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Critical pedagogies for community building: Challenging ableism in higher education physical education in the United States

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Abstract

Enacting critical pedagogies within physical education (PE) contexts have been found to increase critical consciousness and disrupt hegemonic taken-for-granted assumptions about ability and the body. As an under-researched area, the aim of our research was to explore the extent to which a critical pedagogical approach in PE can disrupt normative ableist notions of disability through a disability-specific, critically orientated, tennis class. Six students from a large southeastern US university chose to participate and student video narratives and reflective essays were collated as data sources. Through inductive and deductive data analysis, the key themes constructed were: (1) 'the learning journey in critical education,' underpinned by the following subthemes: (i) 'initial shock,' (ii) 'new experiences,' and (iii) 'humbling encounters.'; and (2) 'consequences of critical pedagogy', supported by (a) 'building a community through meaningful relationships,' and (b) 'change in perspective.' We conclude by discussing the pedagogical potential of our critical approach.

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'The conditions *for* critical pedagogy are increasingly under threat. At the same time, the *need* for critical pedagogy has only increased.' (Tinning 2020, 10)

Physical education and health ideologies

Physical education and health education (PE/HE) in the United States (US) are domains which have historically upheld traditional pedagogies of teaching and learning which rarely ask students to critique the messages of a hidden curriculum nor provide means of empowerment for marginalised student populations (Azzarito and Ennis 2003; Oliver, Hamzeh and McCaughtry 2009; Ruiz and Fernandez-Balboa 2005). This is apparent in globalized contexts as well; Rønholt (2002, 33) describes the Norwegian hidden curriculum as the 'knowledge [and] attitudes…that students learn as an unavoidable and unintentional consequence of participating in the formal, routine activities of school.' While the cultures of countries, education systems, schools and subject areas therein are complex and nuanced, the hidden curriculum in PE in the US, Australia and across much of Western Europe often reflects white, Eurocentric, sexist, patriarchal, heteronormative, homophobic, and ableist discourses about what knowledge is most valuable and which types of bodies get to participate. These discourses reinforce neoliberal and neoconservative approaches to teaching about the body, health, and physicality in ways that intend to exclude those who do not fit within the markers of acceptability and normality (Evans 2014). The knowledges and attitudes implicitly communicated to students through the hidden curriculum ultimately become 'regimes of truth,' silencing those in marginalised positions in schools through the construction of meanings that reflect the interests, beliefs, and power

dynamics of groups positioned at the top of social hierarchies (Dowling 2008; Fernandez-Balboa 1993).

Similarly, health education in US, Australian, and Western Europe schools has been critiqued within existing literature as frequently failing to cultivate student agency regarding enactments of health, well-being, and physical activity. Instead, scholars have identified HE as reproducing technocratic rationalities by engaging in 'bodies at risk' pedagogies, upholding rhetoric of control and regulation of the body, and promoting particular types of 'healthy bodies' (Azzarito, Simon and Marttinen 2017; Wright 2004). As indicated by literature from US and Australian scholars, damaging discourses about bodily health are maintained within school contexts through a reliance on epidemiological data, a process-product approach to health initiatives which leave little flexibility for a holistic approach, particularly for marginalised students, and by pervasive discourses of neoliberalism where each individual is primarily responsible for their own successes and failures in achieving widely accepted 'truths' regarding health and physicality (Azzarito 2012; Evans, Davies, and Wright 2004; Fitzpatrick and Tinning 2014;). In order to re-imagine PE/HE as spaces for a diversity of students who are empowered by their physicality and sense of self within physical culture contexts, it is crucial to address the failures of these disciplines in cultivating physical, mental, and emotional agency. This re-imagination includes initiating the need for a social justice agenda and enacting both democratic engagements and critical pedagogies in PE/HE that address imbalanced power dynamics and embedded hidden curricula inherently marginalizing students who do not meet accepted status quo 'norms.

