

Hèbert's natural method of physical education and its application in scouting

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Abstract:

Background: Modern Hebertism combines fitness with outdoor practice and can be performed individually or in groups. This exercise system developed by Georges Hèbert is based on natural movements of the human body and adapt to the surrounding environment. Owing to these characteristics, it is particularly well-suited enhancing the abilities, skills and competencies of individuals engaged outdoor activities that require considerable physical effort. While there is empirical evidence supporting the psycho-physical benefits of Hebertism, scientific studies examining its effectiveness specifically among scouts remain limited. **Purpose:** This study is aims to analyze and evaluate the impact of on scouts concerning perceived psycho-physical and social development, well as the benefits and applicability of the method. **Methods:** The sample consists of 61 scouts belonging to different groups in the Lombardy region, with an age range from 17 to 50 years, with a heterogeneous scouting experience. The method includes the use of protocols based on the 10 pillars of Hebertian exercise and the Hèbert Path. A questionnaire consisting of 7 questions with pre-determined answers is developed and administered to assess the Scouts' perception of their psycho-physical and social development and to understand their awareness of the benefits and usefulness of Hebertism. **Results:** In the post-implementation of the method, it was found that 73.77% of the sample appreciated Hebertism; 68.86% considered the method to be a useful tool for the boys' growth and 70.49% stated that they perceived Hebert's method to be useful for scouting. Following the application of the Chi-square test, a first significant relationship was found between the perception of psychophysical benefits after doing outdoor activities and being able to break away from the daily routine in this way ($p < .001$). A second significant relationship was found between the perception of psychophysical benefits after doing outdoor activities and the perceived usefulness of hebertism for the children's growth ($p < .001$). **Conclusion:** The study makes it clear that Hebertism plays a fundamental role in the overall development of Scouts, contributing positively to their physical, mental and social growth. These findings suggest the need to further promote Hebertism, ensuring that all members of the Scout community can fully benefit from its principles and practices.

Key Words: Fitness outdoor, Free movement, Psychophysical growth, Pathway, Educational benefits

Introduction

In the vast panorama of exercise methodologies, Hébertism emerges as an approach that goes beyond simple gymnastic exercise, embracing a philosophy of life based on harmony between man and his natural surroundings (Raiola et al, 2021). Born out of the visionary mind of Georges Hébert, a French naval officer, this method of natural gymnastics is distinguished by its holistic conception of human movement, which aims not only to strengthen the body, but also to develop the individual's cognitive, emotional and relational abilities (Gleyse, 1996). Hébertism is rooted in the fundamental principle that man should be able to successfully meet any physical or environmental challenge by drawing on his body's innate resources and adaptability (Aliberti, 2023). As Georges Hébert himself states, it is essential to be strong in order to be useful in various contexts, this view is at the heart of the methodology in question, emphasising the importance of physical preparation that is not an end in itself, but can be applied in real-life situations (Herbert, 1912). Over the years, Hebertism has attracted the interest of numerous practitioners and scholars, both for its effectiveness in increasing physical capabilities and for its intuitive and playful approach to movement (Gorce, 2004). In the panorama of exercise, the method stands out for its philosophy imbued with harmony between man and his natural surroundings, arguing that gymnastic activities should be performed in the open air, aiming at the preservation and protection of the human being (Berryman, 2006). Hébert develops this theory through an analysis of the ways of life of primitive humans, who, living in close connection with nature, achieved a complete and robust physical fitness, necessary for their survival, embodying a model of completeness characterised by strength, health and the ability to cope with daily challenges (D'Isanto et al, 2023). This method aims to restore the balance between body and mind, promoting individual well-being in harmony with nature (D'Elia et al, 2023). The method's practices

include a wide range of activities, from gardening to dance, from air therapy to self-defence (D'Elia et al, 2022). The Natural Method is thus conceived as a methodical, progressive and continuous action that accompanies the individual from early childhood to adulthood, with the aim of ensuring integral physical development (D'Isanto et al, 2022). This methodology emphasises the importance of skills such as walking, running, jumping, climbing, swimming, all practised with a view to altruism, i.e. putting oneself at the service of others to protect them (Quenot, 1998). For all these characteristics, Hebertism is complementary in achieving the physical and moral goals set by another movement, the Scouts (Altavilla et al, 2022).

