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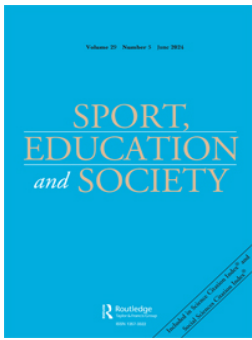
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## Teaching sport and social justice: an investigation into the experiences of university lecturers

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# Teaching sport and social justice: an investigation into the experiences of university lecturers

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in both awareness of and engagement with the issue of sport and social justice. While research has been conducted on social justice in relation to university students enrolled on physical education (PE) courses, there has been little exploration of how the concept is understood and taught on sport-orientated courses (such as sport development, sport management/business, and sport coaching). Using a narrative, qualitative case study approach, this study draws on in-depth qualitative data generated from 14 semi-structured interviews with university lecturers, working in different English universities, responsible for teaching students on courses that were centred around sport. The intention is to explore how lecturers viewed the connection between theoretical knowledge and practical actions (praxis) in promoting social justice values. The work of Freire (1970) and intersectional theory are used to explore how those interviewed reflected on their teaching practices and informed their teaching and learning for inclusion, equity, and social justice outcomes. The interview transcripts were thematically analysed to identify the lecturers' understandings, experiences, and teachings of sport and social justice. The findings show how the lecturers' positionality was informed by a Freirean pedagogy (including the ideas of praxis and conscientização) which shaped their teaching and demonstrated a relationship between teaching, sport, social justice and activism. Based on the findings discussed here, it is proposed that social justice needs to be featured in all sports-orientated courses and not be treated as an optional extra.

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Undergraduate teaching;  
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## Introduction

The concept of social justice has gained widespread traction amidst growing recognition of systemic inequalities. Increased use of the term 'social justice' in both sport and education reflects the zeitgeist and the heightened awareness of multiple forms of injustice and inequality, often appearing alongside expressions such as *equity*, *diversity*, *inclusion*, *belonging*, *accessibility*, *fairness*, *representation*, and *sustainability* (Lee & Cunningham, 2019; Lynch et al., 2022). Given the different interpretations of the term social justice, it is important to understand the views and experiences of some of those responsible for its teaching and learning to undergraduate students.

The concept of social justice is contested, complex and multifaceted. Therefore, a brief discussion is warranted at the outset as it forms the foundational philosophical framework of this study. On a very

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basic level, the term refers to societal inequalities. It can be extended to include working towards ensuring that access to resources, opportunities, and rights should not be linked to a person's circumstances (for example, their ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status). As Long et al. (2017) have noted it is a normative statement, lacking a singular, universal approach, which means that unreflective use of the term can lead to misunderstandings and/or its tokenistic engagement.

Social justice is widely understood to be about promoting fairness, equality, and opportunities, particularly for those who are marginalised or disadvantaged, typically through state intervention and redistributive policies. How this is achieved in a neo-liberal environment is a key focus of this study. Advocates of neo-liberalism (as a political and economic philosophy) see social justice achieved through individualism, free markets, profit maximisation, and limited government intervention. As Ryan (2012) has noted, there is no lack of discussion about the impact of neoliberalism on the English higher education system (see also, Collini, 2012; Edwards, 2022; Enright et al., 2017; Feldman, 2023). English universities are increasingly adopting a market logic that prioritises marketisation, commercialisation, and an all-pervasive audit culture (including, but not limited to REF, NSS, KEF, rankings, and impact factors).<sup>1</sup> Underpinned by an administrative bloat (Ryan, 2012), an increasingly toxic workplace has emerged, something Troiani and Dutson (2021) have termed an 'edufactory'.

While there has been discussion of social justice in relation to 'athlete activism' (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017; Cooper et al., 2019; Jolly et al., 2021; Leng & Phua, 2022; Rugg, 2019), and school-based PE (Evans & Davies, 2015; Gerdin, 2024; Philpot et al., 2021), there has been little assessment of how the term is understood by those engaged in teaching the concept in sport-oriented courses. Using narrative inquiry, semi-structured interviews, and ideas developed by Freire (1970/1996) and intersectional theory, the intention is to encourage participants to reflect on their teaching practices and explore the connections between theoretical knowledge and practical actions (praxis) in teaching and learning for greater levels of inclusion, equity, and social justice outcomes. Critical reflection is a key element of Freire's (1970/1996) praxis, with intentional reflection and action necessary for transformational change. In his text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970/1996) opposed to the 'banking' model of education and proposed that social justice pedagogy is more effective when students are 'invited' to engage in dialogue and when discussions take place *with* and not just *towards* students. A key role of the teacher is therefore to develop students' *conscientização* ('critical consciousness'). This study aims to explore how lecturers viewed the connection between theoretical knowledge and practical actions (praxis) in the teaching of sport and social justice in English universities. Two research questions guide this study: how do lecturing staff create inclusive, transformative learning environments that foster social justice values? How do they generate active engagement among their students and develop their 'critical consciousness'?