Critical pedagogy in PE/HE

Within the oppressive contestations of power and knowledge production located in PE/HE, scholars have identified means of resistance, resilience, and determinations of strength and empowerment from those people located within the margins (hooks 2000; Collins 2000). For example, based on almost a decade of teaching experience as well as content expertise derived from their doctoral experiences, Simon and Lynch (2019) created a curriculum for elementary-aged students in the US that aimed to challenge widely-accepted norms regarding body shape, size, and colour within health, fitness, and PE contexts. The curriculum employed pedagogies that both challenged students' assumptions of strength in relation to muscularity and provided opportunities to reflect on their own understandings of what it means or looks like to be strong. Similarly, Azzarito, Simon, Marttinen, and Markiewicz (2014) examined the impact of the implementation of a critical pedagogy in US schools, The Body Curriculum, which facilitated ethnic minority students' critique of dominant discourses on the body from a fitness and health perspective. The Body Curriculum created a space for students to critically examine their sense of self as located within a framework of white normativity and gendered body idealisations, resulting in subsequent student resistance to these discourses and enactments of agency in the construction of their self-physicality (Azzarito, Simon, and Marttinen 2016). In order to disrupt gender norms of female participation in physical culture in the US, Fisette and Walton (2013) explored how a collaborative project between the researchers and participants resulted in critical engagements with media texts of gender and the body. Thus, the idea that marginalised individuals can develop their agency from a de-centred position frames an approach to research involving individuals who represent the intersection of multiple marginalised populations not as solely oppressed or as 'victims' but rather as agentic and autonomous beings

who can self-determine when and how they choose to enact resistance and resiliency towards their compounding oppressive contexts.

In spite of the demonstrated value of enacting critical pedagogies within PE/HE contexts, it is difficult to locate them in practice due to student resistance, a lack of understanding about these pedagogies, institutional structures, and a reliance on neoliberalist discourses within school and PE/HE contexts in the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia (Tinning 2002; Evans 2014). Student resistance to critical pedagogies is common, as it is difficult to 'go against the grain' in terms of disrupting hegemonic knowledge taken-for-granted as true (Ruiz and Fernandez-Balbo 2005). Additionally, many PE/HE educators may give lip service to the ideas of democratic engagements or critical pedagogies but often fail to understand what this might mean in practice. Institutional structures also serve as barriers to engaging in transformative pedagogy (Lynch and Curtner-Smith 2020). For example, PE teacher certification assessments serve as a gatekeeper for entry into the PE teaching profession in the US. These assessments dictate the content on which teacher-educators must focus in order to produce 'qualified' teachers who can pass the certification. If teachers' understandings and approaches to pedagogy and curricula which emerge from critical and transformative pedagogies are not embedded within teacher certification assessments and valued as important forms of knowledge, then it could be argued that they hold little value in the eyes of pre-service teachers and teacher educators (McLaren, Martin Farahmandpur and Jaramillo 2004). Finally, widely established transnational discourses of neoliberalism function as regulators, constructing school as a factory that 'produces' global citizens who are responsible for their own success (or failure), thus dismissing underlying assumptions within critical or transformative pedagogies of the inherent structural inequity and

imbalanced power dynamics that maintain hegemonies of control (Evans and Davies 2015; Lorente-Catalan and Kirk 2014).

Schools as sites of continuous production and re-production of knowledge have been critiqued by scholars on a global scale as wilfully upholding imbalanced power dynamics in which 'normalised' or 'status quo' groups of people (i.e. white, cisgender, middle and upper class, straight, able-bodied) are dominant and all others are marginalised or positioned as 'outsiders' (Leonardo 2009). Thus, there is a need in educational contexts to engage in emancipatory, transformative, and democratic pedagogies for oppressed students from intersecting marginalised groups. These should centre the lived experiences of students engaged in a dialogical process of sharing and co-constructing knowledge and addresses power imbalances through democratic practices (Giroux 1988; McLaren 1998).

