

Reduced school dropout rates owing to targeted sports programs in France.

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Abstract

In school dropout prevention programs, researchers emphasize the importance of addressing all educational components and stakeholders (e.g., Burzichelli et al., 2011). Among these, sport is recognized as a key factor for(re)integration (Siedentop et al., 2019). This article examines the impact of various specific sport programs across France on students' engagement at school. The nationwide study focuses on students' subjective perceptions of these initiatives. Although the programs differ, they share a common feature: they are based on cooperation and mainly organized by the students themselves, with support from their teachers, particularly physical education teachers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among 19 young people aged 12 to 18. These interviews focused on their personal school and life trajectory, their perceptions of school, of sport and of the specific sport project. Collected data (speech) was then analyzed using ALCESTE lexical analysis software (Reinert, 1990, 1994).

Keywords: school drop-in; sociability; participative sport projects; qualitative study; lexical analysis

Introduction

In France, as in many other countries, preventing school dropout remains “a major challenge for educational policies” (Eduscol, 2020).¹ This issue is crucial not only for personal and collective wellbeing, but also for economic reasons: school dropout is costly for society, with an estimated expense of 230,000 euros per young person leaving school without a diploma (BCG cabinet, 2012).² In addition, when education fails, future adults are more likely to experience difficulties themselves and that might have negative social impacts. Wolf and Kupchik (2016) highlighted strong correlations between school suspensions or dropout and adverse adult outcomes, referring to the most extreme trajectory as the ‘school-to-prison pipeline’. As a result, endeavors to better understand school dropout and ‘drop-in’ must continue.

Literature

The literature review is organized into four sections, focusing respectively on school dropout, school drop-in, the role of sport in education, and sociability.

School dropout

According to the French Code of Education, early school dropout is defined as “a process that leads a large number of young people to leave the educational system of initial training every year without having obtained a qualification equivalent to the baccalaureate or a diploma for professional purpose”.³ In 2020, one million young people in Europe, including 80 000 in France, left school without a diploma, a figure that represents a significant decrease compared to previous years.⁴ Students considered to be at risk of dropping out often present characteristics such as absenteeism, poor academic performance, disruptive behaviour, or even disengagement due to boredom (Martin et al., 2002). These situations stem from multiple causes, ranging from personal, family, and socio-cultural factors to structural features of the educational system itself (Christle et al., 2007). As far as individual factors are concerned, gender seems to be a predictive variable. In most countries around the world, the school dropout rate among girls is higher than among boys, owing to widespread—and sometimes global—gender inequalities (Shahidul & Zehadul Karim, 2015). Conversely, in western societies,

¹ <http://eduscol.education.fr/cid48490/enjeux-et-objectifs-de-la-lutte-contre-le-decrochage-en-france-et-en-europe.html> (accessed 17 November 2020).

² <http://www.cnesco.fr/fr/decrochage-scolaire/> (accessed 23 November 2020).

³ <https://eduscol.education.fr/891/enjeux-et-objectifs-de-la-lutte-contre-le-decrochage> (Accessed 30 November 2020)

<http://www.fse.gouv.fr/dossiers-thematiques/la-lutte-contre-le-decrochage-scolaire-en-france-et-le-fse> (Accessed 18 november 2021).

boys seem to be more at risk than girls (see, for example, Bernard & Michaud, 2018, regarding this pattern in France). Other individual factors—such as low academic performances, repeated academic failures, and absenteeism—are often linked to low levels of motivation and interest in school from to begin with (Lacroix & Potvin, 2014); behavioral disorders such as violence, rejection of authority or opposition to the rules can also appear. As an overall consequence, students who experience poor or negative school situations are commonly affected by high anxiety, depression or sadness that can extend into early adulthood life dissatisfaction (Liem et al., 2010).

These individual factors are entangled with specific familial and socio-cultural backgrounds that represent a second category of dropout factors. First of all, a low familial socio-economic status is strongly linked to school dropout (Janosz, 2000); it is also often associated with having a cultural background different from that of the host country. In addition, parents with low levels of education often struggle to support their children on all the matters related to their education (De Witte et al., 2013), which supports the sociological evidence that schools are not institutions in which equal opportunity is effective (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964).

