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This is the Accepted version of the following publication

Luguetti, Carla and Oliver, KL (2019) ‘I became a teacher that respects the kids’ voices’: challenges and facilitators pre-service teachers faced in learning an activist approach. Sport, Education and Society. ISSN 1357-3322

The publisher’s official version can be found at https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13573322.2019.1601620
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‘I became a teacher that respects the kids’ voices’: Challenges and facilitators pre-service teachers faced in learning an activist approach

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‘I became a teacher that respects the kids’ voices’: Challenges and facilitators pre-service teachers faced in learning an activist approach

Several studies demonstrate the benefits of educating for social justice in physical education teacher education programs (O’Sullivan, 2018; Philpot, 2015; Walton-Fisette & Sutherland, 2018), which supports that pre-service teachers (PSTs) have the capacity to be active agents of change. In working with social justice, PSTs engage in what can be a very personal struggle with their own stereotypes and assumptions about the people they are working with (Oliver et al., 2015).

Although the challenges that PSTs faced to learn an activist approach to teaching are described in the literature, there is little research that aims to understand how these challenges progress across time. The aim of this study is to explore the challenges pre-service teachers faced when learning to use an activist approach across time. Participatory action research framed this 3-semester study (18 months). Participants included 10 pre-service-teachers, 90 youth, and two researchers. Data collected included: (a) collaborative PSTs group meetings; (b) PSTs reflective diaries after each teaching episode; (c) lead researcher observations collected as field notes; (d) PSTs generated artifacts; and (e) PSTs interviews and focus groups. Data analysis involved inductive and constant comparison. Results conveyed: (a) the PSTs’ assumptions about what student-centered pedagogy meant and the challenges of overcoming their misconceptions about teaching and learning; and (b) the PST’s struggles in coming to understand themselves as activist teachers, with dispositions as advocates of social justice.

Future studies should continue to explore the challenges and facilitators PSTs face when learning an activist approach aimed at empowering both students and teachers to develop a critically conscious understanding of their relationships with the world through their effort to name and change the world together.

Keywords: sport; empowerment; activist approaches; social justice; participatory action research; PETE; critical pedagogy; student-centered pedagogy

Over the past four decades, a history of research conducted on social justice, critical pedagogies and physical education teacher education has develop (Fitzpatrick, 2018;
O’Sullivan, 2018; Walton-Fisette & Sutherland, 2018). This research posits that pre-service teachers (PSTs) have the capacity to be active agents of change and engage in transformative pedagogical practices. In this perspective, PSTs recognize the power structures in society that led to inequity and sought to empower students to challenge and change those inequities (O’Sullivan, 2018). Critical education cannot be reduced to a teaching method or transmission of knowledge as in a ‘banking education’ perspective (Freire, 1987); but rather should be viewed as an educational philosophy where a teacher concerned with questions of justice, democracy and ethics creates spaces for social change (Giroux, 2011; Hill et al., 2018; O’Sullivan, 2018).

Over the years, researchers have investigated practices of critical pedagogies in Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) programs (Hill et al., 2018; Philpot, 2015; Shelley & McCuaig, 2018). Philpot (2015) explored how six PSTs, teaching in a PETE program in Australia, understood and enacted critical pedagogy. This study demonstrated a commitment to social justice from all of the PSTs, despite differences in their understandings of critical pedagogy. Further, these differences revealed each teacher educator’s own valued theoretical perspectives, and manifested themselves in teaching practices within the PETE program.

Hill et al. (2018) sought to map variations in definition and conceptualization of social justice in PETE programs in Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the US. Most frequently, the participants articulated a humanist approach to social justice by encouraging their PSTs to have awareness of equality of opportunity in relation to gender, sexuality, and/or racism. Less prevalent, was the importance of taking action for democracy, empowerment, or critical reflection. The authors concluded that the range of non-critical concepts found raised concern that PSTs were not getting the tools required to tackle sociocultural issues.
Shelley and McCuaig (2018) presented one PETE educator’s use of critical pedagogy as a strategy for confronting social injustice and socio-cultural issues within an Australian Health PETE program. Their paper argued that the approaches for social justice pedagogy offer a more nuanced rationale for, and appropriate alignment with, the pedagogical strategies employed. The authors suggested that disrupting PSTs’ values and knowledge through critical pedagogies continues to be an unpredictable and dangerous project.

Although we have a body of research on social justice and critical pedagogy in PETE, there is much to learn about how best to support PSTs in foregrounding issues of equity and justice in their own teaching (O’Sullivan, 2018; Philpot, 2015; Shelley & McCuaig, 2018). For example, while PSTs may be told that they need to empower students to actively engage in their education, they usually have little experience of living this student voice rhetoric during their PETE experience (Enright et al., 2017; Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013).

