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YOUNG PEOPLE, STUDENTS, AND ATHLETES: COMPETITION REDEFINED IN CONTEXTS OF INTENSIFIED SCHOOLING IN SPORTS

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Abstract

Based on an ethnography carried out in an Argentinean high school that is located in a sports club and oriented to physical education, this article analyzes appropriations of sport by young people in terms of their school experiences, related competition, curriculum, and aspirations. Techniques such as semi-structured interviews, field observations, and norm analysis were used. It was found that students contextually appropriate available, legitimate, or dominant meanings and practices regarding norms/regulations coming from school, sports, or even adult expectations, produce alternative or slightly transformed values. They build a critical relationship with the curriculum, with sports, and with the school itself, signifying in a different way the emergence of sports competition values (based on individual success) and the enrichment of the cultural production of the educated person in a more collective way. For many students, sports are valued as a place to develop a professional career, but they are also in tension with youth, student, and curriculum expectations. Sports in these types of schools provide an appealing experience for young people, helping the institution meet their objectives by offering valuable knowledge, discipline, and companionship.

Keywords

Physical Education, Sport Education, Values, Competition, Argentina

Introduction

What about becoming a professional athlete? Or maybe a physical education teacher? A sports journalist? Are sports just a hobby? What is the use of sports in school? These are some of the questions that young Argentinians enrolled in high school are asking themselves. But not in just any school. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, a type of school that had been absent in the educational system until then has been expanding throughout the country: one oriented towards physical education.

The National Plan for Compulsory Education—developed in 2009 by the National Ministry of Education, following the 2006 National Education Law (No. 26,206), which established compulsory

secondary education—defined the political guidelines for secondary education and established the necessity to create school formats that responded to the lack of completion of this level, the diversity of youth interests, and that would create opportunities to guide them towards the labor market and higher education. It proposed new options for oriented secondary education[1], like the orientation in Physical Education, along with fields such as Art, Agriculture and Environment, Communication, Languages, and Computer Science.

Physical education was gradually incorporated into the modern school in Argentina towards the end of the nineteenth century (Aisenstein and Scharagrodsky 2006). The expansion of primary schooling, which was involved in the construction of a national identity, deployed corporal techniques in order to instill a social order and discipline to diverse population groups. Thus, physical education was established as a subject: a privileged space for the formation of the body. But towards the first decades of the twenty-first century, physical education and the expansion of secondary school encountered a new sociocultural context. The creation of a school organized in (and from) physical education and sports intensification responds to a broader process (Balaguer 2025) linked to the hegemony of sports in social life, beyond its role as a device for national identity or moral disciplining.

Sports are no longer only an instance for the production of identities and social collectives on a national, class, gender, and even racial scale (Besnier et al. 2018; Archetti 2001). Sports permeate contemporary youth sociability: their daily lives are often organized in the sociability of clubs, or in informal spaces in neighborhoods, where they gather to practice sports. But sports are also deployed as a multimillion-dollar business, putting into circulation images, bodies, experiences, and materialities—from a soccer jersey to a sticker—within global reach. Those images then produce desires and projections: the sports industry attracts millions of young people who dream of sporting success, which in turn can be (in increasingly precarious and unequal life contexts) an economic victory (Besnier 2012; Garton 2020; Majul 2021). Preparing to be the best and reaching an elite level in a professional career (Fuentes 2021) is an increasingly legitimate possibility for many young people. Moreover, sport and other physical practices increasingly have become an instance for the production of the self and of athletic, healthy, and aesthetic bodies, given the fitness logic that prevails in the social production of contemporary subjectivities (Costa 2015). This confirms Guedes's (2009) research: sports understood as privileged signifiers—producers of meaning in contexts of social change—for both those who practice it professionally and recreationally, as spectators or students.

What would such a school intensified in sports and physical education offer to contemporary youth? Two young people from a privately managed school oriented in physical education, among whom we deployed an ethnographic study during 2021, compared this offering to other types of schools and curriculum: "It's very different from the school I went to, but I really like the orientation more than anything else, above all the sports," one student reported. Another student, Carlos, agreed: "I prefer to be at the gym a thousand times; for example, now that we have a volleyball tournament from 11:40

[1] Traditional options for the oriented cycle at the secondary level in Argentina were Economics and Administration, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences.

a.m. to 1:40 p.m., rather than sitting there studying economics or psychology, I enjoy school much more. I see it as more flexible and I like it." The comparison with a "regular" high school illustrates a youthful expectation that seems to be fulfilled in this type of oriented school: the taste for sports, movement, and competition as core organizers of the school experience. What they value outside school is now happening inside its walls.

