Sports activities in a psychosocial perspective: Preliminary analysis of adolescent participation in sports challenges

Nicolas Moreau
University of Ottawa, Canada

Olivier Chanteau
CSSS Bordeaux-Cartierville-Saint-Laurent, Canada

Maryse Benoît
University of Sherbrooke, Canada

Marie-pier Dumas
McGill University, Canada

Audrey Laurin-lamothe
Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada

Luc Parlavecchio
DesÉquilibres, Canada

Caroline Lester
University of Ottawa, Canada

Corresponding author:
Nicolas Moreau, University of Ottawa, School of Social Work, 1 Stewart Street, Office 108, Ottawa, ON, K1N 6N5, Canada.
Email: nicolas.moreau@uOttawa.ca
Abstract
As the literature is far from being unanimous in regards to the psychosocial benefits of sports practice, we conducted a preliminary qualitative study with nine teenagers who participated in a group sporting challenge to better understand: (1) youths’ perceptions regarding the program’s most important dimensions and (2) its effects in the physical, psychological and social spheres of their life. Following these results, we highlighted six driving principles we consider to be significant to interventions involving sports as a tool for psychosocial development: (1) cooperation amongst youth; (2) facilitators’ discipline, direct involvement and positive attitude; (3) moving the youths beyond their physical, psychological and social comfort zones; (4) the interplay between enjoyment and effort; (5) constant innovation in training content; (6) risk as a driving force for cohesion and social ties.

Keywords
Adolescent, alternative intervention techniques, psychological perspectives, social perspectives, sport

A significant number of institutional programs are intended for troubled youths – young people facing adjustment difficulties, behavioral problems, academic failure and dropout or mental health difficulties. These institutional programs usually favor approaches based on verbal expression, such as counseling, psychotherapy and psychosocial interventions (Boutereau-Tichet et al., 2005, Gendreau, 2002). Therapeutic alliances in these approaches are generally based on a dialectical interaction (discussion, introspection, analysis) that supports cognitive or reflexive processes. The aim is therefore to encourage problem verbalization and explore solutions in a welcoming and confidential environment (Clark, 2007). The therapeutic setting is often standardized and interventions are set and agreed upon in the form of plans. These approaches also tend to favor prescheduled meetings in set locations, where participants are usually seated. Several studies have shown the usefulness of these approaches in intervening with troubled youth. A meta-analysis by Cooper (2009) on non-directive, humanist interventions practiced in British high schools noted that these are related to an improved sense of well-being and academic performance. Narrative-based interventions, such as cognitive-behavioral approaches, have in turn shown effectiveness in the treatment of anxiety (Albano, 2009), depression (Gill and Brannigan, 2008) and antisocial behavior (Townsend, 2007) in North America.

However, participation rates and commitment of troubled youths to counseling or psychosocial interventions remain considerable challenges (Binder et al., 2008; Coatsworth et al., 2001; Santisteban et al., 1996; Szapocznik et al., 1988). This can be partially explained by the association between adolescence and greater instability, as well as attitudes of resistance, passivity and even distrust towards counseling (Kline, 2009). Moreover, narrative-based approaches seem to have limited effectiveness with youths who are not willing to express themselves verbally or to engage in personal reflection (Benson, 1997; Craig and Nylund, 1997).