A large part of socialization takes place within schools; yet the school environment itself can also contribute to dropout. Indeed, the school institution itself creates conditions for some children to drop out (Christle et al., 2007). Generally speaking, public education often leads to worse results, in academic, social as well as emotional skills, than alternative education (Verdiani, 2012). This difference was also highlighted in a well-known study showing that Montessori children were happier, more attentive, and more academically competent than their peers in mainstream elementary schools (Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006). Teachers' behaviors and personal development play a key role in maintaining students at school (Cohen, 2015). In France, Meirieu and Frackowiak (2008) identified the different forms of violence experienced by teachers, students, and other educational actors, arising from organizational, architectural, physical, psychological, and social tensions. One of the causes of these different tensions stems from the system of ongoing/continuous assessment. As broadly shown by Butera and colleagues (2011), assessment and many other competitive processes lead to a decrease in performance, self-esteem and prosocial behaviors.

School drop-in

So far, school drop-in has received less academic attention than school disengagement (see Christenson and Thurlow, 2004; Christenson et al., 2012). According to the French Ministry of Education,⁵ the fight against school dropout is divided into three main areas: prevention; promoting second chance opportunities; and creating partnership policies involving institutional and educational actors. First, with regard to prevention, many actions have been put in place. These actions mainly aim to strengthen the educational support network around students and to improve the overall school climate. Second, the right to make mistakes—central to alternative education approaches and to all processes of learning and maturation—is increasingly recognized in practice. Students are therefore supported in their right to try again if they fail an exam or diploma. Finally, regarding federating a partnership policy, a tighter and more robust network has been developed between institutional (political, administrative and associative) and educational actors to tackle school dropout.

In terms of integration, sport is often mobilized to foster the development of students' psychosocial skills (Danisch et al., 1997; Lapointe et al., 2012; Petitpas et al., 2005; Moreau et al., 2014). Some studies more specifically highlight the impact sport has on the wellbeing of socially disadvantaged populations, in particular among immigrant communities (Nathan et al., 2013). This issue will be further explored in the following section.

The potential role of sport in school drop-in

Throughout French history, sport has served many purposes, ranging from military and national cohesion objectives to health, educational, and social issues (Arnaud, 1996). The social issues have been particularly controversial. Indeed, education and practices whose aims were integration through sport have produced very different responses from moral and social perspectives. From a moral point of view, since the eighties, studies have underlined a regression in morality through sport participation (Shields and Bredemeier, 2001; Long et al., 2006; Long, 2015). Studies have even linked sport to delinquency (Roché, 2005), aggression (Collard, 2004), and forms of social exclusion—issues that are often associated with competitive settings. Addressing education and school drop-in therefore shifts the focus from the value of sport alone to that of physical activities more broadly. Indeed, when not practiced in competition but in other varied forms, physical activities can foster social integration and enhance ethical decision-making reciprocity, empathy and self-esteem (Zanna, 2010).

This is the case with self-organized physical activities (also called 'street sports'), which have been shown to enhance morality and responsibility (Long et al., 2008). Street sports also allow participants to develop other kinds of sociability (Recours et al., 2004; Thomson, 2000), specifically those based on horizontal human interactions, a sharing of emotions and a different relation to space, time and citizenship (Vieille-Marchiset, 1998; Long and Pantaléon, 2014). Siedentop – widely recognized as the “father of sport education” – and his colleagues (2019) insist on the importance of the autonomous and festive dimensions of sport in terms of both

⁵ See: <http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid55632/la-lutte-contre-le-decrochage-scolaire.html> (accessed 30 November 2020).

sociability and education. Vieille-Marchiset (2016) also suggest that sport has simultaneous effects on young people's valorization as students and as individuals, on a strengthened way of living-together and on improved school results. These assumptions are in line with the results of Morgan and Parker (2017) who showed how sport projects based on boxing increased young people trust in themselves, in others and in the future.

Other kind of physical activities are interesting from a human and social perspective: namely, outdoor activities. Some of these, like hiking, can lead people to reconnect to nature (and even to their own in-depth "nature") and thus to develop ethical, sustainable and responsible reasoning (Long et al., 2018). Such activities can even help 'at-risk' young people re-engage with life, return to school, and achieve social inclusion : thanks to their anthropological, psychological and physical characteristics, outdoor activities can transform young people's ordalic risk-taking behaviors (drugs, sex, etc.) into constructive behaviors on which they might base their identity (Méric et al., 2019).

