related to an object are not only individually internalized – and thus a result of a subjective internal process – but also the product of social exchange. Objects, ideas and representations are, thus, always intersubjectively determined. Applying the constructivist paradigm in research implies involving research participants in the research process by capturing their individual signification around a research object and activating a communal creation of the meaning (Gergen, 1994). Inter-subjectivity also puts the researchers in the position of creating the texture and fabric of the shared meaning; they are not neutral as wanted by the realist paradigm, but they are involved in meaning structuring (Gergen, 1994).

Dialogic evaluation (DE) falls into this second approach and promotes actions of planning, implementation and interpretation of the evaluation design in close dialogue with the actors of the evaluation context. Because DE implies a co-construction of the research/evaluation design in dialogue with the context (Cousins and Chouinard, 2012; Diaz-Puente *et al.*, 2008; Spaaij *et al.*, 2018), DE may also be categorized as a specific form of participatory evaluation.

Despite several commonalities with “participatory approaches,” DE comprises nuanced differences. The main one is that DE stresses the relevance of dialogue as a source of

knowledge building at a methodological and epistemological level. While in participatory evaluation (Cousins and Chouinard, 2012), the relational dimensions related to the creation of a balance between the researcher and the stakeholder in the evaluation process are strongly emphasized, DE finds dialogue the key tool for promoting a participatory approach to evaluation (Green, 1997, 2001). Dialogue is conceived as the main resource to construct new meanings with others.

Dialogue indeed permeates all the phases of the evaluation process, from the planning of evaluation objectives and indicators to the discussion and interpretation of results.

In conclusion, the peculiarity of the methodology lies in the usage of dialogue within the evaluation process as an activator of sense-making, intersubjectivity and socialization (Greene, 2001, 2003).

DE is generally in charge of an evaluation staff of researchers who apply the methodology in synergy with diverse actors implied in the program/action under evaluation (founders, beneficiaries and workers). However, it may also be implemented independently by organizational managers who want to apply a participatory methodology for internal evaluation. Within this paper, we will focus on DE as a specific form of participatory evaluation that researchers can apply within diverse contexts, and we will show how it sustains certain outcomes of IOL.

Several studies have reported various advantages related to participatory approaches, including DE, such as strengthened validity of evaluation findings and conclusions (Alpert and Bechar, 2007) better usage of the evaluation findings on behalf of stakeholders (King, 1988) and social justice and social betterment effects at a community level (Cousins and Chouinard, 2012).

The implications of participatory methodologies, such as DE, in evaluation also affect participants and organizations during the evaluation process. Cousins and Chouinard (2012) defined these effects as “process use.” Process use is reflected in changes at the individual (actions or behavior, attitude or affect) and organizational levels, including organizational learning (Amo and Cousins, 2007).

This leads to the assumption that participatory methodology may sustain IOL processes. Participation, reflexivity and power shifts (Spaaij et al., 2018) are consistent elements characterizing this approach. These components may reasonably improve task commitment, re-definition of organizational roles and boundaries and formation of new relational dynamics and networks, as well as knowledge and competencies sharing (Liu et al., 2021; Figure 1)

Methodology

Aims

This study aimed to highlight how DE may support, accelerate and strengthen IOL processes. Specifically, through the re-reading and reinterpretation of the DE process, we want to identify the connection between the phases of DE (Table 1) and the crucial

The intersection between IOL and DE.

