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Opening the black box of a sports-based programme for vulnerable youth: the crucial role of social bonds

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ABSTRACT
While sports-based intervention programmes for youth attract much interest, little is known about the underlying processes that might account for their impact on participants. Moreover, youth’s perspectives are seldom taken into account. The present article examines the underlying processes and key dimensions of sports-based interventions that contribute to the development of youth social bonds at the micro-social level. Such bonds are essential to reducing stigmatisation, discrimination and inequities. Our qualitative research presents a detailed case study on the sports intervention programme, \textit{DesÉquilibres}. Results are based on the analysis of 27 interviews with participants, a focus group with 5 coaches and ‘observant participation’ of training sessions and challenges. We found that six elements are essential to \textit{DesÉquilibres}: (1) Establishing a supportive climate; (2) Promoting collaborative strategies and group cooperation; (3) Striking a balance between outside rules and self-initiated actions; (4) Favouring collectivisation of individual performances; (5) Supporing the interconnectedness of effort and pleasure and (6) Exploring beyond participants’ comfort zones. We conclude that certain conditions are necessary if the goals of sports programmes are to transform social bonds between youth, and between youth and coaches, in a positive and protective way.

Introduction
When considering the impact of sports-based interventions on mental health, self-development and social functioning in adolescents, one must bear in mind the inherent complexities of sports for this age group as current evidence is not consistent. Several studies have reported the benefits of sports for dealing with depression (Babiss and Gangwisch 2009), developing self-esteem (Kirkcaldy, Shephard, and Siefen 2002; Gendron et al. 2005; Bowker 2006) and promoting social functioning and relational aptitudes such as tolerance and compassion (Bailey 2005). Yet substantial evidence also suggests a correlation between sports and higher rates of delinquency and aggression (Faulkner et al. 2007; Gardner, Roth, and Brooks-Gunn 2009; Lemieux and Thibault 2011), behavioural problems (Endresen and Olweus 2005) or generally poor social and psychological functioning (Larson, Hansen, and Moneta 2006).
generalisation of the sporting experience and the absence of a clear definition of what constitutes a sporting experience seem to explain the dichotomy in these findings from studies interested in ‘development’ on an individual level (Coalter 2015). According to Hartmann and Kwauk, ‘sports programming and participation does not automatically and inevitably lead to prosocial outcomes and effects; these effects accrue only under the right or sufficient conditions, with appropriate resources, and with self-consciously designed and directed programming’ (2011, 298). In other words, sport can be a vehicle for change, but it’s not always positive, and alone, it is not sufficient (Hartmann and Kwauk 2011; Chamberlain 2013; Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, and Skille 2014; Coalter 2015; Gonin, Dusseault, and Hébert 2015).

A challenge in addressing these issues stems from a certain lack of clarity in the literature. A majority of sports programmes cannot concretely identify the processes by which they have obtained outcomes (Coakley 2011; Coalter 2015). Consequently, studies in the field often do not clearly define and analyse interventions, which explains much of the difficulty in developing a valid knowledge base (Coalter 2015). In the light of these critiques that justify some scepticism (Coalter 2015) we conducted research on the impacts of a sports-based intervention programme from the point of view of participants (Moreau et al. 2012). We demonstrated that the development of social bonds was one of the major success factors of the programme, which is based on the same model and implemented by the same organisation as the programme presented in this article (DesÉquilibres).

Study objectives
This article strives to open up the black box of a sports-based intervention programme DesÉquilibres and to explore how social bonds are transformed at a micro-social level. Attention is given to these dynamic processes among participants, as well as between participants and eductrainers, by describing the key dimensions of DesÉquilibres from the youths’ perspectives. This qualitative study is part of a larger research programme addressing various aspects of sports-based intervention programmes: recruitment (Plante et al. 2014), training and challenges, intervention (Thibault Lévesque, Molgat, and Moreau in press), eductrainer characteristics and social engagement.

Social bonds
Given the studies on vulnerable youth development, social bonds are likely to be important ingredients in sports-based intervention programmes (Spaaij 2012; Moreau et al. 2012) as well as in other alternative interventions promoting well-being in youth (Delgado 2000). Our definition of social bonds is inspired by the work of Hirschi (1969), who defines it by four dimensions: (1) attachment to reference persons and institutions; (2) commitment in social relationships; (3) involvement in activities occupying the mind; and (4) belief in the moral validity of social rules.