Rethinking high education as a practice of freedom: challenges to conceptualizing and practicing critical pedagogy

There is little interest in understanding the pedagogical foundation of higher education as a deeply civic and political project that provides conditions for individual autonomy and takes liberation and the practice of freedom as a collective goal (Giroux, 2011, p.154)

According to Giroux (2011), higher education has been hostage to market-driven modes of accountability where faculty are increasingly deprived of power. This mode of ideology and teaching, called neoliberal pedagogy, stifles critical thought, reducing citizenship to the act of consuming, defining certain marginal populations as contaminated and disposable, and removing the discourse of democracy (Giroux, 2011).

In this paradigm, undergraduate students are educated primarily to acquire rote learning,
memorization, and high-stake testing, producing an atmosphere of student passivity and
teacher routinization. Faculties are reduced to a class of technicians and students as
mere recipients of the forms of banking education (Freire, 1987, 1996).

Unlike dominant modes of authoritarian pedagogy in high education, critical
pedagogy presupposes a notion of a more socially just world by offering the students
ways to think critically and act in the world, encouraging human agency (Freire, 1987,
1996). According to Paulo Freire, education is a practice of freedom that must expand
students’ capacities for agency by naming, critical reflection, and acting on the worlds
in which we live (Freire, 1987). Critical pedagogy attempts to understand how power
works within particular institutional contexts and seeks to constitute students as social
agents (Freire, 1996, 2005). It means to educate students to become critical agents who
actively question and negotiate relationships between theory and practice, critical
analysis and common sense, and learning and social change (Giroux, 2011).

Critical pedagogy in high education opens up a space to engage students in an
open dialogue that ‘frame their own relationship to the ongoing project of an unfinished
democracy’ (Giroux, 2011, p.157). It provides students with skills and knowledge to
question the assumptions that legitimize the disempowering social practices and then
take responsibility for intervening in the world: a language of critique and hope (Freire,
1987, 1996, 2005). Hope for Freire is a practice of moral imagination that enables
teachers and students to think otherwise in order to act otherwise in the interest of
justice, equality and freedom (Giroux, 2011).

There are a number of challenges that teachers and students might face when
engaging in critical pedagogy in high education. First, they may be uncomfortable with
the necessary change in power relations that results from the necessity of a more
democratic pedagogical process (Bovill et al., 2011; Enright et al., 2017; Fitzpatrick,
2018; Luguetti & Oliver, 2018; Oliver et al., 2015). It challenges conventional conceptions of learners as subordinate to the expert lecturer in engaging with what is taught and how (Bovill et al., 2011). Educators and pre-service teachers need to break down the power differential between them, experiencing the freedom to become critical thinkers and critical beings in the world (Freire, 2005). In addition to this, educators and pre-service teachers need to learn that listening to and trusting young people are valuable and important skills (Oliver et al., 2015). In that sense, educators and pre-service teachers need to be aware about reproducing power relationships (Mcintyre, 2006; Nygreen, 2006). According to Nygreen (2006), divisions of race, gender, class, and age are often reproduced within collaborative groups, no matter how sincere the attempt to equalize power between teacher and students.

Second, educators and pre-service teachers must be prepared to engage in what can be a very personal struggle with their own stereotypes and assumptions about the people they are working with (Mcintyre, 2006; Oliver et al., 2015). For example, according to McIntyre (2006), pre-service teachers working in socially vulnerable areas believe that hard work and merit lead to success regardless of the social and cultural contexts and that the researcher is the authority figure and the participants are the recipients of his/her knowledge. This ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy: a binary position where white student (us) believe that they need to ‘help’ people from socially vulnerable background (them) reifies the myth that the students are white knights whose mission is to ‘save’ the poor and the downtrodden (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Mcintyre, 2006).

While advocacy for critical pedagogy and education for social justice has grown exponentially over the years, there is little research that aims to understand how educators conceptualize and practise critical pedagogy over time. This paper addresses
this research gap and advances these issues through exploring the challenges pre-service teachers face when learning to use an activist sport approach across time.

Methods

This study was a participatory action research (PAR) project. PAR supports the belief that knowledge is rooted in social relations, and it is more powerful when produced collaboratively through action (Fine, 2007; Freire, 1987, 1996).

Context and participants

The project took place in a University in Guarujá, Brazil. Guarujá is an urban, coastal and tourist city and has high rates of income inequality. The University is located in a socially and economically disadvantaged neighborhood in the city. The lead author, lecturer in the University, contacted the coordinator of a Physical Education teaching degree in the University and explained the objectives and methodology of the research. In 2017, the University coordinator agreed to start a sport project called ‘Sport and Empowerment’. The project’s mission was to ‘promote and democratize access to educational sport aimed at empowering young people’. We invited young people from two schools in the University’s neighborhood to participate in this project. The young people came after school in the University to work with the pre-service teachers. This project was connected with the University in Guarujá and its PETE program.

