Inclusive Sporting Events in Schools for Youth With Disabilities in Quebec: Social, Educational, and Experiential Roles of These Activities According to the Interviewed Practitioners

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Abstract
Participating in physical activities and sports entails positive impacts for youth with disabilities regarding their physical and social well-being. In Quebec, however, opportunities to practice inclusive sports adapted to their needs are scarce beyond the boundaries of the school environment. Through 33 semi-structured interviews conducted with practitioners involved in organizing such adapted sporting events, this study aims to better understand the needs and expectations linked to these events and, simultaneously, identify the social, experiential, and educational roles of these events on youth with disabilities. Results demonstrate substantial positive impacts on these young people (enjoyment, pride, self-esteem, etc.) and on their relatives. Results also highlight several barriers, notably, material and human, that can hinder their desire to go on with physical activities and sports in their school environment.

Keywords
inclusive sports, youth with disabilities, schools, practitioners, Quebec.

Introduction
Among the newest statistical studies conducted in Quebec on young people with disabilities, it has been observed that 17.4% of pupils in elementary and high schools live with a disability or have learning or adjustment difficulties (Ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport du Québec [MELS], 2014). More specifically, 3% of youth aged between 0 and 14 in Quebec live with a functional incapacity (Institut de la Statistique du Québec, 2012) and the major functional limitations in the province are linked to autism spectrum disorder, language impairment, mobility disability, and intellectual deficiency. Actually, 44% of youth aged between 5 and 14 years old living with disabilities in Quebec see themselves as limited in their recreational activities owing to their disability (Institut de la Statistique du Québec, 2012). Concurrently, the prevalence of overweight and obesity in youth with disabilities increases by 2 to 3 times when compared with other children and adolescents (Aubé, 2012; Carbonneau & Roult, 2013). However, many of these studies also demonstrate on the key social role played by physical activities and sports regarding this population. Indeed, sports and active forms of recreational activities encourage various forms of social integration. Youth with disabilities thus feel acknowledged and respected, leading to personal growth and meaningful experiences. Making sports more inclusive also contributes to the awareness of the general population regarding the difficulties faced by people with disabilities (Struthers, 2011; Wilhite & Shank, 2009). The success of these integrative interventions generally depends on the quality and accessibility of the environment and on the training and competence of practitioners involved with them (Carbonneau & Roult, 2013; King et al., 2003). In this context, some authors suggest that the

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disability creation and affirmation process mainly streams from living environments not being adapted to the mental and physical realities of these groups as opposed to being linked exclusively to the individual (Fougeyrollas & Roy, 1996; Office des personnes handicapées du Québec [OPHQ], 2009).

With specific regard to youth with disabilities, many studies demonstrate on the central role that schools play in providing access to physical activities and sports (Law, Petrenchik, King, & Hurley, 2007; Martin Ginis & Hicks, 2007). School is an everyday life environment for education and personal growth. As such, they can and have to be the initiators, providers, and facilitators of inclusive, healthy, and enjoyable physical activities (Dugas & Point, 2014; Martin Ginis & Hicks, 2007). Although school-based practitioners really want to integrate and energize youth with disabilities through sports, they are obstructed by financial, human, and educational constraints (Roult, Carbonneau, Chan, Belley-Ranger, & Duquette, 2014). Several studies bring forth important discrepancies regarding the implementation of physical activities, notably linked to schools (regular and specialized), living environments (urban, suburban and rural), disabilities (mild to severe), and sports (individual and team sports) (Bui-Xuan & Mikulovic, 2007; Carbonneau & Roult, 2013). Despite the positive development and acknowledgment of certain inclusive sporting competitions on an international (Paralympic Games), national (Canada Games), or provincial (Défi sportif event) level, very few adapted, regularly occurring sporting events involving several local schools are available. Youth with disabilities are, for the most part, limited to physical activities in their school or in extra-curricular settings, which narrows interactions with peers (Carbonneau & Roult, 2013; Dugas & Point, 2014). This lacking, if not altogether omitted, offer for inclusive sporting competitions fosters social stigmatization as youth with disabilities are unable to develop in a typical competitive framework (with championships, rankings, etc.) in the same ways as their peers without disabilities (Belley-Ranger, Duquette, Carbonneau, & Roult, in press). Yet, Hassan, Dowling, McConkey, and Menke (2012) and Harada, Siperstein, Parker, and Lenox (2011) remind us that these adapted sporting events are very good occasions for young people with disabilities to interact with other people, giving them considerable personal development opportunities, notwithstanding the presence of potential physical barriers (Duquette, 2015; Ortiz-Castillo, 2012). This research problem is thus relatively complex and requires further investigation as it affects a sizable portion of youth in Quebec. In the past years, very few studies have been conducted regarding the role of adapted sporting events on youth with disabilities attending elementary or high school, more specifically, studies aimed at understanding and analyzing the perspective and challenges faced by school-based practitioners involved in implementing these adapted events.

In this regard, this research has two main objectives: (a) analyze the needs and expectations of school-based practitioners participating or willing to participate in adapted sporting events planned in school environments in Quebec and (b) identify the social, educational, and experiential roles played by adapted sporting events on their participants according to supervising practitioners. It also has two specific objectives: (a) analyze the barriers as well as the physical and environmental facilitators related to the participation in adapted physical and sporting activities of young people with disabilities and those who work with them and (b) identify the social benefits of these adapted sporting events for young people with disabilities.

