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## **Service-Learning in Physical Education Teacher Training. Physical Education in the Modelo Prison, Barcelona**

Teresa Lleixà<sup>1</sup> & Merche Ríos<sup>1</sup>

1) Departamento de Didáctica de la Expresión Musical y Corporal,  
Universitat de Barcelona, Spain.

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# **Service-Learning in Physical Education Teacher Training. Physical Education in the Modelo Prison, Barcelona**

Teresa Lleixà  
*Universitat de Barcelona*

Merche Ríos  
*Universitat de Barcelona*

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## **Abstract**

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In the Psychiatric Unit of the Modelo Prison, Barcelona, a physical education programme is carried out annually with the participation of University of Barcelona (UB) students. In this context, we carried out a study based on service-learning parameters. The aim of the study was twofold: to determine the impact on inmates of the physical education programme that was undertaken with university students; and to assess what university students' learnt in the prison-based socio-educational intervention programme. This paper describes the context of the research and the methodological basis of service learning. The qualitative tools to gather the information were: two focus group; a semi-structured interview with a representative of the unit's guards; and the students' field diary. We present results that demonstrate the impact of the physical, sports activity on the socialisation of inmates, in terms of aspects such as communication and personal skills. The results also show the effect of the programme on the university students' learning processes, particularly with regard to the contextualisation of learning.

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**Keywords:** physical education, university education, service-learning, prison, severe mental disorder

# **Aprendizaje Servicio en la Formación del Profesorado de Educación Física, en la Prisión Modelo de Barcelona**

Teresa Lleixà  
*Universitat de Barcelona*

Merche Ríos  
*Universitat de Barcelona*

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## **Resumen**

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En el Módulo Psiquiátrico del Centro Penitenciario Modelo de Barcelona se realiza, anualmente, un programa de Educación Física en el que intervienen estudiantes de la Universidad de Barcelona. En este contexto hemos realizado una investigación basada en los parámetros metodológicos del Service-learning que pretende, por un lado, determinar el impacto en los internos de un programa de educación física compartido con estudiantes universitarios y, por otro lado, valorar los aprendizajes de los estudiantes universitarios en el programa de intervención socioeducativa en el centro penitenciario. De esta manera el artículo describe el contexto de la investigación y la fundamentación metodológica del Service-learning. Los instrumentos de recogida de datos fueron: dos grupos de discusión, la entrevista semiestructurada a una representante de los funcionarios de vigilancia; y el diario de campo de los estudiantes. Los resultados obtenidos muestran el impacto de la actividad física y deportiva en la socialización de los internos en lo que se refiere a aspectos como la comunicación o las competencias personales. Muestra también la incidencia del programa en los aprendizajes de los estudiantes universitarios, sobre todo en lo que refiere a la contextualización de dichos aprendizajes.

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**Palabras clave:** educación física, enseñanza universitaria, aprendizaje-servicio, centro penitenciario, trastorno mental severo

The main focus of this paper is the physical education programme that was held in the Psychiatric Unit of the Modelo Prison, Barcelona. Participants included teacher training and social education students from the University of Barcelona (UB). Service-learning teaching methods were applied (Billing & Waterman, 2003; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Furco & Billing, 2002; Puig, Batlle, Bosch, & Palos, 2006). The experience was based on previous social sports meetings that had involved students from the UB's Faculty of Teacher Training and its Faculty of Education and inmates from prisons and mental health centres. The physical education programme had three functions: to carry out a socio-educational activity for inmates by means of physical education; to train university students; and to undertake research. It was the first time that this kind of project had been undertaken in a Spanish prison. Consequently, this is a pioneering study that will affect future activities in this area. To systematise the experience and ensure that it was rigorous, we carried out the research<sup>1</sup> that is reported in this paper, whose two main objectives were as follows:

1. To determine the impact of a physical education programme involving university students on psychiatric unit inmates held in a men's prison in Barcelona (the Modelo Prison).
2. To assess what the university students learnt as a result of the socio-educational intervention programme in the prison.

