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‘Getting more comfortable in an uncomfortable space’: Learning to become an activist researcher in a socially vulnerable sport context

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‘Getting more comfortable in an uncomfortable space’: Learning to become an activist researcher in a socially vulnerable sport context

Abstract

Activist research engages all participants as co-researchers in order to challenge the status quo in hopes of creating spaces in which they will actively participate in their education and feel responsible for their own and others’ learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). There are a number of challenges that researchers might face when engaging in activist research with co-researchers. In that sense, researchers must be open to multiple perspectives and critical attitudes in order to negotiate the challenges that arise in the process. This paper describes the challenges that the lead author faced in learning to become an activist researcher in a socially vulnerable sport context and how these challenges were negotiated. The lead author, supervised by the second author, conducted a six month activist research study in a soccer program in a socially and economically disadvantaged neighborhood in Brazil. Participants included two researchers (lead and second authors), 17 young people, four coaches, a pedagogic coordinator and a social worker as co-researchers. Multiple sources of data were collected, including 38 field journal/observations and audio records of: 18 youth work sessions, 16 coaches’ work sessions, three combined coaches and youth work sessions, and 37 meetings between the lead author and the second author. By using an activist approach four challenges were identified and negotiated: learning to become more comfortable with an activist approach, helping young people to articulate what they know and the researcher to see what they say, valuing co-researchers’ knowledge, and negotiating the culture of sport. We argue that challenges are essential, necessary and significant in an activist research project in order to transform ourselves as researchers and our relationship with others.

Keywords: *Activist research; Participatory action research; Social vulnerability; Empowerment; Collaboration; Challenges; Critical pedagogy; Paulo Freire; Marginalized groups;*

There is a growing interest in encouraging initiatives to diminish problems arising from social vulnerability by offering access to social and cultural capital through music, sport, and literature (Fox & Fine, 2013; Greene, 2000). Among the forms of social and cultural capital, sport is almost always addressed in the public policies of different countries (Coalter, 2005; Kirk, 2004). Sport is a sociocultural phenomenon and has been associated with positive youth development, community regeneration, development of human social capital, potential to decrease incidences of crime and anti-social behavior in socially vulnerable areas and combat substance misuse (Coalter, 2005; Mcevoy, Macphail, & Enright, 2012). In the last 15 years we have seen a variety of curriculum, instructional and pedagogical models (Metzler, 2011; Casey, 2014) in sport that focus on the promotion of 'life skills' for youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds. For example, Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) (Hellison, 2010) that uses various forms of physical activity and sport to teach participants personal and social responsibility for their behaviors, and Positive Youth Development (PYD) that seeks to teach young people the 5Cs framework, which are competence, confidence, character, caring/compassion, and connection (Holt, 2008).

Despite a central concern with equity in sport contexts, many researchers have argued that research in sport contexts might actually be reproducing the relationship of inequality, thus reinforcing the process of social vulnerability (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, & Coalter, 2012; Lawson, 2005; Luguetti et al., 2015). For example, most researchers have developed programs for young people without the participation of the young people themselves or the assistance of others from their communities (Lawson, 2005). Further, many of these programs are prescriptive (e.g., expect certain behaviors from the young people) yet lack attention to the broader structures in which these young people live (Haudenhuyse et al., 2012). Few studies in sport contexts have been developed by researchers alongside of coaches and youth with the intention to intervene—to change/negotiate patterns of inequality that define the sport experience for young people (Luguetti et al., 2015, 2016, 2017). We believe there is potential to use activist approaches, informed by feminisms and critical pedagogies (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013; Fine, 2007; Freire, 1987, 1996) to working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds in sport contexts (Luguetti et al., 2015).

The authors of this paper engage in dialogue with researchers who want to do more than describe the dynamics of inequality. We are writing in conversation with researchers who want to intervene—to change/negotiate patterns of inequality that define the experience for young people from socially vulnerable backgrounds, such as poor housing, poor health, low income, high crime environment, and others (Collins, 2004). Drawing on feminisms and critical pedagogy as the theoretical frameworks (Fine, 2007; Freire, 1987, 1996), this study was part of a large project aimed at co-creating a prototype pedagogical model (Luguetti et al., 2015, 2016, 2017) for working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds in a sport context. Together the participants worked to identify barriers to sport opportunities in the youth's community, imagined alternative possibilities to the barriers identified, and collaborated to create realistic opportunities for the young people to negotiate some of the barriers they identified (Fine, 2007; Freire, 1987, 1996; Luguetti et al., 2015, 2016, 2017). This project involved the researchers Carla and Kim (lead and second authors), 17 young people, four coaches, a pedagogic coordinator and a social worker as co-researchers.

