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*Towards a pedagogy of love: exploring pre-service teachers' and youth's experiences of an activist sport pedagogical model*

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# **Towards a pedagogy of love: exploring pre-service teachers' and youth's experiences of an activist sport pedagogical model**

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## **Towards a pedagogy of love: exploring pre-service teachers' and youth's experiences of an activist sport pedagogical model**

*Introduction:* Several studies demonstrate the benefits of socially critical work in physical education and sport which value the importance of taking action intended for democracy, empowerment and critical reflection (Devis-devis 2006). An 'ethic of care' has been proposed as a moral basis for socio-critical work, describing caring or love as being the basis for pedagogic dialogue and commitment to young people (Rovegno and Kirk 1995). Although we have a body of research on socially critical pedagogy in physical education and sport that highlights the importance of an ethic of care (eg. Ennis 1999; Hellison 1978), there is little research that aims to explore teachers' and youth's experiences in living this kind of pedagogy. *Purpose:* The aim of this study was to explore both pre-service teachers' and youth's experiences of an activist sport pedagogical model for working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds and to interrogate the way in which a pedagogy of love emerged. *Participants and settings:* Participatory action research framed this 3-semester study (18 months). Participants included 10 pre-service-teachers (PSTs), 90 youths, and a researcher (the lead author). *Data collection/analysis:* Data collected included: (a) lead researcher observations collected as field notes; (b) collaborative PSTs group meetings; (c) PSTs' reflective diaries after each teaching episode; (d) PSTs and youth generated artifacts; and (e) PSTs and youth focus groups and interviews. Data analysis involved induction and constant comparison. *Findings:* A pedagogy of love emerged when we implemented the activist sport pedagogical model across three semesters in a socially vulnerable context with pre-service teachers and youth. First, a pedagogy of love involved repeatedly challenging inequities. Second, it valued solidarity thereby cultivating a learning community. Finally, it fostered hope and imagination in all participants in order to persevere despite barriers. *Implications:* We suggest that the activist sport approach could be considered an holistic approach in which teacher/coach and youth interact affectively (Hellison 1978) and showed profound commitment to humanity, *conscientization* and pedagogic dialogue (Freire 2005).

**Keywords:** sport; activist approaches; participatory action research; pedagogical models; ethic of care

## Introduction and Theoretical Perspectives

Since the mid-1980s, there has been a steady growth of socially critical work that explores how physical education and sport might contribute to, and be shaped by, social, cultural, political, and economic forces (Pringle, Larsson, and Gerdin 2018; Fitzpatrick 2018). The socially critical studies not only established links between what happened in physical education or sport and wider social problems, but also encouraged social action and emancipation (Devis-devis 2006). It has been argued that physical education and sport has been a site of social oppression, but it also can be a medium of empowerment and emancipation through *conscientization* and pedagogic dialogue (Freire 1987; Rovegno and Kirk 1995). Socially critical work has made convincing arguments that empowerment and emancipation are important goals of education where people collectively should work together to create a more just and equitable society (O’Sullivan 2018; Freire 1987). It aims to analyze how unjust conditions are produced and maintained in order to understand, critique, and renegotiate/ transform them (Devis-devis 2006; Walton-Fisette and Sutherland 2018; Felis-Anaya, Martos-Garcia, and Devís-Devís 2018).

In socially critical pedagogy, research has focused on emotion and caring of humans and the environment because an ethic of care and responsibility has been proposed as moral basis for socio-critical work (Devis-devis 2006; Rovegno and Kirk 1995). These authors attempted to show how existing socially critical orientations might be broadened, enhanced, and enriched by giving equal weight to an ethic of care and responsibility in addition to the ethic of justice and emancipation. In that sense, caring has been the central concept of some physical educators and researchers in their work to challenge the status quo and contribute to building a socially just society (Ennis 1999; Hellison 1978).

Most socially critical scholars in physical education and sport have used Nel Noddings concept of ethic of care (Noddings 1984) as the foundation for their interventions (Owens and Ennis 2005). Noddings (1984) explained that the ideal of caring evolves from a natural sympathy that human beings innately feel for each other. In that sense, being in relation to others, caring and being cared for, is a basic reality of human existence: caring is ontologically basic. This can be accomplished as teachers model and nurture an ‘ideal’ of the ethic of care through several activities that includes modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation (Owens and Ennis 2005). Noddings’

suggestion that caring requires continuity, and caring relations seem to be facilitated when the caregiver is embedded in the community or culture (Owens and Ennis 2005).

Ethic of care is understood from many perspectives and scholars from a variety of disciplines have defined care in various ways (Antrop-González and De Jesús 2006; I. Rovegno and Kirk 1995). In recent years, a number of theorists have criticized the White feminist conceptions of caring, and suggested that a new theoretical discussion must begin with a process theory of caring that deepens the conversation and provides insight to the potential complexities and contradictions inherent within caring interactions, interpretations, expressions, and contexts (Antrop-González and De Jesús 2006; Roberts 2010; Sosa-Provencio 2017; Ladson-Billings 2009). They argued that caring should not be colorblind or power blind and that marginalized populations necessarily understand caring within their sociocultural context; preparing young people to challenge the racism, sexism, class exploitation, and linguisticism in their communities. This premise is at the heart of the conceptualization of ‘Critical Care’ (Antrop-González and De Jesús 2006), Critical Feminist Ethic of Care (Sosa-Provencio 2017) or ‘Culturally Relevant Critical Teacher Care’ (Roberts 2010), terms that capture the ways in which marginalized populations may care about and educate their own, and their intentions in doing so (Antrop-González and De Jesús 2006).

