The experience of a highly skilled student during handball lessons in physical education: a relevant pointer to the gap between school and sports contexts of practice

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The experience of a highly skilled student during handball lessons in physical education: a relevant pointer to the gap between school and sports contexts of practice

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Introduction: This study investigated the experience of a highly skilled student during a handball physical education unit in a French high school. More specifically, the analysis describes the nature of his involvement during two lessons that follow a pedagogical model close to the principles of Sport Education. The present case study of a student who experiences the gap between school and club practices raises the question of the possibility of promoting real ‘sport experiences’ in school. It contributes to empirical studies investigating Sport Education models and is based on situated learning perspectives and the theory of community of practice.

Method: The study was carried out in reference to the theoretical and methodological framework called ‘course of action,’ in view of conducting a local analysis based on the actor’s point of view. The audio and video recordings of two lessons and post-lesson self-confrontation interviews allowed us to reconstruct this student’s experience through the identification of elementary meaningful units.

Results and discussion: The results indicated two main characteristics of this student’s experience. First, we found a conflicting search for a ‘modus vivendi,’ which usually characterizes school practice but which is particularly problematic in this case because of the student’s elite handball skills. He attempted to mobilize his outside handball expertise while still maintaining a legitimate activity in terms of school rules. His involvement revealed a considerable amount of negotiation to coordinate his playing with that of other members of the class, and also personal negotiation in response to the resulting instability of his identity. Second, his adoption of the role of tutor to help his teammates’ progress led to positive participation in class activities. This position revealed the gradual appearance of a ‘broker-like’ experience between two communities of practice engaged in the same physical activity. It reflects spontaneous adaptation of a dual membership (school and sport) through the use of a pedagogical approach based on sports models of practice.

Keywords: community of practice; situated learning; course of action; physical education; highly skilled student

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Physical education (PE) is based on both sports and artistic practices that are highly prominent cultural forms (Sandford and Rich 2006). Given the diversity of these practices (e.g. informal games with peers, structured experiences in adult organized sports communities, or practices spread by the media), PE classes bring together students who have heterogeneous physical backgrounds (MacPhail, Kinchin, and Kirk 2003). This diversity of students’ backgrounds could be a source of conflict or difficulty likely to affect their involvement at school, especially for adolescents who are trying to build their identity and are looking for landmarks (Ennis 1999). How do prior sports practices outside of school influence a student’s involvement during PE courses? Involvement in any practice constitutes a central dimension of the actor’s experience and is related to his or her particular situation. The present study focuses on the school experience of a highly skilled handball player during a PE unit, in which handball was taught as a social practice taken as a reference (Amade-Escot 2006). We assume that this unique experience provides an interesting example of a ‘boundary case’ where an extracurricular and a school experience of a particular sport practice come together (MacPhail, Kirk, and Kinchin 2004).

Focusing on a student’s school experience falls right in line with the current development of PE models based on authentic experience of practice. Indeed, a growing number of teaching methods are opposed to traditional analytic models like the multiactivity curriculum model (Kirk 2006), which propose school activities that are disconnected from social practices. Sport Education (Siedentop 1994), Sport for Peace (Ennis et al. 1999), Game-Centered Learning (Wright and Forrest 2007), and the Personal Social Responsibility Model (Hellison 1995) are methods that link the sport taught in PE classes to the wider sport culture, and concentrate essentially on the notion of authenticity. These models promote authentic and meaningful student-centered learning activities in order to develop positive sport experiences (MacPhail, Kirk, and Kinchin 2004).

