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## An Activist Approach to Sport Meets Youth From Socially Vulnerable Backgrounds Possible Learning Aspirations

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### BSTRACT

**Purpose** This study was a 2-phase activist research project aimed at co-creating a prototype pedagogical model for working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds in a sport context. This article addresses the learning aspirations (learning outcomes) that emerged when we created spaces for youth to develop strategies to manage the risks they face in their community. **Method** This study took place in a socially and economically disadvantaged neighborhood in a Brazilian city where we worked with a group of 17 boys aged 13 to 15 years old, 4 coaches, a pedagogic coordinator, and a social worker. During a 6-month period, we collected multiple sources of data including field journal entries/observations (38) and audio records of youth work sessions (18), coaches' work sessions (16), combined coaches and youth work sessions (3), and meetings between the lead and the 2nd author for debriefing and planning sessions (36). **Results** By using an activist approach, 4 learning aspirations emerged: becoming responsible/committed, learning from mistakes, valuing each other's knowledge, and communicating with others. **Conclusion** Findings suggest there is a need for more sports programs that start from young people's concrete needs and life situations and look to create places for youth to see alternative possibilities and take action.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Critical pedagogy; empowerment; sport programs; student-centered pedagogy

I think this project in the middle of the slum can help kids not to go into a life of crime. (Noel, age 14)  
I think those are values that you can bring to your life, guys.  
The small kids could be inspired by you boys, think about it.  
(Coach Maria)

This study was a two-phase activist research project aimed at co-creating a prototype pedagogical model (Kirk, 2013) for working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds in a sport context. The intent was to use sport as a vehicle for assisting youth in becoming critical analysts of their communities and developing strategies to manage the risks they face by looking for alternatives that extend beyond their current life situations (Fine, 2007; Freire, 1987). The first phase of this project was designed with the intent of identifying what facilitated and hindered the youths' engagement in sport (Liguetti, Oliver, Dantas, & Kirk, 2016; Liguetti, Oliver, Kirk, & Dantas, 2015). In that phase, five features were identified as being essential for working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds: student-centered pedagogy, inquiry-based education centered *in action*, an ethic of care, attentiveness to the community, and a community of sport (Liguetti et al., 2015). In this article, we describe the emergence of learning aspirations when

the five critical elements of the prototypical model were combined and used in the soccer project—in other words, when we worked collaboratively to create realistic opportunities for the youth to begin to negotiate some of the barriers they identified. We used a student-centered inquiry *as curriculum* (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013) approach for working with the youth. This approach combines student-centered pedagogy with inquiry-based learning centered in action as a means of working with youth to listen/understand the barriers they face in physical activity settings and collaboratively work to negotiate and/or transform these barriers to create better activity possibilities (Oliver, Hamzeh, & McCaughtry, 2009; Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013).

### *Pedagogical models: sports and youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds*

During the past two decades, we have seen an explosion in the development of curriculum, instructional, and pedagogical models (Casey, 2014; Metzler, 2011). Generically, these models provide “design specifications” that include a key theme, critical elements, and learning outcomes (Kirk, 2013). The key theme refers to the

central idea on which the model is based (Metzler, 2011). The critical elements are “benchmarks” (Metzler, 2011) that make a model distinctive in terms of what teachers and learners must do to faithfully implement the model (Kirk, 2013). Finally, the learning outcomes are the educational intentions of a program—what we might expect students to know, understand, or be able to do (Metzler, 2011). The value of using pedagogical models is the tight alignment of the learning outcomes with the teaching strategies and subject matter (Casey, 2014; Kirk, 2013; Metzler, 2011). It has been argued that by using these design specifications, educators can develop specific programs at local levels for local purposes (Kirk, 2013).

Several scholars have developed pedagogical models with the intent of working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds. For example, positive youth development (PYD; Fuller, Percy, Bruening, & Cotrufo, 2013; Holt, 2008), teaching personal and social responsibility (TPSR; Hellison, 2010; Walsh, 2008), sport empowerment (Hastie & Buchanan, 2000), and sport for peace (Ennis et al., 1999) have emerged in physical education (PE) and sport. The prescriptions of learning outcomes are a feature of these models and describe specific intended youth behaviors that will result from implementation. For example, TPSR prescribes respect for the rights and feelings of others, self-motivation, self-direction, and caring as the desired learning outcomes (Hellison, 2010), while PYD identifies five “Cs” (Holt, 2008)—competence, character, connection, confidence, and caring/compassion—as the specific desired learning outcomes for youth. These models have been shown to promote positive attitudes, motivational responses, and prosocial behaviors in youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds (Ennis et al., 1999; Fuller et al., 2013; Hellison, 2010; Walsh, 2008). With that said, what these models were ultimately designed to do was to control youth behavior or create individual empowerment (Lawson, 2005; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2012).

What strikes us as curious is that each of these models was created by adults without youth participation and was applied from a top-down perspective (Lawson, 2005; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2012). Although we have many positive results from using these various models with youth in sport contexts, we believe there is now a need to begin to develop models by working *with* youth, rather than developing models *for* youth (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2012; Fisetite & Walton, 2014; Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012; Oliver & Hamzeh, 2010; Oliver et al., 2009). We believe that sport holds the potential to move beyond helping youth control their behaviors to creating spaces for real-life change. If we hope to create sporting experiences that allow youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds to begin to identify and negotiate barriers

to their participation, their voices must be present in the process.