**Literature Review**

**Disability Creation Process (DCP) and Living Environments**

The traditional standpoint regarding people living with a disability has long been the result of a dichotomous ideology drawing a clear line between disabled and non-disabled people (Carbonneau & Roult, 2013; Dugas & Point, 2014). The DCP model as suggested by Fougeyrollas and Roy (1996) and Fougeyrollas (2011) significantly influenced the support given to people with disabilities in Quebec as well as on an international scale. This model’s special feature is its dynamism as it connects the situation and the individual to the concept of time (Fougeyrollas, 2011). Every disabling situation is thus seen as temporary. Moreover, Fougeyrollas’s (2011) systemic vision places the individual in the center of a physical and social environment. A disabling situation will thus result from the consistent interactions between the individual’s personal characteristics and his environment (Cavallo, Majnemer, Duffy, & Feldman, 2014; Le Clair, 2011; Palisano et al., 2011; Preskitt, Goldfarb, Mulvihill, Colburn, & Davis, 2013). It is therefore possible to minimize barriers to the individual’s everyday activities by changing the elements the latter interacts with (Fougeyrollas, 2011). As a result, this sets new benchmarks with regard to creating adapted activities for youth with disabilities.

When it comes to the participation of youth with disabilities in recreational activities, many aspects need to be considered. First, the individual ranks, since age, gender, motivation, motor and social skills are the most impactful elements (Anaby et al., 2014; Arim, Findlay, & Kohen, 2012; Bendixen, Senesac, Lott, & Vandenborne, 2012; Bjornson, Zhou, Stevenson, & Christakis, 2014; Bult, Verschuren, Jongmans, Lindeman, & Ketelaar, 2011; Shikako-Thomas, Shevell, Lach, et al., 2013). Haycock and Smith (2011) specify that youth with disabilities tend to isolate themselves from peers which hampers their ability to participate in recreational activities around them. They are also more susceptible to weight gain and obesity problems owing to a sedentary lifestyle that is significantly linked to their environment (Abeysekara, Turchi, &
The second aspect about this recreational issue is the paramount importance of the social and family environment. Parents often play a pioneering role in getting their child involved, whether by encouragement or guidance (King et al., 2003). Bedell et al. (2013) note that if parents have low education and income, giving support and encouragement toward a recreational activity becomes proportionally more difficult, especially with sports that require costly investments. From this perspective, Emira and Thompson (2011) add that the lack of specialized resources, poor transmission of information and, above all, flaws in public organization significantly hamper the access to recreational activities for these families. Further to that point, Muir and Goldblatt (2011) criticize the withdrawal of political authorities in bringing about adapted programs to support people with special needs and their families. For their part, Longo, Badia, and Orgaz (2013) illustrated that personal and environmental factors have a greater impact on participation than factors linked to the family environment alone. The handicap thus seems to result from a mismatch between the individual’s personal characteristics and environmental elements which he interacts with. It is therefore paramount to maximize the offer of inclusive activities (Aujla & Redding, 2013; Bedell et al., 2013; King, Curran, & McPherson, 2013; Muir & Goldblatt, 2011).

**Inclusive Physical and Sporting Activities in a School Environment and Socio-Emotional Development of Youth With Disabilities**

Sports are a key component for everyone’s physical and mental development, but especially for people living with a handicap (Ortiz-Castillo, 2012; Over et al., 2012; Shikako-Thomas, Kolehmainen, Ketelaar, Bult, & Law, 2014; Stan, 2012). Moreover, this is one of the reasons why physical activities and sports are integrated in the academic curriculum of students at a very young age (Dugas & Point, 2014). Many authors agree that elementary and high schools can act as incubators in establishing physical and sporting activities as long-term life habits for young people with disabilities (Brittain, 2004; Bui-Xuân & Mikulovic, 2007; De, Small, & Baur, 2008). Furthermore, Bourgoin (2007) states that physical education classes could become a transition point between specialized health care environments (hospitals, clinics, etc.) and learning environments for youth with disabilities. This is due to their potential to enable social connectedness while placing youth with disabilities in the position of learners. In this context, the emergence of regular-inclusive and specialized classrooms in elementary and high schools entails significant challenges for physical education teachers. They are not specifically trained to answer the needs of this particular group and thus often feel uncomfortable in their interactions with them as well as limited in their ability to adapt their activities (Block, Taliaferro, & Moran, 2013; Dowling, Fitzgerald, & Flintoff, 2012; Flores, Beyer, & Vargas, 2012; Hassan et al., 2012; Sherlock-Shangraw, 2013; Thaver & Lim, 2014). Docheff (2011) concludes, from interviews conducted with specialized trainers, that they greatly need to share their realities together along with some “hints and tips” on how to better adapt to this group. Although adapting their activities entails certain financial, material, and technical obstacles, adapting their interventions is the biggest issue for physical education teachers (Docheff, 2011; Hassan et al., 2012; Haycock & Smith, 2011; Svenby & Dowling, 2012; Thaver & Lim, 2014).