Activist research and socially vulnerable areas

Many people live in socially vulnerable areas which have a combination of linked problems including poor housing, poor health, unemployment, poor skills, low income, high crime environment, and family breakdown (Collins, 2004). Social vulnerability may be defined as the result of the negative relationship between the availability of material or symbolic resources of individuals or groups and access to the social, economic, and cultural opportunity structure provided by the state, market and/or society (Misztal, 2011).

There exists the perception that any problem faced by people from socially vulnerable backgrounds (educational failure, drug and alcohol abuse, etc.) is primarily a result of their own volition (Freire, 1996). In reality, the majority of people living in socially vulnerable areas want to work toward the creation of safe neighborhoods, clean streets, effective schools, and access to health care; they are doing the best they can with what they have, and what they have is often limited by the contexts in which they live (McIntyre, 2003). We believe that people from socially vulnerable backgrounds have the capacity and agency to analyze their social context and to challenge and resist the forces that impede their choice of possibilities (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). In that sense, we suggest activist research as one possibility for working with people from socially vulnerable backgrounds because it offers them the opportunity to enhance their agency (Fine, 2007; Freire, 1987).

Activist scholars have engaged in research with the belief that knowledge is rooted in social relations, and it is more powerful when produced collaboratively through action (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Building on the work of feminist studies and critical pedagogy

(Fine, 2007; Freire, 1987, 1996; Hooks, 2000), scholars have developed projects that engage practitioners in dialogue and action to address issues of social change. It starts with the notion that the people most affected by a problem are not only capable of better understanding their realities, but are also the best equipped to address the problems they face (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Fine, 2007; Freire, 1987). For a more elaborate discussion see Luguetti et al. (2015).

Activist research focuses on generating changes within communities through empowering both researcher and co-researchers to develop a critically conscious understanding of their relationship with the world (Freire, 1987; Maguire, 1993; Mcintyre, 2006). Knowledge and understanding are co-produced where researchers follow as well as lead, and co-researchers lead as well as follow, and where both learn to resist the imposition of oppressive, disempowering, and commonly accepted practices (Luguetti et al., 2015; Cook-Sather, 2002; Freire, 1987).

In socially vulnerable areas, educators and researchers have engaged in activist research as evidenced in and through multiple projects designed to address, for example, change in urban schools (Nygreen, 2006), explore youth agency in universities (Mcintyre, 2003) and address health issues (Horowitz, Robinson, & Seifer, 2009). However, few activist research projects have been developed in sport contexts (Luguetti et al., 2015, 2016, 2017). Despite the scarcity of activist research in sport, it is believed that there is potential in using activist approaches with young people from socially vulnerable backgrounds in sport contexts because young people have the potential to become agents in the process of transformative learning, seeking opportunities to reframe and re-imagine their sport experiences.

Challenges to becoming an activist researcher

To do activist research, researchers must be open to multiple perspectives and critical attitudes in order to negotiate the challenges that arise in the process. There are a number of challenges that researchers might face when engaging in activist research. These include: an open-ended, messy, and risky process (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009; Koirala-Azad & Fuentes, 2010; Maguire, 1993), stereotypes and assumptions (Kidd & Kral, 2005; McIntyre, 2003; Mcintyre, 2006; Nygreen, 2006), learning to listen and trust co-researchers (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Cook-Sather, 2002; Mcintyre, 2006; Oliver & Kirk, 2015)**,** and reproducing power relationship (Mcintyre, 2006; Nygreen, 2006)**.**

Many researchers, specifically beginners, may be uncomfortable with the necessary change in power relations that results from the necessity of a more democratic pedagogical planning process (Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011). However, it is precisely the unexpected twists and turns that occur in ongoing collaborative processes that generate creative energy, produce “aha” moments, and increase the possibility of co-researchers agency (Mcintyre, 2006). One risk activist researchers face is when their co-researchers care about different kinds of issues, or take the project in different directions, than the researcher intended (Nygreen, 2006). When this happens, the researcher has to negotiate the messiness of the project as it shifts to better meet the needs of the co-researchers.

