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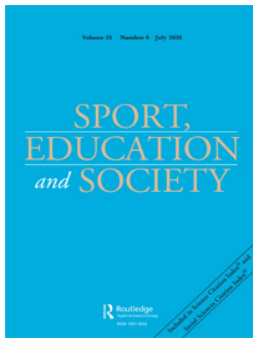
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Becoming critical in physical education: a Freirean approach to the *Praxis* of embodiment

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ABSTRACT

Physical Education (PE) places the body at the forefront, with embodiment emerging as a concept that transcends the traditional dualistic view, recognising the diverse embodied experiences of students (Aartun et al., 2022; Lambert et al., 2024). However, there remains a lack of studies that connect pedagogies of embodiment to critical theories. From a critical perspective, the Brazilian writer and philosopher Paulo Freire offers a theoretical construct that emphasises education for social change. This conceptual paper aims to explore the possibilities of a Freirean-inspired pedagogy of embodiment in PE, drawing on some constructs – including *conscientização*, *praxis*, dialogue, and humanisation – to propose a framework we call a *praxis of embodiment*. Rather than viewing the body as a passive recipient of instruction, this perspective positions the body as a site of knowledge, agency, and resistance. Building on Freire's educational philosophy, we outline five pedagogical principles that articulate how critical reflection and bodily experience can become integrated in transformative PE practices: (1) cultivating embodied awareness; (2) thematising social experience; (3) engaging in dialogues of experience; (4) co-designing embodied interventions; and (5) reflecting on *praxis*. This paper encourages PE teachers and researchers to resist disembodied and normative educational models, particularly the 'banking' model of education, and instead foster learning spaces grounded in bodily experience, critical dialogue, and collective transformation. Central to this is the idea of becoming critical in PE – where students and teachers engage affectively, politically, and relationally through the body to transform themselves and the world.

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, there has been growing interest and debate surrounding embodiment in Physical Education (PE) (Aartun et al., 2022; Lambert et al., 2024). Embodiment has emerged as a concept that challenges and extends beyond the traditional dualistic, natural-scientific view of the body (Aartun et al., 2022). This shift has drawn increased attention to research and pedagogical approaches that engage with the body as a lived, experienced, and socially constructed

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phenomenon (Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019; Lambert, 2020). This shift marks a broader recognition of the critical role that embodied experiences play in shaping learning and personal development within educational contexts.

Despite this shared intent in understanding embodiment and PE, scholars often employ a range of terms (e.g. meaning, embodied learning) and theoretical frameworks (e.g. phenomenology, critical race theory, feminist post structural theory) to explore similar ideas. As a result, the term 'embodiment' can take on varied theoretical meanings and be applied differently in practice. As Lambert et al. (2024) note, although embodiment appears to be a central focus, its interpretation and implementation in PE remain inconsistent. Yet, given that bodily engagement is our primary mode of experiencing and acting in the world, one might expect that acknowledging embodiment in PE would be more intuitive – both conceptually and pedagogically.

Discussions on embodiment have been present in PE literature since at least the 1970s, with foundational contributions from scholars such as Arnold (1979) and Whitehead (1990). Arnold (1979) emphasised the educational significance of movement through a threefold model: education in movement, which focuses on experiencing movement for its intrinsic worth; education through movement, which supports personal growth and the development of self-knowledge; and education about movement, which involves the academic study of movement across multiple disciplines such as physiology, psychology, sociology, and philosophy. Grounded in phenomenology, Whitehead (1990), in turn, introduced the concept of physical literacy, placing embodiment at the heart of human flourishing and advocating for movement as a way of knowing, relating, and being in the world. Together, their work shifted understandings of the body beyond a purely physical or mechanistic view, advancing a perspective that values the subjective, lived experiences of movement and the intrinsic worth of embodied engagement (Lambert et al., 2024).

The concept of embodiment emerged as a response to the critique of the disembodied nature of PE programmes, which often prioritise natural science perspectives while neglecting the experiential and subjective dimensions of movement (Lambert et al., 2024; Thorburn & Stolz, 2017). For example, traditional PE programmes often measure success through quantifiable outcomes such as speed, strength, or endurance, neglecting how students experience movement. An embodied approach, however, values the subjective dimensions of activity – for example, noticing the joy of running outdoors, the rhythm of breathing, or the sense of connection with others while moving. This commitment to the embodied subjective experience is a central feature of critical and phenomenological approaches to PE in the Brazilian context (Betti et al., 2015). Thorburn and Stolz (2017) echo this critique, reflecting on the dominance of natural science perspectives in PE and the overvaluation of theoretical knowledge at the cost of practical, embodied experiences. They suggest that this imbalance creates a disconnect between theory and practice, advocating for a more integrated approach that incorporates existential and phenomenological frameworks to re-emphasise the importance of embodied learning. Aartun et al. (2022) further build on this critique in their literature review on 'pedagogies of embodiment,' highlighting the need for new pedagogical approaches that challenge traditional PE practices. Their review reveals two key themes among the articles analysed: first, pedagogies that encourage critical reflection on hegemonic notions of health, gender, and body ideals (sociological perspective), and second, those that explore innovative movements and practices to foster more inclusive and embodied learning experiences in PE (phenomenological perspective).

