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The facilitator's role in supporting physical education teachers' empowerment in a professional learning community

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2 **empowerment in a professional learning community**

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24 **The facilitator's role in supporting physical education teachers'**
25 **empowerment in a professional learning community**

26 Physical education (PE) researchers demonstrate the benefits of collaborative
27 continuing professional development (CPD) through the cultivation of
28 professional learning communities (PLCs). Furthermore, this body of research
29 reflects teachers' empowerment as a current concern in the literature about PLCs.
30 Although the importance of teachers' empowerment in PLCs is recognised, there
31 is much to learn about the facilitator's actions to create spaces for empowerment.
32 The purpose of this paper is to explore the facilitator's actions in supporting PE
33 teachers' empowerment in a PLC. Action research framed this project in Brazil.
34 Participants included six PE teachers, a facilitator, and a critical friend. Data
35 sources included daily observations and reflections from weekly meetings with
36 the teachers and the critical friend. Data were analysed using inductive and
37 thematic methods. By engaging a Freirean view as a theoretical framework, it
38 was understood that the teachers needed to empower themselves to survive in
39 their reality, learn in order to be recognised at school, and act to change their
40 micro-context. Accordingly, three themes represented the facilitator's actions to
41 support teachers' empowerment: (a) creating a horizontal relationship with
42 teachers through dialogue; (b) understanding and respecting teachers' learning;
43 and (c) struggling with teachers in their reality as an act of solidarity. These
44 facilitator actions contributed primarily to building a democratic space where the
45 teachers could name, critique, and negotiate the barriers they faced. Although
46 creating spaces for teachers' empowerment provided the opportunity for
47 improving teachers' PE knowledge, these spaces fundamentally supported
48 teachers in seeking better professional conditions, organising themselves as a
49 community, and pursuing social change.

50
51 Keywords: dialogue; solidarity; learning communities; continuing professional
52 development; revolutionary leader; progressive teachers

53 **Introduction and theoretical framework**

54 The facilitation process is recognised as central to the accomplishment of
55 collaborative continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers that intends to

56 improve the physical education profession (Lawson, Kirk, & MacPhail, 2020), and
57 create spaces for teachers' empowerment (Lugueti, Oliver, & Parker, 2020). CPD has
58 been described as 'all the activities in which teachers engage during the course of a
59 career which are designed to enhance their work' (Day & Sachs, 2004, p. 3) and the
60 current literature reflects the importance of a transition from the notion of individual
61 and prescriptive teacher development to collaborative CPD. Collaborative CPD refers to
62 programmes where more than two teachers are encouraged to share their learning and
63 mutually support each other (Cordingley et al., 2015). Due to documented
64 improvements reported in global research, professional learning communities (PLCs)
65 have become one of the most used strategies to enhance successful and collaborative
66 CPD (Cordingley et al., 2015; Kennedy, 2014; Vangrieken, Meredith, Packer, & Kyndt,
67 2017). Within these PLCs, the facilitator's role is understood as crucial to communities
68 nurturing and evolving (Goodyear & Casey 2015; Hunuk, 2017).

69 Teacher reflection through inquiry, collective problem solving, and learning in a
70 community (Toole & Louis, 2002) are only a few of the internationally recognised
71 benefits of PLCs to teachers' CPD (Parker & Patton, 2017). Scholars have recognised
72 that PLCs seemed to overcome barriers such as time, location, and cost in teachers'
73 CPD (Armour & Yelling, 2007). Moreover, teachers who participated in a PLC
74 developed a sense of community, a positive view about their professional growth, and
75 shared empowerment (Tannehill & MacPhail, 2017). PLCs have as foundation: (a) the
76 assumption that knowledge is situated in daily experiences and teachers learn better
77 when they reflect critically about their experiences; and (b) the enhancement of teacher
78 and pupil learning (Vangrieken, et al., 2017; Vescio, et al., 2008). It is acknowledged
79 that within PLCs, diverse characteristics might contribute to weakening the
80 collaboration inside communities (Toole & Louis, 2002) and reinforce callous habits

81 rather than enabling transformative learning (Keay, 2009; Watson, 2014). It is argued
82 however that despite the recognised challenges, PLCs might hold the key to real
83 transformation once change in institutions is initiated by the conscious confrontation of
84 competing values (Kennedy, 2014; Watson, 2014).

85 Physical education (PE) researchers have investigated characteristics of
86 collaborative CPD through the cultivation of PLCs (Patton, Parker, & Pratt, 2013;
87 Hunuk, 2017). PE CPD is characterised as: (a) based on teachers' needs and interests;
88 (b) understanding learning as a social process; (c) including collaborative opportunities
89 within PLC; (d) ongoing and sustained; (e) viewing teachers as active learners; (f)
90 improving pedagogical skills and content knowledge; (g) facilitated with care; and (h)
91 focused on improving students' outcomes (Armour, Quennerstedt, Chambers, &
92 Makopoulou, 2017; Elliot & Campbell, 2015; Parker & Patton, 2017). Furthermore, the
93 importance of facilitators during teachers' development in a PLC is acknowledged
94 (Poekert, 2011; Goodyear & Casey 2015; Hunuk, 2017).