In addition, there is a strong contrast between the immediacy of youths’ relationship to time, and the institutional habitus of planning and structuring meetings (Bourdron and Belisle, 2005). A number of individuals will therefore show reluctance to engage in a
process they perceive to be too standardized. Misperceptions about social services and their usefulness, fears of judgment and feelings of stigmatization will then be decisive in the choice not to use conventional support services (Ingoldsby, 2010). Many youths in extreme distress are also particularly difficult to mobilize or to reach, including: (1) youths placed in residential care (Marier, 2004); (2) those living on the fringes of society or who are homeless (Parazelli, 2002); and (3) youths who are highly disadvantaged socio-economically, and those from families who have immigrated (Nock and Ferriter, 2005). These groups often will have simultaneously accumulated failures in emotional, social and familial realms over the course of many years (Poirier et al., 2007). Some have lived in unenviable and often deleterious conditions. Their relationships to authority figures are marked by mistrust. Thus, they show much resistance to practitioners and intervention in general (Cousineau, 2007). This in turn leads to withdrawal and disengagement from the realm of adults and institutions, and attempts to empower themselves in marginal contexts, away from institutional and social forms of violence (Lemetayer, 2002; Marier, 2004; Parazelli, 2000). The result is that intervention in an institutional setting or school, which can contribute to forms of social control (Hébert, 2001), may compete with identity-based issues and explorations. These explorations are often marked by desires for emancipation, rebellion or sometimes ordalic emotional regulation, such as risk-taking and overcoming one’s physical limitations. Identity-based claims and questioning social norms are seldom echoed in encounters between youths and practitioners. Institutional response mechanisms may prove unable to address such fundamental searches for meaning and emancipation (Chanteau et al., 2007). The very purpose of social inclusion set in a perspective of employability – as a more or less desired and possibly imposed form of empowerment – appears to exacerbate feelings of inadequacy, incompetence, rejection, loneliness and anger in more vulnerable youths (Goyette and Turcotte, 2004; Vultur, 2005).

Strategies for social and community inclusion (Cousineau, 2007) that take into account both troubled youths’ ambivalent relationship to institutions and their marginality (Parazelli, 2002) represent innovative and promising alternatives. In this regard, the use of recreational activities is a well-established practice in street work (Rivard and Mercier, 2009), community intervention (Bilodeau et al., 2009) and social work (Tucker, 2009). These interventions frequently include non-verbal strategies, such as art therapy (crafts, graffiti, writing, visual arts or music) and sports activities. Intervention frameworks are generally more flexible and creative, and youths’ personal experiences are not framed as problems to be solved, but rather as alternative forms of empowerment. Instead of opposing marginal youths’ journeys to the social norms they struggle to fit into, these approaches tend to focus on strategies of dialogue and reconciliation, which reflect their alternative identity building methods (Parazelli, 2002). Overall, these approaches are part of a logic that could be termed “non-interventionist”, and promote cross-disciplinary processes of socialization and individuation that are generally congruent with the needs of troubled youth. Their distinctiveness certainly lies in the fact that they are based on constructivist models, which generally allow one to better recognize the subjectivity of the youths’ experience.

Kiselica et al. (2008) reports that when practitioners are involved in recreational activities or sports, as well as practical group activities, the therapeutic alliance seems to
settle more easily, particularly for male participants. Research relating to physical activity as a tool for psychosocial development, however, is scarce and contradictory. Many of these studies tend to confirm the significance of physical activity in the treatment of anxiety, depression and self-esteem issues, as well as physical and emotional well-being, among adolescents (Babiss and Gangwisch, 2009; Covey and Feltz, 1991; Dishman et al., 2006; Iannotti et al., 2009; Jerstad et al., 2010; Wiles et al., 2008). Covey and Feltz’s (1991) study of a cohort of 149 female adolescents emphasized the contribution of physical activity on resilience and emotional balance. Bailey (2005), in turn, reported that participation in sports among adolescents seems to encourage a reduction of delinquent behavior.

In contrast, Faulkner et al.’s (2007) quantitative longitudinal study conducted amongst 3796 Canadian students with delinquent behaviors found no significant effect of vigorous physical activity on respondents’ self-esteem. In the same survey, practicing sports appears to have been directly associated with increased delinquent behavior, especially among boys. These results are consistent with results of Miller and her colleagues (2007), who observed a link between jock identity and more incidents of delinquency. To sum up, the recent literature of this field is very ambiguous and indicates that sports can have a beneficial or negative influence on troubled youth, from a psychosocial perspective (Sabo and Veliz, 2008).

An important factor determining whether physical activities are beneficial or not seems to be the context. To this effect, Bartko and Eccles’ study (2003) showed a clear difference in terms of youth development between structured activities – extracurricular activities, volunteer work, participation in a club – and unstructured activities – television, games, social networking. According to them, the positive relation between sports and higher level of personal fulfillment could be influenced by a constructive context and greater social involvement. A study by Wright (2006) is consistent with this hypothesis on the beneficial aspects of “constructive contextuality”. The practice of a sport such as boxing, in a context based on solidarity and reciprocity within the group, appears to contribute significantly to youths’ sense of belonging and personal value. Comments collected through participant testimonials suggest that this type of work allows for the exploration of identity issues on physical, individual and social levels. Symbolically, it appears that boxing creates a sense of empowerment both inside and outside of the ring. The practice of a sport in a context of authoritative intervention seems to have the opposite effect. Pantaleon and Bruant’s research (1999) demonstrates an interesting example of a context that could be deemed counter-productive. In their study, the use of intervention methods perceived as authoritarian was associated with a decreased level of moral development and increased competition and domination mechanisms. In sum, this contextual variable could possibly explain the ambivalence of research on interventions that operate through sports.