While most studies in PE focus on a phenomenological perspective, there is a need for further research that connects pedagogies of embodiment to critical theories. This paper builds on the idea of pedagogies that foster critical reflection on hegemonic notions of health, gender, and body ideals, as discussed by Aartun et al. (2022). These pedagogies not only aim to develop critical thinking skills but also engage students in embodied practices that surface how societal discourses are lived and felt in and through the body (Oliver & Kirk, 2016; Shilcutt et al., 2024). Grounded in feminist theories and critical pedagogy, the concept of *praxis* is essential here, as teachers and students are invited to both reflect on and act through their embodied experiences in ways that challenge dominant understandings of health and beauty. In Freire's terms, *praxis* – the unity of reflection

and action upon the world – frames lived experience as both the starting point and the result of critical transformation (Freire, 1970/2005).

Although existing scholarship in critical pedagogy and PE has fruitfully explored sociological and phenomenological notions of embodiment – applying lenses such as Foucauldian power dynamics or Merleau-Ponty's lived body – a critical lacuna remains. Specifically, there is an underexplored integration of Paulo Freire's core constructs – *conscientização* (critical awareness) and *praxis* (reflection and action) – directly onto the sensory and material body. In this way, our contribution is to assert the body not merely as the object or result of political forces, but as the agentive, concrete site where *praxis* begins and ends. By framing Freirean critical philosophy around the concept of embodiment, this paper uniquely positions the body as the primary text for political interpretation and the locus of transformative action, thereby offering a more radical and actionable framework for critical PE.

On this basis, this paper aims to explore the possibilities of pedagogies of embodiment in PE through a Freirean lens. Drawing from the work of the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (1970/2005; 2000; 1998; 1996; 1992; 1982; 1976), the paper highlights his theoretical framework, which conceives education as a transformative *praxis* for social change. Despite previous connections between embodiment and critical theory (e.g. Betti et al., 2015, in their analysis linking Freire's philosophy to the phenomenological concept of *Sich-Bewegen*), Freire's insights have not been explicitly drawn upon to understand embodiment. This article addresses this gap by first outlining Freire's significant contribution to the field of PE and sport pedagogy, before proposing a '*praxis of embodiment*' in PE – an approach grounded in Freire's philosophy that unites critical reflection with bodily experience. This approach is crucial, as it positions *praxis* as something that begins, transforms, and is itself transformed in and through the body, in ongoing interaction with the social world. The *praxis* of embodiment is articulated through five pedagogical principles: (1) cultivating embodied awareness by connecting sensation, emotion, and cognition; (2) thematising social experience through the body; (3) engaging in dialogues of experience in PE through circles of culture; (4) co-designing embodied interventions; and (5) reflecting on *praxis* through questions that link learning to personal and social transformation. As a conceptual paper, our aim is not to report empirical findings, but to advance theoretical dialogue by proposing a Freirean-informed framework for embodied pedagogy in PE.

Paulo Freire in the field of physical education and sport pedagogy

Paulo Freire's ideas have been widely used in PE and sport pedagogy (PESP) as both a theoretical lens and a way to implement pedagogies (e.g. Betti et al., 2015; Da Matta et al., 2013; Ginciene & Luguetti, 2025; Gonçalves et al., 2020; Luguetti et al., 2017; Luguetti & Oliver, 2021; Spaaij et al., 2016; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013). Freire's critical pedagogy has been taken up as lens in PE research to explore how democratic and socially just practices can be enacted in school settings (Gerdin, 2025; Philpot et al., 2024). In Sweden, Gerdin's (2025) study on pupils' experiences of inclusion and social justice highlighted the importance of horizontal teacher – pupil relationships grounded in trust and love, student involvement in decision-making, and opportunities for critical reflection on positionality and power. Similarly, Philpot et al. (2024)'s research with Spanish primary school PE teachers demonstrated how Freirean principles such as dialogue, problem-posing, and critical consciousness were operationalised through student-led dialogical encounters and pedagogies of questioning and exploration. Both studies underscore how Freire's ideas can shift PE practice from hierarchical and exclusionary models toward more democratic, participatory, and transformative approaches, where young people's voices are not only heard but actively shape their educational experiences.