In this study, we used an activist approach to co-create a prototype pedagogical model because we believe there is value in developing pedagogical models with youth and coaches. A “prototype” model is a model under development, where the initial architecture of key theme, critical elements, and learning outcomes or aspirations have been tentatively identified but further implementation and trialing are required to adapt and refine the model. In developing this prototype model for working with socially vulnerable youth, we suggest that the social value of sport should extend beyond inculcating youth about society’s rules (Lawson, 2005). If we continue to use sport as a vehicle for reinforcing social norms, we might actually be perpetuating inequities, particularly for youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, & Nols, 2012). These young people face concrete challenges (poverty, educational failure, drug and alcohol abuse, etc.) that require interventions that are based on a thorough analysis of their social circumstances (Fine, 2007; Freire, 1987, 1996). We argue that young people have the capacity and agency to analyze their social context and to challenge, resist, and negotiate the forces that impede their choice of possibilities (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Freire, 1987).

### ***Empowering young people through action: An activist approach***

Unlike many approaches in sport contexts found in the literature, activist researchers in PE have worked with youth to identify, critique, and transform barriers to young people’s engagement in physical activity (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2012; Fisetite & Walton, 2014; Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012; Oliver & Hamzeh, 2010). Activist scholars provide young people with opportunities to identify and study social problems affecting their lives, and they work collaboratively with them to facilitate change (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Freire, 1987, 1996). This change is partially a result of challenging traditional student–teacher power relations by giving young people opportunities to participate in curricular and pedagogical decision making (Cook-Sather, 2002; Enright & O’Sullivan, 2012; Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012). When students are recognized as agents, they begin to take ownership over their learning, they take responsibility for themselves and others, they find meaning, and they engage more enthusiastically (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Cook-Sather, 2002, 2006).

Activist research is grounded in feminist (Collins, 2000; Fine, 2007; Hooks, 2000) and critical pedagogies (Freire, 1987, 1996) and has been developed through

work with marginalized populations (e.g., girls, people of color, people in poverty). Feminists have worked from the position of challenging and changing current power relations in education, and they caution against uncritically or unreflectively privileging student voices (Collins, 2000; Fine, 2007; Hooks, 2000). Feminist scholars reveal how complicated power dynamics are in the reality of classrooms. They suggest we must be willing to “take small steps toward changing oppressive practices even if complete change seems or is unattainable” (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 6). Similarly, critical pedagogy is aimed at empowering both students and teachers to develop a critically conscious understanding of their relationships with the world (Freire, 1987). This type of pedagogy holds the possibility of enabling students to explore the potential of what it means to be critical citizens (Freire, 1996; Schor & Freire, 1986).

Although there are many promising outcomes in this type of work for PE and sport pedagogy, the majority of these studies have been done with girls in PE contexts in part because girls have historically been marginalized (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2012; Fissette & Walton, 2014; Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012). We believe there is potential in using activist approaches with youth, female or male, from socially vulnerable backgrounds in sport contexts. By considering an activist process of working with youth to co-create a prototype pedagogical model, we challenge the conventional conception of youth as subordinate to the expert teacher/coach (Freire, 1987, 1996). In that sense, youth become agents in the process of transformative learning, as they seek opportunities to reframe and reimagine their sports experiences. In this study, we used a student-centered inquiry *as curriculum* approach (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013) for working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds to better understand how to work with them in ways that might foster their collective empowerment (Fine, 2007; Freire, 1987, 1996; Luguetti et al., 2015, 2016).

## Methods

### Setting and participants

This study utilized a Brazilian soccer project that has existed since 2008. This project is run by a nongovernmental organization, funded by Brazilian companies who finance projects instead of paying taxes to the Brazilian government through a law to encourage youth to participate in sports. This project serves approximately 250 boys and girls aged 6 to 15 years old. Approximately 90% are boys and 10% are girls. The overwhelming ratio of boys to girls in this project is a result of Brazil being known worldwide as the “country

of soccer,” but it is still very much a country of *male* soccer.

The project runs in four different neighborhoods of a socially and economically disadvantaged district in an urban, coastal, and tourist Brazilian city with high rates of income inequality and pockets of illiterate people (Sistema Estadual de Análise de Dados [State System of Data Analysis], 2010). Although the coach participants in the study were working in four different sites/neighborhoods, the youth participants of the study came from only one site. This site is located in an area with many slums and explicit drug trafficking. We selected this site because it had high percentages of economically disadvantaged youth. At this specific site, we chose to work with the 13- to 15-year-olds because as youth get older, the risk for social vulnerability increases. It so happened that at the site where we were working, all of the 13- to 15-year-old youth were boys. Although this study was not intended to be an all-boy research study, it ended up as one due to the lack of 13- to 15-year-old girls playing soccer at this site.

The research idea was presented to the general and pedagogical coordinators of the project who agreed with the initial idea and design. We presented the study to both coordinators because we hoped that the co-created prototype pedagogical model could later be incorporated throughout the entire soccer project. It is also important to highlight that both coordinators were ex-soccer players. The main objectives of the study and a summary of the methodology were presented to all coaches in the project who also agreed to participate. The youth and their parents gave assent, and parents signed an informed consent form. Ethical approval for this study was received from the Ethics Committee (Protocol No. 608.759). All adults involved in the study signed informed consent.

