

Sports: The Expectation of Children and Young Practitioners in the Favela

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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to analyze, on the basis of the studies and research work done, the dynamics of sports programs for children and young living in the favelas and low-income environments. We will be brief as regards the guiding principles and the purposes of social inclusion programs (PIS being the acronym in Portuguese) based on sport practice, as they are already widely known. Our main interest lies in the forms of participation, ownership and re-meaning that children and youngsters perform on the basis of the so-called local rationality. Consequently, we will privilege, most of all, the degree of symbolic interaction, taking into consideration the significant amount of “misunderstandings” involving certain programs, in view of the professionalization meaning hoped for sports in view of the local rationality of children and young. That is to say, sport practice is seen as a way of enhancement and of strategic relationships for the building of the “self” as a sports professional.

Keywords: Sports; public policies; children and young; popular layers.

Introduction

A characteristic of the phenomenon that will be discussed below is the paradox involving social recommendations and local rationalities. The different campaigns organized in schools and especially by the media, apparently seek to influence people so that they may assimilate positive beliefs about the regular practice of physical activities, in the hope that they will make them active sport participants instead of mere spectators.

At present the benefits envisaged for the regular practice of physical activities go beyond those of a physical-biological nature and, among the different options that can be practiced, sport seems to be the most usual one. In the literary heritage both of Physical Education and Sociology, and also of other areas, sport is mentioned as a potential and positive socialization means as well as a youth social inclusion channel, because regular practice benefits the morals and the personality of those involved in the practice of sports (Dacosta, 2005; Tubino, 2001; Elias & Dunning, 1992; Danish & Nellen, 1997).

In the context of public policies, both national and local, the belief on the psycho-physiological benefits of sport materializes through actions that facilitate sport practicing. Allegedly, children and young like practicing sports and, consequently, they will certainly participate spontaneously in the projects being presented to them. In fact, possibly in view of the influence of statements like this one, a growing number of Social Inclusion Projects through Sports (PIS) was launched in the 1980s, which, in their majority, were targeted for children and young living in the favelas, in the hope that they would become a counterpoint option to the unlawful socialization of organized crime groups acting in the favelas (Zaluar, 1994). The purpose of most projects is precisely taking children out of the streets to involve them in sports educational environment: that is to say, taking children from the streets so that they might be included into the educational environment.

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In fact, in recent decades we have witnessed an increasing number of PIS launched with the above characteristics. However, the existing theorization on the relationship of sports and of groups in risk or ostracized as a result of poverty in Rio de Janeiro, mostly in the favelas, seems to evade considerations on the local rationalities of children and young vis-à-vis the programs that are being offered (Vianna & Lovisolo, 2005). There is a predominant concern in the discussions about the topic regarding the number of people engaged in the projects, however, the simple verification that there is an expressive amount of individuals involved with PIS in Brazil (Gomes & Constantino, 2005), should not be admitted as an absolute indicator of the efficiency of those actions, since this kind of information or data does not allow us to know the situation of other intervening factors, for example the reasons why individuals join and abandon the programs. The number of individuals who join is a simple “body count” and therefore the use of that kind of information employed by researchers in their intent to map the scene of sports practice (Gomes & Constantino, 2005), may lead to wrong overestimates, as it only indicates the adherence of people to the program, without taking dropouts into consideration, that is to say, the high turnover of participants within the projects (Vianna & Lovisolo, 2009a) – Table 1. Adhesion indicators are significant when the time comes to assess each project.

Table 1 – Numbers of students per years of practice

Years of practice	Subjects	%
< 1	4,338	79.42
1-2	871	15.95
2-3	177	3.24
3-4	59	1.08
4-5	16	0.29
5-6	1	0.02
	5,462	100

Source: Adapted from Vianna & Lovisolo (2005).

The importance of understanding the scene of local rationalities of children and young lies in the fact that they promote belief-building with its various effects on practices. We assume that is normal for people to behave according to their beliefs, inasmuch as these provide the grounds which in turn determine the intents emerging from their involvement with the PIS. We also admit the coexistence of different social conceptions on the influence of practice oriented towards physical activities, which are instrumental for individuals formalizing their various interpretations of those same beliefs, leading to decision-making processes supported by the signals or responses from their practical experiences (Vianna & Lovisolo, 2005).

