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Social Justice narratives in academia: challenges, struggles and pleasures PETE educators face in understanding and enacting critical pedagogy in Brazil

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Social Justice narratives in academia: challenges, struggles and pleasures PETE educators face in understanding and enacting critical pedagogy in Brazil

Research demonstrates the benefits of educating for social justice in Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) programs. This body of research shows that social justice pedagogy enables student teachers to create a sense of social agency and community purpose in their teaching that positions them with more certainty when facing the political and professional hurdles embedded in a teaching career. The social justice perspective allows PETE educators and student teachers to work together in order to become conscious of the power structures in society that lead to social inequities. Although there are comprehensive studies on social justice and critical pedagogy in PETE, there is much to learn about how PETE educators conceptualize and practice critical pedagogy. Particularly in Brazil, there is limited research that confronts and analyses data from the myriad of emancipatory pedagogical PETE practices around the country, in order to turn those practices into a coherent body of critical narratives and shared knowledge. The purpose of this paper is therefore to explore the challenges, struggles and pleasures that two PETE educators faced in understanding and enacting critical pedagogy in Brazil. A theoretical framework based on Freire's critical pedagogy is employed to discuss the complementary narratives presented in this paper. We proclaim our hope that critical pedagogy might point to some avenues for political democratic struggles in a moment when public Education in Brazil is under severe attack promoted by the right-wing forces that currently sit on the presidential and the ministry of Education chairs.

Keywords: physical education; teacher education; empowerment; activist approaches; social justice; Freirean dialogue; critical pedagogy; student-centered pedagogy

Introduction

Higher education institutions have traditionally been considered a space where critical thinking and liberty of thought should reign (Giroux, 2011a). Freedom of speech, diversity of ideas and overt public debate have been the cornerstone principles of Western universities. Giroux (2011a) is adamant about the centrality of cultural exchanges and dialogue in the construction of ‘democratically configured spaces’ (p.138). However, over the past three decades, higher education institutions have been under a constant neoliberal attack that shuts down public spaces and diminishes democratic conversations (Giroux, 2010). Similar to many other public cultural institutions in Western societies, higher education providers face a lack of investment and even cuts in their funding, which threaten their autonomy. Hence, universities have been struggling to continue to contribute to the forward-thinking communities need to tackle the increasing social challenges the world currently faces.

It is within this context that institutions have been called upon by advocates of social justice to guarantee that students can be listened to in their educational spaces and forums. Pedagogy for social justice in higher education has evolved in different geographical, political and theoretical contexts. Theoretical foundations include the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed and the New Sociology of Education, as well as Marxist postulates (Devis-devis, 2006). These foundations share oppression, empowerment, dialogue, justice and social inequality as key concepts that have oriented proponents’ pedagogical and research activities. In this paper, we draw specifically on Freire’s critical pedagogy. For Freire, critical pedagogy, more than a set of techniques, is a political tool to amplify students’ awareness of the social justice battles they will face if they aim to build a better world than the one left to them by past generations (Freire, 1987). According to Freire (1987), critical pedagogy

has the potential to boost human agency by naming, thinking and acting on the realms in which we live.

In the specific field of Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE), the last three decades have seen a surge of research that has looked at the teaching practices of PETE programs concerned with social justice and critical pedagogy (e.g., Ovens et al., 2018; Philpot, 2016; Schenker et al., 2019; Walton-Fisette & Sutherland, 2018). This body of research points to the potential of critical pedagogy to enable student teachers to create a sense of social agency and community that positions them with more certainty when facing the political and professional hurdles embedded in a teaching career. However, it is important to highlight that, as is the case more broadly, there is no consensus about critical pedagogy and pedagogy for social justice in PETE research or practice; there are different histories, theories and practices depending on social and cultural contexts, geographies as well as the orientation of particular pedagogues (Schenker et al., 2019).

There are two large comparative projects on critical pedagogy and pedagogy for social justice in PETE: one across Sweden, Norway and New Zealand (Schenker et al., 2019) and the other across North America, Europe and Australasia (Hill et al., 2018). In their study, Schenker and his colleagues (2019) investigated the concept of social justice in health and physical education and concluded that the teaching of social justice varies from one context to another. For example, in different contexts, the marginalised groups may differ as well as the strategies for acting on inequities (Tinning, 2016). In their mapping of variations in the definition and conceptualization of social justice in PETE programs, Hill and his colleagues (2018) identified a range of understandings about social justice in the programs they assessed. Most frequently, the participants in their study articulated a humanistic approach to social justice by encouraging their student

teachers' awareness of equity of opportunity in relation to gender, sexuality, and/or racism. Less prevalent was the importance of taking action for democracy, empowerment, or critical reflection.

