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Teachers' enactment of Freirean democratic pedagogies in primary school physical education

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ABSTRACT

Background: Despite its ubiquity in education discourses, social justice is a highly contested concept that can be framed in different ways [Dowling, F., H. Fitzgerald, and A. Flintoff. 2012. *Equity and Difference in Physical Education, Youth Sport and Health: A Narrative Approach*. Routledge]. The 'social' element of social justice is always framed by broader cultural and socio-political contexts. Therefore teaching for social justice cannot be conceptualised as a single pedagogy that can be enacted without regard for the learning content and the learning context.

Purpose: The rationale for this research is to bridge the gap between advocacy for pedagogies for social justice and practices done in the name. The specific aim of this paper was to explore how specialist primary school physical education teachers in Spain enact democratic practices that promote social justice by engaging students in decision making in ways that ensure their voices are heard and considered.

Method: The research was informed by Critical Incident Technique (CIT) methodology. Data were generated through six classroom observations and stimulated recall interviews with three Spanish primary PE teachers. Data analysis was informed by Paulo Freire's [1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Seabury Press] democratic pedagogy and associated concepts of dialogue, problem posing and critical consciousness.

Findings: The findings demonstrate how the teachers' PE teachers' practices have strong roots in democratic principles that are consistent with the scholarship of Freire. The two themes; (1) 'Student-led dialogical encounters' and (2) 'Pedagogy of questioning and exploration' provide insight into how the Spanish primary school PE specialists in this study teach for and about social justice in contextually relevant ways.

Discussion: These findings remind us that PE provides a fertile educational context for implementing democratic pedagogies due to its interactive activity-based context and curricular focus on holistic development. The findings provide insight into both how democratic pedagogies in PE are possible even with very young students.

Conclusion: We argue that democratic pedagogies are essential to social justice outcomes in school PE. They can enhance student participation, foster relationships, and empower individuals to become active agents

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of change. Democratic pedagogies in primary schools provide a sound foundation for scaffolding a critical consciousness in secondary school PE contexts.

Introduction

Since the start of the twenty-first century, social justice or related concepts such as equity and inclusion have become infused in national education policies, curriculum documents, initial teacher education policies, and teacher registration requirements. Despite its ubiquity in education discourses, social justice is an ambiguous concept that can be framed in different ways (Dowling, Fitzgerald, and Flintoff 2012). In addition, teaching for social justice is complex, context specific, and based on individual, social, cultural, historic, political perspectives (Gerdin et al. 2019). Our starting point for this paper is a conception of education as a democratic practice where people come together in dialogue, reflect upon the world, and actively participate in transforming both their own and others' social reality (Freire 1970). As such, democratic practices promote social justice by ensuring that students have opportunities to participate in decision making in ways that actively shape their collective future.

This study is based on the assumption that the 'social' element of social justice is always framed by broader cultural and socio-political contexts. The importance of context is acknowledged in scholarship that specifically explores pedagogies for social justice in school physical education¹ (PE) (see, e.g. Hill et al. 2018; Lamb, Oliver, and Kirk 2018; Lynch, Walton-Fisette, and Luguetti 2022; Robinson and Randall 2016; Schenker et al. 2019; Stirrup and Hooper 2021; Walton-Fisette et al. 2018). This literature base draws on a broad range of theoretical concepts and perspectives including a focus on democracy (Lynch and Sargent 2020; Oliver and Kirk 2016); student voice (Iannucci and Parker 2021), or more specific to this paper, a focus on student voice in primary school Physical Education (Cardiff et al. 2024; Howley and O'Sullivan 2021; Iannucci, van der Smee, and Parker 2023; Ní Chróinín et al. 2024). Specific to the subject of Physical Education (PE), the context of this study, we draw on Wright's (2004) definition of teaching for social justice in Health and Physical Education (HPE) as practices that have the goal of helping students identify, challenge, and transform existing social inequities relating to physical activity and health.

This paper is part of a larger international research collaboration project {name} that explores how HPE teachers teach for and about social justice (e.g. Gerdin et al. 2019, 2021) This paper extends this research by drawing on data from a new context, both in terms of country (Spain) and educational level (primary school). The rationale for this research project is to bridge the gap between advocacy and practice. Despite a shift in curricula towards practices that support social justice (Cliff 2012), accounts of teaching for social justice in PE are less common, and accounts of pedagogies for social justice in primary school PE are rare. Therefore, the specific aim of this paper was to explore how specialist primary school PE teachers in Spain teach for social justice.