In sport pedagogy, several studies have drawn on Freirean principles to examine sport for development (SfD) programmes, particularly in the Global South (Adeosun, 2023; Mwaanga & Prince, 2016; Nols et al., 2018; Quarmby & Luguetti, 2021; Spaaij et al., 2016; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013). These studies highlight both the potential and limitations of embedding critical pedagogy in sport. For example, research in Zambia, Brazil, Cameroon, and Kenya revealed the complexities of creating

transformative SfD programmes that move beyond surface-level change and address structural oppression (Spaaij et al., 2016; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013). Mwaanga and Prince (2016) further emphasised the importance of avoiding 'othering' by fostering authentic dialogue and problem-posing practices, while Adeosun (2023) provided a rich illustration of Freirean ideas of dialogue, love, and hope in informal sport settings in Trinidad and Tobago. In the Global North, studies in Belgium (Nols et al., 2018) and England (Quarmby & Luguetti, 2021) showed how SfD programmes could foster belonging, mutual respect, and empowerment, while also revealing the challenges of embedding fully critical pedagogies in practice. Freirean perspectives have also shaped coach education, with Chapman et al. (2019) documenting the English FA's shift from authoritarian approaches towards liberating, context-based learning.

Freire's work has also underpinned the Activist Approach, which positions young people as co-creators of curriculum and change (Luguetti et al., 2017; Luguetti & McDonald, 2020; Luguetti & Oliver, 2021; Shilcutt et al., 2024). Rooted in the Student-Centred Inquiry as Curriculum (SCIC) framework (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013), this approach involves building trust, broadening perspectives, and engaging in co-design processes to tailor programmes to participants' needs. Studies with socially vulnerable and refugee-background youth have demonstrated how this model enables young people to become critical analysts of their communities while supporting strategies to navigate risks (Luguetti et al., 2017; Luguetti & Oliver, 2020). Key features include listening and responding to youth voices, fostering inquiry-based learning, enacting an ethic of care, engaging with local community issues, and building collective forms of sport participation.

Finally, Freire's pedagogical philosophy has been central to advancing critical pedagogies of affect in PESP (Luguetti et al., 2019; Luguetti & McDonald, 2020). Research has emphasised the transformative role of radical love – anchored in dialogue, solidarity, hope, and imagination – as both the process and outcome of education for social change (Freire, 1970/2005). This pedagogy of love challenges traditional practices by prioritising care, solidarity, and social inclusion, and by fostering democratic and transformative engagements with young people. Importantly, it recognises the non-linear nature of social transformation, where small steps – grounded in love and critical reflection – can incrementally build agency and freedom over time.

Despite the extensive use of Freire's ideas in PE and sport pedagogy, particularly in fostering democratic, participatory, and transformative practices, the explicit integration of Freirean principles with pedagogies of embodiment remains absent. While studies have examined how Freirean concepts such as dialogue, problem-posing, critical consciousness, and radical love can shape PE, sport for development, coach education, and youth-led curriculum design, they primarily focus on cognitive, social, and ethical dimensions of learning rather than the lived, bodily experience of students and athletes. As a result, the potential of a Freirean lens to inform embodied practices – where critical reflection is inseparable from movement, sensation, and corporeal experience, and where students engage as bodies connected to the world – has yet to be fully explored.

Becoming critical in physical education: toward a *praxis* of embodiment

Born in Brazil in 1921, Paulo Reglus Neves Freire experienced social inequalities from an early age in his hometown of Recife (a Brazilian city and capital of Pernambuco, a northeast state of Brazil). The social inequalities experienced by Freire directly influenced his vision of education. Although his initial academic degree was in law, it was in the field of education that his practices and reflections gained global visibility (Gadotti, 2019).

Although Paulo Freire's pedagogical work is extensive and multidimensional, this paper draws selectively on a few key concepts – namely, *conscientização*, *praxis*, and *dialogue* – as foundational elements in articulating what we refer to as a *praxis* of embodiment. These concepts serve as entry points for reimagining embodied learning as a political, relational, and transformative experience in PE. This pedagogical vision took shape in Freire's early work in adult literacy, where he developed a method focused on raising *conscientização* through the act of reading the world rather than merely

decoding words (Freire, 1982) – that is, not in the literal sense, but as a critical interpretation of one's social and historical context, as a process grounded in experience, emotion, and embodied presence (Freire, 1970/2005).

This vision of literacy and *conscientização* was the foundation for the development of his Literacy Project in the small town of Angicos, in the state of Rio Grande do Norte (northeast of Brazil). In this project, carried out in 1963, more than 300 rural workers were taught to read and write in just 45 days. The experience in Angicos sparked discussions about possible ways to address the widespread lack of access to education among rural workers, and how this reflected a broader context of unequal opportunities that were central to the exploitation of labour. In just a few years, this project had a social impact among teachers, researchers, and advocates of an education connected to social justice Gadotti (2019).

Among the foundational concepts in Freire's work, *conscientização* can be defined as the process of developing critical awareness. Presented in the book *Education: The Practice of Freedom* (Freire, 1976), written during his exile, critical consciousness goes beyond the subjectivity of reflection and reaches a political attitude of understanding one's role in the world and thinking/acting critically about it. The exercise of *conscientização* is, for Freire, a practice of recognising oppressive situations in light of the possibilities for change, generating engagement and struggle – a perspective also presented in the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970/2005) and 'Pedagogia da Autonomia'¹ (Freire, 1996).