One of the most obvious connections between Scouting and Hébertism is the figure of Georges Hébert himself, the founder of Hébertism, who was a fervent supporter of the Scout movement and significantly influenced the Scout approach to physical outdoor activities (Raiola et al 2022). Hébert recognised the scout movement as an opportunity for young people to develop their physical, mental and social skills through practical and interactive experiences with nature (Raiola et al, 2021). Hébertism shares some fundamental principles with Scouting, such as the importance of direct contact with nature and the value of personal autonomy and leadership (Gidney, 2002). Both promote the development of survival skills and problem-solving abilities through outdoor activities and experiential learning (D'Isanto et al, 2024). In addition, both approaches encourage a sense of responsibility towards others and the environment, promoting altruism and community service (Raiola et al 2021). Although there is empirical evidence on the benefits of Hebertism, the lack of scientific evidence on its effectiveness in terms of developing and maintaining psychophysical and social aspects among participants in the Scout movement is a gap in the scientific literature. The context of this research is therefore the need to explore in greater depth the effects of implementing the Hebertism method in the scouting context, with the aim of obtaining empirical data useful for both the scientific community and practitioners, thus providing new perspectives on how natural methods can be effectively integrated into modern educational programmes (D'Elia et al, 2020). This study aims to fill an important knowledge gap, considering that the Scout movement, with its global spread, constitutes a far-reaching and potentially influential educational context, and that a better understanding of the integration of Hebertism and Scouting could offer new possibilities for growth and development for young people, promoting a more balanced approach between body, mind and nature (Di Domenico et al, 2024). This lack of knowledge underlines the importance of a targeted study to assess the impacts of Hebertism on perceptions of psycho-physical and social development and awareness of the benefits and usefulness of the method for people involved in Scouting.

Material & methods

Study participants

The sample consists of 61 scouts belonging to different groups in the Lombardy region, with an age range from 17 to 50 years, of whom 31 are female and 29 male, with a heterogeneous scouting experience, 22 of them being scout leaders.

Study design

Outdoor exercise protocols administered over a 12-month period based on the 10 pillars of Hebertism - swimming, carrying, climbing, jumping, balancing, throwing, wrestling, quadruped, running and walking - have been drawn up in order to be able to tackle the Hebert Trail, which takes place in the open air and includes all ten families of disciplines covered by the method. Each discipline increases specific motor skills, enabling the harmonious development of one's own body. The sessions based on physical exercise consist of 1 hour of practice 3 times a week, each scout commits individually or in groups to training in nature, using makeshift tools found in the environment: branches, trees, stones, etc. At the end of the 12 months, the scouts met in one day and tackled the Hebert trail, managing to complete it in all its parts. A questionnaire consisting of 7 questions was drawn up and submitted to the participants in order to gain an insight into their perception and awareness of the Hebertism methodology. This is represented in Table 1.

Table 1. Questionnaire.

Questions	Answers
1) In your opinion, does Hebertism convey values that are expendable in today's society?	Very-Enough-A little-Not at all
2) How many hours a week do you exercise outdoors?	(<di 1)-(<da 1 a 3)-(<da 3 a 6)-(>di 6)
3) Do you feel the benefits on your body and mind after outdoor activities?	Very-Enough-A little-Not at all
4) How much does doing outdoor activities help to distract you from your daily routine?	Very-Enough-A little-Not at all
5) Do you think that Hebertism is still a useful tool for the growth of children today?	Very-Enough-A little-Not at all
6) Do you think that Hebertism is still appreciated by Scouts?	Very-Enough-A little-Not at all
7) Do you perceive Hebertism to be a useful method for Scouting?	Very-Enough-A little-Not at all

Statistical processing

A descriptive analysis was elaborated in order to understand the participants' answers to the questionnaire. Subsequently, the Chi-square test was used to detect any significant relationships between the qualitative variables represented by the questionnaire questions, all with the statistical software JASP.

Results

After the administration of the questionnaire, the results shown in Table 2 were found. Table 2. Results of questionnaire responses.

Table 2. Results of questionnaire responses.