Freirean democratic pedagogy

In this paper, we draw on an analytical framework informed by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's (1970) conception of democratic education to interpret and represent findings on how PE teachers in Spanish schools taught for and about social justice. Freire (1970) conceptualised education as a practice of freedom where people come together in dialogue in order to reflect upon and transform their social reality. Freire (1970) proposed that learning should be humanising; it should equip humans with the ability to 'name the world and change it' (88) through critically reflecting on their experiences and interrogate conditions of oppression and discrimination and prepare them to become autonomous citizens who have the right to plan and decide their lives by themselves

(Giroux 2011). Underpinning Freirean pedagogy is horizontal relationships based on trust between teachers and pupils, which, in turn, needs to be underpinned by love, humility and faith (Freire 1997). By fostering horizontal pedagogical relationships, pupils are empowered to engage in dialogue with ideas presented as guidance, rather than imposed, thus allowing them to co-create the learning process (Giroux 2001).

A central pillar of Freirean pedagogy is the need to shift power from the teacher to the student. Freire (1997) called for education that goes beyond ‘banking’; that is, the depositing of unquestioned knowledge into a compliant student-recipient to ‘problem-posing’ education which moves from the hierarchical patterns characteristic of banking education to learning through dialogue between students and teacher. Freire called for pedagogies that explore hierarchies and help the learner to recognise the workings of power, perceive contradictions, and act against oppression. Importantly, Freire (1970) argued that reflection and action must occur simultaneously – a dynamic termed ‘praxis’ (Freire 1970) that is directed towards the structures of society to be transformed.

Through problem posing and dialogue, students are challenged to consider new perspectives that may confront their taken-for-grant understandings. As a desired outcome, Freire foregrounds the emergence of *conscientização* or a critical consciousness that involves ‘learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and take action against the oppressive elements of reality’ (Freire 1970, 19). Freirean pedagogy links democratic principles with critical pedagogy. Sant (2019) positions Freirean pedagogy as ‘critical democratic education’ due to its focus on enabling all students to have equal and real opportunities to be agents of social transformation.

In the specific context of PE, Luguetti, Kirk, and Oliver (2019) stated that Freirean pedagogy can provide students with the agency and freedom needed to begin transforming their own worlds one small step at a time.

We draw on Freirean concepts to illustrate democratic pedagogies that occur in different geographical and temporal locations than the concepts in which they were first written. We are cognizant that Freire was adamant that his ideas were not ‘methods’, and that educators in other contexts need to further ‘recreate and rewrite [his] ideas’ (Freire, as cited in Macedo 1994, xiv) to address their own social justice agendas. Although PE classrooms are far removed from the original contexts where Freire conceived of his critical pedagogies, the subject needs to address the perception that PE ‘remains sexist, racist, homophobic and ableist’ (Fitzpatrick 2019, 1129) and the suggestion that the way PE is often taught in schools does not always provide equitable health outcomes across gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion and social class (Gerdin et al. 2021). Teaching in PE should therefore help students to challenges and transforms these practices. As such, we use Freirean concepts to illuminate practices in PE that have the goal of helping students identify, challenge, and transform existing social inequities relating to physical activity and health (Wright 2004).

Study context

PE in Spain is linked to the European pedagogical tradition (such as, for example, Austrian School Gymnastics, the Psychokinetic Method, Expressive Body Techniques, the Comprehensive Teaching of Sport Games and Relational Psychomotricity) and the works of pedagogues such as Freire and Meirieu (Martínez Álvarez et al. 2009). In 1990, almost 15 years after the death of dictator Franco, an education law ‘Ley Orgánica de Ordenación General del Sistema Educativo’ (LOGSE), was enacted, marking a significant milestone in reconsidering the role and presence of PE in compulsory education (Martínez Álvarez 2000). This law proposed an eclectic curriculum that encompassed various approaches present in schools, ranging from traditional to more avant-garde ones. While it can be asserted that this period marked a considerable advance in incorporating PE as an integral subject in the education system, it also generated considerable diversity in practices and conceptions.

This curriculum change was accompanied by a strong push in initial teacher training and ongoing professional development, with the creation of groups of PE teachers exploring new ways to extend the positive aspects believed to be provided by the subject to the entire schooling

population. One of the groups that has been seeking democratic and inclusive ways of understanding PE in schools since the early 1990s was the ‘Tratamiento Pedagógico de lo Corporal²’ (TPC), a professional learning community (PLC) of PE teachers established in the Spanish province of Valladolid. TPC draws on Freire’s ideas of empowerment and embodiment (Martínez Alvarez and Vaca Escribano 1997) and pedagogical traditions of French educators such as Celestin Freinet, Georges Lapierre, and Jean Leboulch that consider movement and body as relevant part of the educational development of children. The teachers whose practices are reported on in this paper participated as members of the TPC professional learning community or they were in PETE programmes that drew on TPC.

