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► To cite this version:

Jacques Gleyse, Jean-Luc Canal. Everyday Physical Education for 11-year-olds in a "rurban" (outer city) secondary school in the south of France: the conflict between norms and arts de faire - an ethnographic approach. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 2013, 18 (3), pp.298-316. 10.1080/17408989.2012.690373 . hal-01334725

HAL Id: hal-01334725

<https://hal.science/hal-01334725>

Submitted on 21 Jun 2016

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Everyday PE for eleven-year-olds in a "rurban" (outer city) secondary school in the South of France: the conflict between norms and *arts de faire*. An ethnographic approach.

Abstract: This paper presents direct, participative observations of the social behaviour of eleven-year-old pupils and teachers during compulsory Physical Education classes in France with the aim of improving understanding of the myriad expected and unexpected behavioural incidents in an interactive and micro-sociological perspective. Pupils receive four hours per week "total immersion" for a full school year (two hours twice a week). The findings led to a further discussion of fundamental related teaching and learning issues in this discipline. Findings also brought to light the reality of learning from peers, which is virtually independent of the institution and the will of the teacher, although a dialogue may be maintained with the latter.

Key-words: Physical Education (PE), France, "arts de faire", Institution, Ethnography.

In France, Physical Education (PE) is a compulsory school discipline, part of the official curriculum in state schools requiring four hours a week for eleven-year-olds. It is included in all annual assessments.

Articles have appeared in the *E.P.E.R*, *Quest*, *JTPE*, *Sport*, *Education and Society*, *P.E.S.P.* and the French language *STAPS*, detailing the experience of those involved in PE since the publication of “theories of the situated action” (Kirk, 2003, 219) (Kirk, Kinchin, 2003, 221-235).

However, in the English literature, the earliest work on interactions in school using an ethnologic approach is that of Hargreaves (1967), but this work is concerned with school life generally. Willis (1977) also used this type of approach but his paper shows how rejection procedures by underprivileged children lead them ultimately into manual employment.

Connell’s work (1982), although using an ethnologic approach, focuses on questions of gender. Much other research in English also uses this approach but sometimes considers other aspects of school educational activities, specifically PE. This is particularly the case of research under Evans (1988), Kirk & Tinning (1990), which examines, as do some aspects of our work, the question of control in PE.

Still on PE, relevant work has been conducted by Sparkes (1992) and Wright, Macdonald & Burrows (2004).

Articles in Spanish by the Argentineans Martínez Álvarez & Gómez (2009) and the Andalusians Sicilia Camacho & Fernandez-Balboa (2004) use similar methodology to the approach employed in our study.

Again in English, but covering the whole life of the class, we would cite recent work by O’ Donovan & Kirk (2007).

Other research (Nespor, 1997) over a longer period of ethnographic presence (two years) also attempted to define what school represents and what constitutes its limits. Finally, still using an ethnographic method, the earliest work of Walker (1988), describes how male culture is organised through school in underprivileged inner-city areas.

Some literature concentrates on particular cases (Clarke & Quill, 2003, 253-266) or incidents identified as "critical" (Amade-Escot, 2000, 83) during a teaching session. This is of value to both the neophyte and the experienced teacher, with a more realistic approach to teaching method. Other articles put greater emphasis on pupil motivation (Ommundsen, 2006, 289-315), or on the practical aspects of teaching (Kim et al, 2006, 361-379), (Morgan, Kingston, Sproule, 2005, 257-285).

However, in French literature, there is little work based on the presence in class of the researcher over an extended period (more than a few weeks) and it is unusual for an ethnographic approach to be adopted which clearly concentrates on the actual activity of the class as a group comprising pupils and teacher. Our approach to PE research draws on contemporary ethnological work in the field of physical exercise (Callède, 1985; Darbon, 1995; Bromberger, 1987a; 1987b; Saouter, 1998; Gleyse, Valette, 1999; Pruneau, 2001), and English language research into education (Angus, 1986; Delamont, 1984; Erickson, 1982; Lutz, 1981; Spindler, 1982; Stebbing, 1975; Snyder, 1971; Ogbu, 1981; Wolcott, 1975; Woods, 1990) and a few French papers (Berthier, 1996; Lapassade, 1996, 1998).

Our work involved direct, participative observation of the social behaviour of pupils and teacher during PE under “total immersion” four hours per week over a full school year (two hours twice a week). The aim was to investigate the wide range of anticipated and unforeseen behaviour in an interactive and micro-sociological environment.

It surprised us to discover what is most routinely familiar in a PE class. Yet, the observer’s task is not easy for the experienced PE teacher, since we become imprisoned by a number of work routines and prejudices accumulated over careers lasting many years.

The battle is not easy either for the ethnologist studying contemporary life. It is essential, of course, following the example of traditional ethnology, to win the confidence of the group in order to gain access to its “secrets” and the minutiae that make up the daily routine.

Ethnology has often been portrayed as simultaneously distant and participative, external and internal. The ethnologist is always external to the relationships being studied. Exteriority defines the ethnologist as much in terms of method (the observer makes contact, tries to become accepted and to understand) as from the subject’s point of view. They and the group know they will never belong to the group being studied, although some ethnologists, by vanity, naivety or calculation, sometimes give the appearance of being absorbed by the subject they are observing, for example by actually initiating a religion. The involvement required when speaking of participative observation is of an intellectual order: it involves entering into the other’s reasoning (Augé, 2006).

Thus, the researcher moves from the status of controlling adult (Woods, 1990) at the start of the academic year, to a second status of guardian or safe deposit or even coat-hanger as they are entrusted with watches, rings and jackets and thirdly to that of confident and games partner. At this stage, revelations, admitted by pupils or prompted by the researcher’s curiosity having become a member of the group, become quite numerous.