The French PE unit on which this study focused was not based explicitly on one of these models, but it exhibited obvious similarities with some important features of the Sport Education model: the constitution of persistent teams whose five members were of different skill levels, the organization of training matches during each lesson to prepare for the final tournament, letting students take charge of refereeing and scorekeeping, and encouraging students on each team to devise their strategies together. Contrary to Sport Education principles, however, these social roles were not taught or assigned by the teacher. Students had to invest themselves in the task of referee or scorekeeper, but they took on these roles on a voluntary basis. Moreover, the teacher did not define or impose a coach role. The students organized themselves within their teams in order to define collective strategies. This unit was designed in reference to the French national curriculum, which covers two main areas of acquisition: (a) specific technical and tactical skills and (b) social abilities. The class included mainly novice students who were playing handball for the first time or had previously participated in one 14-h unit. The teacher’s aims were to introduce students to core techniques and tactics related to handball. The students had to learn specific technical skills (e.g. pass and catch the ball, dribble, shoot), tactical skills (e.g. getting free of one’s marker, mastering the ‘pass and go’ move), and the main rules of the game (e.g. the rule about entering the goal area, the three-step rule). Social skills were developed via the different roles involved in playing team sports, such as referee or scorekeeper. Accordingly, the teacher strove during the handball unit to promote a way of playing that was close to that found in authentic sports clubs during the sports season. The first two lessons were used to set up teams that would remain the same throughout the entire
The next six lessons were dedicated to teaching and learning tactical and motor skills with teammates. The final lesson was structured as a culminating competitive sport event to evaluate students’ individual and collective skills. Due to these characteristics, this PE lesson was particularly relevant for studying the activity of a student expert as a member of a regular classroom, because of the potential conflict that he could live between his extracurricular and school experience of the handball practice.

Situated learning theory (Kirk and Kinchin 2003; Rovegno 2006) has been used as a theoretical framework for exploring the potential of instructional models in PE such as the Sport Education model, through investigation of the various physical, social, and cultural dimensions of the learning context. In particular, studies have looked into how these models provide a meaningful learning experience through participation within a ‘community of practice’ (Kirk and Kinchin 2003; MacPhail, Kinchin, and Kirk 2003; MacPhail, Kirk, and Kinchin 2004). They have demonstrated the benefits of such models over traditional ones (Clarke and Quill 2003; Browne, Carlson, and Hastie 2004; Sinelnikov and Hastie 2008, 2010; Spittle and Byrne 2009). According to these studies, organizing students into groups that stay the same throughout the season promotes team affiliation (MacPhail, Kirk, and Kinchin 2004) and an authentic ‘sport experience’ (Brunton 2003; Kirk and Kinchin 2003). This curriculum model reinforces the degree of compatibility between students’ experiences of Sport Education and their broader conception of sports (MacPhail, Kinchin, and Kirk 2003). Moreover, these authentic sports experiences in school influence young people’s involvement in other contexts of physical activity and reduce problems of the transfer of learning between school PE classes and the social culture of sports (Kirk and Kinchin 2003; MacPhail, Kinchin, and Kirk 2003). However, the proximity of school practices and sports communities can also generate confusing experiences, particularly for students who are engaged in high-level competitions (Kinchin 2001). In this respect, Wenger (1998) explains that everyone belongs to multiple communities of practice with various engagements, objectives, and references. The experience of ‘bounds between communities of practice’ or ‘boundary practices’ encourages identity instability and perturbation, which influences collective learning dynamics and mutations within these communities. The experience of a highly skilled student seems to provide a key opportunity for investigating the gap between the school and sports contexts of a similar practice.

In this respect, studies that take into account students’ perspectives are necessary for assessing a student’s experience of practice. According to Wenger (1998), involvement throughout an entire community of practice is revealed by investigating the practice itself and each actor’s experience. A major part of empirical studies based on situated learning and the communities-of-practice theory have investigated full PE units or Sport Education seasons. These ‘global’ analyses have made use of observations, self-directed interviews, and questionnaires to gather students’ perspectives and to analyze the effects of PE models on various learning dimensions (motivation, gender, affiliation, social networks, pleasure, benefits in comparison to more traditional models, feeling of responsibility) (for a review, see Hastie, de Ojeda, and Luquin 2011). Few empirical studies have looked at the ‘local’ experiences of students during the shorter time frames corresponding to PE lessons. Dyson (2006) mentions the merits of developing such additional studies centered on students’ experiences in natural settings, which is precisely why the present article analyzes the experiences of a highly skilled handball student during two PE lessons. This local level of analysis centered on one student’s involvement in PE seems to be an interesting way to reveal the ongoing individual activity of students in class.