The physical education and sport pedagogy literature has demonstrated a growing interest in the pedagogical possibilities of ethic of care (Owens and Ennis 2005; Inez Rovegno and Kirk 1995). However, most of the research in the area considers Nodding’s conception of caring. According to McCuaig (2012), this body of research has considered an ethic of care as ahistorical and acultural. It describes an ostensibly colorblind, apolitical construction of care that risks silencing the multiple identities and ways of knowing that marginalized students embody (Valenzuela 1999). Absent from the physical education and sport pedagogy field is a framework for caring which addresses the specific needs of youth at the intersection of race, ethnicity, class, gender, disability, and language. We propose such a framework is provided by a ‘pedagogy of love’.

### ***Pedagogy as a Freirean Act of Love***

Teachers committed to emancipatory education are motivated by their passion for learning and teaching and their love for others. According to Paulo Freire, education occurs ‘when [the teacher] stops making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love. True solidarity is found only in the plenitude of this act of love’

(1987, 35). In that sense, love became both the means to and the end of Freire's educational project (Schoder 2010). Freire believes in a 'decolonizing love' as the critical concept of ethic of care described by Chicana and Black feminists (Antrop-González and De Jesús 2006; Roberts 2010; Sosa-Provencio 2017; Ladson-Billings 2009). For Freire, it is a love based in pedagogical dialogue, solidarity (commitment to others and commitment to the cause of liberation), hope and imagination.

This love is not a checklist of methods or what Keith (2010) called 'anaemic love', a pedagogy of cordial relations. It is a love that requires ongoing, conscious reflection and action regarding how men and women exist in the world, with the world, and with each other (Schoder 2010). Love is an act of courage, not fear: a commitment to others and to the cause of liberation (Freire 2005; Darder 2017). For Freire, love is an act of bravery, courage, faith, hope, humility, patience, respect, and trust (Freire 1987, 2005). For him, only through such love could pedagogy possibly become transformative and liberating. A pedagogy of love is intimately linked to our deep personal commitments to care for, enter into relationships of solidarity with, students and colleagues that supports our humanity (Darder 2017). It must encompass a deep unwavering commitment to social inclusion and democracy: a revolutionary commitment to transform the oppressive ideologies and practices in education (Freire 1987).

A liberating education could only with difficulty be conceived without a profound commitment to our humanity and dialogue (Freire 2005). According to Freire (1987), dialogue could not exist without a teacher's profound love for the world. Love is not only a basis for dialogue but also a loving commitment to students' and teachers' political dreams. For Freire, teacher's political dreams are equity, inclusion and social justice. In that sense, it is arguably difficult to teach without educators knowing what takes place in their students' world. The educators 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, 73).

In a pedagogy of love, teachers should also stimulate creativity and imagination in their students as well as the capacity to better critique surroundings and, thus, possibly challenge inequity and injustice. It is important to recognize that it is not possible to know the future or how our educational actions might affect our students through critical pedagogy (Kirk, 2019). For example, students might intellectually understand but in the same time they are unable to change structural realities. A

pedagogy of love is a non-linear process and transformation begins at the micro level. Small steps toward changing oppressive practices make a difference over time. It creates levels of agency and freedom.

Liberating teaching and teachers' and students' capacities to dream are strongly linked. The more teachers were willing to struggle for an emancipatory dream, the more they are to know the experience of fear, how to control and educate their fear and, finally, how to transform that fear into courage (Darder 2017).

While advocacy for an ethic of care in socially critical pedagogy in physical education and sport has grown over the years, there is little research that aims to explore people's experiences of living this kind of pedagogy (Fitzpatrick 2018). This paper addresses this research gap and advances these issues through exploring both pre-service teachers' and youth's experiences of an activist sport pedagogical model across three semesters in a socially vulnerable context and demonstrates the ways in which a pedagogy of love emerged. In this study, everyone (the lead author, the PSTs and the youth) was on a learning journey and as such reflecting on their own biases.

## Methodology

This study was a participatory action research (PAR) project. PAR supports the belief that knowledge is rooted in social relations, and more powerful when produced collaboratively through action (Kemmis 2006; Fine 2007; Freire 1987, 1996).

### *Setting and participants*

This research project took place in a University in Guarujá, Brazil. Economic inequality is rife in Guarujá (SEADE 2010). As with many urban areas in Brazil, this inequality is omnipresent and highly visible, as *favelas*<sup>1</sup> are side-by-side with new luxury high-rise structures; poverty and privilege live side by side. In that sense, people in their everyday lives see poverty regardless of whether they are poor or rich. In Guarujá, the permanent protection areas and wetlands were occupied by *favelas*. Many households were settled in this areas of uneven terrain and present characteristics of precarious and semi-precarious households. *Favelas* have rarely had official street names, and the chaotic ad hoc streets are often an impediment to service provision, and police.

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<sup>1</sup> Favelas is a Brazilian shack or shanty town; a slum. It is a unique, low and middle-income, and unregulated neighborhood that has experienced historical governmental neglect.

Households have historically been denied access to basic utilities like electricity and plumbing, as the development of the *favelas* was unplanned and rapid.

The University is located in a socially and economically disadvantaged neighborhood in the city, surrounded by three *favelas* (SEADE 2010). The lead author (Carla), 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’. 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 volunteer pre-service teachers (PSTs). The PSTs volunteered to participate in the project and the classes were not linked to any required unit. 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 of the first authors’ university (protocol number 2.258.880). All pre-service teachers signed informed consent.

The study involved approximately 90 young people in total, divided in 16 youths, ages 9-13 (9 boys and 7 girls – semester 1), 35 youths, ages 7-13 (20 boys and 15 girls – semester 2), and 64 youths, ages 7-13 (36 boys and 28 girls – semester 3). In addition, 10 pre-service teachers (PSTs) in total were part of the study. Five PSTs were in the project across the three semesters. A PST participated in the project in the first semester, but had to leave in the end of the semester because of work reasons. In the third semester, Carla opened the possibility of new five PSTs engaging in the project. The increase in the number of the PSTs occurred due to the increase in the number of young people attending. The PSTs (five women and five men) were in the third or fourth semester of a Physical Education teaching degree. The PSTs ages ranged from 18-35 years and they had no previous experience with activist approaches. Most of the PSTs lived close to the University and they self-identified as low socioeconomic status. Five PSTs stated that they lived in *favelas*.