Several authors (Vidal 1997) have shown that uproar is a condition for perpetuating the academic system. Others perceived (the institutional pedagogy of Rogers or Neil) that the group itself is one of the driving forces in academic learning. However, no research into PE in France up to now has really asked what is learnt from the everyday *arts de faire* (de Certeau,

1980) and what precisely the pupils actually learn. The principle of *arts de faire*, as defined by de Certeau, is “the game” in institutions, the unorthodox or unclassifiable within the instituted. *Arts de faire* means everything that escapes the institution — rationality, organisation, quantification. “Usually, the unorthodox is present discreetly in the street, but it just needs a crisis for it to rise up in spate, swamp cellars, raise drain covers and occupy the town. When light is suddenly thrown on nighttime events, we are taken by surprise. However, the existence of what is normally hidden is revealed – an ever-present internal resistance.” (de Certeau, 1970, 7). The paper that follows meticulously examines this dynamic in a specific school class.

Until now the concept of *arts de faire* has been used neither as a tool nor as a theoretical basis for research into teaching practices in school PE. *Arts de faire* make it possible to perceive a quite different pedagogic reality, not that which involves the teacher’s laborious activity but all that eludes teaching, long described as uproar, or “opting out”. *Arts de faire* in school education, specifically in relation to PE and Sports, would definitely be disruptive in Foucault’s description of the incarceration aspect of French schooling (Foucault, 1975): lining up, docile bodies, rankings inherited from the Brothers of Jean-Baptiste de La Salle charity schools, discipline, silence and immobility. *Arts de faire* is all that noise, movement, gesture, disturbance, indocility and indiscipline that infiltrate the established institutional order, the fundamental dogma, and provide some degree of freedom which makes the instituted bearable for the greatest number.

1 Method

The class of eleven-year-olds observed was an ordinary one in a junior high school (*collège*) in southern France, with no peculiarity whatsoever. The children’s socio-economic backgrounds were mixed, the balance being similar to many secondary school first year classes (a third being quite privileged, a third averagely so and a third underprivileged). The

assessment at the start of the academic year showed a similar pattern to the norm. There were 12 girls and 13 boys. The school is situated in a "rurban" (outer city) area in southern France. The teacher was himself a PE teacher, similar to many. He held an advanced teaching diploma in sports and PE "*Certificat d'Aptitude à l'Enseignement de l'Education Physique et Sportive*" being promotion after obtaining a master's degree "*Maître d'Education Physique et Sportive*". Aged forty-eight (the average teaching age in the region) he had worked in the same school for twelve years. For ethical reasons, the names of the establishment, the class, the pupils and the teacher have not been disclosed.

The researcher was assimilated into the class.

Standard ethnographic aids were used (a notebook for meticulously recording both significant and less significant ethnological events with photographs and sketches as necessary), and spontaneous and qualitative, guided discussion. The researcher concentrated on major ethnographic categories: subject, discussion, language, myth, prohibition, rites and rituals (Piette, 1992). Thus the ordinary is transformed into the extraordinary, the banal into the strange.

Unguided (spontaneous) discussions for research purposes took place at the end of the ethnographic period of immersion, in other words once the researcher was accepted by the group. Interviews were of variable but sufficient duration and always with two or three pupils. Verbatim remarks were carefully deciphered and content was analysed qualitatively (by subject, Bardin, 1984).

In total the researcher made nearly 700 pages of ethnographic notes covering spontaneous discussions, sketches and on-the-spot remarks made by the teacher or the pupils. On occasion, situations were described that were either complex or difficult to remember or could not be reported verbatim. In any event, the purpose of the ethnography was to ensure certain facts were not forgotten, to collect them methodically in order to collate the

ethnography later, in other words, to systematise data collection from a process of induction. To this end the methodology of Claude Levi-Strauss (1962) and other classical ethnologists was employed.

2 Findings

It is not possible here to explain all the *arts de faire* used by the class/teacher combination. We describe only the most obvious. However, *arts de faire* have been described in a number of fields.

2.1 The conflict between everyday *arts de faire* and institutional rationality

“You really have to behave like an idiot from time to time, you have to let your hair down; your body has to exult at times at school.” (Mid-year, Spontaneous Remark by the Teacher: SRT)

This was said during a period of guided discussion. While it was to be expected that an experienced teacher would confirm academic principles, rationalising the teaching event was an opportunity for the pupils to freely express themselves regarding the described, approved system:

“... To get back to the general subject of people walking out of class like that... Everyone does it at some time or other [...] and then OK, back again! There must be a lot of stuff that escapes me you see, but I still take that into account, realizing that in a class, any class, there are so many things I don’t understand, you know. You see what I’m trying to say? Things just get impossible and that’s why suddenly you give a shout of protest [...].”

Question: *You’ve just said that at a particular moment, there’s stuff you don’t understand?*

“Masses of it!”

Question: *For example?*

“Oh, I dunno, there could be a kid who seems to be fully engrossed in the stuff, doing an exercise I’ve suggested, though not perfectly and then, he says to himself, ‘I’m doing it but I really couldn’t care less. It’s pointless, stupid, I don’t like it, I’m only doing it so’s not to get told off’ and then I realize it’s always like that! It is actually happening every few minutes.” (Spontaneous Group Discussion: SGD).

So this is a real picture of the times left unorganised by the institution, in which a multitude of *arts de faire* (de Certeau, 1980), major and minor, become entangled. They are a major learning opportunity for the pupils, including their relationships with their peers.

“In a way, they opt for self-teaching, they prefer to do everything on their own, even back to front, rather than follow the advice of someone else. I think they should have greater decision-making ability regarding the class and more ‘freedom’ in inverted commas.” (SRT).

