Original Article

Sport and School Integration: a New Approach to Understand the Dropout in Junior High School. A Theoretical Proposal Applied to the French Case.

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Abstract

Problem statement. This article focuses on the phenomenon of dropout in junior high school, with a theoretical contribution. **Approach.** After taking into consideration the characteristics of this phenomenon in French society and its Republican educational system, an interpretative and exploratory hypothesis will be proposed. The authors aim to test empirically the link between participation in physical education courses and the process that leads to situations of more or less manifest dropout. **Purpose.** Moving from the supposition that for a student is relatively easy to avoid participation in physical education classes, the main research question asks if the school dropout begins where it is easier for the student to avoid taking part in the courses. This hypothesis is translated into a qualitative typology that the authors wish to test empirically. The four ideal types that emerge are the result of a particular attitude which an adolescent shows toward: a) school, b) physical education teacher, c) peers, d) physical activity. **Conclusion.** The authors claims that the participation in physical education courses could play the role of an important "analyzer" (Coulon, 1994) of the school wellbeing, and wish to contribute to catalyze the scientific debate on this topic.

Keywords: physical activity, dropout, school, adolescent, France.

Introduction

This contribution is part of a research program on assessment and development of devices to fight against dropout in French junior high school¹. Today the school dropout is one of the most discussed topics by education specialists and school policies. Since the late nineties numerous conferences and research reports have been devoted to the phenomenon of early exits from education system (EC, 2000).

In France, the problem is even more salient than the universalist principles of the "French insertion model" (Verdier, 1996, 2000) seems to show flaws. Indeed, at a time when the democratization of education is presented as one of the largest acquisitions of contemporary states, the idea that young people do not reach a minimum level of education is emerging as a major contradiction. Moreover, these early exits from school would pose societal and ideological problems.

Starting from this premise, our work seeks to present an unexplored perspective of dropping out. Rather than focusing on the situations by a global approach, we would like to focus on the circumstances and the profile of individuals that may represent early indicators of dropping out. The purpose of this study is the phenomenon of "exemption" from the physical education sessions (PES) and its links with more or less manifest forms of dropout. In the French educational system, physical education is a mandatory subject that engages students from 4h to 2h per week and is present at all the exams required for graduation of the first and second degree.

As this is an exploratory contribution, we will present it solely by a theoretical point of view. The purpose of this contribution is the formulation of hypotheses useful to amplify the discussion of the dropping out phenomenon and support further the researchers' experiences which dealing with this theme. Initially, we will consider the French sociopolitical conditions in which the scientific community and educational institutions have begun to perceive the issue of dropping out in problematic terms. In a second step, our purpose will be

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anchored on an institutionalist perspective of the problem, namely the effects of the school's legislation on situations at risk of dropping out. The third and final focus will concern an interactionist dimensions and will focus on the micro-social dynamics within the class.

The school drop-out as a social and political problem

Dropout is a problem that has emerged gradually in the French and European panorama. But the study on the dropout remain futile without an analysis of the framework (Muller, 2003) in which this issue developed.

From the standpoint of public policy, first of all, the term "dropout" makes its name only in the late 2000s, by the action of various institutional texts on school careers called problematic. It relies on changes in the Education Code occurred in 2009 and 2010 to define populations of students eligible for forms of support to help them in their educational career (Law 2009-1437 of November 24, 2009, art. 36 - Act 2019-1781, December 31, 2010). From that time the criteria to qualify a student of "dropout" are established, namely any teenager who fails to obtain the general degree or a professional degree.