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. Although Carla considers herself a middle class in this study, she grew up in a community of low social economic status in her childhood and adolescence. Carla grew up playing soccer and flying kites with friends who lived in *favelas*. Given their daily experiences of inequality



over years, it is important to highlight that everyone (Carla, the PSTs and the youth) was on a journey in this study. They were all learning how to co-create an activist sport approach based on young people's voices in a socially vulnerable area.

The second author (Kim), an expert in activist approaches, served as a critical friend. Kim was contacted regularly throughout the three semesters for advice on how to progress through the project. The third author (David), an expert in pedagogical models, was involved with the conceptual work of the project and writing up the findings.

### ***The implementation of the activist sport model***

Over the last seven years, we have developed an activist sport model with and for youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds (Authors, 2015; 2016; 2017a). The pedagogical model was designed to listen and respond to youth through sport as a vehicle for assisting them to become critical analysts of their lives and their communities and develop strategies to manage the very particular challenges they face. The model provides a theoretical orientation that shifts notions of youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds beyond a deficit perspective, recognizing the strength-based capacities individual participants bring to their pedagogic interactions.

The model 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 critical elements (Authors 2015, 2017a, 2017b). Student-centered pedagogy is the ability and willingness of adults to listen to youth and respond to what they are hearing. Inquiry-based learning centered in action engages the youth in inquiry in order to help them better understand what facilitates and hinders their learning opportunities in sport and to imagine alternative possibilities. Ethic of care describes the coaches' interest in and respect for the youth's lives both inside and outside of the sport context. Attentiveness to the community requires awareness of the problems the youth encounter playing sports in order to make possible local actions. Community of sport creates times for the youth to see other possibilities and this require a collective action on the part of the community.

The key theme of this activist approach is to *co-construct empowering learning possibilities through sport with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds*<sup>2</sup>. The model used a process, Student-Centered Inquiry as Curriculum (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013), as a means of working with the youth in order to better understand how to assist them to foster collective empowerment (Fine 2007; Freire 1987, 1996) (Figures 1 and 2).

[Insert Figures 1 and 2]

The implementation of the activist pedagogical model 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). Carla 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), Carla was observing and offering feedback, while the PSTs were responsible for the learning activities with the youth.

A Student-Centered Inquiry as Curriculum (Oliver and 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's engagement in sport (Oliver and 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 sport. For example, the youth experienced different types of sports and games.

Given what we learned during *Building the Foundation Phase*, Carla and the PSTs co-created and implemented with the youth an *Activist Phase*. This 8-week *Activist Phase* started from things that the youth saw as important if they were going to

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<sup>2</sup>For more information regarding the schedule of tasks with youth and student learning see Authors (2016).

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 PSTs and Carla. *Listening to Respond* involved the strategies Carla and the PSTs were using to inquire about the youth's perceptions of the training sessions and barriers they face in sport contexts. *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.

### ***Data collection sources***

Data collection spanned an 18 month period and included:

(a) *Lead researcher observations collected as field notes*. The lead researcher Carla wrote field notes/observations after each class (total of 78 pages) about the PSTs and youth's experience of the activist sport model. This data was used to inform the weekly collaborative group meeting discussions among the PSTs.

(b) *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 sport model in their teaching. In the first semester, the collaborative PSTs' meetings were used to collectively analyze data gathered with and from the youth (total of 21 meetings). In the second and third semesters the meetings were used to help the PSTs engage in conversations about their experiences using the activist pedagogical model and seek advice from others on how to proceed or negotiate challenges that emerged (total of 28 and 14 meetings). All PSTs group meetings were audio recorded and transcribed (total of 568 pages).

(c) *PSTs reflective diaries*. The students completed diary entries after every class for the 84 classes across the three 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 youth's engagement and student teachers' behavior.

(d) *PSTs and youth generated artifacts*. All PSTs generated artifacts and these were collected, such as lesson plans, summaries of data collected from the youth, and shared materials on social media (total of 189 pages). In the same way, all youth generated artifacts were collected such as banners, videos, and written material.

(e) *PSTs and youth focus groups and interviews*. Two 20-minute interviews (second semester) and two 30-minute focus groups (third semester) were conducted with the PSTs. After the first interview, we decided to use focus groups with the PSTs and youth because of their dialogic potential. The focus groups align with the intent to co-construct learning opportunities to support and foster collective empowerment. The interviews and focus groups were based on the experiences they faced in implementing the activist sport model. One 30-minute focus groups (first, second and third semester) were conducted with the youth. The interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded for verbatim transcription (total of 121 pages).

### ***Data analysis***

Data analysis involved three steps and was approached using an inductive lens (Lincoln and Guba 1985). First, Carla read all data sets and engaged in the process of coding aimed at capturing both the PSTs' and the youth's experiences of the activist sport pedagogical model. Through this inductive analysis, statements and ideas were developed as data was read and re-read. The second process of analysis involved constant comparison. The third and final process of analysis involved David. David engaged in a process of checking the interpretations. Carla and David discussed the codes she had identified in relation to the research questions. David 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. Pseudonyms are used throughout to refer to the PSTs and youth. For the presentation of results, direct quotes have been translated into English.

