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*An Activist Approach to Sport Meets Youth From Socially Vulnerable Backgrounds: Possible Learning Aspirations*

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An Activist Approach to Sport Meets Youth From Socially Vulnerable Backgrounds:  
Possible Learning Aspirations

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Abstract

Purpose: This study was a two-phase activist research project aimed at co-creating a prototype pedagogical model for working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds in a sport context. This paper addresses the learning aspirations (learning outcomes) that emerged when we created spaces for youth to develop strategies to manage the risks they face in their community. Method: This study took place in a socially and economically disadvantaged neighborhood in a Brazilian city where we worked with a group of 17 boys between ages 13- 15, 4 coaches, a pedagogic coordinator and a social worker. Over a six month period, we collected multiple sources of data including field journal/observations (38), audio records of youth work sessions (18), coaches' work sessions (16), combined coaches and youth work sessions (3), and meetings between the lead and the second author for debriefing and planning sessions (36). Results: By using an activist approach, four learning aspirations emerged: becoming responsible/committed, learning from mistakes, valuing each other's knowledge, and communicating with others. Conclusion: Findings suggest that there is a need for more sports programs that start from young people's concrete needs and life situations and look to create places for youth to see alternative possibilities and take action.

*Keywords:* student-centered pedagogy, sport programs, critical pedagogy, empowerment

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“I think this project in the middle of the slum can help kids not to go into a life of crime” (Noel, age 14).

“I think those are values that you can bring to your life, guys. The small kids could be inspired by you boys, think about it” (Coach Maria).

This study was a two-phase activist research project aimed at co-creating a prototype pedagogical model (Kirk, 2013) for working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds in a sport context. The intent was to use sport as a vehicle for assisting youth in becoming critical analysts of their communities and developing strategies to manage the risks they face by looking for alternatives that extend their current life situations (Fine, 2007; Freire, 1987). The first phase of this project was designed with the intent of identifying what facilitated and hindered the youths’ engagement in sport (Luguetti, Oliver, Kirk, & Dantas, 2015; Luguetti, Oliver, Dantas, & Kirk, 2016). In that phase, five features were identified as being essential for working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds. These included: student-centered pedagogy, inquiry-based education centered *in action*, an ethic of care, attentiveness to the community, and a community of sport (Luguetti et al., 2015). In this paper, we described the emergence of learning aspirations when the five critical elements of the prototypical model were combined and used in the soccer project, in other words, when we worked collaboratively to create realistic opportunities for the youth to begin to negotiate some of the barriers they identified. For this, we used a Student-Centered Inquiry *as Curriculum* (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013) approach for working with the youth. This approach combines student centered pedagogy with inquiry-based learning centered in action as a means of working with youth to listen/understand the barriers they face in physical activity settings and collaboratively work to negotiate and/or transform these barriers in order

to create better activity possibilities (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013; Oliver, Hamzeh, & McCaughtry, 2009).

### **Pedagogical Models, Sports and Youth From Socially Vulnerable Backgrounds**

Over the past two decades we have seen an explosion in the development of curriculum, instructional and pedagogical models (Casey, 2014; Metzler, 2011). Generically, these models provide ‘design specifications’ which include a key theme, critical elements and learning outcomes (Kirk, 2013). The key theme refers to the central idea on which the model is based (Metzler, 2011). The critical elements are ‘benchmarks’ (Metzler, 2011) that make a model distinctive in terms of what teachers and learners must do in order to faithfully implement the model (Kirk, 2013). Finally, the learning outcomes are the educational intentions of a program, what we might expect students to know, understand, or be able to do (Metzler, 2011). The value of using pedagogical models is the tight alignment of the learning outcomes with the teaching strategies and subject matter (Casey, 2014; Kirk, 2013; Metzler, 2011). It is argued that by using these design specifications educators can develop specific programs at local levels for local purposes (Kirk, 2013).

Several scholars have developed pedagogical models with the intent of working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds. For example, Positive Youth Development (PYD) (Fuller, Percy, Bruening, & Cotrufo, 2013; Holt, 2008), Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) (Hellison, 2010; Walsh, 2008), Sport Empowerment (Hastie & Buchanan, 2000) and Sport for Peace (Ennis et al., 1999) have emerged in physical education (PE) and sport. The prescriptions of learning outcomes are a feature of these models and describe specific intended youth behaviors that will result. For example, TPSR prescribes respect for the rights and feelings of others, self-motivation, self-direction, and caring as the desired learning outcomes (Hellison, 2010), while PYD identifies five ‘C’s (Holt, 2008): Competence, Character, Connection, Confidence, and Caring/Compassion as the specific

desired learning outcomes for youth. These models have been shown to promote positive attitudes, motivational responses, and pro-social behaviors in youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds (Ennis et al., 1999; Fuller et al., 2013; Hellison, 2010; Walsh, 2008). That said, what these models were ultimately designed to do was to control youth behavior or create individual empowerment (Lawson, 2005; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2012).

What strikes us as curious is that each of these models was created by adults without youth participation and applied from a top down perspective (Lawson, 2005; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2012). While we have many positive results from using these various models with youth in sport contexts, we believe that there is now a need to begin to develop models by working *with* youth, rather than developing models *for* youth (Enright & O'Sullivan, 2012; Fisette & Walton, 2014; Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012; Oliver, Hamzeh, & McCaughtry, 2009; Oliver & Hamzeh, 2010). We believe that sport holds the potential to move beyond helping youth control their behaviors to creating spaces for real life change. If we hope to create sporting experiences that allow youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds to begin to identify and negotiate barriers to their participation, their voices must be present in the process.