What appropriations of sport and schooling are made by young people in this type of oriented schools? What meanings about competition and success are put into play among young people and adults, and how are they articulated with their future projections? Our theoretical approach considers these perceptions as a way of objectifying social values (Graeber 2018), addressing, at the same time, a power relationship in the construction of meanings grounded in the category of appropriation, as developed in the field of anthropology and education in Latin America (Rockwell 2009). Students contextually appropriate available, legitimate, or dominant meanings and practices regarding norms/regulations coming from school, sports, or even adult expectations, produce alternative or slightly transformed values. That's why it is also helpful to incorporate the encounters, conflicts, or articulations of the points of view (Neufeld 2000) from families, schools (authorities, teachers), or even what "society" as a whole demands from students regarding what they say about sports.

We grasp meanings as a form of value that speaks about how desires (Graeber 2018) and aspirations intertwine with what schools and sports as institutions, practices, and values have to offer them. If modern sports already possessed a formative expectation in the shaping of amateur ideology, we ask which value constructions are made by young people in a new context, where sports are both a tool for economic projection and an instrument to present themselves as competent and capable people. Are sports a new type of cultural production of educated people? (Levinson and Holland 1996).

Methodology

The ethnography was conducted on the fourth grade level of a private high school (located within a sports club) oriented in physical education[2]. The fieldwork focused on involvement in the daily life of the school and was conducted over the course of four months in 2021, consisting of twice-weekly visits participating in classes of different subjects related to physical education, recesses, and institutional events. The observation focused on interactions among students and between students and teachers. The ethnography aimed to identify the meanings and value perceptions of young people regarding the role of sports in their schooling process. We conducted six open individual interviews: one each with the principal, the legal representative, a preceptor, and three teachers, and two open group interviews with mixed groups of male and female students. Documentary information—such as educational laws and the curricular design of the high school oriented in physical education from Córdoba[3]—were collected to analyze the regulated expectations of the public educational policy about this new type of school and the role of sports. We carried out a thematic content analysis based

[2] Franco Balaguer carried out the fieldwork as part of his master's thesis in educational research, directed by Sebastián Fuentes.

[3] In Argentina, each province develops its own curriculum designs based on national guidelines.

on the theoretical categories of the research (Guber 2005), contrasting the native perspectives of students and teachers with the selected norms.

The school, which we will call "El Ceibo," belongs to and is located within a traditional sports club founded at the beginning of the twentieth century in the city of Córdoba, one of the most populated in the country. The selection of this school allows for explaining and deepening the intricate relationship between education, sports for young people, and the educational system. Schools in sports clubs are a novel type of institutional organization in the Argentine educational system. Clubs capitalize on the relationship they have with families and their infrastructure to offer a formal school experience. This relationship is structured according to the interest of varying sectors of society in sports, which seek in them spaces for sociability, sports competition, the disciplining of children and young people, or the search for fit and healthy bodies.

Club schools are not state-run, but they also do not have the characteristics of a traditional private school, run by a proprietary, a public limited company, or a religious congregation. In Argentina, sports clubs operate as non-profit civil associations: the "owners" of the clubs are their members. The phenomenon of club schools has been little studied at the local level; therefore, there are no concrete surveys on their number at a national level. In Córdoba, there are twelve schools—eleven created in this century—that operate on the premises of sports clubs. The rise of club-based schools converges with the establishment of physical education oriented schools: two phenomena that occurred at the same time and have sport as their central axis.

The expansion of this type of school is explained not only by their symbolic capital as sports institutions, but that they are seen as "private" institutions, which large sectors of the population value as an instance of the production of social, moral, and economic distinction in relation to the state and the public (Fuentes 2013; Servetto 2014). The option that families have of choosing a school in a club with a vast sports infrastructure and a way of bonding with young people is attractive in principle because of the playful, physical, and experiential aspects, and is produced by a fragmented educational system (Tiramonti 2008) where each social fragment seeks a singular type of schooling adapted to their preferences and expectations. The families that attend El Ceibo belong to middle and upper-middle social classes, taking into account the employment status of the adults in the family group and their educational levels.

In Argentina, secondary school is compulsory by law. It consists of two cycles—basic and oriented—and depending on the province and the type of secondary school (common or technical), it can last from five to seven years. In the province of Córdoba, common secondary schools last for six years; each cycle lasts three years, and the oriented cycle in El Ceibo is focused on physical education with several sports subjects[4]. As in all Argentinian secondary schools, all students follow the same annual path and subjects in each year.