### **Findings**

This study aimed to explore both the pre-service teachers' and the youth's experiences of an activist sport pedagogical model. A pedagogy of love emerged when we implemented the activist sport pedagogical model across three semesters in a socially vulnerable context with PSTs and youth. In this section, we will describe the emergence of this pedagogy of love and the struggles we (Carla, PSTs and youth) faced through this non-linear and long term process. The first feature of a pedagogy of love was a willingness to repeatedly challenge inequities. We will use a gender inequity incident as an example of how this willingness was expressed and how it was essential to negotiate

inequalities. A second feature that emerged was valuing solidarity thereby cultivating a learning community. A third feature was fostering hope and imagination in all participants in order to persevere despite barriers. It was evident that the PSTs and youth cared enough to want to put in effort over time to challenge inequity, develop deep authentic relationships, and to imagine alternatives.

***“The boys say we do not know how to play soccer”: The courage to repeatedly challenge inequities – a commitment to the cause of liberation***

The first feature of a pedagogy of love that emerged was the willingness to repeatedly challenge inequities as a commitment to the cause of liberation. The youth described a lot of challenges. For example, they described the violence and the lack of opportunity to play sports as the main barriers to engage in sport in their community across the three semesters. They described that the local neighborhood was mostly unsuitable for physical play (dirty, dangerous, unpleasant, violent, etc.). An activist sport approach encouraged everybody collectively to listen to young people’s barriers to participate in sport and brainstorm possible spaces for micro transformation.

We will use a gender inequity issue we faced as an example of how this willingness was expressed across time. The implementation of the activist sport model helped us to see the ‘gender inequity’, but we (Carla, PSTs and youth) needed to be committed to keep challenging inequities over and over and over. We had to have patience and commitment to name, critique and negotiate the gender issues that arose in our context as well as they had the potential to reproduce these inequities in the beginning of the project. As described in Carla’s field notes, we needed to care about making things better and be persistent in this care in order to continue challenging the inequities we faced:

This is the third semester working on the project and in the *Building the Foundation* phase the gender issues emerged again. I noticed that the PSTs have a hard time including the girls in the games. They do not seem to realize that the girls are not being included. I decided to change the prompt questions of the PSTs’ diaries to force them to observe the boys’ and girls’ behaviour in class. The girls comment on many injustices in PE classes and I am afraid that our project will reproduce these injustices (Semester 3, day 5, Carla’s field note).

Although the activist sport model made the gender inequities more visible for the youth, the PSTs struggled to see them in the beginning of the project (semester 1) and

Carla was persistent in pointing out the injustices. For example, when Rodrigo and Julio dominated the handball game as players and appeared to forget they were teachers/coaches:

Carla: In the last class I asked for some of you to play with the kids and I realized that both Julio and Rodrigo were dominating the game. They entered into the competitive spirit of the game. Whenever the teachers come in to play with the kids we need to remember that we are teachers and that we want everybody to participate. The girls were hardly involved in the game. It got to the point where I tell Julio, "You're just going to pass the ball to girls." I forbid Julio to pass the ball to the boys.

Rodrigo [PST]: Actually, I did not realize that. I think I'm competitive.

Carla: It was a very interesting class and it seemed that some of you forgot our role as a teacher. Rodrigo was passing the ball and saying, "Are you with butter in your hand?" (Semester 1, PSTs collaborative meeting 15).

Although competition, domination and winning might not be just related with masculinity, the *Building the Foundation* phase revealed issues of gender in the PSTs behaviours. In the *Building the Foundation*, we had six weeks of meeting with the PSTs and youth to identify what facilitated and hindered the youth's engagement in sport. We started by inquiring into what the young people liked/disliked, their perceptions of school and family, their opinions about the project, and barriers to sport participation they encountered in both the program and their community as a whole. We created a democratic space where the PSTs and youth could share their beliefs and concerns. Gender inequality emerged as an issue across the three semesters. In our weekly meeting, Rodrigo and Julio described that they were ex-soccer players and it was one of the challenges for the reproduction of gender inequity. Carla also shared her experience as ex-indoor soccer player and how she struggled to see gender issues in her first Participatory Action Research project in 2011.

Gradually, the PSTs started to understand that they were contributing to the reproduction of the current gender dynamics. In the *Building the Foundation* phase, we explored different content and different ways of teaching in order to broaden the youths' perspectives about sport (e.g. types of sport and ways of teaching). The youth experienced different types of sports and games (e.g. invasion games, net/wall/racket games, fielding/striking games, athletics, combat sports, gymnastic, and others). In that phase, we explored a few classes of each sport and soccer was the content of two of those classes

(lessons 4 and 5) in semester two. Soccer as a content focus made the gender inequity blatantly visible and thus open for critique. As such, in these two classes Carla and the PSTs decided to explore naming and critiquing the inequities within the soccer context and worked to negotiate a better outcome, particularly for the girls. It is important to highlight that soccer in the *Building the Foundation* phase it was not the youth's choice.

Soccer is a national sport in Brazil and it is considered a male sport. Soccer is such a stereotypical game for boys in Brazil, and boys behave in stereotypical gendered ways. Challenging inequities in soccer was hard for the males because fundamentally it challenged their masculine identities. Challenge inequities in soccer was hard for males because fundamentally it challenges their masculine identities and how they learned to be male (Kirk, 2003). Soccer thus created a space for this gendered conversation in this particular context. On other hand, as Kirk (2003) noted, there is nothing essentially gendered about soccer. There is nothing in the essence of soccer that requires players to behave in dominant or violent ways; 'not all sports, not even those played predominantly by men, require or condone physical violence and aggression' (p.73). We cannot read off from elite professional sport that all forms of soccer are essentially expressions of hegemonic masculinity.

That is why soccer itself created the space for a conversation about gender in this particular context and required our patience and commitment to persist in challenging inequalities. This commitment reflected a pedagogy of love:

Carla: What were the main difficulties in the last class?

Janaina [PST]: When it comes to soccer, the girls are still sitting aside and the boys continue to dominate the games. I felt the exclusion of the girls in my class. I was playing on a team that decided the rule of always passing the ball to Adriana. We forced the boys to pass the ball to her. The girls on the other team began to complain that the boys did not pass the ball to them. That was when they sat down and stopped playing.