### **Physical Activity and Sports Programmes in Prison**

Studies on physical activity and sports programmes in prison could be divided into two categories. The first would include ethnographic studies that provide a more general view of the subject and address various aspects. Castillo (2004) presented a descriptive study of sport in prison in a European context, with a particular focus on Spanish prisons. Martos-García, Devis-Devis & Sparkes (2009a) dealt with several aspects of this subject including the use of leisure time, inmates' perceptions of therapeutic benefits, social control, gender as a determining factor, and the construction of masculinity. In a similar line, Fornons (2008) looked at issues such as social control through sport, self-perception, and the passing of time. Fernández Gavira (2007) used the experience of training sports instructors in a prison to discuss conflict management.

The second category would include papers that focus on specific topics. Rehabilitation and social reintegration are a recurring theme (Bodin, Robène, Héas, & Sempé, 2007; Castillo, 2004; Gallant, Sherry, & Nicholson, 2014; Parker, Meek, & Lewis, 2014). The physical and mental health benefits of sports in a prison environment are also a common subject of study (Ionescu, Parisot, & Irode, 2010; Lamb & Weinberger, 1998; Meek & Lewis, 2012; Pérez, 2002). Devís, Martos & Sparkes (2009b) discuss symbolic evasion and personal liberation. Finally, on the topic of physical activity and sports in prison and instructor training, some papers examine the construction of the instructor's identity (Martos-García, Devís-Devís, & Sparkes, 2010), as well as programmes carried out prior to the present study (Ríos, 2004; 2009).

More specifically, publications on mental health indicate that prison inmates with a mental disorder (or suffering the effects of a mental disorder) have to recover an awareness of their own body and accept it, discover their possibilities for movement, overcome motor problems, progressively recover coordination, and assimilate attitudes, values and habits to improve their health and quality of life (Faulkner & Taylor, 2005; Lamb & Weinberger, 1998). The effects of physical education on social and interpersonal relations are indisputable: motor behaviour encourages individual growth and contributes to the process of rehabilitation and reintegration into society (Ríos, 2009).

### **Physical Education and Service-learning**

Several authors have stressed the social commitment required to become a Physical Education teacher (Brown, 2005; Buxarrais, 1997; Hernández Álvarez, 2004; Pascual, 2004; Sirna, Tinning, & Rossi, 2008; Timken & Van der Mars, 2009; Tinning, Macdonald, Wright, & Hickey, 2001). Future physical education teachers can learn the contents of their subject and the methods used to teach it, but the process will only be genuinely effective if they are able to reflect on the role that their actions will have in the social environment (Arthur & Bohlin, 2005; Egerton, 2002; Ehrlich, 2000; Rhoads, 1997). Service-Learning is a methodological strategy that makes this reflection possible. "Service-Learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and

strengthen communities” (NSLC, 2008). Most of the research into Service Learning at the university stresses its pedagogical, social and ethical rounding, defending a model that helps to create a fairer, more cohesive society (Martínez, 2008; Tapia, 2008). In a study of the methodology of Service-Learning based on the ideas of critical pedagogy, Brown (2001) stresses the following principles:

[...] service-learning partnerships should strive to:

1. Tie research and education to concrete community issues by making curricula and educational activities responsive to community issues and community need;
2. Examine the characteristics of citizenship or community membership through the principles of history and dialogue, interrogating the systemic and historical contexts of issues and responses to issues;
3. Contribute to the function of education in discovering causes and long-term responses to social issues by engaging in activities that have impact in communities as defined through dialogue with that community;
4. Employ academic knowledge in applications to community problem-solving through the concept of praxis and critical dialogue;
5. Expand educational institutions’ (and the individual representatives of those institutions) participation *in* community, especially in terms of fostering coalitions and creating responsive resources for and with that community. (p. 23)

The field of physical education is ideal for the application of service learning, as the practice of physical activity has innumerable social benefits. These benefits have been described by many authors who define them as: learning about personal and social responsibility (Hellison, 1995; Escartí, Pascual, & Gutiérrez, 2005); social and moral education (Cecchini, Fernández Losa, González, & Arruza, 2008); the promotion of inclusion (Cruz & Petersen, 2011; Lleixà & Soler, 2004); and conflict resolution (Capllonch, Figueras, & Lleixà, 2014; Fraile, López Pastor, Ruiz Omeñaca, & Velázquez Callado, 2008). Various service learning and physical education practices have been described in a publication by Rubio, Campo,

& Sebastiani (2014). The physical education programme carried out in the Modelo Prison in Barcelona applies the principles of Service-Learning. The program has two strong points: its educational value for university students, and the positive influence of physical education on prison life.