95 Facilitators are persons, teachers, teacher educators, or other professionals who
96 mediate PLCs (Hunuk, 2017; Patton, Parker, & Neutzling, 2012; Poekert, 2011). To be
97 effective, facilitators must understand the institutional pressures, cultures, and
98 expectation that separate them from teachers (Fletcher, Beckey, Larsson, & MacPhail
99 2020). Within the role of facilitation, the importance of understanding teachers'
100 contexts, listening to their voices, enhancing their self-esteem, observing and being
101 observed during their practice, and building a community of teachers are seen as
102 essential for teachers' development (Patton et al., 2012). In PLCs, the presence of a
103 facilitator who dialogues with the teachers, analyses their context with them, and
104 mediates negotiation among members is important, for example, for initiating and
105 maintaining the PLCs (Goodyear & Casey, 2015). In turn, facilitators' perceptions of

106 successful CPD identify the importance of focusing on student learning, considering
107 teachers as learners, and being attentive to teachers' empowerment (Patton & Parker,
108 2014).

109 Teachers' empowerment is a current topic in the literature about PLCs.
110 Investigating a PE teachers' PLC in disadvantaged schools, Tannehill and MacPhail
111 (2017) demonstrated that teachers' empowerment was linked with competency and
112 responsibility for their own growth. Teachers increased their autonomy in teaching and
113 learning, self-efficacy, and their focus on students while they improved their capacity to
114 examine their own teaching practice (Tannehill & MacPhail, 2017). In other studies,
115 teachers felt empowered when they perceived that their work was influencing the
116 context (Atencio, Jess, & Dewar, 2012), they experienced peer acknowledgement and
117 confidence to pursue capacity building (Parker, Patton, Madden, & Sinclair, 2010), and
118 they were able to identify their learning needs and solve their own problems (Parker,
119 Patton, & Tannehill, 2012).

120 Although the importance of teachers' empowerment in PLCs is recognised
121 (Atencio et al., 2012; Tannehill & MacPhail, 2017; Parker et al., 2010), facilitator
122 actions to create spaces for empowerment in PLCs has received less attention. In order
123 to attend to this gap, this study explored the facilitator's actions in supporting PE
124 teachers' empowerment in a PLC. Specifically we sought to answer: What was the role
125 of a facilitator in supporting PE teachers' empowerment within a PLC in one Brazilian
126 school? We employed Freire's conception of teachers' empowerment and a
127 revolutionary leader (Freire 2005a, 2005b) as a possibility for understanding the
128 facilitator's role as social agent in cultivating a PLC.

129

130 **A Freirean view of teachers' empowerment and a *líder revolucionário***

131 **[revolutionary leader]**

132 Paulo Freire was a remarkable Brazilian educator and philosopher who, amongst
133 many insightful proposals for educational arena, contributed to understanding teachers'
134 transformation and change during CPD. He affirmed that teachers' development
135 happens through a judicious analysis of their practice (Freire, 1998, 2005b) and the
136 critical reflection provides teachers with a comprehension about this practice. With an
137 increased consciousness about their reality, teachers should fight for social justice, not
138 in isolation, but collectively. They also should battle for ongoing professional
139 development as their right; a professional development that provides opportunities for
140 living the experiences and tensions of their praxis, and the possibilities to transform it
141 (Freire, 2005b). During the process of development that involves scientific preparation
142 coupled with struggling to overcome social injustice, teachers learn through a dialogical
143 process of reflecting on their practice and acting politically. Dialogue is a social praxis
144 where people share their experiences. It is the encounter of people who, by reflecting
145 and acting, transform their world. It is not only problem-solving, it aims to express the
146 voice of the oppressed as a fundamental condition for human emancipation (Freire,
147 2005a). As Freire so eloquently stated:

148 We must scream loudly that, in addition to the activism of unions, the scientific
149 preparation of teachers, a preparation informed by political clarity, by the
150 capacity of teachers, by the teachers' desire to learn, and by their constant and
151 open curiosity, represents the best political tool in the defence of their interests
152 and their rights. These ingredients represent, in truth, real teacher empowerment.
153 (2005b, pp.14-15)

154 Freire's statement about teachers' empowerment opens an avenue to argue that
155 the CPD process is not only about knowledge acquisition, but rather it is about
156 reimagining teachers as activist professionals (Cochran-Smith, 2009; Sachs, 2016) or
157 what Freire called 'a progressive teacher'. According to Freire, progressive teachers
158 should act as agents of transformation and dedicate their profession to overcoming
159 social injustice, as they should be transformative of practice and critically conscious.
160 Freire (2005b) led us to understand that while being a progressive teacher is urgent in
161 the educational context, also recognised is the presence of challenges and conflicts such
162 as teachers' fight for their rights as professionals and for public recognition.

163 Freire (2005a, 2005b) affirmed that teachers have much more than content
164 knowledge to teach, or what he called a banking education. They have to teach their
165 students through their example of fighting for fundamental changes in the education
166 system, against authoritarianism and in favour of democracy. Teaching practice is
167 inherently associated with teachers' interpretations about what is going on in their
168 schools, 'how they understand competing agendas, pose questions, and make decisions;
169 how they form relationships with students; and how they work with colleagues,
170 families, communities and social groups' (Cochran-Smith, 2009, p. 454). Thus, teaching
171 involves teachers understanding about and being activist agents in their context.