In this paper we used an activist approach, to co-create a prototype pedagogical model because we believe there is value in developing pedagogical models with youth and coaches. A 'prototype' model is a model under development, where the initial architecture of key theme, critical elements and learning outcomes or aspirations have been tentatively identified, but further implementation and trialing is required in order to adapt and refine the model. In developing this prototype model for working with socially vulnerable youth, we suggest that the social value of sport should extend beyond inculcating youth about societies' rules (Lawson, 2005). If we continue to use sport as a vehicle for reinforcing social norms we might actually be perpetuating inequities, particularly for youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, & Nols, 2012). These young people face concrete

challenges (poverty, educational failure, drug and alcohol abuse, etc.) that require interventions that are based on a thorough analysis of their social circumstances (Fine, 2007; Freire, 1987, 1996). We argue that young people have the capacity and agency to analyze their social context and to challenge, resist, and negotiate the forces that impede their choice of possibilities (Cammarota and Fine 2008; Freire 1987).

### **Empowering Young People Through Action: An Activist Approach**

Unlike many approaches in sport contexts found in the literature, activist researchers in PE have worked with youth in order to identify, critique and transform barriers to young people's engagement in physical activity (Enright & O'Sullivan, 2012; Fisette & Walton, 2014; Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012; Oliver & Hamzeh, 2010). Activist scholars provide young people with opportunities to identify and study social problems affecting their lives and work collaboratively with them to facilitate change (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Freire, 1987, 1996). This change is partially a result of challenging traditional student-teacher power relations by giving young people opportunities to participate in curricular and pedagogical decision making (Cook-Sather, 2002; Enright & O'Sullivan, 2012; Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012). When students are recognized as agents, they begin to take ownership over their learning, they take responsibility for themselves and others, they find meaning, and they engage more enthusiastically (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Cook-Sather, 2002, 2006).

Activist research is grounded in feminist (Collins, 2000; Fine, 2007; Hooks, 2000) and critical pedagogies (Freire, 1987, 1996) and has been developed through work with marginalized populations (e.g., girls, people of color, people in poverty). Feminists have worked from the position of challenging and changing current power relations in education, and caution against uncritically or unreflectively privileging student voices (Collins, 2000; Fine, 2007; Hooks, 2000). Feminist scholars reveal how complicated power dynamics are in

the reality of classrooms. They suggest we must be willing to “take small steps toward changing oppressive practices even if complete change seems or is unattainable” (Cook-Sather, 2002, pp. 6). Similarly, critical pedagogy is aimed at empowering both students and teachers to develop a critically conscious understanding of their relationships with the world (Freire 1987). This type of pedagogy holds the possibility of enabling students to explore the potential of what it means to be critical citizens (Freire, 1996; Schor & Freire, 1986).

While there are many promising outcomes to this type of work for PE and sport pedagogy, the majority of these studies are done with girls in PE contexts in part because girls have historically been marginalized (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2012; Fisette & Walton, 2014; Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012). We believe there is potential in using activist approaches with youth, female or male, from socially vulnerable backgrounds in sport contexts. By considering an activist process of working with youth to co-create a prototype pedagogical model, we challenge the conventional conception of youth as subordinate to the expert teacher/coach (Freire, 1987, 1996). In that sense, youth become agents in the process of transformative learning, seeking opportunities to reframe and re-imagine their sports experiences. In this study we used a Student-Centered Inquiry *as* Curriculum approach (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013) for working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds in order to better understand how to work with them in ways that might foster their collective empowerment (Fine, 2007; Freire, 1987, 1996; Luguetti et al., 2015, 2016).

## Methods

### Setting and Participants

This study took place in a Brazilian soccer project that has existed since 2008. This project is run by a non-governmental organization, funded by Brazilian companies who finance projects instead of paying taxes to the Brazilian government through a law to encourage youth to participate in sports. The project’s mission is to “promote and



democratize access to educational sport”. This project serves approximately 250 boys and girls ages 6 to 15. Approximately 90% are boys and 10% girls. The overwhelming ratio of boys to girls in this project is a result of Brazil being known worldwide as the ‘country of soccer,’ but it is still very much a country of *male* soccer.

The project runs in four different neighborhoods of a socially and economically disadvantaged district, in an urban, coastal and tourist Brazilian city with high rates of income inequality and pockets of illiterate people (SEADE, 2010). Although the coach participants in the study were working in four different sites/neighborhoods, the youth participants of the study came from only one site. This site is located in an area with many slums, and it is a place that has explicit drug trafficking. We selected this site because it had high percentages of economically disadvantaged youth. In this specific site, we chose to work with the 13-15 year olds because as youth get older the risk of social vulnerability increases. It so happened that in the site we were working, all the 13-15 year old youth were boys. While this was not intended to be an all boy research study, it ended up as one due to the lack of 13-15 year old girls playing soccer at this site.

The research idea was presented to the general and pedagogical coordinators of the project who agreed with the initial idea and design. We presented the study to both coordinators because we hoped that the co-created prototype pedagogical model could later be incorporated throughout the entire soccer project. It is also important to highlight that both coordinators were ex-soccer players. The main objectives of the study and a summary of the methodology were presented to all coaches in the project who also agreed to participate. The youth and their parents gave assent, and parents signed an informed consent form. Ethical approval for this study was received from the Ethics Committee (protocol number 608.759). All adults involved in the study signed informed consent.

