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A transformative learning journey of a teacher educator in enacting an activist approach in Physical Education Teacher Education

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Dr. Carla Luguetti is a Lecturer in Health and Physical Education at Victoria University. Dr' Luguetti's line of research focuses on topics of sport pedagogy and social justice. Over the past seven years, she has focused on understanding activist approaches within sporting contexts. Specifically, her line of research aims at co-creating activist sport pedagogical approaches for working diverse youth. The intent is to use sport as a vehicle for assisting youth to become critically aware of their communities' social issues. Although Dr. Luguetti in an early career researcher, she has a significant publication track record in collaboration with researchers from all over the globe (US, UK, Australia, Sweden, and South America).

Dr. Kim Oliver is a Professor of Physical Education Teacher Education at New Mexico State University. Dr. Oliver has published widely in the field of physical education and education in general. Dr. Oliver's line of research stems from developing and studying curricular topics and instructional strategies for teaching aspects of health-related physical education to adolescent girls. Working in the traditions of feminist, critical, and activist research and pedagogies, her interest is in learning how teachers can assist girls in exploring, critiquing, and transforming personal and cultural barriers that hinder their well being. Specifically, her research focuses on helping adolescent girls learn to explore, critique, and transform personal and cultural barriers that limit their health and physical activity opportunities. Dr. Oliver has also developed an activist approach to teaching physical education and has shared this approach in Scotland, Norway, across the United States, and in her courses.

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A transformative learning journey of a teacher educator in enacting an activist approach in Physical Education Teacher Education

Over the past decades, a body of scholarship has highlighted the benefits of an activist approach in Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE). This body of research shows that an activist approach enables teacher educators, student teachers, and young people to work together in order to become conscious of the power structures in society that lead to social inequities. Although we have a body of research on social justice and critical pedagogy in PETE, there is much to learn about physical education teacher educators' learning journeys in enacting activist approaches. By using a critical autoethnography approach, this study explores a transformative learning journey experienced by the lead author in enacting an activist approach based on young people's voices. The PETE educator's learning journey emerged from the reflexive process in the last eight years with the second author. A critical theoretical framework based on critical pedagogy and feminist studies is employed to discuss the transformative learning journey presented in this paper. By establishing a collective meaning, we aim to provide rich instances of critical pedagogies that add to the project of identifying various approaches to social justice in PETE contexts. This is a relevant story to PETE practitioners who might be attempting to take a critical stance in contemporary university contexts.

Keywords: activist approaches; teacher educator; social justice; student-centered pedagogy

Introduction and Theoretical Perspectives

The inspiration for this article emerged from my experience in trying to enact an activist approach in Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) in a new country. At the time of writing this paper, I am a lecturer in health and physical education in Australia. When I first started in academia, I had not thought about how an activist approach would become part of who I am as a PETE educator. In my continually transformative learning journey, this approach challenged my beliefs and ways of seeing the world. I decided to invite my mentor Kim[1] [second author] to write this paper aimed at understanding the complexities of my transformative learning journey. This paper presents pivotal moments which caused a change in my perspective/beliefs about young people and the activist approach to teaching. Our reflexive process started eight years ago, during my Ph.D., and it has been nurtured in our weekly meetings ever since. This article explores the transformative learning journey I have experienced in enacting an activist approach based on young people's voices. I employed critical autoethnography as the methodology to think deeply about my experiences, based on my obligation to engage in critical praxis (Freire, 1987, 1996), a core principle to being an activist educator (Authors, 2017, 2018).

Over the years, activist researchers have focused on learning to listen and respond to young people in order to better challenge the status quo in PETE (Enright & O'Sullivan, 2012; Fisette, 2011; Oliver & Kirk, 2015; Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013). Activist approaches challenge and change power relations in education, revealing how complicated power dynamics are in the reality of classrooms, and affirming Cook-Sather's recommendation to 'take small steps toward changing oppressive practices even if complete change seems or is unattainable' (2002, p. 6). At the heart of activist approaches is a commitment to listening and pedagogically responding to the needs and interests of a diverse student population in localized contexts (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013). It is aimed at creating spaces for empowering young people, student teachers, and teacher educators to develop a critically conscious understanding of their relationships with the world (Freire, 1987, 2005). In this sense, education is connected with social change: a mission that challenges all participants to critically engage with the world so they can act in it (Freire, 2005; Giroux, 2011).

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[1] In this paper, Kim and I understand mentoring through a feminist lens where mentor-mentee relationships are co-created and collaborative dynamic (McIntyre & Lykes, 1998). Critiquing the hierarchical model of mentoring or the mother-daughter mentoring relationships, we agree with McIntyre and Lykes (1998) that mentoring is both a slippery and provocative process but committed to challenging social justice issues by being women with varying degrees of power and privilege.