[4] The fourth grade is the first one of the oriented cycle. Fifteen out of forty curriculum hours are courses related to physical education/sports, such as Physical Education and Training for Life and Work, Sports Practice, Gymnastic and Expressive Practice, and Physical Education and Environment.

Ethical safeguards were maintained: the names of the interviewees were withheld, and the names used here are pseudonyms. In addition, it was decided to keep the name of the high school and the homonymous club confidential, to make any possible identification of the actors more difficult. All permissions and consents necessary were requested during the ethnography.

The Contentious Meaning of Competition: Nuances in Youth Appropriation of Sport

In their daily school life, students go through different moments where they put into practice body techniques to play with and against others. The pedagogical intentionality of teachers can focus on the technique or on the physical exercise itself. Student appropriation occurs around competition, transforming an exercise into a display of speed and physical expertise in order to win:

> The teacher divides the group into two large rows. She tells them that they must run, perform a roll, go under a bench and then jump on a mat. When they return, the next partner runs out. The students take the activity as a competition: [they] do not perform the indicated jump, perform the roll with great speed and, when they pass under the bench, they hit each other. Those waiting in line shout "go, go, go" to the classmates who are doing the activity. When the activity is over, the winning group gathers, grabs each other's shoulders in a circle, and jumps up and down, celebrating the triumph. A student sits down and says "It happens that I am very competitive, too much," to which I answer "Why?" "Because I like to win," she replied (Field Note 2021).

Social norms are learned, centrally, from the students' appropriation of their bodies and legitimate values culturally produced. As is common in many schools, students appropriate the indication to train and learn a body technique as a way to search for success—one of the most extended meanings of sports in contemporary life—transformed into value as a way to show oneself in a school setting.

During the student's week[5] celebrations, young people divided into three "tribes." The activity planned by the teachers aimed at playing a variety of both non-competitive and competitive games and sports. In competitive sports, the students had to sign up in teams respecting the tribe to which they belonged, but could be integrated with classmates from other years.

> In the soccer area there were more students, either as players (mostly boys) or spectators (mostly girls). A female student approached the teacher to tell him that she wanted to play soccer but was not signed up, to which the teacher replied that she should join a team from her tribe. When the teams are changed, they are still all boys. Some girls remain seated on the edge of the court, cheering on their teammates. A few minutes pass, and the student who wanted to play leaves the area (Field Note 2021).

Team building is left to the self-management of the young people, limiting the pedagogical action to the presentation of the proposal. Teachers expect students to develop a learning process that values collaboration and broad participation beyond the competitive logic, but competition attracts the most

[5] September 21 is Student's Day in Argentina, the same day as the beginning of the spring season in the southern hemisphere.

attention. The formal sports environment of a club attributes to competition a differential and teleological value, understanding that it is there where a person or a team can show their skills, achievements, abilities, and everything they trained for, in the search for winning. Competition, as seen here, is gender embedded: if the objective is to win and perform their own skills, homosociality and the subordination of women (Fuentes 2021) organize the scene. Male students perform for and among the girls, showing off their abilities for the female audience, who are associated with the lack of sporting abilities and ambition to compete (Wenetz 2007).

Androcentric sports and competitive logics are installed in the school specialized in sports, with a stark absence of adults' regulations and against curricular orientations: national and provincial regulations address gender hierarchies[6], instructing teachers to intervene in everyday practices of gender-based discrimination and violence. Social gender hierarchies and sports-dominant values on competition seem to prevail over non-competitive and gender justice values in the way young people and adults transform meaning into values (Graeber 2018). The taste for winning is appropriated in this direction and produces practices in accordance with the dominant representation of current sport.

We found nuances regarding the prevailing legitimacy of competition as a native way of valuing the different appropriations between the so-called individual and group sports:

> Antonio: And in group games you want to be more competitive.
>
> Natalia: You always want to win; you always want your team to be... I don't know, you always want to do well. Individually, I don't feel that way so much. I mean, I want to do well, but in the group I feel more obliged to do well (Field Note 2021).

In the case of collective sports, the expectation to win works as a bond between individuals who feel a kind of moral obligation to perform the best for their mates. But it is not only moral: the interdependence of individual and group actions allows for the emergence of mimetic tensions based on disputes between groups, which generates a pleasant emotion as it unfolds in a controlled tension (Elias and Dunning 1992). In the case of individual sports, the focus is on the registration of one's own body and self-control, where all the expectations concentrate on a sole individual.