A recurrent finding across these different studies is the social bond that physical activities can create, whether between peers, young people and educators, coaches or psychologists.

Sociability

Across the aforementioned literature, sociability seems to be the cornerstone of successful sport education programs. In psychology, sociability has received considerable scholarly attention (e.g., Argyle, 2013; Carr, 2004; Maslow, 1962, 1971). In his book entitled 'Politics', Aristotle considered the human being as a 'social animal', a being constantly in need of group dynamics to allow social bonds, integration, recognition and support (Cohen and Wills, 1985). Others suggest that human beings are indeed unavoidably connected through our natural disposition of empathy (Goleman, 1995; Hoffman, 2000).

As underlined by Becchetti and his colleagues (2008), life satisfaction is much more determined by non-instrumental social activities like sport, or any kind of gathering and sharing, than any other 'rational' and functional activities. These researchers enriched Levy's (1979) list of relational goods (empathy, sharing, positive reinforcement and catharsis, among others) by 'adding' solidarity, the sense of belonging, companionship and emotional support. These statements have been largely supported in recent moral psychology (e.g., Nucci & Narvaez, 2014), in particular within school settings (e.g., Noddings, 2014). Once again, physical activities are interesting practices in terms of both emotional sharing (Siedentop et al., 2019) and group belonging (Wallhead and O'Sullivan, 2005).

Sociability and cooperation are thus core elements of what it means to be human (Darwin, 1871), although research suggests these dynamics may operate differently among marginalized groups (Maner et al., 2007). The extent to which human happiness is linked to such connections may be underestimated, even though they outweigh many other factors (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). For young people, who might have lost their trust in society, getting back to the fundamental and intrinsic values of human beings is of primary importance. It is even more important for those still in education (like these study participants) because, as Becchetti et al. (2008) found, social interactions have a bigger impact on their subjective wellbeing compared to fully and well-educated people.

The French national agency for Sport Education and the Ministry of Education relied on this scientific knowledge to support various schools to participate in specific socio-sporting projects to prevent young people from dropping out of school, as part of a national research program across France, called 'Sport and Educational Success' (SES). The present study aims to understand the subjective effects of such programs on students 'at risk' of school dropout.

Methods

Participants

The sample consisted of 19 teenagers (9 girls and 10 boys), aged 12 to 18. The students live in disadvantaged neighborhoods officially designated as priority areas by the State. Their parents are mostly workers, service employees or small craftsmen. Some are unemployed. They generally come from large families, with an average of 4.2 children per household. They were interviewed at school. These students were identified as 'dropouts' either subjectively by their teachers or officially by the academic administration. This identification was based on characteristics such as absenteeism, poor school results, violence or even boredom (Lacroix & Potvin, 2014; Martin et al., 2002). Five schools were included in the program, with five distinct projects:

- The first project was entitled "Artists on Bikes: From College to Stage", and consisted of bike tours and dance performances throughout the region. Students, aged 12 to 13, spent a year preparing this one-week trip. They were in charge of the organization: meals, itinerary, campsites booking and fundraising. In addition, they created a dancing show they performed all along their trip around the region and at their school at the end of the bike tour. Two girls and two boys were interviewed.
- The second project was called "Trilogy" – a partnership project spanning an entire school year, based on inter-class sports challenges (through different sport practices and competitions). This project was conducted in partnership with ELA, an association whose aim is to tackle leukodystrophies. It was conducted by all the classes of the school, that-is-to-say by students from

- 12 to 16 years old. The framework of this project was based on four themes: sport, solidarity, education and schooling. Two girls and two boys were interviewed.
- The third project was “Further in my body, further in my studies”; based on outdoor activities, this project advocated social diversity and solidarity. Mountain biking, biathlon and climbing were thus used among 17 and 18-years old students to highlight brotherhood thanks to many outings and meetings. Two girls and two boys were also interviewed.
 - The fourth project, “Outdoor Activity”, consisted of a three-day stay in a natural site where outdoor practices (climbing, hiking and so on) took place; students had prepared for this stay and participated in the living arrangements (cooking, doing the housework, organizing activities, etc.). They were 12 to 13 years old and thus had to cope with the whole organization, in partnership with their teachers. Two girls and three boys were interviewed.
 - The fifth project was called “Futsal”, and translated into the weekly mixed futsal practice in collaboration with the sports association of the establishment. The aim of this project was to address unethical behaviors and to make boys and girls play together in a culturally masculine activity. The focus was also made on self-refereeing. This project gathered students aged from 12 to 15. A girl and a boy were interviewed.