Previous research on sports-based interventions (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, and Coalter 2012; Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, and Skille 2014) has shown that coaches are viewed as the main actors in facilitating bonds between peers and with social institutions such as the family and schools. Coaches who are sensitive to the varied needs and experiences of youth tend to understand the sporting experience from the participant’s point of view and to set goals in consultation with the youth (Bailey 2005; Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, and Coalter 2012), while keeping in mind their particular needs (Chamberlain 2013). They also help create a suitable social environment for development through sports. In a literature review on motivational climate, Ntoumanis and Biddle (1999) conclude that, in contrast with a performance climate (comparison with others peers), mastery motivational climate (self-comparison) facilitates motivation and improves behaviour and cognitive adaptation. Other authors (Andrews and Andrews 2003; Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, and Skille 2014) have also shown that positive feedback and emphasis on self-reward are specially important when working with vulnerable youths, given that they have significantly fewer opportunities than their peers to experience success. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the social contexts of intervention programmes are not solely shaped by coaches. For instance, with a focus on peer groups, Vazou, Ntoumanis, and Duda (2005) demonstrated...
the importance of equal treatment, relatedness support and the discouragement of intra-team competition and conflict among teammates in the development of a peer motivational climate.

It would therefore seem that in order to reduce stigmatisation, discrimination and inequities, the presence, or lack thereof, of social bonds must be addressed (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, and Coalter 2012; Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, and Skille 2014). All the same, still too little is known about the intervention dimensions that foster social bonds for young participants in sports-based programmes.

**The case of DesÉquilibres**

The *DesÉquilibres* programme takes the view that many ‘problem behaviours’ of young people are rooted in their having few or no social bonds (Vettenburg 1998; Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, and Skille 2014). Hence, the intervention programme focuses on social bonds and conceptualises sport as a central point for experiences of socialisation. *DesÉquilibres* aims to improve bonding, rather than focusing on the behavioural and attitudinal outcomes of youth. The programme acknowledges that sport interventions with pre-determined developmental outcomes may exclude those who, because of multiple barriers, cannot be reached (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, and Coalter 2012). Such ‘constructivist’ interventions have been used elsewhere to address the shortcomings of predetermined programmes (Nichols 2007). By fostering social bonds (and not just by teaching skills), these programmes tie in with a dynamic understanding of the relationship between participants and the programme. Therefore, its philosophy and primary focus on the group (rather than on individuals) make *DesÉquilibres* an excellent case for a field study of social bonds in a sports context.

*DesÉquilibres* is a non-profit organisation founded in Montreal, by former top amateur athletes and sport educators. It seeks to empower youth through social engagement and sports-based activities. The programme consists of training and adventure-type challenges intended for youth. It is important to note that the programme does not only target vulnerable young people. Youth from various backgrounds, both advantaged and disadvantaged, are intentionally included in order to promote group diversity and bonding between participants, and between participants and eductrainers (Plante et al. 2014). During the initial recruitment phase, *DesÉquilibres* addresses groups of young people in order to present the programme as a sporting experience and a unique way to create social bonds. It does so without targeting those who are vulnerable in order to avoid labelling and stigmatising them (Ibid). However, after initial recruitment, *DesÉquilibres* does engage in discussions with on-site school practitioners such as teachers, principals, counsellors and social workers to ensure that a minimum of vulnerable youth (roughly one half) participate in the programme.

Recruitment for the *DesÉquilibres* was conducted in secondary schools on a voluntary basis and targeted specific grades (9–11; theoretically ages 14–16) based on needs, vulnerability and dropout risk as identified by on-site school practitioners. Students were invited to an information session and video presentation featuring footage and interviews with participants who had taken part in similar challenges (see video). Specifics of the programme were discussed, such as schedules, types of training and challenges. Six or seven classrooms were visited, representing approximately 125 youths. Eductrainers collaborated closely with school practitioners (teachers, educators, principals) during and after recruitment and were present on site during presentations and registration. This collaboration ensured that the participants represented a range of experiences in school although students experiencing difficulties (i.e. vulnerable youth) had priority access to the programme. Such partnerships have been shown to be of great value in other intervention programmes (Cousineau 2007).

Over the course of a three-month process, participants in these mixed groups were asked to take part in three weekly training sessions, during which specific challenges are progressively introduced. Each workout lasts one hour and consists of two distinct phases: group games and running.

In order to prepare workouts, each eductrainer must define psychosocial objectives that he/she wishes to reach during the session with participants. To do this, the eductrainer can use invented or adapted games. The objective is always to strengthen the social bond between youth on the one hand, and youth and eductrainers on the other (Parlavecchio 2015). For example, at the beginning of the
session, the eductrainers organise a game in which young people have to throw several balls to one another. The ensuing excitement leads to imprecise throws and, as a result, many balls end up on the floor. The eductrainers interrupt the game and initiate a discussion with the youth about how to make a good pass and how to receive one. They then draw a parallel between making a pass and how best to communicate. In this case, the ball symbolises the social bond.