## Social justice and sport

Social justice has become part of the 'culture wars' and discussions on 'woke' (Sossi, 2023). Interpreted as a process and/or a product, depending on how it is conceptualised and approached, its varied and widespread usage creates different meanings in different contexts. In response to this variability of meaning, the suffix 'justice' is sometimes prefaced with specific terms, for example, reproductive, environmental, humanitarian, and/or racial justice.

Sport has long been claimed to contribute to positive social change (Agyemang et al., 2020; Edwards, 2017; Kaufman & Wolff, 2010). At the same time, claims that participation 'automatically' contributes to a more equitable society have been contested (Bailey et al., 2009; Coakley, 2015; Dagkas, 2018; Gerdin, 2024). As Smith et al. (2021) have identified, a key factor in determining the outcomes lies in the nature of the sporting experiences and the extent to which the teachers and coaches prioritise social inclusion and equity in their practice.

Whilst O'Neill, et al (2023, p. 1) have noted that the terms 'activism, advocacy and protest are used inconsistently' there is an expanding body of research on sport-related activism linked to racism (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017; Cooper et al., 2019; Rugg, 2019), sexism/patriarchy (Cooky & Antunovic,

2020; Crawford, 2023; Goorevich & LaVoi, 2022), homophobia (Cleland et al., 2018; Magrath et al., 2017; White et al., 2021), and 'allyship' (Jolly et al., 2021). Long et al. (2017) edited collection on sport, leisure, and social justice has been supplemented by a 'social justice manifesto' (Adamson et al., 2022), 'position statements' (Darnell & Millington, 2019; Love et al., 2019), and a 'Routledge Handbook' (Lawrence, forthcoming). In their 2018 study Owens, et al, sought to address a lacuna in understanding social justice in physical education teacher education (PETE). Examining more than 40 PETE programmes across seven countries, the researchers investigated how 70 faculty perceived and experienced teaching social justice and found that variation existed in both the extent and frequency of teaching social justice. There has since been a plethora of studies that have focused on school-based PE programmes and youth sport (Cameron & Humbert, 2020; Evans & Davies, 2015; Hill et al., 2019; Knijnik & Luguetti, 2021; Linnér et al., 2022). Other research has focused on the teaching experiences of PE teachers regarding social justice issues (e.g. racism, classism, healthism, ablism, genderism/sexism, heterosexism, linguisticism, religionism, and colonialism, see Lynch et al., 2022). So, whilst trainee PE teachers have been encouraged to develop a critical awareness of social justice (Dowling, Fitzgerald & Flintoff, 2015), this study aims to expand the scope beyond faculty teaching on PETE programmes to include those teaching on a variety of sports-oriented courses, such as sport management, sport development, and sport coaching.

### Freire, activism, and intersectionality

Social justice activism and critical theory are connected in that critical theory provides analytical tools to understand and challenge systemic injustices. Through critical reflection and collective action, activism can bridge between theory and specific initiatives that are seeking to dismantle oppressive structures and move towards creating more inclusive communities (Gerdin, 2024; Spaaij et al., 2016; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2012; Suzina & Tufté, 2020). Encompassing different approaches, most notably feminist, critical race theories, and intersectional approaches (Calow, 2022; Dagkas, 2019), the focus is on issues of identity and systems of power. As such, a Freirean critical pedagogy can be viewed as a critical theory given that it seeks to challenge oppressive structures and seeks to bring about social change.

In his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970/1996) stressed the importance of questioning dominant narratives, fostering critical consciousness among learners, and working towards social transformation. This Freirean approach informs my own research position and is rooted in socio-economic inequality as demonstrated in the research of McEvoy et al. (2016) and Smyth et al. (2014). Paulo Freire is one of the most important critical educators of the twentieth century (Giroux, 2010), with his work on critical pedagogy (Darder et al., 2023) central to challenging oppressive structures within education and society. In their study on social justice experiences in academia, Knijnik and Luguetti (2021) found that using a Freirean-informed critical pedagogy enabled student teachers to create a sense of social agency and community purpose in their teaching. This helped them to navigate the challenges of working in an education system that was under attack from right-wing forces in the country (see also Gonçalves et al., 2022; Neto et al., 2021; Philpot, 2016).

Although Freire's work predates Crenshaw's (1991) work on intersectionality, both emphasise the need to challenge dominant narratives, promote consciousness-raising and work towards socially just outcomes. While Freire's pedagogy emphasises critical consciousness and the need to challenge oppressive systems through education, Crenshaw's work (1991) explores how different forms of discrimination intersect and compound to shape individuals' experiences. Both recognise that individuals hold several identities that intersect. Freire's emphasis on dialogue and praxis aligns with Crenshaw's call for inclusive approaches that acknowledge the interconnectedness of different social identities and experiences. Overall, they complement each other in advocating for transformative action to advance social justice.