In light of the foregoing, we are of the opinion that in order to be able to know the scene that pervades the real adhesion to PIS with reasonable accuracy, a relationship between the beliefs and experiences of participants must be contextually observed and analyzed. Truly speaking, we frequently tend to ignore that in those contexts, even the generic concept of sports is of little pragmatic application, as we are dealing with an object whose meaning has been impacted by multiple and different local and social interactions.

When the beliefs and the benefits of sports and sport practice are at odds, understanding or alternative explanations become necessary vis-à-vis high rates of non-participants or dropouts. (Vianna & Lovisolo, 2009a).

The understanding of the local rationalities of individuals and their reasons for action, and the assessment that could reinforce or modify the initial motives and practices may be instrumental in enhancing and deepening the understanding of the dynamics of the problems under study.

On the basis of this assumption, we tried to focus on the contradiction between social representation in the benefits provided by physical activities and the withdrawal or abandoning of sports practice, with the aim of improving the degree of understanding of the contradictions existing between the beliefs expressed by individuals and their subsequent behavior, in order to contribute to the understanding of the people’s local rationalities and their reasons for action, in order to pave the way to the necessary agreements on the effectiveness of the social/educational intervention through sports addressed to low-income populations.

The description and understanding of the aforementioned aspects could in fact re-energize interventions, thus refining their coherence within the local dynamics, favoring agreements between the institutional proposals and the aspirations of the agents in the intervention process.

Database used

This study has registered, analyzed, compared and interpreted the perception of kids and teenagers practice of sports in the favela. It has been focused on the exploitation of the universe of values, patterns and representations of these individuals from their experiences in their activities. Studies that shows it's care to the sport participants were analyzed: i) the investigation "Desvalorização da aprendizagem técnica na educação física: evidências e críticas" (Vianna & Lovisolo, 2009), searched for knowing the aspiration of 37 boys and 40 girls (average: 11.5 years old) that replied to the questionnaire semi-structured; ii) In the study "Esportes e camadas populares: inclusão e profissionalização" (Vianna, 2007), the deep interviews has been used with 14 young between 10 and 24 years old (average 17.5); iii) From the article "Educational sports: the adhesion from subjects of popular layers" Vianna&Lovisolo (2005) the focus has been put in the documental analyses referent to 6,932 individuals cadasters (between 5 and 24 years old) signed up in a PIS in a period of six years; iv) In the research "Educação física, esportes e lazer para as camadas populares: a representação social dos seus atores" (Vianna, 2003), in a universe of 18,002 sport participants in ten PIS located in the favelas in Rio de Janeiro, the author has investigated 362 individuals between six and 19 years old (average 13 years old) by a semi-structured questionnaire where the results are being analyzed.

The qualitative analyses of the data has sought to respect the verbal ability of the interviewees in the different concerned investigations (Thiollent, 1980) followed by the triangulation and the results interpretations (Ludke& André, 1986).

Results

Expectations of children and young

In order to explain the causal nexus between PIS conceptions and management, and the effects on students, it seems advisable to establish research procedures in accordance with the situations found, adopting certain research strategies in a pluralistic manner, to the extent that the strong and weak points of each of them may be complementarily overlaid.

When recording, analyzing, comparing and interpreting the representations of the players in sport practices in the favela, the aim was to explore the universe of values, norms and representations of those individuals, derived from their experiences in the activities they used to practice. Under this perspective, we tried to observe – in previous studies – the expectations of participants on the reasons that made them join the activities, and also the reasons for their permanence and/or dropout. The individuals surveyed expressed that their expectations comprised both learning and growth in the area of sports, with indication on how and when these expectations had been met or were frustrated. We were able to assess that the permanence in the activity or the shift to other modality depends on a personal evaluation, which is in turn determined by the experiences during practice. In this regard, the perception on how successful the participant was during the activities, and in general the acknowledgement of the results achieved, might seem to interfere with the decision of the participant to continue practicing a certain sport, but also to change or even dropout. This in fact reveals that self-assessment is a relevant issue when trying to explain dropouts or permanence in the activity.