In this paper, we draw on an activist approach that is grounded in feminist theories (Anzaldúa, 2007; Fine, 2007; hooks, 2000) and critical pedagogies (Freire, 1987, 1998); utilizing Student Centered Inquiry *as* Curriculum (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013) as a way of working with marginalized populations. This approach emerged from 24 years of activist research with marginalized young people in physical education settings whereby we collectively worked with them to create curricula or programs that better met their needs and interests (e.g., Authors, 1999, 2000, 2009, 2005, 2019). The approach was designed as a means of listening and responding to young people to better facilitate students' interest, motivation, and learning in physical education (PE) settings.

We have seen numerous benefits of implementing this approach in a variety of settings in order to better meet the diverse needs of young people (Lamb, Oliver, & Kirk, 2018; Nuñez Enriquez & Oliver, 2020; Walseth, Engebretsen, & Elvebakk, 2018). For instance, we have evidence of better facilitating girls' engagement and enjoyment in PE in the US (Oliver, Hamzeh, & McCaughtry, 2009), Scotland (Lamb et al., 2018) and Norway (Walseth et al., 2018) as well as in after school sport contexts (Nuñez Enriquez & Oliver, 2020) and non-governmental organizations (Luguetti, Oliver, Dantas, & Kirk, 2017b, 2017a). In PETE, we have seen benefits of implementing this activist approach in order to challenge student teachers' stereotypes and assumptions when they face a collision between what they thought they knew and what they were experiencing in their work with young people (Luguetti & Oliver, 2019; Oliver, Luguetti, Aranda, Nuñez Enriquez, & Rodriguez, 2017; Oliver et al., 2015). These collisions created a space for their assumptions about teaching, learning, and young people to be challenged and renegotiated; providing ways of looking at the particulars, individuals, and specific situations in localized contexts.

Several studies have analysed how PETE educators conceptualize and practice critical pedagogy without necessarily including young people's voices (Cameron, 2014; Fernádez-Balboa, 1995; Lynch & Curtner-Smith, 2019; Ovens, 2014). Those studies analysed the challenges PETE educators faced when working with student teachers. For example, Fernádez-Balboa (1995) in his autoethnographic study discussed how PETE could become critical and liberating. Through self-study, Ovens (2014) and Cameron (2014) explored the challenges of enacting a critical pedagogy in New Zealand and Canada, and pronounced struggles to negotiate power relations with their student teachers.

Acknowledging those previous studies, we believe that there is a need to explore the transformative learning journey PETE educators face when enacting an activist approach that considers young people's voices. Few studies have analysed how PETE educators conceptualize and practice activist approaches considering young people's voices (Luguetti & McLachlan, 2019; Nuñez Enriquez & Oliver, 2020; Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013; Oliver et al., 2015). In these studies, the authors have argued that PETE educators should challenge their stereotypes and assumptions about the students they are working with. For example, when some student teachers believe they need to 'help' or 'save' a student that is different from them, as described by Ladson-Billings (2000) and McIntyre (2006).

While advocacy for activist approaches has grown over the years (Hill et al., 2018; Schenker et al., 2019), there is little research that aims to understand the transformative learning journey PETE educators face when conceptualizing and practicing activist approaches based on young people’s voices. Through using the work of Paulo Freire (1987, 1996, 2005) and Black and Chicana feminists (Anzaldúa, 2007; hooks, 1994, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2009), this study explores a transformative learning journey experienced by the lead author in enacting an activist approach based on young people’s voices. This paper specifically focuses on the pivotal moments in the lead author’s experience that changed her perspective/beliefs about young people and the activist approach to teaching. This is a relevant story to PETE educators who might be attempting to take an activist approach in contemporary university contexts because it illuminates some of the struggles they might encounter.

Methods

We have utilized critical autoethnography as the methodology through which to gain access to the contours of the lead author’s transformative learning journey in enacting an activist approach based on young people’s voices. Inherent in critical autoethnography is a critical examination of power, culture, and social processes, and how people navigate these systems (Fernández, 2018). Critical autoethnography differs from conventional autoethnography because of its explicit focus on issues of power which therefore allows for both a personal critique and a cultural critique within wider societal structures and systems of domination (Lynch & Kuntz, 2019).

Context and Participants

As a Brazilian PETE educator teaching health and physical education in a university located in Australia, I [lead author] always considered myself as the ‘other’ or someone who represents diversity. I remember my childhood and the economic difficulties we faced. I remember when 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 my mother's salary went to pay for school for my sister and I had the privilege of studying in one of the best schools in the city. I was a poor girl in a rich school. I experienced democratic and caring spaces not only as a student but also in the position of a teacher/coach/lecturer. I had teachers and coaches who listened and responded to my concerns, attending my emotional needs. As an act of solidarity, they worked with me in understanding the barriers I was facing, helping me to negotiate those barriers. I attended a Catholic school[2] in the 90s and 2000s, and this experience impacted my worldview, making me believe in the power of education in the creation of spaces of social transformation. I negotiated the struggles I faced in my childhood and adolescence by means of care and solidarity. I then became a PE teacher/coach at the school where I graduated, progressing to become a lecturer.