Activist researchers must also be prepared to engage in what can be a very personal struggle with their own stereotypes and assumptions about the people they are working with (McIntyre, 2003). For example, according to McIntyre (2006), pre-service teachers working in socially vulnerable areas believe that hard work and merit lead to success regardless of the social and cultural contexts and that the researcher is the authority figure and the participants are the recipients of his/her knowledge. This “us” and “them” dichotomy—a binary position where white researchers (us) believe that they need to “help” people from socially vulnerable background (them) reifies the myth that the students are white knights whose mission is to “save” the poor and the downtrodden (McIntyre, 2006).

Researchers learn that listening to and trusting co-researchers are valuable and important skills in activist research (Oliver & Kirk, 2015). Researchers need to learn how to talk with co-researchers in order to facilitate informative and critical dialogue (Mcintyre, 2006). According to Delpit (1988), it requires a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only open eyes and ears but also open hearts and minds. For that, it is essential the presence of mutual respect and trust among co-researchers exists (Cook-Sather, 2002). This mutual respect is time-consuming because knowledge is created in the context of relationships, and relationship-building doesn’t happen overnight (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009).

Reproducing power relationship is another challenge that emerges in activist research (Mcintyre, 2006; Nygreen, 2006). According to Nygreen (2006), no matter how sincere the attempt to equalize power between researcher and co-researchers, divisions of race, gender, class, and age are often reproduced within collaborative groups of co-researchers. In these ways, activist research projects risk reproducing the same unequal power relations as more conventional research (Mcintyre, 2006). For example, adults simply try to take over the session and tell the group what to do and how to do it (Mcintyre, 2006).

The literature documents many of the challenges of becoming an activist researcher. According to McIntyre (2003) these challenges can be viewed in two distinct ways: (1) as insurmountable barriers in the research process and summarily dismissed, or (2) as essential, necessary, and significant. We believe that challenges are important components in an activist research project. Activist research is not only about trying to transform social structures "out there" and "the people", it is about being open to transform ourselves as researchers and our relationships with others (Maguire, 1993). In that sense, this paper describes the challenges the lead author faced in learning to become an activist researcher in a socially vulnerable sport context and how these challenges were negotiated.

Methodology

This paper is part of a larger two-phase activist research study (Fine, 2007) that aimed to co-create a prototype pedagogical model of sport for working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds.

Settings and Participants

This project took place in a soccer project attended by approximately 250 children and young people (6 to 15 years old) of both genders where approximately 10% were female. 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 aim of the project was to promote and democratize access to educational sport.

The research idea was presented to the general and pedagogical coordinators of the project who agreed with the initial idea and design. The idea was presented to both coordinators because the researchers hoped that the co-created prototype pedagogical model could later be incorporated throughout the entire soccer project. 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 young people and their parents gave assent, and parents signed an informed consent form. Ethical approval for this study was received from the Ethics Committee (protocol number 608.759). All adults involved in the study signed informed consent.

The participants included two researchers (lead and second authors), and 17 boys (ages 13-15), four coaches, a pedagogical coordinator (responsible for supervising and organizing education and training programs), and a social worker. All participants besides the researchers were considered as co-researchers. The reason the participants were all boys was that the group we were working with only had boys. While it was not intended to be a study on boys only, there were no girls playing soccer that were within the age group we were targeting. The young participants of the study came from a neighborhood located in an area with many slums, and it is a place that has explicit drug trafficking. This site was selected because it had high percentages of economically disadvantaged young people (SEADE, 2003).

The two researchers differed from the other participants insofar as neither were members of socially vulnerable groups and thus were considered an in-betweener/outsider (Carla) and outsider (Kim) respectively (Anzaldúa, 2007). At the time of the study, Carla was 31 years old and identified as a PhD student, middle class and physically active as a recreational soccer player. Although Carla's gender, race, age, and social class positioned her as an outsider, her experience in soccer and understanding of the socially vulnerable context positioned her as an in-betweener (Anzaldúa, 2007). Carla had no experience in using an activist approach in either her teaching or research. Although Kim was an outsider in relation to the young people in Brazil, her role was to assist Carla in learning to become an activist researcher. In this ability she served as peer debriefer, helping with progressive data analysis and helping in facilitating a collaborative construction of youth and coach work sessions.

