ABSTRACT
Sports educators have long used coaching and teaching methods based on regimes of mechanical execution of movements. Without accounting for the social context in which sports education takes place, these methodologies consider exhaustive action replication the best way to master physical skills. The past decades have seen a surge in alternative pedagogies that acknowledge that sporting bodies are much more than a combination of techniques. Pedagogies such as Game Sense approach the sports teaching-learning process through a constructivist perspective in which the intellectual dimensions of games are highlighted. This paper empirically examines how dialogic pedagogies can be put to work in sports education in order for students’ bodies to become creative and a central part of their own development. Using autoethnographic data drawn from the authors’ international personal experiences as sports coaches, physical educators, researchers and evaluators in two sports education contexts – school sports education and sport for development (SfD) – the paper aims to reveal pedagogies that foster creative participants who can enjoy, read and write their own games. The authors conclude that while dialogic sports education is not without conflict, it enables sports educators to create spaces in which continuous dialogue can occur. These pedagogies are not simply a tool for inquiry-based educational possibilities; they are the actual dialogic education.

KEYWORDS: dialogic education; sporting bodies; sport pedagogy; critical inquiry; sport for development; sports education

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1. Sports education: which skills matter?

And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music (Friedrich Nietzsche)

The scenario is well known to many educators and parents: a long line of children on a sports court waiting their turn to execute a sport skill. The teacher pays attention to the one child at the front of the line, explaining in detail the right technique to be executed. A few times the teacher stops her/his instruction to call the attention of some children who, instead of patiently complying with the line order, are being disruptive and ask the teacher what time the game will start. This scene reflects a widespread notion in sports education: that learners need to first master a set of motor techniques and physical skills. Only when these skills have been practiced and mastered to a certain level they then can go and play an actual game (Roberts, 2011). This idea emphasises training methodologies that use movement repetition as the key element of their pedagogies. The principle here is that by copying and repeating one pre-existing model, students will later be able to reproduce it in a game context.

These mechanistic pedagogies within sports education have been subject to critique (Light, Curry, & Mooney, 2014) for a number of reasons: the lack of opportunities for students to create their own movement repertoire; having the teacher at the centre of the class and as the model to be imitated; shortage of educational elements that go beyond the physical dimension of sports; and the absence of fun and student engagement (Light, 2012). Alternative pedagogical concepts argue that games and sports belong to the children, who need to be at the centre of the learning process (Light, 2012; Quay, 2012). Novel sport pedagogies go further in promoting not only mechanical movement repetition, but also giving logical and social meaning to bodily and sports practices (Light, Quay, Harvey, & Mooney, 2013). These pedagogies explore the intellectual and social dimension of games and sports, advancing the idea that physicality is an important but not the unique facet of any sports activity (Brown, 2013; Pill, 2016).

In this paper, we aim to contribute to the disruption of the ongoing notion of movement repetition as a core element of learning within sports. We address the existing pedagogies that in the past decades have situated motor skills execution as one important element of a multidimensional set of skills needed for proficient performance in team sports. Drawing on autoethnographic data, we discuss how dialogic pedagogies in sports education can lead to inquiry-based programmes that increase the capacity of learners to critically perceive and
respond to their environment. In summary, we ask how we can promote pedagogies that support the creation of creative sporting bodies that can understand (read) at any particular time what goes on during a game, and also can create (write) their own destiny throughout the games they play (Knijnik, 2016).

Sports education can be defined as any context that seeks to educate through sport and movement. In this paper, we will focus on two prominent sports education settings: school sports education and sport for development (SfD). Across both contexts, we consider a range of ‘invasion sports’ such as football, basketball, ice hockey, and rugby. Invasion sports are games where there are no defined territories for each team (as opposed to net games, for example, such as volleyball or tennis, where players have their own area) and the players score by sending/carrying a ball to a special target (line, goal) through territory defended by the opposing team (Light, 2012). The lack of a defined territory added to the presence of opponents that can bump into each other at any time through the games’ space make invasion sports a rich milieu to explore creativity in sports education.

Our paper starts by presenting three theoretical frameworks that underpin our analysis. We begin by discussing how Freire’s (2000, 2002) practice of naming the world to create new forms of comprehending and living in this world can inform the dialogic co-construction of knowledge in sports education. We then discuss the parallels between Wegerif’s (2002, 2011) theories of how thinking develops in the classroom and how creative thinking can be cultivated in sports education. Third, we highlight the main tenets of Game Sense and explore its notion of enhancing students’ critical views of their bodies as well their team members’ and opponents’ bodies in sports spaces. In the remainder of the paper, we draw autoethnographically on our personal experiences as sports coaches, physical educators, researchers and evaluators involved in school sports education and SfD, in order to empirically illustrate and critically engage these concepts.