When I became a teacher/lecturer/researcher, I didn't have any idea of how to put my beliefs into practice. I started to understand the importance of an activist approach during my Ph.D. in 2012, when I met Kim [second author] and she taught me how to work with young people in these ways (see Authors, 2017a). I saw the value of using a student-centered pedagogy to help create empowering places for young people. Through this process, I began to find a way to put my beliefs into practice. An activist approach helped me to connect learning with social change: a way to develop a consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies and learn to read as part of a broader struggle for justice and democracy (Freire, 2005). In the last eight years, I have worked with diverse student teachers and diverse young people by exploring activist approaches based on young people's voices. Nowadays, as a Brazilian PETE educator living in Australia with English as my second language, I consider myself a diverse PETE educator, passionate about creating spaces for social change.

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[2] Some Brazilian Catholic schools were influenced by liberation theology which was a movement that combined Catholic precepts with a concept of education for freedom.

Kim was my mentor. She accepted supervising my Ph.D. without being my first supervisor or linked with the institution where I was studying at that time. She did this because of her commitment to learning more about how people become activist educators. We always saw the mentoring process through a feminist lens where our relationships were co-created and dynamically collaborative (McIntyre & Lykes, 1998). We were both committed to social justice issues and that was the start of our mentor-mentee relationship. As a full professor teaching physical education pedagogy in a university located on the US/Mexico border, she was always committed to accommodating differences. Kim has been an expert in activist approaches for more than 24 years (see Authors, 2015). Her role as a mentor and co-researcher allowed the challenge of assumptions, confrontation of realities, and identification of new ways of thinking about practice in its various forms. She was someone who could ask provocative questions, contribute and examine data from another lens and offer a critique of my transformative learning journey in enacting an activist approach based on young people's voices. She was also passionate about working with others interested in learning this approach, particularly those committed to working with marginalized populations in some capacity.

The weekly Skype meetings with my mentor

Our stories intertwined eight years ago, where Kim and I meet for the first time. Since 2012, we have talked via Skype weekly or fortnightly about the challenges and benefits I have faced in enacting an activist approach as well as the issues of power that allowed for both a personal critique and a cultural critique within wider societal structures and systems of domination. We always include our Skype meetings in the methodologies of the articles we write together as a way of peer debriefing and assisting with progressive data analysis. In our Skype meetings, I always shared the challenges and facilitators in implementing the activist approach in the context I was working, and we collectively brainstormed ideas to overcome the challenges and planned for upcoming sessions with young people, coaches or student teachers (for more information, see Authors, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b). In 2015-2016, I spent a year doing a postdoctoral study with Kim, and our meetings became more frequent (3-4 times per week). With different intensities, Kim has always been present in my learning trajectory for the past eight years. Our frequent conversations have created a safe space where I have been able to show my vulnerabilities and critically analyze who I have become as a PETE educator.

In the last eight years, I have facilitated activist approaches in Brazil, the United States, and Australia (see a summary of studies in Table 1). Although I facilitated an activist approach in different contexts until 2015, my experience with PETE and activist approach began in 2015 with my postdoctoral degree with Kim. I was able to observe how Kim enacted an activist approach in her PETE context. In PETE, I facilitated two studies: one in Brazil with a university-community partnership in 2017/2018 and one in a PETE unit in Australia (2019).

[Insert Table 1]

Since 2013, the meetings with Kim have followed a similar routine. At first, we talk about personal things and how we feel at that moment. For example, we ask each other about our families and our work and ponder about when we might get to see each other again. Secondly, we talk about the challenges and facilitators we experience in the projects in which we are involved. I usually present a summary of my experiences with student teachers and young people and Kim offers suggestions and helps me to broaden my perspectives of future actions. In these moments I share my anxieties and fears. Finally, we plan how to respond to the challenges and brainstorm possible solutions.

For this specific paper, Kim and I were intrigued by the following research question: What were the pivotal moments where my perspective/beliefs shifted in relation to my understanding of young people and how to implement an activist approach? Our protocol emerged: initially, we organised five online meetings (60 minutes each) where we discussed my learning trajectories, trying to refine the details and concepts presented there. We discussed the following topics chronologically: (a) Phase 1 (2012-2014): my Ph.D., and how I changed in perspective/beliefs about young people; (b) Phase 2 (2015-2015): my postdoctoral study and how I challenged my perspective/beliefs about an activist approach in PETE programs; (c) Phase 3 (2016-2017): experiences of applying the activist approach in a PETE program in Brazil and how I changed in perspective/beliefs about working with student teachers; and (d) Phase 4 (2018-2020): my experiences in applying an activist approach in a PETE program in Australia and how I understood and challenged my assumptions in working in a neoliberal system.

In those meetings, I would tell my story highlighting pivotal moments where I believe I changed, and Kim would weave her experience and knowledge throughout. In addition to our memories, we also used the paper published in each of those phases to discuss the pivotal moments (see Authors, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b). Although the papers described the challenges and benefits of enacting an activist approach, they helped us to remember my learning trajectory, and consequently, the pivotal moments. After each of the five meetings, I sent Kim the first draft of my narrative for each phase and she added comments to challenge my thoughts. An important highlight of these conversations is that they identify the dynamic social settings where they happened.