With regard to these groups with more specific needs, physical education teachers and trainers concluded that they require greater emotional support when compared with their peers without disabilities (Hassan et al., 2012; Haycock & Smith, 2011; Svenby & Dowling, 2012; Thaver & Lim, 2014). It is therefore important for teachers to take some time to develop their relationships with them and also foster inclusive relationships among the group. Hence, physical education teachers should establish an educational climate that benefits everyone’s participation. In that sense and as mentioned by Shikako-Thomas, Shevell, Schmitz, et al. (2013), opting for a recreational rather than competitive atmosphere is preferable. According to Haycock and Smith (2011), youth with disabilities tend to have low self-esteem and do not particularly enjoy being compared with others. Moreover, regular-inclusive classrooms tend to hinder the participation of young people with disabilities. Indeed, the competitive atmosphere that prevails combined with significant gaps regarding physical capacities often hamper youth with particular needs (Docheff, 2011; Dowling et al., 2012; Goodwin, Johnston, & Causgrove Dunn, 2014; Haycock & Smith, 2011; Svenby & Dowling, 2012). Individual activities are seen as less stigmatizing and are thus preferred by youth with disabilities. Taking trampoline as a reference, Haycock and Smith (2011) were able to demonstrate that some activities enable alternative turns which lessens direct comparisons with peers. Thaver and Lim (2014) come to the conclusion that having physical activities specifically designed for youth with disabilities is sometimes preferable. Similarly, Ortiz-Castillo (2012) believes that having the opportunity to share their activities with people who face similar social and physical challenges encourages youth with disabilities to participate. Sharing a good moment with friends hence makes participating in diverse activities more enjoyable which helps to ensure continuity.

Although competitiveness does not appeal to young people with disabilities, Hassan et al. (2012) nuance the concept. They believe that implementing sporting competitions among youth with disabilities is a good idea. Such competitions notably provide opportunities to overcome one’s limits and develop physical capacities. However, it seems that these events must be mindfully designed to respect its participants’ physical capacities (Hassan et al., 2012). Therefore, a competitive atmosphere is healthy provided that the event is specifically designed for youth with disabilities. According to Harada et al. (2011), this explains the wide success of broadly adapted
sporting events such as Special Olympics World Games. Giving young people with disabilities a chance to surpass themselves physically and personally in a competitive environment tends to modify how other people see them. They are no longer physically or mentally limited people, they become full-fledged athletes (Hassan et al., 2012; Haycock & Smith, 2011; King et al., 2013). According to Harada et al., being part of these competitions is also helpful to build self-esteem. Sporting competitions give the opportunity to connect with teammates, particularly when teams travel for a tournament (Hassan et al., 2012). These same authors also believe that such events force youth with disabilities to work on their autonomy and independence forcing them to leave the family home. However, Ortiz-Castillo (2012) explains that adapted physical activity, in general, as well as during competitions, requires accounting for several external elements such as transport, accessibility to the competition areas, and affiliated costs. Yet, these elements constitute significant barriers for this group, their close relatives, and practitioners. As for families that could consider themselves stigmatized due to their child’s disability, Harada et al. state that they feel valued and truly willing to support their child’s participation in such occasions.

**Method**

**Research Area**

This research is part of the “Choisir de Gagner” project that was started during winter of 2012 to encourage youth with disabilities in Quebec to adopt healthy lifestyle habits. This unique project in Quebec is specifically focused on conducting various studies regarding the issue and, alternately, developing tools to motivate youth with disabilities to really “get moving.” Various partnerships were notably established among schools, associations, and sporting organizations. Furthermore, the “Réseau du Sport Étudiant du Québec” (RSEQ) in the Montérégie area has organized various adapted sporting events throughout the school year since September 2013. These events are specifically designed for students with disabilities attending regular or specialized elementary and high schools. Seven sports were targeted, namely, track and field, basketball, rhythmic gymnastics, field hockey, swimming, soccer, and volleyball. Two full-day tournaments are organized for each sport over the school year. These events are always held in a partner school with the appropriate equipment needed to receive every participant. An average of 40 students from four different schools attend each of these activities. In parallel to this project led by the RSEQ in the region of Montérégie, an activity was organized in October 2014 to introduce adapted sports to the population of Baie-Comeau in the Côte-Nord region. This event focused on bringing local students with disabilities from elementary and high schools, both specialized and regular, to discover eight sports, namely, track and field, physical conditioning in a gym, trampoline, high jump, shot put, field hockey, soccer, and climbing. A total of 42 pupils participated in this adapted sport event.

**Data Collection**

The data collection period took place during these two adapted sporting events through a series of semi-structured interviews with practitioners. This research is primarily based on the interpretative paradigm according to which our analytical premise is structured around—the fact that social reality is multi-facetted and built upon individual perceptions and realities that change over time (Fortin, 2010; Paillé & Mucchielli, 2012; Veal, 2011). This study also falls under the pragmatic paradigm because of the avowed objective to yield results and empirical evidence that would be useful in further interventions (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2012; Veal, 2011). This method was chosen due to its success in other studies conducted about young people with disabilities (Jeanes & Magee, 2012; Lord & Patterson, 2008). Moreover, semi-structured interviews allow a thorough understanding of the phenomena based on the perspectives and meanings that social actors give to their reality (Savoie-Zajc, 2009). This method allowed us to meet our study objectives and provided the opportunity to address issues linked to perceptions, impressions, and motivations. These issues are relatively difficult to examine through a more structured methodological framework due to their complexity (Sirakaya-Turk et al., 2011). Semi-structured interviews enable supple, fluid, and flexible discussions within which the interviewer guides more than he controls the ongoing dialogue (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). With specific regard to the guide used to structure phone interviews which lasted 25 min in average, it was built around five main topics: (a) respondents’ experience related to supporting youth with disabilities and types of groups supported, (b) forms and modalities in the organization of inclusive sports and physical activities in the interviewed practitioners’ schools, (c) reasons and motivations to get involved in such adapted sporting events, (d) practitioners’ needs and expectations regarding these adapted sport activities, and (e) roles and benefits of these events relating to young people with disabilities. However, it is important to recall that even though the questions were open, they may have influenced some answers. Yet, the structure of this qualitative questioning is based on Paillé and Mucchielli’s (2012) method of analytical questioning according to which the respondents are guided throughout the interview, but have some flexibility in their answers. Thus, a very long open question was asked at the end of each interview and the respondents were invited to comment as they pleased on the topics discussed or anything related to the problem studied.