University PE

University PE, a common elective in the US for undergraduates, is one avenue which has been identified as a space to practice critical pedagogies since PE is a space for all students across social identifiers and abilities (Lynch & Sargent, in Press). These PE activity courses, which include swimming, aerobics, rock climbing, yoga, self-defence, tennis, and more, are typically one-credit courses and enhance students' Grade Point Average. These electives are advertised to the entire student body and are characteristically taught by graduate teaching assistants with varying pedagogical experiences and knowledge (Wahl-Alexander and Curtner-Smith 2018). Frequent participants of these courses have been known to be prospective or current pre-service PE teachers since the activity courses provide a way to gain content knowledge of the activities and add 'techniques' to their repertoire of teaching PE. However, the courses are usually taught by technically oriented graduate assistants and instructors with little

criticality. Consequently, 'students are frequently graded on the basis of skill performance, with high marks being awarded to the best athletes' (Livingston 1996, 115). Across Europe, the structure and delivery of PE/HE differs. In the UK for instance, entire undergraduate programmes are dedicated to the study of PE/HE and are usually delivered by full-time faculty, although the extent to which these staff have taught in schools and/or have expertise in socio-critical issues and pedagogy varies. In Spain, to compare, PE/HE often comprises an optional route on a more generic sport and physical activity programme. Despite differences, these type of undergraduate PE courses, given their ubiquity for students across diverse university contexts, could enact pedagogies to challenge students and provide a space for high levels of reflection and an appreciation of equity issues (Livingston 1996). Moreover, these courses could have authentic assessments that do not rely on performance (Hastie and Sinelnikov 2007). For instance, Leo and Goodwin (2013) in the US, Maher et al. (2020) in the UK, and Sparkes et al. (2019) in Spain, have all experimented with the use of disability simulations to embody knowledge of inclusion, disability and pedagogy among prospective and pre-service PE teachers. In a similar vein, special school field experiences have been used to ensure that prospective PE teachers gain 'hands on' experience working with students with disabilities as part of broad attempts to challenge hegemonic assumptions about disability and ability in PE (see Coates et al., 2020; Maher et al., 2019). Nonetheless, to date limited research has been carried out on college activity courses, especially on those taught with critical intentions (Lynch & Sargent, in Press). Thus, this educational context may provide fertile ground to disrupt normative ableist notions of disability.

Ableism in physical education and health education

Students who are labelled by disability, whether visible or not, are frequently constructed as an 'other' within a field which relies heavily on physical performance as a marker of health as well as ascribes value and social capital to high-performing individuals (Lynch 2019; Lynch and Hill 2020). The ableist framework within which PE/HE is constructed functions as an invisible regulator that implicitly positions individuals with disabilities as 'outsiders' who cannot achieve at the same level as their able-bodied counterparts. This purview is indicative of a deficit understanding of disability whereby emphasis is placed on what students with disabilities cannot do, when compared to their peers, rather than centring, as Terzi (2005) advocates, the capabilities of students with disabilities. Within institutions of education, physical culture, and PE/HE contexts, ableist assumptions and deficit ideologies are damaging for students with disabilities because they are viewed as incapable of reaching the same set of standards and norms as other students and faulted for this while simultaneously ignoring structural barriers which did not take the potential for student disability into account in design and implementation (Lynch and Hill 2020). Our research runs counter to these taken-for-granted hegemonic assumptions by endeavouring to develop a socio-critical awareness of disability among university students. Indeed, in light of the embedded prejudices towards and lack of accommodations for students with disabilities, along with the strong emphasis on body performance in PE/HE, it is clear that there is a dire need for teachers to enact critical pedagogies that facilitate student engagement in the deconstruction of disability discourses. One example can be found in Lynch (2019) chapter on disability and social justice curricula development, which demonstrated a means of re-conceptualising PE/HE pedagogy from a position that destabilises ableism inherent within physical culture contexts by centring a social justice perspective on disability. The goal of these pedagogies is to come to an understanding of the diversity of humanity through a 'differently-