Although much has been written about social justice in the field of PETE over the last three decades (Ovens et al., 2018; Philpot, 2016; Schenker et al., 2019; Walton-Fisette & Sutherland, 2018), there is little research that has examined a Freirean approach in this subject. In addition to this, there is much to learn about how PETE educators conceptualize and practice critical pedagogy. As recently pointed out by Hill et al. (2018) and Schenker et al. (2019) little research has examined how PETE educators operationalise teaching for social justice. Particularly in Brazil, there is limited research that confronts and analyses data from the myriad of emancipatory pedagogical PETE practices around the country, in order to turn those practices into a coherent body of critical narratives and shared knowledge.

In this paper we begin this process, by exploring the challenges, struggles and pleasures that we, as PETE educators faced in understanding and enacting critical pedagogy in Brazil. The narratives presented in this paper point to the two different ways we engaged in the goals of promoting social justice in the PETE courses we taught at distinct moments of our careers. By establishing a Freirean dialogue between our own teaching trajectories and practices, we aim to provide rich instances of critical pedagogy that add to the project of identifying various approaches to social justice in PETE environments in Brazil and beyond. This is a relevant story to PETE practitioners who might be attempting to take a critical stance in contemporary university contexts which while politically different from Brazil are facing similar regulatory regimes. This approach fills a gap in the literature as it creates a theoretical discussion about Brazil's PETE as it is impregnated by 'well-carried out practices' (Freire, 1998b, p.21).

As a first step towards this enterprise, we discuss the utility of narrative methodologies to our endeavor (Riessman, 2011; Flyvbjerg, 2006), and their application to the PETE field. We then present our two narratives as case studies focusing on our own pedagogical practices. Based on Freire's critical pedagogy, these narratives are then followed by a dialogue aimed to critically interpret each other's pedagogical perspectives. We ultimately provide insights into how critical pedagogy is done in PETE and justifications by practitioners for using such approach. The paper concludes with the argument that in the quest for social justice critical pedagogy is particularly relevant in the current Brazilian political context where public education at all levels is suffering severe attacks by the far-right forces that control the federal government.

Two case studies and a dialogic narrative: the realisation of critical pedagogy in Brazilian PETE

In order to discuss critical pedagogy in Brazilian PETE, we initially offer two separate case studies of our experiences as PETE educators in two universities in Brazil.

Understanding the knowledge and the experiences transmitted by context-dependent case studies is key to human research (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The two case studies presented here are embedded in real-life situations, that allowed us to share a nuanced perspective of our realities (Flyvbjerg, 2006). To present the ambiguities and intricacies of real life, our case studies 'contain a substantial element of narrative' (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 237).

Narrative methods are closely linked to identity construction, which in its turn is built *in situ* and unpacked by the analyses of scenes, scenarios, dialogues and other performative actions selected by the 'narrators to make their points' (Riessman, 2011, p. 324). As we compare our distinctive cases through our narratives, we are then able to 'construct arguments about a process of social change' (Riessman 2011, p. 312).

Dowling et al. (2015) show how narrative methods have been used extensively in PETE research, examining teachers' and students' subjectivities and stories, and also to convey sexuality/gender examinations and body experiences in this field. The authors describe how Tinning's (1997) powerful narratives enable readers to share their stories about Physical Education, and to connect the 'personal, the political and the intellectual commitments' to this field (Dowling et al., 2015, p. 932) . In this paper, we go one step further in our examination of PETE practices: after narrating our case studies, we craft a Freirean dialogue between us. From a Freirean perspective, dialogue is not simply talk about people's everyday lives, but a political tool aimed to unveil social practices (Freire, 1998; Betti et al, 2015). Therefore, our dialogue aims to provide a refined reflection and a practice-embedded theory for Brazilian PETE educators, while pondering over the country's political context. The basis of the Freirean dialogue is deep-reflection and political action; dialogue in Freire is a social praxis informed by local perspectives and understandings (Giroux, 2011b; Freire, 1987). Hence, Freire's dialogical method is a tool for social change (Knijnik, in press).