Concerning the social context, it's possible to follow Bernard who does not hesitate to describe as "paradoxical" the growing concern for this phenomenon: "the more the problem is on the forefront, the more people affected by this problem diminish" (Bernard, 2011: 40). Although each country is autonomous in selecting criteria to isolate precocious exits from school, the data available for France - and for other European countries - show a steady decline rate of dropouts for the past four decades

Tab. 1 Percentage of dropouts in France (1965 – 2005)

Years	1965	1975	1985	1995	2005
Dropsouts	37	20	14	8	6

Source : DEPP, Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale

To understand this contradiction, we must move on the analysis from the school context and place the dropout as societal issue. To this end, the statistics on success rates in bachelor suggest that the fact of completing schooling with a diploma is, nowadays, a standard : 85.5% in 2003 and 87.8% in 2008 (DEEP, Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale). However, in this context the degree of normality is not only defined by the raw numbers on dropout teenagers. It appears as the result of applying the principles of the economic development and social cohesion. This issue emerged in a context where strong growth in the schooling attendance was accompanied by the progressive deterioration of the labor market and welfare services. If, at the time of the postwar boom, teenagers without a diploma were able to find quickly a place on the labor market, today, the framework has changed significantly. From the mid 1970s, the sequence of economic crises is increasing inexorably, unemployment hitting intensely individuals without qualifications or with weak levels of schooling. From that time, problems accumulate. The weaker qualification degree slows down the insertion in the labor market and increases the likelihood of antisocial behaviors that are increasingly amplified to media and political overrepresentation (Goaizou, Mucchielli, 2005). This consideration seems valid particularly for some European countries, like France, which are characterized by "closed employment systems", where the effects of flexibility are not distributed homogeneously but hit three specific groups: ethnic minorities, women and youth (Blossfeld, Mills, 2005). The status of dropouts, or their level of social visibility was non-existent until the late 1990s and has changed radically in recent years. It became a public issue (Dorn, 1996). Dropping out as a social problem concern only a small population, but which can, nowadays, constitute a source of major problems.

Studies on dropping out: a literature review

Within the framework just described, the French researches on the topic of school dropout are fairly late (Bautier, 2002; Blaya, 2010; Duat, 2011; Esterle-Hedibel, 2007). They tend to focus on the most visible aspects, namely the variables expected to produce directly or indirectly the break in school. The topics are the influence of socio-economic background, the individual characteristics such as age, sex, belonging of a minority group, psychosocial status, but also the role of family structure and the characteristics of schools (Coudrin, 2006; Caille, 1999; Rumberger, 2004; Benabou et al., 2004). These studies adopt, in general, a process approach: early schools' difficulties precede the expression of conflicting attitudes toward school and ultimately lead to its permanent abandonment (Broccolichi, 1998; Millet, Thin, 2005). It is nevertheless an ideal perspective that hides situations and paths differentiated. A common characteristic of these contributions is to approach the dropout by means of individual and contextual factors, assumed are the lead of desertion schooling. Normally, these studies conceive the process of dropout marked by a number of phases. According to Bryk and Thum

(1989), the process begins with early school difficulties where the student shows problems regarding the level of investment, low interactions with teachers and peers. These attitudes are crystallized in a second time and flow in "a-school" behavior, where students feel themselves victim of a school that is not able to understand them (Millet, Thin, Op. cit.). At this level a reciprocal rejection "student-teacher" becomes more radical, reaching the final abandonment of the school system. It's also possible to identify attempts to differentiate the path analysis, as the typology proposed by Janosz et al. (2000) which aims to formalize the severity of the stall.

Shedding light on the signs that may offer useful information to detect a potential dropout situation is a more complex task. It's on this point that we would like propose our theoretical contribution. As mentioned in the introduction, our investigation concerns the link between the manifestations of the phenomenon of dropping out and the "exemption" from the courses of the physical education