172 The facilitators, or those in charge of education who Freire called leaders, should
173 be *líderes revolucionários* - revolutionary leaders, the person who engages in a critical
174 intervention with people in their reality in order to transform that reality through praxis.
175 They establish permanent dialogue, using this dialogue as a humanization pedagogy
176 (Freire, 2005a). The revolutionary leader does not go *to* the people to bring the
177 knowledge to them, but through dialogue unveils the situation *with* the people. Yet,
178 more than discussing the situation with the people, the revolutionary leader proposes

179 action *with* them (Freire, 2005a). The leader creates spaces for people to critically
180 perceive the reality that oppresses them, and what becomes the first action to surmount
181 oppression. After this, the second action is to transform reality and to create a new
182 situation (Freire, 2005a). In this sense, facilitators and teachers as leaders and people,
183 act with solidarity.

184 Solidarity is an act of love that involves humility, hope, trust, and courage. It is
185 where the leader enters into the situation of '*the other*', fighting at their side,
186 understanding and sharing the oppressing situation of those whose voices are silenced
187 (Freire, 2005a). Fighting beside teachers also encompasses the facilitator's or leader's
188 consistency between words and deeds; boldness to confront permanent risks;
189 radicalization to increase their action; faith in the teachers; and the courage of love
190 (Freire, 2005a).

191

192 **Methods**

193 This research was part of a larger action research project that cultivated a PLC
194 with PE teachers in Brazil. The underlying premise of action research in education
195 hinges on strategic actions to improve teachers' practice, through a spiral cycle of
196 planning-acting-observing-reflecting, involving those responsible for the practice (Carr
197 & Kemmis, 2004; Freire, 2005a). Action research was chosen for this project as it
198 creates spaces for changes in individuals and groups by understanding teachers'
199 practices and the situation in which they live (Carr & Kemmis, 2004) while allowing
200 teachers and facilitators to address grand challenge of meeting the needs of teachers
201 *together* (Fletcher et al., 2020). Such research is a process that involves dialogue,
202 critical reflection, and action in and about people's situation(s); it is participants' praxis
203 in the cause of their reality (Freire, 2005a).

204

205 ***Context***

206 In Brazil, teachers are paid less than other professionals with the same degree
207 level, and they are in a group of professionals who receive the lowest salaries in the
208 country. Almost half of the teachers in the country are without teaching contracts and
209 are not permanent teachers, which further limits their work rights, salaries, and stability
210 (Gatti, Barreto & André, 2011). Full-time schools are seen as one way to reduce
211 education inequities and increase the quality of public education systems. Those schools
212 extend school time from four to seven hours or more per day, and affect approximately
213 15.5% of students in the country² (Brasil, 2010).

214 This study took place in one full-time public school in Governador Valadares,
215 Brazil. The city is located in south-eastern Brazil and it is classified as one of the most
216 violent cities in the country for young people, being ranked 62nd (among 5570 Brazilian
217 cities) in terms of youth vulnerability in the country (Brasil, 2015). The school was built
218 in 2014 and initially, it was focused on youth sport training. In 2018, although the youth
219 sports training project had finished, the teachers continued working in this school and
220 using the sports facilities, even without pedagogical and financial support from the
221 municipal administration. Currently, the school accommodates almost 700 students
222 aged 9 to 14 years old.

223

224 ***Participants***

² According to ‘Observatório do Plano Nacional de Educação’ (Observatory of National Education Plan). Data from 2017, see <https://www.observatoriodopne.org.br/indicadores/metas/6-educacao-integral/indicadores>

225 Participants included six PE teachers (see Table 1), a facilitator (pseudonym
226 Laura³ – lead author), and a critical friend (pseudonym Mary – second author). Four of
227 these teachers had been teaching together in this school for five years. Ethical approval
228 for this study was received from the Ethics Committee of the first authors' university
229 (number 2.441.430). All teachers signed letters of informed consent.

230

231 [Insert Table 1 near here]

232

233 During the course of this project, the facilitator's positionality changed.
234 Although she began as an outsider with the group, she transitioned to an insider position
235 as the project progressed. Laura was 33 years old when this project began. She is a PE
236 teacher educator in Brazil who investigated teachers' development in this city beginning
237 with her Master's degree. Laura had been a PE teacher in a municipal school earlier in
238 her career. In addition, she already knew these teachers and this school since she is from
239 the same city and completed her undergraduate degree at the same university as most of
240 the teachers. Moreover, she knew this school because she had previously coordinated a
241 course there. This proximity facilitated Laura's access to the school and after talking
242 with the municipal coordinator, the principal and the teachers, it was agreed to have her
243 on school site for a year to work with the PE teachers. Laura was supported by her
244 critical friend, Mary.

245 Mary is a Canadian teacher educator who had worked for over 35 years in
246 universities in both the United States and Ireland. She had been working with teachers'
247 professional development since 1976, and specifically with PLCs since 2010, when she

³ Names were changed at this early version to preserve the peer review integrity.

248 was researching this phenomenon in different contexts and countries. Mary helped
249 Laura with the weekly analysis of her observations at the school. She acted as a critical
250 friend who was constantly challenging Laura to see the phenomenon through another
251 lens, analysing the situation from the teachers' perspective.