The participants in this study included 17 boys (aged 13–15 years old), 4 coaches, a pedagogical coordinator, a social worker, and 2 researchers. All of the boys came from families who earned less than two minimum-wage incomes, and some of the boys were from families who earned less than a minimum-wage income (35%). The coaches, pedagogical coordinator, and social worker each averaged 3 years of experience in working with youth from socially and economically vulnerable backgrounds.

The two researchers differed from the other participants insofar as neither were members of socially vulnerable groups and thus were considered an in-betweeners/outsider (lead author Carla) and outsider (second author Kim), respectively (Anzaldúa, 2007; Collins, 2000). Although Carla’s gender, race, age, and social class positioned her as an outsider, her experience with soccer and understanding of the socially vulnerable context positioned her as an in-betweeners (Anzaldúa,

2007). Although Kim was an outsider in relation to the youth, her role was to assist Carla in learning to use student-centered and inquiry-oriented approaches to education. In this capacity, she served as a peer debriefer, was involved in the progressive data analysis, and helped in facilitating a collaborative construction of the youth's and coaches' work sessions.

### Data collection

A student-centered inquiry *as curriculum* (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013) approach was used both as a process of working with the youth and as a framework for data collection (Lugueti et al., 2015, 2016). "It was originally designed as a way of developing curriculum with youth in order to better meet their interests, motivation and learning in PE" (Lugueti et al., 2015, p. 6). Student-centered inquiry *as curriculum* involves a two-phase process of *building the foundation* and a four-phase cyclical process of *planning*, *responding to students*, *listening to respond*, and *analyzing responses* as a means of curriculum design and implementation.

We collected data for 18 weeks in 2013 whereby Carla met with the youth for 40 min each week prior to their soccer training sessions (18 sessions). Debriefing between Carla and Kim followed immediately for approximately 90 min via Skype conferences. We used Skype because the second author lived in a different country from where the research was being conducted. In these debriefing meetings, we analyzed data and planned the coaches' work sessions that followed the next day. Each Friday, Carla held a work session with the coaches, the pedagogical coordinator, and the social worker. These 16 sessions were each an hour in duration. Again, Carla and Kim debriefed immediately via Skype following the coaches' work sessions whereby they analyzed data and planned for the next youth work session. In addition, there were 3 combined coaches/youth work sessions toward the end of the research project.

*Building the foundation* took place over 8 weeks and was designed with the intent of identifying what facilitated and hindered the boys' engagement in sport (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013). We started by asking what the boys liked/disliked, their perceptions of school and family, their opinions about the soccer training sessions, and barriers to sport participation they encountered in both the program and their community as a whole. Through Phase I, five features were identified as being essential for working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds: student-centered pedagogy, inquiry-based education centered *in action*, an ethic of care, attentiveness to the community, and a community of sport (Lugueti et al., 2015). Given what we learned during

the *building the foundation phase*, we co-created and implemented a leadership program with the boys and the coaches. In this 10-week program, we combined the five features that allowed four learning aspirations to emerge. For more information regarding the schedule of work session tasks for coaches and youth and combined coaches/youth work sessions, see Lugueti et al. (2015).

We used the cyclical process of *student-centered inquiry as curriculum* (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013) as both the data collection process and the curriculum development process. *Planning* involved the creation of the work sessions between the boys and Carla (the first author), as well as the work sessions between the coaches and Carla. *Responding to students* involved the creation of work sessions that bridged what Carla was learning from the youth, what she was learning about using a student-centered pedagogical approach, and what she was doing with the coaches. *Listening to respond* involved the debriefing and analysis of data between the first and second authors following the youth work sessions. *Analyzing the responses* involved the debriefing and analysis of data between the first and second authors following the coaches' work sessions.

### Data sources and analyses

Data sources for this project included 38 field journal entries/observations of the training sessions and audio records of all work sessions: youth (18), coaches (16), combined coaches and youth (3), and meetings between Carla and Kim (37). Given the weekly meetings between Carla and Kim, data analysis was ongoing. Carla transcribed the work sessions, and we used these transcripts in our debriefing meetings to discuss what we were learning and what we thought we needed to learn more about. In addition to these 37 debriefing/data analysis meetings, Carla and Kim met twice (14 days total) face to face for more in-depth data analysis. The first meeting took place during the middle of data collection with our main objective being to verify the emergence of the key features (*building the foundation*). We also met at the end of the study to identify the learning aspirations that emerged through the leadership program.

### Results

In this section, we will describe the risks the youth identified within their community and how we worked together to develop strategies for managing the risks they identified. Next, we show the learning aspirations that emerged during the second phase of the study: becoming responsible/committed, learning from mistakes, valuing each other's knowledge, and communicating with others.

### **Community risks and managing the risks the youth identified**

Five weeks into the project, Carla began noticing that the youth would listen to funk music before the work sessions began. Up to this point, the youth had not discussed their views of their communities despite Carla's attempts to steer the conversation in that direction. Carla and Kim discussed the possibility of using funk music to help the youth describe their experiences in the community. Through the funk lyrics, the youth reported severe problems in their community, including poor housing conditions, strong presence of drug trafficking, violence, and lack of basic sanitation.