**Sample**

With regard to the sample, all school-based practitioners were solicited, whether they were involved in designing these events.
or simply accompanying youth with disabilities. A total of 76 individuals were contacted, and 37 agreed to participate in the present study. The latter group comes from 25 different educational institutions and consists of physical education and sports teachers \((n = 13)\), special education teachers \((n = 11)\), special educators \((n = 5)\), recreation technicians \((n = 2)\), coaches \((n = 2)\), a school principal \((n = 1)\), a French language teacher \((n = 1)\), a special education technician \((n = 1)\), and a kinesiology professional \((n = 1)\).

More than 65% of interviewed practitioners work in regular schools. The remaining workers belonged to specialized schools. Moreover, close to 65% of respondents have been working at their current position for more than 5 years. Cumulatively, respondents support a total of 1,198 pupils with disabilities. In parallel, practitioners identified moderate to severe intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, and visual impairment as the most commonly supported disabilities in their schools (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1](image-url) **Figure 1.** Types of functional limitations for youth supported by the interviewed practitioners.

*Note.* MID = mild intellectual disability; MSID = moderate to severe intellectual disability; ASD = autism spectrum disorder; MD = motor deficiency; VI = visual impairment; HI = hearing impairment; LD = language disorder; Psy = psychopathology; T21 = down syndrome: Trisomy 21.

### Data Analysis

Three of the research team members did the verbatim transcription for all interviews. A first phase of topic categorization and aggregation of the results was then conducted by two researchers among the team. Initially, topics were linearly listed according to the types of respondents, such as the following:

**Topic:** Planning modalities for inclusive sports and physical activities in schools according to physical education and sports teachers:

Teacher 1: Problems linked to spatial planning (gym and changing rooms notably);
Teacher 2: Issues linked to spatial layout and restricted availability to sports areas;
Teacher 3: Gymnasiums and changing rooms do not answer the needs of youth with disabilities whereas outdoor sport facilities are usually appropriately equipped.

However, this method did not translate into significant or meaningful results. The first data analysis phase thus switched to a transversal topic analysis that went as follows:

**Topic:** Social benefits of adapted sporting events on participants with disabilities:
Sustained interactions with other pupils (Physical Education and Sports Teacher 3 from School 2);
Discussions among students from different schools (Special Education Teacher 6 from School 9), and so on;
More substantial exchanges among teammates (Special Educator 1 from School 17), and so on.

Using this method allowed us to not only analyze our entire body of population simultaneously but also one piece at a time or, more precisely, question after question (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2012). Then, a second data analysis phase was conducted by the same researchers involved in the previous one. They analyzed and interpreted the resulting qualitative data through a coding tree which schematizes all topic groups by unifying topics, sub-topics, and more specific findings. Here is an example to illustrate this schematization:

**Unifying topic:** Types of inclusive physical activities and sports organized in schools and planning modalities;

**Sub-topic:** (a) Physical activity level for youth with disabilities in schools, (b) physical activity level for youth with disabilities in their family environment, (c) quality of the layout for sports facilities and changing rooms, (d) accessibility regarding sports facilities and changing rooms, (e) recurrence of individual activities for youth with disabilities, and (f) limited integration of youth with disabilities in regular groups.

**Specific findings:** (a) Purchasing adapted equipment is more complex in specialized schools and (b) daily organization of inclusive physical activities between youth with and without disabilities by teachers able to meet special needs.

Overall, this analysis structure follows the basic principles of qualitative research as stated by Paillé and Mucchielli (2012) and Veal (2011). In this regard, it is important to recall that the objectivity of collected and analyzed data was evaluated with two tried and tested analysis techniques. Indeed, this phase of the analysis was conducted independently by two members of the research team. At the end of the process, we shared the results in view of reaching an agreed-upon analytical framework. Besides, a triangulation of data was made by comparing the data obtained with those used in the literature review (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2012; Sparkes & Smith, 2014).
Results

This section presents the main unifying topics that emerged from the data analysis phase, namely, “characteristics of the supervised youth,” “types of inclusive physical activities and sports organized in schools and planning modalities,” “motivations to participate in inclusive sporting events,” “social and experiential benefits of inclusive sporting events on youth with disabilities,” and “needs and expectations of practitioners involved in inclusive sporting events.” It should be noted that these results are not presented by respondent types as this cross-matching of data has proved insignificant during the qualitative analysis phase. So, we have decided to present the answers and comments of all respondents on each unifying topic mentioned above.

Characteristics of the Supervised Youth

Close to one third of respondents who work in regular schools and support youth with disabilities state that functional limitations are growing increasingly severe. Moreover, the same practitioners identify a wider heterogeneity regarding functional limitations among classrooms designed for youth with disabilities. Interviewed teachers dealing with this issue believe that the organization of such adapted activities becomes more complex as the amount of unique needs and specificities increases. They add that this situation could hinder the participation of youth with disabilities to physical activities and sports. Furthermore, some teachers clearly stated that organizing team sports is impossible for them due to the considerable differences in functional limitations in their classrooms. Continuing in this line of thought, a physical education teacher from a regular school said,

I can hardly see myself designing an indoor soccer activity in my class. I have two very active pupils dealing with an autism spectrum disorder next to six others who can’t follow or simply struggle to understand the rules.

The majority of non-teacher participants from regular schools agreed on this review of the situation. They, however, add that the wide variation of functional limitations explains why certain schools are reluctant to, or simply cannot, participate in adapted sporting events. A recreation technician from a regular school stated,

You know, you don’t want to bring your group [to adapted sporting events] when you know that they will get crushed. Minimal preparation is required. If enjoyment is not met then the main objective is a miss.