We, as authors of this paper, are both PETE educators who migrated to Australia from Brazil in similar stages of our careers to take up academic positions in different universities in a new country. Carla¹ is an early career academic who migrated to Australia in 2019 and Jorge is a senior academic who migrated in 2009. In addition to the commonalities of our migration journeys, other circumstances brought us to a stage where we were able to start an in-depth systematization of our past academic practices and identities: our previous passages as undergraduate and graduate students at Universidade de São Paulo (in the 1980s and in the 2010s) – where Freire was an

¹ Names were changed at this early submission stage to preserve the peer review integrity.

Emeritus Professor and where, as we show below, his ideas have inspired the Education faculty. Furthermore, a prior joint publication in 2013, the numerous conversations we had while Carla was preparing her international job applications and exchanges about teacher educator pedagogy, made us realize that we both employed teaching practices that use critical pedagogy to advocate for social justice.

It was our identification with Freire's utopic philosophy, however, that formed the first impetus for this paper. The social struggle in Brazilian education has always been associated with the name of Paulo Freire. Brazilian educators who aim for social justice usually have Freire as their light beam, a guide to illuminate their utopia (Knijnik, 2013). This deeply embedded ideal has also enabled our dialogues. This does not mean that we approach his ideals without acknowledging its critiques. We are aware of criticisms towards Freire's sexism (hooks, 1994); or of Ellsworth's (1989) arguments that the 'myths' of critical pedagogy can sustain repressive practices within the classroom from 'well-intentioned' white middle-class teachers. Nevertheless, as pointed out above, in the Brazilian context, Freire's relevance is central to the reader's understanding of our positionality.

Brief notes about us

Carla: I am a 37 years old white middle class Brazilian woman and an early career academic. I taught PE and school sport for five years in Brazilian schools with a teacher-centred education philosophy. I also had experience in teacher-centred, teacher education programs in Brazil. My PhD and Post-doc studies focused on the development of an activist approach for working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds, an approach that is embedded in critical pedagogy and feminist studies (Luguetti et al., 2017, 2019; Fine, 2007; Freire, 1987). In this article, I discuss my

experiences as a teacher educator in a two-year participatory action research in a PETE course, conducted at a University located in a socially and economically disadvantaged neighbourhood in the beach city of Guarujá. This experience took place in a community-engagement sport program, which is an informal educational setting that was a partnership between my university and the community. During the 2017/2018 school year, I, ten student teachers volunteers and approximately 90 youth participated in a community project called 'Sport and Empowerment'.

Jorge: I am a 53 years-old white middle-class Brazilian-Australian man and a senior academic. I have a vast PE teaching experience in schools and NGO sports programs, within low socio-economic communities. My PhD focused on gender in sports and human rights. I lectured in a range of public and private tertiary institutions across the São Paulo state. In this article, I discuss my own pedagogical practices within a PETE course at a large and traditional non-for-profit private educational institution that has a range of campuses spread around São Paulo and neighbor cities. The experiences narrated took place on the university's Barueri campus. Barueri is a city of social contrasts: on the one side we can see the luxury enclosed villages (the 'Alphaville' condominiums sheltered by divisive tall walls) where the bourgeoisie live and drive inside their armored cars. On the other side, a range of poor and unstable housing on *favelas* (a slum or shantytown with weak walls) built on hills, where lack of basic public services is the norm. The PETE course analyzed was conducted from 6:45 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. Additionally, despite the location next to 'Alphaville' mansions, the students were mostly from working class backgrounds and arrived at the campus after work hours and after enduring long hours of commute to get to the university due to the lack of public transport options. Most of them were inhabitants of Barueri's and nearby cities' socially disadvantaged communities.

Our approach/method

After we had devised the idea of discussing our trajectories as PETE educators in Brazil, we established a protocol to these journeys. Initially, we exchanged emails for a month, where we narrated our trajectories in detail. Soon, it became clear that our narratives had similarities, particularly in reference to their language; we could see how the Freirean philosophy and concepts were deeply embedded in the way we wrote about our experiences. Later, we organized seven online meetings (90 minutes each) where we discussed our narratives, trying to refine the details and concepts presented there. Then, each of us finalized their own narrative to make possible the final step, which was to critically analyse the partner's story using the Freirean concepts discussed during our previous conversations. An interesting note is that, without previous agreement, we usually wrote the narratives in English, but we often talked in Portuguese. All exchanges, though, were by necessity shaped by the concepts of Freire's critical pedagogy that constructed our identities and practices.