An intersectional, critical approach is employed here because, as noted above, it advocates for change. Much-needed change is needed in English universities' sports departments/schools/

faculties which remain solidly and overwhelmingly white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, non-disabled, middle-class environments (Dart, 2023; Hattery et al., 2022; Ward et al., 2022; Ward et al., 2023). Rather than 'engines of social change' many universities reproduce a Eurocentric, elitist, individualist, competitive environment that generates a culture of gendered, sexist, racist, and ablest practices (Bhopal & Myers, 2023). As Dowling et al. (2015, p. 1031) have noted, 'it seems unethical to expect our students to engage in this type of reflexivity concerning their practice if we are unwilling to better understand the roles we play in both the cultural construction and the cultural distribution of knowledge'. Employing an intersectional, critical narrative inquiry approach, the intention is to understand how working in such an environment is understood and reconciled by those tasked with teaching 'social justice'.

## Methods

Reflecting on Dowling et al.'s (2015, p. 1029) observation regarding teachers' reluctance to 'expose themselves to the researchers gaze' and the challenges of navigating 'messy, biographical reflexivity concerning their teaching practice', this study set out to stimulate critical reflection on the teaching of sport and social justice. A narrative inquiry approach (Dowling, 2012) was chosen as it allows for insight into the frontline experiences of those teaching social justice issues, how staff sought the students' active engagement and how they developed a 'critical consciousness' within their students.

## Narrative inquiry

The narrative approach is a qualitative methodology that explores the experiences individuals share. Valuing subjectivity, it seeks to capture individuals' construction of realities, nuanced emotions, and important contextual details. However, as Dowling, Garrett, et al. (2015) have noted, critiques of narrative research have often centred on its perceived lack of rigour. In response, a range of studies have demonstrated the robustness of narrative inquiry (Casey & Schaefer, 2016; Oh et al., 2013; Tolgfors et al., 2023). As argued by Dowling, Garrett, et al. (2015) using narrative research to explore teachers' experiences can challenge conventional (normative) thinking and behaviours and prevent our research agendas from becoming stagnant. In this study, the intention is to explore how lecturers view the connection between theoretical knowledge and practical actions (praxis) in promoting social justice values.

## Sample

Purposive sampling was used to identify the participants, initially approaching personal contacts who could offer an informed insight into the teaching of sport and social justice. Approval for the study was secured from the author's university's research ethics committee. After an initial email was sent to participants, which outlined the study, the participants were sent an information sheet that detailed the purpose of the study; subsequently, all those contacted gave their voluntary, informed consent to participate. The use of personal contacts does raise specific ethical considerations; particular attention was given to the wording in the initial contact email and subsequent correspondence seeking to avoid any potential for coercion (with the initial email contact offering several non-judgemental 'exit routes'). It is also recognised that the use of purposive sampling might reflect my own biases and assumptions. Therefore, I was continuously reflexive throughout the study, with colleagues not directly involved in the study, acting as 'critical friends' throughout.

All those approached agreed to participate. This study draws on data generated from in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with 14 faculty members, currently working in, or who had previously worked in, sports departments in different English universities. Participants ranged from early and mid-career lecturers to Readers and Professors – all of whom taught (or had taught) on sport-orientated courses (e.g. PE, Sports Management, Sport Coaching, and Sport

Development). As was noted earlier, sports departments/faculties/schools in English Universities are not diverse and whilst there was an even balance in gender (eight female, six male), it was not possible to secure a more disparate sample.

## Data collection

Adopting a semi-structured interview format allowed for flexibility and for the participants to share their experiences in their own words. An interview schedule contained six broad themes. All the interviews were conducted online (most on MS Teams) in the first part of 2023 and lasted between 35 and 75 minutes. Current teaching responsibilities varied, with none of the participants teaching on a dedicated 'sport and social justice' module; as will be discussed below, it was their commitment to social justice which, when combined with circumstantial opportunities, allowed them to act on this commitment.

All those interviewed were on full-time permanent contracts and so spoke from a position of privilege (as many noted in their interviews), acknowledging some of their 'privileges' (white, non-disabled). In the following discussion, the biographical details of the respondents are not provided to preserve their anonymity. A decision has been made not to provide this information because 'we all swim in the same part of the sea' – and it would be relatively easy to identify participants if any biographical data were supplied. It was felt important to protect the identity of the participants for them to be open in their interview. Those interviewed all commented that they enjoyed having an opportunity to participate, explaining that since the Covid19 pandemic, increased levels of working from home, and ongoing 'silo working', there were limited opportunities to 'talk shop' with colleagues.

## Data analysis

The critical theory of Freire (1970/1996) and intersectional theory was used to explore how those interviewed reflected on their teaching practices. The interviews were transcribed with the transcriptions capturing the experiences and perspectives of those interviewed. As noted earlier, narrative research enables insight to be generated into individual perspectives and meanings. Using the steps identified by Braun and Clarke (2019) to establish 'trustworthiness' during the data analysis, all the interviews were transcribed verbatim. A systematic thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the interview transcripts. A deep understanding was gained through conducting multiple readings of the participants experiences. The transcripts were then subjected to open coding, with significant statements relating to social justice coded (using the qualitative data analysis software, Nvivo 12), and then grouped into potential themes. This was an iterative process that involved constant comparison and refinement to ensure coherence and that the emergent themes were consistently grounded in the empirical data. These steps helped to interpret the meaning and significance of the data and to provide a holistic understanding of participants' experiences with five of the central themes now presented.