The participants in this study included 17 boys (ages 13-15), four coaches, a pedagogical coordinator, a social worker, and two researchers. All of the boys came from families who earned less than two minimum wage incomes, and some of the boys were from families who earned under a minimum wage income (35%). The coaches, pedagogical coordinator and social worker each averaged 3 years of experience working with youth from socially and economically vulnerable backgrounds.

The two researchers differed from the other participants insofar as neither were members of socially vulnerable groups and thus were considered an in-betweeners/outsider (lead author Carla) and outsider (second author Kim) respectfully (Anzaldúa, 2007; Collins, 2000). Although Carla's gender, race, age, and social class positioned her as an outsider, her experience in soccer and understanding of the socially vulnerable context positioned her as an in-betweeners (Anzaldúa, 2007). Although Kim was an outsider in relation to the youth, her role was to assist Carla in learning to use student-centered and inquiry-oriented approaches to education. In this capacity she served as a peer debriefer; was involved in the progressive data analysis; and helped in facilitating a collaborative construction of the youth's and coaches' work sessions.

### **Data Collection**

A Student-Centered Inquiry *as* Curriculum (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013) approach was used both as a process of working with the youth as well as serving as a framework for data collection (Luguetti et al., 2015, 2016). "It was originally designed as a way of developing curriculum with youth in order to better meet their interests, motivation and learning in PE" (Luguetti et al., 2015, pp.6). Student-Centered Inquiry *as* Curriculum involves a two-phase process: *Building the Foundation* and a four-phase cyclical process of *Planning, Responding to Students, Listening to Respond*, and *Analyzing Responses* as a means of curriculum design and implementation.

We collected data over 18 weeks in 2013 whereby Carla met with the youth for 40 minutes each week prior to their soccer training sessions (18 sessions). Debriefing followed immediately with Kim for approximately 90 minutes via Skype conferences. We used Skype because the second author lived in a different country from where the research was being conducted. In these debriefing meetings we analyzed data and planned the coaches' work sessions that followed the next day. Each Friday Carla held a work session with the coaches, the pedagogical coordinator and the social worker. These 16 sessions were each an hour in duration. Again, Carla and Kim debriefed immediately via Skype following the coaches' work sessions whereby they analyzed data and planned for the next youth work session. In addition, there were three combined coaches/youth work sessions toward the end of the research project.

*Building the Foundation* took place over 8 weeks and was designed with the intent of identifying what facilitated and hindered the boys' engagement in sport (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013). We started by inquiring into what the boys liked/disliked, their perceptions of school and family, their opinions about the soccer training sessions, and barriers to sport participation they encountered in both the program and their community as a whole. Through Phase I five features were identified as being essential for working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds: student-centered pedagogy, inquiry-based education centered *in action*, an ethic of care, attentiveness to the community, and a community of sport (Luguetti et al., 2015). Given what we learned during *Building the Foundation phase*, we co-created and implemented with the boys and the coaches a leadership program. In this 10-week program we combined the five features that allowed four learning aspirations to emerge. For more information regarding the schedule of work session tasks for coaches, youth and combined coaches/youth work sessions, see Luguetti et al. (2015).

We used the cyclical process of *Student-Centered Inquiry as Curriculum* (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013) as both the data collection process as well as the curriculum development process. *Planning* involved the creation of the work sessions between the boys and Carla (the first author), as well as the work sessions between the coaches and Carla. *Responding to Students* involved the creation of work sessions that bridged what Carla was learning from the youth, with what she was learning about using a student-centered pedagogical approach, and what she was doing with the coaches. *Listening to Respond* involved the debriefing and analysis of data between the first and second authors following the youth work sessions. *Analyzing the Responses* involved the debriefing and analysis of data between the first and second authors following the coaches' work sessions.

## **Data Sources and Analyses**

Data sources for this project included 38 field journal/observations of the training sessions and audio records of all work sessions: youth (18), coaches (16), combined coach and youth (3), and meetings between Carla and Kim (37). Given the weekly meetings between Carla and Kim, data analysis was ongoing. Carla transcribed the work sessions and we used these transcripts in our debriefing meetings to discuss what we were learning, and what we thought we needed to learn more about. In addition to these 37 debriefing/data analysis meetings, Carla and Kim met twice (14 days total) face-to-face for more in-depth data analysis. The first meeting took place during the middle of data collection with our main objective to verify the emergence of the key features (*Building the Foundation*). We also met at the end of the study to identify the learning aspirations that emerged through the leadership program.

## **Results**

In this section we will describe the risks the youth identified within their community and how we worked together to develop strategies for managing the risks they identified.

Next we show the learning aspirations that emerged during the second phase of the study: becoming responsible/committed, learning from mistakes, valuing each other's knowledge, and communicating with others.

### **Community Risks and Managing the Risks the Youth Identified**

Five weeks into the project Carla began noticing that the youth would listen to funk music before the work sessions began. Up to this point the youth were not discussing their views of their communities despite Carla's attempts to steer the conversation in that direction. Carla and Kim discussed the possibility of using funk music to help the youth describe their experiences in the community. Through the funk lyrics, the youth reported severe problems in their community, including: poor housing conditions, strong presence of drug trafficking, violence, and lack of basic sanitation.

Although the lyrics describe severe problems, "I had no bathroom", "I had nothing to eat", "My house had wooden walls", "I'm preparing for the worst", "I may be arrested or may be killed", "Lack of choice, a great illusion"; the youths' stories were not of someone who laments the constraints of resources and the lack of opportunity. The lyrics the youth chose were laced with agency: "Never give up", "I was born with it and I fight with it tooth and nail", "I'm the winner. I am a funkeiro, and I'm proud of it", "I realized my voracity". The lyrics of the funk songs illuminated the hope the youth had - a hope for managing the risks they identified in their community. At the end of the second funk song they created, they described: "The life of crime does not pay; stop and think!"