Types of Inclusive Physical Activities and Sports Organized in Schools and Planning Modalities

There is a broad consensus among all participants that inclusive physical activities and sports are indeed organized in schools on a daily basis. According to the respondents, practicing a sport is an integral part of the educational process designed for students with disabilities. A general agreement springs from the interviews whereby youth with disabilities tend to be rather active during school days. Furthermore, a regular elementary school principal stated,

It’s part of the school’s educational mission to get these young people moving. We ought to offer physical activities and sports although our means are sometimes limited.

However, this activity level tends to drop drastically in their family environment. According to all teachers interviewed, most youth require significant or even constant support when doing physical activities. This assistance goes beyond requirements in terms of adapted equipment. In fact, it is demanding to the point where certain families would give up on physical activities with their child, either for lack of motivation or time. A special education teacher from a specialized school said,

We cannot hold this against parents. They worked all day long, perhaps during the weekend too, and as they are exhausted we ask them to go out with their child with sustained needs. It is a big deal and requires a lot of motivation.

The issue regarding the layout of sports facilities was regularly brought forward by participants. In fact, various teachers and instructors from regular schools conveyed disappointment regarding the accessibility and obsolescence of indoor sport facilities. The fact that some specialized classrooms are located at the far ends or in the basement of schools hinders movement and reduces the remaining time to play as most booking systems plan 75-min periods. Wider, and often directly accessible through classrooms, outdoor sport facilities are generally far less problematic. Changing rooms however raise significant problems according to the interviewed participants. They are too small to simultaneously include several groups and are often inadequate for the needs of youth with moderate to severe deficiencies. Some teachers abandoned the idea and opted to use their classrooms and maintenance rooms near the gymnasia and schoolyards instead. A physical education teacher from a regular high school reported,

Bringing the group to the gymnasium is not always easy. It is far. Corridors are narrow. We must climb several stairways. Once you’re there, you lack the space to change clothes. Changing rooms are either full or too small, so we need to be resourceful and opt for innovative options.

Participants who work in specialized schools do not face the same issues owing to the mission of their institutions. However, they face financial difficulties related to purchasing of special equipment or adapting sport facilities depending on the needs and characteristics of accommodated youth. A special educator from a specialized school said,
Our main problem here is being able to purchase the equipment that will meet the needs of all our youth. It is often quite onerous and will be quickly replaced by newer and more powerful products, not to mention that it deteriorates too.

Regardless of the type of school, physical activities available to young people with disabilities are either done individually or in teams of two. Some teachers brought forward their efforts to mix up students with mild disabilities into regular groups. However, doing so often spells frustration for not only the newcomer, owing to his or her weaker level of play, but also for the rest of the group who sees him or her as a disadvantage for their team. Four teachers said they hold inclusive physical activities on a weekly basis during lunch time. These activities are designed for pupils with disabilities, but “able buddies” are welcome. Game rules and equipment are modified, for example, a bigger ball to play soccer or a lower volley-ball net to play seated. These teachers identified several benefits regarding such activities. On one hand, pupils with a disability felt included and valued and, on the other hand, regular pupils faced new challenges and became more sensitized to the realities of their peers with special needs. Despite their obvious benefits, these activities are almost exclusively developed by teachers who have been trained to answer special needs. From this perspective, a physical education and sports teacher from a regular elementary school stated,

When I run physical activities for all pupils [with and without disabilities], it is clear to me that those with a limitation are having a lot of fun whereas the remaining are discovering new realities. It is motivating, but very demanding at the same time since I have to do that outside of classes hours and reserve sport facilities for that purpose.

Motivations to Participate in Inclusive Sporting Events

All participants agreed that their main motivation for participating in inclusive sporting events is linked to the fact that there is a lack of the aforementioned events in Quebec. With the exception of some provincial one-off events, young people with functional limitations have very few physical activities to choose from outside of their school environment. A recreational technician from a regular high school said,

Beyond the Défi Sportif, our pupils with special needs don’t get much. Very little is actually offered outside of schools. It is unfortunate.

All participants deplore this situation. In the past few years, teachers have tried to bring several schools with special classes together with an inclusive 1-day event. They faced many of the same issues every time, namely, financial problems, lack of volunteers, and lack of time. Surprisingly, they also had to deal with poor investment from the various schools contacted. This element, interestingly enough given the previous findings, was hard to explain for the teachers interviewed. Further to the point, a physical education and sports teacher from a regular high school noted,

At some point, I tried to set up an inter-school tournament for our group with disabilities. I had no support whatsoever and it was time-consuming, overlapping ordinary teaching. In addition, when I asked colleagues from other schools about it to eventually get them into the project, they showed next to no interest.

Many instructors and technicians also reported that numerous young people with disabilities came to them to express their frustration at not having tournaments or sport championships like their fellow pupils. With this need clearly expressed, practitioners wanted to meet the request and registered their schools for inclusive events. Moreover, some teachers and coaches stated that they participate in these inclusive sporting events as it is their only occasion to actually compete in a tournament. These participants even stated that these inclusive tournaments were a first step toward provincial or even national sporting events. A coach from a regular high school said,

When I went with my group to the first RSEQ activity, I took the opportunity to present it as a step toward the Défi Sportif. It was a repetition for what they would feel at the Défi. It boosted them.