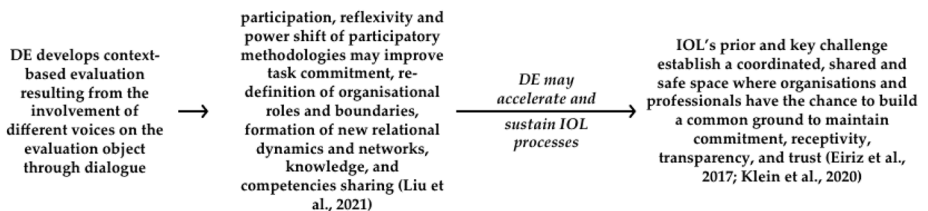


Figure 1.
Intersection between IOL and DE

	Procedure	Practices of DE
Phase 1	Preliminary action of dialogue was run to co-construct the evaluation objectives, tools and indicators within the partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Guided exchange of views on partnership's shared goals to define evaluation indicators and tools – Dialogue on program expectations to negotiate shared values and beliefs
Phase 2	Monthly monitoring meetings were held to discuss criticisms and strengths of the project within the inter-organizational group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Formation of an inter-organizational group (sharing of human resources) – Constant contact between partners – Informal climate – Equal and fluid dialogue on the activities – Exchange of information between parties
Phase 3	Results reporting and discussion within the partnership: At the end of the projects, meetings were held to discuss and interpret evaluation data with the inter-organizational groups of the project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Sharing of the evaluation results with partners – Promotion of dialogue on evaluation results – Co-interpretation of results

Table 1.
DE Steps applied in
the two cases under
analysis

preconditions to promote three main IOL outcomes: building common knowledge, defining new solutions and being aware of the new knowledge and competencies acquired (Eiriz *et al.*, 2017; Liu, 2021).

Comparative case studies

A case study is an intensive investigation of a single case to shed light on a larger class of cases (George and Bennet, 2005). It is generally used to observe a phenomenon in its natural setting, especially when the borders between the context and the phenomenon remain undefined (Hodge and Sharp, 2016). Specifically, the researchers aimed to explore the relationship between IOL and DE and the possible connection between these two processes, as studies in this field remain limited. For this study, we decided to compare two cases in SDP in terms of IOL. Case 1 was implemented from 2016 to 2017 in a suburban district of Milan and a town of the Milan Province. It involved three entities: our university, a grassroots sports society and a social cooperative. Case 2 was implemented in two cities in the province of Milan and a suburban district of Milan. It lasted from 2014 to 2016, and its partnership involved: our university, three grassroots sports societies of Milan and province, a social cooperative and a private foundation. These cases were selected based on the “crucial cases” criteria (George and Bennet, 2005). A crucial case is defined as a particular case that fits the theoretical assumptions the researcher is interested in exploring (in this work, DE sustaining IOL).

On the contrary, the researcher picked up deviant cases because they refute a certain theoretical hypothesis. Several peculiarities make these cases crucial (George and Bennet, 2005) for studying IOL in the context of DE. First, both cases were based on positive youth development through sport principles (Holt *et al.*, 2017) and aimed to develop a positive motivational climate within the micro-sport environment, leading to the promotion of individuals' sense of acceptance and perception of inclusion, promote positive communication within the micro-sport environment, strengthening participants' self-efficacy in sport, provide youths with individual psychological counseling for overcoming individual challenges during sports training and develop capacity building within the partnership, serving youth inclusion. Specifically, this final goal focused on developing skills and new learnings for the partnership involved was interesting in terms of IOL

development. Second, in both cases, our university was involved in evaluating and monitoring the projects' effects through DE. Consequently, we had the opportunity to reflect on how this methodology could create the conditions for IOL promotion. Moreover, a three-phase DE procedure (Table 1) was applied in both cases.

This condition facilitated the comparison of the cases and made it possible to highlight similarities and differences in terms of IOL outcomes promoted by the DE design. Therefore, it explored the connections between the phases of DE and the crucial preconditions for IOL to occur. Finally, both the initiatives were inter-sectorial actions implemented through partnerships between several organizations, particularly sport and non-profit social organizations. Intersectoral actions may be described as formal partnerships of diverse organizations or people with different backgrounds that cooperate to reach a common target (Corbin *et al.*, 2016). In these cases, achieving the partnership goal required the presence of an intermediate workgroup composed of multiple professionals (sports coaches, educators and psychologists) belonging to different sectors and disciplines (Lindsey and Bitugu, 2019).

Cases under analysis

The following section briefly presents the two multi-stakeholder initiatives in SDP that we chose to analyze. In line with Rupčić (2021) and Gibb *et al.* (2017), we considered partnerships and the resulting networks as contextual learning entities in which both exploratory and exploitative learning and knowledge transfer are expected to happen.