252 A critical friend is a person who, although does not know the context of action,
253 provokes their friend with questions, provides other data analysis options, and offers
254 critiques of the friend's work (Costa & Kallick, 1993). Being a capable reflective
255 practioner, this person creates spaces for supporting their colleague and negotiating
256 shared understandings (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009). The critical friend is an outsider
257 of the group, who helps people act more prudently and critically during the research and
258 to move toward transforming reality (Carr & Kemmis, 2004). The critical friend and
259 facilitator – in this case, built an honest relationship based on truth and commitment
260 with the cause (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009; Costa & Kallick, 1993).

261

262 ***Data gathering and design***

263 This action research took place over one academic year (2018). In terms of
264 design, for one semester Laura was embedded in the school on a full-time basis. The
265 cycle of action research occurred according to the following design: every Tuesday the
266 PLC met to plan PE decisions and discuss teachers' learning. During the week, the PLC
267 acted and observed the decisions previously made and teachers brought these
268 observations to the next Tuesday meeting. On Fridays, Laura discussed critical incidents
269 with Mary, which served as a debriefing session and allowed reflective planning for the
270 upcoming days. During the second semester, Laura was not based in the school, but the
271 group maintained the weekly meetings by Skype and Laura maintained weekly
272 meetings with Mary.

273 In the first six weeks of the research, Laura acted as a participant observer
274 (Patton, 2002). During this time, she observed teachers' interactions with each other,
275 with the administration, and with teachers outside of PE. Laura observed their
276 behaviour during their classes, engaged with the school problems and, in short, became
277 part of their daily routine. After this period, she became the group's facilitator. Laura
278 helped teachers with their daily routine, which involved collective decisions, tasks, and
279 discussions. She mediated negotiations between the teachers and the administrative staff
280 regarding events and teachers' requests. Depending on the teachers' needs, Laura also
281 organised different activities with them, which included workshops, learning
282 experiences, and projects.

283 The larger project, that encompassed the current one, included multiple data
284 sources: meetings with the teachers; researchers' meeting; individual teachers'
285 interviews; field notes generated by the facilitator's observations; social media records;
286 and the artefacts that the PLC produced. Although all data helped to compose the larger
287 research project, for this present paper we used the weekly meetings with the teachers
288 and the critical friend, and the field notes as primary data sources.

289

290 *Weekly Meetings*

291 Two types of meetings were data sources. The weekly meetings with the PE
292 teachers (21 in total), which happened in the scheduled period reserved for teachers'
293 extra class work. The researchers' meetings, which occurred by *Skype* each Friday (26
294 in total) and were recorded and transcribed verbatim in English, while the teachers'
295 meetings were recorded and transcribed in Portuguese (total of 555 pages).

296

297 *Field notes*

298 Field notes were recorded by the facilitator throughout the project (65 entries -
299 total of 141 pages). There were two types of field notes guided by the questions: What
300 are the teachers' actions in this PLC? and What are the facilitator's actions while
301 supporting them? The first type of field notes registered teachers' routines; school
302 context, and teachers' interactions, behaviours, and lessons taught. The second was a
303 researcher' journal, where the facilitator's concerns, impressions, thoughts, and
304 decisions were reported.

305

306 *Data analysis and trustworthiness*

307 *Data analysis*

308 Data analysis involved inductive and iterative analysis using thematic analysis
309 methods (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). Through the interaction between data and
310 researcher interpretation, inductive analysis of the data constructed themes (Patton,
311 2002). The analysis was accomplished in several steps. First, meetings between Mary
312 and Laura were read by both of them separately, and they made comments in the
313 margins about issues that they had discussed. These notes were general ideas about
314 future possible codes. Next, Mary and Laura coded interesting data extracts with labels
315 that they could identify with their understanding about the meaning. Following that,
316 they read other data sources, mainly the field notes and transcripts of meetings with
317 teachers from the same week as the researchers' meeting under analysis, to understand
318 if the codes made sense. Mary and Laura then went back to each researchers' meeting
319 and confirmed or changed the codes. They repeated this process with each researchers'
320 meeting, and finally, Mary and Laura grouped the codes into themes that responded to
321 the research question (see Table 2).

322

323 [Insert Table 2 near here]

324

325 *Trustworthiness*

326 To attend to the research question of this study, different trustworthiness criteria
327 were adopted: triangulation of the data sources, prolonged engagement, presence of the
328 critical friend and member checking. Triangulation of the data sources was intended to
329 describe the phenomena through different perspectives, and the prolonged engagement
330 from the researcher's immersion in the field (Cho & Trent, 2006). The presence of the
331 critical friend encouraged researcher reflexivity and challenged data interpretation
332 (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Member checking occurred when each week the facilitator
333 gave back the community's previous reflection through drawn schematics and checked
334 with the teachers about the themes discussed. It was a reflective process, generating
335 insights and checking contradictions (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

336

337 **Results**

338 Three themes represent the facilitator's actions in supporting PE teachers'
339 empowerment: first, creating a horizontal relationship with the teachers through
340 dialogue; second, respecting the teachers' learning; and finally, struggling with the
341 teachers in their harsh reality as an act of solidarity.