Although the lyrics describe severe problems—"I had no bathroom"; "I had nothing to eat"; "My house had wooden walls"; "I'm preparing for the worst"; "I may be arrested or may be killed"; "Lack of choice, a great illusion"—the youth's stories were not of someone who laments the constraints of resources and the lack of opportunity. The lyrics the youth chose were laced with agency: "Never give up"; "I was born with it and I fight with it tooth and nail"; "I'm the winner. I am a funkeiro, and I'm proud of it"; "I realized my voracity." The lyrics of the funk songs illuminated the hope the youth had—a hope for managing the risks they identified in their community. At the end of the second funk song they created, they wrote: "The life of crime does not pay; stop and think."

*Carla:* In the last session, you showed me through the lyrics of funk music that 'a life of crime does not pay. Why didn't you choose a life of crime, guys? What led you to not choose a life of crime?

*Leon:* I think it was because of soccer.

*Kleitton:* I think it was my father. If I chose a life of crime, he would see me die. I don't want that.

*Peter:* My cousin is in jail because he tried to rob two supermarkets in our neighborhood, and the police caught him.

*Breno:* My uncle, also, is in jail. I don't want that to happen to me.

*Noel:* I think this project in the middle of the slum can help kids not to go into a life of crime. (Youth Work Session 8)

The activist phase of this project started with the things that the youth identified as important if they were going to move from merely becoming critical analysts of their communities to developing strategies to negotiate the risks they identified. Their primary barriers revolved around issues of safety, sanitation, and opportunities to play sports. However, from the youth's perspectives, avoiding a life of crime was their top priority. According to them, "Family is why they don't want a life of crime and sport is a way they can avoid crime."

Once these barriers were identified, Carla and Kim, the coaches, and the youth all worked collaboratively to imagine alternative possibilities. Through this imagining,

sport continued to be viewed as a constructive activity, one that could offer not only the youth themselves, but also younger children, the opportunity to avoid a life of crime. Given the youth's desire to avoid a life of crime and their belief that sport created such an opportunity, Carla, Kim, and the coaches discussed possibilities for creating additional sporting experiences. A leadership program emerged as one possibility that would offer the youth an additional day each week to work in a sport setting. It was within the sport context that they could literally manage the risks they identified, and as activist researchers, we believed creating realistic possibilities was essential.

*Carla:* Would you like to teach other children in the project that a life of crime does not pay? Would you like to help the coach? Like a leadership program? Now it's time to choose a project to develop.

*Garcia:* I would. But how would we do that?

*Carla:* How do you think you could help your coach?

*Noel:* I could help carrying the balls.

*Peter:* I could help with the goalkeepers.

*Carla:* We also could develop a project to improve your behavior. You said that the behavior in your training session is a problem. Another thing that you spoke about is the bad condition of the soccer field. Which program would you like to develop?

*Noel:* The leadership program.

*Kleitton:* I'd like to teach small kids.

*David:* Teach small kids.

*Peter:* Leadership program.

*Noel:* I would like the leadership program. Small kids could learn a little more with people who are more experienced. (Youth Work Session 8)

The idea of creating a leadership program where the older youth would work to assist the coaches during the younger children's training sessions was one of the options put forth as a possible change project. The youth articulated places where they had choices, places that were realistic for them. The coaches also accepted the idea of developing the leadership program with the youth. In the next section, we use vignettes to show how each learning aspiration emerged through combining the five critical elements in the development and implementation of the leadership program.

### **Vignette 1: 'Cleaning up our language : Becoming responsible/committed**

The youth came early to our work session and seemed engaged with the possibility of helping the coach with the small children. The week before, the youth had decided collectively to develop the leadership program, and according to them, if they did not control their own behavior, they could not be good role models for the small children. At the beginning of our work session,

Carla told the youth that the coaches agreed to develop the leadership program with them. However, she said that the coaches had some concerns.

*Carla:* Why do you think the coaches are worried?

*Kleiton:* I think it's because we do not respect each other.

*Henri:* Because in our training sessions, we use bad words all the time, we have no respect. (Youth Work Session 9)

Earlier in the study, the youth had identified their behavior as the second worst problem in their training sessions. At that time, the youth suggested that the people in charge should control their behavior. With the invitation to develop the leadership program, the youth began to realize that they were responsible for controlling their behavior. In the youth's opinions, the leadership program should bring out the "ideal leader" and controlling their behavior became a necessity for being a role model for the younger children.

*Carla:* How do you think an ideal leader should behave?

*David:* He should be responsible, and he must know how to control his emotions.

*Peter:* The ideal leader should be disciplined. For example, he doesn't miss the training sessions.

*Noel:* If he says he wants to be a leader, he must show up or call the coach if he can't come.

*Kleiton:* An ideal leader should be an example for everyone, including the younger kids. He cannot mess up the training session. He should teach the less skilled kids.

*Peter:* An ideal leader does not say bad words.

*Kleiton:* If the coach is talking and someone is talking at the same time, this leader should ask for silence.

*David:* I also think, as leaders, we should help advise the younger kids about drugs, like Coach Anthony advised us last week. Remember when he told us that he lost his best friend to drug trafficking?

*Henri:* We could help younger kids not to make the same mistake Anthony's friend did.

*Carla:* What do you think you can do in your training sessions so the coaches will believe that you can be leaders? Remember that they are unsure.

*Henri:* We must avoid using bad language, especially cursing each other.

*David:* We should be less critical when someone makes mistakes. We need to support each other.

*Peter:* We must maintain the peace in our training sessions.