A utilitarian approach can be perceived in the statements of the young vis-à-vis their involvement with sports. For them, the attendance and participation in projects allows them to learn how to play a certain sport, to participate in competitions, and also to interact socially and to use their free time. All this is interpreted as expectations to be fulfilled at the PIS programs. Data on field work confirm these expectations on a regular basis.

Aspirations and dreams to achieve professional qualification.

The findings of studies that researched children and young that practiced sports in the PIS programs at a favela in Rio de Janeiro indicate that in the perception of those who are involved, sports qualification may represent for these low-income populations a means of achieving personal and social success (Vianna, 2003; 2007; Vianna *et al*, 1999). Such a perception arises and is reinforced by the intense and daily action of the mass media, which, either intentionally or not, use to broadcast pieces of information and provide grounds for the theory that culture, and especially sports and music, are efficient means to achieve social change.

In fact, sports also comprise an area for professional involvement and, as such, it opens perspectives for improvement in the lives of the working class. This is not only for the best players, but also for average athletes and for those who are able to identify the possibility of engaging in other professional duties within sports. There is consistent evidence on the penetration of the dream of becoming an athlete or a sport teacher in these people's imaginary (Vianna & Lovisolo, 2009a; 2009b) as they sense that PIS programs and other sports practice-related events in the favelas are the starting points to achieve such an aspiration.

The perception on the relevance of the social capital for growth in sports.

The theory on the social capital refers to two aspects. The first one emphasizes qualification on the basis of relationships and skills and its use for social empowerment; the second one emphasizes the aspect of social confidence in its effects on the organization of common actions, basically in tune with the works and studies of Robert Putnam. Conform Granovetter (1983) – the strength of non-local weak ties, is portrayed by the perception of the young that in order to join sports clubs as athletes they need to have the support or be sponsored by a professional observer able to open the doors of this selected channel. Somebody with penetration in the sports environment and able to make his/her talent noticed seems to be – for the young – the opportunity that might change their lives. However, the strength of the weak ties is only useful if the talent or the gifts for sports of young people are manifest through learning and perfecting processes. Nevertheless, the effective arrangements for the systematization of the activities performed – which are the determinants of the sports progress, not always contribute to the development of the necessary skills and competences (Vianna, 2007; Vianna & Lovisolo, 2009b). The lack of resources for purchasing equipment and adequate dietary supplies, and also for registering at competitions and affording travelling expenses make progress difficult or even impossible, even in the case of the most talented ones. This may lead to inadequate qualification and dropout (Vianna & Lovisolo, 2005).

There is also an ideology contrary to competitive sports which in Brazil is established in the opposition between “sports at school” and “school sports” (Stigger & Lovisolo, 2010). The result, for this and for other reasons, is that regular sport practice, either for leisure or competition and, above all, positioned to boost performance, was excluded from the school environment and is now practiced in non-school alternative facilities. Sport competitions, greatly praised by the media and by some government sectors, was vehemently criticized by opinion makers in the physical education area, especially in view of their liaison with capitalism in several dimensions. Contrary to school education, in which the law forces students to enroll, in the case of sports projects conducted in the interior of the favelas, the young are free to join, dropout or change activities. To join a PIS project, participants should be enrolled at the public school, and this may encourage those interested in achieving progress in sports to continue their school education and therefore make their contribution in the fight against inequality in Brazil and in the increase in the number of school years (Pastore & Silva, 2000). The most valued social program in Brazil, the *Bolsa Família* (a sort of family grant) also imposes the obligation to attend school in order to receive this grant-in-aid. However, the use of sport as a means to achieve student retention seems to oppose to the local rationality which considers sport as an aim in itself.

To some young, the representation of school qualification seems to represent that which is difficult, disagreeable and more costly. On the other hand, the option for sport seems to be more pleasant, less costly and with higher possibilities of fulfillment. We may then suppose that, as dropout might be the outcome when the school does not fulfill the expectations of the student, the sports project that fails to fulfill the expectations of participants as far as their chances of professionalization in sports are concerned, helps to increase the number of dropouts (Vianna, 2007; Vianna & Lovisolo, 2005).

Sports practice seems to contribute to build a sense of citizenship in individuals which surpasses the mere recognition of individual and collective rights, as well as their obligations and discipline. Students show the need to go beyond the physical and social limits of the place where they live, study, have fun, work, suffer, and where they raise their children and spend most of their lives. Social stigmas and designations that erode the freedom of young in the working class to access social advantages, (Elias & Scotson, 2000) and freedom of circulation are also a negation of autonomy (Lovisolo, 2000).

