Abstract: This paper is a report on a participant observation undertaken with volleyball teams preparing to participate in School Games. The goal was to understand how a proposal of moral education is dynamized in game experiences, which demand managing situations, searching for ways of recognition and visibility, and enhancing opportunities for participation, which are also educational experiences.

Resumo: O presente trabalho apresenta os relatos de uma observação participante realizada com equipes de voleibol em momentos de preparação e disputa de Jogos Escolares. O objetivo foi o de compreender como uma proposta de educação moral se dinamiza na formação da experiência de jogo, em que é preciso gerenciar situações, buscar formas de reconhecimento e visibilidade e ampliar oportunidades de participação, as quais são, ao mesmo tempo, experiência de formação.

Resumen: Este trabajo presenta los relatos de una observación participante realizada con equipos de voleibol en momentos de preparación y disputa de Juegos Escolares. El objetivo fue comprender cómo una propuesta de educación moral se dinamiza en la formación de la experiencia de juego, donde es necesario resolver situaciones, buscar formas de reconocimiento y visibilidad y ampliar las oportunidades de participación, que son, al mismo tiempo, experiencias de formación.

Keywords: Sports. Moral principles. Adolescent.


*Universidade Federal de Sergipe. Aracaju, SE, Brasil. E-mail: ufsquefren@gmail.com

Received on: 09-15-2014
Approved on: 07.01.2015

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1 INTRODUCTION

As part of a cultural project to produce sport as an educational practice, training of student teams is a major pedagogical strategy for sport in schools. Above all, training sessions include the demands of moral education since the pursuit of athletic performance underscores the view that “everyone who wants to be an athlete must follow a fundamental axiom, namely, no one is an athlete without moral obligations” (CAMINHA, 2003, p. 64). Sports tournaments, in turn, are based on the assumption that “expecting important marks without daily, rigorous and multiform training that covers the development of all physical, nervous and psychological qualities of athletes is pointless” (MOLLET, 1979, p. 57).

This text describes the experience of participant observation carried out between May and November 2012 with male and female volleyball teams of the Arquidiocesano Sagrado Coração de Jesus (Archdiocesan School Sacred Heart of Jesus), located in the city of Aracaju (SE). Regular training sections were analyzed as “stages for experiences and social contacts” (MAGNANI, 2009), with special emphasis on how participation in sports practices and training sections is part of the process of building the game experience as education, understanding that it “is related to production of images and meanings for social life, it participates in the construction of notions of subject and identities, and it establishes social relations where voices and stories intersect” (NOGUEIRA, 2013, p. 890).

The search for higher performances builds experiences that play the pedagogical role of culture in building identities, mobilizing desires and building moral values, which means to say that “pedagogy occurs wherever knowledge is produced, wherever culture is given the chance to translate experiences and constructive truths, even if those truths seem endlessly redundant, superficial and trivial” (GIROUX, 1999, p. 253).

The work included three steps: the first meetings focused on signing an agreement with the school and identifying some peculiarities of the institution. They gradually went from an initial moment of strangeness and unfamiliarity with the people and the location to one of freedom to make inquiries and pay more attention to details and events. At the second step, our work as assistant coach for teams preparing for the 10th TV Sergipe School Games, the 19th Spring Games and the 17th North-Northeast Inter-Diocesan Games (25 athletes, 13 girls and 12 boys, aged 14-17) was recorded on a field book, with entries covering daily training routine and videotapes of official matches. At this stage, not only students took on role of athletes; I also had to share the role of assistant coach with another assistant. There were no interviews, but rather dialogues on sports, questions about athletes’ moral education and the stories and performance possibilities of the school’s volleyball teams. In the third phase, we went away from the research site, in short periods of absence and return to report to the school and evaluate the work done. This text went through two previous assessments by the school: in December 2012, when participant observation ended, and in March 2015, after this journal confirmed publication.