Carla: When the girls sat in the stands I went to talk to them and they said that soccer is very annoying because the boys never pass the ball.

Janaina [PST]: And they already came complaining at the beginning of the class "Please no soccer!"

Carla: I'm not saying that we cannot play soccer. We need to think about the way that we teach... sit with them and talk about what happens in PE... because they said that the boys do not let the girls play in PE... we have to explain to them that

here we will not reproduce what they experience in school. Another suggestion is that you work with smaller groups, small sided games. Thus, everyone participates more (Semester 2, PSTs collaborative meeting 3).

Carla helped the PST's see where the inequities existed in their teaching and playing and she worked with them collectively to make the games fairer for everyone. Carla and the PSTs worked to make soccer-like activities more equitable for the girls and boys playing in lessons 4 and 5. Carla and the PSTs created a democratic space with the youth to brainstorm ideas in class of how to make the soccer activities more equitable. The girls brainstormed interesting strategies of how to include everybody. For example, they co-create games in small groups to teach each other. Janaina [a PST] and Carla also played with the youth to challenge some of the boys assumption the girls don't know how to play soccer.

In that sense, they needed to be willing to continue to challenge inequities. After experiencing soccer in two classes in semester two, we co-created the *Activist Phase* with the PSTs and youth and soccer was one of the content areas they wanted to continue learning. Given what we learned about the gender dynamics during *Building the Foundation Phase*, we co-created and implemented with the youth a curriculum aimed at exploring games and sports we could play on the beach. Our work started from things that the youth saw as important if they were going to develop strategies for negotiating the gender barriers they identified and what facilitated their learning.

Today we concluded the semester with the activist project. In this semester, the kids and the PSTs co-created games together to play on the beach. The idea was to explore the various possibilities of playing on the beach and from there overcome the barriers of lack of space to play in their neighbourhood. The day was beautiful and we went to the beach with the help of the kids' parents. I found it curious that many games the kids and PSTs co-created were games from soccer. They elaborated six stations and four stations were related to soccer. They played a foot volley game (mix of volley and soccer), a 'gol caixote' game (3 vs 3 that we usually played with flip flops in place of the goalpost), a game that was a mix of soccer and bowling and the traditional soccer. Boys and girls were engaged in games and many parents also went in to participate with them. How cool to see the community re-signifying the games; co-building ways to play soccer (Semester 2, day 33, Carla's field note)



Carla was curious to see many games coming from soccer because the PSTs explored games they could play on the beach. Most of the games the kids were not familiar with. Carla learned that soccer emerged as a dominant cultural artefact. Carla and the PSTs embraced the soccer and worked with the youth collectively to make the games fairer for everyone. Soccer created a space for inequities to be publicly transparent to the group and as such allowed us to intentionally work through, negotiate, and transform these inequities in order to create more, equitable opportunities.

The gender issues we faced was an example of how a pedagogy of love was expressed across time in order to challenge inequities in our commitment to the cause of liberation. We had to have patience and commitment to name, critique and negotiate gender inequities particularly when soccer was used as a content focus. The PSTs also had to recognize that they were complicit in reproducing gender inequities in the beginning. This is a particular type of caring that is often demonstrated for teachers in an effort to challenge inequities and untruths that continue to marginalize students (Roberts 2010; Sosa-Provencio 2017; Ladson-Billings 2009; Valenzuela 1999). For Freire, love requires a commitment to dialogue and the capacity to take risks for the benefit of those we teach and ourselves. In that perspective, love requires patience and persistence to continue to challenge injustices and oppressive power relations: it is a struggle, it is non-linear and it is a “hard and soft” process.

***“We're taking care of each other”: Developing solidarity and thereby cultivating a learning community***

The second feature of a pedagogy of love that emerged was the development of solidarity, thereby cultivating a learning community between the participants. The activist sport model created spaces for solidarity to emerge. Solidarity emerged when Carla and PSTs understood and shared the youths’ struggle of trying to escape various forms of oppression. The PSTs came from the same areas most of the young people; they were from low social economic areas. Carla also grew up in a socially vulnerable community. Carla and the PSTs worked with the youth to cultivate a learning community. In order to develop solidarity, the PSTs had to understand the youth’s life situations and their emotional needs. The PSTs started to empathize with the youth’s realities. The solidarity between the participants, built in trust and empathy, created a space that result in a family to care for each other and their community. However, in

order to get to this point it took time, happening through a two-year long interaction between the participants.

Coming to understand the youth's life situations and their emotional needs was essential to develop solidarity. The PSTs' had to show interest in and respect for the youth's lives outside the sport context. This process emerged first in the youth's voice:

Beatriz: Our group has reached a consensus that the best coach in the world needs to be patient.

Aline: It needs to be a committed coach.

Aline: The best coach is different from my PE teacher. She divides the court and puts girls on the side and boys on the other side. The boys play soccer and the girls 'queimada' (a kind of dodgeball).

Maria: And the boys are aggressive, the children get hurt and the teacher does not take action.

Aline: The boys do not let the girls play, they like to hurt the girls and they think they are stronger (Semester 1, youths' voice, Lesson 6).

As described in the data above, the young people experienced a lot of inequity outside the sport context and they hoped to have a different kind of teacher/coach in the project. They were describing a culture of domination, gender division and aggression they experienced outside the project. When they were given the opportunity they were able to highlight what makes a good coach. The opportunity to ask the youth about the characteristics of a good coach/teacher and the youth's behaviors and desire for personal attention from the teachers helped the PSTs to understand the importance of caring and commitment to working with the youth. In this environment the youth had emotional needs and developing a relationship based on dialogue facilitated this type of caring to emerge. In the beginning some of the PSTs misunderstood caring:

Carla: I was watching the 'shock' game<sup>3</sup> that you taught in the last class. It reminded me about the ethic of care... In a previous study I was involved in, the coaches mentioned how the kids liked to hug them in the beginning of the training sessions. I remember a day they gave a collective hug. The 'shock' game reminded me of this affective relationship.