*Carla:* In the last session, you showed me through the lyrics of funk music that "a life of crime does not pay". Why didn't you choose a life of crime guys? What led you to not choose a life of crime?

*Leon:* I think it was because of soccer.

291           *Kleiton*: I think it was my father. If I chose a life of crime, he would see me die. I  
292           don't want that.

293           *Peter*: My cousin is in jail because he tried to rob two supermarkets in our  
294           neighborhood, and the police caught him.

295           *Breno*: My uncle, also, is in jail. I don't want that to happen to me.

296           Noel: I think this project in the middle of the slum can help kids not to go into a life  
297           of crime (Youth work session 8).

298           The activist phase of this project started from the things that the youth identified as  
299           important if they were going to move from merely becoming critical analysts of their  
300           communities to developing strategies to negotiate the risks they identified. Their primary  
301           barriers revolved around issues of safety, sanitation and opportunities to play sport.  
302           However, from the youths' perspectives, avoiding a life of crime was their top priority.  
303           According to them, "family is why they don't want a life of crime and sport is a way they  
304           can avoid crime".

305           Once these barriers were identified, Carla and Kim, the coaches, and the youth all  
306           worked collaboratively to imagine alternative possibilities. Through this imagining, sport  
307           continued to be viewed as a constructive activity, one that could offer not only the youth  
308           themselves, but also younger children, the opportunity to avoid a life of crime. Given the  
309           youths' desire to avoid the life of crime, and their belief that sport created such an  
310           opportunity, Carla and Kim and the coaches discussed possibilities for creating additional  
311           sporting experiences. A leadership program emerged as one possibility that would offer  
312           the youth an additional day of each week to work in a sport setting. It was within the sport  
313           context they could literally manage the risks they identified and as activist researchers we  
314           believed creating realistic possibilities was essential.

315 *Carla:* Would you like to teach other children in the project that a life of crime does  
316 not pay? Would you like to help the coach? Like a leadership program? Now it's time  
317 to choose a project to develop.

318 *Garcia:* I would! But how would we do that?

319 *Carla:* How do you think you could help your coach?

320 *Noel:* I could help carrying the balls.

321 *Peter:* I could help with the goalkeepers.

322 *Carla:* We also could develop a project to improve your behavior. You said that the  
323 behavior in your training session is a problem. Another thing that you spoke about is  
324 the bad condition of the soccer field. Which program would you like to develop?

325 *Noel:* The leadership program.

326 *Kleiton:* I'd like to teach small kids.

327 *David:* Teach small kids.

328 *Peter:* Leadership program.

329 *Noel:* I would like the leadership program. Small kids could learn a little more with  
330 people who are more experienced (Youth work session 8).

331 The idea of creating a leadership program where the older youth would work to assist  
332 the coaches during the younger children's training sessions was one of the options put forth  
333 as a possible change project. The youth articulated places they had choices, places that were  
334 realistic for them. The coaches also accepted the idea of developing the leadership program  
335 with the youth. In the next section we use vignettes to show how each learning aspiration  
336 emerged through combining the five critical elements in the development and implementation  
337 of the leadership program.

338 **Vignette 1 "Cleaning up our Language": Becoming Responsible/Committed**

The youth came early to our work session and seemed engaged with the possibility of helping the coach with the small children. The week before, the youth had decided collectively to develop the leadership program, and according to them, if they did not control their own behavior, they could not be good role models for the small children. At the beginning of our work session, Carla told the youth that the coaches agreed to develop the leadership program with them. However, she said that the coaches had some concerns.

*Carla:* Why do you think the coaches are worried?

*Kleiton:* I think it's because we do not respect each other.

*Henri:* Because in our training sessions we use bad words all the time, we have no respect (Youth work session 9).

Earlier in the study, the youth had identified their behavior as the second worst problem in their training sessions. At that time, the youth suggested that the people in charge should control their behavior. With the invitation to develop the leadership program, the youth began to realize that they were responsible for controlling their behavior. In the youths' opinions, the leadership program should bring out the "ideal leader" and controlling their behavior became a necessity for being a role model for the younger children.

*Carla:* How do you think an ideal leader should behave?

*David:* He should be responsible and he must know how to control his emotions.

*Peter:* The ideal leader should be disciplined. For example, he doesn't miss the training sessions.

*Noel:* If he says he wants to be a leader, he must show up or call the coach if he can't come.

*Kleiton:* An ideal leader should be an example for everyone, including the younger kids. He cannot mess up the training session. He should teach the less skilled kids.

*Peter:* An ideal leader does not say bad words.



364           *Kleiton:* If the coach is talking and someone is talking at the same time, this leader  
365           should ask for silence.

366           *David:* I also think, as leaders, we should help advise the younger kids about drugs,  
367           like Coach Anthony advised us last week. Remember when he told us that he lost his  
368           best friend to drug trafficking?

369           *Henri:* We could help younger kids not to make the same mistake Anthony's friend  
370           did.

371           *Carla:* What do you think you can do in your training sessions so the coaches will  
372           believe that you can be leaders? Remember that they are unsure.

373           *Henri:* We must avoid using bad language, especially cursing each other!

374           *David:* We should be less critical when someone makes mistakes. We need to support  
375           each other.

376           *Peter:* We must maintain the peace in our training sessions.

377           *Henri:* We can think about moments to come together like when we prayed together  
378           last week (Youth work session 9).