## Findings and discussion

This section presents and discusses the participants' views on the teaching of social justice to students enrolled on sports-oriented degrees. After reflecting on what they understood by social justice, they reflected on their teaching and their positionality. They then reflected on whether they viewed teaching as a form of activism, and on the students' responses.

### *What is 'Social Justice'?*

The interviews began by asking what they understood by the term 'social justice'. All those interviewed reflected on the complexity of the term and its multiple meanings, summed up by Participant

4's response that it was 'the most difficult question! When you're put on the spot it's actually quite difficult to define it without resorting to a list of cliches'. Those who taught PE modules cited that Freire's critical pedagogic approach was an essential part of their modules, although this was understood in terms of equality and equity, rather than 'social justice'. They viewed their role as 'teacher' through a Freirean 'lens', in that they were not the sole repository of knowledge but rather facilitators of discussion and that they were learning *with* their students. While some participants did list a series of words and ideas (e.g. dis/advantages, un/fairness, in/equality, inclusion/exclusion at individual and structural levels), it was also suggested that the term had not been subject to much scrutiny.

Participant 14 acknowledged that the term had become more popular in recent years, but that they avoided using it, preferring instead to name specific aspects of social justice. This was echoed by the majority who avoided using the term because it was 'too broad'. Because of the vagaries of the term, many were using specific terms such as gender, racial, or economic inequality. Participant 9 preferred the terms 'intersectional' and 'power' because 'if you don't focus on power, you become blind to all sorts of things', explaining how they felt:

increasingly distance(d) from the term because it's one of these terms that has become an empty signifier. It says a lot but says nothing at all. People bandy this term around, but the politics of it is lost. I want to return to words like discrimination, oppression, which is actually what I'm talking about ... I try to use [...] terms that are more specific to what I'm talking about.

Another described how:

one reason terms like social justice are more problematic ... is because they have a clear judgemental, moral dimension to it. It forces me to decide what I think justice is ... which potentially leads to having to decide what is 'just' and what is 'wrong'. Whereas terms like equality, inequality, discrimination, exclusion are a bit less questionable, still debatable, but [they are] a bit clearer what they mean. (Participant 11)

Those interviewed spoke about the political dimension of social justice and the desire to encourage students to recognise and reflect on their own moral and political positions. It was acknowledged that it was no longer a term that was used exclusively by those on the left of politics or by those holding a left-libertarian approach to social justice. This utilitarian approach to 'rights' was noted by Participant 14 who cited the example of Conservative Government Minister, Iain Duncan Smith, who was responsible for several different welfare cuts and co-founded the Centre for Social Justice, a right-wing, neoliberal organisation that sees social justice in terms of the ability to access a 'free market' (<https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk>). Participant 6 explained how:

You could be a very strong advocate of social justice and vote Tory. You could feel that you're a strong advocate for social justice, and aggressively defend the current system as being a socially just one. And that's what makes it difficult because you're using the same terms, but you're actually coming from very different perspectives. People's approach to teaching social justice is largely driven by their own political position. I'm a traditional lefty and broadly socialist in my politics, which informs my approach to social justice. I can't separate the two.

All those interviewed recognised that social justice was intersectional and admitted that they were often more comfortable speaking about certain issues than on other issues, often linked to their biography (for example, their gender, sexuality, social class, dis/ability, and ethnicity). There was a common feeling that the term social justice had become a 'bit buzz-worthy ... increasingly used by a lot of organisations who, in my view, have nothing to do with social justice. It's just become a little meaningless' (Participant 13). Another participant thought that whenever something enters the mainstream it becomes 'watered down', while another commented how 'because we live in a capitalist society, it's like, "right, how can we commodify feminism or commodify anti-racism" – maybe we can sell some nice fancy wristbands!' (Participant 4). In Dart's (2022) assessment of the Azeem Rafiq racism scandal at Yorkshire County Cricket Club and the (in)actions of his own University, he called for a more serious engagement with equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) work that went beyond minimum compliance and the issuing of what he described as anodyne EDI public statements, before citing the comment attributed to Stuart Hall in that 'the university



is a critical institution or it is nothing'.<sup>2</sup> There was a common feeling that organisations were 'jumping on the social justice bandwagon just to tick some EDI/DEI boxes'. The increasingly corporatised use of the term, as discussed by Winberry (2021), was why some were reluctant to use it, while others felt that there was a disconnect between those using the term and their actions outside the classroom:

Sara Ahmed talks about how anti-racism is performative. The actions that people are speaking about are missing. You know, we can talk a good game about what it is, and we can preach ... but being an advocate of social justice agendas ... the action is often missing. That's what I mean by its emptiness. [Participant 9]

What emerged early in the interviews was a recognition of the diverse interpretations of 'social justice', revealing its complexity and subjective nature, which led to specific terms being used in place of the term 'social justice'.

## Teaching social justice

Echoing the findings of Philpot (2016) who sought to 'shake the student's cages', those who adopted a Freirean approach led them to present 'real world' problems/issues and create space for dialogue in an attempt to develop a 'critical consciousness' among their students. Participants shared their excitement, and challenges, in the classroom and explained how they sought to engage the students in a range of 'social justice' issues/topics through discussions on discrimination and inequalities, and so help to generate a 'critical consciousness' within the students.