As mentioned above, all these projects were developed, built and managed by the students themselves with support from their teachers—particularly Physical Education teachers, who acted as the main facilitators.

Interviewer and interview procedure

Each participant took part in a semi-structured interview, all of which were conducted by the same interviewer. The interviewer had been trained in this approach and was familiar with qualitative methods (Patton, 1990). Three pilot interviews were conducted, with minor refinements being made as a result of the participants’ feedback.

After obtaining consent, individual interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. The interviews began with a presentation of the study, including introductory comments and scientific precautions. All participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous and that their personal opinions were important. The researcher then asked permission to record the interview.

Interview guide

An interview guide was developed to help participants describe their memories of their personal school and life trajectory, their perceptions of school, of sport and of the specific sport project.

The first section focused on biographical information, inviting participants to recount their life stories (e.g., ‘Could you tell me about yourself?’; ‘Do you have siblings?’). The questions in section 2 – surrounding participants’ perceptions of school and education – concerned several different points: their subjective experience, their interests and their likes and dislikes (e.g., Can you tell about your life at school? What do you like/dislike about it?). Section 3 concerned their perceptions of sport practice in general (e.g., Do you like sport? Do you practice any sports?). Finally, section 4 contained questions about the participants’ perceptions of the specific sport project undergone at their school (e.g., What do you think of this project? Did you feel good while participating in this project? What did you like and/or dislike?). Throughout the interviews, follow-up questions were used to encourage participants to elaborate on and justify their responses.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed *verbatim*.

Trustworthiness

Building on the works of Lincoln and Guba and on Tracy (2010), Smith and McGannon (2018) identified three main features of qualitative methods: eight universal criteria, member checking, and inter-rater reliability. Our study meets the main ‘universal criteria’ outlined by Tracy (2010, 840) in ethical, methodological and heuristic terms. However, due to the difficulty of accessing ‘at-risk’ students for the interviews, it was unfortunately impossible to re-contact them for member checking. Finally, inter-rater reliability method was not applied in our study since there was no coding: only the lexical analysis is reported in this article.

Data analysis

After compiling the interview transcripts into a common textual corpus, we conducted a lexical analysis of the data. This analysis was carried out using software known as A.L.C.E.S.T.E.⁶, which was specifically developed for French-language applications (Reinert, 1990). Previous studies have shown this software to be a reliable and valid tool for analyzing interviews conducted in French (e.g., Romand and Pantaléon, 2007). The general aim of the lexical analysis is ‘to determine how the elements that constitute a text are organized’ (Reinert, 1994, 153).

For our purposes, this analysis consisted of two phases. First, a Hierarchical Descending Classification was conducted. This process identified the most frequently used vocabulary, co-occurrences of specific terms, and recurring statements. It divided the corpus into different Elementary Context Units (ECUs). This classification built lexical classes, each characterized by a specific vocabulary. A.L.C.E.S.T.E. also provides

⁶ ‘Analyse de Lexèmes Co-occurents dans les Enoncés Simples d’un TExte’. In English: ‘Analyzing the Co-occurent Lexemes in Simple Statements of a Text’.

Textual Units (TU) – sentences from the more representative ECUs – and words for each lexical class (Bart, 2011). The relevant part of the Textual Units analysis appears in the Results sections of this article, in the form of interview extracts. At the second step, we employed the Factorial Correspondence Analysis to identify organizing principles of these classes to allow a better qualitative and visual understanding of the problem by the interviewees.

Results

This section presents the results of the study, following the two steps of the lexical analysis identified in the previous section.

Hierarchical Descending Classification

This step identified three lexical classes prevalent in and across our 19 interviews. These classes correspond to the themes of the interview guide. Their profiles were characterized by certain recurring words (significant χ^2 , $df=1$). The distribution of vocabulary is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The three classes of the lexical analysis.