379           The youth identified responsibility and commitment as a barrier in their training  
380           sessions. It was the learning aspiration that the youth identified as the most important  
381           challenge they needed to negotiate in order to be leaders. The youth brainstormed how they  
382           should behave and ways they could help in a leadership program. They agreed that they  
383           would: “avoid using bad language”, “try to be less critical when someone made mistakes”,  
384           “preserve the peace”, and “value moments to stay together”. The youth realized that if they  
385           were able to control their behavior the coaches would no longer be worried about them  
386           helping the younger children.

387           Similar suggestions emerged in the coaches' work sessions in relation to being an  
388           “ideal leader”. Coach Maria said that the youth should be “committed.” For her, if a youth

said he was going to attend the younger kids training session, showing up was a means of demonstrating that commitment. Coach Daniel highlighted that the ideal leader “should be respectful.” For example, he wouldn’t invade the space of others. Coach Anthony talked about the need for leaders to “control their emotions and negotiate conflicts.” The coaches agreed that it might be valuable, if the leader helped low skilled children. They believed it would help the leaders develop more sensitivity and patience.

As the leadership program continued, the coaches started to notice that the youths’ responsibility and commitment were improving. Coach Anthony talked about Conrad: “I have never seen Conrad like this. Conrad was helping me to teach the younger kids what it means to be offside. For a moment, I was quiet. Conrad’s voice was heard by the small kids more than my voice”. Coach Anthony said that Conrad fulfilled an important role by helping him to teach a complex rule (offside position) to the younger children. Coach Anthony identified also that the youths’ commitment had improved: “The leaders are not missing the training sessions anymore”. Finally, the coaches identified that the youth had improved their behavior in the training sessions.

*Coach Anthony:* The boys improved their behavior in the training sessions. We know that Leon and Kleiton have a longstanding relationship problem. However, the important thing is that they have improved their behavior a lot. They don’t fight anymore. Kleiton doesn’t say bad words. I think it happened because of the leadership program (Coaches’ work session 18).

Unlike the coaches, the youth could not describe changes in their behavior. The leadership program came from experiences that the youth assumed were important if they were going to manage the risks they identified. The youth decided to do the leadership program in order to be involved in sport more often as this would help them avoid the life of crime. They also identified that it would be a place to help the younger children. The

leadership program gave them the opportunity to enhance their agency (Freire, 1987, 1996). Carla and Kim and the coaches created spaces for the youth to engage in processes that positioned them as agents of inquiry and as “experts” about their own lives (Cook-Sather, 2002). The leadership program offered a space for the youth to act differently. The youth felt empowered because they took ownership over the leadership program and in turn it created opportunities for the youth to be responsible and committed, an opportunity they embraced with great interest and seriousness.

**Vignette 2 “A Boy was Kicked out of the Project”: Learning From Mistakes**

*Coach Anthony:* In a disputed part of the game, Kleiton said to me: "If you are thinking I'm playing bad, come here and take my place. Fuck you coach!" Very furious I [Coach Anthony] said: “Fuck you! You are immature Kleiton”. So, I kept guiding the boys in the game. Kleiton scored a goal and he spoke again with me: “Fuck you, coach! Did you see what I did?” I felt so bad after that. That's not what we teach the boys. I felt really bad because of Kleiton’s words. This attitude did not fit in our group. By the end of the game, I decided to kick Kleiton out of the project. I spoke to our coordinator, Daniel and he said, from his point of view; he would never have Kleiton back in the project. Carla had a different point of view, as did Newton and Tim (the Caretaker of the soccer field) who came to talk to me a few days after that game. Tim was sober at that time and he asked me to reconsider my decision. I was pretty set on my decision because it hurt my ego. I was wondering if I had done something wrong, because Kleiton had been showing improvement in his behavior (Coaches’ work session 17).

On a sad Monday, Carla was entering the field when Peter came in her direction to tell her: "Kleiton was kicked out of the project. He swore at Coach Anthony in the game

438 yesterday." At that moment, a movie of Kleiton's behavior ran through her mind. "Kleiton  
439 has improved his behavior a lot. What could have happened?" Carla thought.

440 Immediately, Carla tried to talk to Coach Anthony about what had happened, but he  
441 seemed to be resolute in his decision: "Kleiton does not belong in this project anymore. He is  
442 out, definitely out" – said the coach. The unhappiness in Coach Anthony's eyes and his  
443 affection toward the youth made Carla believe that it would not be the end of the story. Tim  
444 and Newton came to talk to Carla:

445 Carla, you should try to talk to Coach Anthony about Kleiton. Kleiton has a lot of  
446 problems in his family, you know that. He's also not doing well at school. He is a  
447 good guy. At the beginning of the project, he used to clean the soccer field. He grew  
448 up here with us (Carla's field notes).

449 Tim, Newton and Carla agreed that Kleiton was an important person in the project.  
450 So, at the end of the training session Carla tried to talk to Coach Anthony, again. They spoke  
451 for half an hour about what had happened and the importance of Kleiton to the project. Coach  
452 Anthony shared the notion that Kleiton was important to the project, but he didn't change his  
453 decision that day.

454 Two days later Kleiton was sitting on the wall waiting to talk to Carla. Tim had asked  
455 Kleiton to come and talk to Carla. Kleiton came in her direction and Tim suddenly said:  
456 "Carla, Coach Anthony said that Kleiton could come back if he apologizes to the group. Talk  
457 to him, Carla. He is overreacting, and he doesn't want to apologize". It was at least a half  
458 hour conversation between Tim, Kleiton and Carla. Newton, Peter, Peter's father and Leon  
459 also tried to convince Kleiton he should apologize. In that moment, everybody came together  
460 as a community in the hope of trying to encourage Kleiton to come back to the project.