The project was a partnership between the University and two schools aimed at creating spaces of empowerment for young people and pre-service teachers. All youth and pre-service teachers were invited to participate in the research. 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 2.258.880). All pre-service teachers signed informed consent.
The study involved approximately 90 young people in total, divided in 16 youth ages 9-13 (9 boys and 7 girls – semester 1), 35 youth ages 7-13 (20 boys and 15 girls – semester 2), and 64 youth ages 7-13 (36 boys and 28 girls – semester 3). In addition, 10 pre-service teachers in total (6, 5 and 10 in the first, second and third semester, respectively) were part of the study. The PSTs (five women and five men) were in the third or fourth semesters at the beginning of the project of a Physical Education teaching degree. The PSTs ages ranged from 18-35 years and had no previous experience with activist teaching approaches.

The lead author (Carla) was also part of the study. She was a 34-year-old middle class Brazilian lecturer with 6 years of experience using activist teaching approaches in a variety of physical activity settings in and out of schools in both Brazil and the US. Her PhD research was an activist study using an activist approach with boys from socially vulnerable backgrounds in a sport context (see Luguetti et al., 2017a, 2017b). The second author (Kim), an expert in activist approaches for more than 24 years (see Oliver et al., 2015), served as a peer debriefer and assisting with progressive data analysis.

**Activist sport approaches**

Over the last four years, we have developed an activist sport approach with and for youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds (Luguetti et al., 2017a, 2017b; Luguetti & Oliver, 2018). The approach was designed as a means of listening and responding to youth in order to use sport as a vehicle for assisting them in becoming critical analysts of their communities and developing strategies to manage the risks they face. This activist approach combines student centered pedagogy, inquiry-based learning centered in action, an ethic of care, attentiveness to the community, and a community of sport as key (or non-negotiable) critical elements (Luguetti et al., 2017a, 2017b). The key theme
of this activist approach is to co-construct empowering learning possibilities through sport with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds\(^1\).

The implementation of the activist approach to teaching lasted 18 months across 3 academic semesters (2017/2018). Youth participated in sports twice a week for one hour each day (total of 84 classes). The lead author was responsible for the learning activities with the youth in the first semester (23 classes) while the PSTs were observing and participating with the young people. In the second and third semesters (33 and 28 classes, respectively), the lead author was observing and offering feedback while the PSTs were responsible for the learning activities with the youth.

A Student-Centered Inquiry as Curriculum (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013) approach was used both as a process of working with the PSTs and youth as well as serving as a framework for data collection. This process includes Building the Foundation Phase followed by a four-phase cyclical process of Planning, Responding to Students, Listening to Respond, and Analyzing Responses (Activist Phase) as the basis of all content and pedagogical decisions.

Building the Foundation Phase took place over 6 weeks and was designed with the intent of identifying what facilitated and hindered the youth’ engagement in sport (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013). Carla and the PSTs started by inquiring into what the youth liked/disliked, their perceptions of school and family, their opinions about the training sessions, and barriers to sport participation they encountered in both the program and their community as a whole. In that phase we also worked in order to broaden their perspective in terms of sport. For example, the youth experienced different types of sports and games.

\(^1\)For more information regarding the schedule of tasks with youth see Luguetti et al. (2017a).
Given what we learned during *Building the Foundation Phase*, Carla and the PSTs co-created and implemented with the youth an *Activist Phase*. In this 8-week *Activist Phase* started from things that the youth saw as important if they were going to develop strategies for negotiating the barriers they identified. In each semester we developed a different action based on the barriers the youth identified. *Planning* involved the weekly meetings between the pre-service teachers and Carla. *Listening to Respond* involved the strategies Carla and the PSTs were using to inquiry the youth’s perceptions about the training sessions and barriers they face in sport context. *Responding to Students* involved the creation of training sessions that bridged what Carla and the PSTs were learning from the youth. *Analyzing the Responses* involved the debriefing and analysis of data between the Carla and the PSTs as well as Carla and Kim following the PSTs weekly meetings.

**Data gathering**

Data collection spanned an 18 month period and included:

(a) *Collaborative PSTs group meetings* (63 meetings). The structure of the meetings created an environment for PSTs to engage in conversations about their experiences using an activist approach in their teaching. All PSTs group meetings were audio recorded and transcribed (total of 568 pages).

(b) *PSTs reflective diaries*. The students completed diary entries after every class for the 84 classes across the 3 semesters. A total of 257 PSTs reflective diary entries were completed during the period of the study. Diary entries were based around writing cues about student’s engagement and teachers’ behavior.

(c) *Lead researcher observations through field notes*. Carla wrote field notes/observations after each class (total of 78 pages) about challenges and enablers
arising during teaching sessions. This data was used to inform the weekly collaborative
group meeting discussions.