Findings

Finding ways of working that align with my beliefs

I started my journey to develop my activist methodological perspective without any idea of how it would transform me. I wanted to work with young people from socially vulnerable backgrounds, but I did not know why or how this would ultimately help me grow personally and professionally. In 2012, I remember when I met Kim for the first time, and I started to read one of her most cited papers: 'Las ninas pueden jugar tambien' or 'Girly girls can play games'. Although it is such a powerful paper, I could not relate to what Kim wrote. I was not a 'girly girl' and I always could access places where 'girls' could not access. I was always a high skilled girl that the boys wanted on their soccer team. It was the only advantage of being a poor girl in a rich school. I remember playing soccer barefoot at my school and never leaving the court. If my team lost, the other team would invite me to play again. I would also complain if we had to include girls in PE classes. The games were not as fun when we had girls in PE classes. I simply could not relate with the girls Kim was describing in her work. Looking back, I am sometimes ashamed of what I now see as anti-feminist. While I was purposefully resisting what Kim's work could bring to my project because it was about girls, Kim was communicating with a professor whom I had gone to work with for a 6-month period. He continued to talk with Kim about my work and continued to encourage me to reach out to her.

In addition to not understanding the 'girly girls' Kim wrote about; I also could not see the relationship between social class and gender. I asked myself 'How could the struggles girls face be related to social class issues?' I could not see how gender and social class inequities could be interrelated and how pedagogies for gender inclusion could be translated to social class. As with many urban areas in Brazil, I lived surrounded by inequality as *favelas* were side-by-side with new luxury high-rise structures: poverty and privilege live side by side. Living two blocks from the favela allowed me to grow up playing soccer and flying kites with friends who lived there. We used to play a small sided soccer game called 'gol caixote' on the streets. The posts were made with flip flops and the uneven terrain, the houses, and the people passing by rendered the game even more fun. I grew up seeing a world divided by social class. I understood that the rich people around us, 'the oppressors', believed that 'having more is an inalienable right, a right they acquired through their own effort, with their courage to take risks' (Freire, 1987, p. 59). They believed that we did not have more because we were incompetent and lazy. I learned that the oppressed were not the 'problem'. However, I also learned the power of hegemonic discourses that normalize disadvantages and reinforce inequalities (Freire, 1987). I was the poor girl at the rich kids' school, and I had to do something about it.

Research emerged as a possibility to create spaces for social transformation. As a Ph.D. student, I wanted to create spaces for social transformation. It was 5 months after I met Kim, while I was re-reading her papers on a train to London, that I first 'felt something' (without any rational explanation at that time) about how her way of working would help me. I emailed Kim and she accepted to guide me on a journey that I did not have any idea what it would be. I took the risk to let her show me something I have never experienced before. In my Ph.D., I had weekly Skype meetings with Kim. Kim would ask lots of questions, trying to understand where I was hoping to go in my work. She would offer suggestions of possibilities of how I might work with both young people and their coaches[3].

Starting to value young people's voices was a pivotal moment in my journey as a PETE educator. I struggled to understand that I could not privilege one form of knowledge over any of the others. Specifically, I valued both theoretical knowledge and coaches' knowledge more than I valued the young people’s knowledge. Kim was continually helping me to see how developing an activist approach would look different than a teacher-centred way of working. My background in teacher-centred pedagogies was a barrier to valuing young people’s voices. Kim consistently brought me back to young people’s voices, showing me how to move forward while maintaining their centrality. Kim could not tell me that young people’s knowledge was important, but rather helped me to see the value in young people's voices. She did this by encouraging me back to consider youth voice over and over again. It took me a long time to understand and trust that every kind of knowledge (theories, adults’ knowledge, young people’s knowledge, researchers’ knowledge) was important in an activist way of working. It took time to understand and centralize students’ voices, something that Kim continued to ‘push’ in as many ways as she could imagine. It was after 11 weeks working with the young people in my Ph.D., trying to trust what Kim was saying but all the while having certain reservations, that I said to Kim: ‘Oh my goodness, the kids have the answers’ (Authors, 2018a, p. 886).

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[3] In my Ph.D., the participants included two researchers, 17 boys (ages 13-15), four coaches, a pedagogical coordinator (responsible for supervising and organizing education and training programs), and a social worker. All participants besides the researchers were considered as co-researchers (for more information see Authors, 2018a)

Kim did not actually roll her eyes at me, but I am sure she wanted to as she laughed out loud. Now I was ready to hear what she and the young people were trying to tell me. What I still find curious is why Kim spent so much time with me despite my resistance to much of what she was saying. I wonder now whether she knew at the time from her experience working with both young people and student teachers in these ways, that this type of work is time-consuming and people have to come to it in their own way and on their own timeline. Activist research is an invitation to work in collaboration for the good of all. It took me a while to accept that invitation. Had she given up on me because it took me so long to see, I may in return have given up on the youth, never getting to the point where I was able to re-tune (Cook-Sather, 2006) my ears to hear and redirect my actions in response. My cautiousness and initial resistance in learning to value students’ voices also helps me better understand why some young people maybe be reluctant to trust me, and in turn, I must give them time in the same ways Kim gave me time.