abled' framework as well as to critique the construction of disability from a deficit perspective. However, there is a scarcity of research focusing on the development of a critical pedagogical approach among university PE students. More broadly, Philpot et al. (2020) analysed how New Zealand PE teacher education (PETE) students' biographies mediated understandings of the messages of their PETE programme from a critical pedagogical perspective, whereas Shelley and McCuaig (2018) explored one PE teacher educator's use of critical pedagogy as a strategy to confront social justice and socio-cultural issues within an Australian university programme. Alfrey and Conner (2020:1) discussed, from a critical pedagogical perspective, what they referred to as the 'inherently messy and complex process of [HPE] curriculum transformation and enactment' in Australia. When attention turns to disability, critical pedagogical research is rare. While Sparkes et al. (2019) used a critical pedagogical perspective to facilitate prospective PE teacher learning about inclusive pedagogical strategies for students with disabilities in Spain, to the best of our knowledge no research has yet explored the ways and extent to which critical pedagogical PE/HE can disrupt normative ableist notions of disability among university students. Therefore, our research investigates the learning experiences of university students in a disability-specific, critically oriented, tennis class.

Method

The data from this paper form part of a broader research project, a digital ethnography exploring students' experiences of alternate teaching practices and digital assessment methods in university PE activity courses carried out from January 2017 to May 2017. To relate to students' everyday lives, we employed a digital ethnographic approach (Pink et al. 2016). The digital provided the foreground to carry out the ethnographic work, where we could research daily experiences and perspectives. We were particularly interested in how students interacted with the

digital, material and sensory environment to share open and reflexive experiences of their learning.

Participants

Out of 17 students in the class, six aged 19-24 from a large southeastern US university chose to participate in this study. The students consisted of one male and five females, each self-identifying as white and able-bodied. Students were all enrolled in a Beginners Tennis activity course that met for 50 minutes, twice a week, for 15 weeks.

Course outline and the educator

At the university where the study took place, Beginning Tennis was typically taught in a traditional format (Livingston 1996): students were graded based on skill acquisition and practical performance. However, Shrehan, the educator of the course and primary researcher, had a sociocritical teaching philosophy and background, and was completing her doctorate on critical pedagogies in PE during the study. Her knowledge of intentional critical approaches led to her redesigning the course towards an immersion experience that focused on challenging ableist perspectives. The university had a varsity wheelchair tennis team that Shrehan had strong links to from previous partnerships. Collaboratively with the players and head coach of the team, they reimagined the course requirements to give students exposure to people with disabilities, wheelchair tennis, and simulations activities. The class requirements included the completion of three events: (1) an in-class wheelchair guest session, (2) active participation at a community tennis tournament, and (3) volunteering for a day at the wheelchair national championships. Students could be graded[1] an A (A = 90-100 points, B = 80-89 points, C/D = 60-79 points) in the class if they attended each event and completed the required authentic assessments. If one was

[1] Shrehan recognised the controversial nature of grading processes in higher education and while the course and assessment had to be outlined, there were spaces of educator autonomy.

not completed, their starting 100 points were reduced by 10 points each time. The assessments required students to submit three video narratives to evidence a reflective learning journey. Reflections were digitally recorded in a place where the student felt comfortable and uploaded to the university's online learning platform. Video narratives were required to be three to eight minutes long and had an accompanying thought-provoking guide that the students could draw upon if they chose to. Questions in the guide included: *What did you learn during/from this experience? Was this a new experience? What does this mean in your life? How did you feel supporting a wheelchair tennis event? Was it your first time?* Additionally, at the end of the semester, students completed a reflective free write uploaded to the online learning platform. In line with critical thought, the brief was intentionally 'loose' to encourage meaningful thinking and creativity, and students had full ownership over the direction of the writing.