342

343 *Creating a horizontal relationship with the teachers through dialogue*

344 Public schools in Brazil face structural challenges that influence CPD actions. At
345 the beginning of the academic year, there was a lack of sport equipment, shortage of
346 teachers, and an ineffective teaching schedule. Laura's field notes indicated, 'The
347 teachers have assumed many roles inside the school, but the situation is chaotic' (Field

348 notes 6). On several occasions, because of the shortage of teachers, the students left
349 school early or simply went to the football field and stayed there with the PE teachers
350 acting as supervisors. When Laura arrived at the school, however, she was assertive in
351 relation to what she should do *for* the teachers. She wanted to organise meetings, build
352 the curriculum of the school, and provide the teachers with PE content knowledge.
353 During a meeting with her critical friend, she reflected on her actions:

354 Laura: I am doing an agenda [for] the first meeting, I will send it to you, and you
355 could help me. What do you think?

356 Mary: Do they want an agenda? Did they ask you to do this? Does their meeting
357 generally have this agenda? I would be careful of making it too formal. [...]

358 Laura: In truth, the teachers told me in interviews, they want meetings
359 organised, you know? They want to do a meeting in a meeting room. They want
360 an agenda; they want... but I understand what you said.

361 Mary: Where is the median, where is the compromise? Here is an agenda, but
362 not so formal [...]. Let's talk about these things. Where we start, where we will
363 go with this. (Researchers' meeting 5)

364 Although Laura was acting with good intentions from the start, it was not what teachers
365 needed. Laura had to learn to construct a horizontal relationship through dialogue and
366 open a democratic space that placed the teachers at the centre in order to understand
367 them. Her first action was to be accepted by the teachers. Laura described: 'Rodrigo
368 asked me what I was doing there, what I was researching. If I was observing the
369 students or them [the teachers]' (Field notes 2). Thus, Laura had to deconstruct
370 teachers' perceptions of her as someone who came from a university environment to tell
371 them how they should teach. She dedicated herself to showing the teachers the equal
372 relationship that she desired to create with them.

373 Initially, Laura addressed the teachers' needs by joining with them in completing
374 their daily obligations. Together, the group structured the PE space so that the teachers
375 were able to teach. They cleaned the equipment room and pool, and organised PE
376 equipment. However basic, these small actions helped the teachers to feel secure
377 enough in the school to achieve their work. They needed to survive their harsh reality
378 and Laura was there to support them in doing this. They appreciated that they had been
379 listened to and that they were then part of the re-building process.

380 Mary: So, you know that what you are telling me Laura is that the time you
381 spent in school in the last 3 weeks has paid off. Because they trust you, and you
382 made it a social situation. Even if you were getting materials or you were doing
383 other things. It was not like real meetings, it was an informal kind of
384 environment, an easy environment to talk, because you are doing things at the
385 same time. It is like having many people in your kitchen and you make food and
386 talk at the same time. That is what you did there. It happened maybe by chance,
387 but it happened, and it was very good. That is the start.

388 Laura: And I think the teachers recognised it, because in the end the teachers
389 talked, 'Okay, now we have a meeting, now we start something'. They repeated
390 many times, 'All meetings have to happen like this...' (Researchers' meeting 5)

391 The facilitator also helped the teachers during their classes and built a social
392 relationship with them. They had lunch together and talked about their personal
393 struggles. In the end, the teachers understood that Laura was not there to control or
394 supervise them. Vitor said 'Laura is here just like a midfielder player, only receiving the
395 ball and passing it' (Teachers' meeting 8). It became clear that she helped them to
396 create democratic spaces of dialogue.

397 Laura learned how to put the teachers at the centre of the process by truly
398 listening to them. Mary however had to help Laura understand how important it was to
399 let the willingness to change come from the teachers and not from her. The community
400 learned together that there were more urgent things, such as solving daily problems,
401 improving their work, and learning together, than developing a PE curriculum, Laura's
402 initial idea. When a democratic space was created and the teachers had an equal
403 opportunity to talk, they led the facilitator to understand what was important for them;
404 their comments included:

405 You contacted the group to know more about us. Pedro and Simone said that
406 everybody here was so sad, so worried [...]. We arrived and you asked us. Then
407 we just let off steam about our situation. (Vitor, Teachers' meeting 21)

408 It was through this dialogue that the facilitator and teachers learned and grew by
409 understanding their differences (Freire, 1998). Laura came from university, but was
410 open to live the teachers' lives and listen to their voices. The teachers accepted her by
411 understanding her intention of transforming the community in a democratic space
412 (Freire, 1998). The democratic spaces created, contributed to improving teachers'
413 empowerment to face their challenges and learn together.

414

415 *Understanding and respecting the teachers*

416 Laura had to learn to respect the teachers' context, which involved the learning
417 pace of the PLC, including how teachers learned best and the teachers' motivations to
418 do it. Due to the teachers' difficult conditions, their learning pace was different than the
419 inexperienced facilitator thought it should be. Laura had to learn to respect that the
420 teachers' concerns were not always related to PE content knowledge, but instead, about
421 how to survive in the harsh reality of the school. Pedro reflected 'You asked: "how do

422 you believe that the meeting should progress?” Then I answered: “You should give us a
423 time to cry about the week”. And we are always doing it here’ (Teachers’ meeting 9).
424 She was creating safe spaces, where teachers could take risks, spaces that later became
425 discursive learning spaces.

