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

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Abstract

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

Keywords: student-centered pedagogy, sport programs, critical pedagogy,

empowerment

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44 Possible Learning Aspirations

45 “I think this project in the middle of the slum can help kids not to go into a life of
46 crime” (Noel, age 14).

47 “I think those are values that you can bring to your life, guys. The small kids could be
48 inspired by you boys, think about it” (Coach Maria).

49 This study was a two-phase activist research project aimed at co-creating a prototype
50 pedagogical model (Kirk, 2013) for working with youth from socially vulnerable
51 backgrounds in a sport context. The intent was to use sport as a vehicle for assisting youth in
52 becoming critical analysts of their communities and developing strategies to manage the risks
53 they face by looking for alternatives that extend their current life situations (Fine, 2007;
54 Freire, 1987). The first phase of this project was designed with the intent of identifying what
55 facilitated and hindered the youths’ engagement in sport (Luguetti, Oliver, Kirk, & Dantas,
56 2015; Luguetti, Oliver, Dantas, & Kirk, 2016). In that phase, five features were identified as
57 being essential for working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds. These
58 included: student-centered pedagogy, inquiry-based education centered *in action*, an ethic of
59 care, attentiveness to the community, and a community of sport (Luguetti et al., 2015). In this
60 paper, we described the emergence of learning aspirations when the five critical elements of
61 the prototypical model were combined and used in the soccer project, in other words, when
62 we worked collaboratively to create realistic opportunities for the youth to begin to negotiate
63 some of the barriers they identified. For this, we used a Student-Centered Inquiry *as*
64 Curriculum (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013) approach for working with the youth. This
65 approach combines student centered pedagogy with inquiry-based learning centered in action
66 as a means of working with youth to listen/understand the barriers they face in physical
67 activity settings and collaboratively work to negotiate and/or transform these barriers in order

68 to create better activity possibilities (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013; Oliver, Hamzeh, &
69 McCaughtry, 2009).

70 **Pedagogical Models, Sports and Youth From Socially Vulnerable Backgrounds**

71 Over the past two decades we have seen an explosion in the development of
72 curriculum, instructional and pedagogical models (Casey, 2014; Metzler, 2011). Generically,
73 these models provide ‘design specifications’ which include a key theme, critical elements and
74 learning outcomes (Kirk, 2013). The key theme refers to the central idea on which the model
75 is based (Metzler, 2011). The critical elements are ‘benchmarks’ (Metzler, 2011) that make a
76 model distinctive in terms of what teachers and learners must do in order to faithfully
77 implement the model (Kirk, 2013). Finally, the learning outcomes are the educational
78 intentions of a program, what we might expect students to know, understand, or be able to do
79 (Metzler, 2011). The value of using pedagogical models is the tight alignment of the learning
80 outcomes with the teaching strategies and subject matter (Casey, 2014; Kirk, 2013; Metzler,
81 2011). It is argued that by using these design specifications educators can develop specific
82 programs at local levels for local purposes (Kirk, 2013).

83 Several scholars have developed pedagogical models with the intent of working with
84 youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds. For example, Positive Youth Development
85 (PYD) (Fuller, Percy, Bruening, & Cotrufo, 2013; Holt, 2008), Teaching Personal and Social
86 Responsibility (TPSR) (Hellison, 2010; Walsh, 2008), Sport Empowerment (Hastie &
87 Buchanan, 2000) and Sport for Peace (Ennis et al., 1999) have emerged in physical education
88 (PE) and sport. The prescriptions of learning outcomes are a feature of these models and
89 describe specific intended youth behaviors that will result. For example, TPSR prescribes
90 respect for the rights and feelings of others, self-motivation, self-direction, and caring as the
91 desired learning outcomes (Hellison, 2010), while PYD identifies five ‘C’s (Holt, 2008):
92 Competence, Character, Connection, Confidence, and Caring/Compassion as the specific

93 desired learning outcomes for youth. These models have been shown to promote positive
94 attitudes, motivational responses, and pro-social behaviors in youth from socially vulnerable
95 backgrounds (Ennis et al., 1999; Fuller et al., 2013; Hellison, 2010; Walsh, 2008). That said,
96 what these models were ultimately designed to do was to control youth behavior or create
97 individual empowerment (Lawson, 2005; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2012).