Sport sociological research has often focused on the negative dimensions of sports. Marxism theory, for example, has concentrated on alienation (Anderson, 2010: 81–96; Brohm, 2006; Denault, 2011: 133–141; Giulianotti, 2005: 29–42), while other theorists have underlined sport’s racial inequalities (Marcellus, 1998; Moreau, 2008; Sage, 1998: 88–90) or gender inequalities (Anderson, 2010: 121–134; Sage, 1998: 57–79). Despite the fact that sport can reproduce social ideologies, we are interested in exploring how it
can also be a place for social transformation, and how context might play a crucial role (Donnelly, 1993, 1995; Sage, 1998: 277–294).

Our research team was interested in the program DesÉquilibres, a cooperative model of sports intervention targeting troubled youths in Montreal. Founded by former top amateur athletes and sports educators, DesÉquilibres puts forward an intervention focused on civic and collective participation, in the form of sports challenges. Such programs are based on the premise that fostering positive experiences through social and sport adventure promotes positive development (Heinze et al., 2010). The studied project is not part of a therapeutic program. It intentionally targets youths in general, including but not focusing on troubled youths, in order to promote group diversity. Moreover, the educators that have conceived the program have intentionally decided not to gather information on youths’ type of difficulty in order to interact with each participant without stigmatizing him/her. Furthermore, it is in this perspective that the organization’s facilitators have coined the term “edutrainers”, as they consider themselves to be both trainers and educators. Most of the coordinated projects present great challenges: 250 km relay races, nocturnal hikes, 200 km cycling routes and several weeks of group training.

The aim of our study was to find out the youths’ perceptions regarding the program’s most important dimensions and its effects on the physical, psychological and social spheres of their life.

**Methodology**

Youth recruitment was conducted on a voluntary basis. DesÉquilibres first held two information meetings at weekly intervals on 17 and 26 February 2009, in two Montreal recruitment pools, (a high school and Carrefour jeunesse emploi, a center for youth social and economic integration). A few participants had some behavioral problems, academic failure or mental health difficulties – others had no such issues. However, because of the philosophical perspective of the organism (edutrainers do not want to stigmatize youths), the program and the present study did not document which participants had specific troubles or high risks to adopt delinquent behaviors. During this meeting, the organization screened a five-minute film featuring youths who had already participated in a sports challenge. The project’s framework was then presented: scheduling, practice content, implications of the intermediate \((n = 2)\) and final \((n = 1)\) challenges, as well as educational opportunities following their completion. Two edutrainers and a former participant facilitated the first meeting. Approximately 40 youths attended. A week later, interested youths were invited to a second meeting to receive a summary of the information previously presented, and to formally sign up for the project. This included a deed of commitment and a parental consent form for minors, as well as health check, risk release and media consent forms. Sixteen youths enrolled.

The first two weeks of training (screening phase) ensured that the project was well understood by the youths and that the values of the organization were aligned with those of the participants. During these two weeks, youths could decide whether they wanted to continue participating or not. In this particular study, four youths decided to leave the program during the first two weeks. Two weeks later (one month after the first training session), youths were invited to join a nocturnal hike in the woods
(walking for about 10 hours, from 20:00 to 6:00). All of the youths who remained after the screening phase \((n = 12)\) successfully participated in the walk. However, one participant left the project after completing this first intermediate challenge. This brought the group size to a final number of 11 participants; no other youths withdrew from the program prior to its completion. One month later, another intermediate challenge was held: a 200 km cycling route (non-stop), before the final challenge (a 300 km relay ran in 30 hours, with a travelled distance of 20–28 km for each participant, over five separate relays) held the following month, 12 weeks after the first training session.