Classes	Class 1 48 ECUs 8%	Class 2 383 ECUs 66%	Class 3 132 ECUs 26%
Characterization of the class	“Familial Life”	“School Life”	“Sport”
Associated vocabulary	Father / Mother Brother / Sister Home Family Trustfull Thank	Teacher Group class Together We Pupils Cool To talk To listen To understand To help To have fun To give	Soccer / Boxing / Basket Sport Artist / Bike / Dance To be upset / Problem To play To win Competition The will to win To bring Team To like / Love Dream Project / To go forward

Notes: Only the most important and meaningful Elementary Context Units (ECUs) of each class have been selected for this article. Following Max Reinert (1994), these ECUs are selected based on both Chi-squared values and the researchers' own interpretation of the nature of the problem. The ECUs are presented by decreasing order of Chi-squared value within each class.

Class 1 was the smallest class in term of occurrences, containing just eight percent of the Elementary Context Units (ECUs) of the whole corpus. The classification process revealed the specific vocabulary of the participants concerning their ‘family life’. Notably, it highlighted that the participants had many siblings (‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’) and that they belonged to a low socioeconomic class, underlined by the parents’ jobs: the ‘mother’ was often described as a ‘housewife’, while the ‘father’ typically held low-paid jobs such as ‘butcher’ or ‘laborer’. Participants reported sharing few activities with their families, for various reasons including financial constraints, lack of time, and the absence of a health- or sport-oriented habitus. As a result, sport practice was not a family activity, especially since some participants lived in single-parent family or “foster homes”. Overall, the data suggest a lack of family and emotional ties in the private lives of the participants, which may contribute to emotional, cognitive, and social insecurity.

Conversely, class 2 was the largest class in terms of occurrences: it contained 66 percent of the ECUs in the whole corpus. This class referred to life at school, according to the participants. The most quoted word was ‘teacher’, underlining the key importance of this educational social actor. He / She was regarded as the cornerstone of school life by the interviewed students. Significantly, the excerpts from interviews about teachers exclusively highlighted their social and psychological skills (and not their academic knowledge): ‘teachers must be cool with students’; ‘since the project, there’s been more understanding and collaboration between us and the English teacher’; ‘he [the teacher] sends us messages to help us and to keep us going’; ‘I don’t consider Mr. X as a teacher anymore, he is much more to me’, and ‘now, I feel like I want to learn more ... it’s easier ... to ask questions, for example’. These results suggest that, since the socio-sport projects, relationships between teachers and students have evolved towards stronger social ties and greater trust. Participants involved in these projects were no longer or not only considered as ‘teachers’ and ‘students’; real human relationships had emerged, and the class atmosphere and students’ wellbeing consequently improved. The vocabulary of this class also referred to the ‘group class’, which is also of great importance for young people in terms of social belonging. Although some interviewees had felt excluded before the project, their sense of belonging improved, and their perception

of the class group was renewed. More precisely, a group in its proper psychosocial meaning and dynamic was born. Indeed, with the significant words of this lexical class ('together', 'we', 'the students', etc.), we might also observe how our participants highlighted the importance of social cohesion, solidarity and the feeling of belonging. This statement is supported by the following excerpts: 'now, we communicate in a better way, even with students we don't really like; we don't scream anymore'; 'it was the first time I went on holidays with my classmates. I was very happy. It helped me a lot back in class'; 'every day, it was the same thing: we woke up together, we had meals together, we biked together... all together', or 'we've become very close to each other since the project'. This humanistic discourse also sprung from the recurrent verbs of this lexical class ('to talk', 'to listen to', 'to understand', 'to help', 'to give'), which can also be highlighted by some excerpts of interviews: 'we've come to understand each other; so, now, we are supporting and helping each other in class' or 'sometimes, I stay with my Maths teacher after the class, at midday, just to talk'. All of the verbs in these excerpts and others referred to human relationships, communication, mutual understanding and care.