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<sup>3</sup>The kids were holding hands all in a circle with Roberta and with their eyes closed. Then, Roberta squeezed both hands to pass the 'shock'. The kids as soon as they received the shock (the hand tightened), they passed the shock along.

Roberta [PST]: One of the girls in my class brought me a flower as a gift and it happened a couple of times.

Janaina [PST]: I also think the kids are jealous. For example, Alan and Carlos when they arrive here on the project they want to do all the activities together.

Carina [PST]: Alan even cried one day that we separated him from Carlos in one of the activities in basketball. I feel sometimes that my students are jealous of each other (Semester 2, PSTs collaborative meeting 11).

At first, some of the PSTs understood the youth's emotional needs and specifically the bodily touch or 'relational touch' presented in the 'shock' game (Andersson, Öhman, and Garrison 2018) as 'jealousy'. For example, Carina said 'they want to sit next to me because they are jealous and they want my attention' and Janaina said: 'the jealousy they have with each other' in Alan and Carlos case. Rather than see the students need for adult love and attention as something that might be missing in these young people's lives, the PST mistook it for jealousy.

Carla: What did you learn this semester?

Caio: I learned new sports

Carla: What else?

Jose: Anger.

Carla: What about anger?

Jose: There are people here who are very stressed. We learned to play and control our anger.

Cris: At the beginning of the project, when we lost, it was a desperation to win. Now I do not know the score of the game.

Alef: We made a lot of friends.

Caio: I thought that by creating the games, we learned new things.

Jose: By creating the games that we have never played before, we improved our creativity.

Janaina [PST]: I think in the beginning you always played with the same people and you did not like to change the pair for example. Now you like to play with everyone in the group. At first the girls were not very included in the games. And now you understand that it makes no difference, girls and boys can play.

Carina [PST]: I think they are listening much more to the teacher.

Rodrigo [PST]: I think they're taking care of each other. They are not just worried about scoring (Semester 1, PSTs and youth focus group).

The youth and PSTs described how the youth learned to be more committed and respect each other. They learned the value of inclusion. They also learned to communicate better and value interpersonal relationships. They describe the project as a space to make new friends. Finally, they described how they learned different sports and created new games which explored their creativity. What started out as a desire to win at all costs was, by the end of the project, replaced by friendships and fun and opportunities to be together through physical activity.

The activist sport model also helped the PSTs to learn. As members of an extended family, the teachers began to build caring relationships with their students:

Pedro [PST]: I came with that background of being more authoritarian. This project took out a curtain that I had in front of the eyes and showed me a way of teaching where the teacher doesn't need to be a militarist: a way of teaching where the kids have autonomy and voice. I think today I'm a new teacher, a better teacher for sure.

Carol [PST]: I'll always remember the friends we made and the importance to give kids' voice. We come with a view that the teacher who commands and the student only obeys, but it is not so. I got into the project with that head and nowadays I am thinking completely different.

Rodrigo [PST]: I'll take that learning piece for the rest of my life... I'm not going to let the students on the corner, either. I think I've learned to care more about my students, I'm going to fight for my student... You have to put things into practice with them together, invite them to be part of the class (Semester 3, Focus group 2).

The PSTs learned to value relationships over being an authoritarian teacher. In order to encourage the construction of a community of learners, they had moved away from the role of expert and revealed themselves as learners themselves, who enacted an ethic of human connectedness. A desire to build deep relationships emerged when we implemented the activist sport approach. The PSTs needed to learn from the youth's reality and be willing to re-think themselves in order to create one community in solidarity with them. The PSTs learned to respect the youth, respect their knowledge, their culture and their history. As the semesters went by, the PSTs began to better understand the youth's context and emotional needs. They begin to find ways to better relate to the youth that allowed the youth to feel important and valued. This activist sport model created spaces for everybody to learn the value of solidarity. As members

of an extended family, a community, the youth learned to assist, support and encourage one another.

The activist sport model appeared to create spaces for solidarity emerged thereby cultivating a learning community between the participants. Carla and the PSTs understood and shared the youths' struggle of trying to escape forms of oppression such as the lack of space to play sports. The PSTs and youth showed a sincere concern for each other, that allows the development of a group spirit, a social body of community life. According to Freire, 'solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is in solidarity; it is a radical posture' (Freire, 1987, p. 31) and it is found only in the plenitude of this 'act of love' (1987, p. 35). It is a deep commitment to protecting, caring for, and empowering students in the face of social barriers and oppressions that surface in their everyday lives (Daniels, 2012).

***“We could push the houses back to have more space to play”: Fostering hope and imagination through a pedagogy of love***

The final feature of a pedagogy of love to emerge was a desire to foster participants' hope and imagination. The activist sport model, built on attentiveness to the community and community of sport allowed all participants to nurture hope and imagination across the three semesters. The possibility to imagine first emerged in the youths' conversations. They could metaphorically imagine alternatives to the barriers their community faced that adults could not, or would not, see. In the beginning of the project Carla and PSTs were afraid they could not do anything to make things better for the youth:

Carina [a PST] and I went for a walk around the neighbourhood. We took the chance to visit a community next to the project and a community leader welcomed us. Upon entering the community I noticed narrow streets where hardly a car could pass. I also saw many favelas (precarious wooden houses). The houses were mostly built in invaded places and it was possible to observe a public neglect, evidenced in the dirt on the streets, unpaved streets and the smell of sewage. The kids were playing barefoot in the narrow streets. They were kicking balls and flying kites. The community leader took us to a sports association: the only one that offered sports to that community. There was no field or court there. It was an 8-square-meter shed, with no mirror and beaten cement as the floor. It had a rug that was placed on the floor for Judo classes. The community leader said about 30

children per class attended in that space. I kept thinking ‘no way could they put 30 kids here’. The community leader was very happy to learn about our project and possibilities for partnership (Semester 1, day 8, Carla’s field note).