426 At another point, Laura should have understood how teachers learned better.
427 During the first workshop that she conducted with the teachers, Laura brought academic
428 texts for the teachers’ discussion. André first reacted, ‘Oh my God, do I have to read all
429 this?’ (Teachers’ meeting 6). Mary had advised Laura beforehand about this situation,
430 but she had to live those experiences to understand the teachers’ situation:

431 Mary: It is like school for them. They do not want that. They may get it later, but
432 not now.

433 Laura: Yes, I understood. I put the entire text on the *WhastApp* group and some
434 pictures of the meeting, but nobody said anything yet. But it is okay, if someone
435 wants to see the text and their photos, they are there.

436 Mary: So, did you change the reading for the next meeting? Good, it is okay.
437 (Researchers’ meeting 11)

438 By knowing the teachers better, the facilitator started to believe in the teachers’
439 capacity for building something that was important to them, and moreover, their ability
440 to learn and transform their reality. For example, when the research project started, the
441 teachers were facing a problem regarding lack of recognition inside the school. Then
442 Laura asked: ‘Why do classroom teachers want to punish children by removing them
443 from PE classes?’ and ‘How can we make PE something that is recognised and
444 respected in this school?’ (Teachers’ meeting 1) that generated a group discussion.

445 Repeatedly, Laura used this strategy: pose questions, encourage teachers to talk,
446 and choose where they would like to go with the idea. She took notes about their

447 discussion, organised their ideas, and afterwards, brought the content back to them. This
448 process produced another discussion by the group. It generated the teachers' reflections
449 and self-recognition. As Simone said, 'I am thinking about things I did not think
450 anymore [...] Because of it, sometimes we have to come back and study, because even
451 we do not recognise what we do every day' (Teachers' meeting 2). The teachers lacked
452 the opportunity of discussing and reflecting, and they began to feel recognised when
453 they had the chance to engage like this.

454 These opportunities generated an autonomous way of thinking about PE. In their
455 meetings, teachers began to reflect on their own practice and relocate themselves in the
456 school. They understood that investing in their work was also a way to be recognised.
457 Following these understandings, the PLC developed workshops about PE approaches,
458 teachers organised a lesson structure and invested in learning new teaching strategies.
459 Jair pointed out, 'during the observation of Rodrigo's class, I can learn many things that
460 work for Vitor, for Simone, but I have never thought about it. So, it is professional
461 learning, and it is in practice' (Teachers' meeting 4). They were thinking autonomously
462 how to improve their teaching and learning and the willingness to learn had come from
463 them.

464

465 *Struggling with the teachers in their hard reality as an act of solidarity*

466 Laura became part of the group, learning and developing with the teachers. Yet
467 similar to the teachers, she had 'ups and downs'. It was not an easy task to create this
468 democratic space and put it into practice. Laura had to learn how to respect the teachers
469 and act with solidarity with the PLC, which would make her part of them.

470 During the project, Laura learned by experimenting with the balance between
471 pushing teachers' learning while giving them space to develop. When the teachers

472 complained incessantly about school life, she acted more directly, reminding them of
473 the community's trajectory and target. Other days she apologised and showed
474 understanding for their complex lives. Laura recounted:

475 We have millions of problems. [...] This is a teacher's life. Either you make
476 your life hell and look only at the problems, or you think about doing something.
477 What I proposed was to make something with you... we should think of
478 solutions. I think we are progressing. (Teachers' meeting 11)

479 Laura acted according to her feelings. She was open to the group changes and was
480 assertive about the group direction. However, she felt insecure, lost, and at other times,
481 desperate. In speaking with Mary, she indicated: 'I am in this vacuum with the
482 teachers', and Mary highlighted 'Yes, I liked the piece of the lecturer's letter where it
483 said "in that moment I realised that Laura is part of the group, she is an insider hoping
484 for change"' (Researchers' meeting 12). The facilitator was constantly worried about
485 the teachers' situation, then she acted with solidarity and lived the struggles with them.
486 She wrote about her personal journey:

487 I am afraid about going to Ireland in July. I would like to spend more time here
488 at the school. On the other hand, I know it is important to my Ph.D. The things
489 at the school are so slow. In addition, we faced the truckers' strike, so the
490 lecturer came to the city but could not offer the workshop. There was a sequence
491 of events that left me worried about getting out of the school earlier. I will talk
492 to Mary and analyse the best decision. (Researcher's journal May, 2018)

493 Acting with solidarity also contributed to creating democratic spaces for
494 teachers' empowerment. The teachers were acting as an independent group and being
495 voice of resistance in the school. In their last meeting, the teachers analysed the benefits
496 and problems of being this resistance voice:

497 Pedro: I feel the strength we have when they [administrative staff] ask us simple
498 daily things. They are thinking twice before asking something [of] us, before
499 saying something, before imposing something on us. Now they know there is
500 resistance on the other side.

501 Laura: Yes, I agree. We do not need to be waiting for someone. As a group, you
502 know how to organise yourselves. You know your needs and you are able to
503 walk by yourselves.