2. Looking for an embodied untested feasibility: a Freirean perspective on sports education

Paulo Freire’s pedagogies for liberation have been used in countless social contexts. According to Freire (2000), the education of critical and conscious citizens is the central task of any training process that aims for the autonomy of its participants. In order to become autonomous citizens who can understand and transform their social reality, students need to gain social critical awareness in a journey that Freire calls conscientização (Freire, 2002). This process
can exist only where the practice of open and deep dialogue between all participants overcomes the culture of silence that oppresses men and women. Learning occurs in the social experience, where students and teachers go beyond their traditional roles and generously share their knowledge, as all human beings have something to teach to and to learn from the others (Freire, 2002).

Dialogue is the basis for the establishment of a community that shares its understandings of the world in which they live (Freire, 2002). More than a pedagogical tool, Freire sees dialogue as a method of deconstruction of the way pedagogical and political discourses are constructed (Torres, 2002). Dialogue enables a particular community of learners to start posing problems and to be critical co-investigators of their reality (Torres, 2002). By sharing their praxis, their collective reflections through constant and critical dialogue, the community of learners starts to read the world and to re-construct their world in their own terms, moving towards individual freedom and social liberation (Freire, 2002).

Education is only possible if embedded in meaning (Freire, 2000). Freire’s emancipatory education is embedded in actual circumstances, in the real lives of community members where they can see and share the meanings they give to their lives. In every social environment where educators intend to implement a Freirean approach, their first step is to acknowledge that any social actor has prior knowledge that they can use to make their world meaningful. Therefore, educators need to create strategies to enable participants’ voices to become part of the co-constructed reality. In this sense, to read the world is to re-write reality (Freire, 2002).

Freire’s initial work was to enable the voices of unschooled adult sugarcane employees who lived in deep poverty. He wanted to advance their capacities to express their world with their own words, so they could read and understand the social conditions of oppression they lived – the initial step of the conscientização. Naming the world would help them to become autonomous citizens who look for freedom. For Freire (2000), becoming conscious of both individual and social circumstances is central to our appreciation of the world around us.

Using Freire’s concepts as a basis allows us to critically analyze the current status quo of sports education. Despite the fact that in the past decades there has been an increase in alternative pedagogies which claim that to learn a sport involves much more than to develop a motor skill, the technical approach is still widespread within sports education (Spaaij and Janes, 2013; Knijnik, 2016). A Freirean approach to sports education goes beyond the technical approach due to its lack of autonomy promotion. Movement repetition is the opposite of promoting the capacity of reflection and action; imitating a technique from an authority (a
teacher, a coach) who arguably performs it at a superior level erases the possibility of dialogue and creative discovery within the infinite range of body movements and techniques. Sporting bodies need to be allowed to explore the countless possibilities of movement in different social circumstances that rise in a sports context.

In line with Freire’s approach we argue that to promote dialogic education in sporting settings, interaction between all interlocutors needs to be upfront in every educational context (Lefstein & Snell, 2014). A non-interactive situation occurs when sports instructors/teachers assert their power to establish what is right or wrong in terms of a sport skill. The situation described early in this paper where a teacher demonstrates and pupils repeat is what we call a sporting monologue; it does not create autonomous players. On the contrary, to create autonomous and critical citizens within the sporting terrain, educators need to allow participants to take their own decisions in and with the world, therefore crafting their autonomy on the courts (Freire, 2002). In this sense, sport is seen as a cultural manifestation where only the shared experience of participants will promote the subject’s own body autonomy (Betti et al, 2015). A shared experience of bodies in movement, in meaningful educational settings – not standing in lines and copying a master.

It is important to acknowledge there are examples where dialogic education has permeated sports education, particularly within physical education (PE). Since the 1980s, a numbers of scholars have advocated that a physically educated student should have a critical awareness of movement that goes beyond simple knowledge of sports and games (Kirk, 1986; Tinning, 2002). Hickey (2001), Dowling, Fitzgerald and Flintoff (2015) and Fernandes-Balboa (1997) continue to argue for the importance of utilizing critical and emancipatory pedagogies within physical education. The work of these scholars and others (Culpan & Bruce, 2007; Enright & O’Sullivan, 2012; O’Connor, Jeannes, & Alfrey, 2016) illustrates the connections between emancipatory pedagogy and physical education that are being advocated globally. These studies call for a more critical dialogue in school-based PE and, in particular, the destabilization of traditional teacher/student relations and the prioritisation of decontextualised skill/drill approaches. Enright and O’Sullivan (2012), O’Connor et al. (2016) and Oliver and Lalik (2004) all discuss curriculum redevelopments that have sought to engage students more extensively in co-creating alternative PE curricula through supportive, dialogic approaches. These studies confirm the value of doing so to provide more meaningful movement experiences for young people and encouraging them to critique and contest particular discourses surrounding competition, masculinity and whiteness that are inherent and normalised within many physical education curriculums (Flintoff, 2015). More recently, these debates have
permeated SfD, with scholars recognizing the centrality of critical pedagogy within sports initiatives seeking to facilitate broader social change (Mwaanga & Prince, 2016; Oxford & Spaaij, 2017; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013). In the next section, we shift our attention to Wegerif’s approach to dialogic education.