All students who initially agreed to participate in the project \((n = 16)\) were contacted to participate in the study. Nine accepted, none formally refused, two did not respond to our calls, one relocated and four were not available. The nine youths that agreed to participate in the study had completed the entire project. The study participants’ socio-demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Given the exploratory nature of the project, we opted for a qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews, which took place between 22 September and 21 October 2009, in DesÉquilibres’ offices, in the absence of the edutrainers. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed in full before being submitted for content analysis, more specifically to a thematic analysis (Quivy and Van Campenhoudt,

| Table 1. Respondents’ socio-demographic characteristics \((n = 9)\). |
|-----------------------------|--------|--------|
| **Sex**                    | **N**  | **%**  |
| Male                        | 3      | 33.3%  |
| Female                      | 6      | 66.7%  |
| **Average age**             |        |        |
| 17.6 (standard deviation = 2.3) |    |        |
| **Average number of siblings** |     |        |
| 2.6 (standard deviation = 1.8) |    |        |
| **Parents’ birthplace**     |        |        |
| Canada                      | 7      | 77.8%  |
| Other                       | 2      | 22.2%  |
| **Parents’ marital status** |        |        |
| Married or common-law status | 5    | 55.6%  |
| Divorced or separated       | 4      | 44.4%  |
| **Academic and professional status (during the school year)** | | |
| Studies full-time and works part-time | 5 | 55.6% |
| Studies full-time and does not work | 2 | 22.2% |
| Studies part-time and does not work | 1 | 11.1% |
| No longer studies and works full-time | 1 | 11.1% |
| **Current level of studies** |        |        |
| High school                 | 4      | 44.4%  |
| Professional                | 3      | 33.3%  |
| CÉGEP**                     | 2      | 22.2%  |

*The respondent who no longer studies indicated his highest level of educational attainment, which is a professional diploma.

**In Québec, CÉGEP (Collège d’Enseignement Général Et Professionnel) are colleges that offer both pre-university and vocational programs of study.
Findings

The results are presented according to the two aims of our study: (1) youths’ perceptions regarding the program’s most important dimensions and (2) its effects in the physical, psychological and social spheres of their life. A summary of our results is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of the categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intrinsic features of the DesÉquilibres program</th>
<th>DesÉquilibres program’s impact on youths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Primary categories</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social ties</td>
<td>Self-confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pursuing a regular sports practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving beyond personal limitations in other areas of social life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values of determination and perseverance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Secondary categories</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Edutrainers’” charisma</td>
<td>Self-assertion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation amongst youth</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving beyond personal limitations</td>
<td>Team spirit and mutual trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interplay of enjoyment and effort</td>
<td>Self-discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration of related health notions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tertiary categories</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports innovation</td>
<td>Openness to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk as a driving force for cohesion</td>
<td>Sports practice as an emotional release</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Desire to learn and share one’s own experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DesÉquilibres’ intrinsic characteristics

Primary category. The emergence of social ties is probably the most recurrent theme and broadest category that we extracted from our data. The various exercises and sports challenges to which the youths dedicated themselves offered opportunities for them to network and develop a sense of belonging among within their peer group. Feeling a resonance between their own experience and others’, and being dynamic within the nurturing confines of the group, was a powerful motivator for change and commitment, which gave rise to meaningful affiliations and active participation. This was the case for Joel and Emily:

- Doing things together (...) really as a group. (...) It’s still a cardio workout, but (...) as a team rather than more individually (...) that’s (what made a) big difference I think. (Joel)
- They’ll be there for you (...) And there is no problem whatsoever. (...) You know, you’re (in it) with these people so you have to trust them and they’ll listen to you. And they’ll trust you too. (Emilia)

Secondary categories. Four other categories emerged from the analysis. The first concerns edutrainers’ charisma, which seems to reflect a subtle blend of discipline, participation in the activities and a generally positive attitude:

- Well because they didn’t just tell us what to do. (...) Tell us, go have fun. They were really with us. You could see they loved it. (Aimee)
- They were very strict, but in a positive way (...) it was really like… you just have to do it, like, you know, and they’re funny at the same time so it was really fun, you know. (...) They’d say like… “Well, just do it, I know you can” sort of jokingly, but they knew we could do it, they saw it, otherwise they wouldn’t have said it. (Anaïs)