Finally, Class 3 accounted for 26 percent of the ECUs in the corpus. This class referred both to sport in general and to the specific sport projects. It contrasted two types of discourse. The first concerned 'competition' and its potential 'problems', such as the desire to win or the frustration of losing. This mainly referred to 'traditional' sports or physical education (PE) that similarly use social comparison, assessment or ranking, as illustrated by the following excerpt: 'in sport, there is competition whereas, during the project, we didn't care about that'. The second discourse was orientated toward the specific sport 'projects' that were more supported by prosocial values and positive psychology, as evident in words and phrases such as 'team', 'like', 'love', 'dream' and 'go forward'. In the discussion part, we will argue that this vocabulary referred to in-depth social ties but also to identity dimensions (such as self-esteem) of the interviewed students. Some excerpts from the interviews illustrated this point explicitly: 'when we're short, we want to be fast... I improved my velocity, my endurance, my vertical elasticity... and I'm more right in my head'; 'it brought me more concentration in class, which enabled me to improve my marks'; 'since the project, I feel wiser and more altruistic'; 'I feel wiser and more balanced'; 'we like our teachers more since then – we consider them differently now'. What can also be underlined, thanks to these interview excerpts, is the close relationship between body and mind or how physical activities also affected psychological balance, attention and personality traits. The analogic statements (like "being right in one's body and mind") are very significant of how movements can rebalance thoughts, emotions and identity consistency.

Factorial Correspondence Analysis

In the second step of the lexical analysis, we used a method that displayed the relationships (distance, proximity, opposition) between the three lexical classes by decomposing the variance into orthogonal factors. Figure 1 shows the relationship between the three classes as derived from the two-factor correspondence analysis. The classes are represented in distinct colors, and the distance between points of different colors corresponds to the lexical distance within the interview corpus. The total variance in the data accounts for 100 percent of the variance.

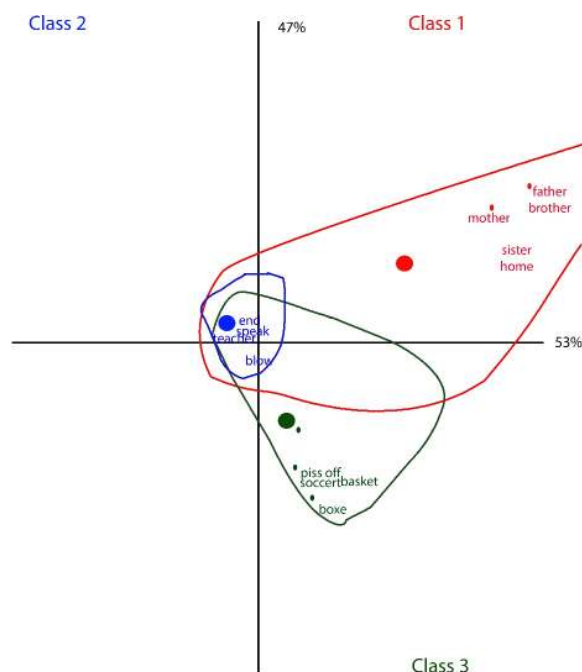


Figure 1. Factorial Correspondence Analysis Graph.

A first point of interest is the overlap between sport and the two primary contexts of socialization among young people : family and school. It highlights the link that sport is able to weave, whatever the social context. On the other hand, the hermetic relation between school and family (indicated by the partial opposition of the two lexical fields) may underline the lack of coordination between these two contexts. If successful schooling requires rebuilding links between family and school life, the current situation may be particularly harmful for 'at-risk' young people.

Despite the overlaps that we have just underlined, the classes do not appear in the same dial of the graph. This suggests that discourses about sport in general, and socio-sport projects in particular, are positioned in opposition to those concerning school and family. This highlights the fact that the logics that constitute these discourses are somewhat different, as the semantic content of the classes makes explicit. This result could have important implications on PE contents.

Discussion

The results outlined above can be understood in light of the core human need for sociability (Maslow, 1962, 1971), especially among students identified as 'at risk' of dropping out of school. This fundamental human need emerged clearly from most of the words and expressions used by the participants. Indeed, the results of the present study showed that, beyond the diversity of the different applied sport programs, what is important was social regulation and cooperation, whatever the sport, the gender and the culture (since the APELS programs took place in different parts of France). In other words, it was surprising that the discursive collected data were quite homogeneous although sport programs were so away from each other. But still, students' experiences were similar. Nevertheless, students' experiences were similar, all tied to this fundamental psychosocial bond : sociability. This is the hypothesis we have done to interpret the convergence of their speeches, since they are in line with many previous studies.