1. In your opinion, does Hèbertism convey values that are expendable in today's society?	Very	Enough	A little	Not at all
Frequency	40	15	6	0
Percentage	65.57	24.59	9.84	0
2. How many hours a week do you exercise outdoors?	< di 1	Da 1 a 3	Da 3 a 6	>di 6
Frequency	3	40	16	2
Percentage	4.92	65.57	26.23	3.28
3. Do you feel the benefits on your body and mind after outdoor activities?	Very	Enough	A little	Not at all
Frequency	40	20	1	0
Percentage	65.57	32.79	1.64	0
4. How much does doing outdoor activities help to distract you from your daily routine?	Very	Enough	A little	Not at all
Frequency	35	22	3	1
Percentage	57.38	36.06	4.92	1.64
5. Do you think that Hebertism is still a useful tool for the growth of children today?	Very	Enough	A little	Not at all
Frequency	42	18	1	0
Percentage	68.86	29.50	1.64	0
6. Do you think that Hebertism is still appreciated by Scouts?	Very	Enough	A little	Not at all
Frequency	45	15	1	0
Percentage	73.77	24.59	1.64	0
7. Do you perceive Hebertism to be a useful method for Scouting?	Very	Enough	A little	Not at all
Frequency	43	17	1	0
Percentage	70.49	27.87	1.64	0

In the first question 'In your opinion, does Hèbertism convey values that are expendable in today's society?', 65.57% answered very; 24.59% answered enough, 9.84% answered a little; none not at all. To the second question 'How many hours a week do you exercise outdoors?', 4.92% answered less than 1; 65.57% da 1 a 3; 26.23% da 3 a 6; 3.28% with more than 6. In the third question 'Do you feel the benefits on your body and mind after outdoor activities?' 65.57% answered very; 32.79% enough; 1.64% a little e none not at all. To the fourth question 'How much does doing outdoor activities help to distract you from your daily routine?', 57.38% answered very; 36.06% answered enough; 4.92% answered a little; 1.64% answered not at all. In the fifth question 'Do you think that Hebertism is still a useful tool for the growth of children today?' 68.86% answered very; 29.50% answered enough, 1.64% answered a little and none not at all. In the sixth question 'Do you think that Hebertism is still appreciated by Scouts?' 73.77% answered very; 24.59% answered enough; 1.64% answered a little; none not at all. In the last question 'Do you perceive Hebertism to be a useful method for Scouting?' 70.49% answered very; 27.87% answered enough; 1.64% answered a little and none answered not at all. Following the Chi-square analysis, two significant relationships were found between the qualitative variables. The first relationship concerns question 3, 'Do you feel the benefits on your body and mind after outdoor activities?' and between the question 4, 'How much does doing outdoor activities help to distract you from your daily routine?', where it resulted ($p < .001$). This is shown in contingency tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Contingency table between question 3 and question 4.

Contingency Tables

Do you feel the benefits on your body and mind after outdoor activities?	How much does doing outdoor activities help to distract you from your daily routine?				Total
	Not at all	A little	Enough	Very	
A little	1	0	0	0	1
Enough	0	2	8	10	20
Very	0	1	14	25	40
Total	1	3	22	35	61

Table 4. Chi Quadro analysis.**Chi-Squared Tests**

	Value	df	p
X ²	62.981	6	<.001
N	61		

Then, the second relationship found is always between the demand 3 'Do you feel the benefits on your body and mind after outdoor activities?' and between the demand 5 'Do you think that Hebertism is still a useful tool for the growth of children today?', with the result of ($p < .001$). This can be observed in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5. This can be observed in Tables 5 and 6.**Contingency Tables**

Do you feel the benefits on your body and mind after outdoor activities?	Do you think that Hebertism is still a useful tool for the growth of children today?			
	A little	Enough	Very	Total
A little	1	0	0	1
Enough	0	9	11	20
Very	0	9	31	40
Total	1	18	42	61