98 What strikes us as curious is that each of these models was created by adults without
99 youth participation and applied from a top down perspective (Lawson, 2005; Spaaij & Jeanes,
100 2012). While we have many positive results from using these various models with youth in
101 sport contexts, we believe that there is now a need to begin to develop models by working
102 *with* youth, rather than developing models *for* youth (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2012; Fiset &
103 Walton, 2014; Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012; Oliver, Hamzeh, & McCaughtry, 2009; Oliver &
104 Hamzeh, 2010). We believe that sport holds the potential to move beyond helping youth
105 control their behaviors to creating spaces for real life change. If we hope to create sporting
106 experiences that allow youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds to begin to identify and
107 negotiate barriers to their participation, their voices must be present in the process.

108 In this paper we used an activist approach, to co-create a prototype pedagogical model
109 because we believe there is value in developing pedagogical models with youth and coaches.
110 A ‘prototype’ model is a model under development, where the initial architecture of key
111 theme, critical elements and learning outcomes or aspirations have been tentatively identified,
112 but further implementation and trialing is required in order to adapt and refine the model. In
113 developing this prototype model for working with socially vulnerable youth, we suggest that
114 the social value of sport should extend beyond inculcating youth about societies’ rules
115 (Lawson, 2005). If we continue to use sport as a vehicle for reinforcing social norms we
116 might actually be perpetuating inequities, particularly for youth from socially vulnerable
117 backgrounds (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, & Nols, 2012). These young people face concrete

118 challenges (poverty, educational failure, drug and alcohol abuse, etc.) that require
119 interventions that are based on a thorough analysis of their social circumstances (Fine, 2007;
120 Freire, 1987, 1996). We argue that young people have the capacity and agency to analyze
121 their social context and to challenge, resist, and negotiate the forces that impede their choice
122 of possibilities (Cammarota and Fine 2008; Freire 1987).

123 **Empowering Young People Through Action: An Activist Approach**

124 Unlike many approaches in sport contexts found in the literature, activist researchers
125 in PE have worked with youth in order to identify, critique and transform barriers to young
126 people's engagement in physical activity (Enright & O'Sullivan, 2012; Fisette & Walton,
127 2014; Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012; Oliver & Hamzeh, 2010). Activist scholars provide young
128 people with opportunities to identify and study social problems affecting their lives and work
129 collaboratively with them to facilitate change (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Freire, 1987, 1996).
130 This change is partially a result of challenging traditional student-teacher power relations by
131 giving young people opportunities to participate in curricular and pedagogical decision
132 making (Cook-Sather, 2002; Enright & O'Sullivan, 2012; Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012). When
133 students are recognized as agents, they begin to take ownership over their learning, they take
134 responsibility for themselves and others, they find meaning, and they engage more
135 enthusiastically (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Cook-Sather,
136 2002, 2006).

137 Activist research is grounded in feminist (Collins, 2000; Fine, 2007; Hooks, 2000)
138 and critical pedagogies (Freire, 1987, 1996) and has been developed through work with
139 marginalized populations (e.g., girls, people of color, people in poverty). Feminists have
140 worked from the position of challenging and changing current power relations in education,
141 and caution against uncritically or unreflectively privileging student voices (Collins, 2000;
142 Fine, 2007; Hooks, 2000). Feminist scholars reveal how complicated power dynamics are in

143 the reality of classrooms. They suggest we must be willing to “take small steps toward
144 changing oppressive practices even if complete change seems or is unattainable” (Cook-
145 Sather, 2002, pp. 6). Similarly, critical pedagogy is aimed at empowering both students and
146 teachers to develop a critically conscious understanding of their relationships with the world
147 (Freire 1987). This type of pedagogy holds the possibility of enabling students to explore the
148 potential of what it means to be critical citizens (Freire, 1996; Schor & Freire, 1986).

149 While there are many promising outcomes to this type of work for PE and sport
150 pedagogy, the majority of these studies are done with girls in PE contexts in part because
151 girls have historically been marginalized (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2012; Fissette & Walton,
152 2014; Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012). We believe there is potential in using activist approaches
153 with youth, female or male, from socially vulnerable backgrounds in sport contexts. By
154 considering an activist process of working with youth to co-create a prototype pedagogical
155 model, we challenge the conventional conception of youth as subordinate to the expert
156 teacher/coach (Freire, 1987, 1996). In that sense, youth become agents in the process of
157 transformative learning, seeking opportunities to reframe and re-imagine their sports
158 experiences. In this study we used a Student-Centered Inquiry *as* Curriculum approach
159 (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013) for working with youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds in
160 order to better understand how to work with them in ways that might foster their collective
161 empowerment (Fine, 2007; Freire, 1987, 1996; Luguetti et al., 2015, 2016).