School integration through the lens of physical activities

First of all, why stress the relation between dropout and the PES "exemption"? This questioning is grounded on the idea that there is an important link between "physical activity and social integration". In our view it's a dialectical relationship, where the benefits of physical activity are also tangible at the social level, in the measure that the characteristics of the context allow the translation of the sport benefits in social life of the individual in a broad sense, concerning also the school background. By this statement we do not mean that sport is a useful tool for social control in a narrow sense, which would be a kind of sociological naivety. Indeed, numerous studies criticize the virtues of sport, from its competitive and marketing dimensions (Brohm (1992, 2006), as well as surveys of Chantelat et al. (1996), or Falcoz and Koebel (2005) whose results converge on the idea that the "transferability of the supposed virtues of sport to other areas of social life is more the realm of myth rather than of reality " (Duret, 2008: 54). However, if for us there is a link between physical activity and school is because we consider the sessions PES as well as others curricular lessons. Although in France the status of PES differs from that of other courses, as we said in the introduction it is a mandatory subject and it is present at all examinations (3 to 4 hours per week). Following this perspective, we cannot talk about school integration success if the student's attendance at PES lessons is low. For this reason the observation of engagement in PES classes can provide valuable information on the whole "school wellness" of students because, as just mentioned there is a dialectical relationship between physical activity and social/school integration. This point joins recent studies by Coates and Vickerman (2008), whereby the student's investment in physical activity is directly proportional to the feeling of experiencing positive relationships with teachers and peers, in a word: the feeling of being integrated into the school.

Dropout and PES exemption: institutional factors and peers relationship.

This link between PES exemption and dropout in the junior high school can also be understood from an institutional perspective. In fact, PES courses have two characteristics that facilitate the circumvention of the obligation of school attendance. First, it is a discipline whose institutional "weight" (the coefficient for exams, for example) is secondary to scientific, literary or linguistic subjects. This means that PES is the least of school subjects, making it less sensitive to defects or absence of participation. Second, participation in PES is subject to conditions of physical integrity, good health, in short to good capacities. However, certain incapacities claimed by a student are sometimes difficult to determine. A student may be exempted from physical education on the basis of motives that justify, in the eyes of the teacher, that he/she does not take part in the session (although we cannot prove the substantiate of these justifications). Prosaically, more than in English or mathematic, the student in a dropout condition can in PES simulate a back pain, a discomfort because of the physical effort required or any other sign of unfitness that the teacher could never verify. The interruption of student participation in PES class is almost impossible to prevent, which gives to students the opportunity of a sort of "legally dropout".

This PES exemption can therefore allows students to avoid school work in reason of the situations of failure, boredom or humiliation connected with the school experience (Blaya , 2010). In response to this specificity, it is interesting to note the institutional changing in these last decades on this subject, including the definition progressively affirmed in the texts of the notion of "partial incapacity". The purpose of this development is to identify situations where health problems prevent the student to take part at the PES courses (and thus, negative, those to which it can participate despite his inability). This raises the question on the effects of decisions taken by the policy maker on the activity of teachers in junior high school. There is indeed differentiated modes of application of these texts (some teams of teachers forcing students exempted to stay in the class, and others allow student to leave school, etc.).

It should be noted that the exemption from PES may also cover students who have no signs of dropping out. Let us take an example of a schoolgirl with good grades but without sport experience and that stops participating to PES (a situation that can occur even with the help of parents). This could correspond, in the typology of Fortin et al. (2004), at the 'depressive' students (they have an average performance, a negative

perception of classroom climate, and teachers have a positive view of them). The data show that these cases relate mainly teenagers whose absenteeism is probably related to discrimination and signs of male dominance prevalent in the sports and physical education (Cogerino, 2006). But these exemptions may also represent early signs of an overall dropout. Thus, according to Blaya & Hayden (2003), this is a "process of removal or a missed collision that in the long-term will lead to disaffection, a dropping out." In fact, if the drop-out is a process that leads to the absence and abandonment, this achievement is preceded by loss of attention, loss of interest, absence of participation, in short several indicators that are often invisible and which is defined as "inner dropouts" (Bautier, 2002; Bonnery, 2003). It is within this context that the exempt in PES may be considered as a precursor, perhaps even a "predictor" of dropping out.