During a two-week tryout, approximately 30 participants receive orientation and specific support and can choose whether to pursue or abandon training. In the fourth week, the remaining participants (between 15 and 20 youths) are invited to a 10-hour night walk in a forest. A second challenge awaits participants in the eighth week – generally a 160–200-km bike ride. The programme culminates with the grand challenge of a 300-km relay run in the 12th week, during which each participant averages between 20 and 30 km of running per 24-h period (both day and night) over the course of two full days. At the end of the 12 weeks, participants are honoured during a ceremony of recognition with their peers, their parents and members of their institution (school). This form of recognition has contributed to our analysis that the DesÉquilibres programme is perceived as a rite of passage by the youth (Thibault Lévesque, Molgat, and Moreau in press).

DesÉquilibres and social bonds

The goal of DesÉquilibres consists of working on social bonds, in a micro-sociological framework, in other words, through face-to-face interactions. In this sense, the organisation does not aim to directly strengthen the social capital of an individual (although this may be an indirect effect), but rather to work on social bonds themselves (Moreau et al. 2012). DesÉquilibres differs from the psychological and developmental perspectives of interventions that are advocated by positive youth development (Holt 2008) and from the deficit reduction approach, which aims to develop life skills that are possibly lacking in adolescents (Nichols 2007).

In fact, DesÉquilibres seems in many respects to work on the creation of the four dimensions of social bonds that we defined previously (Hirschi 1969). Through training and the active participation of eductrainers in different activities (see the Research Methodology section), this programme seeks to create attachment bonds between participants and between young people and eductrainers. By means of the relay race, it also aims to change the family members’ and the teachers’ perceptions of the youth and thus facilitate their bonds. The cooperation and the interconnectedness of the participants that are needed to surmount the challenges align with Hirschi’s commitment to social relationships: DesÉquilibres puts emphasis on every participant’s equal and essential role in group success. Participants are also asked to involve themselves physically (cf. number, duration and composition of the training sessions) and morally in DesÉquilibres by agreeing to the terms of a contract of engagement at the time of registration. Moreover, this programme not only creates a new social space and time for participants, but also becomes a recurring topic of discussion for them, thus occupying their ‘mental space’ throughout the programme. Finally, the belief in the moral validity of social rules is sustained through an empowerment perspective, that is to say, by way of the participants’ need to believe in social norms such as autonomy, responsibility and initiative, which thereby enable them to find their place in today’s society (Moreau 2009).

Research methodology

Recruitment and data collection

The research project covered four programme cohorts, but only three were analysed for this article as we had reached saturation of the data (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006). As illustrated in Table 1, youth participation in the research differed from youth participation in the intervention programme. Once the ethical approval from the principal researcher’s university was granted, the research assistants explained the study to participants during the first training session and then asked the youths if they could participate in the training sessions and challenges and then anonymously report what they experienced and saw. With regard to interviews, all Cohort 1 youths as well as those who dropped out
in Cohort 3 were asked to be interviewed. This request was made in two steps: (1) orally, during the last training session; and (2) by phone. None of the teachers, social workers or educratners knew the research participants’ names – this ensured no one was pressured to participate. For the focus group, a request was sent to the educratners by e-mail. Written consent for research participation was obtained from youth, their parents and educratners (Table 2).

One focus group with educratners was assembled during Cohort 1. In Cohorts 1 and 3, we used semi-structured interviews with youth; in Cohorts 2 and 3, we undertook ‘observant participation’ (Moeran 2007, 14). We use the concept of ‘observant participation’ (and not ‘participant observation’) for two reasons: first, we ourselves participated in the training and the challenges with the youth and educratners. In this respect, we carried out a ‘carnal sociology’ (Wacquant 2015, 5) in which, as sociologists and researchers, we initially embraced the DesÉquilibres programme by experiencing activities, training and challenges through our own suffering and actual perspiration. The second reason, which stems directly from the first, is that this embodied participation brought us closer to the ‘back stage’ of the participants’ interactions (Moeran 2007, 14). The educratners and the young people quickly considered us to be part of their group, as we trained and completed the challenges together. Thus, our methodology refers to an ethnography based on ‘performing the phenomenon’ (Wacquant 2015, 2).

This stance came with challenges with regard to methodology, ethics and epistemology. Researchers and educratners have begun conversations throughout the research process to discuss analysis findings. These exchanges were not made for the simple purpose of reaching ‘truth’ or validating the data, but through a process of ‘critical dialogue’ in order to encourage reflexivity of researchers (Smith and McGannon 2017). We also strived to maintain the most ethical position possible by following the principles of Gauthier (2010, 4), namely: (1) to not hide facts and results; (2) to doubt and question our ideas and convictions; and (3) to be aware of our limits as researchers.

### Table 1. Programme and research participation: Cohorts 1, 2 and 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Programme participation</th>
<th>Research participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Programme completed</td>
<td>Programme incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 2</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 3a</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: In the third Cohort, only those who had not completed the programme were interviewed. Repetitions and saturation had already been observed in Cohort 1 by respondents who had completed the programme. By interviewing only the non-completers of the third Cohort, the research team sought to prevent a possible bias through an over-representation of positive responses from programme completers who had been observed in a previous study (Moreau et al. 2012).