In the sections below we initially present our narratives separately. Later, we enter into a series of dialogues which, by contrasting the lived experiences of both academics, create a new grounded critical pedagogy in Brazilian PETE. An important highlight of these conversations is that they identify the dynamic social settings where they happened. Our stories did not happen in a void; they were enacted within specific historical conditions. The narrative methods we employed allowed us to contextualize the construction of academic identities (Riessman, 2011) as they are permeated by the critical pedagogy that enabled social justice accounts to emerge within different PETE programs in Brazil.

Part 1: The narratives

The early career academic's journey towards a Pedagogy of Love

My first encounters with critical pedagogy

My encounter with critical pedagogy was permeated by struggles, perplexities, pleasures and love. I remember when I was six years old and we left my grandparents' wealthy house and moved to a neighbourhood in the suburbs: a socially vulnerable area. I grew up playing soccer and flying kites with friends who lived in favelas. I remember that all of my mother's salary went to pay for my sister and my school fees. I had the privilege of studying in one of the best private schools in the city. I remember going to school wearing tennis shoes called 'kichute', the cheapest, least fashionable sneaker brand. I was the poor girl at the rich kids' school.

Although I felt excluded by some peers at school, my teachers took care of me. My teachers showed deep personal commitments to care for and enter into relationships of solidarity with me. In the 1990s and 2000s, I experienced a school with teachers who listened to me and were close to me personally. This experience impacted my worldview, making me a strong believer in the power of education to create spaces of dialogue and social transformation.

While my beliefs were grounded in social change and empowerment, my professional identity developed within a teacher-centred pedagogy in my PETE course in 1999-2003. Most of my lecturers were high level sports coaches or medical doctors whose teaching focused primarily on the one hand, sport-techniques and on the other hand, biological aspects of health. We did not talk about diversity, inclusion or social justice. I was taught that the teacher should be the only one in power.

When I started my PhD in 2011 at the School of Physical Education at Universidade de São Paulo, I began to understand that a teacher-centred approach could

not create the kinds of results related to social justice that I desired. It was during my action-research doctoral project that I started to understand the importance of student-centred pedagogies. I saw the value in using student centred pedagogy to help create empowering places for the youth with whom I worked.

Facilitating a community engagement sport project

As a university lecturer in 2017, I facilitated Participatory Action Research in a 4-semester research project in Brazil. This was by far one of the biggest and most meaningful pedagogical challenges I had ever experienced in my academic career. The project was a community-based engagement intervention. It used a critical pedagogic approach where I collaborated with diverse student teachers as we worked with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds in a private university located in Guarujá, Brazil (Lugueti et al., 2019).

In this intervention, we co-created a sport approach based on critical pedagogy and feminist studies. 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 faced such as educational failure, drug and alcohol abuse. Additionally, we applied an activist approach because, rather than 'blame the victim' for the problems they face, we asserted that young people have the capability to analyze their social contexts and to challenge and resist the forces that impede the possibilities for their liberation. Although I had eleven years of experience as a lecturer, I started this community engagement project as a novice since I had never before been involved in a project where my students and I could create a democratic space for learning and reflection. With the non-democratic culture and lack of dialogue as the University norm, I could not even grasp the existing forms of oppression happening in my workplace. The student teachers and I protected

ourselves as a group, by creating a learning community. I became part of the student teachers' lives. Although we barely knew each other early in the first semester, we developed a strong relationship during the months that we worked together. We collectively decided to extend the time of our weekly meetings and we also organized two barbecues each semester because we enjoyed each other's company and wanted to spend more time together. We valued the importance of this interpersonal relationship to learning and social change. I understood the social, cultural and economic challenges in the student teachers' lives, such as affording university fees. I also saw how proud their communities were because they were attending university. We created an identity as a group, thus, the University started to value our work more.

I cannot be a different teacher educator today. I am always trying to connect learning with social change in PETE. It is part of who I am. I became passionate about the affective dimension presented in critical pedagogy or what Paulo Freire describes as a pedagogy of love. Love is not only a basis for dialogue but also a loving commitment to the students and teachers' political dreams (Freire, 2005).