On the other hand, the relationship between PES exemption and dropout can be considered in terms of the positive role that the sport can play on attracting students to school. The first way of understanding this bundle of assumptions is its historic function in the school system: even today, the PES is seen as a means to offset the adverse effects of an intellectual overloaded (Blaya, 2010). So the PES, by the energy expenditure and its emotional release which it can offer to teenagers, it can be thought of as a place of possible membership, enthusiasm, like a tool to intensify the school integration. We observe for example that a student who is dropping out in all subjects keeps a good link with PES. We tend to suppose that this type of membership is due to the special skills of the student, skills that are not required in the "main" disciplines (French, science, mathematics, languages, ...). Thus, a student in a dropping out situation who is a good sportsman/woman or his/her physical qualities allowing him/her to be performing in motor learning, will probably see in the PES an opportunity to "succeed" in a field of his/her school life. In this context, sport is then seen as a means of affirmation for the student to show his qualities to others and to oneself. According to recent qualitative studies, the identity function of sport seems to exert all his influence especially for young people of the most disadvantaged social classes. For these teenagers sport represent an important tank of identity resources, and sometimes the symbols it carries become the only models to guide its own construction (Ohl, 2003, 2004). To show the personal skills through sessions PES is not a secondary issue regarding the problem of school dropout, especially in a field of physical education where body investment and performance visibilities are stronger than in other disciplines.

It is on this level that the interactions with the teacher of PES and / or with other students during the PES sessions are an additional way of understanding - even strategic - the link between PES and the dropout. On this point, Gold-Coté (2007) shows the powerful effects of a caring attitude of teachers towards students (it seems to reduce by two thirds the risk of moving to a serious situation of dropout). Encouragements, congratulations and appreciations towards the efforts promote self-confidence and success (Broccolichi, 2000). The interaction with the teacher is not without impact on the process of dropping out, especially in PES (Bonniot-Paquier, Cogerino & Champely, 2009). Similarly, several authors have highlighted the relationship between intermittent involvement of the student who has left school and the variety of his problems (Guerin, Pasco & Riff, 2008). Within this framework, there exists a social dropout, both on the side of the affiliation (Esterle-Hedibel, 2006) that on the side of harassment (Borteyroux & Blaya, 2006).

Therefore, the link between PES and dropout cannot be limited to a strict reading in terms of successes, absence of failure, about school performance. The schoolboy/girl may lose interest, be absent or instead head back to the school with more participation and find an interest in the relationships between teachers and peers. So Millet & Thin (2005) show that in the case of unfavorable social conditions to the achievement of school work, the students can try to overcome the constraints in classroom. Also at this level PES provides a particular space in the daily lives of junior high school students, because of the frequency and nature of interactions. Specifically, during PES collaborative situations are mandatory (for example climbing belay or collective choreography in dance or acrobatics) or competitive (in racquet sports or team sports) (Huet & Saury, 2011; Saury and Rossard, 2009).

This lighting helps identify but also to complicate the subject of the study: how many students are exempted from PES because the eyes of peers are too heavy? How many students will experience their first transgression of the obligation of participation in PES, because the "stomachache" they oppose the teacher will be the only way to escape the jeering which they are subjected in during the sports? On the contrary, how many students in a situation of "inner dropout" will eventually join the school because the PES session will be an opportunity to find their classmate? How many students do not miss their PES session as it is the only time during the week where they can show a positive image of themselves? The last two questions implicitly questioned the real "social skills" of school (Finn, 1989). The challenge is to understand whether the interactions "classmate-classmate" and "student-teacher" during PES sessions, allow teens at risk of dropping out to restore a sense of their place within school with a more positive identification with the school.

Hypothesis

The questioning of this study can be grouped into the following two poles.

1) The relationship between PES exemption and junior high school dropout. A adolescent who has left school is a student exempted from PES? Conversely, a student exempted in PES is an adolescent who has left school? Does exemption from PES has a predictive value in the school dropout phenomenon?