Case 1. Case 1 is a multi-stakeholder sports initiative involving a grassroots sports society in the North of Italy, an Italian Social Cooperative working with vulnerable youth in Milan. A private foundation funded the project, which lasted a year. The partnership implemented a sport-based project for young people from 13 to 18 years old. The project involved two groups of ten youths and provided one weekly multi-sport session (volleyball, basketball, soccer and handball) and transversal skills workshop sessions on video making and bicycling. During the sports sessions and the workshops, two educators (from the social cooperative) and sports coaches (from the grassroots sports society) who were supervised weekly by a psychologist (from the social cooperative) managed each group of youths. An inter-organizational group was thus created to complete the given task of the project.

Case 2. Case 2 was a sport-based project that involved three grassroots sports societies in the North of Italy and a social cooperative. A private foundation funded the project, which lasted three years. In each sports society, a soccer team was created with 10–15 vulnerable youths. Like Case 1, each team was managed by an inter-organizational group of professionals: a coach from the grassroots sports society (offering regular training), an educator from the social cooperative (co-conducting the training with coach and providing regular feedback to the youth during the activities) and a psychologist from the social cooperative (with supervisory function). The project involved youths in two weekly soccer training sessions (90 min each) and a total of 10h of workshops for transversal skills development.

Data analysis

The present case study was based on the integrative explorative approach, which requires a constant dialogue between the reference theory of IOL (Brix, 2021; Eiriz *et al.*, 2017; Klein *et al.*, 2020), the collected material and the researcher's interpretation (Maaloe, 2004).

Researchers' diaries and evaluation reports that have been structured at the time of both cases study implementation formed the basis of our data (2016–2017 for Case study 1; 2014–2016 for case study 2). These materials were a crucial source of information that made it possible to retrospectively reflect on how DE guided IOL. Indeed, these data sources captured the key events

and relational dynamics that occurred during and following our evaluation. [Table 2](#) shows the material analyzed for the two cases.

Chiara Corvino and Chiara D'Angelo were involved in data collection for the case studies, while Diletta Gazzaroli supported helped analyze the material for the current study. Materials were examined separately based on two key elements. On the one hand, we evaluated the DE process implemented within the two cases and identified which aspect of the DE process could reflect certain conditions for IOL achievements. We specifically focused on Eiriz and colleagues' (2017) contribution concerning the centrality of sharing common actions across organizations to promote IOL (see the previous section). We specifically considered whether and how DE could create a fruitful context to promote sharing among diverse organizations and, consequently, lead to IOL.

Furthermore, for each case, we analyzed the specific IOL promoted by the DE process in terms of common knowledge developed, new innovative solutions created and transfer and use of useful lessons (Brix, 2021; Klein *et al.*, 2020). The two cases were then triangulated to highlight similarities and differences in terms of IOL development.

Results

The results summarized in [Table 3](#) illustrate that the dialogic process in both cases guided the promotion of diverse IOL outcomes. The results section shows which process

Case 1	Case 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Eight researchers' diaries from 2016 to 2017 reporting the key events of the dialogic process - Final Evaluation Report (2017) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Five researchers' diaries from 2014 to 2016 reporting the key events of the dialogic process - Initial (2014), intermediate (2015), and final (2016) evaluation reports

Table 2.
Materials analyzed

DE phases	IOL outcomes
Phase 1	Case 1 - Establishing shared goals Case 2 - Learnings about partners' organizational culture - Negotiation of new monitoring tools
Phase 2	Case 1 - Awareness of new strategies for promoting inclusion through sport (e.g. the circle) - Commitment to the partnership scope Case 2 - Negotiation and co-creation of new forms of training centered on games and fun to work with vulnerable youth - Engagement toward the partnership scope
Phase 3	Case 1 - Awareness of new learnings and competencies acquired through the project Case 2 - Awareness of new learnings and competencies acquired through the project

Table 3.
Main results

components created the conditions for generating inter-organizational learning for each dialogic evaluation phase. These processual components trace some of the conditions highlighted by Eiriz and colleagues (2017).

Dialogic evaluation Phase 1 – development of shared meanings and representations of the partnership scope

For both cases, the DE first phase, characterized by an exchange of points of view regarding the shared goals of the partnership, was crucial in bringing out the different organizational peculiarities. This action made it possible to highlight the different positions of the organizations involved in addressing the inter-organizational macro-objective; specifically, the development of social inclusion through sport and the specific modalities through which to reach the partnership's goal. From a procedural perspective, the researchers' role was to conduct a series of meetings to guide partners in discussing three key questions: What does sport mean? What does it mean to promote social inclusion? What does it mean to promote social inclusion through sport?