Furthermore, interviewed participants agree that participating in these events allow youth with disabilities to explore beyond their usual environment, interact with other students, and, for the most part, enjoy new experiences. About the last element, some teachers and instructors from regular schools said they participate in these inclusive events to get their group to try sports that are difficult to plan in their school settings. For instance, swimming stands as the most sought-after activity as most schools do not have a swimming pool. If they do, it is not necessarily adequately adapted for groups with special needs. From this perspective, a specialized instructor from a regular elementary school noted,

These events allow them [youth with disabilities] to interact with other people like them and to realize that they are not alone in their world. I think it is great and motivating as they are cheerful afterward.

Social and Experiential Benefits of Inclusive Sporting Events on Youth With Disabilities

All practitioners acknowledge that if youth know they are attending an inclusive sporting event soon, they tend to be more diligent and focused during school-based physical activities, and for a whole month leading up to the event. A specialized instructor from a regular elementary school stated,
Last year, when they [youth with disabilities] learned they would go to the RSEQ activity, I felt them more motivated, but fretful also. That was probably because they knew they were competing against other pupils, some maybe stronger.

Many teachers believe this attitude is also related to the preparation process in which practitioners emphasize the idea that some competitors might be stronger. Almost all participants believe that this preparation stage is healthy for youth with disabilities. They add that it makes them feel considered and trained just as any regular teenager. Only a few teachers pointed out that some students had their stress levels increase.

The main benefits linked to the participation in inclusive sporting events occur during the event itself, according to the participants. The latter were unanimous about the pride and enjoyment that sprung from these activities. Participants also noted that their pupils tended to surpass themselves in such contexts. Several teachers and instructors also noted an increased sense of belonging and team spirit among some youth, most notably those competing in soccer and field hockey tournaments. From that perspective, a physical education and sports teacher from a regular high school stated,

Last time, I felt my ball hockey team had become close-knit. Some pupils that I often saw detached were actually focused during the competition. I believe they were aware of the challenge.

A majority of participants from regular schools see these events as an opportunity for youth with more severe disabilities to try various sports that are not generally available in their school environments. Practitioners unanimously agree that these sporting activities are a means to socialize for youth with mild and moderate disabilities who are able to communicate. For parents, it is an opportunity to see their child flourish and have fun.

All teachers, trainers, instructors, and technicians interviewed share the common belief that these sporting events yield positive impacts on the regular sport practices that pupils do in their respective schools. In fact, some youth who attend these inclusive events are motivated to pursue the practice of their favorite sports. Some are committed to improvement, driven by the challenges they have undergone and those to come. Practitioners generally consider that participating in these inclusive events fosters self-esteem and encourages youth to adopt steady, active lifestyle habits. Some teachers and trainers talked about the fact that teams who had won trophies or medals at these events were welcomed back as champions at school, just like any other regular sports team. They got printed jerseys, their trophy exposed, and an announcement on the intercom system. According to the practitioners, getting these types of consideration further increased the feelings of pride and happiness. In addition, it raised awareness among regular students. On this topic, a trainer from a regular high school stated,

I pressured my school administration from the beginning in an attempt to get printed jerseys for my winning team. Rest assured that with the “Champions” label printed on their back, they walked around proud and visible.

Needs and Expectations of Practitioners Involved in Inclusive Sporting Events

The majority of practitioners interviewed are aware that the current inclusive sports projects in the Montérégie and Côte-Nord regions are going through their developmental stages, and therefore do not have clear expectations regarding them. Almost all participants look forward to the projects’ longevity. They see them as an opportunity for their pupils to leave their accustomed environments, and meet and interact with other youth with disabilities in a context of competition similar to any other regular tournament. A specialized instructor from a specialized school noted,

Of course, these events must occur every year. Our pupils need them, and so do we. It is a chance to go beyond our everyday environment and meet other people.

Moreover, some teachers bring forward the idea to split the initiative into several smaller events, once every month or two, in an attempt to keep youth with disabilities active throughout the year. Furthermore, all participants in the study agreed that if more inclusive events were organized, it would become paramount to include them in the school calendar. However, there is no general agreement regarding the ideal time to hold these inclusive events. Some suggest keeping them during class hours, to ensure full participation from their students. Others suggest having them during weekends or evenings so that parents can better support their child.

All participants in the study stated that preparations should begin long in advance of the event due to the relatively complex transportation logistics. This barrier forces them to demand a calendar at least a full year before the inclusive event. On this topic, a specialized educator from a specialized school noted,

Transportation is our biggest barrier and concern. It must be planned in advance. It greatly helps to have the RSEQ calendar in order to better prepare for the activities.

In parallel, teachers from regular high schools expressed the desire to sit down with specialized practitioners and share ideas regarding inclusive sporting events. These meetings would take place during the preparation phase of these events and would aim to share information and hints on how to better prepare a group of youth with disabilities for such events (physical conditioning, mental and attention aspects, nutrition, etc.). These statements are consistent with the belief expressed by the two trainers that were interviewed in this study. The latter said that the rules followed during the event should be clearly stated to the participants several days before it occurs.
through exchanges with the organizers. A trainer working at a regular high school stated,

My group steps into the tournament, and that is sometimes when we learn that the rules have changed. Rules at school, and those that apply here are different. This is disruptive, it is not easy for them. Rules need to be exposed in advance.

Finally, one participant out of three believes that these inclusive sport activities must remain “friendly,” with a warm and good-natured atmosphere. These events should not emphasize competitiveness, or participants with more severe limitations run the risk of being cast aside again. A physical education and sports teacher from a regular school noted,

Every activity I have been part of was always friendly. Matches were played in a good-natured atmosphere. This is paramount if we want everyone to have fun and be willing to come back.