Semi-structured interviews with youth took place within the school, and with the focus group at the DesÉquilibres office. Questions in the interview guide for young people related to their experience in DesÉquilibres. The questions were general and a mix between open-ended and semi-open-ended questions: ‘Can you tell me how things went for you with DesÉquilibres?’ ‘Did it bring you anything?’ ‘Can you explain?’ ‘Have things changed for you (good or bad), with your friends, or with other people you know (school, family, neighbourhood or community)?’ The interview for the discussion group was guided by these simple questions: ‘If we were to take your place tomorrow, could you explain to us what
to do? Could you tell us what we need to complete the programme, which conditions and objectives are needed?’ We therefore did not address the question of social bonds directly in the interviews or in the focus group. This was a deliberate choice to let the notion emerge ‘spontaneously’ and to not introduce bias. The study participants’ sociodemographic characteristics are presented in Table 3.

| Table 3. Socio-demographic profiles of youth participants: Cohorts 1 and 3. |
|---------------------------------|-------|-------|
| Gender                         | Male 4 | Female 2 |
| Average age                    | 14.9 (Standard Deviation = 1.31) |
| Language                       | French 4 | English 2 | Other 2 |
| Professional situation (during school year) | Studying full time and working part time 2 | Studying full time and not working 2 |
| Parents’ civil status          | Married or common-law partners 4 | Divorced, separated or widowed 2 |
| **N**                          | **%**  |-------|
| Male                           | 16     | 62    |
| Female                         | 10     | 38    |
| French                         | 16     | 62    |
| English                        | 3      | 12    |
| Other                          | 10     | 38    |
| Studying full time and working part time | 3      | 12 |
| Studying full time and not working | 23     | 88    |
| Married or common-law partners | 18     | 69    |
| Divorced, separated or widowed | 8      | 34    |

Notes: Data collection with the second Cohort was exclusively based on participant observation. Their profiles are not presented since only those youths who participated in a semi-directed interview completed the socio-demographic questionnaire. Twenty-seventy youths were interviewed (20 in Cohort 1 and 7 in Cohort 3), but only 26 completed a socio-demographic questionnaire. Some youths reported speaking several languages.

**Thematic analysis**

Interviews and focus groups with participants were recorded, transcribed and subsequently coded and analysed using a thematic approach (Paillé and Mucchielli 2012). We used Nvivo software from the beginning to organise and analyse the material, through a process deconstruction and restructuration of the corpus (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana 2014). As a first step, we outlined a conceptual description of the meanings of youth discourse (categories). In a second step, we drew out the relationships between these categories and the interviews (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). We applied an iterative coding process, combining deductive and inductive thematic analysis based on pre-established themes (experience, characteristics, contribution and justification of the programme) and an openness to emerging themes (Patton 2002; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). A total of 74 sub-themes were progressively merged into 7 definite overarching themes. Coding was done by a student and a research professional under the supervision of the principal investigator. Specifically, the principal investigator read the first interview and made suggestions (need for closer coding of the text, danger of over-interpretation of data, etc.). Subsequently, two more interviews were randomly selected to check the coding of the student and the research professional; discussion between research team members contributed to enriching data interpretation. The coding was found to be in line with expectations. The themes mentioned in the results were mentioned throughout the interviews. Some of these themes were also mentioned in the focus group and participant observation. Names used in this text are fictitious to preserve anonymity. The analysis of focus groups, youth and eductrainers’ interviews should be understood not in a process of improving the validity of data – which would stem from a problematic positivistic epistemology for social sciences (Smith and McGannon 2017) – but as a way to put in dialogue several types of discourse that illuminate a complex social reality.

**Findings**

Based on the thematic analysis, we have identified six key elements in the development of constructive social bonds (Table 4).

The first is the establishment of a supportive climate. Also reported by Coakley (2011) as an important factor, the supportive and safe (mentally and physically) environment provided by *DesÉquilibres*
offered a positive experience for the participants. While training sessions promote physical stamina and endurance, the overlap of social and athletic objectives appears to foster a sense of togetherness. In these early stages, considerable emphasis is placed on peer bonding:

None of my friends were taking part in this. So, at the beginning…I did not know anybody.… We played games.… So right away, we had to communicate with one another, so that we could play on…the more we trained together, the more we felt connected. Sometimes, you’d end up with people you didn’t really know … you had no choice but to ask yourself: ‘Oh! What’s his name, and what’s her name,’ and then you would hear somebody calling out their name. (Ramon)

Within DesÉquilibres, we found that the supportive climate was cultivated through key characteristics of the interventions, including: (1) structured activities and clear rules; (2) ‘emancipative authority relationships’ between eductrainers and participants; (3) peer support and collaboration, rather than competition; and (4) the feeling of being involved in something bigger than oneself.