### **Context of the Intervention**

The Modelo Prison is situated in one of the central areas of Barcelona and is one of the biggest prisons in Catalonia, with around 2000 inmates. It is divided into six wings, attached to which is the psychiatric unit ([Ateneu Llibertari Poble Sec, 2004](#)). During the semesters of the latest academic year and the summer period, a group of 10 teacher training and social education students visited the psychiatric unit at the Modelo Prison once a week.

Table 1.

*The design of the intervention programme.*

<b>Intervention plan</b>	<b>Students<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>Inmates</b>
General programme objectives	Critically, constructively analyse the deprivation of liberty, and develop a framework for considering crime, mental illness and punishment. Bring about changes in attitude and commitment to inmates with mental illnesses, and break social stigmas. Analyse potential interaction techniques and put into practice group facilitation and moderation strategies through physical education activities.	
Objectives for the two groups	Identify educational components of the socio-educational intervention Design and hold social development days based on physical education Analyse and demonstrate understanding of group facilitation and moderation techniques and strategies based on physical activity Acknowledge the benefits of using physical education as a teaching resource in socio-educational interventions Show an open attitude to diversity, recognize the benefits of physical education for everyone, with no exceptions	Recognize and accept your own body, and its potential for expression and movement Improve postural and body control Resolve motor problems that require control of motor skills Develop general fitness Improve relations with the social environment Improve hygiene habits Appreciate and enjoy physical activity for well-being
Contents	Models of social intervention through physical activity The treatment of cultural diversity in physical education The game: concepts, theories and different perspectives The game: teaching guidelines	Cooperative motor skills games Awareness-raising motor skills games Multicultural motor skills games
Method	Problem solving Allocation of tasks Cooperative learning	
Design of the activities	Motor skills games: students and inmates share the roles of leader and facilitator of the sessions. Refreshments: a time for relaxed conversation, accompanied by food and drink.	
Assessment activities	Observation Discussion groups Diaries (portfolio)	



The sessions were carried out on Mondays from 9 am to 2 pm. Once inside the prison, the unit's physical education teacher led the first sessions, whilst the students and the unit's educator acted as fellow participants and facilitated the learning of the inmates with mental disorders. As the university students and inmates began to gain confidence, the role of teacher was transferred to the students. Finally, leadership was shared between the students and the inmates. Gradually but constantly, students and inmates became the leaders and facilitators of the sessions. Classes took place in the unit's courtyard, which was reserved for the programme participants during this time. The rest of the inmates (participation was voluntary) remained inside the unit so as not to distort the activity. Usually, around 16 inmates participated in the activity. The sessions began with one or two presentation games and games to discover the characteristics of the group members, including the teacher, the educator, the students and the inmates. The aim was to stimulate cognitive abilities and to promote a feeling of group cohesion. Subsequently, dynamic games were presented to improve motor functions and to teach the proposed contents. They were alternated with stretches and sensory games to keep the heart rate down and to decrease the feeling of fatigue. Once the activities had been completed, the participants went to the unit's hall, where a discussion was begun by asking the group and the facilitators in particular how they had felt. Finally, the session for the following week was designed by all participants. In the morning and after the physical activities, there was a break for food and drinks, in a shared space for relaxed conversation.

## **Method**

### **Methodological Basis**

This research applies service-learning methodology. Service-learning was devised as an educational programme of community intervention. However, the scope of service-learning as a research method for the scientific community was quickly recognised. Shumer (2002) highlighted the similarities between the characteristics of service-learning and qualitative research requirements. These characteristics were described by Shumer (2002) in a review of various authors' proposals and are listed below:

1. Connecting with the community served throughout the process to determine real need and to measure the level of quality and impact
2. Involving students in the selection, development and evaluation of service sites and service experiences
3. Including formative and summative evaluation of the impacts of service and quality of learning
4. Including regularly occurring reflective sessions that analyse connections between service experiences, academic theories and subject matter
5. Constructing curriculum that enhances the learning potential of service experiences (p.184).