*Henri:* We can think about moments to come together like when we prayed together last week. (Youth Work Session 9)

The youth identified a lack of responsibility and commitment as a barrier in their training sessions. It was the learning aspiration that the youth identified as the most important challenge they needed to overcome to be leaders. The youth brainstormed how they should behave and ways they could help in a leadership program. They agreed that they would "avoid using bad language," "be less critical when someone makes mistakes," "maintain the peace," and "think about moments to come together." The youth realized that if they could control their

behavior, the coaches would no longer be worried about them helping the younger children.

Similar suggestions emerged in the coaches' work sessions in relation to being an "ideal leader." Coach Maria said that the youth should be "committed." For her, if a youth said he was going to attend the younger kids' training session, showing up was a means of demonstrating that commitment. Coach Daniel highlighted that the ideal leader "should be respectful." For example, he would not invade the space of others. Coach Anthony talked about the need for leaders to "control their emotions and negotiate conflicts." The coaches agreed that it might be valuable if the leader helped low-skilled children. They believed it would help the leaders develop more sensitivity and patience.

As the leadership program continued, the coaches started to notice that the youth's responsibility and commitment were improving. Coach Anthony talked about Conrad: "I have never seen Conrad like this. Conrad was helping me to teach the younger kids what it means to be offside. For a moment, I was quiet. Conrad's voice was heard by the small kids more than my voice." Coach Anthony said that Conrad fulfilled an important role by helping him to teach a complex rule (offside position) to the younger children. Coach Anthony identified also that the youth's commitment had improved: "The leaders are not missing the training sessions anymore." Finally, the coaches identified that the youth had improved their behavior in the training sessions.

*Coach Anthony:* The boys improved their behavior in the training sessions. We know that Leon and Kleiton have a longstanding relationship problem. However, the important thing is that they have improved their behavior a lot. They don't fight anymore. Kleiton doesn't say bad words. I think it happened because of the leadership program. (Coaches Work Session 18)

Unlike the coaches, the youth could not describe changes in their behavior. The leadership program came about from experiences that the youth assumed were important if they were going to manage the risks they identified. The youth decided to participate in the leadership program to be involved in sport more often as it would help them avoid a life of crime. They also identified that it would be a place to help the younger children. The leadership program gave them the opportunity to enhance their agency (Freire, 1987, 1996). Carla, Kim, and the coaches created spaces for the youth to engage in processes that positioned them as agents of inquiry and as "experts" about their own lives (Cook-Sather, 2002). The leadership program offered a space for the youth to act differently. The youth felt empowered because they took ownership over the leadership program, and in turn, it created opportunities for the youth to be responsible and

committed—an opportunity they embraced with great interest and seriousness.

### **Vignette 2: ‘A boy was kicked out of the project : Learning from mistakes**

*Coach Anthony:* In a disputed part of the game, Kleiton said to me: ‘If you are thinking I m playing bad, come here and take my place. Fuck you, coach Very furious, I (Coach Anthony) said: ‘Fuck you You are immature, Kleiton. So, I kept guiding the boys in the game. Kleiton scored a goal and he spoke again with me: ‘Fuck you, coach Did you see what I did? I felt so bad after that. That s not what we teach the boys. I felt really bad because of Kleiton s words. This attitude did not t in our group. By the end of the game, I decided to kick Kleiton out of the project. I spoke to our coordinator, Daniel, and he said, from his point of view, he would never have Kleiton back in the project. Carla had a different point of view, as did Newton and Tim (the caretaker of the soccer eld) who came to talk to me a few days after that game. Tim was sober at that time and he asked me to reconsider my decision. I was pretty set on my decision because it hurt my ego. I was wondering if I had done something wrong, because Kleiton had been showing improvement in his behavior. (Coaches Work Session 17)

On a sad Monday, Carla was entering the eld when Peter came in her direction and said to her, “Kleiton was kicked out of the project. He swore at Coach Anthony in the game yesterday.” At that moment, a movie of Kleiton s behavior ran through her mind. “Kleiton has improved his behavior a lot. What could have happened?” Carla thought.

Immediately, Carla tried to talk to Coach Anthony about what had happened, but he seemed to be resolute in his decision: “Kleiton does not belong in this project anymore. He is out, de nitely out,” said the coach. The unhappiness in Coach Anthony s eyes and his affection toward the youth made Carla believe that it would not be the end of the story. Tim and Newton came to talk to Carla:

Carla, you should try to talk to Coach Anthony about Kleiton. Kleiton has a lot of problems in his family, you know that. He s also not doing well at school. He is a good guy. At the beginning of the project, he used to clean the soccer eld. He grew up here with us. (Carla s eld notes)

Tim, Newton, and Carla agreed that Kleiton was an important person in the project. So, at the end of the training session, Carla tried to talk to Coach Anthony again. They spoke for half an hour about what had happened and the importance of Kleiton being part of the project. Coach Anthony shared the notion that Kleiton was important to the project, but he did not change his decision that day.

Two days later, Kleiton was sitting on the wall waiting to talk to Carla. Tim had asked Kleiton to come and talk to Carla. Kleiton came in her direction, and Tim suddenly said: “Carla, Coach Anthony said that Kleiton could come back if he apologizes to the group. Talk to him, Carla. He is overreacting, and he doesn t want to apologize.” It was at least a half hour conversation between Tim, Kleiton, and Carla. Newton, Peter, Peter s father, and Leon also tried to convince Kleiton he should apologize. In that moment, everybody came together as a community to try to encourage Kleiton to come back to the project.