The study was carried out within the framework of ‘course of action’ theory (Theureau 2006). This framework belongs to the same theoretical trends as the ‘situated learning’
paradigm, which postulates co-determination and mutual specification between the actor and his/her material or social environment, as well as the inseparability of knowledge, social activities, and contexts (Brown, Collins, and Duguid 1989; Lave and Wenger 1991). Thus, both ‘situated learning theory’ and the ‘course of action’ frameworks refer to the same general postulates originating in the so-called ‘situated approaches’ of action and cognition (Kirshner and Whitson 1997). However, the choice of the ‘course of action’ framework compared to ‘situated learning theory’ is based on two main reasons, according to our research question: (a) the course of action framework looks at the activity at a more microscopic level, and focuses on the activity’s local construction dynamics during concrete classroom situations; and (b) this theoretical and methodological framework enables an analysis of the activity that places priority on the actor’s experience and allows for a local analysis centered on the micro-dynamics of the activity.

The ‘course of action’ is a reduction of an activity to the part that is meaningful for the actor. This theoretical object is defined as follows: ‘The activity of a given actor engaged in a given physical and social environment, where the activity is meaningful for that actor; that is, he [sic] can show it, tell it and comment upon it to an observer–listener at any instant during its unfolding’ (Theureau and Jeffroy 1994, 19). Actors are able to account for a part of their experience by pointing to the element of the situation that was taken into account in their activity, and by describing their feelings. This methodology provides access to aspects of the activity that are usually ‘hidden.’

Some studies have investigated students’ experiences during PE lessons by referring to this methodological and theoretical framework. For example, Guillou and Durny (2008) analyzed the dynamics of student activity in two dyads playing table tennis. They focused on the students’ concerns in relation to knowledge activated in a natural setting. The construction of each student’s course of action revealed typical concerns and shared knowledge by the students in each dyad. From the same perspective, Saury and Rossard (2009) investigated the dynamics of students’ concerns during a PE unit on badminton. The reconstruction of the students’ courses of action pointed out the gap between the competitive versus cooperative involvement of the students on the one hand, and the cooperative versus competitive structure of the prescribed learning tasks on the other. The study showed that students’ involvement in PE differed from the teacher’s prescriptions and from the meanings the teacher associated to the learning tasks.

The present study was aimed at contributing to these research perspectives. It analyzes the course of action of a highly skilled handball student, and categorizes the student’s involvement in class activities, i.e. his participation in this ‘academic’ form of handball playing.

Method

Participants and learning situation

A 16-year-old high-school student named Alex volunteered to participate in the study. He was an elite handball player engaged in an extracurricular sports club with top-level competitive objectives. He belonged to the best team in the club, which played in the national youth handball championship. He participated in four training sessions per week with his teammates, and had competitions every weekend. He was hoping to be selected for the national youth team. The teacher was a 45-year-old woman. She had been teaching PE for 20 years in different schools. She specialized in handball, and had played this sport at the national level in her youth. Alex and the teacher were informed of the study’s objectives. It was decided that the teacher would not modify the
form or content of the lessons. It was established that the teacher would not have access to Alex’s activity data.

Alex’s activity was studied during the last two PE lessons of a handball unit composed of eight lessons. The two lessons we studied had the same structure: first, a warm-up (20 min) by two teammates, which consisted of moving the ball toward the goal; second, a problem-solving situation centered on how to get free of one’s marker (40 min); third, an inter-team match session to refine the teams’ strategies in order to prepare for the final tournament (30 min).

Data collection
The entire classroom was filmed in full shot with a fixed video camera during both lessons (1 h and 40 min each). Alex’s behaviors and communications but also those of nearby actors were recorded entirely by a second video camera in medium shot focused on Alex. The second video camera was connected to an HF microphone worn by Alex that recorded all of his verbalizations. The teacher’s verbalizations were recorded by a dictaphone. Individual self-confrontation interviews (2 h long on average) were conducted with Alex in a school classroom immediately after each lesson. The self-confrontation interviews prompted Alex to recall and explain what he had carried out during the lesson as he viewed the video. The student and the researcher could stop the video for a moment, as desired, in order to document or to ask for details about the student’s activity or about the context. The researcher’s questions encouraged the actor to explain his actions, communications, feelings, interpretations, and focusing. This methodology was used in order to stay within the ‘regulated participation’ format for situated methodologies (Theureau 2006), which is designed to keep actors in contact with the situation under analysis and in a mental state that predisposes them to re-experiencing the situation. The interviews were recorded in their entirety with a video camera and a tape recorder.