2 ABOUT THE ARCHDIOCESAN SCHOOL

The Archdiocesan School Sacred Heart of Jesus is located in the block formerly delimited by Riachuelo, Senator Rollembarg, Itabaiana and Pacatuba streets – land destined...
to be the Episcopal Palace at the time of Don José Thomaz Gomes da Silva, first Bishop of the Aracaju Diocese, sworn in on January 3, 1910. According to Souza (2006), the option to invest public money in religious enterprises, then provided for under Law 534, allowed the Diocesan Seminary Sacred Heart of Jesus, founded on April 4, 1913, to have its own headquarters rather than being located at the Bishop’s residence at Camerino Square, 181. The school was founded when the first Archbishop of Aracaju, Dom Vicente Távora, allowed Father José Carvalho de Souza, then rector of the Archdiocesan Seminary, to found the Diocesan Educational Institution Sacred Heart of Jesus, which became a Gymnasium in 1960 and a School in 1963.

The school’s church towers stand out in the São José neighborhood landscape, in Aracaju’s central area. Beneath the two towers, which have prominent crosses at the top, an image of the Risen Christ consecrates the red and white tones that adorn the entire Jesuit architecture, extended by a row of red parallel lines between typical classroom windows. Its symbol – a moving Olympic torch over an open bible inside an inverted triangle of thick red borders – expresses the sporting sense of the school’s moral education proposal, exposed on a plaque during the opening of Multisports Park Monsenhor José Carvalho de Souza:

Recognizing the importance of sport for body development, as a prerequisite for the development of the spirit, the ARCHDIOCESAN SCHOOL “S. HEART OF JESUS” offers its – current and future – students this MULTISPORTS PARK, consisting of SEMI-OLYMPIC AND CHILDREN’S POOLS, SPORT GYMNASIUM and FOOTBALL FIELD, today opened under GOD’s blessings through the hands of Hon. DOM LUCIANO JOSÉ CABRAL DUARTE, ARCHBISHOP OF METROPOLITAN ARACAJU.


Before visiting the Archdiocesan School for the first time, I had my impressions about it: as soon as I arrived in Aracaju, in May 2009, I realized the importance of student competitions and the School’s role in Sergipean sports; I remember one of my students at the School of Physical Education at the Federal University of Sergipe (UFS) referring to the “arch-enemies” as the main school to be defeated in sporting events. At the same time, I was amazed by the effervescence of the Spring Games in the city of Aracaju and the state of Sergipe:

More closely, a sporting event in my school life was important for learning and stayed in my memory: Sergipe’s Spring Games. Going deep in my memory, I remember a Saturday afternoon in September 1987. Over the 900 meters of Barão de Maruim Avenue in downtown Aracaju, thousands of people gathered on the sidewalks. Coming from different parts of the city, including several towns in the state, the whole population seemed to move to that area. They came on foot, by car and especially by bus since special lines were offered that day. They mingled with street vendors, police officers, firefighters, health workers, people handing out political leaflets, and political authorities on a dais at the center of the avenue. With this, the avenue would color up, changing the dour aspect of daily life to give way to the colors and sounds of Sergipe schools, but ultimately to give way to the desires and expectations of young students, parents, school principals and teachers, who would be warmed on that day: the day of the Spring Games opening parade. Desires and expectations that would be channeled over the next twelve or fifteen days on the sports competitions to be held in several parts of the city (DANTAS JUNIOR, 2010, p. 18) [emphasis added]

Television coverage of the 26th Spring Games still in 2009 increased my interest in the School. The story about the opening ceremony, broadcast by TV Sergipe, an affiliate of Globo
Network, used expressions such as “the biggest celebration of school sports” and “a memorable night”. The number of schools and students participating in the Games – 378 public and private schools, and more than 13,000 students – showed the magnitude of the event. The parade of athletes, the presence of then Governor Marcelo Deda, the lighting of the Olympic cauldron, the solemn oath and presence of athletes like Hugo Hoyama and siblings Diego and Daniele Hypólito at the opening ceremony anticipated the realization of an inspired event in Olympism.

In the article on the closure of the Games, the Archdiocesan School appeared as the general champion in that edition, with 47 gold medals, 51 silver medals and 31 bronze medals. In addition to red and white highlighted in flags and students’ uniforms, I had my first contact with the school’s then pedagogical and managing director Monsignor Carvalho. Rather than exalting victory itself, the clergyman’s words thanked students, teachers, parents and grandparents who went to root for the School.