3. Learning sports thinking skills: Wegerif and the creative body

Two themes underpin Wegerif’s vast work in the field of dialogic education: meaning and social context (Wegerif, 2011). Whether in search of epistemological and ontological definitions of dialogue (Wegerif, 2008, 2018) or reflecting on dialogic education in the internet age (Wegerif, 2013), both themes remain constant: that a sentence, a word or even a simple human noise does not have any meaning if isolated from its space and time. In this sense, there is a Socratic agreement between Wegerif and Freire as both emphasise the centrality of the context where human relationships are enacted, for the understanding and crafting of meaningful dialogues.

Wegerif (2002, 2011, 2013) looks at the importance of dialogue in the development of children’s capacity to think. From several experiments with children within and outside classrooms settings, Wegerif (2013) observes that the process of considering the viewpoint of significant others, such as relatives and colleagues, seems to shape the way children’s brains develop. Open and deep dialogue is a key element to move children from self-absorption to a ‘Dialogic Space’ (Wegerif, 2011). Crafted from Bakhtin’s term ‘chronotope’ (a ‘space-time’), Wegerif’s notion of ‘Dialogic Space’, rather than being a fixed and limited zone where people talk and listen to each other, is a vibrant nonstop exchange where meaning is developed and constantly reshaped. This observation leads us to identify another congruence between Wegerif’s ‘Dialogic Space’ and Freire’s propositions of the unfinished nature of human dialogue – which will be used in sections 6 and 7 of this paper to identify pedagogies that account for the dynamism of invasion sports contexts. The ‘Dialogic Space’ coined by Wegerif sees dialogue as education itself, through envisaging education as ‘a matter of improving the quality of dialogue from within dialogue’ (Wegerif, 2013: 38).

The existence of the other is a central feature of dialogic education. It is not enough to acknowledge the physical presence of the recipient of our message as we also talk to a likely image that we have of them. We talk in different ways to a child, a police officer or to a queen. Our internal anticipation on how our recipients might listen to and answer to our speech also frames our conversations. Hence, the perception of the other from the beginning or even prior
to the dialogue is relevant to how we frame our conversations (Wegerif, 2011, 2013). This ‘inside-outness outside-inness nature of dialogue’ is what allows the learning process in the social space (Wegerif, 2011: 180). Here, Wegerif’s proposition echoes a central feature in Freire’s (2002) considerations of dialogic teaching practices being a window for ongoing learning: Freirean teachers learn while teaching as their learners teach them while learning. Teaching is a social enterprise (Freire, 2000, 2002). Dialogic pedagogies for sports education must thus consider the other as an intrinsic part of the learning process.

Human culture plays a central role in the inside-out and outside-in nature of dialogic education (Wegerif, 2013). Humans engage in dialogues that go beyond face-to-face conversations and can be traced in the human history. We can enter into continuous dialogues with voices from the past (e.g. philosophers or other authors) or, nowadays, we can be part of a dialogue of many voices in online debates. The dialogic nature of human beings demonstrates that to educate through and for dialogue, teachers need to build trustable relationships. Hence, ethics and emotions are vital in dialogic education, even prior to cognitive aspects of learning (Vass & Deszpot, 2017; Wegerif, 2013). Reliable relationships can help students to engage sociably in different community contexts ‘without the need either to oppress or to be oppressed’ (Wegerif, 2013: 35). The resonance with Freire’s culture circles could not be clearer here.

Even if Wegerif does not explicitly address sports education in his works, we can trace many parallels between his propositions for dialogue as the context to promote and teach thinking skills, and the dialogic sports education we discuss in this paper. For instance, when Wegerif expands Nietzsche’s metaphor of thinking as dancing by considering that dancers learn to dance while dancing. Moreover, he maintains that dancing, as thinking, ‘is to be found within the activity rather than within the individual’ (Wegerif, 2002: 52). Hence, the collective element of learning invasion sports cannot be ignored and replaced by a technical and more individualistic approach to sports training; rather, it must be emphasised if we want to create players that are able to read, write and enjoy their own games. In the next section, we explore the parallels with Game Sense, a pedagogy that caters for the need to learn sports while playing sports.