Researchers' diaries and evaluation reports reported that these questions allowed deep organizational diversity to emerge and accelerate negotiation and alignment between organizational cultures to guarantee shared values and beliefs.

In Case 1, researchers' diaries described two levels of diversity that emerged. On the one hand, diverse meanings of social inclusion through sport were reported. The sports staff involved reported that inclusion involved mainly the sports team, whereas social workers described that inclusion should necessarily result in a broader inclusive process within the community. Phase 1 made it possible to discuss these representations. Eventually, within a supportive dialogic process, both sport and social workers converged into a more complex and richer definition of inclusion through sport that incorporated both their perspectives. Specifically, the group concluded that youth needs to first have a good experience on the sports team to be included in the larger community. The sports team was reported as a preparatory environment where youth learn, experiment and acquire social skills that need to be transferred to the larger community. Within this new perspective, social inclusion through sport was described as a ladder where the micro sports environment represents the first step, and the community and the society constituted the last step. This allowed broadening the representational horizons of the actors involved in promoting social inclusion through sport.

Then, the second level of diversity emerged regarding the stakeholders' implicit expectations for the projects and their understanding of the general aims of the project. In particular, the sports society board wanted to use the project as a lever to strengthen its presence in the territory and increase the number of its members. Specifically, the president of the sports society aimed to recruit new members through the project. This initial instrumental component caused friction within the partnership. Therefore, the cooperative's professionals were reluctant to discuss any instrumental components related to the project and struggled to accept this sports society's positioning. Despite this struggle, the DE process allowed mutual (and divergent) expectations to emerge before the start of the project and consequently to create the conditions needed to make them unambiguous (engaging partners in a common project aim).

In Case 2, the initial evaluation report described diverse representations of social inclusion attainment. Specifically, two contrasting representations emerged from the funding foundation and the social cooperative involved. The foundation followed a standardized, fast and technocratic approach (that could be more easily accounted for),

whereas the social cooperative reported the need to build customized and progressive work processes based on youth-specific needs and strong synergy with the wider community.

Eventually, the foundation and the social cooperative converged into structured monitoring forms. This tool, which the foundation strongly desired, was structured to monitor the specific progress of each participant from an individualized perspective, as sustained by the social cooperative.

In terms of IOL, DE guided professionals to co-create a new and innovative approach for monitoring social inclusion through sport (e.g. monitoring sheet).

In conclusion, the two cases illustrate how the promotion of dialogue in the initial evaluation design phase led to building a common knowledge about the partnership's scope and meanings, which is one of the main aims in terms of IOL outcomes. In Case 2, the reciprocal understanding and knowledge of partners' organizational cultures promoted the creation of new tools for monitoring social inclusion through sport.

Dialogic evaluation Phase 2 – new boundaries, tasks and strategies negotiation

Consistent with the principles of DE (Greene, 2001), partners' meetings were held monthly to monitor progress, strengths and weaknesses of project implementation. In both cases, only sports coaches from the sports society, educators and psychologists from the social cooperative attended the meetings. Therefore, to support cross-participatory project management, it was necessary to create a delegation of professionals. Monthly meetings allowed constant formal contact between the professionals from different organization, which gradually led to the creation of an informal climate. Consequently, all the involved organizations shared their human resources to progress in the monitoring and evolution of the project.

In both cases, the diaries of Case 1 and intermediate report of Case 2 reported coaches' dilemma about sport and inclusion. At the very start of both projects' implementation, it is described that the youth involved were not prepared to face coaches' initial structured training proposal; they weren't physically equipped to perform the training. This made coaches feel frustrated with the project because they originally expected the training approach to be the same as that of their grassroots sport's society. Coaches were thus forced to adapt the sports activity to fit the specific youths' sports skills. This required modifying the activities and structuring sessions to focus more on games and fun rather than sport. The educators and the psychologist spontaneously supported this process during the meetings by inviting sports coaches to define new possible ways to manage the training. In both cases, the dialogue with educators and the psychologist encouraged coaches to reflect on their expectations and redefine their behaviors and activities on the field. Consequently, they rebuilt and maintained their commitment. In both cases, monthly meetings constituted an opportunity to reconstruct sports coaches' engagement and find new training strategies centered more on games than on sports skills development.