The second category consists of cooperation and active reciprocity among participants during practices and challenges. Sports activities offer a context where spontaneous exchanges, gratuitous gestures and unspoken camaraderie take place, thereby reflecting an emerging complicity within the group. This must be distinguished from the social ties mentioned above, which, in turn, form a much broader dimension, as they extend beyond the sports field. As stated by Anouk, cooperation and active reciprocity mean participation in the activities is not about being better than others, but rather about helping and accompanying them in their own progress:

- You see someone who really hugely improved and it’s like, “Oh man, it’s so great for you that you’re getting so much better!” Because in the end, you know you’re putting in as much effort for your own self, so that’s what was cool, that everyone wanted to improve themselves, but not to beat the others at it. (Anouk)

The drive to continually move beyond personal limitations in training sessions and sports challenges is another significant element (third category). Madeleine loved edutrainers who “push us further, (...) make us continue (...) tell us ‘we know that you can
do it, so keep going. And don’t stop.” Aimée, for her part, enjoyed the uncertainty about her ability to complete the race: “The last hour-long race. I really liked it because I was not really sure I could do it (…) I think that’s the best moment I enjoyed.”

The fourth category, the combination of enjoyment and effort (initiated by edutainers or by the group itself) during training sessions and challenges, is yet another popular aspect of the program: “Everybody was acting like fools. It was hard work, but we could talk. We could have fun together” (Madeleine) and “DesÉquilibres means that you have fun, you apply the technique and they teach you the technique” (Simone).

Tertiary categories. Finally, two tertiary categories can be mentioned: (1) sports innovation (through the use of unknown or little known games, or by changing certain rules of more common games) and (2) risk (of injury or failure) as a driving force for cohesion:

It was really diversified at every practice (…) it was something new, not repetitive every time. (Anaïs)

You could run into people (…) Yes, my nose got busted twice (…) Those were accidents so, you know, you can’t really hold it against anyone. (Simone)

The program’s impact on youths

What we call the program’s impact is what youths have learned from their DesÉquilibres experience in terms of practicing sports (including related health notions), as well as on the psychosocial level.

Primary categories. Four major categories emerged from the analysis concerning the program’s impact on youths. The first is based on developing self-confidence. For Aimée, it means, for example, to be “confident all the time” and “less shy,” while for Emily: “Having self-confidence (…) it boils down to what I want to achieve. I can succeed, and I’m not afraid to say what I think either.”

Almost all respondents mentioned pursuing a regular sports practice after the DesÉquilibres experience (second category). The prospect of running a marathon for instance was considered by some youths as another potential challenge, something accessible and achievable:

I want to run a marathon (…) I don’t know how long it takes to train, but a year should be enough. (…) Do the Montreal marathon (…) I always wanted to run one (…) like, 42 km. (Alexandre)

Although discovered through running, continually surpassing one’s own limitations was applied to other areas of social life (third category). If Emily feels “capable of anything,” Anaïs has adopted a new work ethos, which she relates to success:

Generally, if you want to achieve something in life, it is by working that you will succeed because running is like with anything else. (…) I managed to run for a long time, and I didn’t think I would be able to. So something in life I thought I couldn’t do, maybe I will succeed at it. (Anaïs)
The fourth category includes values of determination and perseverance, as mentioned by Simone: “I really wasn’t sure I could do it, but with perseverance you can achieve anything. It’s great” (Simone).

**Secondary categories.** Five other categories can be mentioned. The first is self-assertion: “I made it to the end, and now, I’m proud to say that I made it to the end” (Emilia).

Responsibility, the second category, also emerged in the youths’ discourse:

I tried to be responsible nonetheless, and to keep a sort of spirit (…) we can lose focus a little, but we are still in the project (…) trying to be responsible towards others. (…) Not just being like, I don’t care, it’s not my problem, you deal with it. (…) There is a responsibility towards others, and towards myself, towards the project at hand. (Anouk)

The establishment of a team spirit and development of mutual trust should also be mentioned (third category): “I can trust people because I learned about team spirit and all that (…) that’s right, I can be more trusting with someone” (Alexandre).