162 **Methods**

163 **Setting and Participants**

164 This study took place in a Brazilian soccer project that has existed since 2008. This
165 project is run by a non-governmental organization, funded by Brazilian companies who
166 finance projects instead of paying taxes to the Brazilian government through a law to
167 encourage youth to participate in sports. The project’s mission is to “promote and

168 democratize access to educational sport”. This project serves approximately 250 boys and
169 girls ages 6 to 15. Approximately 90% are boys and 10% girls. The overwhelming ratio of
170 boys to girls in this project is a result of Brazil being known worldwide as the ‘country of
171 soccer,’ but it is still very much a country of *male* soccer.

172 The project runs in four different neighborhoods of a socially and economically
173 disadvantaged district, in an urban, coastal and tourist Brazilian city with high rates of
174 income inequality and pockets of illiterate people (SEADE, 2010). Although the coach
175 participants in the study were working in four different sites/neighborhoods, the youth
176 participants of the study came from only one site. This site is located in an area with many
177 slums, and it is a place that has explicit drug trafficking. We selected this site because it had
178 high percentages of economically disadvantaged youth. In this specific site, we chose to work
179 with the 13-15 year olds because as youth get older the risk of social vulnerability increases.
180 It so happened that in the site we were working, all the 13-15 year old youth were boys.
181 While this was not intended to be an all boy research study, it ended up as one due to the lack
182 of 13-15 year old girls playing soccer at this site.

183 The research idea was presented to the general and pedagogical coordinators of the
184 project who agreed with the initial idea and design. We presented the study to both
185 coordinators because we hoped that the co-created prototype pedagogical model could later
186 be incorporated throughout the entire soccer project. It is also important to highlight that both
187 coordinators were ex-soccer players. The main objectives of the study and a summary of the
188 methodology were presented to all coaches in the project who also agreed to participate. The
189 youth and their parents gave assent, and parents signed an informed consent form. Ethical
190 approval for this study was received from the Ethics Committee (protocol number 608.759).
191 All adults involved in the study signed informed consent.

192 The participants in this study included 17 boys (ages 13-15), four coaches, a
193 pedagogical coordinator, a social worker, and two researchers. All of the boys came from
194 families who earned less than two minimum wage incomes, and some of the boys were from
195 families who earned under a minimum wage income (35%). The coaches, pedagogical
196 coordinator and social worker each averaged 3 years of experience working with youth from
197 socially and economically vulnerable backgrounds.

198 The two researchers differed from the other participants insofar as neither were
199 members of socially vulnerable groups and thus were considered an in-betweeners/outsider
200 (lead author Carla) and outsider (second author Kim) respectfully (Anzaldúa, 2007; Collins,
201 2000). Although Carla's gender, race, age, and social class positioned her as an outsider, her
202 experience in soccer and understanding of the socially vulnerable context positioned her as an
203 in-betweeners (Anzaldúa, 2007). Although Kim was an outsider in relation to the youth, her
204 role was to assist Carla in learning to use student-centered and inquiry-oriented approaches to
205 education. In this capacity she served as a peer debriefer; was involved in the progressive
206 data analysis; and helped in facilitating a collaborative construction of the youth's and
207 coaches' work sessions.

208 **Data Collection**

209 A Student-Centered Inquiry *as* Curriculum (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013) approach
210 was used both as a process of working with the youth as well as serving as a framework for
211 data collection (Luguetti et al., 2015, 2016). "It was originally designed as a way of
212 developing curriculum with youth in order to better meet their interests, motivation and
213 learning in PE" (Luguetti et al., 2015, pp.6). Student-Centered Inquiry *as* Curriculum
214 involves a two-phase process: *Building the Foundation* and a four-phase cyclical process of
215 *Planning, Responding to Students, Listening to Respond*, and *Analyzing Responses* as a
216 means of curriculum design and implementation.