Moreover, the monitoring meetings made it possible to retrospectively reflect on the new co-created strategies to face certain challenges with the youth. For instance, in Case 1, diaries reported that the group realized the importance of using "the circle" to calm youth after a conflict. The cases show that dialogue and reflection (promoted within monitoring meetings) supported coaches' re-engagement in the partnership task and, therefore, allowed coaches and educators to find new solutions to promote inclusion through sport (e.g. game-based training), which was one of the main aims in terms of IOL outcomes.

Dialogic evaluation phase 3 – awareness of new knowledge acquisition

In both cases, the evaluation design aimed to explore whether and how the workers involved in the project acquired new competencies to promote social inclusion through sport.

In Case 1, the evaluation report highlighted that the inter-organizational group developed several new competencies, such as the capacity to create a positive climate among the youth in a very short period, develop leadership skills, manage negative emotions, collaborate in a multi-professional team, share reflections and insights on youth within a multi-professional team, develop self-awareness, and manage complex and conflictual situations involving the youth.

In Case 2, the final evaluation report highlighted how the coaches, through the continuous exchange with social workers, developed a diverse perspective on the youth and began to interpret their behaviors from a psycho-pedagogical perspective. During the project, the coaches' language also gradually changed. Indeed, they gradually internalized the terminology and idioms that are more typical in the educational and psychological sphere. The data evaluation further revealed the change in decision-making. At the project's beginning, sports coaches were strongly hesitant to manage educational decisions regarding the youth, delegating such responsibility to educators. At the end of the project, they showed a greater propensity to dialogue with the youth.

DE Phase 3 offered a great opportunity to discuss such competencies and strengthen the value of the lessons learned through the process. Indeed, Phase 3 included meetings to share data collected by the evaluation staff with the partners to promote dialogue, reflection and data co-interpretation.

Proposing a dialogue on data evaluation, including competencies built during the project, made it possible to foster awareness of the common knowledge developed by all professionals, which represents a crucial premise underlying knowledge acquisition transfer.

Discussion

This study analyzed two cases where diverse organizations forged a relationship to accomplish a shared objective (Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek *et al.*, 2019) related to promoting social inclusion through sport. The connection between the DE phases and the crucial preconditions to promote three main IOL outcomes was explored within the cases. Specifically, DE guided three main outcomes that have been reported in the IOL literature: building common knowledge (Bruneel *et al.*, 2010; Peronard and Brix, 2019), defining new solutions, increasing awareness of the new knowledge and competencies (Broekel *et al.*, 2014; Holmqvist, 2009; Peronard and Brix, 2019; Wegner and Mozzato, 2019) and creating a fruitful ground for knowledge transfer (Rupčić, 2021).

First, the DE process allowed the latent expectations of the organization involved in the partnership to emerge and converge on a shared representation of project objectives and work approaches. This is in line with Liu's (2021) suggestions in terms of conditions guiding ILO, indicating that one crucial premise for IOL's common knowledge to occur refers to the emergence of latent relational dimensions that facilitate the connection between all the levels (within and across organizations) involved in a project. In the initial phase, DE made it possible to structure a co-shared vision of the inter-sectorial action goal. DE enabled the actors involved in the project (coaches, educators, psychologists and organizations) to reflect and dialogue on their work and behave consistently with their organizations' and the inter-organizational objectives. This allowed the organizations to learn about each other's working cultures and develop working methods that compromised the two organizational cultures. In terms of IOL outcomes, DE guided the generation of common knowledge

(Bruneel *et al.*, 2010; Peronard and Brix, 2019) about the partnership scope and promoted the integration of diverse organizational representations (Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek *et al.*, 2019).