While many found the motivation to complete the program through a common team spirit (as Anouk stated: “Just doing something as a group makes me really motivated”), some youths continue to set goals on their own. This kind of impact can be defined by developing self-discipline (fourth category):

I learned to be a little less lazy (…) I motivate myself (…) I would say I’m always pushing myself, but I never like it. So, I don’t look lazy, but only because I’m always pushing myself. (Alexandre)

The integration of related health notions (fifth category) was also raised in our interviews.

I ate poorly before, and with DesÉquilibres they taught us to eat well, and so, I still eat really healthy. (…) Those were really things that I didn’t eat before. And so, I convinced my mother to buy brown bread. (…) I always have brown bread at home now. And I drink more water, much more water than before. (Emilia)

**Tertiary categories.** Finally, three tertiary categories can be mentioned: (1) openness to others (including meeting First Nations communities, etc.); (2) sports practice as an emotional release and (3) the desire to learn and share one’s own experience after participating in *DesÉquilibres*:

I think it was Nutashkuan because we saw people who were so different (…) to see different cultures (…) and I really enjoyed it, and it was beautiful (…) It felt like I was at the other end of the world. (Anaïs)

Well having peace of mind because my head is often full of things and when I’m running well I have nothing in mind except running. So I feel much better. (Emilia)

So you contribute time to teach them what they want to learn. And I had actually thought I’d share what I learned about running. (Anouk)
Discussion

Theoretical implications

Our preliminary results show that practicing sports in an environment that encourages positive reinforcement strategies, civic engagement and group mobilization can be an effective tool to foster psychosocial development. In this sense, our observations confirm Bartko and Eccles’ (2003) hypothesis on the advantages of constructive contexts and Wright’s (2006) observations on the multi-faceted effects (individual, collective or group levels) of sports-based projects.

Indeed, DesÉquilibres is carried out through organized sports activities (carefully planned weekly training sessions, as well as intermediary and final sports challenges) that could be considered as a “constructive context”, providing a fertile ground for acquiring skills and developing positive social relationships (Bartko and Eccles, 2003).

Moreover, many of these activities are part of a group intervention dynamic that can also favor development of transversal skills, such as socialization, collaboration and sharing. In this sense, the group serves to dispel fears and spark individual motivations, thus bringing a team spirit experienced as caring and protective by its members. The group thereby becomes unifying as it promotes feelings of belonging and empowerment (Berteau, 2006).

Lastly, we found that usage of “tribal” terminology and referring to ritual processes in describing the group and its challenges appealed to the youths. Accordingly, some participants were quite sensitive to the family atmosphere at DesÉquilibres, and this lead to reconstruction processes within the “tribe”:

In the end it’s almost like going back to your family… You know, like, the tribe, like [edutrainers’ name] always said (Alexandre)

We quickly felt like (…) a unit, like a family and, you know, there wasn’t any drama. (Anouk)

Practical implications

Six principles can be highlighted as the driving forces of any intervention involving sports as a tool for psychosocial development. The first refers to cooperation amongst youths during sports activities. For example, when the fastest runners are too far ahead during running practices, they are asked to turn back to help slower runners pick up their pace.

The second principle involves the “edutrainers”. The importance of their personality was mentioned by many youths (cf. “edutrainers”’ charisma). If we cannot exclude the fact that DesÉquilibre’s “edutrainers” have genuine charismatic power (Weber, 1965), we nevertheless think that their personality results from the combination of three essential qualities: discipline, involvement in the sports activities and a positive attitude.

The third principle is to continually push the youths outside of their social habits, to enable them to consistently move beyond their limitations, be they physical, psychological or social.
The interplay of enjoyment and effort is another principle. In order for the youths to accept various types of effort, and even types of effort (physical, psychological and social) that are inherent in the kind of sporting achievements they train for, they must also have fun. Concepts of effort and pain – which appeared in our interviews – should also be refined in future research, since they appear to be extremely polysemic.

The fifth principle lies in the constant innovation and novelty of training sessions. Indeed, practicing familiar sports or activities with unknown or different rules left its mark on the respondents, and was particularly appreciated by those who were the least initiated to sports. One of our hypotheses to explain this phenomenon is that new or rearranged games homogenize the group, as usual technical skills are often useless or even detrimental in some cases.