Semi-structured interviews (1 h on average) were conducted to collect additional data dealing with the classroom context, and the personal histories of the teacher and of Alex. The teacher was interviewed twice, once at the beginning and once at the end of the handball unit. Alex was interviewed once, at the end of the collaboration. These interviews ensured a better understanding of the events occurring during the unfolding of the previous lessons, and allowed us to gain access to the teacher’s aims and pedagogical conceptions. Moreover, handwritten field notes, informal conversations with Alex, the teacher, or another student, and various observations made by the researcher concerning Alex’s activity were summarized. These additional data were used primarily to discuss the results.

Data processing
The data were processed in two steps: (a) reconstruction of Alex’s course of action on each lesson; and (b) nested categorization to describe the nature of his particular experience.

(a) All of the materials collected were written down in a three-level protocol in order to generate Alex’s course of action. This stage consisted first of describing the observable behavioral and verbal dimensions of Alex’s and the closest actors’ activity using video recordings. Then the self-confrontation interviews were transcribed verbatim. Third, the semi-structured interviews and other handwritten field notes were gathered. All these materials were labeled according to the timing of the lesson and thus permitted the description of Alex’s course of action. The reconstruction of a course of action consists of rebuilding the chain of discrete, elementary meaningful units (EMUs) of activity. It requires the
step-by-step documentation of actions, communications, focusing, interpretations, feelings significant to Alex’s point of view, and the tracking of his activity during each lesson. This was done through the simultaneous analysis of the audio and video recordings of Alex’s activity, his verbalizations during the self-confrontation interviews, and the field notes.

(b) This chain of EMUs in the course of action thus constructed was used to identify broader units that were significant from Alex’s point of view. Three different categorization levels were identified by the researchers. The first categorization was achieved by grouping EMUs. For example, when the student was refereeing during Lesson 1, the following succession of EMUs – ‘Blow the whistle on the goal, since the girls’ team will have trouble against the opponent team composed of two boys,’ ‘Go toward the girls’ team.’ ‘Tell the girls to try mainly to block the boys’ – made up a broader category we named ‘Advise the girls who are losing the match.’ This first categorization identified Alex’s typical concerns by gathering categories whose content referred to the same similar theme. The units ‘Make teammates work hard’ and ‘Make Olivier run to warm-up’ were put in the same category referring to the typical concern ‘Make teammates work hard.’ Then, we classified the above typical concerns into different ‘involvement modes’ on a higher level. For example, the typical concern ‘Make teammates work hard’ belongs to an involvement mode we labeled ‘Make other students progress.’ This mode also included other concerns such as ‘Give advice to his teammates.’ The categories were labeled using Alex’s vocabulary and processed in a way that represented Alex’s point of view and involvement.

The validity of the data processing was ensured by a double categorization process. Two of the authors independently reconstructed Alex’s course of action. Both had a good understanding of the theoretical framework, experience using course of action methodology, and professional experience teaching PE. Disagreements were discussed in relation to the empirical data until the two researchers judged the reconstructed course of action to be satisfactory. Finally, data from the semi-directive interviews and the field notes were used to refine the analysis and to enrich the interpretation of Alex’s different involvement modes in the two lessons.

Results and discussion

Twenty typical concerns emerged from the analysis of Alex’s activity. They were categorized into seven involvement modes (Table 1).

The involvement modes reveal two main characteristics of Alex’s experience during the PE lessons. The first is the experience of a conflict between sports involvement as a highly skilled handball player and school involvement as an ‘ordinary’ student in the class. The second is a ‘viable’ experience of practice through involvement as a ‘tutor’ in the collective learning dynamics of the class.