Data Collection

An activist approach called Student-Centered Inquiry *as* Curriculum (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013) was used as a process of working with the young people as well as serving as a framework for data collection. Student-Centered Inquiry *as* Curriculum involves a two-phase process: *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. *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. Given what we learned during *Building the Foundation phase*, we co-created and implemented with the boys and the coaches a leadership program[2]. The cyclical process of *Student-Centered Inquiry* ***as*** *Curriculum* was used as both the data collection process as well as the curriculum development process. *Planning* involved the creation of the work sessions between the boys and Carla, 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 young people, with what she was learning about using a youth-centered pedagogical approach, and what she was doing with the coaches. *Listening to Respond* involved the debriefing and analysis of data between Carla and Kim following the youth work sessions. *Analyzing the Responses* involved the debriefing and analysis of data between Carla and Kim following the coaches' work sessions.

Data were collected over 18 weeks in 2013 whereby Carla met with the young people for 40 minutes each week prior to their soccer training sessions (18 sessions). Debriefing followed immediately with Kim for approximately 90 minutes via Skype conferences. In these debriefing meetings the researchers 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.

Data Sources and Analyses

Data sources for this project included 38 field journal/observations of the training sessions and audio records of all work sessions: youth (18), coaches (16), combined coach and youth (3), and meetings between Carla and Kim (37). Carla transcribed all 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. Data analysis was twofold. First, individually Carla and Kim read all their meeting notes and engaged in a process of initial coding. Second, we looked across the data to identify places that Carla struggled to use an activist approach (Fine, 2007; Freire, 1986; 1996) with youth. Third, we looked across the data to identify the ways with which Carla negotiated the challenges she experienced and the types of supports that she drew on. After the data was initially coded, Carla and Kim discussed their coding together. Examples of codes by each author were offered, and then questioned and critiqued by the other author. This enabled the authors to share commonalities and differences. By engaging in this step Carla and Kim attempted to act as external analysts of each other's reflections, seeking clarity by asking questions and probing for deeper meaning where appropriate. Trustworthiness was established through the on-going analysis across the entire larger project. That is, each week, Carla and Kim skyped for 90 minutes following each youth and coaches work sessions to discuss what Carla was learning. These skype meetings were audio recorded and transcribed and chronicled the on-going process of analysis from the beginning of the study through its completion. These transcripts then became the place from which we explored the challenges Carla faced learning to become an activist researcher.

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[2] For a more detailed description of this process please see (Luguetti et al., 2015, 2016).

Findings

Four main challenges were encountered and negotiated in becoming an activist researcher in a socially vulnerable sport context. The first challenge involved Carla's discomfort with the activist process of working, particularly with the young people. The second challenge was in learning to help the young people to articulate what they know and in Carla's ability to see what they were saying. The third was valuing the co-researchers' knowledge. And the fourth was learning how to negotiate an activist project located in the culture of sport. In this section we describe how these four challenges emerged and how these challenges were negotiated.

'You are always changing!': Becoming more comfortable with an activist approach

Carla experienced two major challenges in learning to become more comfortable with an activist approach. These included a) learning how to alter her plans based on youth engagement and disengagement; and b) learning to share power in the work sessions with the youth. These challenge emerged in part due to her assumptions about teaching and youth.

> Kim: For tomorrow you could take a poster board and they can write together: why do you love to play soccer? If they say we don't know you ask them: why are you here?
>
> Carla: Do you think this will take the whole youth work session, Kim? I am planning to ask about their perception of the soccer lesson.

> Kim: I think their perception about the lesson is too narrow right now. It will be a small part.
> Carla: You are always changing!
> Kim: We have to change based on what the kids are doing and right now; they are not talking to you.
> Carla: I agree, the coaches are talking but the kids are not (Meeting 3)

Due to the uncertainty of what information the youth might provide, Carla had to be very prepared for each session because she never knew where a session would take her. This lack of knowing often caused her to be uncomfortable going into the work sessions.