4. Game sense and the construction of dialogic space in sports education

Game Sense was developed in the 1990s as an Australian variation of Bunker and Thorpe’s (1982) Teaching Games for Understanding model. Reid and Harvey (2014: 81) describe Game Sense as a ‘learner centred pedagogy that sees learning as a complex, social process involving
the whole person across a wide range of context’. Game Sense is underpinned by an inquiry-based and problem-solving approach that contextualises learning within game-based situations (Light, 2013). Educators organise modified games to support players to understand tactical, technical and social elements of game play. Rather than teaching skills out of context, Game Sense therefore requires a modification of the game setting to enable skills to be learnt in a supportive context without decontextualising them (Pill, 2014), such as adapting equipment, the playing area or the environment to support learning. For example, passing in football (soccer) would traditionally be taught to young players in pairs who will stand still whilst passing a ball back and forth to each other. Coaches and teachers would reinforce the skills required to execute this skill appropriately. Utilising Game Sense would see educators organise players into small groups and encourage them to pass the ball whilst moving. The educator would support this process by adjusting the size of the playing area or using a heavier ball that travels more slowly. These adaptations support players to understand the skill and simultaneously consider tactical elements of where to move to receive passes, learning which is absent in a traditional context. Development of both skills and tactics can occur through the introduction of a defensive player, encouraging participants to consider where they are passing to and how they move to avoid the defender.

Traditional approaches to teaching sports and games rely on direct teaching styles and educators imparting knowledge to players about the correct ways to execute skills and tactics. This approach assumes the coach or teacher is the authority with participants empty vessels who bring little existing knowledge or expertise (Freire, 2000). Game Sense places the participant more centrally in the learning process, with a focus on providing a context where participants have to problem solve and draw on their own knowledge (Light, Curry, & Mooney, 2014). Game Sense is underpinned by guided discovery. A key responsibility of the coach or teacher is to prompt critical thinking of players through posing questions that encourage dialogue of tactics, technique, social and moral aspects of game play (Harvey & Light, 2015). This should occur organically, with coaches facilitating adapted game play and then intervening when problems occur and encouraging players to reflect on how they might change or adapt their approach. For example, if football players are struggling to score a goal, the coach might stop play during an attacking sequence and encourage attacking players to consider what they might do to spread the defence more broadly and create space for goal scoring opportunities. The coach would pose a series of questions that encourages dialogue between players to develop their own solutions to this tactical problem. This prompts higher-order thinking connected to strategic, tactical and problem-solving knowledge requiring input
for both individuals and teams (Light, Curry, & Mooney, 2014). In this way, Game Sense ensures all participants are continually involved in thinking about and responding to the game. Regardless of whether they are in possession of the ball, they are reflecting on the position of their team members, where they need to be and critically appraising the skills and tactical play taking place (Brooker, Kirk, Braiuka, & Bransgrove, 2000). Moreover, the constant questioning in Game Sense pedagogy prompts critical thinking within and on the games, creating a positive, dialogic and student/player-centred learning environment (Light & Harvey, 2017).

Whereas traditionally the educator would be the key decision maker, Game Sense uses dialogue to shift control to participants (Light, 2004). The blend of dialogue, problem solving and participation supports players to ‘read (perceive), react (understand) and respond (movement behaviour)’ through games (Pill, 2014: 49). Learning occurs through player interaction with the physical environment and dialogue, which Light, Curry and Mooney (2014: 72) suggest supports the development of deep knowledge where students ‘learn the concepts and key ideas informing game play and apply this knowledge when playing’. Coaches support students to explore multiple options and make decisions on the best response in different situations. The focus of discovery is not always on tactical or technical knowledge associated with game play, coaches can also facilitate discussion regarding moral dilemmas (such as deliberate fouling to gain advantages). As such, Light et al. (2014) argue that through its dialogic approach, Game Sense promotes the development of ethical and moral reasoning, social skills and problem solving abilities that are applicable in broader life situations.

Game Sense pedagogy aligns with the three common pillars of most constructivist approaches in education: learning is active, is social and is a process of interpretation (Davis & Sumara, 2003). In Game Sense pedagogy, students are not to internalize the representations of external models of sporting performance (Light, 2013); instead, they are prompted to reinterpret their social context to actively create their own responses to the problems that are posed by their teachers (Light & Harvey, 2017). Furthermore, students are able to recreate the games that are more suited to their group age, understanding and ability levels (Knijnik, 2016).

5. Methods

In order to empirically examine how dialogic education can contribute to creative and critical thinking in sports participants, this paper uses autoethnographic data drawn from the authors’ personal experiences as educators, coaches, researchers and evaluators in two prominent sports
education contexts: school sports education and sport for development. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand culture (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). This method has proven valuable in sports education research (e.g., Allen-Collinson, 2012; McLachlan, 2017). For the present purpose, autoethnography allows us to write in a personalized and evocative style, drawing on our experiences to extend understanding about dialogic practices in sports education. Autoethnography, which is grounded in postmodern philosophy, does not fulfill traditional, positivistic judgment criteria such as validity, reliability and generalizability. Criteria that are more appropriate exist, notably resonance, where the research findings and write-up should reverberate with the experience of the reader so that they can identify at some level with what is being communicated (Allen-Collinson, 2012). In this paper, we also aim to increase resonance by relating our personal experiences to the aforementioned pedagogical approaches.