461 According to Carla, this was one of most unforgettable moments in the project.

462 Kleiton came by, walking with his head down, and he sat on the field's wall, waiting for the

463 end of the training session. Anthony did not talk to Kleiton while the youth were playing.  
464 Carla didn't know if Kleiton would be able to apologize to the youth. He seemed so  
465 uncomfortable. Peter's father said: "Let's all sit, boys, because Kleiton wants to say  
466 something to us". Carla had never seen the youth so silent. Kleiton said: "I would like to  
467 apologize to you guys. I was wrong to swear at Coach Anthony last game. I was wrong". A  
468 hug between Kleiton and Anthony symbolized the return of Kleiton to the group. This  
469 episode was central to the youth understanding about how mistakes were places for learning.

470 The next week, Carla asked to the youth to give her some examples of how they were  
471 "learning from mistakes" in the leadership program.

472 *Leon:* I was talking to Kleiton about that, Carla. He has learned from his mistake. In  
473 the last game, he made a mistake, and he has learned from that.

474 *Carla:* Do you think this is related to the leadership program?

475 *Leon:* Yes, I think so (Youth work session 16).

476 In the next coaches' work session Anthony talked about Kleiton's case.

477 *Coach Antony:* My attitude was forgiveness. How can I teach my students if I am not  
478 able to forgive? Kleiton apologized to the group and it was very difficult for him to  
479 do. I don't know if I will have consequences in my next training sessions because of  
480 this. I don't know if I'll lose the control of the boys. However, he is a boy that I  
481 cannot abandon. He is part of the project. As an educator, I could not discard him.

482 When Tim came to me, my first reaction was that he could not interfere in my  
483 decision. However, Kleiton is part of the project, and Tim helped me to see that.

484 Kleiton has many problems in his family environment. I also know that I have lost my  
485 head in the game. I also swore at Kleiton. Coaches make mistakes, and I could learn  
486 from my mistake, too (Coaches' work session 17).

This vignette supports the validity of the learning aspiration “learning from mistakes” and exemplifies a situation of how it worked. Anthony realized that in Kleiton’s case he needed to give him an opportunity to apologize and to learn from his mistake. This act affected all the youth insofar as everyone learned from Kleiton’s mistake. This was an opportunity to say to Kleiton that his behavior was unacceptable, and if he wanted to come back, he had to apologize. In addition, the learning aspiration of learning from mistakes, becoming responsible/committed was also present. We see this when Leon and Peter helped us to convince Kleiton to apologize to the youth. Everybody worked together to help Kleiton apologize, and in doing so several people showed Kleiton that they cared for his wellbeing.

“Learning from mistakes” was the second learning aspiration that emerged in the leadership program. What happened with Kleiton gave everybody an opportunity to learn from his mistake. Coach Anthony realized that “coaches also make mistakes” and he described that he learned from his mistakes as well. According to the coaches, this event challenged the assumption that coaches are the authority that guides all training decisions and thus they are never wrong.

### **Vignette 3 “A Magical Moment: Let’s Put the Coaches and the Boys Together”: Valuing Each Other’s Knowledge**

Twelve weeks into the study a magical moment happened. Carla was apprehensive and she arrived 40 minutes before the first combined work session with the youth and coaches. In the previous week, Carla had been talking with Kim and she helped her prepare herself for this meeting. Kim tried to calm her down by saying that our goal would be to keep doing exactly what we were doing. Carla organized the chairs in a circle. Robin, one of the younger youth, came to the meeting. He was wearing a uniform and was preparing to play. As soon as Robin realized that there was not a training session, he decided to join in the meeting with Carla.

Carla and Kim's goal for the meeting was to bring together the ideas from the work sessions with the youth and the coaches. Carla started by asking the coaches and the youth to share their experiences thus far in the leadership program.

*Coach Anthony:* The leadership program gives me more freedom in the training sessions. I have almost 40 kids in the same training session, and the leaders helped me so much. You cannot imagine, guys. You guys organized the younger kids. So, I could notice things that I could not pay attention to without you guys.

*Noel:* I think the younger kids listened to us. They respected us. It's so nice to feel this power.

*Coach Neo:* These leaders have also stopped messing up their training sessions. As leaders, they have showed very good behavior. Congratulations, guys!

*Coach Rian:* I think this example is very important, Neo. If you guys have a positive attitude, the small kids who usually use bad words would stop. This might transform the environment of the training sessions. This might transform how people value you guys in your community.

*Coach Maria:* I think those are values that you can bring to your life, guys. The small kids could be inspired by you boys, think about it.

*Coach Anthony:* Let me give an example of how this is relevant, boys. When we asked the small kids if they knew anyone older in the project, they pointed out exactly who is here now, you boys: "the leaders". That means you can influence the small kids' lives. They know you. You guys have the power to make changes. We are just helping you guys (Combine coaches and youth work session 1).

When we put together multiple points of view in a collaborative/activist study, the participants started "valuing each other's knowledge" (Fine, 2007; Freire, 1987). At the end of data collection, the coaches and the youth were asked what they learned in the leadership

program. Coach Anthony said that he learned a lot from the youth. The coaches said that they had learned to value the youth's knowledge. Garcia, one of the youth leaders, said that he learned a lot from the small kids as well as Coach Anthony. The coaches and the youth discussed how they were able to learn from one another. This may have happened because activist studies require multiple points of view and create spaces where everyone can learn. When students are engaged in a project in their communities and participate in the co-construction of the program, teachers find that not only are their students learning but they themselves are also learning (Freire, 1987). This process might create roles and interaction opportunities that change adult perceptions of young people as well as young people's self-perceptions (Cook-Sather, 2002).