> Carla: Do you think I should try to talk about some rules with the boys? Because it is really bad when someone is talking and someone else is joking at the same time.
> Kim: You can say that sometimes when a person is talking, there are people joking around. "Have you noticed that? Are you comfortable with the way you engage? Do you think, maybe, we should have some kind of rules for what we do when one person is talking? Do you think we need that? Because I am a little bit uncomfortable, but if you are not uncomfortable, I am ok with it."
> Carla: It is hard for me.
> Kim: I know. You are just in this place that you cannot control...You have to learn to be comfortable with being uncomfortable or being willing to be uncomfortable.
> Carla: For example, I planned to divide them in small groups, and I prepared for that. Then, they said "We prefer to stay in a whole group"!
> Kim: That is ok because it doesn't really matter to you if they are in a big group or in a small group, right? (Meeting 4)

The second challenge Carla experienced in becoming more comfortable with an activist approach was learning to share power in the work sessions with the youth. Kim was constantly trying to help Carla negotiate what felt like chaos.

> Carla: I don't know how your youth's sessions are but mine it is chaotic. Some of the kids are talking in the same time. I cannot control them!
> Kim: Don't worry about controlling them. My girls always talk in the same time, all of them. Active learning looks chaotic and it feels out of control. They are coming every week. I think if you try to control them they will not talk to you.
> Carla: I agree! (Meeting 14)

Carla's discomfort continued to persist across the entire research project. Kim helped Carla see how to share power with the kids in order to negotiate youths' behavior. Instead of Carla setting the rules and consequences for youth's behavior, Kim gave Carla specific strategies around behaviors, putting responsibility on the youth. It challenges the status quo by putting youth in position of power. Kim's help, while important and necessary, did not take Carla's feelings of discomfort away. What caused the discomfort was not so much the help from Kim, but rather the uncertainty involved in activist research that is simply part of the process. Thus, Kim and Carla continually had to negotiate this discomfort throughout the entire research process.

'I think the youth cannot see small important things': Helping youth to articulate what they know and researcher to see what they articulate

The second challenge Carla faced in becoming an activist researcher was in helping the youth to articulate what they know, and then learning to see what they were meaning. At the end of the first youth work session Kim was helping Carla to find ways to help the youth communicate their knowledge.

> Carla: I think they enjoyed the work session but they are sometimes ashamed to speak, especially in a whole group. They spoke few words
>
> Kim: You just have to ask them to elaborate more. Can you tell me a story about that? You have to push that. If you don't push you will get 1 word. Maybe other way is asking them: what do you think other boys think about this?
>
> Carla: I said that and they responded so much better… Have you seen what I planned for the next youth's work session?
>
> Kim: Yes, but I don't think you should ask the kids direct questions. It is too direct. If you can figure out what is important to them without asking, just listening. What is their favorite part of soccer? Get them to talk about those kinds of things. It will help you to get into a conversation.
>
> Carla: Yes, I got. But I don't know how I can do this.
>
> Kim: I think you need to be really direct about your uncertainty. I would go back to the kids and say: I am really interested in understanding some things, but I am not sure how to talk to you. I am wondering if you would tell me more things that are important to you about playing soccer. Maybe put them in groups. What is important for you? What prevents you from getting here? I think you come out and say, "I don't know how I can do this. Can you help me? Put them in the position of experts (Meeting 2)

Kim was helping Carla with strategies to help the youth start talking more in the work sessions. Kim suggested to Carla to ask them to elaborate more, to talk about other youth and to put them in the position of expert. She also recommended that she start spending more time getting to know the youth so that they could become more comfortable with her.

Carla started to watch some of the youths' soccer games, walk with them to their houses, play with them, and talk to them before the training sessions. This time also allowed her to identify what the youth liked. They enjoyed listening to funk songs before training sessions. Carla started to use their music to help them articulate their thoughts about their communities

(Luguetti et al., 2016). The funk songs were a way of helping the youth to find language. However, while Carla became better at helping the youth name their experiences, she struggled to see what they were actually telling her.