The two autoethnographic contexts we examine in this paper (school sports education and SfD) offer fruitful sites for investigating dialogic learning and educative processes related to sports practices (Harvey, Kirk, & O’Donovan, 2014; Rossi & Jeanes, 2016). The primary route to their selection was our intimate knowledge and familiarity with the settings. Our insider perspective gives the advantage of access to in-depth and nuanced meanings, knowledge about, and lived experience of the field of study (Allen-Collinson, 2012). The selection of two distinctive settings allowed for comparative analysis of dialogic education in practice. The analysis focused on the identification of patterns of convergence and divergence/dissonance across the two cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We used the three theoretical lenses to interrogate and reflect on each case separately, and then explored cross-case patterns of similarity or difference. The aim of this analysis was threefold. First, we sought to illustrate and compare specific uses of these approaches in practice in distinctive contexts. We also used the cases to critically reflect on issues and challenges associated with putting dialogic education concepts into practice. Finally, we explored the implications of the identified uses, applications and challenges for future dialogic pedagogies in sports education.

Within our autoethnographic analysis, we used two types of triangulation: investigator triangulation and theoretical triangulation. Rather than focus solely on the work and lived experience of one author, the analysis compared the experiences of all authors in order to produce a fuller and richer synthesis of practical applications of dialogical education across the two contexts. Moreover, the combination of multiple theoretical lenses in the interrogation and
interpretation of dialogic pedagogies in sports education provided a more multi-dimensional and critical inquiry into the phenomenon.

The two settings examined in this paper are as follows. The first setting draws on the vast teaching experiences of the first author as a physical and sports educator within the public and private educational systems in São Paulo, Brazil (Knijnik, 2009). The sports classes analysed here were taught either as part of the official PE curriculum in public schools or as an element of the sports education extracurricular activities offered by private schools to students aged nine to 16. The purposes of the curricular and additional programs were to teach children how to play a particular sport and to compose schools squads to participate in a range of local and state competitions. Parents and school communities also had expectations that children would learn teamwork, moral values and prosocial attitudes during PE classes and sports training. However, as the programs increased in student load, competitive aspects often overpowered these educational purposes, posing intriguing challenges to dialogic education.

Our analysis of the second setting, sport for development, draws on the second and third authors’ empirical studies of SfD initiatives in Zambia and Brazil (Spaaij, 2012; Jeanes, 2013). We will use specific examples from these studies to illustrate our arguments. In brief, the SfD initiative studied in Brazil involved a programme aimed at improving the skills and employability prospects of marginalized young people; whereas in Zambia, the programmes focused on using sport as a context in which to educate young people about HIV/AIDS. We seek to understand SfD projects in their specific local contexts, grounded in our recognition that such projects are clearly not homogenous across space and time. When considering the use of dialogic education in SfD we therefore do so with an understanding of how specific initiatives are currently operationalised within particular communities.

6. School sports education

Sports training within school settings and at junior levels is usually linked to outcomes that go beyond the learning of physical and sports skills. Expected outcomes are that playing sports will have a positive influence on children’s holistic growth – physical, moral, intellectual, social and emotional – while they learn how to face unavoidable feelings of frustration associated with sports failures. Moreover, educators claim that sports educational programs contain unique opportunities for learning ‘responsibility, democratic principles and citizenship’ as it engages ‘the whole person’ (Light, 2013: 39).
Since the late 1980s, Brazilian PE curricula also point to this rounded perspective of physical and sports education (Betti et all, 2015). Having overcome the influential – but outdated – notion of the ‘physically educated’ student (Corbin, 1987), the curricula started to look at how to engage the full student, body and mind, throughout movement-based educative experiences. Nevertheless, the professional training of future PE teachers and sports educators did not prepare them to deal with the new curricula pedagogical guidelines (Ghirardelli Junior, 1997). Their Bachelor’s Degree was based on a combination of theoretical units connected to biological aspects of the body (anatomy, physiology, biomechanics) with pedagogical units on the physical aspects of how to teach different types of movement. The pedagogical subjects – such as gymnastics, martial arts, athletics, outdoor and indoor sports – were organised as a sequence of technical movements that students needed to master in order to successfully pass the unit. University students spent their study time in a four-year full-time degree practicing mechanical repetition of movements, with the expectation that at the end of each course, they would be able to teach the same skills to their own future students, in schools or sports clubs. A large proportion of these students were already athletes in a range of different sports and were used to these training methods which, if valuable at a high-performance level, were ineffective in schools and educational settings (Ghirardelli Junior, 1997).