According to Carla, this moment was one of most unforgettable in the project. Kleiton came by, walking with his head down, and he sat on the eld s wall, waiting for the end of the training session. Anthony did not talk to Kleiton while the youth were playing. Carla did not know if Kleiton would be able to apologize to the youth. He seemed so uncomfortable. Peter s father said, “Let s all sit, boys, because Kleiton wants to say something to us.” Carla had never seen the youth so silent. Kleiton said, “I would like to apologize to you guys. I was wrong to swear at Coach Anthony last game. I was wrong.” A hug between Kleiton and Anthony symbolized the return of Kleiton to the group. This episode was central to the youth understanding about how mistakes were places for learning.

The next week, Carla asked to the youth to give her some examples of how they were “learning from mistakes” in the leadership program.

*Leon:* I was talking to Kleiton about that, Carla. He has learned from his mistake. In the last game, he made a mistake, and he has learned from that.

*Carla:* Do you think this is related to the leadership program?

*Leon:* Yes, I think so. (Youth Work Session 16)

In the next coaches work session, Anthony talked about Kleiton s case.

*Coach Anthony:* My attitude was forgiveness. How can I teach my students if I am not able to forgive? Kleiton apologized to the group, and it was very dif cult for him to do. I don t know if I will have consequences in my next training sessions because of this. I don t know if I ll lose the control of the boys. However, he is a boy that I cannot abandon. He is part of the project. As an educator, I could not discard him. When Tim came to me, my rst reaction was that he could not interfere in my decision. However, Kleiton is part of the project, and Tim helped me to see that. Kleiton has many problems in his family environment. I also know that I have lost my head in the game. I also swore at Kleiton. Coaches make mistakes, and I could learn from my mistake, too. (Coaches Work Session 17)

This vignette supports the validity of the learning aspiration “learning from mistakes” and exempli es a situation in which it worked. Anthony realized that in



Kleiton's case, he needed to give him an opportunity to apologize and to learn from his mistake. This act affected all the youth insofar as everyone learned from Kleiton's mistake. It was an opportunity to say to Kleiton that his behavior was unacceptable, and if he wanted to come back, he had to apologize. In addition to the learning aspiration of learning from mistakes, becoming responsible/committed was also present. We saw it when Leon and Peter helped us to convince Kleiton to apologize to the youth. Everybody worked together to help Kleiton apologize, and in doing so, several people showed Kleiton that they cared for his well-being.

"Learning from mistakes" was the second learning aspiration that emerged in the leadership program. What happened with Kleiton gave everybody an opportunity to learn from his mistake. Coach Anthony realized that "coaches also make mistakes" and he described that he learned from his mistakes as well. According to the coaches, this event challenged the assumption that coaches are the authority that guides all training decisions and thus they are never wrong.

### ***Vignette 3: 'A magical moment: Let's put the coaches and the boys together : Valuing each other's knowledge***

Twelve weeks into the study, a magical moment happened. Carla was apprehensive, and she arrived 40 min before the first combined work session with the youth and coaches. During the previous week, Carla had been talking with Kim and she helped her prepare for this meeting. Kim tried to calm her down by saying that the goal would be to keep doing exactly what they had been doing. Carla organized the chairs in a circle. Robin, one of the younger youth, came to the meeting. He was wearing a uniform and was preparing to play. As soon as Robin realized that there was not a training session, he decided to join in the meeting with Carla.

Carla and Kim's goal for the meeting was to bring together the ideas from the separate work sessions with the youth and the coaches. Carla started by asking the coaches and the youth to share their experiences thus far in the leadership program.

*Coach Anthony:* The leadership program gives me more freedom in the training sessions. I have almost 40 kids in the same training session, and the leaders helped me so much. You cannot imagine, guys. You guys organized the younger kids. So, I could notice things that I could not pay attention to without you guys.

*Noel:* I think the younger kids listened to us. They respected us. It's so nice to feel this power.

*Coach Neo:* These leaders have also stopped messing up their training sessions. As leaders, they have showed very good behavior. Congratulations, guys

*Coach Rian:* I think this example is very important, Neo. If you guys have a positive attitude, the small kids who usually use bad words would stop. This might transform the environment of the training sessions. This might transform how people value you guys in your community.

*Coach Maria:* I think those are values that you can bring to your life, guys. The small kids could be inspired by you boys, think about it.

*Coach Anthony:* Let me give an example of how this is relevant, boys. When we asked the small kids if they knew anyone older in the project, they pointed out exactly who is here now, you boys: 'the leaders. That means you can influence the small kids' lives. They know you. You guys have the power to make changes. We are just helping you guys. (Combined Coaches and Youth Work Session 1)

When we put together multiple points of view in a collaborative/activist study, the participants started "valuing each other's knowledge" (Fine, 2007; Freire, 1987). At the end of data collection, the coaches and the youth were asked what they learned in the leadership program. Coach Anthony said that he learned a lot from the youth. The coaches said that they had learned to value the youth's knowledge. Garcia, one of the youth leaders, said that he learned a lot from the small kids as well as Coach Anthony. The coaches and the youth discussed how they were able to learn from one another. This may have happened because activist studies require multiple points of view and create spaces where everyone can learn. When students are engaged in a project in their communities and participate in the co-construction of the program, teachers find that not only are their students learning, but they themselves are also learning (Freire, 1987). This process might create roles and interaction opportunities that change adult perceptions of young people as well as young people's self-perceptions (Cook-Sather, 2002).