> Carla: I asked the boys what they would change in the training sessions. Eric said "I would change the grass, like to artificial grass and build another field where the canal is". There is a canal next to the field, and he wants to build another field. They said that they want to build an expensive dressing room, too. I think they cannot see small important things. For example, I know and they know that there is a disease that they can get because of the dirty grass on the field, a kind of itch. I think that is a huge issue. The boys should consider that disease before suggesting huge changes like an expensive dressing room.
>
> Kim: When you say that they cannot see small change, I don't read it that way. What they want to change are things that allow them to not get sick. When they say, "We want a changing room: we want expensive changing rooms because there are showers and water." It is cleaner. They want artificial grass to protect their health. I see some of these things as focused around changes that allowed them to be healthier. …. Kids are going to be big before they are going to be small. So, they might talk about wanting a really beautiful expensive place because what is embedded in a beautiful expensive place is nice grass or a nice facility to change or warm water in the shower, water to drink. It incorporates the small things (Meeting 4).

This example shows how Kim's help was crucial to Carla's learning to hear what the youth were saying. Kim helped Carla to see how the boys talked about big changes embedded the problems of skin disease from dirty playing areas, unsafe drinking water, and lack of changing facilities. This is where Carla found structural support to be critical to her abilities to work in activist ways.

'Now, I believe, after nine sessions: the youths have the answers': Valuing co-researchers' knowledge

Valuing co-researchers' knowledge was the third challenge Carla faced in becoming an activist researcher. At first, she struggled to understand that she could not privilege one form of knowledge over any of the others. In particular Carla valued both theoretical knowledge and coaches' knowledge more than she valued the youths' knowledge. However, the studies success was dependent on all co-researchers' knowledge.

> Carla: The question is: how much should the coaches be aware of this pedagogical model? For example, I can do this if I teach the coaches what each of these elements means and it might create a more aware process.

> Kim: I think you don’t want to rush that piece because if you rush you are going to be no longer youth driven. It is Carla voice driven. Laying this on the coaches is different from trying to work with the coaches to develop a pedagogical model for working with kids from socially vulnerable backgrounds. You had a starting place, but you have already seen that your starting place is moving. So, I would not get to the end too fast. I think that everything you are doing is working toward a place where you will actually have a conversation with the coaches about how you could achieve this in reality. I mean you are doing exactly that. You are just not talking about critical elements and learning outcomes language, yet (Meeting 7).

Kim was helping Carla to see what she was doing in relation to what she wanted to do. Kim got more direct about an activist approach, showing Carla how she was already co-creating a prototype pedagogical model with the coaches and the youth. Kim was continually helping Carla see how developing an activist model would look different than a coach-centered model. She was bringing Carla back to youth voice and showing how to move forward. In part, Kim was helping Carla develop a language for what she was doing.

> Carla: That is so interesting... The youths have the answers!
> Kim: They do... everything single answer you need...
> Carla: Now, I believe, after nine sessions. I was listening to our last [recorded] meeting and I saw how I talked about a top down idea again and you suggested to me to start by asking questions to youth and I really agree with your reflection. The youth have the answers.
> Kim: I think there is so much to be said to helping young people to take responsibility for their own behaviors. We can tell them what to do, but we can’t make them do anything. We can invite them to behave in that ways they know are good for young kids.
> Carla: Yes, I know that. I think an agreement is very important, but we have different ways to do that. Your way, the way you are teaching me is so much better and I didn't expect this. It is so different when the youth build these ideas (Meeting 18).

It took 9 weeks before Carla could see the value of the youths’ knowledge in relation to the development of the pedagogical model. The challenge was coming to see that youth’s knowledge and voice was significant if she was going to be able to develop a pedagogical model that was based on an activist approach. Kim could not tell Carla that youth’s knowledge was important, but rather help her to see the value in youth voice. She did this by encouraging Carla back to youth voice over and over again. It took Carla a long time to understand and trust that every kind of knowledge (theories, the coaches’ knowledge, the boys’ knowledge, researchers’ knowledge) was important in an activist way of working.

‘I think the hardest part is the relationship between people’: Negotiating the culture of sport

The final challenge that emerged in becoming an activist researcher in a socially vulnerable sport context was a result of the culture of sport. Carla had to learn to negotiate with the coordinators of the project who valued "winning" as their main objective, and the structural hierarchy between the coaches and the coordinators. The coordinators tried to convince the coaches that competitive results were fundamental to the project.