Second, the DE process supported intra- and inter-negotiation to find new organizational solutions (Broekel *et al.*, 2014; Holmqvist, 2009; Peronard and Brix, 2019; Wegner and Mozzato, 2019). The DE process made it possible to reach this premise thanks to the monthly meeting managed by the inter-organizational groups (a delegation of all the organizations involved in the projects). These meetings acted as a connection point for all the partners because they were based on open dialogue and fluidity of communication (Greene, 2001). These meetings did not just provide useful information needed to progress in project improvement (because professionals involved were asked to exchange information about the project) but also promoted workers' reflection about their emotions and actions during project implementation and, consequently, efforts to find new solutions when required by the process (e.g. game-based training). This process is strongly coherent with what was suggested by Liu (2021). According to the author, one crucial premise behind IOL's new solutions is promoting intra- and inter-redefinition and the intersection of boundaries, roles and functions at multiple levels. Thus, it is possible to complete a common project task only when all the professionals and partners agree to work together.

Furthermore, the monthly meetings re-engaged coaches on project tasks, resulting in enhanced commitment within the partnership (Eiriz *et al.*, 2017; Klein *et al.*, 2020; Peronard and Brix, 2019).

Finally, in both cases, the final evaluation phase aimed to explore whether and how professionals involved in the project acquired new competencies to promote social inclusion through sport. DE Phase 3 made it possible to discuss new competencies and lessons learned from the process and, therefore, strengthen the involvement of sports coaches, educators and psychologists within the project. Allowing professionals and organizations to recognize that new acquirements' values exceeded the project's expectations brought awareness about their significance in an overall partners' evolution. Thus, DE promoted awareness of new knowledge acquirements, which may foster their transferability (Rupčić, 2021). Table 4 summarizes the key points of our study.

Conclusions

The manuscript adds new insights about the ties between DE and IOL and the use of DE methodology to promote IOL practically. As Anand *et al.* (2020) suggested, we explored the ability of a new methodology – that is, DE – to support IOL and go beyond the managerial implications by focusing on a different kind of context and setting.

Although having dialogue during the evaluation is the turning point for establishing a common ground for IOL development, it can also be a limitation. Establishing an evaluation based on reciprocity requires time, which constitutes a challenge in a social context-oriented toward speed and productivity.

Furthermore, the manuscript explored two local projects related to SDP, and future studies should expand their horizons at an international level.

Despite these limits, the work has practical implications for effectively conducting DE within partnerships to develop IOL (suggestions for using DE to guide IOL):

Evaluation planning:

- discuss with the partnership the aims of the common project and the related divergences;
- include voices of all stakeholders, especially the ones who have less power;

TLO

IOL premises	DE process management	DE process results	IOL outcomes
The emergence of latent issues to create interconnections within and across organizations	Preliminary action of dialogue to co-state evaluation goals and indicators	DE let mutual-divergent expectations emerge before the project start, creating the conditions to make them unambiguous and engaging partners in a common aim	Partnership's aims common knowledge: shared representation and definition of the task to ensure behavior consistency from all partners
Intra- and inter-redefinition of boundaries, roles and functions promotes IOL	Monthly meetings for project monitoring required cross-participatory management; consequently, a delegation process was activated by all organizations Monthly monitoring meetings detected coaches' disengagement risk because their training proposals were not appropriate. Discussion sessions were settled to elaborate on coaches' frustrations	The establishment of the inter-organizational team enabled to sharing of knowledge and skills to improve professionals' work Dialogue with the inter-organizational team allowed coaches to reflect on their expectations, redefine their behavior and activities and rebuild commitment for improvement	Open dialogue supported reflexivity, engagement, knowledge and skills sharing allows professionals to feel comfortable searching for new work approaches
Awareness of what was achieved through the partnership improves transferability	Final meetings for evaluation data discussion were held to reflect on the competencies and knowledge built during the project	Evaluation data highlighted the attainment of new competencies, a different perspective on youth, a decision-making process change	Providing the opportunity to recognize new acquisitions of the partnership facilitated the transferability chances

Table 4.
Main results

- use dialogue as a source to co-build a shared representation of the partnership goals and promote common knowledge; and
- use the dialogue on the new shared goal to structure innovative evaluation plans and M&E tools.

Monitoring phase:

- create a delegation team participating in monthly monitoring meetings;
- provide the delegation team with a safe space where to express criticisms and feelings about the partnership work; and
- use the criticisms provided to re-discuss the partnership goal and search for new work approaches.

Evaluation of results, discussion and interpretation:

- use data discussion with the partnership as a source of knowledge building; and
- discuss the results and use them as a source for new learnings transferability.

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