The Freirean notion of *conscientização* can also support the discourse of embodied and situational awareness, which suggests that daily life and social positions are a crucial part of bodily experiences. The pedagogies described by Aartun et al. (2022), which challenge hegemonic ideals of gender, health, and the body, reflect this Freirean idea of humanisation. In this sense, humanisation involves recognising the culture, story, and ontological experience of the subject as essential in the process of reflection, action, and resistance to oppressive situations. This process aligns directly with the core Freirean concept of *praxis* – the dialectical unity of action and reflection that leads to transformation (Rossato, 2010).

For Freire, 'human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world.' (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 52) – close to the context of PE, where more inclusive and diverse movements become ways of resisting dominant narratives. Freire (1976) conceptualises liberation as a form of *praxis* that can be understood as an ongoing process of reflection and action through which individuals engage with and transform their world. In the context of PE, this can be translated into the creation of more body-inclusive practices, such as rethinking competitive activities to foster cooperation, participation, and diverse forms of bodily expression.

Freire's political pedagogy, when viewed through the lens of embodiment, emphasises resistance as a vital part of the educational process. For Freire (1970/2005), liberation involves raising *conscientização* of oppression and taking transformative action to reclaim rights, presence, and voice – experiences that are deeply embodied. His idea that teachers must embody their discourse by connecting knowledge with presence and ethical action supports our interpretation of the embodied pedagogies. In PE, this can be seen, for example, when students critically examine dominant beauty ideals during body image discussions and co-create inclusive movement activities that challenge these norms – thus using embodied action as a form of critical resistance. In this view, education is not simply about transmitting knowledge but engaging learners in a political and relational process of becoming, where bodies are seen as sites of resistance, transformation, and critical reflection:

The oppressed must not only struggle to regain their lost humanity, but also for the freedom of their oppressors, because their humanity is inextricably bound up with theirs. Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it (Freire, 2000, p. 35).

This perspective of dialogue as a way of connecting with students and understanding education as a learning process that involves active participation from both student and educator converges with

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perspective of the lived body. His philosophical framework emphasises the integration of perception, cognition, and action in a unified process through which individuals make sense of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012).

When Freire discusses humanisation (Freire, 1970/2005), experiences, culture, and history are invitations to include the body of the subject and their real experiences in the learning process. It goes beyond the intellectual aspect of learning and offering a concrete perception of life – aligned with pedagogies of embodiment, which resist disembodied learning experiences that exclude sensory and experiential aspects.

Another key concept thematised by Freire in different manifold publications and rooted in critical theory lens, is *praxis*. In Freire's work, *praxis* refers to the dialectical unity of action and reflection that leads to transformation. According to Freire (1970/2005), this *praxis* is fundamentally realised through a *dialogical* approach. Dialogue, as presented in Freire's work, is a way to connect with people's lives, experiences, and cultures – and to open education as a path to liberation – being much more than mere verbal communication between educator and students.

It is a commitment to building effective and relational bridges (Freire, 1996). Dialogue, as mentioned, before, is presented as a fundamental way to support educators in forming a true connection with the unfinished reality that is constantly transforming (Freire, 1996). This concept directly aligns with the notion of 'corporeal conversation,' proposed by Lambert et al. (2024), which foregrounds the body as a primary medium of communication and co-construction of meaning. According to the authors, unlike abstract linguistic exchanges, this conversation occurs through the body's five interrelated attributes: intentionality (the purposeful nature of movement), affect (emotional experience and expression), meaning (how movement communicates understanding), sharing (the co-construction of meaning with others), and the unity of body and mind. Together, these dimensions reflect a reciprocal reading of the world through the body in action (Lambert et al., 2024).

This synthesis highlights how our proposed *praxis of embodiment* requires the teacher to engage with the student's body not merely as a physical object, but as a subject whose movement embodies and expresses these relational, affective, and meaning-making processes. Viewing Freirean dialogue through this embodied lens allows us to interpret these elements as foundational mechanisms for humanising bodily experiences, where critical reflection (*conscientização*) is not merely cognitive, but a holistic, embodied process of interpreting and transforming one's reality through collective, sensitive engagement.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Freire's perspective – read through the lens of embodiment – is the idea of resistance within the educational experience. The concept of liberation, which begins with critical awareness, encourages action to change complex oppressive structures by reclaiming rights, space, presence, and voice (Freire, 1970/2005). In PE, this translates into concrete pedagogical acts of resistance against normative body politics. For instance, questioning the normative experience of the body – regarding gender, ability, or health – moves beyond theoretical debate when students reclaim space through non-conforming movement patterns, or when the quiet act of fatigue – such as pausing, slowing down, or withdrawing from normative physical expectations – is validated as a site of potential political commentary, resisting performative pressure and revealing alternative ways of being in movement, rather than being seen as a deficit.

Furthermore, the teacher's posture and gesture during a lesson become manifestations of an ethically lived practice: Are we physically mirroring inclusive values? Does our movement invite shared authority or reinforce a hierarchy? This makes embodiment more than a concept; it becomes a political and ethical way of being in the world and a vital tool for critical inquiry in the gymnasium.