Young teachers and coaches arrived at schools without properly knowing that they would face different contexts, with a diverse range of students who mostly were neither keen nor prepared to engage in exhaustive sports mechanical training. This was the case of the first author, who, as a novice teacher arriving in a fringe public school in São Paulo – the largest city in South America, with over 16 million inhabitants – was unable to implement any sports training program based on a monologic skills/drills approach of ‘I tell, you repeat’. From lack of sport equipment and facilities to completely disengaged students who just wanted to play football in their PE class time, the first years of teaching with the monologic method were a complete failure (Knijnik, 2009).

At the time, an educational revolution was taking place in São Paulo. As the city came to be governed by the Workers’ Party, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire headed up the city’s educational department. His concept of dialogic education spread rapidly across the municipality’s public schools. Freire’s (2002) arguments for the preparation of autonomous and critical citizens were present in every debate within public schools. It would not take long for the first author to realise that he needed to read the world (Freire, 2000) together with his students if education towards autonomy was to become more than a slogan – it would need to be embedded in students’ sports education.
In attempting to transform ‘reading the world together’ into concrete educational practices, the first author and his students jointly identified football and handball as the two team sports that the students wanted to develop skills in. Furthermore, it was clear that these students viewed their PE classes as one of the few spaces where they could enjoy and play their favourite sports – they wanted the excitement of a real game; they did not want to waste their PE time in lengthy lines repeating movements or passing a ball to each other with no actual meaning. Playing a game was the activity for them to express their feelings and to create their own sense of the world. Using a Game Sense approach, the next step was to generate authentic playing contexts (Knijnik, 2009) with the students where they could play modified games or game-like activities to develop understanding, decision-making and skills that work within the context of a game (Light et al., 2014). By exploring their curiosity and needs (Freire, 2002) but also their ability to create their own body movements without the prerequisites of a high-level performance, creative and dialogic bodies’ inventions – like improvised dance (Wegerif 2002, 2018) – were being allowed in the space of the PE classes. The embodied learning that was being created across the PE classes relied on the material awareness of individual capabilities which were placed in the social context of each school community’s collective experience (Cappucio, 2015).

This dialogic and embodied process did not happen without conflict. On the contrary, gender issues were at the front of everyday conversation with students. Boys, used to having the court to themselves to play football without interference from girls (Betti et al., 2015), were reluctant not only to share the physical space but also to group up with girls in order to create new game ideas that would make the PE classes inclusive and interactive (Light, 2013). Students and teacher faced a daily battle and several tense negotiations over gender issues in the PE setting.

A different set of challenges to dialogic sports education was posed by the private school setting where the same teacher worked as a sports educator. Unlike the public school context, there were no issues concerning programme funding, lack of equipment or sporting facilities. On the contrary, the school grounds had two sports halls and outdoor facilities that mirrored a sports club. Perhaps these high-level facilities were where the challenges started. The students who came to the extracurricular sports programs had been pre-selected by their teachers based on their perceived physical skills. Prompted by their parents, they had high expectations of becoming good athletes and most of all, of winning games and competitions. The teacher, though, wanted to implement a dialogic process where, step by step, the students could realise that the most important skill within an invasion sport context is to find the right
space (Menezes & Reis, 2017). Sports education, in this case, was to teach that movement execution, as important as it is in sports learning, is only the final part of a skilful performance. Perception of where your body is on the court in relation to your team mates and your opponents’ bodies (reading the game) and the ability to make the right decision after reading some spatial-timing indicators are two crucial skills that happen before the actual body actions (movement).

Hence, the teacher’s purpose was to teach sports in a holistic context, where inquiry-based strategies in modified real game contexts (Light, 2013) were in place. Consequently, students would have the capacity to learn how to read a particular game situation while thinking about the best course of action (decision making) to take before writing their destinies on the court. The use of white boards, mostly with the older groups (12-16 years) was emphasised in order to open dialogic spaces and enhance the students’ capacity to pose their own questions and to solve their own problems (Mercer et al., 2010) within actual sports situations.

Critical thinking, though, needs to be nurtured. Children need to learn how to express themselves in a dialogic context (Wegerif, 2002). Open conversations just exist in an atmosphere of trust (Freire, 2000). Parents with high expectations regarding their children’s sporting prowess did not want to wait. The questioning of training methods and game tactics were intense. The teacher’s initial playing strategies were open to allow students to better understand the space and time of a game, hence improving their ability to become dialogic and creative players. However, if scores and match results were not a priority to the teacher, they were to parents and to school management. Conflicts and dialogues with students provided evidence for the maturation of this educator and his ability to constantly self-reflect and challenge the culture of oppression (Freire, 2000) within children’s sports competitions, questioning the inner value of a system where victories are more important than the development of autonomous and critical citizens.