In addition, Billing & Waterman (2003) reviewed innovations in service-learning research that serve as a reference for increasing the rigour of this method's designs.

### **Data Gathering Instruments and Analysis**

The following qualitative tools were used to gather information, whose subsequent analysis and triangulation was carried out to meet the research objectives:

*A) 2 Focus groups: one comprised of members of the task force; and one made up of inmates*

The aim of both focus groups was to exchange opinions through an open and emerging process. However, different procedures were used for each one. The task force discussion group was made up of the physical education teacher, the unit's educator, the representative of the guards and eight university students. In this case, there were a total of 11 participants.

The discussion was held at the end of the research period and was recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The focus group comprised of inmates who had participated in the activity was carried out in two stages. The first stage involved the evaluation meetings at the end of the physical activity sessions. In these meetings, topics arose which were then used in the second stage. The second stage consisted of a discussion group with the inmates. This

discussion was longer and was carried out at the end of the research period. In this last case, 8 inmates voluntarily participated.

The inmate discussion group could not be recorded with audio-visual equipment, as the prison expressly prohibits this. Instead, the group facilitator took notes, with the help of the unit's educator.

*B) A semi-structured interview with a representative of the unit's guards*

The interview was carried out at the end of the period and was made up of open questions that provided a frame of reference for the interviewee, but did not limit her responses.

*C) The field diary of students who participated in the experience*

Students kept field diaries of anecdotes about the training, relationships or personal impressions, rather than records of the sequence of activities. Apart from its function as a depository of information, the diary will also serve to help students to reflect personally on the experience. For Fernández-Balboa (2009, p. 160) the ability of physical education teacher training to promote universal human dignity will depend on "the degree to which we understand the ethical implications of our work; and to understand them, we must know ourselves".

We established the following dimensions, drawn from the research objectives, to analyse the results:

- Characteristics of the programme
- Daily life in prison
- Inmates' learning
- Students' learning

## **Results and Discussion**

The information gathering tools enabled us to establish the opinions of the main groups involved in the programme in relation to the different dimensions of the research: the characteristics of the programme, daily life in prison, inmates' learning, and university students' learning

## **Evaluations by the Inmates with Mental Disorders**

**Characteristics of the programme.** In general, we can state that the inmates had positive feelings about the programme.

We look forward to Monday, to see you. /It gives us strength for the rest of the week [FGI]

In terms of the programme's contents, the inmates were aware of the educational components of the physical games.

The physical education programme brought them closer to life outside the prison, and made them feel less closed in on themselves—a feeling that is frequently caused by being deprived of freedom. This contact with life outside was due to the relationships and dynamics that had formed with the university students.

You don't think you are in prison, that you are locked in. At times, you don't believe you are in the class. It takes you back to the street./ You disconnect from the prison world./You think about other things. [FGI]

In addition, inmates who do not usually communicate with their families and friends stated that this was their only way of interrelating with the outside world. As an inmate said in the discussion group, "communicating with a family is an escape valve. If you are alone in here, you are in trouble."

In terms of the programme's contents, the inmates were aware of the educational components of the physical games. This was clearly shown by their responses to the question of whether the physical games were childish: they stated that no, such games helped them to become less inhibited and to learn physically and mentally. In addition, they were aware that they had learnt new things throughout the course.

Finally, they mentioned that they realised that the dynamics of the programme were unusual in prisons. Consequently, they felt that the opportunity to share activities with people from the outside on a weekly basis was something they had to take advantage of. One inmate stated: "it's a gift."

**Daily life in prison.** The inmates positively evaluated the physical education programme, as they considered that it facilitated communication. They stated that interaction between the different units had increased, and that the experience had broken up the subgroups that were the result of living in different units.

The subgroups are broken up during the week. There is more contact with the groups from the floor below/ There is more interaction in the unit and in the courtyard/ Doing activities that involve both units links us together. When we are in the courtyard we speak more/ We encourage the most isolated people to participate. [FGI]

Inmates felt that they knew each other better, as a result of having shared the experience with other inmates, regardless of their unit.