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

228 *Building the Foundation* took place over 8 weeks and was designed with the intent of
229 identifying what facilitated and hindered the boys' engagement in sport (Oliver &
230 Oesterreich, 2013). We started by inquiring into what the boys liked/disliked, their
231 perceptions of school and family, their opinions about the soccer training sessions, and
232 barriers to sport participation they encountered in both the program and their community as a
233 whole. Through Phase I five features were identified as being essential for working with
234 youth from socially vulnerable backgrounds: student-centered pedagogy, inquiry-based
235 education centered *in action*, an ethic of care, attentiveness to the community, and a
236 community of sport (Luguetti et al., 2015). Given what we learned during *Building the*
237 *Foundation phase*, we co-created and implemented with the boys and the coaches a
238 leadership program. In this 10-week program we combined the five features that allowed four
239 learning aspirations to emerge. For more information regarding the schedule of work session
240 tasks for coaches, youth and combined coaches/youth work sessions, see Luguetti et al.
241 (2015).

242 We used the cyclical process of *Student-Centered Inquiry as Curriculum* (Oliver &
243 Oesterreich, 2013) as both the data collection process as well as the curriculum development
244 process. *Planning* involved the creation of the work sessions between the boys and Carla (the
245 first author), as well as the work sessions between the coaches and Carla. *Responding to*
246 *Students* involved the creation of work sessions that bridged what Carla was learning from
247 the youth, with what she was learning about using a student-centered pedagogical approach,
248 and what she was doing with the coaches. *Listening to Respond* involved the debriefing and
249 analysis of data between the first and second authors following the youth work sessions.
250 *Analyzing the Responses* involved the debriefing and analysis of data between the first and
251 second authors following the coaches' work sessions.

252 **Data Sources and Analyses**

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

264 **Results**

265 In this section we will describe the risks the youth identified within their community
266 and how we worked together to develop strategies for managing the risks they identified.

267 Next we show the learning aspirations that emerged during the second phase of the study:
268 becoming responsible/committed, learning from mistakes, valuing each other's knowledge,
269 and communicating with others.

270 **Community Risks and Managing the Risks the Youth Identified**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

296 Noel: I think this project in the middle of the slum can help kids not to go into a life
297 of crime (Youth work session 8).

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

305 Once these barriers were identified, Carla and Kim, the coaches, and the youth all
306 worked collaboratively to imagine alternative possibilities. Through this imagining, sport
307 continued to be viewed as a constructive activity, one that could offer not only the youth
308 themselves, but also younger children, the opportunity to avoid a life of crime. Given the
309 youths' desire to avoid the life of crime, and their belief that sport created such an
310 opportunity, Carla and Kim and the coaches discussed possibilities for creating additional
311 sporting experiences. A leadership program emerged as one possibility that would offer
312 the youth an additional day of each week to work in a sport setting. It was within the sport
313 context they could literally manage the risks they identified and as activist researchers we
314 believed creating realistic possibilities was essential.

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

318 *Garcia:* I would! But how would we do that?

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

320 *Noel:* I could help carrying the balls.

321 *Peter:* I could help with the goalkeepers.

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

325 *Noel:* The leadership program.

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

327 *David:* Teach small kids.

328 *Peter:* Leadership program.

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

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

338 **Vignette 1 "Cleaning up our Language": Becoming Responsible/Committed**

339 The youth came early to our work session and seemed engaged with the possibility of
340 helping the coach with the small children. The week before, the youth had decided
341 collectively to develop the leadership program, and according to them, if they did not control
342 their own behavior, they could not be good role models for the small children. At the
343 beginning of our work session, Carla told the youth that the coaches agreed to develop the
344 leadership program with them. However, she said that the coaches had some concerns.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

377 *Henri*: We can think about moments to come together like when we prayed together
378 last week (Youth work session 9).

379 The youth identified responsibility and commitment as a barrier in their training
380 sessions. It was the learning aspiration that the youth identified as the most important
381 challenge they needed to negotiate in order to be leaders. The youth brainstormed how they
382 should behave and ways they could help in a leadership program. They agreed that they
383 would: “avoid using bad language”, “try to be less critical when someone made mistakes”,
384 “preserve the peace”, and “value moments to stay together”. The youth realized that if they
385 were able to control their behavior the coaches would no longer be worried about them
386 helping the younger children.