If the stereotypes of Negroes, the poor and slum dwellers determine the curtailment of the circulation in the different social spaces outside the favelas, the conflicts between their own rival groups or factions circumscribe even more the circulation of the young. Those residing in places controlled by armed groups in conflict with other groups feel constantly threatened by the mere fact of passing by, or when they are playing or visiting friends and relatives who live in conflict areas or in areas controlled by rival groups.

The frequent confrontation between bandits and between these and the police is a constant threat for those that are in transit, or those who wish to leave or to return home. Violence imposes a code of conduct that enhances social oppression and limits the autonomy of residents, who are limited or oppressed by “outsiders” and also by “insiders” in the favela, without any chance or voice. In this context, sport may represent for these individuals the “negative freedom” or the expression of non-conformity. In other words, sport can be seen as an “exit” mechanism, through which individuals relinquish the place where they are being oppressed and look for another place in their search for self-actualization. The search for new paths seems allied to challenges, achievements and the sense of belonging, and sport can be the bridge built by the weak ties (Granovetter, 1983). In fact, it can be understood because young favela dwellers see sport as a means of social ascension, for achieving prestige or as an alternative for their own lives. Sports would then represent an opportunity to broaden their relationship circles beyond the strong ties – the local ties (Granovetter, 1983).

When establishing contact with other realities and with individuals that pertain to other social spheres in competitions, training sessions and journeys to other places, young athletes enhance their life perspective with each new sport experience. However, the lack of resources and adequate infrastructure to engage in competitions and especially the lack of support in the case of transportation, food, family assistance and so on may hamper the wish of talented young people to achieve success. To explain it in a few words, the taste and the identification with sporting activities seem to fuel the desire of these young people to professionalize in their search for better life conditions, prestige and personal achievement.

Paths for the poor to improve their lives

As in the case of school qualification, sport is seen as a means for not-so-rich people to achieve success in life. Values such as persistence, dedication and willpower are linked to both paths, which are more democratic, because in principle they depend on their own willpower, discipline and effort. The belief that personal investment for social mobility is of little relevance (Scalon, 2004), may be relativized vis-à-vis the representations of the young. Individuals believe that it is necessary to have initiative and involvement. However, they seem to choose what is really worthwhile and effort-demanding.

In addition to the assistance provided by people around them and to the need to make good use of opportunities, i.e. to make acquaintances with people in good situation in order to improve their own lives (Scalon, 2004; Granovetter, 1983), attributes such as willpower, talent, study, knowledge, the wish to study and to learn, character and personality, work, dedication and responsibility, can be developed through hard work, which in some cases penalize temporary pleasure in exchange of future satisfaction. All these are seen as qualities that translate into attitudes and behavior, which are necessary for achieving success, both in sports and in life.

Information data found by Vianna (2003) suggests that the experience in the field of sports may help these individuals in overcoming the determinist perspective of the limitation imposed by the social position beyond their own cultural heritage (Elias & Scotson, 2000).

The easiest way to succeed in life: sports or studies?

Sport appears to be for some young amateurs living in the favelas something that makes it worth the effort. They see sport as the easiest way to achieve success in life (Vianna, 2003). In general terms, children and young people say that they like the sport they practice and that it is a source of pleasure. In the case of football, which is the dominant sport, the pleasure of playing and the wish to win may reduce the cost of the physical and technical training. However, the situation is different in the case of school education, because effort and discipline do not appear immediately, because they are seen at a later stage, especially in the labor field. We are in the presence of a kind of logic that is utilitarian, simple but efficient, in the appraisal and orientation of conducts: sports practice makes young people feel pleasure, but the same does not apply completely school life.

The visibility offered by sport consists of the opportunity to achieve prestige, of standing out in a multitude of anonymous people, in the chance of broadening the experiences of life, of knowing other places and meeting new people – the weak ties (Granovetter, 1983). People seem to wait for an opportunity to continue in sport because sport is seen as a path to autonomy (Lovisolo, 2000).