As was found by Ovens et al. (2018), it was an individual lecturer's interest in social justice that helped to ensure it was included in the curriculum. However, specific use of the term 'social justice' was often contingent on their level of control over the curriculum. Participant 3 explained that incorporating social justice issues was done 'more by stealth ... by putting in a bit of sociology into things'. Another thought that 'social justice was only on a curriculum if a particular lecturer is interested in it', and that although one of their modules was 'about half social justice issues, I know that if somebody else had that module, it wouldn't be like that' (Participant 3). Another lecturer explained their action by saying:

my role is to get this conversation started with the next generation of sport graduates. Because no-one else is talking about it in my department, they're not gonna get this anywhere else. Certainly not from the media. Some might get it from their families, but for the vast majority of them (students), this will be the first time they've thought about social justice at a deeper level. (Participant 6)

Participant 2 explained how seminar discussion using the term social justice 'can be a bit abstract, whereas if you talk about injustice and inequality that's more real for them ... also, the narrative of the (sports) industry is about inequalities rather than injustices'. The absence of a clear and substantive course-wide focus on social justice was described by Participant 12 as:

ironic, because when you look at the world we live in, and the kinds of challenges that people and organisations face, we actually need students to understand the issues of social justice and inclusion.

There was a recurring recognition that sport *could* be a vehicle to create positive social change and develop the students' 'critical consciousness' (Freire, 1996). At the same time, there was a persistent recognition of the demise of sport-orientated modules and courses which contained a critical social science basis.

If you look at the types of courses that have social justice, or sociology, or social science themed modules – it's there in PE, Sport Development, maybe in Sport Coaching – but where is it on the Sport and Exercise Science courses? They are going to graduate and work with people so, from my perspective, it needs to be in every course. A lot of sports sciences courses have a very basic approach to how they think about men and women; there's no thinking about where these categories come from or how they are constructed. And it's the same with race, it's all binary thinking! There's very little critical thought about the language or about social identity markers and a real lack of opportunity for them to engage with these things ... we need to be creating spaces for these discussions. (Participant 4).

It was built-in, baked into the old course which meant that the whole course itself was embodying social justice. Now that's gone and there is some of the DNA still left, but it's not immersive. There're aspects of social justice within some individual modules ... but I think social justice and inclusion needs to be infused within every module. (Participant 10).

Those who had a degree of control over what they taught explained that the curriculum had 'shrunk' and they now had 'half the time to do just the same amount'. They recounted how they had been told there was not enough room on the curriculum for any specific, explicit social justice modules. The importance of academic staff involved in curriculum planning meetings to argue for the inclusion of social justice was seen as essential. In terms of how social justice was approached, and the lecturer's desire to create positive social change, Participant 2 explained how they felt it was imperative to:

talk about action. We need to talk with students about social justice in action, and provide them with the tools, the resilience, the emotional intelligence to go out there and be activist disruptors, in all sorts of ways. I think that's really crucial in terms of how we teach it.

Participant 10 explained how they continually strove to ensure social justice was retained in an increasingly narrow curriculum, a curriculum that was seen as being shaped by an individualistic, neo-liberal culture that prioritised 'work ready' graduates instead of preparing students with critical consciousness and sensibilities that would help to change 'the system':

for me, it's about sticking to our guns and supporting modules that are around social justice and inclusion ... trying not to let those subjects be squashed, because that's gonna be really problematic if they are.

All the participants reflected on the challenges of integrating social justice into their modules and courses. Their levels of control of the curriculum varied and despite its sporadic inclusion, there was a clear desire to push back against an increasingly narrowing curriculum. Through their teaching, the lecturers aimed to move social justice from the periphery to the core of the curriculum and were consistently arguing for a more comprehensive integration of social justice into sport. Echoing the findings reported by Shelley and McCuaig (2018) and Gerdin (2024), this was because they wanted to equip their students with 'deeper' thinking skills and, hopefully, adopt a more activist mindset (Binder & Kidder, 2022).

### Lecturers' positionality

Using a narrative approach allowed those interviewed to reflect on the issues of transparency on personal experiences and vulnerabilities, while also acknowledging the diversity of student experiences, and the need to be sensitive to issues faced by students when discussing aspects of social justice. As Gerdin (2024) found in his study, teachers sought to build good relationships with the students in their efforts to teach for social inclusion and social justice.