#### **Vignette 4 "How Can I Talk With Low Skilled Kids, Coach?": Communicating With Others**

The youth started the leadership program by helping the coaches to prepare the soccer field, being referees in games, and helping to take care of the younger children. However, at the beginning of the leadership program, the necessity to help the low skilled children emerged. Helping the low skilled children was considered most valuable by the coaches and demanded a great deal of responsibility. At the beginning of the leadership program, the youth had started to realize that they were not showing sensitivity to the children who lacked soccer skills. For example, they talked about Breno, a boy who was commonly the last one to be picked for the youth in their training sessions:

*Garcia:* Hey guys, I think the leader cannot say: "You're playing sucks".

*Noel:* But that is what happens in our training sessions with Breno.

*Leon:* Breno plays for pleasure.

*David:* Yes, he just plays to wear the uniform. He is the last one to be picked.

*Noel:* He misses a lot of training sessions, right?



562 *Carla:* Don't you think that he is missing a lot of training sessions because he is  
563 always the last one to be picked?

564 *Garcia:* That is true. I always think, Oh my God! I only have Breno left to choose for  
565 my team. Oh my God!

566 *Carla:* How about if these guys improve? If these boys improve, they could help the  
567 whole team too, right? (Youth work session 11).

568 As soon as the youth started the leadership program, their vision of the low skilled  
569 children started to change. They began to discuss in their work sessions how they should  
570 work with these children in order to help them improve their skills.

571 *David:* We should give positive feedback to the low skilled kids.

572 *Carla:* I agree David. For example, in the last training session Robin touched the ball  
573 three times in a game of 20 minutes. Every time I celebrated with him, do you  
574 remember?

575 *Hildo:* Three times? Oh my God! That is too bad.

576 *Leon:* The problem is that nobody passes the ball to him. I think the leader should ask  
577 the other kids on his team to pass the ball to Robin.

578 *Noel:* The leader could help Robin also to position himself on the soccer field.

579 *Leon:* We could get the kids like Robin to do some exercises, like pass or kick, in a  
580 separate place. I think it could help them. At least, they would touch the ball more  
581 times (Youth work session 13).

582 In the process of helping the low skilled children many challenges emerged for the  
583 youth leaders. The youth reported that their main difficulty was their abilities to communicate  
584 effectively.

585 *Carla:* How did you help the low skilled kids in the last week? How did you manage  
586 that?

587           *Noel*: I didn't.

588           *Garcia*: I also did not. The kids did not understand what I said. The coach said most  
589 of the things I wanted to say.

590           *David*: They didn't know what offside meant, for example. It is a complex rule and  
591 they don't know that.

592           *Noel*: I tried to help with the kids' positions, but it was so messy. They were running  
593 everywhere. So crazy!

594           *Leon*: They stopped and they listened to me, but it seemed they did not understand  
595 anything I said.

596           *Peter*: They did not listen to me.

597           *Leon*: But you, Peter, talked to the kids in a stupid way. You said "kick the ball,  
598 asshole". That's why they didn't listen to you.

599           *Noel*: Nobody respects a leader who speaks like a stupid guy, like an animal.

600           *Garcia*: The coaches should help us to find a way to talk to these kids (Youth work  
601 session 14).

602           The youth were looking for ways of being responsible and being able to communicate  
603 in ways that were effective with the small children. Cuss words were not an effective  
604 communication style and the youth began to realize this as they worked in leadership roles.  
605 This particular opportunity allowed them to learn to communicate in different ways. Across  
606 the leadership program the youth improved in their abilities to communicate with the younger  
607 children. The youth also began to realize that it was necessary to have good communication  
608 with the coach as well: "Today I am the leader. How can I help, coach?"

609           In later meetings, Kleiton and David reminded us that we also needed to speak with  
610 Tim. Tim had all the keys to open the doors in the facility. They said "Tim is always drunk,  
611 and it is so hard to talk to him sometimes". To help the small children's training sessions it

was necessary for the youth leaders to communicate effectively with many people, including Tim. At the end of the leadership program, Peter's father said: "I will talk as a father. My son has changed a lot since this leadership program has started. Peter has changed his behavior in our house; especially, he has changed the way he talks to his mother, how he talks to people".

'Communicating with others' was the last learning aspiration that emerged as the leadership program unfolded. It happened mainly when the leaders started to help the coach's work with the children who lacked soccer skills. For example, they identified that swearing was not an effective communication style. The youth identified that to be able to help the younger children; they had to respect all ability levels.

### Discussion

This study was a two-phase activist research project aimed at co-creating a prototype pedagogical model for working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds in a sport context. The first phase was the development of the key theme and critical elements (Luguetti et al., 2015, 2016). The five critical elements (student-centered pedagogy, inquiry-based education centered *in action*, ethic of care, attentiveness to the community, and a community of sport) provided a patchwork of practice that formed the basic architecture of the prototype model. In this paper, we described what emerged when we worked collaboratively to create opportunities for the youth to begin to negotiate some of the barriers they identified.

When the five critical elements were combined and used in the soccer project, four learning aspirations emerged with this group of youth and their coaches. First, the youth became more responsible and committed when they had opportunities to be leaders. Second, participants learned that mistakes were areas for learning and growth. Third, participants learned to value different people's knowledge. Finally, the youth learned to communicate more effectively. The leadership program offered the youth an additional day each week to work in the soccer project, thus allowing them to manage what they identified as a serious

risk (the life of crime). While it may seem that merely adding one day per week for the youth to engage in the sport program was insignificant, what is important to remember when working in activist approaches is that transformation begins at the micro level—small steps toward changing oppressive practices make a difference over time (Cook-Sather, 2002; Oliver et al., 2009).