The most recent Spanish Primary School Physical Education Curriculum ‘Real Decreto 126/2014’ (Ministerio de Educación de España 2014) focusses on personal development through the interaction between cognitive, relational, emotional, cultural and movement. PE strives to create students who are agents of their own learning (Bruner 1997) by providing learners with tools (see, e.g. Bores Calle 2006) to help them to be aware of their starting level and of the process that has led them to the current state. Real Decreto 126/2014 (Ministerio de Educación 2014) promotes five strands of development based on Pierre Parlebás’ Motor Praxeology (Parlebás 1988) that focus on movement in a broad range of contexts (see Figure 1).

The delivery of primary school PE is the responsibility of a specialist teacher (e.g. a teacher with a degree in primary education and a specialisation in PE) that may or may not teach other subjects to the same group of pupils. Primary students are required to have two hours of PE per week with activities that include exercise and sports skills, expressive movement, cooperative activities and movement in the outdoors (see Figure 1). In the next section, we detail the methodology used in this study to explore how specialist primary school PE teachers in Spain teach for social justice.

Methodology

The research was informed by Critical Incident Technique (CIT) methodology (Flanagan 1954), a qualitative research methodology that focusses researcher attention on specific actions that influence outcomes. We employed a ‘bottoms up’ approach that focussing initially on teachers’ practices through direct observations and post-observation interviews. In this study, we focussed the observations on ‘critical incidents’ that appeared to help students identify, challenge, and disrupt the status quo and inequitable power relations (Fitzpatrick 2019). Specifically, our focus was on practices of inclusion, reflection, consciousness raising, instruction about oppression, and actions that focussed on social justice, equity, and inclusion. Ethical approval for the study was obtained through the University of (host university).

This paper draws on data from lesson observations and interviews with three specialist³ PE-trained teachers (see Table 1). The two male and one female teachers (44–59) were all full time

Strand 1	Individual motor actions in stable environments (<i>e.g., traditional exercises for the development of psychomotor and individual sports skills</i>)
Strand 2	Motor actions in opposition contexts (<i>e.g., combat sports or individual racquet sports</i>)
Strand 3	Motor actions in cooperative contexts, with or without opposition (<i>e.g., cooperative games, acro-gym, group games or team sport</i>)
Strand 4	Motor actions in contexts requiring adaptation to the environment (<i>e.g., hiking, orienteering, climbing or games in nature</i>)
Strand 5	Motor actions in artistic or expressive contexts (<i>e.g., body expression or dance</i>)

Figure 1. Five development strands of the Spanish Primary School Physical Education Curriculum (RD, 126/2014).

Table 1. Lesson observations.

No	Context	Teacher	School	Class / Teacher
1	Kubb	Carlos Male teacher, 49 years old	Public Primary School	Grade 5 class 17 students Age 10–11
2	Skipping	Carlos Male teacher. 49 years old	Public Primary School	Grade 6 24 students Age 11–12
3	Musical chairs	Antonio Male, 59 years old	Public Primary School	Infantil 7 students Age 3–5
4	Capture the flag	Antonio Male, 59 years old	Public Primary School	Grades 2–6. 12 students. Age 7–12
5	Large Ball skills	Antonio Male, 59 years old	Public Primary School	Grades 5–6 3 students Age 10–12
6	Outdoor Education	Sofia Female teacher, 44 years old	Public Primary School	Grade 5 class 23 students Age 10–11

PE specialists each with more 20 years of teaching experience in primary school PE. The three educators were grounded in the principles of TPC and bring extensive experience in applying this model within school settings and have pursued numerous professional development courses and action-research seminars. These experiences have enabled them to gain a deep understanding of the model and successfully implement it in their teaching practice, frequently in cooperation with university researchers.

The participants were selected by the Spanish members of the researcher team through purposive sampling (Bryman 2016) as examples of PE teachers who employ democratic pedagogies in their teaching practice. The length of teaching service and existing relationships and trust between the participants and Spanish members of the research group developed through their mutual participation in the professional learning community were arguably key enablers to open and honest dialogue in the interviews (Robinson and Lai 2006).

Of the six-lesson observed, five were completed with primary school classes with the sixth lesson occurring with an educación infantil⁴ (early childhood) class. All of the lessons were 40–60 min in length with the exception of the sixth lesson which was more than 120 min. The schools ranged from rural to urban with class sizes ranging from three students to 24 students (see Table 1).