The students recognize this difference: when a group game situation is presented, the tension revolves around performing positive actions for the team; when an individual learning situation is presented, the social pressure generated by the group is left aside and the tension appears with respect to the use of one's own body and self-demand. Students say that when playing a group sport, if they fail a movement or technique, they would not be blamed or expelled, but supported and cheered up to do it better. Emilio, a teacher, agrees with this view, remarking that opposite to what happened in other schools, students here not only have specific "sporting skills," they also deploy a way of "being with their teammates and [understanding] that things don't work out, [learning] a lot of patience; these are

[6] National Law of Sexual Comprehensive Education (N° 26.150) and Córdoba´s curriculum design: "subsequently and progressively (...) scenarios closer to formal sport will be encouraged, maintaining a sense of inclusiveness and equal opportunities for genders in school practice" (2012, 238).

the things that, for me, sport develops" (Field Note 2021). The responsibility of being part of a team can be rewarding and demanding, and this prioritizes the valuing of group sport over individual ones. The meaning of competition emerges as a value constructed in collective terms.

The attribute of "playing well" (*jugar bien*) in a group sport—a frequent moral expression among the students—does not guarantee a position of privilege or prominence, given that, in addition to the physical aspect, other values considered legitimate in group coexistence come into play, such as companionship, solidarity, and a sense of team unity. -"Playing well" is appropriated by young people as morality and as an orientation of individual action towards the good of the team. This is even more critical in an institution that, despite being a club, is still a school, which shades and contextualizes the model of sporting success as the only objective.

Competition as an end in and of itself is presented in the curricular design as an objective that must be problematized in the school: "It is imperative to assume a critical stance regarding the aesthetic patterns or competitive performance that the media transmit as a model" (Government of Córdoba 2012, 235), to which a teacher recounted: "Everything that is formal—that which may imply rigor, that which may imply a connection with the possibility of sports success—is denied, today, in our physical education. It is not like that worldwide; in ours, it is." The curricular design seeks to deploy in school the construction of values different from those that focus only on individual competition and the maximization of the value of individual performance (Ziegler 2008).

The comparison made by the teacher on the subject of sports success is made with reference to the performance of athletes who dedicate their time to training and competitions of a specific practice, while at school, the pedagogical intentions transform these practices and the meaning and value given to the competitions, where student appropriations intervene. For Octavio, this curricular orientation appears contradictory, because it would erase a characteristic of modern sport: "We want to bring part of formal sports, but we want to take out competition and... if the main characteristic of sport is competition, then do we or don't we give sport?" Sport as competition is also a contentious meaning between normative discourse and teachers' views.

The orientation of the school intensified in physical education and sports does not imply a harmony of objectives and experiences. The appropriations of young people sometimes go in the direction of individual competition and the (androcentric) taste for just winning, others in that of group competition, but not necessarily in terms of the value of success. Sometimes it is the "thrill" of playing with others and trying to win that prevails, a value coming from the bodily and group experience. The quest for victory does not always speak of the victory of the values of competition and individual success as the only principle that organizes the practices of young people. There are some moral marks of the cultural production of the educated person (Levinson and Holland 1996) that point out the weight of the school as a place to transform these cultural objectives of sporting success and to favor the differential appropriation that young people make of these sporting values, although teachers may be blind—in spite of gender-based curriculum—to male hierarchies at play.

Careers, Curriculum, and Sport Disciplining

Young people critically construct the moral association between sport and competition, looking at the effects that the teaching of competitive sport has on their relationship with other constructions of value. These other "values" are presented to them when they find that sport demands more of their youth and student time, as Natalia states:

> I recently got my first horse, something I dreamed of all my life, and I was very happy. Then everything became more serious; it started to be more competitive. I have competitions almost every weekend [and] I train every day except Sundays and Mondays. Lately, I'm not going because I have my fifteenth birthday party, I'm [busy] doing all my homework, and it's hard for me.

Natalia holds an upper social class position, as horse riding and the possession of such an animal reflect. Like many of her classmates, she chose this school because of its sports intensification, an experience that clashes against her routine as a teenager practicing additional and family-related sports outside the school, like Juan, who was chosen for the *doguitos*[7], but "didn't make it because [he] had school stuff, so [he] couldn't attend all the training sessions." Whether privileged sports or sport played at an elite level, the intensification of sports may compete with the practice of competitive sports, in the always difficult encounter between family, school, young peers, and other peoples' demands (Neufeld 2000). The school—schedules, attendance, and learnings—and the juvenile aspect are strained when the interest in sports that motivates many young people to enroll in El Ceibo leads them to the deployment of an incipient sports career that will demand more time than the school itself.