In the following interview excerpt, Patrick describes (1) how structured activities and clear rules (Bartko and Eccles 2003) do not necessarily mean a traditional approach to play and training. In fact, games are often modified in order to prevent the boys from excluding the girls from the game and to foster participation by all:

The games, they’re usual games but the coaches have a way of adding challenges and changing the game […] Like for basketball, they [the eductrainers] changed the game. You can take three steps and after that you have to pass the ball. After three steps you don’t have the right to keep moving forward.

Participants are also systematically encouraged to reach out to one another on a first-name basis. This seems to facilitate bonding and we observed signs of participants functioning as a whole and feeling part of the team as they became more familiar with one another: ‘We had to call out each other’s names so it helped us to get to know one another.’ (Philippe) Another participant remarked that: ‘You can’t really play with someone you don’t really know … because when you play, if the other person is looking somewhere else and you need to pass the ball … you have to call out their name.’ (Michelle)

The eductrainers were always present and active during the games, the training and the challenges, and were able to build a relationship of mutual respect and trust with the participants, rather than one based on hierarchical authority. (2) This ‘emancipative authority relationship’ (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, and Coalter 2012: 444) was noted by the participants as a key element to their feelings of belonging, as individuals and adults, to the group:

We felt like adults, like we decided on things, made our own decisions. They would tell us: ‘If you have a problem or something, we’re going to take it up with you and not your parents because you are the adults of tomorrow and we are going to start now.’ (Élisée)

(3) Reflective of the relationship between eductrainers and young people and of the rules that promote group cooperation, the bond between the participants is also based on mutual support and respect, rather than competition (Vazou, Ntoumanis, and Duda 2005; Camiré 2015):

It was fun [training], but it was really hard sometimes. I was exhausted. I did not want to continue. I was tired…. But we were all together, and we laughed. And we talked. That was distracting. You forgot that you were running in the winter. (Chris)

When we run, when we're tired, we're too tired and we want to stop, it's the others who come to help you and who come to run with you so that you don't stop. (Michelle)

Thus, the social bond between the young people as well as between the young people and the eductrainers, which develops gradually, allowed them to find motivation during the physically demanding
training sessions and challenges. Lastly (4), participants reported being involved in something bigger than oneself (Thibault Lévesque, Molgat, and Moreau in press) and related their experiences in terms of self-realisation following the completion of a challenge. They also readily acknowledged the effects of the supportive climate on the extrinsic motivational contribution of the group. Thus, feelings of accomplishment are often described both in individual and collective terms: ‘...[we were] accomplishing feats that we won’t be able to realise alone in the future. We might try but, on our own, we won’t be able to.’ (Steven) These feelings of ‘being involved’ in something bigger than oneself are also linked to the relationship of support, respect and trust established between the participants and the eductrainers, as some participants, parents and teachers did not believe the group would be able to accomplish the last challenge: ‘According to DesÉquilibres, what we just accomplished here is huge. We succeeded, everyone deserves to celebrate...eductrainers shouldn’t thank us, on the contrary, we should thank them.’ (Mike)

The second key feature of the programme is the promotion of collaborative strategies and group cooperation. Interpersonal interactions, which build up over the course of the programme, ultimately regulate the way participants relate to one another. As these relationships evolved, we witnessed participants developing a more definite sense of belonging and cooperation, both of which were observed in training (Peter) and in the challenges (Steven): ‘When you play, you know, you have a tendency to pass to better players, but like they said: “Pass to everyone.” So we learned to pass to everyone. And there were no better players. We were all equals.’ (Peter)

We came to know each other more because we had to encourage each other. Even if we are biking by ourselves, there’s a whole team up ahead or in back pedalling for the same goal.... So after that everyone is talking to everyone else [during the breaks]: ‘Oh! For me it was like this: You know, everyone sharing biking tips…understanding someone else’s weakness and trying to help out.…. So that no one feels left out. (Steven)

Cooperation remained a challenge for the young participants. Although spontaneous gestures of collaboration were observed during the programme (i.e. youth offering to cook and clean7) and during interviews with the participants, other ethnographic data suggested that cooperation was not consistent and that youth could introduce competition dynamics. For instance, during the night of a forest outing, a group broke up into smaller parties, leaving some participants excluded from others. We also observed two participants racing each other during the bicycle challenge. On another occasion, we noticed the pack of joggers divide into two separate groups, with boys rallying ahead of girls, and one male participant half mockingly telling his teammate who had fallen behind: ‘Even those two girls finished before you did.’ As we observed during the training sessions and challenges, eductrainers often intervened in such contexts, in order to address these conflicting situations and to find a balance between the participants’ wishes to run as fast as possible and the group’s responsibility towards other members of the team. The discrepancies between direct observation and subjective narratives show the fluctuation of social bonds and attempts at cooperation. Moreover, these fluctuating dynamics may not always have been outwardly acknowledged, recognised or even remembered during formal interviewing. In our view, this further justifies the importance of constant group monitoring by eductrainers to ensure relationships remain equal among participants (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, and Skille 2014).