Living an activist approach with Kim and with young people and their coaches helped me to understand my beliefs and how I could align my pedagogical practices to those beliefs. I wanted to create spaces for young people from socially vulnerable backgrounds to be whatever they wanted to be. I wanted to do it because it is my story. It happened to me. I learned that student-voice would be a way of working that could help to create those spaces. I learned that the activist approach would create spaces for young people to name, critique, and transform social injustices. I also learned that it would take time and patience and persistence, just like it did for me. This was important insofar as I am not typically a patient person and I want results instantly. You will not get quick fixes with an activist approach. I am grateful that Kim modeled this patience in her work with me so that I could in return be patient with those with whom I worked.

How can I do it in a PETE program?

In 2015/2016, I had an opportunity to do a postdoctoral study with Kim on the US/Mexico border. I experienced how an activist approach would work in a PETE program that had limited resources and only one tenure track faculty and one college instructor. I was observing Kim’s secondary PE methods class where student teachers had the opportunity to experience this approach in practice with local high school youth. In the three hour-class twice a week, we had half in the university and half in a high school close to the university. We used an activist approach as a way of assisting young people to value the physically active life. I could see how student teachers challenged their perceptions of young people after a semester working in these ways with Kim. They started to understand that young people could be sources of knowledge. I was astonished by the possibility of using this approach with student teachers in a PETE program.

A pivotal moment that emerged in this experience was when I started to see gender inequities in my pedagogical practices. Kim and her students (including myself) decided to study how educators, in different contexts, learn to use an activist approach[4]. We had weekly meetings to discuss the challenges and facilitators of learning an activist approach. We were all teaching in different contexts (PE, PETE, and school sport). I was teaching with a doctoral student in an after-school sports club. This club was created to offer middle school students an opportunity to engage in sports and games. It was the second week of the sports club and there was an equal number of girls and boys in the club. I was teaching them small-sided games. Kim and a college instructor were observing me, and both identified quickly that the girls were not being included. They began counting the number of times the boys touched the ball (32) vs. the girls (10). In our weekly meetings, Kim asked me three different times whether I noticed anything about the gender dynamic. I did not notice the gender dynamics in my class. I think I could not see it because of my background as a high skilled girl in PE. I had to see Kim's data to believe I was reproducing gender inequities. Although Kim would always discuss gender inequities in PE, I had to see myself to believe. I had to live someone documenting very specifically how I perpetuated these inequities before I could understand.

Through this experience, I learned the importance of embedding the activist approach in different units and in the school placement (Authors, 2018b). In addition to this, the opportunity to have weekly meetings made me believe in the power of an activist approach in PETE programs. I could see how an activist approach was not just changing my beliefs, but also other teachers' and student teachers' beliefs. The weekly meetings were a safe space where we could discuss our challenges, assumptions, and brainstorm ways to negotiate them. I learned the importance of having a learning community to negotiate teachers' identities. I learned that our identities within the learning communities either connected or clashed with our cultural values and beliefs and this influenced our pedagogical decisions. That is because teachers do not only teach in the way they do because of skills or lack of skills; their teaching is also rooted in their backgrounds, biographies, and in the kinds of teachers they have become (their careers, their hopes. and dreams, their opportunities and aspirations)[5]. I learned the importance of observing others and talking about what we were seeing and not seeing. I began to understand that was okay to feel uncomfortable in these conversations because it was here that we had the potential for growth.

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[4] In this study. participants included a university professor (Kim), a college instructor, a postdoctoral student (myself), a doctoral student, and a student teacher (for more information, see Authors 2018b).

In 2016, I went back to Brazil motivated to implement these ideas in my PETE program. I was teaching in two private universities in Brazil. Brazil has a mixed system of public and private funded universities. Public universities are federally funded or financed by State governments and private universities are mostly for-profit. I was teaching students in private universities, mostly on night-only courses. I had fifty to seventy students in each of my classes and school placement was not valued and organized independently based on students' interests. I could not see an activist approach in my classes, and I had no policy of student supervision of school placement. So, I decided to create a community-based engagement intervention. This is one of the things I like most about an activist approach, it is designed to be context-specific and its processes are meant to be tailored to the needs of the people. As such, I contacted the manager of the community engagement program to explain the objectives, and methodology of the research. In 2017, the manager agreed to run a Sport and Empowerment class for local young people. We invited young people from two schools in the university's neighborhood to participate in this project. After school, the young people came to the university for this class taught by student teachers from the university who volunteered to participate in the project. Although this Sport and Empowerment course was not linked to any unit in the student teachers' university training program, it was the only way I could create an opportunity for student teachers to enact an activist approach in practice.

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[5] We acknowledge that those aspects are related to PE teacher habitus and how it affects pedagogy and practice. Bourdieu's habitus has been applied extensively within the field of PE research (Aldous & Brown, 2010).