The Archdiocesan School Sacred Heart of Jesus is a private Catholic school whose philanthropic aim is to form worthy and capable citizens who are faithful followers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Guided by values such as faith, truth, justice, solidarity and love of work, the Archdiocesan School became the champion of the Spring Games for the first time in 1979 and won it for the 19th time in 2012. Both because of its sporting structure and its educational proposal, the School bore the mark of sportivation of Physical Education, whose intricacies emphasize teacher-coach, student-athlete, class-training session relationship. In 2012, the School’s pedagogical proposal for the first years of schooling – 1st-3rd years of elementary school – indicated Pre-Sports Recreational activities where students came into contact with materials and dynamics through activities with little emphasis on competition; in the 4th and 5th years, multi-sports initiation classes were offered to experience different sports; from 6th to 9th year, during the so-called Sports Physical Education stage, students would choose a sport according to previously acquired knowledge; in high school, with High Level Sports activities, students would enter teams to compete in the School Games and/or other student competitions.

Training sessions for volleyball teams used to take place three times a week, each one lasting approximately two hours, differently from curricular Physical Education. Sessions were divided into four stages, with variations in time and intensity during the periodization: physical preparation; specific warm-up routines; simple exercises where only one fundamental was emphasized; complex exercises through simultaneous training of several technical fundamentals. When competitions approached, physical and technical training was gradually replaced by tactical application exercises focused on game situations.

The pedagogical goal of the School’s volleyball coach and teacher was to reconcile a humanistic proposal with a technicist one – a challenge that resulted from his Physical Education studies in the early 1980s. In his view, technicism was the basis for learning sports’ technical and tactical aspects while the humanistic trend supported an educational proposal based on moral values. In lectures before games and training sessions, memories about technical elements such as serve, block and defense were pervaded by the need to give one’s best, to live up to all that training effort. Technical and instrumental rationality together with memory of the peculiar conducts of athletes’ condition reinforced the objectives and motivations for playing the finals of the 10th TV SERGIPE School Games:

I feel confident for all we have built over the years with lots of difficulty, and if we are here at this final today, we certainly deserved it. What matters is what we managed to produce in training. We don’t have to fear anyone, we’re unbeaten, I don’t know
if you’ve noticed, but we’re unbeaten. The order is to be determined; the order is to believe always; focus on serve, you have eight seconds to serve, you don’t have to go out there and blow the ball, oh no! If I position myself by the net I’ll block, I will defend in the back, they can shoot that I’ll take it, I’ll do what I can. And that’s the lesson I leave to your lives, whatever you want to do, do it now. The worst thing that can happen in a human being’s life is regret: ‘hey, I could’ve done more...’ It’s over! Always seek your best. Whether it’s here, in your professional life or in your family life. That’s the lesson of sports, a whole formation for human beings. That’s what I want, the best of you; be my main player until the twelfth player on the bench. All of you, this is a team, everyone has to be ready to give their best on the court. Winning or losing is part of the game, you have to be prepared for everything. Believe it and make it happen now. It’s not impossible, it’s playing ball. Go get them, break it all, don’t let them even breathe. We’ve trained, we’ve trained for this game, for this title (Raymundinho, Archdiocesan School’s volleyball coach, 2012).

Before matches, the battle cry was repeated several times, focusing on the coach’s question: “Who are we?”; “Arch!” the students answered. “Who are we?” “Arch!” repeated twice and followed by “One, two, three... unity, strength, Arch”. It would build an environment of belonging in which production of collective feelings was the driving force for sports performance. The teacher was a source of motivation for sport experience, not to lead the team as an army or the make discipline into something easy and kind; rather, he built a type of teacher-student relationship guided by friendly confidence. The work was guided by principles such as respect for the name of the Archdiocesan School and pride to be part of that institution; knowledge of the rules of the discipline and dedication to training; belief in the ability to win as a result of the work process; creating a pleasant environment for those who are willing to contribute; appreciation of individuals on behalf of the collective success; use of past stories and experiences to analyze the present situation.