7. Sport for development

At first glance, SfD seems an ideal setting for dialogic education. SfD represents the intentional ‘use of sport to exert a positive influence on public health, the socialisation of children, youths and adults, the social inclusion of the disadvantaged, the economic development of regions and states, and on fostering intercultural exchange and conflict resolution’ (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011: 311). This definition highlights that, from a SfD perspective, sport is a conduit
to achieving wider development outcomes for marginalised individuals and groups, rather than simply sports skill development (Spaaij et al, 2018).

The types of intervention that are undertaken within SfD vary with regard to their philosophical bases, pedagogies and institutional forms (Giulianotti, 2011). In this paper, we are particularly concerned with SfD initiatives that use forms of dialogic education. A dialogic approach to SfD aims to facilitate the positive re-construction of social relations among and within communities (Giulianotti, 2011). SfD agencies working within this model use a dialogic pedagogy that engages and teaches (and, ideally, aims to learn from) participants, often through peer education (Spaaij and Jeanes, 2013; Spaaij, Oxford and Jeanes, 2016). The paradigmatic method is the ‘train the trainer’ technique, whereby educators train local volunteers to become SfD teachers and they then return to their local communities to train more volunteers and to implement programmes. Peer leaders engage young people initially through sports opportunities and use these to deliver core educational messages. Young people are encouraged to share and discuss their collective views on issues affecting their lives and attempt to devise strategies to navigate or solve these within their everyday lives (Mwaanga 2010). Further, the dialogic model is typically willing to modify existing sports to accommodate the SfD program’s inclusive goals (Giulianotti 2011), for example by including indigenous games as opposed to colonial invasion sports.

When conceived in more dialogic and critical forms, SfD programmes tend to exhibit some of Freire’s core considerations regarding the need for interaction and conscientização. Participants can experience SfD initiatives as a space where they can be themselves, feel culturally safe, gain respect, learn to reflect and form opinions, and be temporarily freed from daily struggles (Nols et al., 2018). In the Brazilian programme, this is evident in the focus on relationship building to engage young people in educational processes. The programme emphasises the development of meaningful relationships and mutual trust between educators and participants, where educators and participants become a significant part of one another’s everyday lives. A SfD educator observed that ‘the most important thing is not the subject they are going to learn ... Sure that’s important too, but you must create relationships with them’. This observation aligns not only with Freire’s thinking, but also with Wegerif’s argument that trusting relationships are a building block for dialogic space where meaning can be developed and constantly reshaped.

Within this context, the dialogic SfD educators we studied considered sports activities an experiential setting where they could establish dialogue through bodily co-presence and movement. Sports activities also provided a space for valuable teaching and learning.
opportunities that regularly carried over into post-activity discussions and reflection among participants. During sports activities participants were able to develop a commitment towards each other and display their willingness to work as a team. Competition and conflict that are inherent in invasion sports were also important because they generated opportunities for participants to resolve these situations in a way that would impact positively upon themselves and the others in their programme (Lambert, 2007). Indeed, one of the Brazilian educators noted that conflict situations ‘are inevitable’ and that it is ‘so important to have good facilitators who can take advantage of those moments and turn them into something positive.’ She stressed that these situations generated valuable teaching and learning moments by engaging young people’s emotions and ethics: ‘On the sports field, emotions come out and a lot of these youth respond to conflict with aggression or anger, which can be nerve-wrecking but also bring out a lot of really great real-life teaching moments’ (Spaaij, 2012).

In the Zambian SfD programmes, guided discovery was frequently used within invasion game contexts to prompt young people to consider broader social issues. For example, peer leaders might prompt a discussion on how players could work together effectively to prevent a goal being scored. They would then guide young people to draw parallels between this scenario and the necessity of communicating, working together as a team, and seeing when a team mate was struggling in the broader contexts of their lives. In another example, peer leaders sought to develop player tactics within attacking play through a small-sided game that had attacking players completing a series of movements off the ball to confuse the defensive players and allow them to score. When attacking players successfully completed the movement by outwitting the defenders and scoring a goal, the peer leader stopped play to engage in a teachable moment as advocated within the Game Sense model. As well as facilitating questions regarding the tactical play, the peer leaders also asked questions of the defenders, encouraging them to explain their uncertainty regarding which attacking player to remain close to. The peer leader then supported the group to draw parallels between the uncertainty players felt from watching the players to the doubt of attempting to judge someone’s health status by looking at them. The group discussed the importance of defending players protecting their space (a common tactic in invasion games) and the need to always protect themselves during sexual encounters to avoid HIV/AIDS infection. This example reflects the capacity of Game Sense to encourage creative dialogue about game play and broader moral and social issues (Light, 2013).