387 Similar suggestions emerged in the coaches' work sessions in relation to being an
388 “ideal leader”. Coach Maria said that the youth should be “committed.” For her, if a youth

389 said he was going to attend the younger kids training session, showing up was a means of
390 demonstrating that commitment. Coach Daniel highlighted that the ideal leader “should be
391 respectful.” For example, he wouldn’t invade the space of others. Coach Anthony talked
392 about the need for leaders to “control their emotions and negotiate conflicts.” The coaches
393 agreed that it might be valuable, if the leader helped low skilled children. They believed it
394 would help the leaders develop more sensitivity and patience.

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

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

409 Unlike the coaches, the youth could not describe changes in their behavior. The
410 leadership program came from experiences that the youth assumed were important if they
411 were going to manage the risks they identified. The youth decided to do the leadership
412 program in order to be involved in sport more often as this would help them avoid the life of
413 crime. They also identified that it would be a place to help the younger children. The

414 leadership program gave them the opportunity to enhance their agency (Freire, 1987, 1996).
415 Carla and Kim and the coaches created spaces for the youth to engage in processes that
416 positioned them as agents of inquiry and as “experts” about their own lives (Cook-Sather,
417 2002). The leadership program offered a space for the youth to act differently. The youth felt
418 empowered because they took ownership over the leadership program and in turn it created
419 opportunities for the youth to be responsible and committed, an opportunity they embraced
420 with great interest and seriousness.

421 **Vignette 2 “A Boy was Kicked out of the Project”: Learning From Mistakes**

422 *Coach Anthony:* In a disputed part of the game, Kleiton said to me: "If you are
423 thinking I'm playing bad, come here and take my place. Fuck you coach!" Very
424 furious I [Coach Anthony] said: “Fuck you! You are immature Kleiton”. So, I kept
425 guiding the boys in the game. Kleiton scored a goal and he spoke again with me:
426 “Fuck you, coach! Did you see what I did?” I felt so bad after that. That's not what we
427 teach the boys. I felt really bad because of Kleiton’s words. This attitude did not fit in
428 our group. By the end of the game, I decided to kick Kleiton out of the project. I
429 spoke to our coordinator, Daniel and he said, from his point of view; he would never
430 have Kleiton back in the project. Carla had a different point of view, as did Newton
431 and Tim (the Caretaker of the soccer field) who came to talk to me a few days after
432 that game. Tim was sober at that time and he asked me to reconsider my decision. I
433 was pretty set on my decision because it hurt my ego. I was wondering if I had done
434 something wrong, because Kleiton had been showing improvement in his behavior
435 (Coaches’ work session 17).

436 On a sad Monday, Carla was entering the field when Peter came in her direction to
437 tell her: "Kleiton was kicked out of the project. He swore at Coach Anthony in the game

438 yesterday." At that moment, a movie of Kleiton's behavior ran through her mind. "Kleiton
439 has improved his behavior a lot. What could have happened?" Carla thought.

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

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

449 Tim, Newton and Carla agreed that Kleiton was an important person in the project.
450 So, at the end of the training session Carla tried to talk to Coach Anthony, again. They spoke
451 for half an hour about what had happened and the importance of Kleiton to the project. Coach
452 Anthony shared the notion that Kleiton was important to the project, but he didn't change his
453 decision that day.

454 Two days later Kleiton was sitting on the wall waiting to talk to Carla. Tim had asked
455 Kleiton to come and talk to Carla. Kleiton came in her direction and Tim suddenly said:
456 "Carla, Coach Anthony said that Kleiton could come back if he apologizes to the group. Talk
457 to him, Carla. He is overreacting, and he doesn't want to apologize". It was at least a half
458 hour conversation between Tim, Kleiton and Carla. Newton, Peter, Peter's father and Leon
459 also tried to convince Kleiton he should apologize. In that moment, everybody came together
460 as a community in the hope of trying to encourage Kleiton to come back to the project.

461 According to Carla, this was one of most unforgettable moments in the project.

462 Kleiton came by, walking with his head down, and he sat on the field's wall, waiting for the

463 end of the training session. Anthony did not talk to Kleiton while the youth were playing.
464 Carla didn't know if Kleiton would be able to apologize to the youth. He seemed so
465 uncomfortable. Peter's father said: "Let's all sit, boys, because Kleiton wants to say
466 something to us". Carla had never seen the youth so silent. Kleiton said: "I would like to
467 apologize to you guys. I was wrong to swear at Coach Anthony last game. I was wrong". A
468 hug between Kleiton and Anthony symbolized the return of Kleiton to the group. This
469 episode was central to the youth understanding about how mistakes were places for learning.