These are the words of the teacher, using the term “self-teaching” to mean an unstructured learning dynamic. He is not alone; his pupils too have a sharp awareness of what is happening. Here are the comments of Mélanie C., Sandra, Denis and Jonathan during a warm-up session:

“[...] when Sir turns away, there are some kids who make an initial start, go round the track and then have another go you see, but only do half the circuit, they cheat don’t they, in other words instead of going round the whole track they take short cuts, they go direct. Everyone takes short cuts, cheats.”

Speaking of rugby:

“He [the pupil] passes with his feet when we have to do it by hand.”

and other physical activities:

“Once, when Sir had his back turned, he made gestures at him, two finger signs, things like that.” (Year-end, SGD)

Or, according to Jonathan:

“And once, Benjamin at rugby, it was against Julie F. and she had the ball and he jumped on her and pinched her butt!”

Confirmed by Denis:

“It’s true!”

Sandra won’t admit these sexual connotations at all:

“The last time Olivier did that to me I did the same thing back, and he walloped me!”

(SGD)

You can see in these brief cameos de Certeau’s expression (1980), that: “the daily round invents a thousand ways to steal,” applies in a standard PE class for eleven-year-olds. In fact, where you would expect to find rational motor learning, we observed a thousand and one tiny glimpses of events, built up mainly through interaction with the pupil group on the spot.

Even at the moment of greatest domination, as Georges Balandier (1988) illustrates, a “spontaneous sociality” develops from the *arts de faire*, demonstrated according to Piette (1992) by:

- role distance (Goffman, 1973);
- social lies and gossip;
- compensating activities;
- clandestine tactics and stealing (de Certeau, 1980);
- duplicity and cunning (Maffesoli, 1990);
- investment and lack of interest (Maffesoli, 1990);
- the active game (Bourdieu, 1979);
- gaps and disorder.

This is precisely what this paper examines through observing an ordinary PE class for eleven-year-olds.

2.2 Interaction in class work too

Virginie and Julie exchange solutions in class:

“And when I don’t get it, she helps me. So, we all help one another, that’s why we chat in class.”

Julie “chats” with Mélanie C. too:

“I’m next to Mélanie C. and any time that I can’t do something, she explains it to me; but when she doesn’t understand, she doesn’t ask me, she copies from me instead, [...] and if I make a mistake, she makes one too!” (SGD)

Virginie, Julie and Mélanie C., use what Woods (1990) calls “*coping*”.

According to the teachers, the author of “*Inside schools: Ethnography in Educational Research*” explains “This is adapting to recurring everyday problems, responding to immediate tangible pressure, like the size of the class and the premises, as well as strong socio-structural and long-standing forces such as discipline [...] and the weight of tradition. It is a means of integrating the contradictory aims that the educational system requires its agents to impose (such as liberal individualism opposing the democratic mass phenomenon), the dilemmas faced in class and the tensions induced by the physical, emotional and intellectual demands of the profession. Also, *coping* is involved where biography and organisation meet.” (Woods, 1990, 23).

In fact, it is a response to contradictory interjections as in a double-blind system, such as mass education and elite selection, personality construction and imposed social organisation. In brief, there are numerous contradictions with which both the teacher and the pupil group must come to terms (including the teacher *within* the group). This is true for the whole education system but most particularly in PE which was initially viewed as compensatory relaxation from intellectual learning.

Here it appears that *arts de faire* borrowed from de Certeau (1980) is just as pertinent as *coping* put forward by Woods. It is what the pupils of this ordinary secondary school class call “*messing about*”, meaning everything happening within and opposing the institution. For example, if they know they are not allowed to talk together, they’ll do so constantly without being found out. If they know they are not allowed to share information during a test, they’ll find a way to share the information (“*pump*” and “*dupe*”). But especially in PE, an incredible number of *arts de faire* are concerned.

Furthermore, according to Vasquez-Bronfman and Martinez (1996): “It turns out that quite a high proportion of children in a class are always doing two things at the same time (following the lesson and interacting among themselves) and they successfully manage to do both simultaneously.”

During a swimming session in January, *arts de faire* was being fully expressed. In fact, the aim of the activity defined by the teacher was to:

“*Swim without touching the sides or a classmate for seven minutes. You must not touch the side of the pool, is that clear?*” (Ethnographic notebook: Enb).

In fact of course, some touch the side of the pool. The teacher says: “*Olivier and Sébastien E., come out.*” (Enb). Then, seeing that the task set is difficult to achieve, he changes the rules with the two boys straight away and lets them go back into the pool. Then, he asks Pierre, who is still in the water, how far he has swum. Pierre doesn’t know what to say. The teacher continues:

“*That’s alright, but next time, think about the distance you do.*” (Enb) And then he asks them all to get out of the water, although they have swum for less than five minutes.

A little later, the pupils are given another task (jump into the water) organised in three lines. Sporadic pushing and shoving occurs. Sébastien E. finds himself pushed in the water by Pierre. The teacher sees what has happened immediately and asks the group: “*Who did the*

pushing?” (Enb) Pierre replies naïvely, with confidence: *“It wasn’t me!”* The teacher continues: *“Don’t be cheeky, I saw you. Just calm down.”* (Enb). But no real sanction is imposed on Pierre. Here, we see the teacher’s tolerance in respect of such *arts de faire*.