Experienced dialogue: the voice of sleepy students in Jorge's classes

Behind the scenes

In the mid-1980s I was a young student at the School of Physical Education (EEFUSP) at Universidade de São Paulo, the largest research-oriented public university in South America. At EEFUSP, lectures were mostly delivered with non-dialogic and acritical pedagogies. However, to complete my degree I had to attend pedagogical units in the Faculty of Education. There I was presented with different pedagogical and political contexts. The lectures were dialogic and the academics engaged with the students in democratic conversations.

I had classes with Moacir Gadotti and Lisete Arelaro, who were part of the core group that worked directly with Paulo Freire. They taught us that education was a political way to change the world (Freire, 1996). Furthermore, I realized that in any pedagogical space, students and teachers could rewrite their own stories; the existence of solidarities between educators and learners enlarges the perspectives of democratic learning inside the school.

My initial pedagogies as a university teacher emulated a positivist and content-based approach to university education. Nevertheless, when I realized that a radical democratic approach was needed, critical pedagogy helped me to build powerful relationships that enabled students to engage with their own university education.

First act: I was a novice lecturer, still completing my PhD when I started working in the university in Barueri. In the early 2000s, I was in charge of the Psychology for Physical Education unit. The two-hour weekly lecture ran for 36 weeks in the first year of the PETE night course. I implemented a rigid reading schedule for my students from day one; I presented them a list of foundation papers in English and I expected the learners to have read each week's readings, to pay attention to my explanations and to engage in a question-and-answer session after I finished my content delivery. I was friendly towards the students and considered my teaching approach as a 'dialogic' one. The students were eager to learn but faced difficulties in engaging with the content at that hour of the night. At the 9 to 11 p.m. round of classes, students barely remained awake. A few weeks of this and a student approached me: 'we really want to learn about psychology with you, but these psychology papers in English are super hard to understand...'

Reflexive interval

A bell rang inside me. My so-called 'dialogic teaching' was not working. I realized that there was no dialogue at all in my imposing the topics and the readings over

the students without knowing them. I needed to first constitute meaning inside that community.

Second act

In the following weeks, I stepped down from my ‘sage on the stage’ attitude and implemented major changes in the unit. I started to read the world with the students. I invited them to be active participants in the construction of the unit’s content and activities. Using Freire’s ‘cultural circles’, students formed ‘educational psychology circles’ whereby students were first to choose the unit’s topics that they wanted to engage with more deeply. Smaller groups known as ‘researchers’ circles’ were then formed, with the task to research their topics and prepare classroom activities, which would begin a conversation about their theme with their peers. Every researchers’ circle was to have a coordinator who would replace the lecturer as the person responsible for the delivery of that subject on a set date. Researchers’ circles had weekly meetings with me where content, pedagogies and classroom activities were exhaustively discussed.

Students were finally having their voices heard. The ‘sleepy faces’ from early in the course were suddenly replaced by bright eyed, active participants. Students’ lessons delivery modes incorporated songs, drama and games that included everyone in the classroom. Instead of ‘boring’ lectures, students opted for choral group songs that would convene the content in an engaging way. Laughter was a constant in the classroom. Engagement with the unit went through the roof. Throughout their detailed research, students replaced readings in English with more appropriate pieces in Portuguese that were accessible to everyone. Readings were debated within each researchers’ circle. Expanded researchers’ circles were created and met outside the university hours for more in-depth conversations over different topics. A unique and lasting solidarity bond was formed between all participants.

This critical pedagogical change supported students' deeper involvement with the unit, their course and their university. They started to become critical citizens in every aspect of their university life. They impacted the University during the four years of their teaching training degree. They organized a students' representative body to bring their demands to University leaders. Requests such as opening the University library on Saturdays and keeping the canteen serving during their course's night hours, as well as negotiating with state authorities for better public transport for night courses were achieved.

This whole process was not an easy path. I struggled to admit that students would learn more from their own research than from my lectures. I was frequently questioned by course coordinators who did not want to change the course pedagogical guidelines. However, the satisfaction of witnessing the growth of these student teachers was overwhelmingly positive and worth the pedagogical battles.