The first pole of questioning leads to the following hypothesis (*Hypothesis 1*): the first signs of dropout occur in situations where the institutional devices (PES exemption) allow disengagement school without it appears explicitly in terms of sanctions and conflicts.

In this case our interest turns to the role of institutional devices for situations on risk of dropping out. We are in the frame of a structural approach, which aims to bring out the latent/unexpected effects of the law clauses.

2) The tools against the exemption from PES and school dropout in junior high school.

Which are the reasons given by students to explain the cases of PES exemption? How teachers interpret this phenomenon? What are the means used by teachers to reduce it?

This second pole of questioning leads to the following hypothesis (*Hypothesis 2*): the PES exemption is related to the types of membership in the classroom and the nature of interactions with the teacher. This second hypothesis, which fits within the interactionist paradigm, allows us to examine the effects of interpersonal dynamics.

From these questions and hypotheses, we aim to verify the validity of the typology illustrated in the following table. This is a crosstab between the frequency of the PES exemption and the signs that the teenager manifests in more or less tangible manner toward the dropout. As these two variables are conceived in a dichotomous terms, they can be easily crossed.

Tab. 2 Dropout and PES Exempt Typology

		PES EXEMPT	
		Yes	Not
DROPOUT	Yes	A Coincidence exempt PES / School dropout	B Special relationship with the teacher. Strong interest in physical activities (this means that there is a possibility to continue the school?)
	Not	C Disinterest in physical activity Conflictual relationship with the teacher	D Coincidence regular attendance participation in PES / No signs of dropping out

- The box A does not require any particular explanation: the dropout applies to all school tasks.
 - Box B tells us that, despite his/her general disinterest toward school, the student is motivated to participate in PES lessons. Why? Because he/she has a very positive relationship with the teacher. Because he/she has a very strong passion for PES. Because the session PES allows him/her to stand face to peers in positive terms, to interact with the same status and receive the expected recognition. This would have the effect of strengthening a weakened self-esteem and (maybe) undervalued in other courses. However, one can legitimately ask whether there are possibilities of re-attachment, since the total abandonment of the school has not yet occurred. In this case, the relationship (perhaps) elective with the teacher of PES couldn't be a way to reintegrate the student?
 - Box C denotes a lack of interest only for the fitness classes. Should it be attributed to the student-teacher relationship unsatisfactory? Or to the forms of interaction typical of PES, where the involvement of the body is difficult to accept for some teenager.
 - Box D is the opposite of Box A: we are in the case of an "ordinary" course of study.
- The typology emerged, which should not be forgotten its ideal-type character, will be tested by empirical data that emerge from qualitative interviews.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this research program on assessment and development of devices to fight against school dropout junior high school in France, the issue of exemption in PES seemed to be secondary: why polarize on practices that do not really have a social and professional impact on the life of students? Compared to the problems of exams failure, of school dropout, of issues related to the increased level of qualification of the

young population in some developing countries, is it worthwhile to focus on what appears at first glance insignificant as a practice, a whim of privileged children?

However, as seen here, the phenomenon seems particularly illuminating now of dropout problem in its entirety and complexity. Primary, the PES exemption reflects a lot of the society in which it occurs, the implicit codes of corporeality, and the power relations especially between men and women. Secondary also reveals the types of institutional relationships, the power relations on the rules, the implicit negotiations. In this sense, the PES exemption can take on a role of "analyzer" (Coulon, 1994) of the school wellbeing where it appears.

Finally, from a professional standpoint, it can be considered the PES exemption as a key lever of citizenship education, especially because it represents the first opportunity of crooked behavior on the part of adolescent, sometimes with the complicity of parents or doctors (i.e. which grant false exemptions) and therefore the first opportunity for the adults in charge of his/her education to respond socially and institutionally in the direction of greater honesty.

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