3 FORMING GAME EXPERIENCES

Criticism to “sportivized” Physical Education sees sports training as a set of practices with few possibilities to promote multiple forms of participation. While for Kunz (1994), sport was connected to a kind of instrumental rationality produced for physical and technical improvement of individuals seen as manipulable objects, Soares et al. (1992), say that characteristics of sports performance (maximum athletic performance, performance comparison, the principle of outdoing, tighter regulation, and rationalization of resources and techniques) attribute educational values that inevitably provoke and reproduce social inequalities. The characteristics of the civilizing process – under a high degree of corruption and alienation – cause sport to take on dehumanizing aspects marked by “gradual destruction of the bases of worthy life in society” (TAFFAREL, 2009, p. 72).

However, formation and training of school teams offer a range of opportunities for students to circulate and move between opportunities for involvement and participation provided by the experience of sporting sociability, in the sense that “sociability seems to respond to young people’s needs for communication, solidarity, democracy, autonomy, affective exchanges and especially identity” (DAYRELL, 2007, p. 1111). Interpreting Gohn (2005) for the context of this work, being in a sports team requires that individuals relate to the symbolic universe of that practice and create individual and collective actions, identity processes, analysis and re-interpretation of situations and facts. The student-athlete is presented as one of the “multiple expressions of youth, which can be interpreted within a specific cultural universe” (CATANI; GILIOLI, 2008, p. 12), under a conception according to which being young is as much an obligation as a possibility. In
the multiplicity of manifestations of the youth condition, we find “internal diversity in terms of ethos, lifestyles, worldviews, in general, modes of social construction of reality” (VELHO, 2005, p. 191).

The Archdiocesan School’s volleyball teams includes practitioners who are rockers, skaters, models and musicians; they are connected to social media networks; they write poetry and have political and religious doubts and views. The beginning or the end of training sessions used to be moments to discuss game situations of that day, past games, best performances and moves, but also their flaws, weekend parties, schoolwork or events featured on the media. Interests and points of view would come together to make up a school team, thus enhancing the meaning of the sporting experience and turning student competitions into a point for meeting and social coexistence.

Sports training practices promote the construction of the game experience where technical and tactical elements of each sport are learned and improved. Participants use previous experiences and knowledge about the sport to assess the applicability of the activities suggested by the coach and the way they see themselves in a sports team. As they were training for the 10th TV SERGIPE School Games, the student who played libero in the men’s team left. The athlete chosen to replace him had never trained in that position, which led him to demand pass and defense exercises, leaving attack and serve aside. Faced with that new challenge, the new libero often arrived before training hours and requested that some of the assistant coaches conduct and pass defense exercises.

Not only the two hours of training were used for some kind of involvement with volleyball. On Monday, the two teams trained in sequence: the women’s team trained from 6 pm to 8 pm while men were in court from 8 pm to 10 pm. Arriving before sessions allowed them to train some specifics of volleyball such as attack and defense, shoot to the hoop or to join casual game. They could also play casually with the fundamentals without turning it into a technical improvement activity.

Some female athletes sought to extend the training session: two of them decided to learn to jump serve and took the opportunity to do that while asking to be observed and have their flaws corrected. In order to improve that ability, they would remain after training, during the men’s team time. That situation persisted until some boys would begin to remind them that their training hours were over. Ending a training session did not mean going home, because if there were any ongoing activity, they often stayed in the school. Boys used to come earlier to watch the girls’ training and perhaps participate in some exercise or game, and girls remained longer, not only to train, but to be present in that social space.

The schedules did not prevent the several possibilities of using time to get involved with volleyball, with people and with cultural practices that could possibly arise, such as music or storytelling. Being on the court before the scheduled time and staying after training allowed conversations, meeting athletes from other sports, arranging meetings to decide questions about school subjects such as projects to be presented, setting meetings at concerts and parties, commenting on the events of the day, etc. On one particular day, a member of the volleyball team brought a guitar, since there would be a rehearsal for a music festival to be held in the coming weeks. After the training session, a long bench near the court, next to the water fountain, became a place for songs and stories.