A conflicting experience between school and extracurricular sport involvement

The analysis of Alex’s course of action revealed that the mobilization of his sports experience was problematic in the school community of practice in which he was engaged.

Three of his involvement modes show that Alex was looking for a handball experience similar to the one he knew in his sports club: ‘Invest in a stimulating and intense physical activity,’ ‘Invest in sport roles,’ and ‘Maintain an expert handball-player image in the class.’ These involvement modes characterize Alex’s strong desire to practice handball intensively, to rise to personal challenges, and to maintain his highly skilled status in the class. For example, he spontaneously increased the physical difficulty level during warm-up
exercises, ‘I tried to pass the ball behind my back. It was not interesting to only pass the ball from the front’ (SCIL1), and also during learning tasks, ‘Yes at this moment we were trying to do a kung fu’ (SCIL1). During matches, he organized his team so that there would always be one less player than on the opponent team. He spontaneously took on roles that were not stated by the teacher. In particular, he acted as the team captain, coach, or referee. He thought about how to best organize his team in order to win the match, gave out shirts, stated game strategies, oversaw his teammates’ positioning and activity, cheered them on, and got them together in the changing room for a collective assessment. For example during SCIL2 he said, ‘I am the captain of the team so I believe it’s my role.’ Moreover, Alex systematically acted as referee when his team was not playing. When he was playing, he continually supervised the game in order to ensure that the regulations would be followed and to teach the others the handball rules. He tried to maintain his highly skilled position throughout the class, as he explained in SCIL1: ‘In fact I am always trying to justify myself and my actions. For example, at the beginning they laughed at me because my team lost the match and that’s why I said they had one more player on the field.’ This involvement in the situation as an elite handball player generated conflicting interactions with the teacher and other students. Alex said in SCIL2: ‘Morgan shouted at me, “you’re made!” (…) it’s normal I shot, as I am used to doing during my club matches (…) I need to be myself sometimes and to let it all hang out (…) it is so boring always restraining myself.’ Thus, Alex utilized his expert experience and knowledge despite the fact that he was in school. He tried to recreate sports experiences like the ones he has known in his club.

Table 1. Alex’s typical concerns and involvement modes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typical concerns</th>
<th>Involvement modes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Modify learning exercises to be physically challenging</td>
<td>A Invest in a stimulating and intense physical activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Chose to be a defense player during learning activities, thereby being outnumbered by offense players</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Do not waste time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Let go</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Act as team captain</td>
<td>B Invest in sport roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Supervise refereeing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Win the match</td>
<td>C Maintain expert handball-player image in the class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Explain the team’s defeat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Discuss extracurricular subjects with teammates</td>
<td>D Enjoy time spent with friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Have fun</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Comply with rules shared by the class</td>
<td>E Exhibit appropriate behaviors in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Modify usual way of practicing in the club</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Try to justify one’s conflicting actions</td>
<td>F Comply with teacher’s expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Supervise teacher’s activity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Try to not be seen</td>
<td>G Make other students progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Make an agreement with the teacher</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>17 Make teammates work hard</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>18 Give advice to his teammates</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Observe teammates’ actions</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>20 Encourage teammates</td>
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Three of Alex’s involvement modes showed that he was participating at the same time in a typical school activity, as an ‘ordinary student’: ‘Enjoy time spent with friends,’ ‘Exhibit appropriate behaviors in class,’ ‘Comply with teacher’s expectations.’ He talked about extracurricular subjects with his friends while the teacher gave instructions or during waiting periods, or he played with the balls or teaching materials. He tried to exhibit the legitimate attitudes and communication modes shared by the entire class. In this respect, he had to tone down the mobilization of his talented handball skills. For example, he talked about when, during a match, he had made a goal by slowly lobbing the ball over the goalkeeper whereas he had come running up at full speed in front of him after a counter-attack. He explained how ‘in fact, when I jumped in front of the goalie in order to make a violent shot I told myself “ok wait a minute, take it easy, because he’s a novice and I’m at school”’ (SCIL1). In the same way, when he was referee, he tolerated violations of league rules: ‘You see he just put his foot in the area, that’s a small offence that’s usually penalized in official competitions but in this context, I didn’t react’ (SCIL1). At the same time, he would justify himself when he exhibited behaviors or actions that broke the rules commonly accepted by the rest of the class. For instance, after a powerful shot that other students judged too hard, he explained to them that his shot was not dangerous for the goalkeeper: ‘I was 10 m away when I shot, so it’s ok, no problem!,’ ‘I would have shot at a corner if you had been in the goal area. I aimed for the middle because you weren’t in front of me’ (L1). Alex made sure to show the teacher that he was investing in the learning tasks in a legitimate way. In this respect, he continually watched the teacher’s activity in order to conceal his unacceptable behaviors from her. Interactions with the teacher were extremely rare and only appeared when Alex’s behavior interfered with the proper progression of the lesson, which only occurred when his shots were too hard and frightened other students. He explained (SCIL1): ‘Look, here she’s giving me a lecture; she’s saying that I don’t need to shoot hard to score a goal.’ Finally, Alex did not have to worry about his mark because of his excellent handball skills: ‘Anyway I know that I’ll get the highest mark on the BAC. I know there won’t be a problem’ (SCIL2). However, his experience was deeply influenced by his concern for his teammates’ marks on the BAC: ‘I want them to make progress all the time. Not me but them, because I’m already highly skilled. I want to help them get a good mark on the BAC.’