This tension is representative of the specialization that the professional sports career has taken on in the global and local industry that sustains it (Besnier 2012), with intensive training and competitions at an increasingly younger age. Our data indicate that a school intensified in physical education does not necessarily facilitate the development of a professional sports career: the values associated with academic school and youth time place a limit on the expansion of professional sports as the most valuable horizon for young people.

Young people at this type of school must cope with curriculum and teaching demands. As they advance in their school path, the curricular load of sports subjects increases. What also increases is the possibility to widen their sports-related knowledge and experiences. Antonio, a student, recounted that: "From the fourth grade onwards we no longer have the games and sports we had before, and we played all the games that were unknown to us (...) We always played games in those classes that we had never played in our lives, and it was good." Likewise, Matías (another student) expressed: "We were really excited, because there were games we didn't know and they were very good, but these last [few] years we have been getting more into some specific ones. For example, we are watching volleyball, [doing] more with the technique, organizing the rules, and things like that."

[7] Córdoba's flagship rugby team.

The learning experience and the construction of what is valuable is done by pondering the unknown of the sport they learn at school, which aids in the deepening of knowledge on the subject. The curricular assessment made by young people is also a critical appraisal of the place of sport in school and its relationship with what the school brings them, as expressed by Natalia: "For me, they should spend less time on each game, teach it faster, because it is as if they used many classes to teach low handling[8], when they could have used one or two."

The school time devoted to physical education, sports, and the learning of body techniques allows the students to develop a position of knowledge that looks critically at what the school offers them: they critically appropriate these experiences, as they value new learnings, setting themselves in a power position to assess what they learn. While Matías valued the intensification of volleyball learning, Natalia had a more distant position on how this teaching is organized. There is a similarity between the two perspectives: the criticism is made from the acceptance of the teaching of sport, its learning, and its value in general terms. The tension about how much and how to teach sports in schools is common in secondary schools with the subject Physical Education (Kirk 2006).

Young students and teachers also appropriate the curriculum proposal by converting the meaning and objectives of sports into desires and future aspirations. For some of the latter, teaching competitive sports reinforces a historical function of the modern school: discipline. "One of them says that children who play competitive sports are more respectful of the rules. The higher the level of competition, the more respectful, more humble, and more focused" (Field Note 2021). Discipline becomes a key capital for their future in any position in the labor market.

For students, the aspiration—built in the encounter among crossed expectations from families, sports media and culture, schools, etc.—is varying: they may imagine a future as professional athletes, like Natalia and Juan, or talk about becoming a professional trainer or a physical education teacher. Others, like many young people, do not either talk or imagine how meaningful a future may be in sports (or in any role or position). Generally, students and teachers agree about the goodness of sport to educate (disciplined) persons while opening and depending their chances in the sports industry and in school services.

Conclusions

Sport, when offered as an orientation of secondary education, is appropriated by young people, especially with regard to the competitive dimension prevailing in the global industry. The cultural construction of competition as an individual value is present in this type of schools, nuanced from both the youth and adult perspective and from the curricular design. Young students in El Ceibo critically appropriate competition as a way to bond and support each other, manifested in collective sports more than in individual ones: they experience the value of enjoying the youthful, recreational, and sociability aspect, the excitement of playing with others in a group sport, and strengthening their companionship, enriching the cultural production of the educated person (Levinson and Holland

[8] A volleyball technique.

1996) in a more collective way. Although regulations and norms critically address gender hierarchies and dominant individualistic values related to competition, the appropriation of this meaning into values to foster in schools are neither seen nor played by teachers.

Sport as a schooling system device still appeals to and interests young people beyond the economic and success goals it may promise them. The intensification of sports education allows them to enhance their knowledge of sports, develop a critical perspective on the teaching of sports, and transform the contentious meanings of sports into aspirations for the future, although this conversion is not automatic: while some may aspire to become professional athletes, others do not. Meanwhile, teachers value the intensification of sports as a discipline, as a practice linked to the internalization of norms, and as a convivial experience. This is where an educational offer that proposes diverse sports practices makes sense, being possible in increasingly fragmented educational systems. Clubs transformed into schools offer a novel articulation of dominant values and practices that update educational experiences that students—and their families—consider meaningful.

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