504 Vitor: But I think this is the problem. Our independence. They do not want
505 autonomous people here.

506 Simone: Nobody wants it. They want us like that: 'if you want me to stand up, I
507 stand up. If you want me to sit down, I sit down'.

508 Laura: But... is everything okay in being an autonomous person? Is everything
509 okay in being the resistance voice?

510 Vitor: For me, it is okay... I want more than that!

511 Simone: [shook her head in neutral signal]

512 Pedro: I will say the same thing as Vitor. It is the most important moment...
513 maybe it is not a bad side... maybe it is the correct side. [...] Sometimes we are
514 very worried about doing this or doing that... For example, when I had the
515 opportunity to be the opposition voice here, saying what I was thinking about, I
516 did it. I think, when you hide yourself it is easier for the person exploiting you.

517 (Teachers' meeting 22)

518 The teachers started to act to change their reality. They organised themselves to
519 attend workshops out of school, they conducted a raffle to collect money to clean the
520 swimming pool, and they added their voices to school discussions. They also recognised
521 the top-down actions by which the school overwhelmed them, and they no longer

522 accepted this situation. For example, Simone was able to analyse the big picture of
523 Brazilian education, and the teachers' context as well:

524 If the federal and municipal education system was not responsible for us, the
525 administration of the school should support us a little bit. Then, do we have to
526 stand here just listening to the Coordinator's complaining? As if we did not
527 make anything. As if we did not know anything. Is she [coordinator] the owner
528 of the knowledge?' (Simone, Teachers' meeting 22)

529 Laura was listening to the teachers, and she also shared their concerns. She
530 recognised that they had experienced abandonment many times during their
531 professional lives, as André confirmed: 'The only school where we have the chance to
532 speak and discuss is here. In other schools, PE teachers are nothing, we do not have a
533 voice' (Teachers' meeting 12). Therefore, Laura could not abandon them; she was one
534 of them. She lived their struggles; she knew of their struggles relevance and she acted to
535 help teachers help themselves. Furthermore, the teachers recognised these actions as her
536 most important facilitator attribute. Pedro summarised:

537 We have to say thank you. It is not because we are in front of you, but many
538 times we talked about your commitment with us, your willingness to help us. It
539 helped us so much, helped us to be stronger. (Pedro, teachers' meeting 21)

540 In a sense of togetherness, the facilitator assumed the posture of struggling with
541 the teachers to face the social barriers that surrounded their lives. Together, they created
542 a community and empowered themselves to try to transform various forms of
543 oppression they lived (Freire, 2005a).

544 **Discussion and conclusion**

545 This research explored the actions of a facilitator in supporting PE teachers'
546 empowerment in a PLC. This study extends what is known about teachers'

547 empowerment in PLC (Atencio et al., 2012; Parker et al., 2010; Tannehill & MacPhail,
548 2017), by exploring the facilitator's actions to create spaces for empowerment. Based
549 on a Freirean view of teachers' empowerment and of revolutionary leaders, we suggest
550 that empowerment entails the fight for teachers' interests and rights against social
551 injustices.

552 We recognise that there may be other factors not investigated which influence
553 teachers' empowerment, such as teachers' political context and their history in the
554 school. We noticed however that teachers' empowerment and facilitators' actions,
555 instead of occurring in a cause-effect process, happened in parallel tracks. On one hand,
556 teachers needed to survive in their reality, to learn in order to be recognised, and to act
557 to change their micro context. On the other hand, the facilitator acted to create spaces
558 and support teachers through dialogue, respect, and solidarity. We discuss the findings
559 of this investigation in three ways: (a) acting through dialogue when teachers needed to
560 survive; (b) acting with respect when teachers decided to learn; and (c) acting with
561 solidarity when the community needed to fight against social injustices.

562

563 *Acting through dialogue when teachers needed to survive*

564 Freire (2005a) argued that the role of oppressed people is to liberate the
565 oppressor. It seems there was a reciprocal liberation in the PLC's development. While
566 Laura was helping teachers liberate themselves, the teachers were liberating her from an
567 oppressor position. Before this project started, her intention was to go to the school and
568 explain to the teachers the best way to teach PE. Laura's motivations did not however
569 match the teachers' needs. In the harsh reality within which they were immersed,
570 teachers needed to empower themselves to survive. In this context, Laura's knowledge
571 and her willingness to change their context *for* them were not enough.

572 Through the process of living with them, studying the facilitation literature,
573 understanding Freire's ideas about democratic education and, with the support of a
574 critical friend, Laura became the person who understood the difference between
575 building *with* the teachers instead of *for* them (Freire, 2005a, 2005b). She learned to act
576 through dialogue, developing a horizontal relationship with the teachers and creating
577 democratic spaces for their empowerment. Teachers felt supported, heard and secure to
578 keep fighting to survive.