Thus, the analysis of Alex’s course of action highlights an ongoing fluctuation between the mobilization of the sport-practice model he learned outside of school and the school model that prevailed in class. This dilemma in Alex’s involvement attests to his double affiliation – a school affiliation and a sport affiliation – which generates a conflicting activity requiring the negotiation of meanings.

The analogy between the school practice introduced by the teacher and competitive sport practices, and the teams’ stability throughout this PE unit stimulated the mobilization of Alex’s sport experience within this school community of practice. Alex’s dual membership stimulated an ongoing process of negotiation of meanings, which characterized the progression of each community of practice (Wenger 1998). Dual membership generates discontinuities when the individual crosses over between one community of practice and another and triggers ‘boundary practices’ that are particularly useful for developing learning acquisitions. We assumed that Alex’s involvement in this community of practice generated the emergence of a boundary practice between the school and the sports club. It encouraged a continuous process of collective interaction and negotiation about the meanings of the practices proposed by the teacher. These interpretations are in line with MacPhail, Kirk, and Kinchin’s work on the Sport Education model (2004). Team affiliation and stability
promote the constitution of a community of practice in class. It provides an educationally worthwhile and authentic experience of practice that facilitates the use of meaningful landmarks in sports situations outside of school. Alex’s involvement and interactions, mainly with his teammates, participated in the development of a learning experience in school.

The dilemma in Alex’s experience reveals an intra-individual meaning-negotiation process. Throughout school activities, students are looking for a ‘modus vivendi’ that articulates two typical concerns: to pass the course, and to socialize and have fun while doing so (Allen 1986). They try to meet the teacher’s expectations and abide by class rules, at the same time as they respond to personal preoccupations in order to find interest and pleasure in the practice. Alex’s experience manifests this dilemma. He increased school-task difficulties in order to experiment with physically stimulating experiences that conformed to the school culture. At the same time, Alex spent a lot of time on sport roles that are offered to students during lessons (referee, team captain). This strategy allowed him to make use of his expert skills in a legitimate and enhancing way in the school context. This original ‘modus vivendi’ also concerned the students’ BAC marks, which encouraged Alex to help his teammates make progress. These results reveal a typically academic type of involvement, which is influenced by evaluation (Doyle 1986; Saury and Rossard 2009). Nonetheless, Alex’s example is original because of his expert skills. Finally, his goal of making his teammates progress allowed him to take part in the lessons in a non-conflicting way, to stay interested, and to have fun in his school experience of handball practice.

This analysis of Alex’s experience brings out the weight of the school dimension of student activity in PE classes, despite the teacher’s will to promote an authentic experience of sports similar to those found outside of school. This case study questions the possibility of giving students real ‘sport experiences’ (Kirk and Kinchin 2003; Kirk 2006) in the French school context. However, it reveals the existence of a student’s experience at the boundary between school practices and handball practices outside of school.