If you weren't here, people wouldn't know the names of others... They would go on temporary release (referring to fellow inmates) and we would not know their names, even though we talked in the courtyard. [FGI]

The inmates considered that fewer conflicts had been caused by coexistence since the beginning of the experience. All of the participating inmates agreed that the activity "ironed out problems and weakened all the superficial conflicts" [FGI]. They recognised that "the continuous conflicts caused by coexistence are always close to the surface." [FGI]. They considered that during the PE sessions "problems are diminished" [FGI] and that it "clears the air" [FGI], but that there are limits. After Monday, "new problems begin to appear" [FGI].

In addition, the PE programme affects participation in other educational activities organised by the prison. A total of 8 participants (out of 20, on average) were motivated to participate in other activities. They added that the participation was very positive as it meant that they did not smoke on Monday mornings. However, some considered that the smoking ban was one reason why some inmates did not join the programme.

**Inmates' learning.** Other values that the inmates ascribed to the physical education programme were that it acted as a way to release tensions, boosted expressive abilities and broke the monotony. In addition, they did not feel like prisoners during the PE session.

It helps us to relieve tensions./ It encourages us. / It gives us an opportunity to express ourselves without reprisals from some of the guards and superiors./ It makes me forget that I am in prison /Like a gust of fresh air. [FGI]

The inmates also stated that, for a while, they forgot about their medication, stress and possible negative thoughts. All inmates agreed that participating in the session or leading an activity made them forget their concerns, and thus it helped them to overcome potential apathy. In addition, some inmates stated that they forgot physical pain.

They positively evaluated the fact that the programme was carried out with people from outside the prison, and stated that this reduced their self-perceptions of being “psychiatric people”, as they recognised that they felt accepted. Consequently, they mentioned that the experience increased their self-esteem and self-confidence. In addition, the fact that the activities were designed jointly, and that the inmates also led and facilitated the games, helped them to recognise, rediscover and develop their abilities, which led to an increase in their personal motivation.

It is a great incentive that they are interested in us: they treat us on the same level, they are not bothered by the colour red (the inmate was referring to the colour of the shorts that the prison makes them wear to distinguish them from inmates in the other units). /They get us involved in activities, such as preparing an activity with a partner or getting one of us to lead an activity. This is a very good thing because it gives us responsibility and confidence to do something and when we do it we see that we are capable of doing things and that we are useful and we feel better, and we feel better... and we are grateful for this. [FGI]

All focus group members, who participated in the development of the experience, agreed that the inmates were involved gradually, which enabled them to gain confidence and to learn. They stressed that they lost their fear

of speaking in public and their stage fright. In addition, they considered that the presence of people from the outside contributed to the acquisition of more normal social habits.

**Students' learning.** The inmates recognised that this experience was a highly valid strategy for teaching university students, as it helped them to overcome stereotypes and to contextualise their learning.

I think that it is a very good opportunity for students to get rid of stereotypes and prejudices./ They can work in a real environment, such as the psychiatric unit in the Modelo Prison. [FGI]

### **The Guard's Evaluation**

**Characteristics of the programme.** The guard considered that this year's experience consolidated the activity begun in the previous course. She was positive about hiring the physical education teacher, as she thought that this gave the experience continuity. In addition, she indicated that the physical education teacher's presence made this a sound experience, as it meant that the activity had clear and programmable objectives and the appropriate regularity and periodicity.

She stated that the involvement of the guards in the activity helped to break the duality between the function of a guard and the function of treatment. All of this contributed to improving coexistence in the unit.

**Daily life in prison.** This guard indicated that the activity gave psychiatric unit inmates, particularly those who had been there longest, the desire to do something else other than walk around the courtyard or simply kill the hours and the days. She also considered that this activity, together with the promotion of all kinds of activities for psychiatric patients throughout the week, led to a general improvement in the operation of the unit, specifically:

The interpersonal relationships between the inmates have improved. The number of conflicts has dropped considerably, there has been an improvement in the relationships between inmates and

guards and an increase in the inmates' interest in the activities that are on offer. [GI]

The guard stated that there had again been a decrease in the occupation of psychiatric isolation rooms, as the rates of psychotic episodes and conflicts had been very low.

**Inmates' learning.** According to the guard, the continuity and periodicity of the sessions meant that the inmates felt that they were necessary. In addition, they gave the inmates the feeling of optimism needed to overcome being deprived of freedom. Furthermore, she explained that the contact with the students who came to carry out the activity kept the inmates in touch with reality and with life on the other side.