Other similar behaviour occurs frequently: every time they pass each other Alexia, Olivier and Pierre splash one another. Benjamin, Anthony and Sébastien E. pretend to drown when they turn at the end of the pool. Olivier and Sébastien E. are lectured by the teacher for resting on the side of the pool, are called out of the water, and a few minutes later try to slip unnoticed back into the water. They are seen by the teacher and called out again. While this is going on, Mélanie C., Fanny and Julie float discreetly as the teacher talks to the two miscreants. So, in a very short learning session, pupil behaviour both complies with instructions given and infringes them through minor actions. The teacher’s job is to notice these infringements and apply latitude to the instituted machinery (as in the case of Pierre).

The teacher is acutely aware in the matter of flexibility, game and redistribution:

“Follow a class from A to Z without faltering, you do your class, and he [a pupil] listens, is attentive and takes it in both physically and mentally with absolutely no problem, but he will be only one of six or seven who does, perhaps a quarter of the class.” (SRT)

It is understandable that as a result, three quarters of them benefit from a degree of latitude.

Perhaps this why the pupils consider, as with the example of Mélanie C., that the PE class has *“a good atmosphere”*, *“freedom”*, even though the limits are sometimes exceeded; she may also say that *“it was a shambles”* and that the behaviour was *“inane”*. It is surprising that pupils, when invited to comment on the PE class during an unguided research discussion, in general *almost never referred to the motor training* but to a host of other matters that might previously have been considered non-academic yet are nevertheless an integral part of school activity.

2.3 The ON and OFF of compulsory PE as a school discipline

2.3.1 Rites on entering and leaving the class

Three examples are given of these rites.

In September, the PE teacher tells the pupils:

“When the bell goes, form up in a double line in the quad.” (Enb)

Generally, throughout the year, they respect this instruction but some circumvent it by throwing satchels out of the line have the vital necessity to go and pick them up, some leave the line to shake hands politely with the researcher (most often Benjamin, Pierre, Olivier, Kader, and Jonathan), others have fairly friendly fights with those in the adjacent line. This behaviour is disapproved of by the girls, who say the boys *“just want to draw attention to themselves.”*

Furthermore, the position in the line is not predetermined, and tussles break out to get the first place. Girls like Alexia and Mélanie C. normally take the head, but are sometimes pushed back and hustled by others who relegate them to the third or fourth position, or throw them out of the line altogether. Thus, “the art of the line” (Foucault, 1975) “in a closed area, isolated, functional” (Gleyse, Valette, 1999) is almost continuously disturbed without being reproved by the teachers and monitors, as if allowing a period of adjustment for integrating into the new role of secondary school pupil.

The cloakroom (Gleyse, Valette, 1999) is one of the places where testing institutional limits and those established by the pupil group, certainly occurs. In fact, while the teacher insists on *“three or four minutes for changing”*, the time taken varies and is used in part for other purposes, and not what is intended by the two institutional systems - the school and the PE discipline.

The boys peep through the keyhole to *“eye up the girls”* while they are changing. Boys bang on the door between them to imply a possible intrusion, under the amused gaze of

their peers. Benjamin tries to make a brief incursion into the girls' changing room and incites their protests. Gabriel changes slowly as if playing with his peers or negotiating with the teacher. Yet a wealth of other games (in the sense of *paideia* or *game* - a spontaneous child's game and not *ludus* or *play* with established rules), is organised or learnt: pushing off the person on the end of a shared bench, shouting stridently while hiding, burping noisily and laughing wildly. The silence requested by the teacher is ignored when he is not there, a caricature portrayed by Morad: “*Silence, you, you and you, black marks for everyone,*” (Enb) and the other boys find it hilarious. Fights break out, gentle or quite rough shoving.

The event of the year is when the girls' cloakroom is dirtied by the boys dropping sunflower seed shells (known as “fag-ends” by both pupils and teacher). The teacher makes the girls clean up and they plead innocence. Here, the limit seems to have been exceeded: the teacher calls everyone together and says:

“We won't leave the gym until I know who dropped those fag-ends.” (Enb)

Benjamin gives himself up. The teacher admonishes him, “*What you've done is dishonest. Now please listen to me! It's not nice to see or hear about. You all have to make an effort; it's stupid to fight one another.*” (Enb)

Benjamin is told to “*behave impeccably from now on*”. But there is no further sanction. According to the boys' comments, Benjamin did it as vengeance:

“So the girls, who are spoilt by the teacher, [would] get into trouble.” (Enb)

Several other matters are the subject of this dynamic dialogue and “*limit testing*”. Dress regularly gives rise to tension (particularly leaving laces untied, giving undue importance to brand names); in this the group imposes virtually as many standards as the teacher.

There is often a mild uproar during roll call (stealing someone else's identity, shouting, shoving). The end of session group analysis is followed by half the class while the

rest play with small teaching aids. While instructions are being given there is a lull, silence and immobility contrasting with the incessant commotion. The length of the session itself is variable (it may finish a few minutes earlier or later than the institution’s timetable). From the beginning of the academic year, the teacher insists on punctuality and respecting the timetable. However, his own punctuality during the year lapses on occasion, the teacher arriving late about ten times.

Some of the pupils draw attention to this. Alexia, in a bantering tone, tells the teacher:

“You’re late, Sir, you’ll get a warning!” (Enb)

The teacher’s quiet smile responds to this joke. However, that day perhaps Alexia learns both punctuality and the possibility of flexibility regarding the timetable.

There is scant respect for the warming-up exercise, its duration and the distances to be accomplished (pupils cut corners when jogging, do not repeat the exercises as instructed by the teacher, even do something else entirely).

All these actions oppose the institutional logic and the *arts de faire*, and have a fluctuating limit, defined day by day both by the pupils and the teacher, who is always conscious of it. Nothing seems really fixed. Everything is installed in a dynamic dialogue between pupils and between teacher and pupils; in other words, between the members of the group.