**A tutoring experience invested in a collective learning dynamic**

Alex developed an original kind of activity as a spontaneous ‘tutor’ when his mode of involvement in class was ‘Make other students progress.’ This concern was recurrent across the two lessons we studied. It appeared at the beginning of SCIL1: ‘My objective during the entire lesson is always to help my teammates progress (…) even if I have to improve my own skills. My priority is to have the others progress.’ The analysis of his course of action revealed that Alex wanted to make his classmates work, give them advice, observe their actions and behaviors, and encourage them. For example, during a learning task centered on passing and shooting ‘without a defense player,’ his main preoccupation was to help Olivier. This teammate was suffering from considerable motor difficulties: ‘My objective is to help Olivier learn how to catch the ball (…) I want him to understand that he has to run faster before catching the ball and then to shoot’ (SCIL2). In this task, he also tried to make him progress on shooting: ‘You see, I make him aim at the side to improve his shot when he’s at a narrow angle’ (SCIL2). He gave him motor advice: ‘I tell him where to put his arm (…), how to shoot like this, not like this, in order to help him understand.’ Alex thought about the relevance of his remarks: ‘You see, I often think about the exercise I had Olivier do (…) whether it was useful for him, whether he made progress or not (…) I think about what I could propose to him next time’ (SCIL2). He paid attention to changes in his teammates’ behavior: ‘Look, at this point I saw that he understood what we had worked on before because he ran to catch
the ball’ (SCIL2). Alex also wanted to congratulate them when they made ‘nice or good moves,’ or tried hard, and to encourage them when they lacked confidence as he reported in SCIL1: ‘I try mainly to boost the girls because they are always complaining they are bad at handball and sports whereas they in fact do pretty well.’ This tutoring type of involvement was not a regular and systematic dimension of Alex’s activity. It was balanced by his will not to lose his reputation as a highly skilled handball player. In particular, Alex recognized during the semi-structured interview (SDI) that he sometimes did not let others take initiatives: ‘That’s right, ok, sometimes I give them orders (...) it’s hard I admit it, but they didn’t always listen to me (laugh).’

This way in which Alex got involved through interactions with his teammates seems to represent a satisfactory trade-off between the constraints generated by the conflicting confrontation between his curricular and extracurricular experiences of sports practice. The teacher did not assign this tutor role to Alex, and Alex did not spontaneously take it on at the beginning of the unit. It gradually appeared as the lessons progressed, in response to Alex’s behaviors, which did not fit with the other students’ handball skills. Alex’s participation in exercises and matches generated relational conflicts with other students and also with the teacher. Little by little, Alex modified his involvement approach and learned how to act appropriately in this school context, a change that made others accept him in their activities. In this way, collective rules and legitimate behaviors were stabilized and recognized by everyone, by means of negotiation. Indeed, in accordance with Wenger’s theory (1998), belonging to a community of practice is neither automatic nor immediate. It results from a lengthy negotiation process. The position of each member with respect to the others in a community is dependent on a changing shared-skill system. In this line, Brock, Rovegno, and Oliver (2009) pointed out how the context and the student culture affect the ‘status’ students acquire through their interactions during small group work. In a similar vein, De Keukelaere, Guérin, and Saury (2008) showed how positions varied in an interactive work group during a volleyball unit: one student was considered by his teammates as a volleyball expert; so he was given priority during interactions about technical or tactical aspects of playing because of his undeniably high skills. But at the same time, he was not considered to be a fair player, which sometimes caused him to be marginalized and mistrusted by the others during interactions.