Risk is the final driving principle for interventions involving sports as a tool for psychosocial development. It encompasses physical injuries as much as failing to complete training sessions or challenges (considered to be psychological injuries). In this context, risk is not a disqualifying factor, but rather a source of cooperation and development of social ties among youths. Le Breton’s (2007) conception of risk in contemporary Western adolescents seems quite well adapted to our findings: risk for our participants widely served as a rite of passage towards adulthood and a tool with which to build one’s own identity.

Limitations

One of the possible limitations of our research stems from the composition of our sample. Indeed, the four youths who left the project during the first two weeks of training could not be interviewed. It would have been interesting to know the reasons that motivated their voluntary departure and to have their perspective on the program’s strengths and limits.

Another factor that may account for this lack of any reference to potentially negative aspects may be caused by a sense of “loyalty” of youths towards their peers and towards DesÉquilibres. In this context, discussing negative aspects of the program would amount to a kind of betrayal of the group. Although the achievement of this kind of solidarity would in itself be a good sign, it could also potentially bias our findings.

In addition, some respondents had difficulties verbalizing their experience in semi-structured interviews. Although we cannot exclude that this difficulty may be caused by variables relating to the context of the interview or the questions asked, the limitations in verbal expression and greater difficulties with internalization that are associated with adolescence (Benson, 1997; Craig and Nylund, 1997) are also potential explanations that cannot be overlooked. Moreover, our interviews with girl participants were more detailed than with boys, in coherence with the literature (Brooks, 1998). In this context, and to control the gender variable, the use of assessment tools more suited to youths (e.g., making a video) appears to be an interesting area to explore in the future. Several studies in anthropology and sociology have successfully used similar media to adapt their assessment process to youths’ reality (Grimshaw, 2001; Niesyto, 2000).
The high number of female respondents \((n = 6)\) may also explain the absence of violent behavior and crime, since these are often correlated with the male gender, as reported in a number of studies on sport as a tool for psychosocial development (Faulkner et al., 2007).

Lastly, we can ask a fundamental question about short-term interventions like *DesÉquilibres*. Does it only have a short-term impact, or can it also influence youths in the longer term, and even be a transforming life experience? The interviews realized several weeks after the programs allowed us to document the impact of the intervention in the short term, but a longitudinal study would be needed to measure the long-term effect of such intensive interventions. This would be particularly interesting considering that such long-term studies are rare (Donnelly and Coakley, 2002: 14–17).

**Conclusion**

Classic psychosocial development strategies greatly rely on the use of narratives. However, these types of intervention yield mitigated results with adolescents, who are not generally used to verbalizing or intellectualizing their experiences. In this regard, sports-based interventions are a viable alternative. Research on the use of sports as a tool for psychosocial development is scarce, and results can at times be contradictory. Some studies report a marked improvement in youths’ physical and emotional well-being when involved in a sports discipline, particularly with regard to self-esteem and resiliency. Physical activity would also play an important role in reducing anxiety, depression or delinquent behaviors. Other studies show that contexts that encourage competitiveness and rivalry bring a decrease in self-esteem (Endersen and Olweus, 2005; Tofler and Butterbaugh, 2005), and increase violence (Soffer, 2009), delinquent behaviors and anxiety (Vazou et al., 2006).

Benefits associated with sports’ practice therefore seem deeply related to the context and mindset within which youths are active. This is why our research was particularly attentive to documenting the main parameters that are susceptible to encouraging constructive contexts for practicing sports. Our qualitative analysis of nine youths’ discourses regarding a sports project they were involved in has allowed us to identify six distinctive dimensions that favor the establishment of such a context: (1) cooperation during sports activities; (2) “edutrainers’” discipline, involvement and positive attitude; (3) moving the youths beyond their physical, psychological and social comfort zones; (4) the interplay between enjoyment and effort; (5) constant innovation in training content; (6) risk as a driving force for cohesion and social ties. Our results are thus in the line of the conclusions and recommendations articulated by Donnelly and Coakley (2002). As we do, they underline the importance of trainers’ leadership, giving youths the opportunity to voice their opinion and to be empowered, and the positive impact of sports programs that are egalitarian and based on collaboration rather than performance and competition.

We believe practicing sports can help adolescents in their psychosocial development. As practitioners, however, we must never forget that this type of intervention can also exacerbate certain negative behaviors and as such must be carefully studied prior to implementation.
Funding
This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

References