The observations and interviews were completed by a team of four Spanish researchers and two non-Spanish researchers who have previously drawn on CIT in previous studies, but not within a Spanish context. The value of a multi-nation observer team is based on the proposition that local researchers familiar with context may have taken-for-granted assumptions about teachers' practices. The observations and questions from the outsiders (Patton 2002) were able to supplement those of the Spanish researchers and provide new insights and (re)interpretations of how the observed PE teaching practices aligned with pedagogies for social justice (Gerdin et al. 2019).

Following the observations, we conducted stimulated recall interviews (Bryman 2016) with teachers. These interviews (40–60 min) focussed initially on the critical incidents that occurred during the lessons. The critical incidents were discussed by the research team before the interview. All interviews were completed in Spanish with 'live' translations by the bilingual researchers enabling some further probing questions. All interviews were digitally recorded (including English translations of most responses that were completed during the interviews by one of the research team). A second level of translation of remaining interview data and transcription was completed by a member of the Spanish research team.

Drawing on the work of Braun and Clarke (2013) and consistent with previous data collection completed in the Education for Equitable Health Outcomes – The Promise of School Health and

Physical Education (EDUHEALTH) project (see Philpot et al. 2020), data were thematically analysed through a six-phase thematic analysis approach. In short, this meant that data were first analysed separately by authors. This stage involved familiarisation with the data and individual open coding (Braun and Clarke 2013). Secondly, monthly Zoom meetings between researchers were used to compare, cross-check, and reduce initial codes and themes into common/shared codes and themes. It was at this stage of the analysis that we recognised the uniqueness of the practices by the primary school PE specialists. At that point, we separated the data collected in the primary context and began discussing the uniqueness of the practices and the common contextual factors that enable and constrained teaching. The final level of analysis was a group analysis by all members of the research team. Initial themes were shared electronically and discussed as a group on ZOOM. The strength of the individual and shared analysis lay in the iterative and transparent discussions and debates and consideration of individual perspectives from members of the Spanish research team and those from other countries. We remain cognisant of Uljens (2015) suggestion that a truly ‘shared’ understanding is very difficult as the practices occur in culturally located contexts that we all interpret through our own socio-cultural lenses (Gerdin et al. 2019).

The initial codes which included ‘student voice’, ‘student-centred teaching’, ‘social outcomes’, ‘problem solving’, ‘relationships’ drew us to discussions that focussed on democratic education and the work of Paulo Freire. In the last phase of thematic analysis, we drew on Freirean pedagogy as a heuristic to take the analysis from a semantic to a latent level (Braun and Clarke 2013). The analysis and the two themes that follow are shaped by Freire’s conception of a democratic pedagogy. The value of the findings is that they move beyond advocacy. The findings represent the lived democratic practices of primary school PE teachers.

Findings and discussion

The findings presented in this paper suggest that the PE teachers’ practices have strong roots in democratic principles that are consistent with the scholarship of Freire and key principles of Freirean democratic pedagogy such as horizontal relationships, problem posing and dialogue. The two themes; (1) ‘Student-led dialogical encounters’ and (2) ‘Pedagogy of questioning and exploration’, provide explicit insight into how the Spanish primary school PE specialists in this study teach for and about social justice.

Theme 1 student-led dialogical encounters

Freire (1997) suggested that dialogue with others was needed to open understanding to the contradictions of personal and social reality and enable people to be able to deal critically with their realities and situations. The first theme ‘Student-led dialogical encounters’, reflects the foregrounding of dialogue through student-centred teaching practices. In student-centred classrooms, students are placed at the centre of the educational experience. The teacher shifts from being the sole authority figure to becoming a facilitator and learning guide. In this study, we observed teachers who embraced student-centred learning through giving students’ creating spaces for student autonomy through providing choices of what they were going to learn and how they were going to learn. In addition to this facilitation of student voice in decision making, we observed students who were actively involved in their own learning and leading the learning of others.

As an example, in a one of the first lessons we observed, Carlos placed the students in groups and gave each group the challenge of design a skipping sequence:

Group needs to discuss and agree and what they are going to do/learn as group exercise in skipping – then demonstrates to the rest of the class. (Observation, Lesson 2)

In a different lesson, we observed Carlos working with students to help them to develop lesson plans in order to prepare them to teach the game of Kubb⁵ to a younger group of students. Carlos

required each group of four students to design lesson plans and practice using them with their peers:

Carlos asks a student to explain rules to another student ... This is important as he is preparing the students in his class to lead [a younger group of students]. It is not simply about teaching his students a game, he seems to be asking them to learn to negotiate and explain and self-organise. (Observation, Lesson 1)

In the post observation interview, Carlos stated;

They have to work in small groups then they share with other groups. I went around and asked 'what did you write? Why did you put that there?' The final product will be one common sheet after two or three more lessons. They will agree to a general process for teaching the younger children. (Carlos, int.)