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

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

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

475 *Leon:* Yes, I think so (Youth work session 16).

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

477 *Coach Antony:* My attitude was forgiveness. How can I teach my students if I am not
478 able to forgive? Kleiton apologized to the group and it was very difficult for him to
479 do. I don't know if I will have consequences in my next training sessions because of
480 this. I don't know if I'll lose the control of the boys. However, he is a boy that I
481 cannot abandon. He is part of the project. As an educator, I could not discard him.

482 When Tim came to me, my first reaction was that he could not interfere in my
483 decision. However, Kleiton is part of the project, and Tim helped me to see that.

484 Kleiton has many problems in his family environment. I also know that I have lost my
485 head in the game. I also swore at Kleiton. Coaches make mistakes, and I could learn
486 from my mistake, too (Coaches' work session 17).

487 This vignette supports the validity of the learning aspiration “learning from mistakes”
488 and exemplifies a situation of how it worked. Anthony realized that in Kleiton’s case he
489 needed to give him an opportunity to apologize and to learn from his mistake. This act
490 affected all the youth insofar as everyone learned from Kleiton’s mistake. This was an
491 opportunity to say to Kleiton that his behavior was unacceptable, and if he wanted to come
492 back, he had to apologize. In addition, the learning aspiration of learning from mistakes,
493 becoming responsible/committed was also present. We see this when Leon and Peter helped
494 us to convince Kleiton to apologize to the youth. Everybody worked together to help Kleiton
495 apologize, and in doing so several people showed Kleiton that they cared for his wellbeing.

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

502 **Vignette 3 “A Magical Moment: Let’s Put the Coaches and the Boys Together”:**

503 **Valuing Each Other’s Knowledge**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

529 *Coach Anthony:* Let me give an example of how this is relevant, boys. When we
530 asked the small kids if they knew anyone older in the project, they pointed out exactly
531 who is here now, you boys: "the leaders". That means you can influence the small
532 kids' lives. They know you. You guys have the power to make changes. We are just
533 helping you guys (Combine coaches and youth work session 1).

534 When we put together multiple points of view in a collaborative/activist study, the
535 participants started "valuing each other's knowledge" (Fine, 2007; Freire, 1987). At the end
536 of data collection, the coaches and the youth were asked what they learned in the leadership

537 program. Coach Anthony said that he learned a lot from the youth. The coaches said that they
538 had learned to value the youth's knowledge. Garcia, one of the youth leaders, said that he
539 learned a lot from the small kids as well as Coach Anthony. The coaches and the youth
540 discussed how they were able to learn from one another. This may have happened because
541 activist studies require multiple points of view and create spaces where everyone can learn.
542 When students are engaged in a project in their communities and participate in the co-
543 construction of the program, teachers find that not only are their students learning but they
544 themselves are also learning (Freire, 1987). This process might create roles and interaction
545 opportunities that change adult perceptions of young people as well as young people's self-
546 perceptions (Cook-Sather, 2002).

547 **Vignette 4 "How Can I Talk With Low Skilled Kids, Coach?": Communicating With**
548 **Others**

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

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

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

559 *Leon:* Breno plays for pleasure.

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

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

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

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

566 *Carla:* How about if these guys improve? If these boys improve, they could help the
567 whole team too, right? (Youth work session 11).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

582 In the process of helping the low skilled children many challenges emerged for the
583 youth leaders. The youth reported that their main difficulty was their abilities to communicate
584 effectively.

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

587 *Noel*: I didn't.

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

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

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

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

596 *Peter*: They did not listen to me.

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

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

600 *Garcia*: The coaches should help us to find a way to talk to these kids (Youth work
601 session 14).

602 The youth were looking for ways of being responsible and being able to communicate
603 in ways that were effective with the small children. Cuss words were not an effective
604 communication style and the youth began to realize this as they worked in leadership roles.
605 This particular opportunity allowed them to learn to communicate in different ways. Across
606 the leadership program the youth improved in their abilities to communicate with the younger
607 children. The youth also began to realize that it was necessary to have good communication
608 with the coach as well: "Today I am the leader. How can I help, coach?"