Sport may also represent a bridge for better school qualification. When a young person stands out as good sportsman/sportswoman, he/she may be invited to complete for a private school and thus be granted a scholarship – and this means the chance to study in better school. Although this is still an incipient practice, it is already present in Brazil, especially in high school and university. In this regard, the talent revealed through the performance in sports might be crucial in benefiting or limiting the aspiration to achieve growth through sport.

The contribution of activities performed in the development of skills and knowledge in sports

The trend in some PIS programs to use free time with recreational activities seems to dissociate them from the necessary systematization for the development of knowledge and skills in sports (Zaluar, 1994; Vianna, 1999; Vianna&Lovisolo, 2005) – this would in turn increase the chances of participation in competitions and the possibility of being invited by affiliated clubs or gym centers.

The lack of concern for the deepening of knowledge and skills and the growing rate of challenges - which should be a characteristic of any pedagogic progression - seems to contribute to the dropout rates of participants. The feeling of pleasure provided by the “overcoming [of limitations]” which is repeatedly mentioned as a component of sport seems to vanish. The opposition between the proposals and procedures of sport projects and the aspirations of students lead to a simple assessment: if the activities undertaken do not satisfy the learning and development expectations in sports, there is no reason to continue. The involvement in drug trafficking, the need to work to increase the family income, school problems, school hours incompatible with the sport schedule, the lack of material to practice and the supply of sports that do not match the interests of the young, are some other reasons for the denial to get involved and for dropout. However, there is another factor that causes dropout, when through self-assessment a person becomes aware of the lack of talent. In this regard, sport competitions might help to shape this more rapidly.

There is no evidence that individuals that do not get moving in their efforts to achieve socially valuable objectives experiment some kind of conscience. Similarly, the idea that people in the working class do not see themselves as social agents able to transform their lives and their social environment seems also pure fantasy. We understand that these individuals perceive the limitations and restrictions imposed by the social means, while they believe that talent and personal investment in alternative solutions to those which are socially valuable, can be seen as their own opportunities to improve their lives.

The representation that sport is a means to improve life is still present in the discourse of the informants. The utilitarian vision that, in order to be in activity, “the effort has to be worthwhile” conflicts with the unselfish idea of getting involved without expecting anything in return, and this involvement is also criticized. Sport is seen as a ladder for those who endeavor to overcome barriers both in sport and in life. However, there is lack of perception in the managers of sport projects, in the sense that the infrastructure, the quality of the teaching sessions, the talent and the organic, psychological and social aspects may interfere in the decision of the young to continue or not with their sport activities. Dropouts appear when sport activities fail to fulfill the aspirations of the majority of followers who wish to learn, deepen their skills and grow through sports. For those who are keen and more interested, sport is seen as an opportunity to improve their lives in the future.

The research in Brazil on the phenomenon of the sport for the popular layers has approached the theme from the perspective of the public policies, of the social and pedagogical aspects (Nogueira 2011; Oliveira *et al*, 2016; Kravchychyn& Oliveira, 2016). However, the programs and projects seem to have not yet incorporated the evaluations carried out and are still focused on public policies in the perspectives of managers, without considering the expectations of sports practitioners.

Final Considerations

When the projects that use sport as a means of socialization and citizenship-building are distant from the expectations of individuals, the extent and depth of those projects is reduced, and they are regarded as mere “warehouses” for children. Although in these cases children are taken away from the streets for a relatively short period of time, this is not enough to involve them in a relevant socialization process, and this should not be neglected by managers and by public policy think-tanks.

The various projects involving proposals and similar characteristics fail to accomplish their role in terms of social inclusion and in establishing the bridges needed for the personal and social development of participants, and therefore the far-reaching social impact seems dubious. Apparently, the emphasis of the social impacts of the projects involving any social and education intervention requires the making of agreements between the institutional proposals and the expectations of the players.

Participant dropouts in the case under study are partially explained in the case of projects that fail to fulfill the expectations of those unable to find the conditions for growth and professionalization in the area of sports. We should consider that although professionalization in sports might not be possible for most applicants, either as a result of the lack of infrastructure, adequate tuition or of psycho-physical capacities or valences, these deficiencies lead to dropouts, jeopardizing any social inclusion intent. Furthermore, children and young people living in the favelas are deprived of the benefits of sport practice.

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