The third key feature is the balance between outside rules (imposed discipline) and self-initiated actions. While participants are subjected to the constant rigours and imposed discipline of the programme, eductrainers are careful not to counteract self-initiated actions. This highlights the fine equilibrium that exists in the DesÉquilibres programme between imposed forms of discipline and personal resolve – a balance that motivates participants to take charge of and be responsible for their own involvement.

We felt like real adults. We decided, we made our own decisions. Sometimes, they told us ‘if you have a problem or something, it’s with you that we’re going to solve it because you are the adults of the future, so it’s going to start now’ [...]. There were maybe some times when I didn’t want to go to my practice because there was a storm. But finally, I just told myself ‘I stay here alone or I have fun. ... or I stay at home and do nothing or I go to practice with everyone, to be in the snow and not be alone.’ I said to myself: ‘I’m going to practice.’ (Ricardo)

Ricardo’s statement shows that self-initiated actions can be viewed in terms of an acquired or inner discipline that is dynamically bound and in perpetual equilibrium with social norms (Moreau 2009). While these two concepts of imposed discipline and self-activation have often been described in opposite
terms, we have addressed them together as they are interconnected from the point of view of participants and should therefore be regarded as part of a single enabling system: ‘It gives a little more structure…not just do anything but stay focussed…and if we fool around they come and tell us: “Hey! You can’t behave that way.”’ (Alyson) Therefore, while current literature illustrates the benefits of participatory involvement in sports-based intervention programmes that promote decision-making (Donnelly and Coakley 2002), our results point to the equally important and symmetrical roles of structure and imposed discipline in establishing the necessary and adapted boundaries for individual participants to experiment in a safe environment.

The collectivisation of individual performances is the fourth key element that emerges from subjects’ narratives. DesÉquilibres comprises three distinct and mandatory activities: walking, biking and running. Although these activities are achieved on an individual level, they remain a collective undertaking and participants are required to adapt and perform each of these activities in synchronisation with the rest of the group. This usually entails adapting to the pace of the slower runners and bikers, especially in the final running challenge:

I was beginning to slow down, but he [teammate in relay run] went out and said: ‘You can't slow down, you have to go on. I'm there for you.’ And there was also the time when my eyes started to freeze, and I had trouble seeing, my vision was all blurry… I made an effort to open my eyes and keep on running. (Michelle)

Although youth generally seem to approve of the collaborative spirit of the programme, this collectivisation can also lead to frustrations over limited opportunities to train individually. And despite the fact that eductrainers will to some extent adapt their strategies to individual needs – such as allowing faster runners to quicken the pace – individual undertakings are not consistently encouraged:

Sometimes we would pick up the pace to reach our goal. We wouldn’t be sprinting but we’d run a little faster, and I wanted to do it that way, but she didn’t allow it. I had a lot of energy; I wanted to be able to sprint for at least three minutes. (Peter)

From a psychosocial perspective, these frustrations can be reframed in terms of necessary learning experiences, as all participants are asked to put their personal goals behind the collective needs of the group:

In the relay race, they can run as they please as long as they run in pairs. So then, if he’s the only one running like hell, well we still pair them up, and if the other guy is a little slower, well he has no other choice than to wait…. They have to cross the finish line together. (group discussion with eductrainers)

Interestingly, competitiveness was never alluded to during formal interviews, yet we observed such behaviour repeatedly during observant participation. This raises the relevance of monitoring such behaviour. Reinforcing group collaboration will prevent individual goals from impeding the collectivisation of performances but at the same time, it seems important not to deter participants from pursuing individual goals. In this case, fostering motivational climate does not just imply self-comparison and discourage intra-team competition (Ntoumanis and Biddle 1999); instead, it also relies on encouraging individual pursuits while conveying the message that individual success is closely bound to group objectives, where all participants compete with – not against – their peers to reach a common goal (Camiré 2015).