As a class finishes, the teacher asks the pupils to end their activity, and gather in a particular area in the gym or sports field. They are invited to sit down and asked, in a variable sequence, to:

- listen to the analysis of the session or to answer questions on the learning achieved;
- collect up small items of equipment (tennis balls, posts, competitor’s numbers, rings etc.);
- put away the other equipment used (gym mats, badminton posts, Hand balls etc);

— listen, on occasion, to the program for the next session.

Some examples illustrate finishing rites. At the pool, the call to come out of the water is almost never gets an immediate reaction: four or five pupils nearly always go quickly back into the water. In badminton an impetuous push, or leaping onto the equipment trolley, captures the energy of the boys. Handballs are thrown at the girls instead of being tidied into storage nets.

Getting changed is often the excuse for joyous chaos: the supporter’s song (*Allez la France, Allez l’OM*) is shouted by the boys, clothing is thrown, and friendly fights take place while waiting for the bell.

2.3.2 Transitional areas: exceeding the transfer time

Here are three examples of this.

Within the school grounds, the class is asked to form up in two lines and walk to the cloakrooms near the main building. Here again, the degree laxness is tested. Some of the pupils tap on a classroom or study room window making provocative comments to their peers such as “*Oh! Look how ugly he is. Have you seen his fish-face? Hey moron, what are you doing in the study room?*” (Enb) Some shuffle along, leaving a long gap between themselves and their colleagues, and the teacher, mindful of the low marks they obtained in the last class, discreetly takes care to exclude one or two of them from the football team.

In order to get to the stadium outside the school, or to the gym a fifteen-minute walk away, despite the teacher’s repeated insistence (“*stay in file, keep together, no talking, walk on the pavement, stop and look before crossing the road*”), behavioural infringements still occur. Pressing the bells of houses they pass is one of the boys’ favourite games. Pilfering oranges, pretending to run away down an adjacent road, hitting the bag of balls carried by another pupil, trying to walk on the curb without falling despite being shoved by their neighbour.

One day, Kader trailed behind, hidden by Olivier, Pierre, Anthony and Sébastien E. From beside a garage door he started to run to catch up with the group after ringing someone’s doorbell. Unfortunately for him, the house was occupied by a family in mourning. Someone rushed out of the yard in front of the house. The teacher went back to investigate, and was admonished: *“It’s disgraceful to allow children to do as they like. You should be doing your job properly.”* (Enb)

The teacher called the pupils together and asked them not to play any more *“pranks in such poor taste”*. He told them *“you have exceeded the limits”*, which is doubtless the key to the whole issue.

What is discovered about “conduct instituted” and everyday *arts de faire* is really that it is *testing the limits* (in the etymological sense of *limits*: the Roman frontier between barbarity and civilisation) and these *limits* are tested and appraised by all the members of the group, not just the pupils.

In the above incident between the school and the sports ground, Kader took full responsibility for his behaviour, so the teacher lectured him but did not impose a punishment:

“It’s right and proper that you admitted doing it, I hope you realize the implications.”
(Enb)

The social message being learnt is apparent here. School is perhaps one of those rare places in our repressive society where we can make a mistake and learn from it (“confession is half-way to being pardoned” the proverb says). This did not prevent the teacher from reiterating firmly: *“I don’t expect pupils to go ringing doorbells ever again.”* (Enb). The game had reached the limit of acceptability.

The standard framework, bounded by silence, the line and the precise route as rites imposed by the teacher, is interfered with by small, random behaviour patterns; the pupils test

the standards and rules, burst into laughter, annoy some of their peers, and break the PE class routine in a thousand ways.

A coach ride taking pupils to the pool twenty-two kilometres away is the opportunity for numerous infringements: throwing sports bags over the seats, frenetically shaking the seats, drawing on the steamed up windows, distributing sweets, trading vehicle parts. In brief, the reminders to calm down, be quiet and keep still issued throughout the journey are constantly disregarded or at least tested by the pupils thereby learning the limits of sociability.

2.4 Rituals in physical activities

Regular incidents, generally ritualised, seem to recur with certain activities: starting the activity, a system of constituting values, setting standards in physical techniques, games with small items of equipment that disrupt organisation.

2.4.1 Starting the activity

The teacher sets a routine for starting the physical activity with an alternating system “*Forty-five seconds running slowly and fifteen seconds walking.*” (Enb) Yet here again, the times given are not really respected and furthermore, the pupils run in time to the noise of a passing motorbike, they shove one another, they cut corners in the gym, on the rugby pitch or football ground. Other incidents come to light that circumvent the standards set by the teacher and are important to him.

In rugby, suggestions are often ignored: the length of a kick, limited to 10 meters, increases rapidly; lines for progressive passes are only briefly maintained, quickly deteriorating into a disorganised mass of players. A threat made by the almost disheartened teacher “*you’ll end up running in six-meter diameter circles*” (Enb) is virtually disregarded, though a large laughing group turns round the ethnologist (now clearly accepted by the group).

But these controlled infringements, this *paideia* in the *ludus*, play within the game is nearly always limited and does not actually challenge the system; on the contrary, it enables it to endure. Or perhaps limits are defined moment by moment, here and now.

When placing the record cards for long distance races some pupils are visibly bored, and the only person who seems to have understood the task is Mélanie C., who will become virtually excluded from the *arts de faire* by her peers because she complies too readily with the teacher’s demands.

However, the teacher systematically sets norms at the start of the activity: record cards, the gymnastics session criteria, quite draconian hygiene standards at the pool: “*Using the WC, and going through the shower is compulsory; wait on the side of the pool for the teacher to arrive; goggles are not essential; if you use the equipment — boards, chips, or mats — you must put it away afterwards; you may, if necessary, go to the WC during the session; we shall inspect your feet to make sure they are clean.*” (Enb).