(d) PSTs generated artifacts. All PSTs generated artifacts were collected, such
as lesson plans, summaries of data collected from the youth, and shared materials on
social media, such as Facebook and WhatsApp (total of 189 pages).

(e) PSTs interviews and focus groups. Two 20-minute interviews (second
semester) and two 30-minute interviews focus groups (third semester). The focus
groups were based on the challenges and facilitators they faced in learning to use an
activist approach. The interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded for verbatim
transcription (total of 81 pages).

Data analysis

Data analysis involved four steps and was approached through an inductive lens
(Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, Carla read all data sets and engaged in the process of
coding aimed at capturing the challenges and facilitators PSTs faced in learning an
activist approach to teaching. Through this inductive analysis, statements and ideas
were developed as data was read and re-read. The second process of analysis involved
constant comparison. Data were grouped and placed into categories and moved
backwards and forwards until an agreement was reached. The third and final process of
analysis involved Kim. Kim engaged in a process of checking the interpretations. Carla
and Kim discussed the codes she had identified in relation to the research questions.
Kim added credibility to the analysis by challenging the interpretations of the coded
data and the construction of themes. In this phase, data was moved between different
themes until a level of agreement was reached. Two challenges emerged from the data:
a) the PSTs’ assumptions about what student-centered pedagogy meant and the
challenges of overcoming their misconceptions about teaching and learning; b) the
PST’s struggles in coming to understand themselves as activist teachers. Pseudonyms are used throughout to refer to the PSTs. For the presentation of results, direct quotes have been translated into English.

Findings

Two main challenges were encountered in PSTs’ learning to use an activist approach across time. The first involved the PSTs’ assumptions about what student-centered (SC) pedagogy meant and the challenges of overcoming their misconceptions about teaching and learning. The second challenge involved the PST’s struggles in coming to understand themselves as activist teachers, with dispositions as advocates of social justice. In this section we describe how these two challenges emerged and how we worked with our PST’s to negotiate their experiences.

‘For me to begin to understand this approach took almost the whole year’:

Challenging PSTs’ assumptions about SC pedagogy and their misconceptions about teaching and learning

The first challenge that emerged in PSTs’ learning to use an activist approach were their assumptions about SC pedagogy. In the first and second semesters the PSTs described that they believed SC pedagogy was based on what young people ‘like’ and the idea of ‘camouflaging’ their pedagogy (tricking the kids to do what the PSTs wanted them to do):

Carla: What happened last class?

Roberta: I think they kept talking a lot... They are not seeing us as a teacher... we cannot control them.

Carla: I was able to observe that, too. And I don’t think that everyone likes their behaviour... they are annoying themselves. I'm also not saying that we want them all to be silent and in control... And based on that, I've prepared a lesson for us to create a
safe class environment with them. Instead of deciding rules, we will invite them to
create ways of working.

Rodrigo: So it's actually a way to camouflage the rules? For them not to think that this
thing would be serious, right?

Carla: It's not quite camouflage. Inviting them to create an emotionally and physically
safe class environment is related to co-responsibility, empowerment… It is a way of
making them co-participants in ways of acting with us (Semester 1, Collaborative group
meeting 11).

During the first semester, the PSTs did not understand the value of co-
constructing a class environment with the kids. Carla explained to them that by creating
ways of working instead of rules we could invite the kids to participate in creating their
class environment. However, most of the PSTs believed that SC pedagogy would allow
the teachers to camouflage the rules in order to manipulate the kids into doing what they
wanted them to do. The PSTs believed that by ‘camouflaging’ the rules they would
‘control kids’ behavior’, tricking them to behave in ways the PSTs wanted.

Camouflaging the rules was one way the PST’s sought to be student centered. A
second was in doing what the kids ‘liked’ by creating an ‘easy and fun’ class.

Rodrigo: A SC class is like our aim in the project. We always ask them: ‘what can we
do to improve the class? Or what do you like?’ So, we planned a class based on what
they want, and we modified the class in a way that everyone played, that everyone
participated.

Roberta: In SC pedagogy the goal is always to think of a lesson that is very easy for the
kids. In our group we have a lot of age difference and there are some students with
disabilities. So, it has to be an easy lesson and a very fun class. (Semester 2, PSTs
interview 1).

The PSTs described a lot of misperceptions about SC pedagogy. It was clear that
the PSTs struggled to understand that SC pedagogy it is about understanding what
facilitates youth’s interest, motivation and learning and then using this information to
guide their pedagogy (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013). It is not about what kids want or
like. Only one of the PSTs was able to articulate and put in practice what SC pedagogy
meant after two semesters in the project:

Janaina: SC pedagogy it's more or less what we've been doing during the project. We
[Carina and I] try to emphasize in our class not what they want, but what they need. I
did not go to class as a teacher and said, ‘It's going to be like this, like this.’ Together
with the students we decide what is best. For example, the ways of working we create in
our class. We do not have rules in our classes: we decide ways of working with the kids.
We agreed that you cannot disrespect the teacher and that they cannot fight (Semester 2,
PSTs interview 1).