Part 2 – critical dialogues

Critical pedagogy of love towards liberation: Jorge's response to Carla

Carla's teaching experiences draw upon key Freirean concepts to deliver a powerful message: that at the core of democratic critical pedagogy in any educational community exists a strong bond of love between its participants. As an activist educator, she argues that critical pedagogy and consequently political transformation can only occur in the presence of love (Freire, 1998a). However what type of love is she talking about? Similar to Freire himself, she envisages that the true love between teachers and learners is an act of freedom, it cannot be replaced by either paternalism or manipulation. Love in education is an act of freedom that must generate other acts of freedom (Freire, 1998a; hooks, 1994). Her story is evidence of this love that released

her to critically face the social challenges within her community. This is love that she is eager to continue and to pass onto her students and the communities that they work with, in order to improve their consciousness towards pathways of freedom and liberation (Freire, 1987).

Becoming a critical educator: the conscientização process

Carla's initial statement is powerful: she admits that she embraced critical pedagogy with pleasure but also with doubts. Her opening thoughts remind us that being a critical educator is a process of becoming, through practice and reflection on our own practice (Freire, 1998b). In the following sentences, as she reflects on her social context, Carla shows that social consciousness (*conscientização*), as discussed by Freire, is a continuous process that only happens in a constant dialogue within our communities (Freire, 1987; Knijnik, 2013). As she takes ownership of the language (hooks, 1994) that describes her social class ('the cheapest tennis shoes'; 'the poor girl in the rich kids' school'), her *conscientização* grows, and she creates the political identity that will influence her critical pedagogy of love and freedom.

Carla's pedagogical identity was initially formed by her experiences with teachers committed to taking care of her; these acts of love provided her with the foundations to seek the transformation of student teachers through experiences in spaces of mutual care: a loving democratic community full of dialogue (Freire, 1996). She seems to have experienced this love in different ways, and these were transformative experiences for her (Fine, 2007; Freire, 1987). Experiencing a pedagogy of love as a student provided her with a platform to build trust, care, and empathy for others, creating 'a world in which it will be easier to love' (Freire 1987, p. 24).

In contrast, her experiences as a student teacher were teacher-centred. Carla's initial teacher training, focused in a sporting-biomedical approach, did not give her any

space to think about the contexts and the people she would be teaching. It was a generic training, based on the assumption of the existence of a ‘universal human’, that did not offer familiarity to the reality, and left her with neither concrete experiences nor with proximity to the future communities where she would apply her professional knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

The journey to the untested feasibility

Carla then, took a further step to her own liberation. As evidence of a critical educator moving towards freedom, she embraced a PhD trajectory looking for new teaching approaches that could bring meaningful answers for her communities (Lugueti et al., 2017, 2019). It was during her research training at Universidade de São Paulo when she clearly perceived that teaching-centred approaches did not provide answers while working with vulnerable hard-to-reach youth; facing this limit-situation (Freire, 1987; Freire, 2016), she undertook historical actions (or limit-actions) to create the social conditions to favour liberation (Giroux, 2011b; Freire, 1987). She was on the pathway to build the *untested feasibility*, ‘the future which we have yet to create by transforming today’ (Shor and Freire, 1987, p. 153).

Carla’s next step was to challenge herself and her pedagogies, as a PETE educator, in engrained and actual situations of oppression (Freire, 1987). This was experienced during a two-years long Participatory Action Research project with her PE student-teachers in Guarujá, an experience she reckons as by far her life’s most meaningful pedagogical challenge.

With a critical dialogical framework, the project aimed to assist marginalized youth using sports as means to engage them to become conscious of their community’s social and educational inequalities. Yet, Carla’s narrative is evidence that she and her PETE students crafted a learning community embedded with a critical pedagogy of

love. The project became a space for learning and dialogue; the student teachers were forming their own theories that were embedded in the practice and in the reflection over their practices (Freire, 2016).

A relevant point that threads through Carla's narrative is the strong bonds that were formed among this learning community. She confirms that they enjoyed each other's company and, moreover, she expresses how much they 'valued the importance of this interpersonal relationship to the learning and change'. It is at this stage that she shows that she did not meet her students as a 'disembodied spirit' (hooks, 1994, p. 193) delivering theoretical models; as a PETE educator, she had the courage to give entirely of herself, understanding the personal and social challenges of her students, and bringing to the teaching space the quality of care and love she received as a young student in her primary years. The passion and love that she demonstrated is a form of energy that merges theory and practice, inspiring students and enabling the classroom to become 'a dynamic place where transformations in social relations are concretely actualized' (hooks, 1994, p. 195).