These studies have reinforced the idea that in stable work groups, students negotiate with each other and gradually acquire their positions as the sports activity unfolds. In Alex’s case, this dynamic balance fluctuated between an expert position and a tutor position, through spontaneous interactions with teammates. This duality was particularly significant during matches. When his team was one goal behind, Alex got involved in the situation as an expert handball player and mobilized his skills to quickly score a goal. The other students reacted to this behavior by complaining and rebelling. As soon as he scored to re-establish equality with the other team, he totally modified his investment behavior and positioned himself as a tutor. He stayed back in a defense position, giving advice to his teammates and cheering them on; he acted in a way that would help them progress, score goals, and be self-confident. Our results are in agreement with Brunton’s conclusions (2003) about Sport Education experiments. This author showed that team stability and the transfer of responsibility from teacher to students triggered a change in the power hierarchy that increased feelings of competence and cooperative work. In the same line, Kinchin (2001) conducted a study of a highly skilled student’s experience in PE. He reported that membership in a stable group and the application of Sport Education principles close to those of an extracurricular sport experience led to full participation and the gradual involvement of such students in the PE lessons. The highly skilled students
manifested considerable resistance to more traditional and less meaningful pedagogical models. Our study extends these findings about the gradual participation of a highly skilled student in a community of practice. Involvement as a tutor seems to be a spontaneous and relevant solution for skilled players in a school context of practice because it provides the opportunity to fully take part in class activities and to reinvest their outside sport experience in a way that is accepted and recognized by the class.

This singular dual-membership position of Alex within diverse communities of practice corresponds to Wenger’s notion of ‘broker’ (1998). The activity of ‘brokerage’ exists for people who put their multi-membership experiences in favor of an ‘import–export’ type of activity between the different communities of practice to which they belong. However, ‘brokerage’ is not systematic and requires the ability to support the co-existence of membership and non-membership. On this point, our results showed first that Alex’s tutor position resulted from a gradual construction process during which he learned to fit into his school context and second that this position was fragile, unstable, and required continuous negotiating within the community. When Alex adopted a tutoring type of involvement in the school situation, his activity had things in common with a brokerage-based experience of practice. This position had the potential to promote transformations and learning by himself, by his teammates, and more broadly by the entire class. We hypothesize that Alex’s participation changed the class’s shared repertoire by giving it a sport tonality. Conversely, his school playing experience may have changed Alex’s sports knowledge. At the same time, Alex may have improved his tutoring skills.

This brokerage attitude could supply a workable answer to the identity instability inevitably generated by multi-membership. As Wenger (1998) suggested, the identity process has a crosswise influence on an actor’s experiences and involvement (participation–reification) in different communities of practice. In this special case, tutoring gives Alex a relative degree of identity stability by integrating two dimensions, handball player and ‘ordinary’ student.

**Conclusion**

The present study focused on a single student’s activity; so the limitation of such a case study must be taken into account. The results revealed Alex’s experience in practice and cannot be generalized. Further studies centered on other highly skilled students’ experiences should be conducted to test the generality of the process we uncovered. Our findings show that the experience of a practice in a PE setting by a highly skilled student was relevant to a qualitative investigation of the particular characteristics of a school experience of playing a particular sport as compared to an outside experience of playing that same sport. These findings support the hypothesis that the conflicting experience of a highly skilled student in a school context encourages negotiation of meanings among students. Further research could help identify the significant elements that potentially increase the extent to which transfer of experience and meaningful relationships between school and club sport practices are possible.

Our results reveal Alex’s spontaneous involvement in tutoring. Highly skilled students should be seen as teaching assistants who can help teachers reinforce the meaning of school learning activities and create authentic contexts of practice. In this respect, the acquisition of tutoring skills could act as an interesting learning aim for such students. Finally, this study points out the importance of promoting PE models that engage students in cooperative learning roles so that they can develop methodological and cooperative skills that are common to different practices and contexts. PE classes can be considered as communities
of learners engaged in authentic practices, ones where the teacher is not the sole imparter of knowledge. This could be an interesting way to cope with heterogeneity and to have ambitious learning acquisitions for everyone, despite any variety of extracurricular experiences.

Notes
1. The following notation conventions are used in this article: SCIL1, self-confrontation interview lesson 1; L1, Lesson 1; SDI, semi-directive interview.
2. Acrobatic movement consisting of catching the ball in the air and shooting in the same jump.
3. BAC: baccalauréat, the name of the French high school diploma.

References