Through a quantitative study in Southern France, Recours and colleagues (2004) had indeed already showed that high school students preferred to practice sports within informal contexts – that is to say, contexts that enable them to do what they want to, thanks to self-organization. In New Zealand, Thomson (2000) found the same phenomenon: non-competitive and informal physical activities are more and more a part of youth culture around sociability, spontaneity and creativity. From a moral perspective, the works of Long and his colleagues (2008, 2014, 2015) have highlighted how significant these kinds of sport settings were with regards to developing morality, responsibility and an interactive form of citizenship. Responsibility, cooperation, making friends, communication and prosocial behavior were five key elements out of 11 that Opstoel and colleagues (2019) had outlined in their review study about "Personal and social development in physical education and sports". Overall, as specified by Becchetti and his colleagues (2008), self-organized activities enable people to coordinate, which leads to many social interactions and a certain 'effervescence' (also a key characteristic of social integration and cohesion according to Durkheim, 1951). This 'social effervescence' refers to those moments of collective sharing of positive emotions. This is exactly what the participants of this research described, and how the five projects were designed. The very first intention was to make the students participate (sometimes in full autonomy). In doing so, the achieved goal was for the students to feel alive, in a physiological, psychological and social way: that is to say, to be part of a wider society, to have a place within a group, to recognize others as well as to be recognized by the different members of this group.

This core connection between humans supports – or is supported by – the mechanism of cooperation, which is 'a social fact *par excellence*', as originally underlined by Darwin (1871). Argyle (2013) similarly considers cooperation as 'the basis of sociability' and makes this the very title of his book. The participants of the present study intuitively seemed to understand the difference between competition (through traditional sport practices) and cooperation (through their participation in the specific projects), which they called for without any ambiguity. By doing so, they referred to 'pure', authentic and essential values of humanity (as already highlighted by Becchetti and his colleagues -2008- or by Hoffman, 2000).

The importance that the participants of this study placed on social interactions can be understood in relation to their feeling of exclusion. Indeed, as shown by Maner and his colleagues (2007), exclusion often leads to greater motivation among people to (re)create social bonds, presuming the feeling of exclusion and its psychiatric and physical consequences are not too advanced. Seeking social interactions is a natural quest that has deep roots in our evolutionary history. It is like seeking out food or shelter; it is part of our need for social nurture (Servigne and Chapelle, 2019).

Practical implications

Our results have significant implications in terms of educational policies. Indeed, what emerged from this study was that the endeavor of education trainings and policies must not be placed solely in the teaching methods, contents or programs (even if academic skills are important, as explained by Christle and her colleagues, 2007), but in the humanistic and social regulation of schools. The 'how to be' that teachers display seems to be as or even more important than the 'how to do'. This is what several researchers in educational

psychology have already highlighted (see, for example, Cohen, 2015). Goleman (1995) has even subtitled his book about *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ?*

As a consequence, beyond this first implication, it is the whole French educational system that could be questioned through our results. Currently, this system valorizes competition, assessment, 'external' programs and non-flexible organization (of time, space, activities, etc.), although these characteristics don't seem to fit the needs of 'at risk' students and, we might assume, the needs of students in general. This argument has already found evidence in research on alternative education initiatives (Lilard and Else-Quest, 2006), which are based on the same characteristics as the 'socio-sport' projects of this study that-is-to-say cooperation, participation and non-judgement.

Conclusion

Our study highlighted the positive effects of 'socio-sport'-based programs for students 'at risk' of exclusion or school 'drop-out'. By providing these students with the opportunity to create, organize, and implement their own projects—supported by partners such as teachers, charities, and sport clubs—these programs helped them re-engage with school and generally improve their self-perception. Their self-efficacy was enhanced, and social ties with their peers, teachers and other important figures strengthened.

As shown throughout this article, it appears that sociability is supported by all scientific fields and empirical data, suggesting that it is one of the core essences of humanity and education. Accordingly, activating social bonds for 'at risk' young people seems to be an unmissable pathway to encourage social integration, health and wellbeing as well as school drop-in. Future educational policies must not pass over this opportunity, if they truly aim to affect positively everybody's life and the fabric of the future world – a happy world! Future research is of course needed. Since school drop-in and -out is such an intimate, versatile and long-term phenomenon, longitudinal ethnographies could really enrich our knowledge and understanding of such events.

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