Carla's narrative is evidence of the power of a critical dialogical pedagogy of love to create communities within PETE programs that are capable of building their own consciousness in their struggles for social justice.

A Freirean wake up: Carla's response to Jorge

Jorge's teaching experiences draw upon the Freirean concepts of reading the world with the students by creating a democratic space for reflection and action (Freire, 1987). In the reflections of the First Act, Jorge describes how he came to the realisation that his teaching should not be reduced to a teaching method or transmission of knowledge as found in a banking education perspective (Freire, 1987). Rather, his teaching should be viewed as an educational philosophy whereby a teacher concerned

with questions of justice, democracy and ethics creates spaces for social change. Jorge created a class environment where his students became active participants rather than passive listeners. Jorge allowed himself to read the world together *with* his students and created spaces *with* them to rewrite their own stories (Freire, 1987). His pedagogy connected learning to social change, which challenges students to critically engage with the world so they can act on it (Freire, 2005; Giroux, 2011).

Enabling social change through the language of hope

‘Sleepy’ students are part of the reality of Brazilian university and sometimes teacher educators blame them for that behaviour. I remember being in meetings in Universities, where the main theme was the poor quality of the students in night classes, their lack of interest and engagement. Most of the PETE courses in Brazil have classes at night. In terms of socio-economic status, most students are from working class backgrounds and live in socially disadvantaged communities. Jorge describes how he recognized the immense potential of his students. They are students who work all day and attend university with the hope of social change. They are students who carry an immense perspective of knowledge and vision of the world. By creating a democratic space of reflection and action, Jorge provided students with the skills and knowledge to take responsibility for intervening in the world: a language of hope (Freire, 1987, 1996, 2005). Hope for Freire, reflected in Jorge’s classes, is a practice of moral imagination that enables teachers and students to think in order to act in the interest of justice, equality and freedom (Giroux, 2011).

Jorge also describes the challenges he faced when engaging in critical pedagogy in higher education. Although he experienced radical democratic spaces, he was trying to emulate a positivist, scientific and content-based approach in the beginning of his career. It reminded me of the challenges that I faced, and I am still facing as an early career

academic when engaging in critical pedagogy in higher education. In his first classes, Jorge describes how his students barely remained awake when they were not engaged in the decisions of the class. It challenged him to move from a traditional conception of learners as subordinate to the expert lecturer, to a democratic space aimed at developing critical thinkers and critical beings in the world (Freire, 2005). Jorge learned and I am still learning to be in that space, whereby listening to and trusting students are valuable and important skills (Oliver et al., 2015) when we attempt to equalize power between teacher and students. As described by Freire, hope is a necessary ingredient and that its opposite, despair, leaves no room for activism or movement because of the sense of the overwhelming power of the obstacles in our way as educators (Freire, 2005). Hope creates room for movement, for possibilities to create different outcomes, whereas despair simply shuts them down. Jorge understood that teachers should stimulate creativity and imagination in their students as well as the capacity to better critique surroundings and, thus, challenge inequity and injustice.

Critical pedagogy in action: the researchers' circles

The cultural circles (Freire, 1987, 2016) was the key pedagogical strategy in Jorge's classes. He mentions that the sleepy faces from the early nights of the course were replaced by engagement and collective actions. Furthermore, this engagement extended beyond the classroom. The researchers' circles created by Jorge offered ways to rethink higher education as a practice of freedom (Freire, 1987; Giroux, 2011). He modelled democratic spaces of reflection in order to empower the students and himself to develop a critically conscious understanding of their relationships with the world (Freire, 1987, 2005). Jorge's narrative shows us how teachers and students together can develop greater consciousness of the historical process through their effort to name and change the world (Darder, 2017). In that sense, pedagogy should connect learning to social change, a

project that challenges both teachers and students to critically engage with the world so they can act on it.

Hope and future directions

In this paper, we have explored the challenges, struggles and pleasures that we, as PETE educators, faced in understanding and enacting critical pedagogy in Brazil. We analysed two different narratives of engaging with critical pedagogy in order to bring social justice to the classroom and beyond. This paper extends what we know in the field of PETE (Ovens et al., 2018; Philpot, 2016; Schenker et al., 2019; Walton-Fisette & Sutherland, 2018) by exploring how PETE educators conceptualize and practice critical pedagogy using a Freirean approach in Brazil. As described by Schenker et al. (2019), teaching about social justice varies from one context to another because marginalised groups may differ as well as the strategies for acting on the inequities. The dialogical experiences narrated in this paper offer opportunities for this reflection, particularly in regards of contextualization (rather than generalization) of research and pedagogies in order to create pedagogical concepts that are immersed in the local teaching and cultural practices (Freire, 1987).