The fifth key feature revolves around the interconnectedness of effort and pleasure, to which social bonds contribute. Even though effort is primarily experienced as an individual endeavour, social bonds and connectiveness make sporting activities more playful and pleasurable, even during the more difficult challenges:

The outing in the woods was really fun … it was dark and we were walking. We thought of it as just a walk in the woods but it was more than that. You had to climb up hills in the dark … climb back down … and we would tell each other jokes, things that happened to us, personal things. (Caroline)

This is somewhat similar to the dual dimension of pain and pleasure that we described in our previous research where we observed that higher tolerance for pain was closely bound to the intrinsic levels of pleasure one felt during physical exertion or when crossing over one’s limits (Moreau, Jaimes, and Plante 2013) or, as Michael stated:
I felt satisfied about completing the last challenge, [...] the one that closed the parenthesis. I was really happy to have completed the challenge, to have been able to do something hard that many other people wouldn’t have been able to do. [...] It was something really special in the end.

Finally, results also suggest that interventions should encourage participants to explore beyond their comfort zones and promote varied forms of play that inspire them to experiment without feeling overly challenged or physically overwhelmed. Participants are repeatedly confronted with new and unchartered forms of play, exercise and social experiences and, while these elements test individual resiliency, they also appear to promote individual commitment and a higher level of motivation: ‘I never did anything as extreme as this … like running and playing games with a group of people for a long time, like every week you know, adding five minutes, running for an hour.’ (Alain) Philippe added: ‘This was the first time I ever walked at night. We started at 8 pm, I think, and came back at 5 a.m.! It was really something because I don’t usually go about in the woods in the middle of the night.’

The incessant demands on both psyche and body appear to challenge the participants’ resolve, as the interplay of physical exertion and mental fatigue tests individual levels of endurance: ‘The challenges were really intense. We weren’t on the playing field or in the gym. This was something else…. It wasn’t at all like our trainings; it was a lot tougher. We climbed mountains.’ (Ramon) Moreover, participants are also confronted with the collective pushing of boundaries, as they must learn – and sometimes even accept – to cooperate and help one another: ‘You really need everyone to join in … playing requires that everyone join in. If someone doesn’t do their part, it penalises the rest of us. Because if we want to accomplish the task, we need that person.’ (Frank)

Discussion

While research on sports programme currently focuses on sport and life skills development, our findings highlights the importance of social bonds, which we found played an important role in such interventions (Table 4). In line with the literature highlighting the importance of context for obtaining positive results in sport programmes (Petitpas et al. 2005; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, and Deakin 2005; Turnnidge, Côté, and Hancock 2014), our study shows that some elements mentioned by young people fit with certain elements of Positive Youth Development (PYD): implementation of a supportive climate and necessity for interconnectedness of effort and pleasure (MacDonald et al. 2011); voluntary participation (basic principle of DesÉquilibres), intrinsic motivation as a precursor to the development of youth initiative, active role of the participants in the group and exploration beyond the participants’ comfort zones as essential elements to obtain positive results (Petitpas et al. 2005).

Petitpas et al. (2005) present a typology in four categories for classifying sports programmes offered to young people. According to this typology, the ‘intervention’ programme (category 1) and ‘prevention’ programme (category 2) come under the notion of deficit reductions. Indeed, ‘intervention’ programmes are defined as those that help reduce behaviours that have been identified (by adults) as being dangerous to young people. Following the same logic, ‘prevention’ programmes, for their part, involve activities that keep young people away from behaviours that are considered negative. At the other end of the continuum, ‘development-oriented’ programmes will focus on the growth and development of sport skills (category 3 – sport skills development) or personal and social skills (category 4 – life skills development).

Although our analysis has allowed us to identify some elements of DesÉquilibres common to the current literature on PYD, this programme does not neatly fit into this typology. Indeed, even if DesÉquilibres aims to develop life skills, the main objective of the programme is to develop social bonds. Individual experience and skills development are therefore reframed through the group lens via interactions between youths as well as between youths and eductrainers. The development of personal skills is therefore not a goal, nor is it always explicit. Although, it is present within DesÉquilibres: (1) upstream, as a way to strengthen the social bond and (2) downstream, as a consequence of a stronger social bond. In this sense, the intervention strategy of DesEquilibres, which places the priority on the development of social bonds rather than on life skills, seems complementary to the PYD-based approaches.
Turnridge, Côté, and Hancock (2014) highlight issues about implicit and explicit methods of transferring PYD skills. In particular, they mention that although sport appears to be a context for skills development, there is currently no consensus on the possibility of transferring these skills to other spheres of life, nor on the most effective way to do so. DesÉquilibres bypasses this difficulty by focusing more on the development of social bonds. By highlighting the importance of each participant in the group and their primary role in the success of the final challenge, participants learn to take a fresh look at themselves and their skills, with a constant focus on social bonding (Thibault Lévesque, Molgat, and Moreau in press).

In fact, metaphors used by eductrainers to draw parallels between the skills developed in sport and those used in everyday life were not reported as essential by the participants. The youth talked more about having carried out the three challenges and about the obstacles they faced during the training sessions. Indeed, several participants reported that the key role played by the group was the most important element.