Contact with people who do not have mental illnesses helps open up to a different perspective of society. It's a matter of forming relations between each other and with people from outside.[GI]

**Students' learning.** The parole officer appreciated the teaching practice, but above all highlighted that the students have the opportunity to learn about an environment that is difficult to access.

Training in techniques and activities is essential to enrich education. In addition, they [the students] can learn about the reality inside a prison, which is very difficult to access.[GI]

### **Assessment by the Task Force (the Physical Education Teacher, the Unit's Educator, the Guard and the University Students)**

**Characteristics of the programme.** From the observations and evaluations, we can state that physical education fostered the socialisation of the inmates, both amongst themselves and with the university students. Physical education was valued as a resource that facilitated social communication, specifically through games: the initial distance between participants was broken, interrelation was promoted, confidence was increased, cooperation and cohesion were facilitated and a climate of



interest was favoured. In addition, the activity broke the routine of the centre and reduced the effects of social stigma and the physical context.

Relationships with the university students were always respectful. Of their own accord, inmates welcomed students when they entered the unit by shaking their hands. They interrelated positively with the students during the physical education sessions and the subsequent evaluations.

Gradually, the inmates made more contact with the university students, and the length of conversations increased. [FGII]

The inmates frequently initiated conversations. Thus, the environment was welcoming, which made the students feel accepted and therefore confident and valued.

In addition, group awareness gradually emerged.

On the one hand, we observed progressive group cohesion, and on the other, a need to ensure the group's continuity. [FGII]

In other words, a compact, close group was formed, whose members participated in physical games together and took joint decisions on which motor function tasks to carry out in the following sessions or on group strategies for the most complex games.

**Daily life in prison.** The programme helped to reduce the unit's stigma of mental illness.

The environment was enriching, and diminished the focus on pathology that characterises the psychiatric unit. [FGII]

**Inmates' learning.** A change in the inmates' communication attitude was observed.

The attitude of certain inmates changed during the activity. When they joined the programme, they expressed themselves in monosyllables. By the end, their language was richer and more normal. [FGII]

Gradually, the relationship between the inmates improved. This was seen in an increase in respectful verbal interactions between them, and a rise in supportive and cooperative behaviour during the activities.

[...] comments that ridiculed other inmates disappeared. [FGII]

This enabled encouraging and helping behaviour to emerge during the games. In addition, improvements were observed in the inmates' comprehension, attention, and their ability to structure and form a verbal discourse that was suitable for the different registers of the activity. This was observed in the evaluation activities and when the inmates led the explanations of the physical games. Therefore, it is clear that they made progress in deepening their social relationships.

There was clear improvement in the inmates' motor functions, particularly with respect to body awareness and their flexibility. Self-control and respect for regulations increased, whilst aggressiveness and competitiveness in the games decreased. In addition, there was no smoking during the PE sessions. Significantly, hygiene habits also improved, as inmates were seen to be cleaner and to take more care of their appearance. In addition, it was positively evaluated that the inmates were aware of the benefits of participating in the physical education sessions, on motor, social and psychoemotional levels. The inmates—as they stated—felt temporarily released from being locked in. Finally, the fact that the activity helped inmates to reassess themselves as people was highlighted. In other words, to a certain extent, it helped them to recover their identity.

**Students' learning.** Both students and inmates gained independence in decision-making. The transfer of responsibility to the participants meant that more decision-making behaviour was observed, responsibilities were assumed, and more initiative was taken. It is considered that participants gained independence, self-control and the ability to manage the activity themselves.

## **UB Students' Evaluation Through the Field Diary**

**Characteristics of the programme.** The participating students stressed that the experience had been very positive as it had enabled them to find out about a reality that is often socially stigmatised and difficult to access.

They positively valued having learnt to work in a team, not only with their classmates, but also with the physical education teacher, the educator and the prison guard.

I think that the team work involving the inmates, the intervention group, the guard and the prison educator was a basis without which we would not have achieved the results that we did. / In addition, I was able to learn to work with a very tight team; in which all of us got on well with each other.../... it was also positive to reach agreement on methods and criteria. [FD]

They recognised the value of the service-learning method in their academic and personal paths, as this represented a new way of relating with classmates outside the traditional classroom environment.