Carla: I think I have bad news, Kim. Something I think might disrupt the research. You know we have a general coordinator for our project. He does not attend the coaches' work sessions, but he has his own meetings with the coaches after our work sessions. Last Friday, he wrote on the black board the results of the games the youth had played a week before. He wrote 7x0, 7x2 and 4x0 and he spoke for an hour and a half about how "we cannot lose!" Kim, I was so upset!
Kim: What did the coaches say?
Carla: In front of the general coordinator, nothing. But, after that, in an informal conversation with me, the coaches said how different that idea is from what we are developing together. The general coordinator thinks that the young people have to win because winning is an important part to getting more kids to come to our project. I have data to show him that he is wrong
Kim: Maybe part of you could do you present what you have learned from the youth. Originally we talked about winning is important but we have found that is getting better and being part of the team and have something we can do and we are not on the streets getting in trouble. These are the things that the youth value.
Carla: I think the hardest part is the relationship between people (Meeting 15).

By that point, the coaches already knew that the youth were playing soccer for more reasons than winning competitions (to have fun, to be with friends, to improve tactical skills). The coaches knew that the competition was an important part of our project, but it wasn't the main focus. We had to negotiate this power dynamic within the sport context. Kim suggested Carla always remind the coordinator of the youths' view about the project. In that sense we challenged this "winning" assumption by using youth data. Added to that, Carla invited the coaches to help her talk to the coordinator how important what we were developing together was as well as reminding them how essential their support was for the development of the research.

Besides winning, we also had to negotiate an environment of hierarchy that is part of sport culture. There was a clear hierarchy present in the project: the coordinators' voices should be considered first, followed by coaches.

Carla: The pedagogic coordinator Daniel said to me that I should talk to him first in relation to what I am thinking to do in the coaches' work sessions. He said in that way he can think

> about his opinion before our meeting. I tried to explain that our meetings are an environment that things emerge. It is not a predictable conversation.
>
> Kim: You should put together pretty much the benefits of this project from the coaches' perspectives and from the kids' perspectives. So, he can see. He can be part of this because he allows this to happen in this space. Even though it is not comfortable for you, you are willing to do that. One of the challenges to the project has been the relationship between Daniel and the coaches. For this work to continue it has to be negotiated. (Meeting 33).

> Carla: Anthony said it was hard for him to be youth-centered because the coach should be in charge - the boss. He said that the coach should decide all things in the training sessions!
>
> Kim: But you can be in charge and still be youth-centered! (Meeting 33).

The pedagogic coordinator didn't want to give Carla the power. The coaches were going in Carla's direction. However, the coordinators suggested that the coaches should be more coach-centered. An activist approach is likely to disrupt the culture of sport. The coaches also talked about how they have to show a strong position (coach-centered). In this case, the decisions for the training sessions would be held almost entirely by the coach. The traditional culture of sport requires a coach's position be coach-centered, considering limited participation of young people in the process.

Discussion and conclusion

> The more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can better transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, and to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side (Freire, 1987, p. 21)

In the present study, the researchers (Carla and Kim) broke from the passive role of the researcher as detached observer, and reframed the relationship between observer and observed as one of solidarity and engagement, through active collaboration (Nygreen, 2006). The researchers constructed knowledge with co-researchers (young people, coaches, social worker and pedagogic coordinator) so that the young people could make informed choices about the actions they wanted to take to improve the quality of life in their neighborhood (Freire, 1987; Mcintyre, 2006). However, activist research is not only about trying to transform social structures "out there" and "the people", it is about being open to transforming ourselves as researchers and our relationships with others (Maguire, 1993, p.175). The purpose of this study was to describe the challenges that Carla faced in becoming an activist researcher in a socially vulnerable sport context and how in collaboration with Kim these challenges were negotiated.