579

580 *Acting with respect when teachers decided to learn*

581 Teachers were empowered to keep learning, which would enable their
582 recognition in the school. Although, Laura had the knowledge to help the teachers, she
583 had to learn how to respect teachers' needs, pace, and ways of learning. This research
584 emphasised that, regardless of a teacher's precarity, before any teacher is able to change
585 their practice, their needs must be addressed. As Freire (2005b) pointed out, the first
586 step in organising a CPD program is to understand teachers' reality and base the
587 program on this reality. Understanding this necessity was a difficult task for her, since
588 Laura came from the university environment with different contextual and cultural
589 norms (Fletcher et al., 2020), and tended to force university pacing on the school. It
590 took a long time to respect teachers' precarious situation and its impact on their
591 learning.

592 The facilitator's learning process has been examined by previous studies
593 (Hunuk, 2017; Luguetti et al., 2020). In this context, we emphasised that if the teachers
594 were empowered to learn, to become the revolutionary leader that they needed, required
595 Laura to learn how to structure the PLC, to create spaces for the members' learning, and
596 to respect them as subjects, trusting in them (Freire, 2005a, 2005b). Accordingly, a

597 facilitator needs to be an educator who has genuine humility and is not afraid of
598 revealing his/her own ignorance (Freire, 2005a). The person in charge of education (in
599 this case the facilitator) is being formed or reformed as he/she teaches, and the person
600 who is being taught forms him/herself in this process. In this sense, being a facilitator is
601 not about transferring knowledge, it is about creating possibilities for the construction
602 and production of knowledge (Freire, 2005a).

603

604 ***Acting with solidarity when the community needed to fight against social injustices***

605 In this research, teachers began to themselves to operate as progressive teachers
606 (Freire, 2005b). They fought for their right to be heard and their interest to keep
607 teaching and learning. In the same way, the facilitator was becoming a leader who was
608 struggling together with the teachers in their reality. As well as the teachers, Laura was
609 an insider hoping for change. Without noticing, she acted in solidarity with them and
610 their conditions, fighting on their side. In the same way, the critical friend acted with
611 solidarity, struggling with the facilitator throughout her transformative learning. It takes
612 time for a critical friend to understand the context of the people supported and to be able
613 to consider their needs and desires (Costa & Kallick, 1993; Barkville & Goldbaltt,
614 2009). In this research, Mary did not know how to deal with that precarious reality, but
615 she acted with humility and respect and was open to learning the community's context
616 in order to support Laura through her situation. Often, teachers are oppressed people
617 who are not aware of their reality, and then they reproduce the social condition in which
618 they are immersed (e.g., see Lavoura & Neves, 2019). Though, as an oppressed people,
619 they have the task of fighting for authentic liberation. The facilitator and the critical
620 friend joined the struggles *with* teachers in order to surmount their conditions, acting
621 with courage and faith in the teachers as well as love (Freire, 2005a).

622 In this movement for change, the facilitators, or the revolutionary leaders,
623 according to Freire, have an important role. In this project, instead of reinforcing old
624 habits in school, the facilitator's role was to support the PLC to achieve social
625 transformation at a micro level, enabling transformative teachers' learning (Keay, 2009;
626 Watson, 2014). The facilitator created spaces for teachers' empowerment through
627 dialogue, respect, and solidarity. Creating spaces for teachers' empowerment gave them
628 the opportunity to improve their PE content knowledge, capacity building (Parker et al.,
629 2010), and autonomous teaching/learning (Tannehill & MacPhail, 2017). This present
630 study however adds that being empowered and acting as a progressive teacher
631 encompasses more than being independent and autonomous to drive one's learning of
632 content knowledge. It also demands teachers' empowerment to survive, to learn, and to
633 act. Through these processes, teachers fight for better professional conditions and reflect
634 on their development by organising themselves as a community, conscientious of social
635 change (Freire, 1998, 2005a). Moreover, it was understood that the teachers were living
636 the experience while understanding and reflecting on it. This discussion opens an
637 avenue to understand in future studies teachers' praxis (Freire, 2005a) and their
638 embodied knowledge (Craig et al., 2018) in a movement for social change.

639 Additionally, whereas the importance of facilitators in collaborative CPD with
640 PLCs has been recognised (Parker et al., 2010; Tannehill & MacPhail, 2017), and the
641 effectiveness of CPD has been associated with student learning (Parker & Patton, 2017),
642 the present study adds another dimension to this understanding. When addressing the
643 complexities of being a democratic facilitator in a socially vulnerable situation such as
644 in Brazil, it was obvious that underlying needs must be addressed before focusing on
645 other concerns that could include student learning. These teachers faced difficult
646 conditions and harsh realities in their professional lives. Thus, they needed to empower

647 themselves to change their context. As a result, the facilitator's actions primarily
648 contributed to building a democratic space where the teachers' community could name,
649 critique and negotiate the barriers they faced.

650 The facilitator's role in supporting PE teachers' development offers a unique
651 perspective in PLC studies. It extends the body of knowledge in the area by
652 demonstrating the experience of how a democratic facilitation process can be developed
653 in order to create spaces for teachers' empowerment. It was understood that is essential
654 to support teachers while they collectively struggle for their rights and urgent that
655 teachers act to defend their rights for better conditions in their pedagogical work (Freire,
656 2005b). Additionally, it is crucial to understand that dealing with such action for social
657 justice, seems a pre-condition to focusing on students' learning. In this way, future
658 studies might investigate the situations of teachers and how the process of education
659 might result in changes in teachers' work conditions.

660

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