According to Freire (1996, p. 34): 'teaching requires the embodiment of words through example. [...] Words that lack the corporeality of example are worth little or almost nothing. Right thinking must be matched by right action.' Freire proposes that the teacher must embody their discourse – an idea that aligns directly with the notion of embodied pedagogy. The coherence between speech and action becomes materialised in the teacher's body through presence, posture,

gesture, and an ethically lived practice. These concepts resonate strongly with pedagogies of embodiment and provide the foundation for what we propose as a Freirean *praxis* of embodiment in PE.

Grounding the *Praxis* of embodiment in five pedagogical principles

Crucially, the *praxis* of embodiment we propose rejects Cartesian dualism by treating mind, body, emotion, and sensation as ontologically inseparable dimensions of human experience. In alignment with Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2012) notion of the *corps propre* (lived body), we argue that critical reflection (*conscientização*) cannot be divorced from the sensory, affective, and social ways of being in the world. Read through this lens, Freire's project of humanisation demands that both teacher and student engage with knowledge not merely as a cognitive exercise but as a fully lived, embodied encounter. The body, therefore, is not a passive tool of rationality; it is the source and ground from which critical awareness emerges – and through which transformative action becomes materially enacted.

From this foundation, we conceptualise a pedagogy of embodiment informed by Freire's critical pedagogy, which we term the *praxis of embodiment*. While the literature often distinguishes between sociological and phenomenological strands of embodied pedagogy (Aartun et al., 2022), we propose a third, integrative approach: embodied critical *praxis*. This perspective asserts that the body is not only a site of perception and knowledge, but also of resistance, transformation, and ethical-political agency.

The *praxis* of embodiment affirms that *conscientização* does not occur in abstraction, but through the sensing, moving, and relational body situated within historical and cultural contexts. It challenges educational practices that separate cognition from affect, reason from emotion, and thought from action. Instead, it calls for pedagogical relationships in which students and teachers co-construct knowledge through dialogical and embodied encounters. In this view, the body is not a neutral or merely biological entity, but a site where power, identity, and resistance are inscribed and negotiated.

Anchored in Freirean principles, this *praxis* invites us to reimagine PE not merely as a space for reproduction of normative, performance-focused practices, but as a vital arena for becoming critically aware and politically engaged through the body. It resists the fragmentation of knowledge by recognising embodied experience as essential to transformative learning. In PE, becoming critical means understanding that every movement carries social meaning, and that learning to move critically is inseparable from learning to read, question, and transform one's reality. Rather than reinforcing the *banking model* of education, this approach affirms participatory, embodied forms of knowledge construction – such as through *circles of culture*, which are thematic learning groups centred on participants' lived experiences to generate critical awareness (Freire, 1970/2005), and other dialogical practices.

To enact this perspective in PE, we propose five pedagogical principles that align critical reflection with bodily experience in transformative ways. While detailed further in the next section, these principles offer conceptual and practical guidance for educators committed to developing humanising, critically embodied pedagogies.

Principle 1: Cultivating embodied awareness by connecting sensation, emotion, and cognition

Cultivating embodied awareness involves intentionally creating opportunities for students to connect sensation, emotion, and cognition through movement. In PE, this may involve engaging in diverse bodily practices – such as dance, somatic exploration, or cooperative games – followed by reflective activities where students articulate what they felt, thought, and learned through their bodies. This principle affirms that the body is not a passive recipient of instruction but an active site of knowledge-making, memory, and emotion. As students reflect on how they experience

fatigue, joy, discomfort, or flow during movement, they begin to build awareness of themselves as sensing, feeling, and thinking subjects.

From a Freirean perspective, this process resonates deeply with the notion of *conscientização*, which Freire (1970/2005) describes as a dialectical process of becoming critically aware of one's social reality through reflection and action. *Conscientização* is not confined to abstract cognition; it is corporeal, emerging from the body's presence in the world and its capacity to feel injustice, resist exclusion, and engage ethically. As Freire powerfully asserts: '*We study, we learn, we teach, we know with our entire body [...] with feeling, with emotion, with fear, with passion, and also with critical reasoning*' (Freire, 1998, p. 5). Thus, embodied awareness becomes a precondition for political and pedagogical transformation: students learn not only about movement, but through movement – grounding critical reflection in the flesh of lived experience.

The cultivation of embodied awareness also foregrounds the role of experience in Freire's pedagogy, understood not as anecdotal or individual, but as a politically and historically situated form of knowing. In PE, this suggests that students have already been interpreting the world bodily long before entering formal education. Recognising and valuing these somatic readings of the world allows educators to affirm the embodied histories that learners carry into the gymnasium, treating the body not as a 'blank slate', but as a vibrant and storied presence.