**Daily life in prison.** The students considered that the activity improves the social climate in the prison, though they are aware that they cannot state this with certainty.

The social climate improves... I don't know if this statement is too bold. It seems that most of the prisoners who take part in the activity on Mondays form a tight group, a closely knit group which could influence the relations they have on other days. [FD]

**Inmates' learning.** The students considered that the activity improves the social climate in the prison, though they are aware that they cannot state this with certainty.

The social climate improves... I don't know if this statement is too bold. It seems that most of the prisoners who take part in the activity on Mondays form a tight group, a closely knit group which could influence the relations they have on other days. [FD]

**Students' learning.** The students valued the knowledge they had gained of an area of work about which had had known little prior to the project.

On a professional level, this experience has enabled me to strengthen and put into practice the knowledge that I have acquired over three years in the faculty. I consider that the experience enables students to internalise the knowledge that is addressed in the social education course, which is why I value this activity so highly. [FD]

I have broken through the stereotypes, value judgements and false beliefs that I had about prisoners. [FD]

I think that the learning has been two-way; they learnt and we did too. [FD]

They discovered that physical education was a good resource for social interventions. They learnt to adapt this resource to the reference group and to work on group dynamics, to adapt activities to the motor and cognitive levels of the inmates and to the spatial limitations and the lack of material.

I had to create activities, adapt them and sometimes even invent them. This helped me to develop my own creativity; a capacity that I believe should always be part of the educational environment. [FD]

Students mentioned the importance of having been able to assess the effects of the programme on the group of inmates, and were aware of the importance of socialisation.

As future teachers and educators, they recognised the positive experience of having been able to teach classes, which had given them self-confidence for their future profession. Likewise, they were aware of the value of patience and of knowing how to value gradual progress. They said that they had grown as future teachers and as people. They also stated that they had developed their capacity for empathy.

I also consider that I have put my level of maturity to the test. I have found out that maturity and sufficient emotional control are needed to face situations that are difficult for one to understand or accept. [FD]

They added that they had learnt that an educator needs to constantly observe, to be able to make an effective diagnosis, to know how to find the appropriate activity for each situation and to be able to manage conflict resolution. They considered that they had developed the ability to set limits with the inmates and to have faith in people's potential and capacity. They also considered that they had improved their decision-making capacity on all levels, particularly in direct interventions with the inmates. They valued the development of social abilities as future educators. Among others skills, they considered that their following skills and abilities had improved: communication and assertiveness, acceptance of frustration, knowing how to show affection; enjoying a sense of humour and accepting negativity or criticism.

They were very aware of the feeling of responsibility for having designed and carried out a group activity, which led to knowledge of new resources and positive interpersonal relationships with inmates and the rest of the participants in the experience.

## **Discussion**

In a general evaluation of the programme's impact on the prison environment, the results indicate that the activity helps inmates' social development as it facilitates communication between them and improves the climate of coexistence. The effect of physical activity and sports on social development (Coakley, 1993; García Ferrando et al., 2002) has been described frequently. In a study by Ionescu, Parisot & Irode (2010) on prisons, 20.83% of participants considered that physical activity is a means of social development. In our experience, several pieces of evidence show a reduction in conflicts. Conflicts are a recurring issue in the prison environment. Fernández (2007) considered that the main sources of conflicts in physical activities are the distribution of equipment, inmates who struggle to carry out the motor skills activities, obesity, and inmates who want to be the centre of attention. Fernández also discusses the need to

use empathy to resolve conflicts. Other studies question whether the practice of physical activity is designed more to meet the need for institutional control than to provide benefits for inmates (Bodin et al., 2007; Fornons, 2008; Martos-García, Devís-Devís, & Sparkes, 2009a, 2009b).

Another important characteristic of the programme is the opportunity to break the everyday routine of imprisonment, and to have closer contact with life outside through the students who participate in the activities with the inmates. Martos-García, Devís-Devís and Sparkes (2009b) also see physical activities and sports carried out in a prison environment as an “evasion” of the everyday experience, space and time during the sentence.