Yet, as with other requirements, these norms are not really respected, by either teacher or pupil.

In badminton, passes must be high but not too high: this instruction becomes a competition to touch the gym ceiling. Whenever an activity is started, the teacher tries to set limits in time, space, movement and behaviour. Pupils immediately mount their counter-offensive, testing these limits, but without completely challenging the system, which adapts, continuing to operate through the game.

2.4.2 Values specific to the activity

The teacher stresses a founding principle for each physical activity. Gymnastics rests on three pillars: “*Show yourself, have meticulous discipline, concentrate.*” The strong pressure engendered by the requirement to perform before the whole class is far from gaining pupil support:

“Oh yeah, what’s awful is doing it in front of everyone else; they all look at you.”

(Enb)

This is a real challenge when teasing is so frequent. The teacher often has to reiterate: *“It’s not nice to laugh and jeer.”* Limit testing structures behaviour. The learning opportunity is clear; respecting others is a founding principle of “showing yourself to others”.

Swimming is structured in the teacher’s terms; it is not a sport but a means of survival:

“Being able to swim for twenty minutes and climb back on board is vital if you fall off a boat.” (Enb)

Hence the (ignored) instruction to swim without touching the sides for ten minutes.

“So much can happen in two or three minutes when tiredness takes over. They somehow get onto their backs, they breath in a particular way, and there are things that seem interesting to me; I notice for example, that whatever their level of ability, after about fifty meters, all the swimmers turn onto their backs, which surely indicates that they have breathing problems and manage to find a solution that way.” (SRT).

Here the founding value of the system is to develop confidence in a “problem situation”, encouraging the pupil to discover their individual breathing capacity. Sometimes, they are unsuccessful, which explains why they hang on to the side of the pool.

Pupils value quite another reference system, which includes jumping into the water, splashing about, going down the slide. Above all they want to *“have fun in the water.”* Pierre and Kader experiment:

“Hmm, I didn’t think much of what we were doing. Yeah! In the pool, at the end, we played on the slide and all that. It was crazy, but to start with we swam for ten minutes, at the end of ten minutes, heck! It’s too long!” (Enb)

The same verdict was delivered by Virginie, Julie and Sandra, the latter saying that:

“It’s OK, but I don’t know, it would be better if we could go on the slide!” (Enb)

Here again we see the dynamics of the pupils’ desire and the teacher’s basic value system. We might even talk of a “dialogic” system (Morin, 1984).

In badminton, the teacher’s defined founding value is the hierarchy, the players’ ladder with its system of “*ascending and descending*”, with some pupils being eliminated and all being classified (a value appreciated by the academic institution, Bourdieu, 1972, Estabiet & Passeron, 1971).

“Good; moving on to badminton, it is the same. Establishing a hierarchy I suppose is important, it’s unfortunate but it’s important in life too. A hierarchy is always important.”
(Enb)

Some pupils distance themselves from this link with society; *“We’re happy in the fifth division.” “We’d rather play among ourselves; we’re having a great time.”* (Enb).

The teacher's value system meets resistance however, although the fun activity itself is not really subjected to limit testing, but some challenge the founding organisational system.

2.4.3 Norms in physical techniques

Rugby is without doubt where limit testing flourishes in terms of norms in physical techniques. However, when the teacher is faced with the girls’ resistance to violent contact, he excuses them from tackling in favour of a simple touch. The teacher, confronted by the anguish of some of the girls, (particularly Mélanie C. who cries when she is hit on the head by the ball), blames what he calls the founding value system of rugby: “*contact*”. But he recognises that: *“Mélanie C. reacted too emotionally.”* He also reproves the sudden violence exhibited by Alexandre: *“When you’re hit, don’t get angry; there’s no enemy, this is rugby!”*
(Enb)

Thus, from the third session, faced with the girls' resistance (through fear), the teacher abandons a physical technique he considers a founding value of the activity, showing that he too yields to the limit test. A valid limit is provided by the girls. We also see that the PE

discipline is organised in the immediate present, not *in abstracto*. However, it is significant that the system is chaotic and random: this is clear from the dynamics of *the daily testing of the group's limits, of the institution, the arts de faire, the teacher, the practice, the rules and the technical norms*.

Physical attacks in the course of a game of rugby are numerous: Mélanie C. is scratched on the face, Sébastien E. molested by Olivier “*He won't let the ball go and Olivier is holding him by the balls!*” Mélanie C. thinks “*he can't bear to lose.*” Gladys explains this by saying: “*he thinks he's strong and doesn't like the others to push him around like that [...]. He must [...] think he's strong.*” (Enb)

The teacher intervenes and encourages them to learn about body contact, reminding them of the fun aspect:

“*Some players are too rough. Hitting is often unintentional; it's part of the game, part of life. [...] Olivier, you're behaving like an idiot, go away. Julie got hit, but she's got herself under control.*” (Enb)

We see here that the teacher uses these incidents to help the pupils learn self-control. We also see what is actually learnt, not the teacher's formal plan. Pupils test their limits regarding the aggressiveness of other pupils, just as the teacher tests the pupils' limits in rugby and his own didactic approach. Physical techniques become less important than other learning, although of course group self-control is actually a physical technique.

In gymnastics, other expectations come to the fore. The number of repeats, particularly important to the teacher so that the pupils to learn certain techniques, is not respected: “*After a moment, you are fed up, you do something else.*” Kader and Benjamin do forward summersaults and cartwheels instead of the high rolls requested, saying:

“Well, we did it once and that was enough so we stopped right there, ha! ha! We were doing rolls here, cartwheel things there, I didn’t like it.” This was confirmed in discussion by Virginie and Julie too. (Enb).