The production of a collective feeling embellishes a work permeated by different levels of seriousness and fun. Their dividing line is subtle: a joke or catch phrase, some funny situation, the visit of a former athlete, etc. would trigger relaxed situations. The settler of the men’s team was diligent and punctual in training sessions, besides not missing a chance to train with the women’s team, but his presence in other classes was not as constant. The justification was that
“class is boring, training is not”. Discipline and seriousness are not obstacles to fun; they form a fruitful partnership. Training is bad when it ceases to be dynamic, when not everyone strives and when many mistakes are made. Technical improvement becomes a condition for a positive relationship with the game, with no clear distance between training practices and a playful relationship with the possibilities for sports participation.

Since sport visibility in Sergipe is mainly focused on students, athletes know that their participation will end after school competitions or at a certain age when they no longer can compete in those tournaments. Desire and commitment to improving technical fundamentals, besides exciting about the opportunities for participation, build a space for visibility and recognition – twin manifestations in the School Games. Antiracist and anti-homophobic struggles cannot be pointed out here, for example, due to symbolic and economic inclusion of discriminated groups; we are far from concerns like unemployment, poor living conditions, high cost of artistic and cultural activities. The remoteness of those issues is expressed in the few allusions about the possibilities for social mobility through sport, at least in the socioeconomic sense. Two female students were identified as possible candidates for professional teams, but one of them was not interested in the profession while the other had the opportunity to be part of youth teams in a southeastern state, but decided to return to his hometown of Aracaju, with the justification that “this life is not for [her]”.

The notion of visibility approaches the symbolic benefits of being in evidence. As part of the attempt to become visible in a certain segment of youth, students’ self-evaluation focused on questions like “how have I played” “did you see that ball I attacked”, “how about that defense”. Not as petty or vulgar interest, but as a specific mode of being young and seeking attention and recognition for their actions. In the words of one of them: “Sport is a way of being in the social environment, right, of wanting to be noticed for it and enjoying youth”.

A sports team includes different relationships in a group that proves heterogeneous. There is a relationship with first or second string status: there are those who see themselves as absolutely first-string, whose place is not threatened; those who know they do not have enough skills yet to take the position of older players; others who just want to play, which means training with the team or having the opportunity to enter the court when the opposing team is not a challenge. Students resort to a number of issues to justify their presence in the group of athletes: scoring points is a sign of being there not just to “fill in” but to contribute, which can subsequently bring compliments or comments about one’s performance. The evaluation focuses on whether the opportunity to be on the court was wasted or not, and that one should pay attention to situations able to impress the coach to ensure a place in the next games.

Those who stand out technically want to be recognized as being critical for the successful outcome of the match. More powerful attacks are reason for praise and comparisons with professional athletes. Playing well means building a sense of self-confidence and escaping the derogatory designation of “pipoqueiro”, i. e. a player who fails at decisive moments. Discussions about tactical options included how each player saw his or herself in the team: settlers who want to become attackers, on the grounds the former are not seen and praised as much as the latter. Better understanding tactics is also a process of personnel evaluation about the type of relationship that each one wants to have with the game and his or her presence as a member of a team.

Sport’s educational trait in presenting itself as a field in which there is fun and joy, but also difficulties and problems (VISÃO..., 1991, p. 35) includes the ability to manage situations. Conflict situations were infrequent because, I suppose, of the very trajectory of
the Archdiocesan School in working under the influence of teachers as moral authority. How could conflicts and disagreements not exist? Where were discussions or stressful situations caused by the constant demand for better performance? In seeking the explanation for that fact, I discovered an atypical situation: because of disagreements occurred in previous years, the women’s team came to the conclusion that they had to focus on group interests. In the final match of a tournament, still under the excitement of victory celebrations, the group gathered at the center of the court and one of the athletes stated that the absence of friction and team spirit were the main ingredients of victory: “It’s been five years of volleyball at the School, and it is the first tear without confusion, the first we did not fight, because this is a team”.