Table 6. Chi Quadro analysis.**Chi-Squared Tests**

	Value	df	p
X ²	64.268	4	<.001
N	61		

Dicussion

The study provided important evidence on the perception of Hebertism among scout community members in the Lombardy region, it is appreciated and considered a useful tool for an all-round development of scouts. The inclusive and holistic propensity of this discipline makes it possible to promote not only psychophysical wellbeing, but also social interactions; moreover, the contact with nature and the development of personality that is achieved over time find a particular affinity with the values and objectives of scouting (Raiola et al, 2020). The direct connection with the environment not only enhances awareness of this issue, but also promotes respect and protection for it (D'Isanto et al, 2019). In this way, Scouts can develop a deeper understanding of natural ecosystems and the importance of environmental conservation (Esposito et al, 2024). This awareness is essential to form responsible citizens who are aware of the impact of their actions on the ecosystem (Raiola et al, 2018). An analysis of the participants' answers to the survey questions reinforces these points (Raiola, 2019). To the first question, concerning the values conveyed by Hebertism in today's society, 65.57% answered 'very' and 24.59% 'enough, demonstrating a broad recognition of the social relevance of this practice. In addition, a significant proportion of participants 65.57% practise outdoor physical activity between one and three hours per week, while 26.23% do so for three to six hours, showing a considerable commitment to outdoor physical activities.

The perception of psycho-physical benefits is extremely positive, with 65.57% responding 'very' and 32.79% 'enough, indicating that the vast majority of Scouts perceive considerable benefits for body and mind. Similarly, 57.38% find that outdoor activities help very to distract themselves from their daily routine, and 36.06% enough, underlining the importance of these activities for mental well-being. In addition, a large part of the sample, believes that hebertism is still today a useful tool for the growth of boys (68.86% 'very' and 29.50% 'enough) and appreciated by scouts (73.77% 'very' and 24.59% 'enough). The Chi-square analysis revealed two significant relationships: one between the perception of the psychophysical benefits of outdoor activities and the ability to succeed in distracting oneself from the daily routine ($p < .01$) and the other again between the perception of the psychophysical benefits of outdoor activities and the perceived usefulness of the practice for the children's growth ($p < .001$). These results indicate that Hebertism is not only seen as beneficial in terms of psychophysical wellbeing, but is also perceived as relevant to the current social context, reinforcing its relevance and value in the Scouts' educational sphere (Trigueros et al, 2020). The positive perception and appreciation of natural gymnastics suggest that this practice could be further integrated and promoted within scout activities. Considering the high level of awareness and appreciation among participants, scout leaders could consider adopting further structured programmes based on these principles to further enhance the positive feedback

achieved. Despite the promising results, the study has some limitations: the sample is limited to the Lombardy region and might not be representative of the scout population at national or international level. Future research could benefit from a larger and more diversified sample to confirm and extend the results obtained.

Conclusions

The study confirms that hebertism plays a fundamental role in the psycho-physical and social development of scouts. The continuous promotion of this practice within the scout community is essential to ensure that all members can fully benefit from its principles and practices, thus contributing to their overall growth and the formation of conscious and committed citizens. Until the 1970s, the exercises devised by Hébert were more akin to military exercises and had to be carried out with greater rigour. Today, on the other hand, the activities are conceived as adventure trails, aimed not only at improving the scouts' skills and increasing physical abilities, but also at emotional involvement through nature. Ample space is left for the play component, allowing all boys and girls, including those with possible disabilities, to experience as much as possible of all the proposals. The results show that the objectives set in this work were largely achieved. From a theoretical and practical point of view, the study fills a gap in the scientific literature concerning the lack of studies on the effectiveness of Hebertism in the scout context. The study provides empirical evidence on its positive impact not only on the physical development, but also on the awareness and psychological balance of young people, demonstrating how this practice is a valuable educational tool in promoting people's commitment through a strong connection to nature. From a social point of view, hebertism promotes strong group cohesion, as exercises and adventure trails often take place in a collective context, encouraging collaboration and mutual support. This approach also strengthens the sense of belonging to the scout community and respect for others, which are fundamental values in scouting education and training. Another interesting point of reflection concerns the inclusiveness of the method. The possibility of adapting the exercises to the physical and cognitive abilities of each individual, including children with disabilities, represents an innovative aspect that aligns Hebertism with current principles of inclusive education. This ability to make activities accessible and engaging for all, regardless of individual abilities, reinforces its educational and social value. From the results obtained, it is evident that the objectives set in this work have been largely achieved. Hebertism, therefore, is proposed as a versatile and highly formative practice that could be further enhanced and integrated into educational programmes within the scout movement and also in various social and sporting contexts and outdoor education.

Conflicts of interest. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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