Freire (1970/1996) explained that social justice pedagogy is more effective if students are 'invited' to engage in dialogue and if discussions take place *with* and not just *towards* students. Opposed to the 'banking' model of education, Freire (1970/1996) advocated that teachers should help their students to become critically aware of, question and transform social injustices. The role of the teacher was to build respectful relationships with students and develop their *conscientização* by encouraging them to reflect on and question social injustices. In an attempt to get the students to critically reflect on their positionality, those interviewed explained how they typically started with an overt recognition of their own positionality, because 'it was always a good teaching technique to put yourself in the conversation, or better still, which is harder, to acknowledge your blind spots, because that's often what the students are going through' (Participant 6). Another commented how:

I don't think there's any other way that you can teach apart from being quite open about who you are and where you've come from and why you're doing what you're doing. Everyone's on a journey, you know. No one's instantly arrived there – everyone took a different path. It's about letting them see that we've not got all the answers and that actually in some situations and settings, we're having to deal with uncertainty. (Participant 10)

Those who did have some control over what they taught explained how they had always written modules where ‘I can’t teach it (sport) without talking about those fundamental issues of race equality, gender, sexuality. If you cut me in half, that would be what you’d see – it’s core to me because of my own experiences’ (Participant 5). One tutor explained how they were:

happy for my students to see my vulnerability because that’s the essence of what I was like when I was sitting where they are sitting. So right from the start we try to get the students to feel like they’ve got a space where they can talk about how they’re feeling and thinking’ (Participant 10).

Participant 4 explained how:

nobody’s ever made a judgement about my intellectual capacity or judge me negatively based on how my name sounds, or the colour of my skin, or how a lot of my peer group couldn’t afford to go away to university and had to get a job to support their families. I increasingly try to make explicit the privileged aspects of my identity in addition to what it’s like to be a woman in a world where you’re surrounded by sexism, homophobia and patriarchal values.

At the same time, those interviewed explained how they did not always (want to) put themselves at the centre of the conversation. Participant 7 described how they ‘always try to use myself as an example because I think that’s the easiest way to make the audience feel that you are not attacking them or not judging them’. At the same time, they sought to avoid pressurising their students into openly sharing their positionality, accepting that this might sometimes lead to abstract discussions. Those interviewed were aware that some students would have first-hand experiences of the issues being discussed in the classroom (for example, sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia), and were living their lives intersectionally (Calow, 2022; Nichols & Stahl, 2019), and so remained respectful and sensitive in working collaboratively towards *conscientização* (Freire, 1970/1996)

### Lecturers as ‘Activists’

In Freirean critical pedagogy, developing a *conscientização* (‘critical consciousness’) starts with individuals (be they lecturers or students) examining their social and political reality as a precursor to praxis. Individuals can then engage in transformative action(s) to address social injustices. While the term ‘activism’ was not always made explicit, a Freirean (1970/1996) approach was evident as a means of achieving a more equitable society. When asked about their views on the relationship between teaching, research, and activism, there was a recognition of the difference between words and action. Some spoke about a continuum of activism, and that while some did see their teaching as a form of activism, they were uncomfortable with the word ‘activist’ being applied to them. Viewing activism with a ‘little a, as opposed to Big A’, most were involved in external voluntary work with sports organisations. Two participants identified how they were advocates of Michael Burawoy’s (2005) call for ‘public sociology’, explaining that:

I don’t have a split personality where I am an academic in one space, and an activist in another, and a football fan in another. They are all part and parcel of who I am. I’m aware that I have a special privilege as a researcher and that I can accumulate certain knowledge. So, when I volunteer with refugee groups or in other activities around football, then I can bring that sociological knowledge into the seminars, it feeds into my teaching and into my research ... it’s dialectical. (Participant 1)

We can be criticised for being activists, but we are probably closer to what the sport sector wants than our line managers are. It’s almost essential, a duty, albeit an unpaid part of your job, to be out there and take that knowledge back into the classrooms. (Participant 2)

The participants recognised they were, in varying degrees, public sociologists, but, as one explained this was in their teaching, not through their research:

I feel like the stuff I write makes no difference. I don’t think it has any impact. I feel like that’s the only space (the classroom) where I feel something real happens. When I’m with my students, that’s where you see a genuine shift in attitudes, belief systems, ways of behaving. You know, it gives me some sort of hope that when we send students out into the world, they will become the citizens that we need to have out there. (Participant 9)

Although some did see their teaching as a form of activism, one participant immediately wanted to qualify their response:

because I can see the Daily Fail<sup>3</sup> and the rest of the right-wing press will see us as indoctrinating people, manipulating them and telling them that 'this is right or wrong'. I don't tell them what is right and wrong. But I do see it (teaching) as a form of activism in terms of creating their (students) critical awareness, reflection, thought processes, which actually opens them up to different things, some of which they will never have encountered before. (Participant 1)

Endorsing this fear of media criticism, Participant 4 cited examples where this had happened, before commenting how they had 'stopped posting on Twitter because, you know, I do have a perspective on the trans-inclusion athlete debate, but I am worried about getting caught up in the toxicity of some of those debates and getting trolled'. In seeking to encourage student engagement some rejected the notion of epistemological neutrality. Those interviewed rarely considered themselves as 'radical activists' and were aware of those who had taken principled stands on issues of human rights and social justice (Davies & Sherwood, 2024; Fazackerley, 2020; Feldman, 2023). Cognisant of how critical reflection is a key element of Freire's (1970/1996) praxis, with intentional reflection and action necessary for transformational change, those interviewed constantly sought a balance between expressing their own perspectives and adopting a stance that would foster an environment conducive to open discussion.