This gap between the intention to transfer, even explicitly, and the reception of information by young people is commonly found in the literature (Martinek, Schilling, and Johnson 2001; Schilling, Martinek, and Carson 2007). It may be explained, in part, by how the programme was presented to young people. Indeed, it was always presented as a sporting adventure, and not as a programme of ‘intervention’ or ‘development’. In this sense, we consider that the development of young people in DesÉquilibres occurs in interaction with their environment and that the objective of the programme does not directly target the development of individual skills. Rather, it is the regulation of interactions by eductrainers and the programme’s focus on social bonds that foster a sense of belonging and promote the need to collaborate as a group while helping participants look at themselves and their abilities differently, particularly when faced with situations outside of their comfort zone. In this perspective, the eductrainers do not adopt the position of ‘teachers’, with expert knowledge. They see themselves as modulators of interactions, which allows the group to reflect the potential of each participant.

This research contributes to the literature on the contextual elements needed to obtain positive results in sport intervention programmes. The development of social bonds between members of the group seems a complementary avenue to PYD programmes already focusing on the psychological and social development of the individual. However, the study on what we called the ‘black box’ of processes (leading to outcomes) was exploratory. Results would benefit from being subjected to other types of methodologies to deepen our understanding of social bonds impact on positive outcomes for youth. Moreover, our study focussed on the micro-social aspects of a sports-based intervention programme (and not on the structural aspects) – which involves limitations (Coalter 2015). As reported by Coakley (2011), and based on the critical social theory of youth empowerment (Jennings et al. 2006), key factors to empower youth through sports-based programmes are: (1) a safe environment; (2) meaningful participation and engagement; (3) equal relationships; (4) critical reflection on inequities; (5) participation in changing actions; and (6) individual and community empowerment. The sport context of DesÉquilibres allowed us to only explore factors 1, 2, 3 and 6. Further studies would be enriched by the consideration of structural processes by which the youth were socially vulnerable (Kelly 2011).

Conclusion

This research explored the dimensions of a sports-based programme for vulnerable youth, DesÉquilibres, examining more specifically how they transform (or not) social bonds, from the perspective of participants. Our findings echo existing literature suggesting that outcomes vary depending on the sporting context and each individual’s experience (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, and Skille 2014; Coalter 2015). Physical exertion depends on one’s sense of accomplishment and fulfilment, and participants who often doubt their abilities begin, in a group, to push their limits. Yet accomplishments go beyond the sole realisation of a sports challenge: participants learn to collaborate and lean on one another and are often introduced for the very first time to the notion of interdependency. This crossing of boundaries and construction of social bonds, which involve bridging personal and shared collective experiences,
is often a novel experience for youth accustomed to modern social constructs of self-reliance, personal initiative and autonomy (Rivest et al. in press).

This study did not attempt to draw causal links between the characteristics of the programme and its impact on participants but strived to open the ‘black box’ of a specific sports-based programme, in order to promote a better understanding of the active components of such an intervention. To do so, we focused on youths’ perspectives and found social bonds to be a crucial element. This dual posture (inductive and youth-centred) has allowed us to go beyond classical research, where there is an emphasis on skills transfer and where the young people’s discourse is generally neglected. It is in this sense that our research is innovative. Our hope is that future interventions and research will treat social bonds as worthy of more consideration.

Notes

1. In this article, the concept of social bond systematically refers to these four dimensions.
2. ‘Vulnerable young people’ refers to youth living with different problems (psychological or social) that do not allow them to ‘benefit from their contacts with social institutions [and] are mainly and recurrently confronted with the negative effects of these institutions [in our case school]’ (Vettenburg 1998, 194).
3. The concept of‘eductrainers’ is a mix of the words ‘trainers’ and ‘educators’. The founder of DesÉquilibres invented this term to highlight the fact that his role was a combination of those of social worker and coach. All people working in the programme have used the term to describe their work; the term is also used by the participants.
4. The ‘vulnerable’ youth identified by psychologists, social workers or teachers are never known specifically by eductrainers to avoid any form of stigmatisation.
5. We conducted a single focus group with eductrainers and chose to conduct more interviews with the youths. This choice was made based on the researchers’ belief in the importance of the opinions of the youths. The eductrainers themselves supported this decision.
6. We initially coded with pre-identified categories. The programme’s key elements were subsequently identified through a transversal analysis.
7. The second challenge (biking) takes place over two days. After the first day, participants and eductrainers stay overnight in a municipal building and must share responsibilities for domestic work such as cooking and cleaning. Prior to the final challenge, a collective meal is also organised and responsibilities for this meal must be shared as well.
8. Petitpas et al. (2005, 66) define sport programme based on Positive Youth Development (PYD) as follows: ‘Youth sport programmes that promote psychosocial development are those that use sport as a vehicle to provide experiences that promote self-discovery and teach participants life skills in an intentional and systematic manner.’

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