Janaina could articulate what SC pedagogy meant in the middle of the second
semester. She described the importance of using kids’ data to guide her pedagogical
decisions. In Janaina’s view, SC pedagogy was not doing what kids want, but it was
about to identify what facilitate their interest, motivation and learning. Janaina
exemplified it by describing the co-creation of ways of working when she invited the
youth to be co-participants of deciding how create an emotionally and physically safe
environment in her class. We also observed incidents where Janaina created spaces for
students to be co-participants in her class. Co-creating with youth ways of working in
class instead of deciding top-down rules allowed them to be co-responsible for their
own learning. It is essential in this project that has a learning focus to co-construct
empowering possibilities through sport with youth from socially vulnerable
backgrounds (Luguetti et al., 2017a, 2017b). It highlights the importance to work with
the youth in order to better understand how to assist them in ways that foster collective
empowerment (Freire, 1987).
However, the majority of the PSTs were still struggling to understand what SC pedagogy meant after two semesters. It wasn’t until the third semester that the PSTs began to better understand SC pedagogy. They pointed out that time, the contact with students, and the community of learners they created together was essential to their understanding:

Rodrigo: For me to begin to understand this approach took almost the whole year. In the beginning, I didn’t understand a lot of things Carla was doing with the kids... I discovered that the students feel more comfortable in that way and they also take more responsibility.

Nivaldo: The contact with kids made me learn a lot. The students taught me more than I thought I knew… The weekly meetings have helped us a lot. Carla gave us many guidelines, and I ended up having a lot of insights. The meetings made our learning a lot easier because it is what guides us to understand what facilitates student learning (Semester 3, Focus group 1).

The PSTs started to realize that a SC pedagogy challenged their assumptions about teaching and learning (Oliver et al., 2015). Living a SC pedagogy helped them to learn that kids didn’t have to be ‘organized and in control all the time’. In that sense, SC pedagogy would allow students to feel more comfortable in that way and they also would take more responsibility for their own learning. The PSTs also attributed their learning to the contact with young people. They recognized that contact with the young people provided the reflection of who they were as teachers. The PSTs also described the importance of being in a community of learners in order to understand what SC pedagogy meant. They pointed out that the weekly meetings and having new PSTs in the group allowed them to create this socially friendly space to learn; recognizing and valuing everybody’s knowledge.
Although the PSTs could better articulate what SC pedagogy meant in the third semester, they still faced barriers in how to put this pedagogy into practice. For example, Carina and Nivaldo decided to vote on the content in one of their classes.

Carla: In the last class we have identified some aspects that facilitate the students’ learning… such as work in groups, playing small-sided games, and having teachers who engage in dialogue with them. But I’d like to understand why you decided vote on the content for the next class?

Nivaldo: When we did that, we asked one by one and the three most voted content were the ones we chose for the next class. It was very democratic!

Carla: But what is democratic is not necessarily what facilitates their learning. What do you think facilitates their learning?

Nicolas: I think it is invasion and net games because they are more familiar with.

Carina: Gymnastics and martial arts are more difficult.

Carla: But the question here is not just about content. (Semester 3, Collaborative group meeting 9).

Carina and Nivaldo were in the beginning of Activist Phase when they decided to vote on the content. The Activist Phase is designed to co-create a curriculum with the youth based on what facilitates their interesting, motivation and learning. In the Building the Foundation Phase they inquired into what the youth liked/disliked, their perceptions of school and family, their opinions about the training sessions, and barriers to sport participation they encountered in both the program and their community as a whole. In that phase we also worked in order to broaden their perspective in terms of sport. For example, the youth experienced different types of sports and games such as: territory games, net/wall games, striking/fielding games, target games, gymnastics, martial arts and athletics. Given what we learned during Building the Foundation Phase, they co-created and implemented with the youth an Activist Phase. It started
from things that the youth saw as important if they were going to develop strategies for
negotiating the barriers they identified and what facilitated their learning. In the activist
approach, student learning focus on co-construct empowering possibilities through
sport: social learning expectations. In that sense, youth become agents in the process of
transformative learning, seeking opportunities to reframe and re-imagine their sports
experiences (Luguetti et al., 2017a).

In the Building the Foundation Phase, we identified some aspects that facilitate
the students' learning such as work in groups, playing small-sided games, and having
teachers who engage in dialogue with them. Instead of considering those aspects in their
classes, Carina and Nivaldo kept the misconception that SC pedagogy it is about doing
what youth like and voting on activities. It exemplified how the PSTs were still
struggling to use SC pedagogy in the end of the third semester. Although they could
better articulate what this pedagogy meant, they struggled to identify what facilitated
the youth leaning and how to use this knowledge in their planning.