609 In later meetings, Kleiton and David reminded us that we also needed to speak with
610 Tim. Tim had all the keys to open the doors in the facility. They said "Tim is always drunk,
611 and it is so hard to talk to him sometimes". To help the small children's training sessions it

612 was necessary for the youth leaders to communicate effectively with many people, including
613 Tim. At the end of the leadership program, Peter's father said: "I will talk as a father. My son
614 has changed a lot since this leadership program has started. Peter has changed his behavior in
615 our house; especially, he has changed the way he talks to his mother, how he talks to people".

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

621 **Discussion**

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

630 When the five critical elements were combined and used in the soccer project, four
631 learning aspirations emerged with this group of youth and their coaches. First, the youth
632 became more responsible and committed when they had opportunities to be leaders. Second,
633 participants learned that mistakes were areas for learning and growth. Third, participants
634 learned to value different people's knowledge. Finally, the youth learned to communicate
635 more effectively. The leadership program offered the youth an additional day each week to
636 work in the soccer project, thus allowing them to manage what they identified as a serious

637 risk (the life of crime). While it may seem that merely adding one day per week for the youth
638 to engage in the sport program was insignificant, what is important to remember when
639 working in activist approaches is that transformation begins at the micro level—small steps
640 toward changing oppressive practices make a difference over time (Cook-Sather, 2002;
641 Oliver et al., 2009).

642 We believe that pedagogical models developed through activist approaches will
643 always have learning aspirations that are context specific rather than pre-determined. In
644 contrast to the pre-determined learning outcomes that currently dominate pedagogical models
645 in sport contexts (Ennis et al., 1999; Fuller et al., 2013; Hastie & Buchanan, 2000; Hellison,
646 2010; Holt, 2008; Walsh, 2008), we use the term learning aspirations because what is
647 possible to learn with youth will vary depending on the youth involved (Oliver &
648 Oesterreich, 2013). This is what makes our prototype model conceptually different from
649 other pedagogical models. That is, the learning aspirations that emerge through the
650 implementation of the critical elements, will depend on the needs of the youth involved, the
651 context where the work is implemented, and which areas of social vulnerability are
652 negotiated. Thus we think the term learning aspirations is more consistent with an activist
653 approach because it suggests less prescription and more possibility. The notion of learning
654 aspiration may also be more consistent with the co-construction of pedagogical models.

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

662 Our first challenge was a result of our efforts to work in student-centered ways. The
663 lack of trust in the youth that the coaches initially felt could have prevented them from
664 allowing the youth to work as leaders, thus preventing the transformative possibilities that
665 emerged. Many of these assumptions emerged out of the fear about how the youth would or
666 would not respond to being put in positions that required responsibility and maturity. This
667 basic lack of trust in young people has developed through adults' need to control youth and to
668 view them as passive recipients of what others determine is education (Cook-Sather, 2002,
669 2006). Kim's structural support was essential for the coaches and Carla to understand that in
670 order to co-create a leadership program using an activist approach, we would need to trust the
671 youth to be both responsible and mature.

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

687 We believe there is another important distinction in this work. Our prototype
688 pedagogical model was developed in an informal education, as opposed to a formal school,
689 setting. This allowed for transformation to be realized more clearly because we were not
690 having to also negotiate educational institutions. Informal educational settings can be
691 considered a land of freedom in comparison to formal education because young people
692 choose to participate (Hellison, 2010; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2012). Sports in informal settings
693 might allow youth to see a different path from the reality of their community, provide a place
694 to recharge their hearts, allow them to rediscover secret emotions, and offer a place where it
695 is possible to feel protected and dream about a different future. In addition, sport might be a
696 vehicle for critically understanding the reality in which these young people live and a place to
697 minimize the distorted relationship between youth and the institutions of society. This is
698 important in countries like Brazil where formal education lacks quality (Almeida, 2000). For
699 example, only 59% of Brazilian youth complete middle school, and 40% complete high
700 school (Almeida, 2000). Thus the importance of informal educational opportunities is even
701 greater in countries like Brazil. We suspect this type of model will be most effective outside
702 of school contexts but this will be something we want to explore further.

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

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What Does This Article Add?

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

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

Our activist approach to developing this prototype pedagogical model (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013; Luguetti et al, 2015, 2016) allowed us to identify the barriers to safe and healthy lives the youth face, recognize realistic places within in sport where these barriers could be challenged, and work collaboratively to create transformative possibilities. This study suggests that if our intent is to use sport as a vehicle to help youth manage risk, than we must start from young people’s concrete needs and life situations.

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