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Swiss youths and the myth of integrative sport

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Background

With changes in migration flows, immigration is assuming increasing importance in European political agendas. Fluctuating national identities and the existence of anti-immigrant attitudes have at times resulted in immigration (and immigrants) being constructed as problematic. Against this trend, sport has been presented as a solution. Kofi Annan announced that when young people participate in sport and physical education, “they learn the ideals of teamwork and tolerance” (Annan, 2004). A report on sport commissioned by the European Commission indicated that 73% of respondents believed that sport had an integrative function (EC, 2004, p. 8). While encouraging for sport advocates, it is not clear from these kinds of statements what integration refers to for the general public, nor is it clear how integration might be seen to occur through sport. Considerations of such issues are imperative if pedagogical claims made on behalf of sport are to be taken seriously and if sport is to be included in future policy-making.

Research Questions

1. How do youths make sense of integration as a migration related concept?
2. How, if at all, do youths connect sport to integration as a migration related concept?

Methods

As part of a mixed methods study on sport and social integration, adolescents aged between 13 – 15 years from six schools in North Western Switzerland were asked to volunteer for interviews. From a pool of approximately 350 volunteers, 52 were chosen according to criteria that were employed to maximise variability (sex, participation in sport, school level). The interviews were focused and were conducted by a team of seven researchers. The interview schedule contained questions that concerned ethnicity, race relations, sport participation as a cultural phenomenon, and personal sporting experiences. Interview transcripts were coded and organised by a team of three researchers using a computer-assisted analysis program (AtlasTI).

Frame

Transcripts were analysed using a constructionist discursive framework (Billig, 1991; Gergen, 1995, 1997). The general tenets of the approach are that: (1) people draw upon a range of texts – principal among them language commonly recognised through words – to make sense of phenomena (Wittgenstein, 1976); (2) as users of existing language resources, speakers must be understood as part of social environments (Wetherall, Taylor, & Yates, 2001); (3) people’s abilities to make sense, along with their use of language, are flexible and fluid (Potter, 1996); (4) language use has consequences since it both reflects and shapes users’ intellectual commitments (Sparkes, 1990). In line with these principles, participants’ commentaries were considered as sets of statements that were personally and socio-historically located. Specifically, the notion of interpretive repertoires – cultural reserves of meaning that are grouped together based on content and grammatical structure (Edley, 2001; Wetherall & Potter, 1988) – proved useful.

Research findings

The interview data suggests that in a Swiss context (1) the concept of integration is frequently expressed as a one-sided process whereby persons with migration backgrounds must adopt, or adapt to, dominant cultural standards; (2) while common, connections between sport and integrative outcomes are not as widespread as other research suggests; and (3) cultural storylines in which sport is connected with integration are generally simplistic or one-dimensional in nature. We conclude by arguing that sport advocates should carefully consider what kind of socially-educative contributions sport might lay claim to and by thinking about potential strategies for making these claims convincing.