In October there was an epic session in the teacher’s presence, most of the class starting a jumping competition on the mats when they were supposed to be setting up equipment. A friendly fight broke out between Jonathan and Denis, Marc and Sébastien E., chasing one another, tripping, landing flat-stomached on the mat. In brief, a joyous effervescence where together pupils learn several physical techniques that have no bearing on the planned gym session, or at least, nothing that seems to bear on it. Yet, maybe there is a dialogue between the two.

That day the teacher told them:

“There’s such a lot I don’t understand [...]. It’s not possible to put up with certain behaviour, [...] I grumble because I don’t want to talk to the kid concerned individually. And then there’s a general grouse to [...] get back on track.” (Enb).

That day, getting back on track was absolutely essential.

And if the teacher requires them to *“get things under control”*, the activity, like the learning technique, is just reorganised by the pupils to suit themselves. Yet it is exactly this reorganisation that constitutes learning possible limits, what is acceptable and unacceptable to the institution, even to the group itself.

Similar limit testing occurs in swimming, badminton, and stamina training. The roles, in the sense defined by Foucault (1975), required in the academic institution just as in military, prison and medical institutions, are certainly disrupted; lines, in the symbolic sense, are disturbed, order disrupted by *arts de faire*. But thanks to such “great deviations” the system endures.

2.5 Constituent values of the PE discipline

While the teacher often requires “*seriousness and concentration*”, pupils forget the instructions and abandon themselves to enormous gales of helpless, contagious laughter, which the teacher tries to check with a threatening tone of voice. Sometimes the teacher exploits pupil hilarity in order to create a more relaxed atmosphere, generally welcoming laughter as he remembers his own helpless laughter as a teenager: “*And that too [...] I really like it, being happy at school [...] is not forbidden. When I see them burst out laughing, I’m happy for them [...]. I experienced it when I was at school too.*” (STD)

While a teaching method based on humour might seem worthless, a healthy sense of humour towards oneself, others and the institution is surely beneficial?

Language is important too. What are the language styles used by the pupils and teacher to express themselves? In general, the teacher adopts a language that complies with school orthodoxy and the demands of PE. It often relates specifically to the discipline, to be learnt at the same time as the motor tasks.

The teacher considers that his mode of expression falls within the range of expected school language: “*I speak as a teacher, not as a teenager; I don’t talk slang, I don’t use fuck and shit [...] in every sentence.*” He feels he has to communicate in a way in which he is personally at ease, using everyday language though sometimes borrowing from the street: “*When you talk to a pupil you want to talk as I’m talking to you now, in an ordinary way, which suits me. I don’t talk like Molière, however, if I spoke to them as I do to you, they wouldn’t understand sixty percent of what I say.*” (Enb). And the language limits in a PE class can be stretched till you are swearing like your pupils.

Our observations corroborate that the teacher’s normal speech to pupils sometimes employs colourful expressions, and maybe involuntarily:

— in describing learning behaviour: “*you messed up the last turn*”, “*everyone’s bushed*” (after a long distance run). (Enb).

— during disciplinary comments: “*Benjamin, push off*”, “*Marc, watch out*”, “*Stop bullshitting around*” etc. (Enb)

Between pupils without the immediate influence of the teacher, “normal” expressions are interspersed with sexual or scatological insults, “*Up yours*”, “*Screw your mother*”, “*I’ll stuff it in your mouth and you’ll find out how it feels*”. (Enb) Thus, language *arts de faire* takes a few liberties with school and teaching orthodoxy.

2.6 Disorder

Sports equipment is regularly used for purposes other than those intended. Gym mats, the transport trolley, posts, competitor identity numbers, badminton rackets, record sheets, whistles, stop watches, the sand box; weighted balls and even ordinary balls are given other uses than those intended by the institution.

A badminton racket becomes a guitar in the hands of Denis, a weapon for hitting a backside or head, a machine gun, a spinning top or a frying pan. Olivier tosses it in the air as he pirouettes like a majorette. The trolley is coveted by all. It is no longer used for carrying the mats but is calmly taken for a walk by the pupils. Pierre, Sébastien E., Marc, Olivier and Benjamin argue regularly for the privilege of steering it or riding on it. Pressure by the teacher does not end this game until limits are exceeded.

Swimming boards are used for surfing. Rugby balls play the role of pregnant women. Weighted athletics balls become juggling balls. Posts become loudspeakers, witch’s hats or giant sex organs. The damp grass in the stadium is used for skating. The teacher’s attempts to prevent these activities have little effect. A multitude of *arts de faire* makes ordinary objects fantastically extraordinary. Yet here again learning is achieved, entirely based on the experience, here and now of the actual social construction of the class.

The pupils call it “messaging about”. But the messaging about not only involves the equipment; social relationships and the instituted organisation of orthodox conduct are also disrupted.

Morad and Gabriel think that: *“It goes OK in general, but there’s a lot of messaging about.”* (Enb).

Conflicts between boys and girls occur too and other incidents that bring disorder to order, entropy to harmony. The list occurring during this school year is virtually inexhaustible: *“At the pool, they take people’s bags and throw them, or they take swimming caps.” “They take swimming caps and whack us with them.”*

“Once, Pierre arrived, I went and changed, and when I came back, he hit me and I asked him: ‘What have I done to you?’ and he told me to stop rebelling [...]” (SGD).

“The other day he messed with Morad, and managed to get the better of him. Then he said it was me who started it. No, it was him who started it,” “so I had to mess with him, didn’t I?” (SGD).

Paradoxically, during long distance running the teacher says: *“I have confidence in those in this class; everyone is more or less honest.”*

Although some of the pupils said: *“You’re kind, Sir, you should give him a zero, he stopped!”*

The *arts de faire*, this game within instituted conduct, is considered a problem not only in relation to instituted conduct, the school, PE, the teacher, but also relative to the conduct approved by the group itself.