Tangible manifestations of untested feasibility are important aspect of Freirean pedagogy in SfD. Educators encouraged imagination and the possibility of change that can
move participants and communities to action (Spaaij, Oxford and Jeanes, 2016). Like Freire (1992), one of the educators highlighted the importance of cultivating hope among learners:

The vision that I have of education is first and foremost try to show the young people that they do have opportunities; that these opportunities exist. That they have the qualities within them, and that they only have to work on discovering which positive qualities they possess (Woman, 40s).

Dialogic SfD education is further characterised by its attention to contextual meaning. Wegerif (2018) stresses that meaning emerges only in social and historical contexts, where it is dependent upon unique voices and specific histories. Ensuring SfD education is grounded within local context, dealing with participants’ lived realities, is of critical importance. In Zambia, the recruitment of young people from local communities ensured that peer leaders had a detailed and nuanced understanding of local context, the problems and issues facing the community and specifically the position of young people within these communities. They were already embedded in everyday community life and it was relatively easy for them to empathise with and understand young people’s experiences, and to elicit them for the purpose of dialogue and critical reflection. Game Sense similarly advocates that coaches’ starting point is the young people they are working with and ensuring their learning is always contextualised to the game context. Peer leaders were able to ensure they could apply context in game situations but also in relation to participants’ wider lives.

The experiences of some peer leaders also problematise this notion of the dialogic educator. While a deep understanding of the local context is paramount in facilitating dialogic education, it is also critical to acknowledge that those who can arguably achieve this most effectively are interwoven within the dominant social relations of that community (Betti et al., 2015). These existing relationships cannot easily be cast aside when attempting to foster an educative experience that is seeking to develop alternative and multiple perspectives on participants’ realities. In this regard, the meaning that emerges through dialogue ‘tends to be ambivalent because informed by multiple perspectives’ (Wegerif, 2018).

8. Conclusion

Dialogic spaces within sports education contexts make participants constantly aware of the bodily presence and movements of the ‘other’ (the teammate, the opponent). As we have
shown, particularly within invasion sports environments, players move their bodies simultaneously through space and time. This ‘dance’ between players from the same and/or opposing team makes them creators of countless potential dialogic situations on sports fields and courts. In an invasion sports game context, players need to learn how to interpret real-life situations through the eyes of their teammates or opponents so they can adjust their own movements and successfully progress in the game. This is the aim of any true dialogic education – acknowledging, understanding and responding to others’ existences and voices within one’s mind. This is the basis for the education of players who can read and write their own destiny within – and outside – sports.

In this paper, we have articulated three dialogic approaches to education which support the creation of dialogic spaces within sports education contexts. We argue that dialogic sport pedagogies aim not only to open spaces for inquiry-based educational possibilities; these pedagogies are the actual dialogic education. In traditional sports training scenarios, participants have to learn a sequence of movements, usually replicating a pre-established model, before they enter a sporting dialogue (a real game). In a dialogic approach, participants learn how to create their unique body movements and to respond to the movements of others while in dialogic sports situations. Hence, sporting dialogues are generated and lived through each step of the educational process.

Our autoethnographic data demonstrate that dialogue is never without conflict. Different sports education contexts are shaped by social and sports structures which can block the educational transformation embedded in the dialogic sports education implemented in a range of scenarios. On the one hand, hegemonic gender constructs still deem sports as a predominantly masculine activity. Dialogic sports education needs to keep gender as a priority on its agenda, with ongoing conversations to build and promote gender inclusive sports environments. On the other hand, sports educators have to deal with an enduring win-at-all-costs mentality on a daily basis. This mentality can override dialogic possibilities for the sake of an ephemeral triumph. It is up to dialogic sports educators to make evident that team sports need creative players who will only be nurtured within a real dialogic space without scoring pressures.

SFd settings are not immune to conflict either. While SFd initiatives tend to focus on the social inclusion of vulnerable communities, educational strategies often prioritise technical knowledge, such as personal and professional skill development, to help participants succeed in employment and other existing societal structures (Jeanes, 2013; Spaaij, Oxford and Jeanes, 2016). These approaches can also come in a top-down, non-dialogic form which may in turn
create passive citizens as opposed to creative and critical thinkers. Dialogic sports education can support participants’ sense of ownership of their bodies’ movements and minds, hence increasing the chance of a more critical and empowered approach towards addressing or transforming social vulnerability.

This paper brings together, for the first time, three influential educational approaches in order to create a theoretical framework for dialogic sports education. Freire, Wegerif and Game Sense have clear conceptual connections which, when related in a holistic way, can underpin the dialogic process in educational spaces, such as sports, that are still dominated by traditional and monologic pedagogical approaches. Further research is needed to explore how this articulation will reflect in a range of cultural contexts that aim to create players who can read and write their own games.

9. References