Seen through this lens, embodied awareness is also a process of humanisation. Freire (1970/2005) contends that dehumanisation results from pedagogies that fragment the learner, silencing their bodily expressions, emotions, and histories. In contrast, humanisation requires that education address the person holistically – in ways that invite agency, reflection, and transformation. When PE teachers cultivate spaces where students can move and feel freely, without being measured solely by performance metrics, they enact a pedagogy of liberation: one that acknowledges students as historical bodies capable of knowing, resisting, and transforming.

In summary, Principle 1 anchors the *praxis* of embodiment in the Freirean idea that critical awareness begins in the body. Embodied awareness is not simply about noticing bodily sensations; it is about reawakening the possibility of learning as a sensuous, ethical, and political encounter with the world. It invites students to take their bodies seriously – not only as objects of instruction, but as subjects of transformation.

Principle 2: Thematising social experience through the body

This principle positions the body as a symbolic and expressive language through which students can explore complex social themes such as identity, oppression, resistance, and belonging. Techniques like body-mapping, dramatisation, and narrative identity games allow students to give shape to abstract issues – such as racism, gender normativity, ableism, or economic inequality – by anchoring them in lived, somatic experience. The goal is not only to represent experience, but to feel, name, and interrogate it through the body, thereby fostering empathy, critical agency, and social awareness.

In this sense, Freire's (1982, p. 29) idea that '*the reading of the world precedes the reading of the word*' is central to this principle. The body, as a site of social inscription, offers an initial reading of the world – one that precedes formal education and reflects the cultural, historical, and emotional realities of learners. When students use embodied experiences to explore their positionalities – for instance, through marking zones of comfort/discomfort, exclusion/inclusion, or power/vulnerability on their own bodies – they not only externalise the experience of social inequality but begin to critically reflect on how oppression is lived and potentially contested in and through the body.

Freire (1970/2005, p. 44) reminds us that '*humanisation is the ontological vocation of all people*', and that oppressive systems often deny this by reducing individuals to passive recipients of external definitions. In contrast, thematising lived experience through the body affirms students as subjects – not objects – of knowledge. When the body is engaged as a space of social analysis, it

becomes a testimony: a way to surface the silent histories, invisible struggles, and everyday microaggressions that shape how students inhabit physical and social spaces. In PE, this means recognising how students' relationships to movement, posture, touch, and space are shaped by class, gender, race, and ability – and using that recognition as a basis for collective meaning-making and liberation.

Principle 3: Engaging in dialogues of experience in PE

This principle invites educators to foster dialogical spaces where students can share their bodily experiences in PE – including discomforts, pleasures, frustrations, and memories inscribed on their bodies. Drawing from Freire's 'circles of culture'², the teacher's role shifts from authoritative transmitter to dialogical mediator, enabling a collective construction of meaning grounded in the real, lived experiences of learners. Within these circles, narratives of movement become tools for analysis, solidarity, and the recognition of difference – key dimensions in building a critical, inclusive PE environment.

For Freire (1996), dialogue is not merely a technique, but a mode of humanisation. It is a political and ethical commitment to connect with others not from a place of authority, but from shared vulnerability and unfinishedness. In PE, this principle translates into a pedagogy of presence: how we speak, move, gesture, and posture ourselves matters. The teacher's body becomes a site of coherence – or contradiction – between discourse and practice. Do our gestures invite shared authority? Do our silences give space for embodied expression? Dialogue, when truly embodied, becomes a corporeal conversation that goes beyond words and engages students in a deeper, felt relationship with themselves and with others.

The use of generative themes within these circles of culture – central in Freire's literacy work – also aligns closely with pedagogies of embodiment. These themes emerge from the students' own lived realities and are represented not only through language, but also through movement, gesture, and collective bodily practices. As Rufino et al. (2024) highlight, circles of culture enable participants to critically decode the world by reading and rewriting it through shared experience. In PE, this might mean discussing how different bodies are welcomed (or not) in sport spaces, or reflecting on how fatigue, silence, and resistance are expressed during physical practice. The dialogue is not only verbal – it is muscular, affective, expressive. Thus, this principle affirms that embodied dialogue is not simply a methodological choice, but an emancipatory gesture: one that reclaims the body as a legitimate site of knowledge, storytelling, and transformation.

Principle 4: Co-designing embodied interventions

This principle invites students and teachers to collaboratively design pedagogical practices or school-based interventions that promote critical embodiment. These interventions aim to transform the physical, symbolic, and relational environments of PE by challenging exclusionary norms and expanding the meanings of movement, participation, and agency. Examples include co-creating lessons that centre marginalised experiences, building inclusive spaces for diverse movement expressions, or intervening in the spatial organisation of the gymnasium to resist hierarchical power dynamics.

Freire's critique of 'banking education' is especially relevant here. In this model, the student is treated as a passive vessel into which knowledge is deposited (Freire, 1970/2005). From a bodily perspective, this approach renders the body inert, silencing its movements, gestures, and lived histories. Freire (1992, p. 155) calls this the '*ideology of the interdiction of the body*,' in which bodies are forbidden from expressing themselves, while the true reasons behind such prohibitions remain camouflaged. Embodied interventions, therefore, must aim to re-signify movement and physical space as territories of participation, where students no longer experience their bodies as controlled or invisible, but as valid instruments of expression, resistance, and social critique.