Through the three semesters of working with youth we transformed our fear into courage, and imagination was essential in this process. The collaborative weekly meeting between Carla and the PSTs created a democratic space where we could brainstorm possibilities. In addition to this, we were open to inquiry with the youth about spaces for transformation. An activist sport approach encouraged everybody collectively to listening to young people’s barriers to participate in sport and brainstorm possible spaces for micro transformation. By implementing the activist sport model, we realized the importance of creating opportunities for youth to imagine what life could be beyond what they currently experience. The youth, PSTs and Carla together tried to find possibilities for transformation regarding the lack of opportunity to play sport in their community. Although the local neighborhood was mostly unsuitable for physical play (dirty, dangerous, unpleasant, violent, etc.), we together created spaces to imagine alternative playing possibilities. As described before, the possibility to imagine first emerged in the youth’s conversations with Carla:

Cris: If I were to change my neighbourhood, I would build a court for everyone to play. It would be a ‘public’ court with free access.

Alan: I wanted more justice in my neighbourhood. In my neighbourhood people steal our bikes and nothing happens.

Pedro: The streets could be wider, so we could play. We could push the houses back to have more space to play.

Isaac: I would also distribute cheaper priced balls in my community (Semester 1, youth’s voice, Lesson 15).

Carla: Last week we asked ourselves what ideas you would have to change neighbourhood problems. The first idea was “I would build a field or court that would be public for everyone to play”. Another suggestion was “that it would have more security so that it would not have robbery and that there would be more justice in the community.” Another thing was people who said that asphalt the street that blocked the holes in the street and that take out the trash. There were people who said that they would move the house from the streets to have more

space. We need to think of something to do with all this information: developing a project. I'm not saying we're going to pave the street. Does anyone have a truck?

Alan: We cannot push our houses back to have more space on the street!

Carla: There's no way we can come with a tractor and move the houses away. But we need to think about something that we can do. If we think that “the street has little opportunity to play”, “the street is violent” and “the people who play in the street are also violent”. What can we do?

Aline: Try to behave better.

Carla: How?

Alan: Try to not curse each other.

Aline: Try to not put rubbish on the street.

Cris: Try to not hit others.

Carla: Cool! So we can think about how we can behave on the street so the street is a nice place to play. You also said that you do not have room to play because it takes place with a lot of weeds and trash, so we could go out one day with the parents to clean the neighbourhood?

Cris: How about to make a video to talk about the problems.

Carla: Great idea! Another idea, we can make one day that we go to a neighbourhood and do a ‘day in a neighbourhood’ teaching kids various sports (Semester 1, youth’s voice, Lesson 18).

This data showed the dilemmas of finding spaces for change in working in areas of social vulnerability (e.g. lack of space to play sports in the community). If we just read what the young people were saying at a literal level it would not be possible to find spaces for transformation. Although the youth lived in complex spaces that could limit their ability to imagine something different, they could metaphorically imagine alternatives: ‘we could push the houses back’, ‘I would build a public court with free accesses’ and ‘I would also distribute cheaper priced balls in my community’. In that sense, the youth could see possibilities that adults could not see. The activist sport approach created this space to dream, to create metaphors for everybody to imagine more possibilities for creating a better life. It stimulated creativity and imagination in the young people as well as the capacity to better critique surroundings and, thus, challenge inequity and injustice (Freire 1987).

The PSTs also brainstormed ideas about how could we create spaces for activism in our weekly meeting. We encouraged everybody to dream about possible

futures. We have learned through our work with socially vulnerable youth (Authors, 2017) that dreaming and imagining big is a starting point for finding realistic and concrete spaces for change. The PSTs began to see the importance of hope and imagination through their work with the youth.

A pedagogy of love emerged in the desire to foster participants' hope and imagination. Although the structural realities are hard to change in working within poor neighborhoods, the adults should allow themselves to imagine spaces for change, even if it is metaphorical because youth might see possibilities that adults cannot not see. The literal constraints in poor neighborhoods did not restrict these young people from dreaming about and imagining possible alternative and better futures. It is when people feel powerless to make any change for the better that dreams get crushed and lives broken. We must help youth learn to see possibilities and then enact those possibilities in realistic ways (Greene 1995; Freire 1987).

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to explore pre-service teachers' and youth's experiences of an activist sport pedagogical model for working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds and to interrogate the way in which a pedagogy of love emerged. We draw specifically on Paulo Freire's concept of love. In this section, we discuss: (a) love as essential for pedagogic dialogue; (b) the importance of fostering youth's imagination; (c) love, solidarity and community; and (d) challenges all participants faced in this leaning journey.

Dialogue cannot exist... in the absence of a profound love for the world and for [human beings]... Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to other [people]. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause - the cause of liberation. And this commitment, because it is [a] loving [one], is dialogical... Only by abolishing the situation of oppression is it possible to restore the love which that situation made impossible. If I do not love the world—if I do not love life - if I do not love [human beings] - I cannot enter into dialogue (Freire 1987, 77-78).

In this study, we created a space for pedagogic dialogue aimed to name, critique and repeatedly challenge inequities. Pedagogic dialogue is a concept based on Freire (1987, 2005) that rests on an ethic of care and a pedagogy of love. For example, the activist sport model allowed us to understand the gender power dynamics and critique inequity.