### Students' awareness of social justice

Some of those interviewed were comfortable in using the term 'privileges' whilst others stated it was not part of their everyday vocabulary. As noted by Thornton (2023, p. 12) in their study of class privilege on an elite US college campus, 'privilege is both a binary and relative' term, with Participant 7 in this study viewing privilege as:

a teasing word ... a 'red flag' word that might make some students feel uncomfortable, but it's also a thermometer which tells you where people are at – and so becomes a good opportunity to start conversations.

Others explained how discussions on sport and social justice depended upon the student's level of study, and composition of the cohort, including their gender, ethnicity, and social class. While all those interviewed recognised the importance of acknowledging their privileges in their teaching, students were often less comfortable. Participant 3, who taught mostly undergraduates thought the students 'can feel a bit threatened if they are asked to call out their own privileges – anything which might somehow position them as different than other people, or to suggest that their life is easier'.

In their study of US sport management programmes Springer et al. (2022) found a disproportionately high level among students and faculty holding multiple privileged identities, particularly white, middle-class men. This representation was identified by Participant 8, who explained that most of their students were 'white, male, middle-class types' who, they felt, had 'led quite sheltered lives and had only ever been around people that are just like them ... and so it's no wonder they think in a particular way'. Their advantaged worldview was made visible when participating in the 'privilege walk'<sup>4</sup>; when the students finished in different parts of the room, the debate then shifted to 'OK, let's look at taking some positive action – what about quotas?' And that's when it starts to get a little bit more difficult for them'.

Some lecturers felt that many of their students did not have a strong conception of society. Participant 6 described how:

My experience is that they come to undergraduate studies without ever having thought about social structures. They grasp much better, and much quicker, the psychological concept of 'How do I feel. They've got such a strong, strongly individualised meritocratic idea of society and people's place in it.

When asked about their perception of their students' levels of awareness of social justice issues, one tutor felt they were 'open to ideas, so around gender equality, I get less kickback from male students

when we talk about gender equality than I did a decade ago' (Participant 3). Participant 4 similarly felt there had been 'a huge shift' in their students' levels of awareness and understanding: 'I don't hear the same levels of casual homophobia. If I was trying to talk about transgender issues 10 years ago, I would have been met with a lot of sniggers and ridicule – but it's completely different now'. The level of student awareness often depended on the topic. One participant explained how their students were comfortable discussing sexuality and gender identity, and about mental health, but were less comfortable discussing physical disability. Although students were aware of social justice issues linked to race/ethnicity, they were unsure about the appropriate terminology to use, and 'clueless' in classroom discussions of 'trans' athletes in sport, with Participant 5 'reminded of how vital our job is and that we are not anywhere near where we thought we were'.

Participant 2 reflected that although the students were more aware of social justice issues, they questioned whether they actually 'did anything with that awareness' – I think they are a little bit apathetic around these things. And have a much more transactional relationships – 'you need to teach me this so I can get a degree'. Participant 8 agreed, explaining how:

Gen Z is sensitised to issues of equality and what they can and can't say. But when you start to dig into these issues, I see some very similar opinions to what I saw when I started teaching 10–15 years ago. So, I'm not sure how much people's attitudes have changed. I think what we have is an environment in which it's increasingly taboo to be overtly racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic. They seemed to have built an identity around this idea of how they're more tolerant, but whether they actually are, I'm not so sure.

The suggestion that students were apolitical was a common theme in the interviews. This included those students who were seen as being positioned on the 'wrong side' of society's structures and processes.

Sports students were viewed as having been socialised into the idea that sport is meritocratic and thus had a highly individualised approach that reflected and reproduced neoliberal ideas about meritocracy and social justice. This made the task of using Freire's (1970/1996) idea of *conscientização* in working towards socially just outcomes more difficult. However, it was through this Freirean approach of dialogue, critical consciousness and praxis, that lecturers encouraged the students to reflect on their position (and the position of others). Recognising the challenges they faced, lecturers described how:

Everyone's on a journey, you know. No one's instantly arrived there – everyone takes a different path. (Participant 10)

They have only been around people who are like them ... so it's no wonder they think that way – which is why they've formed a particular habitus in a particular way in a particular environment. (Participant 8)

Over the course of the three-year degree, you can start to challenge some of that and start opening their eyes to the injustices and marginalisation that takes place within sport and within society. (Participant 1)

I'd like to think that towards the end of their journeys with me, some of them become more politically aware. (Participant 6)

The lecturers admitted to adapting their pedagogic practice if they were working with 'home' or 'international' students. When teaching international students (typically on Masters programmes), they were very aware of intercultural issues. While they were confident in speaking about social justice with home students, some felt less confident with international students:

Sometimes I feel that I'm imposing my own cultural views so ... yeah ... I try and be more careful. So, what I do is dilute some of the content, I'll mention them as an issue, but say less than I would normally do. I raise it as a contentious area and hope that that is enough for the students to understand it. I feel a tension between what I think is right and appropriate to express those views to someone who might not share it and potentially alienate some of them. So, I try to keep the connection open by saying less. I don't know if that's right, but that's what I'm currently doing. (Participant 7)

In summary, the findings of this study have shown that in recounting and reflecting their students' awareness of social justice the lecturers' experiences varied widely. Although some of their students

were comfortable discussing issues of privilege, most of them found it unfamiliar or even unsettling. Lecturers commented that the students' levels of awareness often depended on their gender, ethnicity, and social class, which manifested singularly or intersectionally. Despite the lecturers' efforts, some students resisted acknowledging their privilege(s), feeling threatened or indifferent to injustice and inequality. Some shifts in student attitudes were noted, as were levels of apathy and a reluctance to engage. Lecturers were mindful of cultural differences in their approach to international students to avoid alienating them in the classroom.