Co-designing interventions also means confronting what is absent: whose bodies are missing? Which movements are valued? What remains unsaid – or unfelt – in the space of PE? As Freire (1970/2005) warns, dehumanisation occurs when learners are denied their ontological vocation to become more fully human. Interventions that emerge from student experiences and that are materialised in the body – through reconfigured games, dialogical warm-ups, or choreographed protest gestures – actively challenge these processes of erasure. Here, the teacher does not propose a fixed solution, but rather creates conditions for students to name, co-create, and transform their reality. This turns PE into a political rehearsal space for what Freire (1976) calls a '*practice of freedom*.'

By integrating affective, relational, and material dimensions, embodied interventions allow students to inhabit their bodies differently – not as objects to be measured or disciplined, but as living sites of history, desire, conflict, and imagination. The gymnasium becomes a space for critical reflection and creation, where embodiment is no longer discussed abstractly but enacted in ways that disrupt norms and open new possibilities for being, moving, and relating.

Principle 5: Reflecting on praxis through questions that link learning to personal and social transformation

This final principle encourages students and teachers to engage in intentional, meta-reflective moments in PE – asking questions that connect bodily experience to personal transformation and social awareness. These questions may include: What did I learn through my body? What changed in my perception or practice? What structures or norms did I begin to question? How did my movement express resistance or vulnerability? This reflective process is not an add-on, but a central moment in which learning is consolidated, re-signified, and internalised – intellectually, emotionally, and somatically.

As mentioned before, Freire (1970/2005) defines *praxis* as the unity of reflection and action – a dialectical movement through which individuals read the world, act upon it, and transform both it and themselves in the process. Crucially, this reflection is not detached or purely rational: it is embodied, emerging from presence, discomfort, sensation, and relation. The student, in this sense, is not merely a thinker but a '*presence in the world*' (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 64), who learns and reflects through gesture, voice, silence, fatigue, hunger, joy, and tension. In PE, these signals are not interruptions to learning – they are the very material through which critical awareness takes form.

From this perspective, embodied reflection becomes an act of resistance. It is the moment when students reclaim the right to name their experience, to re-read their stories, and to imagine different ways of moving through the world. This necessity for a holistic, humanistic education is powerfully articulated by Freire (1996, p. 145), who argues: 'As a strictly human practice, I could never understand education as a cold, soulless experience, in which feelings and emotions, desires, and dreams should be repressed ...' This insistence on a pedagogy driven by humanity and affect underscores that change must begin with a radical attentiveness to how the world is already written in our bodies. When students reflect on how they breathe in a sprint, how they feel excluded from a team, or how they carry shame or pride in their posture, they begin to realise that the body is not neutral: it is the archive and battlefield of lived history.

Moreover, this principle reinforces Freire's concept of humanisation as an embodied and unfinished process. Oppression, for Freire (1970/2005), is not only a structural or ideological phenomenon; it is a corporeal reality that denies individuals the right to be fully human – to feel, to think, to act. By creating space for embodied reflection, PE becomes a space not just for motor learning, but for ethical, political, and affective becoming. In this sense, reflecting on *praxis* is not only about reviewing a lesson, but about asking what kind of world we are rehearsing in our bodies – and what other worlds we might dare to build through them.

From principles to *praxis*: embodying critical physical education

Building on this, a Freirean-inspired pedagogy of embodiment calls for a reimagining of education that moves beyond content delivery toward relational, affective, and body-centred practices. This includes co-designing learning environments where students critically engage through movement, emotion, and lived experience, uncovering how power and social norms shape their bodily realities in dialogical learning that integrates theory with action and sensation with reflection.

Importantly, this approach recognises the body not only as a medium of expression or resistance but as a site of epistemology – a place from which the world is known, questioned, and transformed. To embody critical PE is to affirm that there is no thought without movement, no reflection without affect, and no liberation without presence. In this light, a pedagogy of embodiment is not a metaphor, but a material commitment to engage students as whole beings whose bodies bear the marks of social reality and whose gestures hold the potential for worldmaking.

Moreover, this embodied *praxis* disrupts colonial and normative logics that have historically marginalised certain bodies, movements, and ways of knowing. By centring lived experience and creating pedagogical spaces where students can move, question, feel, and reconfigure meaning, critical PE becomes a space for emancipating the body – making visible the knowledge that lives in sensation, emotion, fatigue, rhythm, silence, and resistance. Rather than universalising fitness or skill acquisition, it invites plurality, contingency, and vulnerability as pedagogical assets.