Discussion

Literature raises upon barriers (environmental, financial, specialized resources, etc.) that hinder the participation of youth with disabilities in recreational activities. Their living environment (school in the case of this study) has the power to either foster their participation in physical activities and sports or obstruct it. Several constraints were identified due to the semi-structured interviews conducted with practitioners, and the concept of a “built” or physical environment was among them. As stated by several authors (Carbonneau & Roult, 2013; King et al., 2003), the access to sports facilities is a key component in this issue. This study found that sporting facilities were often in poor condition and difficult to access which further complicated and even hampered the participation of youth with disabilities.

In parallel, the lack of financial resources affects both physical education classes and the organization of inclusive sporting events. The fact that schools are a privileged environment for exploring athletic activities (Bui-Xuân & Mikulovic, 2007; De et al., 2008) makes this reality even more important. As for specialized schools, financial problems revealed two major obstacles. The first is the purchase and renewal of adapted equipment. The second is the renovation of sporting facilities to make them more accessible and adapted to the physical needs of the students, as also stated by Roult et al. (2014). The lack of financial resources combined with the questionable quality of existing facilities is particularly problematic. Moreover, there is a consensus among all participants that the organization of these inclusive sports events requires more financial support. Lack of adequate financing makes organizing these events much more difficult and has incidentally complicated previous attempts. Further elements that should be mentioned include inadequate involvement from other schools, lack of time, and a shortage of volunteers. It seems a family’s financial situation also affects the participation in physical activities and sports. In fact, aside from the time spent at school, youth with disabilities participate in next to no physical activities. As Bedell et al. (2013) suggest, low-income households with children dealing with disabilities often cannot afford extra-curricular activities. Providing a financial support for their children’s participation in physical activities is often daunting, especially if the sport requires costly investments. As identified in this study, families of youth with disabilities have a very distinct reality characterized by constant support, the need to purchase adapted equipment, and, ultimately, greater parental exhaustion.

In the present study, the reality regarding the inclusion of youth with disabilities in regular-inclusive physical education and sports classes is complicated by the heterogeneity of their limitations. On one hand, youth with disabilities feel frustrated, and on the other hand, regular students need to lower their intensity which leads to decreased participation. In the same line of thought, some teachers stated that it is hard to constitute a team due to the wide variety of limitations. For a majority of practitioners, this situation affects how they plan their classes, teach, and organize extra-curricular activities, as also highlighted by several authors (Block et al., 2013; Hassan et al., 2012; Thaver & Lim, 2014). Moreover, the lack of specialized resources combined with the increasing severity of disabilities makes it more difficult for teachers to do their job. Further to the point, Carbonneau and Roult (2013) state that the importance of these elements must not be underestimated as practitioners’ competency is the foundation of successful social inclusion. In addition, interviewed teachers sometimes felt powerless with regard to preparing their group of youth with disabilities for an inclusive event. This is consistent with Dorchef’s (2011) findings on the necessity to share information and “hints” on how to adapt teaching techniques for this purpose. Practitioners emphasized this point by stating the need for proper training and exchanges among practitioners with regard to physical conditioning, mental preparation, and rule adjustments. Including students with disabilities in regular-inclusive classrooms also forces teachers to face a new reality for which they are often ill-prepared. This reality is notably linked to adjusting their interventions to accommodate these groups, as suggested by Thaver and Lim (2014) and Dorchef (2011). From this perspective, Hassan et al. (2012), Svenby and Dowling (2012) along with Haycock and Smith (2011) suggest that teachers need to spend more time with their students to build a stronger relationship that will translate into better emotional support connected to the individual needs of the group.

Several obstacles that require further exploration have emerged through these interviews as well. Indeed, many practitioners deplore the scarcity of inclusive sporting events as also stated by Dugas and Point (2014) along with Carbonneau et al. (2013). In parallel, numerous practitioners
mentioned that certain youth with disabilities have repeatedly shown frustration regarding their deficiency when compared with their peers without disability. Teachers thus expressed the will to take every opportunity they have to register their pupils in sporting tournaments. Indeed, a majority of practitioners look forward to more diverse choices regarding inclusive sporting events. This diversity however entails several constraints. In fact, organizing these events will require careful planning in regard to the school calendar. It will also require efficient transportation logistics. If these events were to become more frequent, special attention should be paid to the school calendar to prevent overlaps. However, this topic hosts conflicting views. Some participants suggest these events should be held during school holidays whereas others have shown a preference for weekends and evenings. In every scenario, consultations between actors are the key component with which to ensure the sustainability of inclusive sporting events. With regard to the issue of transportation logistics, its complexity requires planning far in advance which is consistent with Ortiz-Castillo’s (2012) findings. Sufficient and adapted transportation with the ability to cover the territory of all invited schools is paramount. This is increasingly challenging in rural areas synonymous with low-density and wide territories. To maximize the chances of success and provide practitioners and teachers with enough time to adequately prepare, these inclusive sporting events must be communicated at the beginning of the school year.

In light of these barriers and constraints, it becomes clear that the role of the environment on the DCP is undeniable, as suggested by Fougeyrollas and Roy (1996) and the OPHQ (2009). Yet, it seems in-school and inter-school actions are susceptible to mitigate some of these environmental barriers. Despite these difficulties, several schools that are aware of the issue of a sedentary lifestyle among its students with disabilities have taken action to foster the latter’s participation in physical activities. Some teachers highlight the better overall inclusion of youth with disabilities in their school environment which is rooted in adapted activities, modified equipment, and adjusted game rules. Several practitioners deplore the scarcity of such inclusive events and look forward to an increased diversity in these events. In conclusion, the negative effects of having a disability can be considerably reduced by fostering daily sports and physical activities and by planning intra and inter-curricular inclusive events that meet the needs of these youth, as notably underlined by Fougeyrollas (2011).

