

THE 'PLUS' IN SPORT-PLUS.

A step toward social
inclusion?

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for the degree of Doctor in Health Sciences

Background & studies

A growing group of people in our society is confronted with social exclusion in multiple areas of life, such as education, employment, health and leisure. Sport is seen as a potentially rich context for reaching hard-to-reach young people at risk of social exclusion. Sport participation is believed to generate various individual benefits (e.g., improved fitness, reduced anxiety, better self-control, more self-esteem and self-efficacy, social skills and connectedness, especially in socially vulnerable groups), and may also positively affect societal phenomena (e.g., social cohesion). However, these

benefits are not inherent to sport; they must be planned, as objectives in the program, and organized as such that they work towards these benefits. So it is no longer about 'sport for sport', but about 'sport as a means', which is called sport-plus or Sport-for-Development (SfD). Regular sport and SfD have a different underlying 'theory-of-change'.

This thesis is part of a four-year (2016-2019) Strategic Basic Research project called CATCH (*Community sports for AT-risk youth: innovating strategies for promoting personal development, health and social CoHesion*). CATCH explored why, how and under which circumstances sport-plus can be a lever for social inclusion of adolescents in vulnerable situations, and more precisely what sport-plus can do for the social cohesion, personal development and health in these groups. CATCH is a transdisciplinary project in both the design and implementation of the interventions, i.e. it brings together not only researchers from different domains, but also policy makers and practitioners.

Study 1 describes the development and content of a theory on how, why and in what circumstances sport-plus can function as a health-promoting lever. The theory was built on the basis of a rich qualitative dataset collected in different sport-plus programs in three Flemish cities, each in a different province.

Study 2 consists of two sub-studies and describes the development, and afterwards the implementation and evaluation, of a pilot intervention in sport-plus that aims to optimize

STUDY AIMS

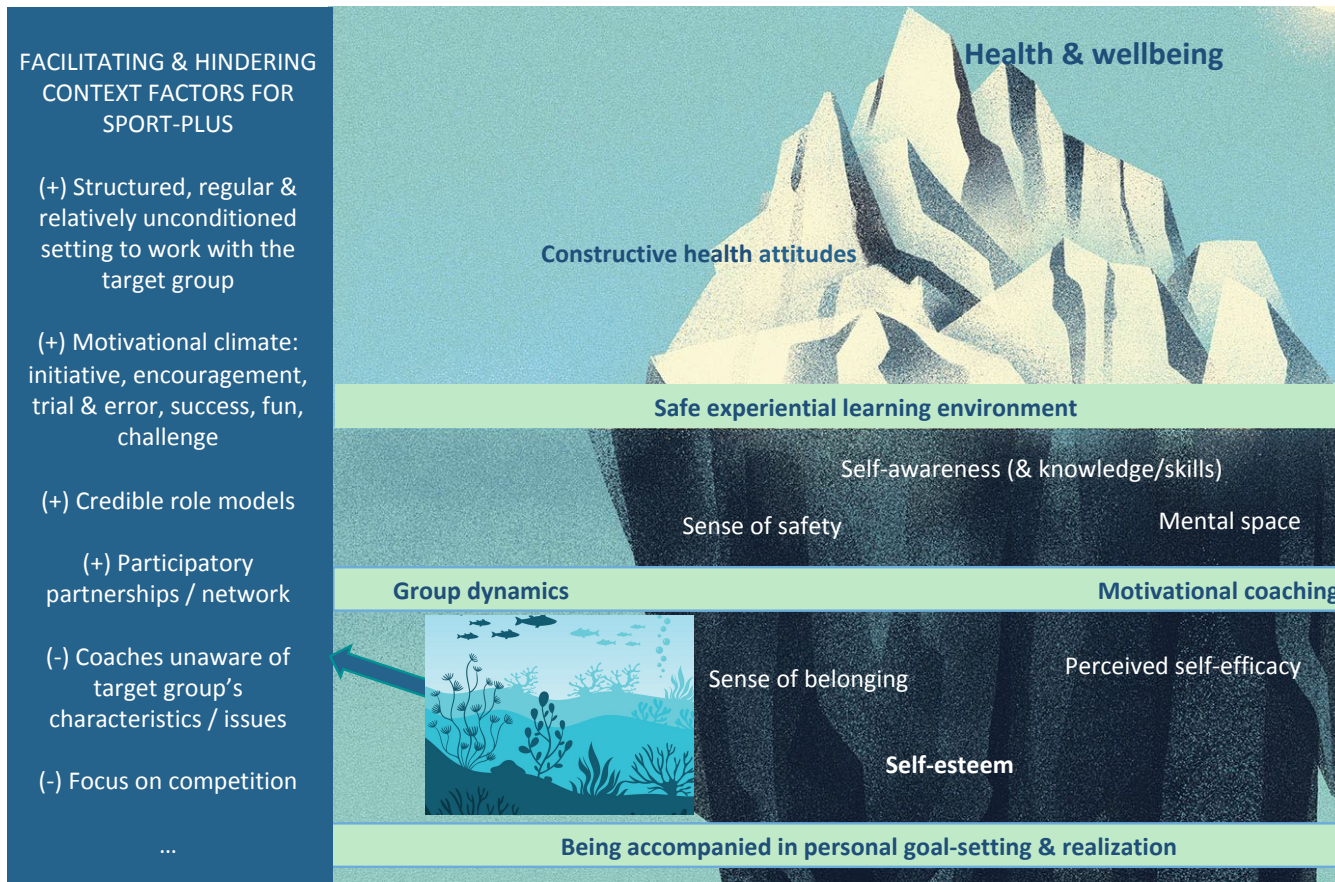
This research aims at identifying the underlying mechanisms of sport-plus that can promote the health of socially vulnerable population groups, and the necessary context factors for the emergence of these mechanisms.

the realization of the objectives of sport-plus through the engagement of sport-plus coaches in a social employment in a participatory training program, with the aim to stimulate the coaches to self-reflection, and to encourage them to recognize, and make use of, functional mechanisms in sport-plus.

In **Study 3**, one specific sport-plus organization served as a comparative case. Interesting in this case was the fact that, while enhanced employability of sport-plus participants was the final goal, improved wellbeing / health was observed as a crucial 'side effect' of the project. The mechanisms that enabled the organization to realize the set goals were the same as those identified in the theory of study 1.

Study 4 offers a general reflection on sport-plus coaches who, as program deliverers, are crucial for the viability and realization of sport-plus goals. Through a secondary thematic data analysis, necessary characteristics, skills and knowledge of the ideal sport-plus coach were identified, as well as determining contextual elements that contribute to the success of sport-plus coaches in realizing the goals of their program.

Key results



- The road from sport-plus to sustainable behaviour change is long and winding. Time and the right conditions are needed, such as a motivational climate, a social-sportive network and political engagement
- The sport-plus coach is a decisive context factor, and simultaneously subject to context, thus the need to train him/her in shaping the optimal conditions for sport-plus to impact positively on health
- Sport-plus, among others, may be an effective health promotion tool if organized in a transdisciplinary, tailor-made and context-specific manner

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Curriculum vitae:

After finalizing an MSc in political and social sciences (2000), Karen Van der Veken starts working in the social / education sector. From 2006 to 2013 she works in emergency and development programs in Africa and Asia. She teaches and does public health research in the Institute of Tropical Medicine (2013-2016) before to engage in the CATCH project (2017).