### ***Vignette 4: 'How can I talk with low-skilled kids coach? : Communicating with others***

The youth started the leadership program by helping the coaches to prepare the soccer field, being referees in games, and helping to take care of the younger children. However, at the beginning of the leadership program, the necessity to help low-skilled children emerged. Helping low-skilled children was considered most valuable by the coaches and demanded a great deal of responsibility. At the beginning of the leadership program, the youth had started to realize that they were not showing sensitivity to the children who lacked soccer skills. For example, they talked about Breno, a boy who was commonly the last one to be picked in their training sessions:

*Garcia:* Hey, guys. I think the leader cannot say, 'You're playing sucks.'

*Noel:* But that is what happens in our training sessions with Breno.

*Leon:* Breno plays for pleasure.

*David:* Yes, he just plays to wear the uniform. He is the last one to be picked.

*Noel:* He misses a lot of training sessions, right?

*Carla:* Don't you think that he is missing a lot of training sessions because he is always the last one to be picked?

*Garcia:* That is true. I always think, 'Oh my God I only have Breno left to choose for my team. Oh, my God

*Carla:* How about if these guys improve? If these boys improve, they could help the whole team too, right? (Youth Work Session 11)

As soon as the youth started the leadership program, their vision of the low-skilled children started to change. They began to discuss in their work sessions how they should work with these children to help them improve their skills.

*David:* We should give positive feedback to the low-skilled kids.

*Carla:* I agree, David. For example, in the last training session, Robin touched the ball three times in a game of 20 min. Every time I celebrated with him, do you remember?

*Hildo:* Three times? Oh, my God That is too bad.

*Leon:* The problem is that nobody passes the ball to him. I think the leader should ask the other kids on his team to pass the ball to Robin.

*Noel:* The leader could help Robin also to position himself on the soccer field.

*Leon:* We could get the kids like Robin to do some exercises, like pass or kick, in a separate place. I think it could help them. At least, they would touch the ball more times. (Youth Work Session 13)

In the process of helping the low-skilled children, many challenges emerged for the youth leaders. The youth reported that their main difficulty was their inability to communicate effectively.

*Carla:* How did you help the low-skilled kids in the last week? How did you manage that?

*Noel:* I didn't.

*Garcia:* I also did not. The kids did not understand what I said. The coach said most of the things I wanted to say.

*David:* They didn't know what offside meant, for example. It is a complex rule and they don't know that.

*Noel:* I tried to help with the kids' positions, but it was so messy. They were running everywhere. So crazy

*Leon:* They stopped and they listened to me, but it seemed they did not understand anything I said.

*Peter:* They did not listen to me.

*Leon:* But you, Peter, talked to the kids in a stupid way. You said, 'Kick the ball, asshole. That's why they didn't listen to you.

*Noel:* Nobody respects a leader who speaks like a stupid guy, like an animal.

*Garcia:* The coaches should help us to find a way to talk to these kids. (Youth Work Session 14)

The youth were looking for ways to be responsible and to be able to communicate in ways that were effective with the small children. Cuss words were not an effective

communication style and the youth began to realize it as they worked in leadership roles. This particular opportunity allowed them to learn to communicate in different ways. Across the leadership program, the youth improved in their abilities to communicate with the younger children. The youth also began to realize that it was necessary to have good communication with the coach as well: "Today I am the leader. How can I help, coach?"

In later meetings, Kleiton and David reminded the researchers that we also needed to speak with Tim. Tim had all the keys to open the doors in the facility. They said, "Tim is always drunk, and it is so hard to talk to him sometimes." To help with the small children's training sessions, it was necessary for the youth leaders to communicate effectively with many people, including Tim. At the end of the leadership program, Peter's father said: "I will talk as a father. My son has changed a lot since this leadership program has started. Peter has changed his behavior in our house; especially, he has changed the way he talks to his mother, how he talks to people."

"Communicating with others" was the last learning aspiration that emerged as the leadership program unfolded. It happened mainly when the leaders started to help the coaches work with the children who lacked soccer skills. For example, they identified that swearing was not an effective communication style. The youth identified that to be able to help the younger children, they had to respect all ability levels.

## Discussion

This study was a two-phase activist research project aimed at co-creating a prototype pedagogical model for working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds in a sport context. The first phase was the development of the key theme and critical elements (Luguetti et al., 2015, 2016). The five critical elements (student-centered pedagogy, inquiry-based education centered *in action*, ethic of care, attentiveness to the community, and a community of sport) provided a patchwork of practice that formed the basic architecture of the prototype model. In this article, we described what emerged when we worked collaboratively to create opportunities for the youth to begin to negotiate some of the barriers they identified.

When the five critical elements were combined and used in the soccer project, four learning aspirations emerged with this group of youth and their coaches. First, the youth became more responsible and committed when they had opportunities to be leaders. Second, participants learned that mistakes were areas for learning and growth.

Third, participants learned to value different people's knowledge. Finally, the youth learned to communicate more effectively. The leadership program offered the youth an additional day each week to work in the soccer project, thus allowing them to manage what they identified as a serious risk (the life of crime). Although it may seem that merely adding 1 day per week for the youth to engage in the sport program was insignificant, what is important to remember when working in activist approaches is that transformation begins at the micro level—small steps toward changing oppressive practices make a difference over time (Cook-Sather, 2002; Oliver et al., 2009).