In one of Antonio's classes, we observed a Student-led introductory activity where one student was responsible for leading the class of 12 students. It was clear that this was a normal everyday part of Antonio's class. In the observations, we noted the following;

Warmup: led by one of students (older) – group exercise including. There is a group reflection on the warmup – what is good and what maybe is missing? ... They play a version of capture the flag – they play the game for a while then stop to collaborate as a team on strategy – the teacher reinforces aim of working together as a whole team. (Observation, Lesson 4)

The introductory activity is a game of 'copy/follow the leader'. One of the boys directs the students around. They are moving in a circle. They stop and then they start doing some warmup activities ... mostly dynamic stretches. This is clearly a routine that is understood by the students. The teacher has no role in this activity. The key learning appears to be 'taking responsibility and autonomy for their own learning'. (Observation, Lesson 3)

The final example of students learning with and from other students comes from a Grade 5–6 class taught by Antonio. In this class, the students maintained a PE notebook where they planned and then reflected on the lessons they taught, merging literacy with PE. In the observed lesson, we saw students leading learning activities based around catching and throwing:

Each student has come to class with a picture of a passing activity in their journal. They are teaching each other – reciprocal learning. Each student is teaching something different. The teacher asks questions of the students and scaffolds the challenges. After each student has a chance to lead, the teacher asks the students what challenge they would like to take on next. The students are asked to demonstrate and then the other students copy ... The teacher is empowering the students to lead each other. He is not showing off his expertise nor claiming to have all the knowledge. Again, there is a strong focus on meta-cognition, student-leadership, learning through teaching others – the teacher's role to facilitate this. (Observation, Lesson 5)

In these examples, the teachers are co-constructing teaching and learning activities with students in response to their wants and needs (Freire 1970) and perhaps most importantly, the teachers are strategically and purposefully engaging students in learning with and from peers. Rather than waiting for a teachable moment, the teachers are purposefully providing the students with problems that they must solve both as content but also as an educational process. There are many payoffs from this student-centred and Student-led approach to learning. Students are taking responsibility for learning rather than passively waiting to be taught. The students are engaged in acts of thinking rather than collecting and remembering information as an end in itself (Freire 1970). Implicit in Freirean pedagogy is a requirement for students to take an active role in their own learning with the aim of empowering individuals to become active agents of change in their communities and societies. Indeed, many scholars advocating for pedagogies for social justice in PE have called for a greater attention to student voice during PE lessons (e.g. Lynch and Sargent 2020; Oliver and Kirk 2016).

In this study, we observed several examples of PE teachers drawing on student voice in classes with students as young as three. For instance, Carlos described how, in the early part of the year, he has a strong focus on building relationship, respect and dialogue. He described his practice as:

... sharing the rules, negotiating the rules. The general way of working is to share strategies, writing and speaking, sharing in small groups, then sharing in big groups (Carlos, int.)

In one observation, Carlos

asked a student to explain a rule to another students. This is important as he is preparing the students on his class to lead. It is not simply about teaching his students a game, he seems to be asking them to learn to negotiate and explain and self-organise. (Observation, Lesson 1)

In an educación infantil class, there were numerous examples where students negotiated rules and demonstrated assertiveness. The following two examples come from a single class:

They play another game with a different tagger. The student say 'pasitos' to ask the tagger to stand further back if they think they are too close. In a sense, the students are learning to make their own decisions. (Observation, Lesson 3)

The rules of the game now change. There is a tagger. The game continues as an elimination game. The students seem to have options of choosing when they run. There appears to be some negotiation. (Observation, Lesson 3)

Although teacher expectations of students have long been promoted as an important part of learning (Rubie-Davies et al. 2020), the level to which the young children we observed assumed responsibility was significant. In all of the lessons, students made important decisions about their learning. They developed and led both introductory and skill learning activities, they adapted rules and developed strategies during games they developed movement sequences and they collaboratively planned to lead others.

The following examples highlight how the teachers sought student voice and how students seemed comfortable and confident in their voices:

Antonio often asks students to give the instructions or to make choices during the game. He is very patient with the students as they, like typical three year olds, are not always focussed on the game. (Observation, Lesson 3)

The centre line dividing the court into 2 is not clear. The students are very honest in their decision making about whether they are tagged or not. (Observation, Lesson 4)

The observations suggest that these students have taken responsibility for their own learning in ways far beyond what may be the norm in early childhood and primary school settings.