Different life pathways supported our experience of democratic practices embedded in critical pedagogies in the lives of our students. All these practices were inspired by our teachers' and lecturers' sense of social justice based on Freire's critical pedagogy. The four themes that emerged from our narratives (e.g., becoming a critical educator: the *conscientização* process, the journey to the untested feasibility, enabling social change through the language of hope and critical pedagogy in action: the researchers' circles) clearly demonstrate the impact of a Freirean lens in how we conceptualized and practiced critical pedagogy. On the one hand, there is the early

career academic who, having experienced inspirational and loving teachers during her initial experiences as a student, dared herself to promote trust and love among her students. She found herself embedded in a transformative social context where her own and the students' voices were finally acknowledged by the institutional powers that be. On the other hand, there is the senior academic who, questioning his initial practices, allowed himself to test democracy in the classroom, and came to realize that being off the stage and opening true dialogue is a powerful tool to increase students' engagement and social participation in and beyond the classroom. This is a realization that, rather than being a teaching method, critical pedagogy arises as students and teachers work to name, critique and negotiate or transform oppressive norms and other self-identified barriers to social emancipation (Freire, 1987, 1998b). In this sense, critical pedagogy is not a teaching method that can be applied regardless of context; it is the outcome of struggles and is always related to the specificity of particular contexts, students, communities, and resources.

The methodology we constructed in this paper is embedded in a radical view of critical pedagogy and democracy within PETE research. The case study narrative writing process and the further Freirean dialogue between us is an innovative research design that can bring relevant insights to the PETE field, contextualizing the construction of our identities. These insights are even more relevant because both PETE educators have experienced critical pedagogy within disadvantaged communities. It is different from most of the literature in PETE that assesses predominantly white, middle-class student teachers in Western countries (Clark, 2019; O'Sullivan, 2018).

We hope our narratives are useful in contemporary universities which, while politically different from Brazil, are facing similar regulatory regimes. An additional challenge for critical PETE educators is the process of adjusting critical pedagogy of

love and hope in the context of the contemporary corporate and neoliberal environments of universities across the world. PETE educators are confronted with expectations to achieve measurable results in the form of students' evaluations and neoliberal productivity tables, which challenge their freedom to deliver pedagogies based on true dialogue and meaningful relationships among participants in the teacher education space (Shelley and McCuaig, 2018). We argue that for educators to claim to be truly critical, they will need to embrace this conflict and work with their students to generate new pedagogies to enlarge the space for radical democratic pedagogies within the corporate university.

As we write this paper, Brazilian education is suffering an unprecedented attack. In addition to an increase of funding withdrawal for public education that threatens the very existence of public schools and universities, right wing political parties and movements have been making persistent attempts to demonize teachers and teaching. Their educational policies and practices are based on an eradication of Freirean ideas and any critical thinking from Brazilian schools. For example, teachers who teach anything related to gender, social justice or diversity are being filmed and harassed online by the 'anti-Freirean' patrols. Teachers and teacher educators feel that they do not have any power to deliver their classes without risking their professional positions. When considering this political context, the dialogical practices presented here become even more relevant. They present educators with political tools to enhance democracy within and outside their educational environments. Freire's philosophy gives hope and empowers critical educators to fulfil the political promise of critical pedagogy to help prepare new generations of active critical citizens.

Our narratives provide the opportunity to reflect on these current events and possibilities of critical pedagogy in Brazilian tertiary education system. There are

challenges for academics to further engage with Freire's dialogical pedagogies. These challenges are all interrelated: on a first look they appear to be more connected to structural problems, but they certainly are linked to personal, cultural and political issues that have always permeated our academic lives and are entrenched in current contexts of Brazilian universities. The arrival in the past decades of critical and democratic pedagogies encourages democratic PETE educators, particularly in a field that historically has been dominated by acritical modes of teaching delivery and training. With our research and practices, we ally with Paulo Freire in the hope that these pedagogies will help our Brazilian PETE colleagues to find the love and the strength they need to fight for democracy in this obscurantist period of the country's history.

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