When soccer emerged as content, we used this as context for pedagogic dialogue to interrogate the ways in which stereotypically gendered practices engaged or marginalized individuals. Importantly, this highlighted the role of pedagogic dialogue in ‘conscientizing’ or helping PSTs recognize their own complicity in reproducing inequalities. According to Freire, through pedagogic dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with student-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the one who teaches, but one who is taught in dialogue with the students, who in their turn while being taught also teach (Freire 1987).

Pedagogic dialogue is the prerequisite and constant characteristic in caring teacher-student relationships. Pedagogic dialogue is the exchange of ideas between equal participants and requires respect for the other participants and for oneself. There is gratitude for the insights others provide and gratitude for the new insights participants achieve through this just act of social love. To remove fairness, respect, or gratitude is to interrupt or even terminate pedagogic dialogue (Schoder 2010).

By exploring the activist sport model, we realized the importance of creating opportunities for the youth to imagine. Although the local neighborhood was mostly unsuitable for physical play (dirty, dangerous, unpleasant, violent, etc.), we together created spaces to imagine alternative possibilities. The youth could metaphorically imagine alternatives, even if these were not possible literally: ‘we could push the houses back’. The activist sport approach created this space to dream, to create metaphors for everybody to imagine more possibilities and alternatives. Working with youth to see things through, no matter how small they might be, is a first step in helping them learn that they can do something to change their situations. That is related to a pedagogy of love: the courage to not only help young people imagine better futures but act on those futures (Freire 1987, 2005; Ladson-Billings 2009; Greene 1995). Hope acquired a new meaning before his comprehension of human incompleteness and of the ability to dream of utopia in the sense of making possible the being more, to make real human existence true (Freire, Freire, and Oliveira 2014).

The literal constraints in poor neighborhoods did not prevent these young people from dreaming about and imagining possible futures. Helping youth to imagine better futures and act on those futures it is a risk because it could backfire. For example, they could see it as an overwhelming impossibility. That is why teacher/coaches, through pedagogic dialogue, must create spaces for youth to see possibilities and then enact on

those possibilities in realistic ways. In a pedagogy of love, teachers should also stimulate creativity and imagination in their students as well as the capacity to better critique surroundings and, thus, challenge inequity and injustice. It is important to highlight that transformation begins at the micro level - small steps toward changing oppressive practices make a difference over time. It creates levels of agency and freedom. Liberating teaching and teachers' and students' capacities to dream are strongly linked. The more teachers were willing to struggle for an emancipatory dream, the more apt they are to know intimately the experience of fear, how to control and educate their fear and, finally, how to transform that fear into courage (Darder 2017).

As a way of fostering youth's imagination, the teacher moves away from the role of expert, with regard to knowledge of difference, and reveals himself or herself as also a learner, who is enacting an ethic of human connectedness (Keith 2010). The activist approach created a space for teachers to change. The PSTs learned to value relationships and respect young people's experiences over being an authoritarian teacher. In that sense, the PSTs' practice was guided by emotional awareness, in the context of an ethic of responsibility for creating human connectedness. Seeing our weaknesses as intrinsic to being human, in the context of flawed but changeable people and institutions, may be the first step towards self-acceptance and yield a new strength, an inner power that may be put to the service of transformation (Keith 2010; Freire 1987).

This activist sport model provided opportunities for solidarity. Solidarity emerged when Carla and PSTs understood and shared the youths' struggle of trying to escape various forms of oppression. We sympathized when we understood and shared the struggles youth faced in socially vulnerable areas. In that sense, solidarity it is as a fluid dynamic that goes beyond the personal connection (Freire, Freire, and Oliveira 2014). It highlights the importance of build a sense of togetherness, including getting to know the young people and their hopes, dreams, and communities (Freire 2005; Ladson-Billings 2009). In that sense, teachers create a community of learners (e.g. 'family members') instead of idiosyncratic connections and individualistic connection with individual youth (Ladson-Billings 2009). The relationship with students must be fluid, humanely equitable and extends to interactions beyond the classroom/court or field, demonstrating connectedness with all students and encourage that same connectedness between students (Hellison, 1978; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire distinguishes charity from solidarity. Charity it is assistance provided to you that you need, so that you will no longer need. Solidarity

in this sense is to share the struggle of trying to escape various forms of oppression (Freire, 1987). It is a manifestation of support and existential posture and policy. To share the fight against the oppression of the other is to join this other in achieving social justice; it is to go beyond the limits of charity to provide an eventual help that is assumed to be a liberating action. This is a solidarity grounded in local neighborhoods which creates new possibilities of experience, while inspiring dreams of hope and utopian possibility (Freire et al., 2014). By sharing love, teachers provide a platform for young people to build trust, care, and respect for each other (Fitzpatrick 2018), creating “a world in which it will be easier to love” (Freire 1987, 24).

Carla, the PSTs and the youth were all in a leaning journey and this process was not without challenges. Throughout the study, we encountered four main challenges. The first challenge involved the PSTs’ assumptions about what student-centered pedagogy meant and the challenges of overcoming their misconceptions about teaching and learning (see Authors, 2019). The second challenge involved the PST’s struggles in coming to understand themselves as activist teachers, with dispositions as advocates of social justice. The PSTs engaged in their own personal struggles, described in previous studies. The challenge 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). The third challenge was that Carla struggled to create a democratic learning space in a university context. Carla shared with the PSTs the struggles she was facing within the group to create a democratic space. She was not afraid to reveal her own vulnerabilities. Finally, Carla had to negotiate her discomfort with giving up control and allowing for various degrees of PSTs’ engagement. The PSTs taught Carla that she should be patient with them through their process of learning to see themselves as teachers.

We identified that this pedagogy worked with youth and PSTs from socially vulnerable communities. However, we believe that the idea of pedagogy of love could be translated to other contexts. It is a pedagogy that aimed to create spaces for empowerment by naming, critiquing and challenging/negotiating various forms of oppression. It is a process that requires reflexivity in order to develop awareness of micro oppression that allowed micro transformations.

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