This section has presented five themes from the narrative interviews: diverse interpretations of 'social justice', concerns about co-option of the term by mainstream interests without meaningful engagement, the influence of biographical experiences on teaching approaches, the challenges in integrating social justice into courses and fostering 'deeper' engagement amongst the students. Lecturers were working hard to maintain social justice content within the curriculum, whilst being sensitive to their students' lived experiences.

## Conclusion

This study set out to better understand the issues of social justice on sports-themed undergraduate degrees; it also wanted to understand how staff facilitated a critical consciousness within the student cohort and how those interviewed approached the connection between theoretical knowledge and practical actions (praxis). Using a narrative approach, participants reflected on this connection in the promotion of social justice values. Using ideas that align with Freire's work (1970/1996), those interviews spoke about how they worked towards greater levels of inclusion, equity, and social justice in their teaching on sports-themed modules.

They sought to keep the curriculum authentic and relevant to student's lives by constantly engaging in current events and the lived experiences of the students. Freire's concept of *conscientização* ('critical consciousness') was evident in the lecturers' responses and, although the term 'activism' was not explicit, it was evident in their efforts to create a more equitable society. Critical reflection is a key element of Freire's (1970/1996) praxis, with intentional reflection and action necessary for transformational change. While the students were described as 'open to discussion', with the majority of students enrolled on sport-orientated courses being male, white, heterosexual, and non-disabled, this generated a limited range of diversity (of experiences) for lecturers to engage with. Tutors often used a Freirean approach in that social justice pedagogy was going to be more effective if students were 'invited' to engage in dialogue and if discussions took place *with* them and not just *towards* them. There was also evidence of them adopting Freire's (1970/1996) guide that the role of the teacher should be to build respectful relationships with students and develop their *conscientização* by encouraging them to reflect on and question social injustices.

The immediate challenge facing lecturers was to ensure that social justice issues were (kept) on the curriculum; it was often left to individual lecturers to fight a 'rear guard' action and argue for its inclusion in what was a shrinking curriculum. The strength of having sociologists teach social justice issues in sport-orientated courses is because they are equipped with the language, theories, and concepts to engage the students; inequality has long been a core concept within mainstream sociology. While the lecturers sought to inspire their undergraduates to be critical thinkers, the increasing marketisation of HE means that students are being treated by university managers as 'customers'. HE is thus 'tasked' with creating graduates who are 'satisfied' and 'workforce ready' and to provide the sports sector with their 'wants' – as opposed to students 'needs'. Those interviewed were fighting against the prevailing marketisation trends in their workplaces. They saw themselves as catalysts, encouraging students not only to absorb knowledge but to question, challenge, and (hopefully) contribute to transforming the structures that perpetuate oppression and social injustices. By focusing on social justice, these 14 lecturers were making visible the pervasive influence of neoliberal discourse and those groups and communities who have been, and continue to be, marginalised and excluded from sport.

Much like the findings of Ovens, et al.'s (2018) study, it was an individual's interest in social justice that kept social justice issues on the curriculum. An increasingly narrow curriculum was limiting the opportunities for discussion on social justice issues relating to sport. Further research is needed to explore how social justice issues can be promoted across a wider range of sports courses, particularly within the field of sport and the bio-sciences. Additionally, more research is needed on what lecturing staff are doing to ensure that social justice can be maintained within a higher education system that seems to be prioritising sport and the bio-sciences. How can social justice avoid becoming a tokenistic, 'tick-box' activity and ensure students can meaningfully engage with issues of equity, diversity, inclusion, belonging, accessibility, fairness, representation, and sustainability in sport?

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## Notes

1. The Research Excellence Framework attempts to evaluate the 'quality' and 'impact' of research undertaken by UK higher education institutions, which is used to inform government funding to universities. The National Student Survey is an annual survey of HE students' experiences and 'levels of satisfaction'. The Knowledge Exchange Framework evaluates universities sharing of knowledge, research, and innovation with external partners.
2. Stuart Hall's views on the role of universities is a common theme in his work. Although he explored this throughout his writings and speeches, he did not actually use the phrase 'a university is a critical institution or it is nothing'; however, it is widely attributed to him (for example, see Giroux, 2013).
3. The Daily Mail is a British right-wing tabloid. It is sometimes dubbed the 'Daily Fail' due to its reputation for being unreliable and sensationalist, making it unsuitable to reference due to its poor fact-checking reputation (see Chadwick et al., 2018).
4. Although this activity is not unproblematic – see <https://medium.com/@MegB/why-i-dont-won-t-facilitate-privilege-walks-anymore-and-what-i-do-instead-380c95490e10>.

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