We believe that pedagogical models developed through activist approaches will always have learning aspirations that are context-specific rather than predetermined. In contrast to the predetermined learning outcomes that currently dominate pedagogical models in sport contexts (Ennis et al., 1999; Fuller et al., 2013; Hastie & Buchanan, 2000; Hellison, 2010; Holt, 2008; Walsh, 2008), we use the term learning aspirations because what is possible to learn with youth will vary depending on the youth involved (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013). Therefore, our prototype model is conceptually different from other pedagogical models. That is, the learning aspirations that emerge through the implementation of the critical elements will depend on the needs of the youth involved, the context where the work is implemented, and which areas of social vulnerability are negotiated. Thus, we think the term learning aspirations is more consistent with an activist approach because it suggests less prescription and more possibility. The notion of learning aspirations may also be more consistent with the co-construction of pedagogical models.

To realize the possible learning aspirations, we had to negotiate two challenges that threatened our abilities to integrate the critical elements into the sport project. These challenges included the adults' lack of trust in the youth and the incommensurability between the culture of sport in Brazil and the articulated goals of the sport project to address the needs of youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds. We think it is important as we consider this process to be cognizant of challenges that emerge as a result of taking an activist approach.

Our first challenge was a result of our efforts to work in student-centered ways. The lack of trust in the youth that the coaches initially felt could have prevented them from allowing the youth to work as leaders, thus preventing the transformative possibilities that emerged. Many of these assumptions emerged out of the fear of how the youth would or would not respond to being put

in positions that required responsibility and maturity. This basic lack of trust in young people has developed through adults' need to control youth and to view them as passive recipients of what others determine is education (Cook-Sather, 2002, 2006). Kim's structural support was essential for the coaches and Carla to understand that to co-create a leadership program using an activist approach, we needed to trust the youth to be both responsible and mature.

The second challenge we experienced was the incommensurability between the culture of sport in Brazil and the articulated goals of the sport project for addressing the needs of youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds. This challenge emerged when the coordinators of the sport program were trying to influence the coaches by demanding that "winning" should be the main objective of the project. Although the project was run by a nongovernmental organization and had as its mission to "promote and democratize access to educational sport," the coordinators insisted that "winning" would be the best way to bring more kids to the project. According to the youth, they were playing soccer to "have fun," "meet friends," and "avoid a life of crime"—reasons beyond "winning the competitions." Further, the coaches were engaged in the project because they believed in the value that sport could bring to youth from socially vulnerable areas. If we are going to succeed in developing a pedagogical model in a sport context, particularly in a sport that has important cultural significance, we have to negotiate the value of "winning." Even though competition is an essential element in a sport context, an activist approach should challenge authoritarian visions that winning should be the most important part of a sport program.

We believe there is another important distinction in this work. Our prototype pedagogical model was developed in an informal education setting, as opposed to a formal school setting. This setting allowed for transformation to be realized more clearly because we did not have to also negotiate with educational institutions. Informal educational settings can be considered a land of freedom in comparison to formal education because young people choose to participate (Hellison, 2010; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2012). Sports in informal settings might allow youth to find a different path from the reality of their community, provide a place to recharge youth's hearts, allow them to rediscover secret emotions, and offer a place where it is possible to feel protected and dream about a different future. In addition, sport might be a vehicle for critically understanding the reality in which these young people live and a place to minimize the distorted relationship between youth and the institutions of society. This is important in countries

like Brazil where formal education lacks quality (Almeida, 2000). For example, only 59% of Brazilian youth complete middle school, and 40% complete high school (Almeida, 2000). Thus, the importance of informal educational opportunities is even greater in countries like Brazil. We suspect this type of model will be most effective outside of school contexts, but it is something we want to explore further.

We consider this prototype pedagogical model a first step in the development of a pedagogical model of sport that meets the needs of youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds. Areas for future study include applying this prototype pedagogical model again in the same context to see if the critical elements hold up and how the learning aspirations might be different. Further studies could be done in other socially vulnerable contexts and in different sport projects to see if the key theme and the critical elements can be refined and consolidated. Once we have a more robust understanding of the critical elements, we plan to begin working with coaches to help them implement the pedagogical model in their work with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds.

### What does this article add

But one does not liberate people by alienating them. Authentic liberation—the process of humanization—is not another deposit to be made in men [sic]. Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it. Those truly committed to liberation must reject the banking concept in its entirety, adopting instead a concept of women and men as conscious beings, and consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world. (Freire, 1987, pp. 79)

Paulo Freire wrote about the possibilities of teaching based on “an authentic liberation”—the capacity to understand the world in order to transform it. In this article, we incorporated his conception of teaching by offering an activist approach for working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds in a sports context. In contrast to prosocial behavior-based approaches described in the literature, we argue that sport can be a vehicle for “an authentic liberation” assisting youth to identify, critique, and transform barriers they identify as problematic to their participation in sport.

Our activist approach to developing this prototype pedagogical model (Luguetti et al., 2015, 2016; Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013) allowed us to identify the barriers to safe and healthy lives that the youth face, recognize realistic places within sport where these barriers could be challenged, and work collaboratively to create transformative possibilities. These study findings suggest that if our intent is to use sport as a vehicle to help youth

manage risk, then we must start from young people's concrete needs and life situations.

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