Most of the challenges Carla faced in this project are described throughout the general education literature (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009; Koirala-Azad & Fuentes, 2010; Maguire, 1993; McIntyre, 2003) First, Carla learned to become more comfortable with an activist approach that was open-ended, messy, and risky, and Kim helped her to negotiate the messiness of the project to better meet the needs of her co-researchers (coaches and youth). Second, Carla learned to help the young people to articulate what they know, and then learning to see what they were meaning. Third, Carla learned to negotiate her assumptions that both theoretical knowledge and coaches' knowledge were more important than young people's knowledge. Researchers never enter the field as disinterested observers but with biases, sympathies, assumptions, and positionalities, all of which shape the research (Kidd & Kral, 2005; Nygreen, 2006)**.** Although this process happened in a socially vulnerable context with multiple social issues interacting (e.g. poor housing, poor health, unemployment, poor skills, low income, high crime environment, and family breakdown, and others), the socially vulnerable context in and of itself was not a challenge for Carla as it is for many scholars across general education research (Mcintyre, 2006; Nygreen, 2006). Carla knew she wanted to work in a socially vulnerable area and had spent a year prior to the study working with the youth and coaches in order to better understand the specific context where her study would take place. However, Carla was not aware of what an activist research process would require of her. Carla had never experienced an activist approach before this project and she struggled with the change in power relations that result from the necessity of a more democratic process (Bovill et al., 2011).

In order to negotiate challenges that arise in activist studies, we suggest the presence of structural support from an expert, especially for beginning researchers who want to become activist researchers. In this study Kim served as Carla's structural support and we describe two examples that show how essential this support was. First, to work in an activist approach without any previous experience, Carla had to learn to negotiate challenges that emerged due to her assumptions about teaching and young people. The structural support helped Carla to negotiate the messiness of the project. Second, although it is crucial to learn how to listen to co-researchers (Cook-Sather, 2002; McIntyre, 2003, 2006), it was essential for Carla to learn to see what the young people were saying and meaning. The structural support was essential to help Carla to interpret the youths' language. In addition the structural support it is suggested ongoing/progressive data analysis in order to negotiate challenges that arise in activist studies. Activist studies are based on listening and respond and the ongoing data analysis allowed the researchers to plan to the next sections (week by week). Carla and Kim had a consistent process across the 18 weeks whereby Carla met with the youth and coaches and had a debriefing immediately following with Kim. By developing an activist research project, Carla had a lot of challenges and the ongoing data helped her to negotiate those challenges as they emerged.

While many challenges Carla faced in learning to become an activist researcher are described in the general education literature, what this paper adds to the larger conversation and what required the most significant effort on Carla's part was in finding ways of negotiating the culture of sport. The culture of sport created tensions that would not necessarily be in other contexts. The culture of sport adds an additional layer to the complexity of activist projects. In an activist approach the participants (researchers and co-researchers) should be at the center. However, the culture of sport became the circle that encompassed everything we did. For example, it happened 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 and would be the best way to bring more kids to the project. According to the young people, they were playing soccer to "have fun", "meet friends," and to "avoid a life of crime". There was a clear hierarchy present in the project: the coordinators' were the people in power, followed by coaches, and finally the young people, and this is reflective of the culture of sport as reported by socially critical pedagogy authors (Stigger & Lovisolo, 2009; Vaz, 2000, 2008). Sport could be considered a prototype for a rationalized life, and sport becomes an 'object' to be dominated and controlled (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1985). It is represented in the cult of obedience to authoritarianism, thus why we often see coaches demanding submissiveness from their players.

In this project, we experienced incommensurability between the culture of sport in Brazil and an activist approach to teaching and research. If we are going to succeed in using activist approaches in a sport contexts, particularly in a sport that has important cultural significance, we will have to be aware up front of how this culture of sport plays out in reality. An activist approach might challenge authoritarian visions of traditional sport programs - the cult of obedience to authoritarianism (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1985; Stigger & Lovisolo, 2009; Vaz, 2000, 2008), the belief that winning is more important than any other aspect, and the structural hierarchy of the sport context that situates coaches knowledge as superior to youths' knowledge. Finally, we conclude by arguing that these challenges should be viewed as essential, necessary, and significant aspects of constructing new knowledge within activist research (McIntyre, 2003). Consequently, the situation is not how to avoid becoming uncomfortable by the challenges we will ultimately face, but rather how to embrace those challenges as important components that will benefit both the researcher and co-researchers (McIntyre, 2003).

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