The School’s men’s team, winner of the 28th Spring Games, had a reputation for controversy, with players standing out in Sergipe’s youth sports scene, both in volleyball and in football. The following year, in 2012, the team included few athletes of that winning and controversial team. Many of today’s students were in their first year in the youth category, leaving behind old mates still in the children’s category. There were subgroups based on age or time in the category, which was not a problem for training. Situations like play fighting were used to immobilize the opponent. There were no punches or injuries; there were comments and jokes, congratulations to well executed strokes and arguments about who really won the dispute. All that was followed by the teacher, who would soon resume his focus on preparation.

In everyday training, some students use distinct references to interpret and manage situations. Daily preparation for tournaments is an opportunity to go beyond the issues described by a sports training manual: in a training session of the women’s team, several former students-athletes arranged to meet at the school to train with the current team, participating in the same activities, resuming their status as team members. When each of them arrived, the reception was increasingly warm, with hugs at the coach and introduction to the rest of the group. It was also a time to remember stories, travels and victories. Since some male athletes had already arrived at the gym, training included former athletes, members of today’s male and female teams, in addition to coaches and assistant coaches who participated in the activities. That is, four or five generations came together in that training session to practice volleyball, which made training a space for multiple contacts, with stories on matches and past events and the meaning of their experience with sport.

4 CONCLUSION

In the 19th Spring Games, the men’s team was defeated in the final match and the female team won the championship. Processes for such teams to play the final of a students’ tournament allow us to assert training practices that both favor gradual adjustments to the effort and encourage youth sociability practices. Sport becomes an instrument to establish social relations that are referenced on the way of being young, allowing athletes to manage situations, seek recognition and visibility, and expand their possibility for participation. Saying that sports training of school teams is not very educational because it is based on performance sports does not say much about the game experience and student-athletes’ place in the process.

In the sporting experience described here, moral content affects our sensitivity because we identify with the moral prescriptions offered. Moral rules are presented less as a duty code and more like an asset that captivates us. A moral code pursued because it is
good has prestige and energy to assume that the rule itself, the way we perceive, justify and respect it, is an object of desire for us. Morals present this double aspect of being an asset and a duty: "one the one hand, as imperative law; on the other hand, as a splendid ideal to which we spontaneously aspire" (DURKHEIM, 2008, p. 104). Good behavior, described by Fraga (2000) as a mark seen in good Christians, good heads of family, good students, good citizens, good eligible bachelors, good employees, is highlighted in the student-athlete who practices sport as a source of experiences and social contacts.

The set of pedagogical efforts and political investment in the School Games prevent us from dealing with events of this magnitude as below educational intentions. It is not about placing sports training as a reflection of the dimension of performance entering school daily life, but rather recognizing both limits and possibilities of sport in fostering educational proposals. The elements highlighted by Bracht (1997) such as participation, social contacts, formation of subgroups, conflict resolution, acceptance, change and expression of rules put us before a practice that brings the opportunity to have positive experiences of participation to recognize potential and create collective involvement mechanisms.

Developing physical abilities and learning motor skills, motivation for sport, performance improvement and mastery of techniques and tactics are tools to work with knowledge, social relations and modes of communication where stories and life experiences form and intersect. Being part of a sports team requires the formation of game experiences where we have to manage situations, seek ways for recognition and visibility and enhance opportunities for participation, which are, at the same time, processes of the game experience as education.

While school has not adjusted itself to recognize students as young people (CAMACHO, 2004), participating in School Games puts certain segment of youth in evidence, which can turn those events into spaces for better understanding aspirations and needs of both young sports practitioners and other social expressions of youth.

Such questions dinamize supposed rigidity of experience and sports morality. Schools’ aim in winning tournaments or standing out in medal tables is not a primary concern for student-athletes, but rather the formation of an experience that ascribes meaning to their own status as young participants of events of social life. Sports training puts the student-athlete in contact with morality initially considered consistent and unchanging, but which is dinamized in the process of legitimacy and significance of social practices. Repetitive exercises to improve physical fitness and technical and tactical improvement are part of in an environment that allows reinterpretations, since they relate to the way individual and collective expectations and experiences are created. Through these experiences, situations of collective involvement emerge, which turn technical and tactical improvement activities into foundations for opportunities to participate as ways to experience the status of youth with recreational and leisure features.

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