A pivotal moment in this project was when I realised I wanted my student teachers to be where I was[6]. I was impatient because they were not getting the activist approach in six months. I was observing my student teachers in their first lesson leading the activities after observing me delivering an activist approach for six months. I was frustrated because they were completely lost in that class. They could barely organize young people. They finished the class exhausted, and I recognized in their eyes the feeling of 'we survived!' At that moment I realized that not only would I need to help them to understand an activist approach, but also, I would need to help them discover themselves as teachers. I was asking the student teachers to teach something that they did not understand fully. They saw me doing it, but it was not enough for them to learn how to do it themselves. I had no patience for them to live this experience as I had lived in my previous years. It was clear that the activist approach was not natural for my student teachers in the same way that it was not natural for me at the beginning.

Although I had 11 years of experience as a PETE educator, I started this community engagement project as a novice since I had never been involved in a project where my students and I could create a democratic space for learning and reflection. 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 created an identity as a group. My colleagues did not value the community-based engagement intervention to prepare student teachers because it was so far outside of what they knew as educators. We were valued by the community, but not by the university. Kim helped me realize that this is not at all uncommon when you are working against the status quo.

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[6] In this study, participants included 10 student teachers, 90 youth, and two researchers (myself and Kim). For more information see Authors (2018b).

Resisting in a neoliberal PETE space

I arrived in Australia in 2018 and I started to design a unit called Adolescent Health. I had no doubts about designing this unit using an activist approach. I now had seen the relative power of this approach with young people and student teachers alike and I was confident that I could figure out how to make it work in my new context. This unit was for second-year students from health education and sport science and aimed to investigate the impact of physical, cognitive, psychological, and social perspectives on adolescent health and wellbeing. The university was the first Australian one to use a 'block' model of learning, where the students' study one unit (subject) at a time every four weeks. Each unit has three, three-hour, face-to-face teaching sessions per week, scheduled over three days. The 'block' model focuses on interactive learning and group work with small size classes (max 35 students). I designed the unit so that we would interview a group of grade 9 students (ages 14 to 15 years old) regarding their feelings during PE, physical activity and health barriers they face to be healthy, changes they wanted in PE and Sport, and what they wanted to know more about regarding health (Building the Foundation Phase). Given what we learned during Building the Foundation Phase, the students had to study the topics that emerged on the analyses of the young people's voices. We delivered a health expo[7] to the same group of students we interviewed.

A pivotal moment in this study was my struggle to understand the complexities of teaching in a neoliberal context and the power of an activist approach in this context[8]. In a neoliberal context, education has been held hostage to market-driven modes of accountability (Giroux, 2011). This mode of ideology and teaching stifles critical thought, reducing citizenship to the act of consuming, defining certain marginal populations as contaminated and disposable, and removing the discourse of democracy (Darder, 2017; Giroux, 2011). In that sense, education has transformed into 'a market commodity that can be controlled, bartered, and sold, without transparency or substantive regulation against the capriciousness of capital' (Darder, 2017, p.2). The university where I work is considered a non-selective one. So, the students experienced the neoliberal system in Australian schools, but they were not always 'successful' in that system. The apparent disbelief in education possibly produces the feeling that education is not the priority for most of them. I understood the complexity of the value of the assessment in a neoliberal system. For my students, the assessment was always more important than learning and not necessarily linked. However, within an activist approach, learning and assessment must both be present – one cannot exist without the other. My lack of understanding of neoliberal contexts initially led me to blame the students for not valuing me or my unit. I had to learn that my students expected the banking concept of education (Freire, 1987, 2005) and that these expectations were shaping their responses to the Adolescent Health unit, and consequently some of their behavior.

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[7] Health expo was a two hours activity where students rotated in ten interactive stands on an allocated health topic. Each station ran for twenty minutes in a gymnasium.

[8] This collaborative self-study explored the challenges of being and becoming an activist teacher educator in a neoliberal Australian context and how those challenges were negotiated. For more information, see Authors (2019b).

Nowadays, I struggle to continue using an activist approach in a PETE program that runs through blocks. The system makes it difficult for me to have the freedom I believe is needed to keep creating spaces for naming, critique, and transform social injustices. For example, the block system does not allow me to co-create rubrics with my students or increase the time we could spend with the kids at school. I think time is an issue in learning an activist approach and in an intensive way of teaching (33 hours in a month), I struggle to see how they learned. I am working in a neoliberal system that teaches in intense blocks and I am not clear how an activist activist approach will survive in this situation. When I think about giving up, I remember that I do not know how to teach in any other way. And what I have learned through all of this is that an activist approach was developed to be context-specific and so I must alter the approach to fit my context. What that might mean for me is still uncertain, but the value I place in the students' voice will keep me seeking ways to work. I never know when I will be placed in a situation that forces me to rethink how an activist approach can work. What I am certain of as I struggle to build communities with my students, is that these processes create opportunities for growth and so I must continue to find new ways of working as my contexts shift.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper explored my transformative learning journey in enacting an activist approach based on young people’s voices. Specifically, this paper focused on pivotal moments that led to a change in perspective/beliefs about young people and the activist approach to teaching. In this section, I discuss: (a) how my positionality influenced the enactment of an activist approach; (b) the role of a feminist mentor in the ongoing reflexive process; and (c) future studies.