‘I am going to fight for my students’: Coming to understand themselves as activist
teachers

The second challenge the PSTs faced was in coming to understand themselves
as activist teachers. The PSTs had to move from focusing solely on their classroom
management in order to understand their role as social agents whose dispositions
advocate for social justice. In the first two semesters, the PSTs struggled to understand
their role as teacher:

Carla: In the last class we organized a game and I realized that both Jorge and Rodrigo
[two PSTs] started to overtake the game... This was very interesting. What is our role as
a teacher? Because if we want everyone to participate, as a teacher, I think we should
make sure that everyone is participating.
Jorge: I remembered that.

Rodrigo: In fact I was overtaking the game. I am quite competitive.

Carla: It was a very interesting lesson that it seemed that you have forgotten the role of a teacher. And it is not only the girls who were not participating, the non-skilled also did not participate. Rodrigo said few times when the kids missed the pass: ‘are you with butter in your hand?’ (Semester 1, Collaborative meeting 15).

Rodrigo and Jorge had overtaken the game in the first semester showing us an example of how PSTs struggled to understand their role as teacher. In the first semester they were observing Carla and playing with the youth. In the second semester, the PSTs were responsible for the learning activities and Carla was observing them and giving support.

Dani: What was the biggest challenge you faced in learning this approach?

Carina: The biggest challenge was to get more attention from children and young people. They get very off task in class. It is still a challenge for me. …At first I was afraid of what it would be like to be responsible for the lesson. I was afraid it would not work…I was afraid of becoming a teacher and I expected they would not obey me.

Janaina: I faced many challenges in practice. The first challenge was for the kids to see me as a teacher. All of us until then, we were as Carla’s assistants. We participated in all activities with the students, playing and helping Carla. So the students started to see us as their colleagues. In the second semester, Carla said, ‘Now it's with you’. The kids kept asking: ‘Where's the teacher?’

Dani: What do you think facilitated your learning?

Carina: I think we all had patience and we worked in groups… So it was not all for one person to do, all three of us worked together… For example, we had Janaina and the kids listened to Janaina better, so it was easier for her to talk to the kids.
Janaina: I think it was Carla's feedback. Her feedback from the lessons was always sacred... This was what makes it much easier... Another help comes from the teachers, we helped ourselves, and we wanted the project to work (Semester 2, Interview 1).

Janaina and Carina described the struggle they faced in the transition between observing the class and becoming the teacher. This challenge can be highlighted in the Janaina’s interview when she said ‘the kids kept asking: where's the teacher?’ In that sense, the youth also realized the issues with management skills. PST’s described wanting to ‘control the classes’ and they wanted the kids to ‘obey them’. They had to learn how to manage the class environment while simultaneously continuing a SC pedagogy. In this phase, Carla’s structural support and the weekly meetings were essential in order to help the PSTs improve their management skills required for becoming an activist teacher.

In the third semester, the PSTs started to talk about the importance of the youth’s lives. They stopped blaming the young people because they could not ‘control them’ or keep them from being ‘off task’ and started to see the importance of a sport project in a kid’s life.

‘Value’ is the only word that comes to my mind in today's class... And thinking of value, I also thought about the value that a sports class has for a child or young people in situations of social vulnerability. I thought about what a huge difference a simple lesson can make in a kid’s day... I meet Marcelo, a 9-year-old boy in old clothes, a slipper and a shy look. By the time Marcelo arrived in class, I saw that something was wrong. Marcelo was not interacting or playing with the other kids... I went to him and asked, ‘Why do not you come and join us?’ And he told me it was because he did not have tennis shoes to play... So, that's why I started writing about ‘value’... I'm talking here about the value of Marcelo's smile when he discovers he does not need tennis
shoes to attend class… discovered the value of a kid’s smile like Marcelo, the greatest learning of my day (Semester 3, Nivaldo’s diary, Day 1).

Carla: Reading Nivaldo’s diary, I thought a lot about who these kids are.

Rodrigo: They are underserved kids and most of them are not heard. They tell us: ‘our teachers at school do not listen to us.’

Nivaldo: I realize that some of the kids, like Marcelo and Caio are kids who live on streets, they’re very low-class. The other kids do not leave their houses because it is dangerous, a lot of violence in their community. They can only leave school and play on the streets if they have someone watching them.

Rodrigo: Here in the project they have opportunities that they do not have in other spaces. They have access to materials and equipment that they do not have at school.

Nivaldo: They are super happy when they play with different sports equipment!