We believe that pedagogical models developed through activist approaches will always have learning aspirations that are context specific rather than pre-determined. In contrast to the pre-determined learning outcomes that currently dominate pedagogical models in sport contexts (Ennis et al., 1999; Fuller et al., 2013; Hastie & Buchanan, 2000; Hellison, 2010; Holt, 2008; Walsh, 2008), we use the term learning aspirations because what is possible to learn with youth will vary depending on the youth involved (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013). This is what makes our prototype model conceptually different from other pedagogical models. That is, the learning aspirations that emerge through the implementation of the critical elements, will depend on the needs of the youth involved, the context where the work is implemented, and which areas of social vulnerability are negotiated. Thus we think the term learning aspirations is more consistent with an activist approach because it suggests less prescription and more possibility. The notion of learning aspiration may also be more consistent with the co-construction of pedagogical models.

In order to realize the possible learning aspirations, we had to negotiate two challenges that threatened our abilities to integrate the critical elements into the sport project. These included the adults' lack of trust in the youth, and the incommensurability between the culture of sport in Brazil and the articulated goals of the sport project to address the needs of youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds. What we think is important as we consider this process is that we must be cognizant of challenges that emerge as a result of taking an activist approach.

Our first challenge was a result of our efforts to work in student-centered ways. The lack of trust in the youth that the coaches initially felt could have prevented them from allowing the youth to work as leaders, thus preventing the transformative possibilities that emerged. Many of these assumptions emerged out of the fear about how the youth would or would not respond to being put in positions that required responsibility and maturity. This basic lack of trust in young people has developed through adults' need to control youth and to view them as passive recipients of what others determine is education (Cook-Sather, 2002, 2006). Kim's structural support was essential for the coaches and Carla to understand that in order to co-create a leadership program using an activist approach, we would need to trust the youth to be both responsible and mature.

The second challenge we experienced was the incommensurability between the culture of sport in Brazil and the articulated goals of the sport project for addressing the needs of youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds. This happened when the coordinators of the sport program were trying to influence the coaches by demanding that "winning" should be the main objective of the project. Although the project was run by a non-governmental organization and had as its mission to "promote and democratize access to educational sport", the coordinators insisted that "winning" would be the best way to bring more kids to the project. According to the youth, they were playing soccer to "have fun", "meet friends," and to "avoid a life of crime", reasons beyond "winning the competitions." Further, the coaches were engaged in the project because they believed in the value that sport could bring to youth from socially vulnerable areas. If we are going to succeed in developing a pedagogical model in a sport context, particularly in a sport that has important cultural significance, we will have to negotiate the value of "winning". Even though competition is an essential element in a sport context, an activist approach should challenge authoritarian visions that winning should be the most important part of a sport program.

We believe there is another important distinction in this work. Our prototype pedagogical model was developed in an informal education, as opposed to a formal school, setting. This allowed for transformation to be realized more clearly because we were not having to also negotiate educational institutions. Informal educational settings can be considered a land of freedom in comparison to formal education because young people choose to participate (Hellison, 2010; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2012). Sports in informal settings might allow youth to see a different path from the reality of their community, provide a place to recharge their hearts, allow them to rediscover secret emotions, and offer a place where it is possible to feel protected and dream about a different future. In addition, sport might be a vehicle for critically understanding the reality in which these young people live and a place to minimize the distorted relationship between youth and the institutions of society. This is important in countries like Brazil where formal education lacks quality (Almeida, 2000). For example, only 59% of Brazilian youth complete middle school, and 40% complete high school (Almeida, 2000). Thus the importance of informal educational opportunities is even greater in countries like Brazil. We suspect this type of model will be most effective outside of school contexts but this will be something we want to explore further.

We consider this prototype pedagogical model a first step in the development of a pedagogical model of sport that meets the needs of youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds. Areas for future study include applying this prototype pedagogical model again in the same context to see if the critical elements hold up and how the learning aspirations might be different. Further studies could be done in other socially vulnerable contexts and in different sport projects to see if the key theme and the critical elements can be refined and consolidated. Once we have a more robust understanding of the critical elements, we plan to begin working with coaches to help them implement the pedagogical model in their work with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds.

**What Does This Article Add?**

But one does not liberate people by alienating them. Authentic liberation - the process of humanization - is not another deposit to be made in men [sic]. Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it... Those truly committed to liberation must reject the banking concept in its entirety, adopting instead a concept of women and men as conscious beings, and consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world (Freire, 1987, pp. 79).

Paulo Freire wrote on the possibilities of teaching based on “an authentic liberation”: the capacity to understand the world in order to transform it. In this paper, we incorporated his conception of teaching by offering an activist approach for working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds in a sports context. In contrast to pro-social behavior based approaches described in the literature, we argue that sport can be a vehicle for “an authentic liberation”; assisting youth to identify, critique and transform barriers they identify as problematic to their participation in sport.

Our activist approach to developing this prototype pedagogical model (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013; Luguetti et al, 2015, 2016) allowed us to identify the barriers to safe and healthy lives the youth face, recognize realistic places within in sport where these barriers could be challenged, and work collaboratively to create transformative possibilities. This study suggests that if our intent is to use sport as a vehicle to help youth manage risk, than we must start from young people’s concrete needs and life situations.

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