Positionality and an activist approach

Unlike traditional teaching paradigms where the teacher represents ‘the expert’ who enters marginalized communities to ‘help’ or ‘save’ a student from oppressed groups, activist approaches aim to co-create knowledge with participants (Freire, 1987; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Activist approaches offer a possibility to negotiate power relations in traditional teaching. However, in negotiating some of the power relations, a teacher’s positionality becomes apparent. Teachers may have power and privilege from their class, education, racial/ethnic backgrounds, gender, sexuality, or other identity positions (hooks, 1994; Muhammad et al., 2015). It is important to highlight that while positionalities can create empowering possibilities, they also have the potential for reproducing systemic inequities and disadvantaging students (Ladson-Billings, 2009, 2014; Muhammad et al., 2015).

In this transformative learning journey, I came to understand how my positionality influenced my understanding of young people, the activist approach to teaching as well as the potential for reproducing systemic inequities. I came from an oppressed position when we consider social class: I was ‘a poor girl in a rich school’. In working with young people from socially vulnerable backgrounds, I was not there to ‘help’ or ‘save’ them because I consider myself one of them, as described by hooks (1994). For instance, I learned the power of hegemonic discourses that normalize disadvantages and reinforce social class inequalities in my childhood (Freire, 1987) and I wanted to do something about this social injustice that I experienced. Although my social class positionality motivated me to engage *with* young people from socially vulnerable backgrounds aimed at social transformation, my background teaching philosophy as teacher-centred was a barrier to genuinely valuing their voices. For example, it took 11 weeks before I started to value students’ voices through enacting an activist approach. It took me a long time to understand that knowledge is co-produced in an activist approach where teachers follow as well as lead, and students lead as well as follow, and where both learn to resist the imposition of oppressive, disempowering, and commonly accepted practices (Fine, 2007; Freire 1987; hooks, 1994).

It is important to highlight that my transformation happened in an uncomfortable space or what Anzaldúa (2007) argues as occurring in an 'in-between space.' This space of transformation, she argues, is 'an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries… being in a constant state of displacement - an uncomfortable, even alarming feeling.' (p. 15). I was always fighting to give up something. I was always 'stubborn' as Kim described me. It was an uncomfortable space essential for my *conscientização*[9] (Freire, 1987). In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks (1994) discusses the need to acknowledge pain as part of the process of developing *conscientização*. hooks relates an occasion on which a student told her that learning to look at the world from a critical standpoint led to an inability to 'enjoy life.' I had to painfully accept that I was not listening and responding to young people's voices from socially vulnerable backgrounds [my brothers and sisters] and consequently not creating spaces of social transformation.

In addition to this, I struggled to see other social injustices besides social class as well as intersectionalities with gender, race/ethnicity, disabilities, and sexuality. Intersectionality suggests that our multiple identities can be simultaneous, inter-related, and sometimes contradictory; and that oppressions shaped by these identities (e.g. sexism, racism, and homophobia) (Muhammad et al., 2015). I believe my social class positionality was contradictory to my gender positionality. For example, I believe that being 'a high skilled girl in PE' blinded me to see gender inequities in my pedagogical practices with young people. The recognition of being a teacher that reproduces gender inequities was also another painful moment in my *conscientização*. I was so ashamed when I realised I could be called anti-feminist. I believe this critical autoethnographic study invited me to recognize my positionality and the role of power and privilege that could shape how I approach this work. This critical autoethnographic created a space that involved being, or becoming, cognizant of my beliefs and positionalities by critiquing my process and journey through collaborative discussions, reflection, and reflexivity (Hawkins, 2015).

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[9] *conscientização* (in Portuguese) or critical consciousness focuses on achieving an in-depth understanding of the world, allowing for the perception and exposure of social and political contradictions. Critical consciousness also includes taking action against the oppressive elements in one's life that are illuminated by that understanding.

The role of a feminist mentor in the ongoing reflexive process

Kim and I developed a relationship of solidarity through a feminist mentoring process. As a feminist mentor, she walked with me by my side as described by hooks (1998). Although we had different positions of power, we shared the commitment to social justice which provided the foundation for engaging in reflexive practices (McIntyre & Lykes, 1998). We developed an affectionate relationship built on trust and radical love (Freire, 1987, 2005). All weekly Skype sessions started with a genuine intention to understand each other's struggles and pleasures in our personal life. It was always more than an academic relationship of mentoring; it was a feminist mentor-mentee relationship (McIntyre & Lykes, 1998). Solidarity figures prominently in Freire's book pedagogy of the oppressed as a key aspect to transforming the social and material conditions of inequality (Freire 1987). For Freire, it is a solidarity based on sharing the struggle with people, and the will to give and rethinking ourselves. Although Kim and I had different positions of power and privilege (e.g., race/ethnicity and social class), we both showed commitment with the voices and perspectives of marginalized and non-dominant positionalities/perspectives. Freire (1987, 1996) described that we are in solidarity with the 'other' only when we stop regarding the 'other' as an abstract category and see them as subjects who have been unjustly dealt with and deprived of their voice. In that sense, solidarity would happen when we stop ‘making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love’ (Freire 1987, p. 24).