Carla: And it's important to remember that we do not work with underserved children and young people. We work with children and young people who live in areas of social vulnerability. These children and young people are not underserved, they have knowledge that many of us do not have. They have experienced many things in life that we do not experience. How can we work with empowerment if we believe that they are underserved? So they live in areas with a complexity of problems, but they can and should dream about different futures (Semester 3, Collaborative meeting 4).

The PSTs started to realize that the youth’s behaviors might happen because of the social environment with which they live. The PSTs understood that sport could be a vehicle for assisting these kids in seeing other opportunities in their lives. Although they still called them ‘underserved’ kids, they realized the importance of the sport project in order to give youth’s voice; a way to overcome barriers they face in their communities. According to Freire (1987, 2005), teachers committed to critical pedagogy are motivated by their passion for learning and teaching and their love for others. In that
sense, education occurs ‘when [the teacher] stops making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love’ (1987, p. 35). For it, the teachers need to know ‘the universe of their dreams, the language with which they skillfully defend themselves from the aggressiveness of their world, what they know independently of the school, and how they know it’ (Freire 1998, p. 73). The PSTs described that they learned the importance of prioritizing youth’s voice and valuing their knowledge.

Julia: I take the project as life learning. I learned to listen to the students here… I learned a lot about their lives.

Rodrigo: I became a teacher that respects the kid's voice… I think I’ve learned to care more about my students. I am going to fight for my students… I became a teacher who talks less and lets the students to talk more.

Nivaldo: All this contact with the kids allowed me to learn this pedagogy that is totally different from what I have been learning in the University. It is quite opposite what I have learned in the last four years I am an undergrad student. I have changed a lot since my first contact with the children.

Pedro: I came with that background of being more authoritarian. This project took out a curtain that I had in front of my eyes and showed me a way of teaching where the teacher doesn’t need to be militarist: a way of teaching where the kids have autonomy and voice (Semester 3, Focus Group 2).

The PSTs pointed out how this experience changed them as teachers. They described that they learned the importance of listening to and believing the youth.

Rodrigo learned the teacher's resilience in believing the student: ‘I am going to fight even though he/she does not do anything at all’. Critical Pedagogy is linked to our deep personal commitments to care for, enter into relationships of solidarity with students that supports our humanity (Darder, 2017). In that sense, a liberating education could only with difficulty be conceived without a profound commitment to our humanity and
dialogue (Freire, 2005). The PSTs stopped blaming the young people and learned to believe in them. They also recognized they learned it is possible to create spaces to empower youth. Finally, the affirmed that they intended to continue teaching children and young people respecting their voice and believing that it is possible to create spaces for social transformation.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the challenges and facilitators pre-service teachers (PSTs) faced to learn an activist approach across time. Two main challenges were encountered in PSTs’ learning to use an activist approach across time. The first involved the PSTs’ assumptions about what student-centered pedagogy meant and the challenges of overcoming their misconceptions about teaching and learning. The second challenge involved the PST’s struggles in coming to understand themselves as activist teachers, with dispositions as advocates of social justice. In this section, we discuss: (a) how the PSTs challenged their own stereotypes and assumptions about teaching and learning; (b) an activist approach as a way to rethink higher education as a practice of freedom; and (c) pedagogical implications and future directions.

In order to learn an activist approach, the PSTs had to challenge their assumptions about what student-centered pedagogy meant and stereotypes of the youth they were working with. The PSTs engaged in what it is considered a personal struggle and described in previous studies (Mcintyre, 2006; Oliver et al., 2015). According to Shelley and McCuaig (2018), challenging and disrupting PSTs’ values and knowledge through critical pedagogies continues to be an unpredictable and dangerous project. The challenges still lies in the confoundedness of changing PSTs beliefs and values that, if left unchallenged, allows them to teach in the way that worked for them but ignores the
young people (Oesterreich & Oliver, 2015). PSTs use their pretexts as a filter to interpret their teacher education courses and reinforce rather than challenge prior beliefs and values about teaching, learning and young people (Oesterreich & Oliver, 2015). In order to effectively challenge pretexts, the nature of PSTs experiences must create the spaces for the concrete and conceptual to collide; providing ways of looking at the ‘particulars, individuals, and specific situations’ in localized contexts (Minnich, 1990; Oesterreich & Oliver, 2015).

In this study, the PST’s negotiated these stereotypes and assumptions when they faced a collision between what they thought they knew and what they were experiencing in their work with youth. These collisions created a space for their assumptions about teaching, learning and youth to be challenged and renegotiated. Most of them believed that SC pedagogy was about camouflaging their pedagogy in order to trick the kids into doing what they wanted them to do in the first two semesters. The PSTs also challenged their pretexts about the kids they were working with. They stopped blaming the young people because they could not ‘control them’ or keep them from being ‘off task’ and started to see the importance of a sport project in a youth’s life. They started to understand their role as social agents whose dispositions advocate for social justice. The contact with the kids and the social environment they created, a kind of community, helped them to better understand SC pedagogy and their role as social agents. By taking the time to know this group of young people, the PSTs were provided with multiple opportunities to explore their fears, anxieties, and prejudices and develop strategies to address them in positive and critical ways (Mcintyre, 2006).