Student voice is a powerful principle that aligns with democratic education. A Freirean pedagogy requires the teacher to share their voice with their pupils and envisages with them a world of opportunities (Freire 1997) with the aim of building fairness, trust, and voice at all levels of society. In these PE lessons, the Freirean pedagogy begins when the teachers endeavours to include all students in decisions around the content and learning activities used to develop knowledge and skills. This can be seen when Carlos encourages students to plan together and practice leading each other and when Antonio ask questions and encourages students to speak up and challenge others' decisions if they believe learning activities are not fair. The foundations of student voice are horizontal relationships that give students the confidence to co-create the learning process (Giroux 2001) and facilitate the development of an environment in which teachers and students learn through actively listening and develop a respect for diverse opinions that enables them to mutually inspire and support one another. The practices we have observed enable students to actively participate in their own learning. Importantly, the observations suggest that democratic practices in these classes are the norm. The students seemed used to creating teams, making game rules and modifications, and leading others. Similarly, the teachers consistently challenged the students to think and make decisions through a pedagogy of questions. This seemingly horizontal relation is the first step to developing the critical conscious needed to name and challenge unequal power relationships within physical activity contexts.

Facilitating student-led dialogue must be done in considered ways by both teachers and students (Howley and O'Sullivan 2021). As a starting point, MacPhail and O'Sullivan (2010) suggest that students need to develop an ethic of care and empathy when they are given responsibilities in the PE classroom. To enhance the democratic experience of students, teachers must constantly reflect on

and with students, in regards to whom is benefitting and whom may be marginalised (purposefully or otherwise) through delegation of student voice and authority.

Theme 2: pedagogy of questioning and exploration

The second theme demonstrates how the teachers purposefully engaged student learning through questioning and exploration. Inquiry and interrogation of knowledge sits at the heart of Freirean critical pedagogy. Questioning is a key feature of problem-posing education (Freire 1970) where educators and students engage in a collaborative, reciprocal relationship, where both contribute to the teaching and learning process.

The data collected in this study demonstrated practices where questioning was the dominant form of communication within lessons. Questions were used to create curiosity and encourage students to explore their own classrooms and communities. Questions were also used to create student awareness of their own behaviour, how this may impact on others, and how students might address this. For example, rather than reprimanding students for actions that could be unsafe, Carlos asked the students to suggest what was appropriate:

One kid was doing something wrong. He threw at the wrong time. They know for security reasons that this is not OK. The students were asked to solve that because they know that was incorrect. They had to solve it by themselves. (Carlos, Int.)

In a second class where the students were learning to play Kubb⁶ with the aim of teaching it to younger students in the school, Carlos spent most of his time asking students how the game is played and how they plan on teaching it.

After the game the students are asked about how to play the game fairly and successfully. The students give feedback. (Observation, Lesson 1)

Even with very young students in the escuela infantil class, Antonio used questions to involve students in learning:

The students are learning to play but importantly they seem to be learning to cooperate. There is a real game thinking / game sense approach that is explicit in the class. [Antonio] is asking the students to solve the problem of how to catch people through a game. (Observation, Lesson 3)

The pedagogy of questioning moves students away from learning through passively receiving information through banking (Freire 1970) and toward an education through active experimentation, problem solving and exploration. Questions are therefore a conduit to explorations where students engage with new materials, new spaces, and new relationships. Exploration in the learning area of PE is certainly not new. It sits at the centre of instructional models such as Teaching Games for Understanding (Werner, Thorpe, and Bunker 1996), Sport Education (Siedentop 1998) and Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (Hellison 2011).

Many of the lessons observed in this study used exploration as a form of guided discovery or problem solving, where teachers used movement as a context to explore teamwork and relationships. For example, in a lesson that used skipping as a context for learning, we observed student groups exploring different ways of including everyone in a skipping sequence. In the post lesson interview Carlos stated that, 'I chose skipping because it can be easily taken into different groups with clear activities, so jumping was an excuse to be a group'. Our observation, notes were consistent with Carlos' assertion that rather than focussing on skill, skipping was a context for exploration:

There is value in creating movement sequences such as skipping, both in their requirement for students to discuss options and experiment with different solutions, but also in their focus away from performance to the relationships between students within the class. The lesson seems to be on cooperation and self-organising themselves in groups and creating and exploring movement. The activity appears to be a good choice. (Observations, Lesson 2)

During an Outdoor Education trip that focussed closely on Strand 3 and 4 of the PE curriculum (Ministerio de Educación 2014) in addition to a cross-curricular focus, we observed how Sofia built exploration into her lesson and stimulated curiosity about the environment of the local school community:

We have barely left the school parking lot. The teacher and the students are crowded around the dirt on the side of the road. They have observed an ant hill. The teacher is talking to the students. A number of students are dropping food by the ant hill. I ask a Spanish colleague to explain. He tells me that the students have been observing the ant hill weekly and exploring how it changes. (Observation, Lesson 6)

I recognise this tree and remember a conversation earlier in the week where [research colleague] told us that the walnuts would soon be ripe, and they would stop and pick them. There are however very few low hanging walnuts. The students look around for solutions. A large stick is found. A student tries to hit the branches with the walnuts, but he is too short. Someone in the group takes the stick and hits the branch. The walnuts rain down on the students. Once the walnuts are collected the students gather around. The process of peeling and cracking the walnuts is discussed. The students proceed to look for walnut cracking solution, sticks, rocks, feet. No one has a nutcracker. At different times the students successfully open or unsuccessfully crush the walnuts. Once the treasures are opened, they are shared and eaten. (Observation, Lesson 6)

In the post observation interview, Sofia stated how,

The space gives them a sense of belonging and specifically for some children that struggle in the classroom, when they are outside they feel and act and express their knowledge completely different. It provides opportunities to make questions and discover things to learn. For example one group of students were crushing plants to make dye. We trust in the students and we trust in the environment to trigger thinking. (Sofia, Int)

The interview with Sofia highlights how she uses these experiences of exploration to enhance learning. Building on these experiences, Sofia explained how the weekly outdoor education is held on a Thursday to allow for further dialogue and discuss on Friday when they are back in class.

On Friday we resume ... Many of the children have been thinking and searching and talking, even after school, and then the next day they wanted to talk and continue learning. That is why we choose Thursday as the day. We want to shorten the connection between the outdoors and the indoors ... so, they are discovering things. (Sofia, Int.)

The experiences within a single outdoor education lesson merged guided discovery and problem solving, some structure with extensive student agency. These exploratory activities were neither random nor unplanned. They were planned experiences to enable students to discover the world in which they live (e.g. Lundvall and Maivorsdotter 2021). Some of the discoveries may appear to be focussed specifically on learning about ecosystems and nature (e.g. communities of ants, the lifecycle of a tree) but, from an educational standpoint, such embodied learning experiences with their own local environments challenge providing rich, opportunities to acquire contextually meaningful knowledge and skills through hands-on experiences (Bruner 1997).

Freire called for a learning that is co-created and re-invented, through a process of inquiry in which teachers invite their pupils to be co-investigators of knowledge learning in dialogue with them; as such they become 'jointly responsible for a process in which all grow' (Freire 1970, 80). Previous research in PE has suggested that questioning and dialogue are practical strategies to incorporate social justice into daily teaching practices (Alfrey and O'Connor 2020). This can be seen through the practices in the findings where students are asked to explore their physical environment, negotiate movement and planning activities and lead others in class where teachers and pupils work together in a less hierarchical relationship as co-investigators as a community of learners (Freire 1970). In addition, the nature of the dialogue has the potential to change the relationship between the teacher and student due to the more collective and collaborative approach to learning. As such, questioning and exploration are important features of enacting pedagogies for social justice in PE.

Although questioning and problem posing reposition the teacher from the knower and the student as the vessel to be filled, Freirean pedagogy requires an openness from teachers to learning,

Dialogue and problem posing designed to lead to a prescribed outcome or way of knowing cannot be considered as democratic. Fundamental to transformative pedagogy is the construction of horizontal relationships in order for dialogue to emerge as a form of guidance, rather than instilled, to further empower the learner and co-create learning (Giulianotti et al. 2019).

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore how specialist primary school teachers in Spain teach for and about social justice in PE. In this paper, we have drawn on Freirean democratic pedagogy to provide insight into the teachers' practices. The findings provide insight into both how democratic pedagogies are *possible* with both small and larger classes and with students ranging from 3–13 years of age, and the *possibilities* that can result from such teaching approaches.

In this study, we observed safe pedagogical environments built on trust and relationships (Quarmby and Luguetti 2023), where students of all ages demonstrated a sense of belonging and they took an active role in their own learning. The teachers used questions and problems and substantive dialogue to challenge the students and themselves to develop new understandings of the world in which they live (Scorrige, Philpot, and Bruce 2021). As Luguetti, Kirk, and Oliver (2019) argue, pedagogic dialogue requires reciprocal respect between the teacher and student that is mutually gratifying for both parties. In this relationship, the teacher teaches while also being taught in dialogue with the students (Freire 1997). These teaching practices provide students with more equitable access to education and an active voice in managing their own learning. They address long-standing notions that student engagement in PE classes is dependent on the students feeling valued and cared for (see, e.g. Cothran and Ennis 1999; McCuaig 2012). The pedagogies described have transformed the relationships between the teacher and students and between students in the classrooms. Transformation beyond the classroom is supported through this foundational work of learning to use democracy to transform power relationships.