Indeed, constraints linked to practicing physical activities and sports have been highlighted in this study. However, the personal and social benefits that spring from the participation of youth with disabilities in physical activities and sports have unequivocally emerged. Having adapted events designed exclusively for youth with disabilities emphasizes positive outcomes and prevents comparisons between athletes with and without disabilities, as also pointed out by Harada et al. (2011). Haycock and Smith (2011) add that such comparisons are in fact a barrier that needs to be dealt with. On the topic of personal development, several statements need to be underlined that are consistent with the study conducted by Hassan et al. (2012). Pushing oneself to excel through being involved in a team or a sports group, physically preparing for a sporting event, and the enjoyment that permeates this whole process are all positive elements that have emerged in this study. For its part, Duquette (2015) highlights that such involvement enables the development of various physical and psychological skills. Youth who participated in inclusive events have gone through physical training and psychological involvement during the event itself, and generally wish to continue practicing their favorite sports. In addition, it seems such events encourage participants to discover and explore new sports that are not necessarily available at school, most notably swimming. In accordance with Terzí’s (2014) work on inclusive education based notably on Sen’s capability approach, among others, our study shows that the interventions made in the context of event projects have not resulted in more adapted equipment on the sites, but have rather contributed to reinvent the way these spaces and facilities are used by creating new opportunities for young people with disabilities. According to several practitioners, these events are also a first step for sports teams toward bigger tournaments. Likewise, practitioners have highlighted the positive effects of these events on self-esteem, as pointed out by Duquette (2015) and Harada et al. (2011). All participants identified a very strong notion of enjoyment during the event itself. They insist on how crucial personal satisfaction is. They directly link it to the friendly atmosphere that must be maintained, as also suggested by Shikako-Thomas, Shevell, Schmitz, et al. (2013). On this topic, participants have expressed a cautionary statement regarding the increased competitiveness of these events that may hinder the notion of enjoyment. They add that a competitive atmosphere could in turn stigmatize youth with more severe disabilities who would naturally compare themselves to their fellow competitors. This is consistent with scientific evidence that has pointed out that gaps among physical capacities of youth with disabilities are an obstacle for their participation in physical activities and sports (Dowling et al., 2012; Goodwin et al., 2014; Svenby & Dowling, 2012).

Youth with disabilities are socially changed by sporting events in their relationships with peers, practitioners, and relatives. Practitioners interviewed stated the sense of belonging related to school and to teammates as one of many positive outcomes. On this topic, Hassan et al. (2012) highlight that travels to tournaments foster the development of relationships among students. Indeed, sports are a means to socialize and break isolation for youth with disabilities, as suggested by Haycock and Smith (2011). The physical conditioning that students undertake to adequately prepare for an inclusive event changes how peers and practitioners perceive them. As stated by King et al. (2013), these youth,
beyond their limitations, are seen as athletes. This study conclusively demonstrates that adapted sporting events change the perception of those dealing with young people with disabilities and shows them that these young people are able to surpass and fulfill themselves. This analytical conclusion unquestionably agrees with the paradigmatic angle of our research from its interpretative and pragmatic perspectives. Effects of this social role evolution are present in both the family and school environments. Youth with disabilities are warmly welcomed back at school by their peers and are allowed the same features (trophy exposed, announcement on the intercom system, printed jerseys, etc.). From the family perspective, young athletes come back satisfied and fulfilled. While these families regularly face stigmatization, inclusive sports help them to be supportive and positive for their child with disabilities which is consistent with Harada et al.’s (2011) statements. As also stated by Duquette (2015), physical activities and sports enhance family bonding. Parents witness the development of their young athlete. Indeed, this shift of perspective from both practitioners and relatives increases the pride of youth with disabilities.

Conclusion

Results in this study notably highlight barriers linked to the participation in physical activities and sports of youth with functional limitations and benefits of inclusive sporting events. While disabilities are seen as a mismatch between a person’s characteristics and his environment, it becomes paramount to transcend possible barriers. In fact, beyond personal and environmental difficulties (financial, human, physical access), inclusive sporting events entail many positive social and personal outcomes. Youth with disabilities get to experience increased self-development and self-esteem through sports. They also feel valued by the new perspective that practitioners and relatives have upon them. They go from people with a disability to full-fledged athlete. It becomes clear that these events reach far into their lives, particularly given that they generally wish to pursue their new favorite sporting activities. The personal enjoyment felt during these sporting events is an undeniable vector of continuation. Moreover, certain elements highlighted in the results require further understanding. One issue to further highlight, notably, is the support given to practitioners and teachers involved with youth with disabilities either through the adaptation of their physical education classes in regular-inclusive settings or through the preparation of their group for an inclusive sporting event. In addition, the social, educational, and experiential roles of these events should be further investigated from the perspective of young people with disabilities who participate and their parents.

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Notes

1. Regular-inclusive classrooms mix up both pupils with and without functional limitations.
2. Specialized classrooms only educate youth with disabilities together.
3. “Choisir de Gagner” is an initiative of the Défi Sportif AlterGo funded by the semipublic organization Québec en Forme. Défi Sportif AlterGo supports various associative, community, and research projects in an effort to better integrate people with disabilities into Quebec society.
4. In Quebec, each region has its own Réseau du Sport Étudiant du Québec (RSEQ). The mission of this regional network is to promote and develop physical activities and sports in schools ranging from initiation to high performance.
5. The region of Montérégie is located south of Montréal city.
6. Baie-Comeau is located 660 km north-east of Montréal, on the north shore of St. Lawrence River.

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