In this study we use an activist approach to working with youth that challenges the conventional conception of youth as subordinate to the expert teacher in engaging with what is taught and how it is taught (Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011; Cook-
According to Freire (1987), education is a ‘conscientization’ practice, and is defined as the process of becoming aware of the structural, political and cultural constraints that prevent a group or an individual from exercising autonomy or participating in a democratic society. In this study we offered a way to rethink higher education as a practice of freedom by modeling democratic spaces of reflection. We understood the importance of living this student voice rhetoric during their PETE experience in order to empower students (Enright et al., 2017; Oliver et al., 2015). We experienced an activist approach by way of critically engaging PSTs as active agents of change. It was aimed at empowering both students and teachers to develop a critically conscious understanding of their relationships with the world (Freire, 1987, 2005).

Teacher and students together can develop greater consciousness of the historical process through their effort to name and change the world together (Darder, 2017). In that sense, pedagogy should connect learning to social change, a project that challenges both teacher and students to critically engage with the world so they could act on it (Freire, 2005; Giroux, 2011).

The PSTs described how their experience of living an activist approach changed them as teachers. They had learned a great deal about themselves and the young people they worked with. They discovered that young people are resources for knowledge, growth, and change (Mcintyre, 2006). Rodrigo described: ‘I am going to fight even though he/she does not do anything at all’. They also learned the importance of valuing young peoples’ voice, and caring about their students. According to Freire (1987, 2005), a critical educator or activist teacher has the ‘passion to know’ their students and the environment where they live and in order to do that he/she should have indispensable qualities and virtues such as humility and the courage of love (Darder, 2017; Freire, 2005). Humility requires courage, trust and respect. It helps teachers to recognize that...
we all know something and we all ignore something. Humility helps the teacher to
never let himself/herself to be trapped in the circuit of his/her truth. By the end of three
semesters, the PSTs recognized how much they learned from the kids and they intended
to continue teaching children and young people respecting their voices and believing
that it is possible to create spaces for social transformation. They described: ‘I am a
teacher who talks less and lets the students talk more. I listen to them more.’ In addition
to humility, an activist teacher needs to have the courage of love as a quality (Darder,
2017; Freire, 2005). It means to love the students and the process of teaching,
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teacher who talks less and lets the students talk more. I listen to them more.’ In addition
to humility, an activist teacher needs to have the courage of love as a quality (Darder,
2017; Freire, 2005). It means to love the students and the process of teaching,
discovering how beautiful it is to be involved in the process of educating people. In our
study, the PSTs learned to care more about their students, showing love of being with
their students.

By taking actions that contributed to community, the PSTs gained a new
confidence in themselves as thinkers and doers. We believe that PETE programs could
develop similar relationships with the dynamic communities that support and surround
them. Those of us who work in PETE programs can contribute to developing those
relationships. Many of us have the opportunity to make room in our courses, and our
programs, to initiate ongoing and collaborative relationships with schools and
communities and developing action research (Mcintyre, 2006). It is through those types
of experiences that university students and youth can view one another as genuine
resources and essential stakeholders in teaching and learning experiences (Mcintyre,
2006).

Engaging PSTs in critical perspectives means deeply engaging them in complex
and challenging transformative pedagogies in an attempt to deconstruct their values and
beliefs (Enright et al., 2017; Oliver et al., 2015; Walton-Fisette & Sutherland, 2018). It
is challenging because of the various beliefs, prejudices, and feelings of resistance that
individuals may experience related to these issues (Walton-Fisette & Sutherland, 2018).

For example, it is necessary to create learning opportunities for PSTs to become aware of their own privileges and the realities of others within dominant structures and ideologies (Hill et al., 2018).

This activist approach was small in scale, involving one university-based researcher and a small team of pre-service-teachers. However, it is worth remembering, as Fitzpatrick (2018) mentioned, that critical work is intended to disrupt the status quo, engage in questioning and uncertainty and challenge power relations and in that sense, it will always be somewhat on the margins and micro (Fitzpatrick, 2018). Although this project happened in a socially vulnerable area, this activist approach is not limited to disadvantaged youth; it has a broader application addressing issues of gender, race, ethnicity and social class in different contexts (Luguetti et al., 2017a; Luguetti & Oliver, 2018; Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012; Oliver & Kirk, 2015; Oliver, Hamzeh & McCaughtry, 2009).


Nygreen, K. (2006). Reproducing or challenging power in the questions we ask and the