Among the benefits of the programme, it was observed that inmates do not smoke whilst they are participating in the activities. Although this pause in smoking only lasts as long as the activity itself, it leads us to consider that physical activities and sports may help in the processes of breaking habits. This role has already been described in other studies (Martos-García, Devís-Devís, & Sparkes, 2009b; Meek & Lewis, 2012; Pérez, 2002).

Improvements in inmates’ physical fitness and health were mainly related to control of the body and movement, a reduction in aggressiveness during activities, and an improvement in hygiene habits. We should bear in mind that a cooperative motor skills game is not the most common type of practice in prisons, which often opt for more sports-related activities (Castillo, 2004). The fact that our programme’s activities consisted mainly of cooperative games may explain the difference with other studies that focus more on sports (Gallant, Sherry & Nicholson, 2014; Meek & Lewis, 1996) and show greater improvements in physical fitness or indicate that the inmates’ main reason for participating is to feel fit (Ionescu, Parisot & Irode, 2010).

In contrast, the improvements in social and emotional aspects observed in our study coincide more closely with the results of other studies. Specifically, the release of tension that we found is in agreement with Fornons (2008), who stated that the majority of surveyed inmates considered that the physical activity made them feel good, happy, healthier, forget that they were prisoners and release accumulated stress.

In our case, physical activity seems to lead to feelings of optimism and to increase self-esteem and self-confidence. This is in agreement with Ionescu, Parisot & Irode (2010) who analysed inmates’ perception of sports

and found that 12.5% considered that physical activities increase self-esteem and self-confidence.

The students' learning occurred in different areas, many of which coincide with the benefits of service learning given by Stukas, Clary, & Snyder (1999): self-enhancement, understanding self and world, value-expression, career development, social expectations and protection. In particular, the students in our study referred to the first four of these points. They also valued the contextualization of their learning. As stated by Rubio, Campo, & Sebastiani (2014) in reference to service learning, "...these proposals for action help us to tackle educational and curricular content in a contextualized, experiential, interdisciplinary and action-centred way." (p.14). The students' learning also included breaking stereotypes. Einfield & Collins (2008) described how service learning can help to overcome stereotypes in multicultural environments. Finally, the development of social skills is another aspect highlighted by authors who address this subject, particularly in the context of civic and citizenship education (Martínez, 2008; Puig et al., 2006).

### **Conclusions**

To conclude, we would like to highlight two main points of this research: the impact of the physical sports activity on the socialisation of the inmates; and the students' learning processes. With respect to the impact of the physical sports activity on the socialisation of inmates, the results of the research show that this activity facilitated communication between inmates, as it fostered interaction among the units and helped to diminish conflicts by improving the climate of coexistence. The activity represents a way of making contact with life outside that breaks the monotony and encourages participation in other cultural activities. With respect to personal skills, the experiences boosted inmates' ability to comprehend and structure a verbal discourse, their confidence in themselves and their willingness to cooperate. An improvement in the motor behaviour itself was also observed, particularly in relation to body awareness, flexibility and aspects of hygiene.

The most important aspects of the students' experience are that they learnt to overcome stereotypes and to contextualise their learning. They experienced a new area of professional activity. In addition, they learnt to

value physical education as a resource for social intervention, to apply educational elements to this resource, and to adapt knowledge of this topic to a real context. In terms of personal abilities, their communication skills improved and they gained independence with respect to decision-making. In short, their learning was considerably enriched by the service-learning method. This experience shows how interactive dialogue between students, inmates and teachers can actively promote collaborative learning. To conclude, the evaluations of all the participants have been very positive, suggesting that the project should continue.

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<sup>2</sup>Students' objectives and contents were drawn from the course plans of the subjects they are studying at university.

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**Teresa Lleixà** is Professor in the Department of Education of Musical and Corporal Expression at Universitat de Barcelona, Spain. ORCID id: [0000-0003-1047-1271](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1047-1271)

**Merche Ríos** is Professor in the Department of Education of Musical and Corporal Expression at Universitat de Barcelona, Spain. ORCID id: [0000-0002-7419-2354](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7419-2354)

**Contact Address:** Facultad de Formación del Profesorado, Campus Mundet, Edificio Llevant, Paseig de la Vall d'Hebron, 171, 08035, Barcelona, Spain. Email: [teresa.lleixa@ub.edu](mailto:teresa.lleixa@ub.edu)