Ultimately, the *praxis* of embodiment invites us to think of PE not as an apolitical training ground for discipline and performance, but as a radical space for humanisation. It is a space where students can encounter themselves and others not through competition or control, but through shared acts of listening, movement, reflection, and creation. To embody critical PE is to recognise that education does not transform the world – people do (Freire, 1996, p. 67) – and that people are not abstractions, but bodies in relation. In this way, the gymnasium becomes a laboratory of the possible – where resistance is rehearsed, liberation is felt, and the future is made flesh. In Freirean terms (2005), this constant striving for an ethically humanising reality constitutes a utopia – the discovery of the '*inédito viável*' (the untested viable possibility). It is the recognition that the current, oppressive reality only obscures the possibility of creating new, emancipatory ways of being and moving.

Final reflections

One of the most famous contributions of Freire, especially in the adult literacy context, was his critique of decontextualised reading instruction. Instead of simply learning to decode words, such as the passive phrase 'Eva saw the grape' (Freire, 1982), the author argued that education must move beyond this mechanical process. It means that true literacy involves 'reading' the world – comprehending its meaning – before reading the word. In this sense, it is not enough to recognise the word 'grape'; one must also understand how the grape was produced, by whom, under what labour conditions, and with what social implications. Likewise, for Freire (1970/2005), learning the word hoe is not just about associating sounds and letters, but about grasping the socio-political role that such a tool plays in the life of a worker. This engagement with the material and social world described in the Freirean perspective can serve as a bridge to understanding embodied pedagogies. To read the world critically is to perceive it through one's lived, felt, and bodily experiences.

In this light, we can draw a direct analogy for PE: The mechanical instruction of a skill – for instance, the technical execution of a specific volleyball set or the holding of a strenuous plank position – is the equivalent of merely reading the word without the world. Our embodied *praxis* demands that we move beyond decoding the movement (the 'word') to comprehending the socio-political context of the practice (the 'world'). This involves questioning which bodies are prioritised, the historical implications of the sport's rules, and whose movement experiences are being erased in the pursuit of 'universal' technical efficiency. Freire's approach recognises that literacy and learning are grounded in the corporeal reality of the learner. This includes their labour,

their movement, their hunger, and their fatigue, thus making the PE experience a meaningful site for human knowledge.

This pedagogical stance affirms that knowledge is not neutral and that education should connect learners to their lived realities, fostering critical awareness and transformative action. Freire's insistence on linking words to social context as a way to create an education connected with the culture, history and elements of oppression can also be interpreted as a form of resistance against the disembodied practices of traditional education, which often ignore the learner's physical, emotional, and existential conditions.

This insight resonates deeply with the notion of a *praxis of embodiment*. Just as Freire (1982) reminded us that reading words without understanding their social significance reduces literacy to a mechanical act, we argue that moving the body – whether through PE, sport, physical activity, or any expressive form – cannot be reduced to mere repetition or technical execution. Movement, in this critical pedagogical frame, is not an end in itself, but a form of language through which one can explore, question, and express the world. To move is to signify; to train the body is also to shape consciousness. Thus, an embodied *praxis* demands that students not only learn *how* to move, but also ask *why*, *for whom*, and *with what consequences* each movement takes place. In this sense, a *praxis of embodiment* can be understood as a pedagogy of resistance.

In this perspective, bodily experience becomes a site for *conscientização* and transformation. When students are invited to reflect on their embodied experiences, they begin to understand that the body is not neutral – it carries histories, identities, and relations of power. Through dialogical engagement, the physical becomes political. This moves education beyond the banking model Freire (1970/2005) criticised, where learners are passive recipients of content, toward a pedagogy of freedom, where bodily knowledge is linked to agency and humanisation. The *praxis* of embodiment, then, is not just about knowing the body, but about becoming more fully human through the body – capable of acting in and upon the world with critical intention.

This perspective is by no means fully realised within the field of PE and demands further exploration. Considering a *praxis* of embodiment stands as an open invitation – echoing Freire's legacy – for us to rethink the body in its relation to the other, to the educational process, and to the world as a whole. It is a call to resist educational models that neglect or instrumentalise the body, and instead to place embodiment at the very centre of transformative *praxis*. Through this lens, PE becomes a powerful space for becoming critical – where students and educators are encouraged to think and act critically about the social, cultural, and political dimensions of embodiment, transforming structures of oppression.

This conceptual framework is vital because it extends critical pedagogy scholarship in PE by offering a clear, five-principle method to integrate critical reflection with embodied experience. The implications for teacher educators are significant, demanding curricula that prepare future teachers to co-design learning environments where students' lived, moving bodies are valued as critical texts and sources of knowledge. Paraphrasing Freire (1996), we might say: *education does not change the world; it transforms people through their bodies – bodies that, in turn, can change the world.*

Notes

1. The book 'Pedagogia da Autonomia' was published in English as 'Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy and Civic Courage' in 1998 by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
2. While we acknowledge the specific historical and political context of Freire's original circles of culture (late 1950s-early 1960s), we maintain the term as it is widely adopted in critical PE scholarship to denote a methodological inspiration for the development of 'generative themes' and collective and horizontal dialogue (Rufino et al., 2024).

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