This study further highlights the importance of context in understanding social justice pedagogies in PE (Linnér et al. 2022). Spain is a country that lost their democratically elected government and their democratic rights until the late 1970s. The genesis of a new PE curriculum (MEC 1990) was a response to reclaiming democracy as a key role in a subject that historically had strong connections to the dictatorship regime (Martínez Álvarez 2000). Installing democratic values and educating students to learn to exercise democracy became a key role of the subject that, in the context of this study, was accelerated through Tratamiento Pedagógico de lo Corporal, a long-standing community of PETEs and PE teachers that was committed to democratic pedagogical practices in PE. This study provides clear examples of context-specific teaching practices that help to shift the classroom hierarchy from being dominated by direct teaching by 'telling' to a greater focus on teaching through exploration and questions and student-led learning through dialogue (Freire 1970). The findings illustrate teaching that foregrounds social justice due to the democratic nature of the pedagogical practices more so than the content of the lessons. We recognise that the practices reported on in this paper may not radically change the structural inequalities in society, but the change in power relations seen in these classrooms should be seen as a 'small win' (Kirk 2020) that lay a foundation for ensuring that students actively participate in decision-making processes that shape their lives.

Although we argue that the practices reported in this paper provide pragmatic examples of teaching for social justice in primary PE, we recognise that we have failed to acknowledge the genesis of these pedagogies. More than 40 years ago, Rogers (1983) suggested that a precondition for moving to more student-centred teaching is that teachers must be sufficiently secure within themselves and their relationship with students and they must trust 'in the capacity of others to think for themselves, to learn for themselves' (188). Specific to the context of PE, Tinning (1991) argued that PE teachers who perceived that issues of equity and injustice were core issues in teaching were more likely to attend directly to relations of power, social hierarchies and exclusion. In regard to *how* these teachers have the confidence to enact democratic pedagogies in PE, it may be telling that

their ITE programmes were specialist PE programmes. Both Carlos and Antonio were full time PE teachers, something less common in many other countries in the global north. In addition, during interviews, all three of the teachers referred to the importance of their professional learning through a broader PLC of PE teachers and ongoing connections with PETE educators. We report on this PLC in a separate publication. What was also not said is *why* they continue to be involved in furthering their own knowledge and pedagogical skills. This points to perhaps a more fundamental emotional commitment to democracy that links to personal dispositions.

Evans and Davies (2017) stated that research should unsettle and disturb corrosive school policies and practices, while offering guidance on more equitable alternatives practices. This paper represents the latter. This study builds on previous work that offers pedagogical alternatives to a narrow focus on performance and physical health outcomes (see e.g. Author et al. 2021; Oliver and Kirk 2016). As such, this study is designed to move beyond critique to offering an articulation of what is done in the name of PE that resonates with our understanding of teaching for social justice. The implication of this study and other similar studies of school-based practices for and about social justice is that there are practitioners that find ways to infuse democracy into their PE classrooms. We also recognise that a change in pedagogy is always challenging as it is situated within socio-political structures in schools and communities, historical conceptions of good teaching of PE, and curriculum requirements (Lugueti and Oliver 2019). Continued work is needed in PETE and in PE policy and curriculum development spaces to ensure that PE teachers have eyes to see social inequity, the skills to begin to address it, and policy structures that make teaching for social justice an imperative part of normal high-quality PE teaching practice.

Notes

1. In this paper we refer to the learning area as Physical Education (PE) as this is the name of the subject in the Spanish curriculum . We acknowledge that some of the Physical Education research named in this study occurs in Health and Physical Education (HPE or PEH).
2. The ‘closest’ English translation for Tratamiento Pedagógico de lo Corporal (TPC) is ‘Pedagogical Treatment of the Body’. TPC has a strong focus on the role of the body in learning.
3. In Spain, the Bachelor in Primary Education is required to teach as a classroom teacher. Additional to the compulsory modules of the four-year degree, a PE specialization (a minor in PE) is required to deliver Physical Education.
4. In Spain, educación infantil programmes and primary education programmes are frequently deliver in the same school premises.
5. A recreational activity that had become very popular across the school to the first-year students in the school.
6. A recreational activity that had become very popular across the school to the first-year students in the school.

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