Alexandre is the target of dominant boys, and Gabriel and Alexia disapprove:

“Sometimes, they get hold of A. He doesn’t know how to look out for himself. He cries too, and they laugh at him so he’ll cry,[...] in fact he’s too nice. He lets them get on with it.”
(Enb)

A system of norms exists within the pupil group, targeting the kindness of some of the others; a system too that is reorganised by the *arts de faire*. It is really another form of “messaging about” disapproved of by the majority. In the case of Alexandre it is both the group limits and his personal limits that are being tested.

2.6.1 Immobility and movement: the intolerability of sitting

At the start of the session, when intermediate instructions are being given and during the end-of-session review phase, the teacher asks the pupils to come together, sit on the ground and keep still. Several pupils fidget: they handle balls, play with badminton rackets, the boys throw small pebbles at the girls, exchange friendly slaps between peers. Immobility markers are quite difficult to establish, much to the teacher's disappointment. The request to keep still causes the opposite response: movement.

2.6.2 The gender battle

In this class everyone seeks to define their symbolic and physical limits. The permeability of these limits is regularly challenged. The boys try to impress the girls with their strength and virility. The girls, far from submitting to this attitude, refuse to take part in activities that call for “male values”. They have their own weapons too: seduction and guile. For the group, a boy is typified by his strength and ability to use force, a propensity to “*show off*”, to “*band together*” and to “*take decisions*”. However, these characteristics are contested by girls with similar qualities, particularly in relation to strength. A girl is generally defined (by the boys and some of the girls too) by her poor performance in team sports, her limited ability in games of skill and her superiority in intellectual matters. Yet being attractive can help her gain a place in the team.

Attempts at co-education that respects differences and similarities, still has far to go.

2.7 Prohibitions and denials

Rudeness of a sexual nature (*“Fuck off”, “I’ll stuff it up your arse”*), deviant behaviour (hands on buttocks, pinching breasts), and games of seduction find a place in a PE class, despite denial and general rejection of sexuality both by the institution and the teacher.

Denial of sexuality is typified by a discussion between the teacher and Pierre: *“Sir, if you kiss a girl at school, will you be kept in?”* The teacher walks on and replies in a distracted sort of way: *“Oh, I’m not in the picture.”*

A range of behaviour and responses with a sexual connotation, self-evident or disguised, contradict the denial of sexuality by the institution, the discipline and the PE teacher. It is a *modus vivendi* that ignores the sexuality of the pupil... and of the teacher, responding to sexuality credited to Eros-impetuous, often clumsy and sometimes aggressive.

The prohibition to chew gum during PE sessions was the subject of constant vigilance from the first to the last session of the school year, yet many pupils (girls and boys) continued to keep a piece of gum in their mouths, often only pretending to throw it in the waste bin. Is this incessant game of imposition and circumvention between the teacher representing the rules, and the pupils trying to evade them in a way that enhances the status of the group, a failure to understand the reason for the prohibition? The teacher’s benchmarks for hygiene, safety and discipline are met by the group’s behaviour, testing them constantly throughout the school year.

3 Schematic view of the system of norms

The system of the class may be schematised, with particularly significant individuals appearing in an area that is virtually symbolic and topological.

FIGURE 1

In this schema Gabriel is the pupil who is the class lynchpin. Gabriel, an older, taller boy re-sitting the year, is the *expert* among the pupil group of *arts de faire*, instituted PE

conduct, the school and the teacher. He fully understands the system of norms established through limit testing. He knows exactly what those limits are.

The teacher moves constantly between the conduct instituted by the school, PE and the *arts de faire* in order to encourage learning. But he does not occupy Gabriel’s central position as he is not an expert in the *arts de faire* instituted by the pupil group.

As the year progresses, Mélanie C., a pupil considered by the majority of her peers as the “*teacher’s pet*” finds herself excluded from the *arts de faire* and unable to benefit from learning from her peers. She mainly learns from the formal teaching.

Alexandre, who is not shown on the diagram, while being more or less a scapegoat, is excluded neither from the *arts de faire* nor from the instituted conduct.

Conversely, as the year progresses, Olivier, only conscious of the *arts de faire*, not having internalised the logic behind limit testing, exceeds the instituted limits and is finally expelled and thus excluded from the group.

So, clearly, the teacher is not the centre of the tribe in the normal PE class. Our ethnographic approach enables us to state this with virtual certainty. We also see that the word “*collège*”, whose etymology goes back to *colegem*, meaning to constitute the law together, suddenly makes complete sense. It really is the pupil group through the *arts de faire*, in dialogue with instituted conduct, that provides the implicit laws or norms of the group, laws that are tested daily by all those involved: this permanent testing may be seen as the most important tutor to this PE class: *limit testing*.

4 Conclusion

Didactic instituted tutoring is only part of the PE learning process. What some call learning “incidents”, and others everyday *arts de faire*, seem to have considerable importance in the normal teaching session. This type of learning doubtless arises largely from the concept

of socialisation. Thus, it is not the individual pupil who is the centre of the learning event, but the pupil group. Limit testing can only be learnt by a committed presence.

If there really is a hidden curriculum in education it does not just concern gender as many have shown, although this has a role in limit testing between male and female. It is more widely socialisation and, even more precisely, *sociality*, meaning the entire non-explicit, non-instituted and not necessarily conscious socialisation, which enables the life of the group to continue day by day.

Finally, regarding the strict domain of physical activities and physical education, it appears that pupils learn as much from their peers as from the teacher (the teacher also learning from their pupils), while *paideia* often takes precedence over *ludus*.

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