Our different positionalities and positions of power created ‘mutual moments of intimacy and friendship, struggle, and contestation’ (McIntyre & Lykes, 1998, p. 431). As described in McIntyre and Lykes (1998), the fact that Kimwas ‘the professor’ and somehow responsible for ensuring that I continue my Ph.D. and postdoctoral study, generated tensions that we had to negotiate. For example, my repetitive stubbornness as a form of resistance. We were committed to a mentoring relationship based on mutual trust, a co-constructed process informed by our particular positionalities and ways of seeing the world (McIntyre & Lykes, 1998). Although the official mentoring relationship was over after my postdoctoral study, we decide to negotiate a new space for ourselves that was not defined by the professor/student relationship: the study I developed in Brazil. To be honest, I wasn’t ready to ‘cut the cord’ as described by McIntyre and Lykes (1998, p. 438). The mentor-mentee relationship in activist research is frequently messier, replete of conflicts, and power relations.

Kim has given me both her time and patience over the past eight years to mentor me and help me to see what I was not seeing. She gave herself to me in the same ways people like Rosary Lalik and Inez Rovegno gave themselves to her. The pivotal moments that I changed in perspective/beliefs about young people and the activist approach happened when I saw and/or experienced something. In all four pivotal moments in my transformative learning journey I had to see for myself before I could believe what she said: (a) when I started to value young people’s voices; (b) when I started to see gender inequities in my pedagogical practices; (c) when I realized that my student teachers would face similar challenges I was facing in learning the activist approach; (d) when I stopped blaming my students for their behavior and I understood the neoliberal contexts. For example, I had to see data from boys’ and girls’ participation in my classes to see gender inequities. The reflexive experience lived in the activist approach was essential in order to move from a deficit view of the young people and student teachers to a critical approach, relinquishing oppressive practices. Through our weekly collaborative group meetings, Kim and I reflected on my actions and dilemmas. Kim and I aspired to become part of this dialogue by critiquing our process and journey through collaborative discussions, reflection, and reflexivity.

Future studies

Future directions should continue to examine PETE educators' learning journeys in enacting an activist approach. We believe that teachers' transformation happens in action with others and teacher educators should engage in ongoing reflection and actions with their students (Freire, 1987, 2005; hooks, 1994). Our recommendations would be to explore PETE educators' learning journeys in enacting an activist approach from diverse backgrounds and positionalities. We suggest that different learning trajectories should be explored to understand how an activist approach transforms educators and how different positionalities and privileges allow or not the awareness of social injustices as well as the enactment of an activist approach. We also suggest that the role of a feminist mentor should be explored in future studies. Our recommendations would be to better understand the role of a mentor to challenge mentees' beliefs by identifying pivotal moments in their learning trajectories. As a co-created and collaborative dynamic process (McIntyre & Lykes, 1998), it would be recommended to explore the mentor's learning trajectory in future studies. For example, the mentor learning trajectory in mentoring is a slippery and provocative process. We believe that the critical reflection described in this article might invite other scholars to recognize the role of power and privilege that could shape how we approach this work; by critiquing their own process and journey through collaborative discussions, reflection, and reflexivity.

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Table 1: Summary of the studies.

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3	Study 4	Study 5
Year	2013	2015/2016	2017/2018	2019	2019
Country	Brazil	United States	Brazil	Australia	Australia
Context	Non-government organization	School sport	University-community partnership	University	Non-government organization
Participants	The lead author, 17 boys (13-15 years old), four coaches, a pedagogic coordinator, a social worker and a critical friend	The lead author, 7 young people (11-12 years old), and a doctoral student	The lead author, 110 young people (9-13 years old), 10 pre-service teachers (PST) and a critical friend	The lead author, 60 young people (13-14 years old), 25 undergrad students and a critical friend	The lead author, 15 girls (15-23 years old), 5 coaches, and insider research assistant and a critical friend
Data collection	(a) observations collected as field notes; (b) audio records of youths' work sessions; (c) audio records of coaches' work sessions; (d) combined coach and youth work sessions; and (e) meetings between the lead author and her critical friend	(a) observations collected as field notes; (b) teacher artifacts (c) weekly collaborative group meetings; (d) teacher interviews	(a) observations collected as field notes; (b) Collaborative PST group meetings; (c) PSTs reflective diaries; (d) PSTs and youth generated artifacts; and (e) PSTs and youth focus groups and interviews (f) meetings between the lead author and her critical friend	(a) lead researcher observations collected as field notes; (b) lead researcher reflective diaries after each teaching episode; (c) material produced in the lead researcher's classes; (d) meetings between the lead researcher and a critical friend	(a) observations collected as field notes; (b) audio records of youths' work sessions; (c) audio records of coaches' work sessions; (d) meetings between the lead author, a insider research assistant and a critical friend