The course outline (see Table 1) was shared with students on day one of class. As Table 1 indicates, the class was student-centred, conversationally oriented, and both began and ended with group dialogue. During class meetings, students peer-taught, organised and ran events to promote ownership and responsibility of their course, attended community events, were provided with opportunities to be exposed to people with disabilities, and had the experience of playing wheelchair tennis. On day one of the course, Shrehan shared her class mantra to the students, (1) We all have different abilities, (2) Sport is for all individuals to enjoy, and (3) Sport has the potential to do social good. Rather than sport as competition, Shrehan communicated her position that it is for personal pleasure without disrespecting others. She attempted to allow students to come to personal understandings through the experiences and opportunities offered and provoking thought during class discussions and individually responding to students' video narratives.

Data gathering and analysis

After the class was taught, Shrehan sought retrospective ethical approval. Upon acceptance of the university review, she pursued participant consent. This was done intentionally after all university grading processes were complete, so students did not feel obligated to participate. Six students in the class responded with completed consent forms and were assigned pseudonyms. Their video narratives and reflective essays were gathered to contribute to the data set. The reflective essays (5981 words) and the narratives transcribed by Shrehan (20, 346 words) were uploaded to Nvivo for data analysis. Shrehan analysed the data using inductive and deductive methods (Patton 2015), with the second author, Mara, acting as a critical colleague. She employed critical pedagogy as a theoretical base to interpret the data and develop themes. Our rationale for using one author to oversee the process was based on knowledge of the course. Shrehan, as the course educator and principal investigator, was the most informed. The research was personal and with all qualitative studies, the researcher is an instrument of the inquiry (Patton 2015).

Findings and discussion

The findings are explained in two broad themes. The first, *'the learning journey in critical education,'* is described by three subthemes (i) *'initial shock,'* (ii) *'new experiences,'* and (iii) *'humbling encounters.'* The second, *'consequences of critical pedagogy'* are explained through (a) *'building a community through meaningful relationships*,' and (b) *'change in perspective.'*

The learning journey in critical education

A critical pedagogic set-up requires the class space to be constructed in a way that is student-centred with high levels of dialogue. Traditionally, the conservative nature of university,

294 including PE spaces, embody discourses that rely on the teacher as an authoritarian figure. Thus,
295 when educators deny an authoritarian position and instead require students to engage in different
296 ways, students may resist this approach (Tinning 2002; Evans 2014; Lynch and Curtner-Smith
297 2019). On the other hand, critical pedagogies can facilitate different learning journeys for
298 students.

299 *Initial shock*

300 To begin the learning journey, initially, students were shocked at the way the class was delivered
301 and at the expectations. Day one (see Table 1) included discussing the syllabus and course
302 requirements. The unique requirements of the course meant that Charlotte considered quitting:

303 > On the first day of class, I was very worried that this class was going to be
304 > much more than I had bargained for. I remember feeling like I was never going
305 > to be able to complete all of the requirements for the class … I was really ready
306 > to drop the class, but I told myself that wasn't an option.

307 Mary described how she initially resisted the course requirements: 'I did not want to
308 waste my Saturday's volunteering for some [wheelchair tennis] tournament.' It was
309 apparent throughout Mary's reflections that initially she did not regard the course
310 content as relevant to her personal life or meaningful to her learning at university.

311 On the second day of class, students participated in icebreaker activities. Sinead
312 explained:

313 > I was *extremely intimidated*. First task was a wheelbarrow relay with a
314 > stranger. I was so scared that the whole semester would be like this. Who were
315 > these people? Are we ever going to play tennis? If I didn't need the one-hour

> credit, I probably would have dropped the class. I wondered what the heck I had gotten myself into. Thank goodness I stayed with it!

Sinead was shocked at the activities and interactions with her classmates because they were atypical. Emilia agreed, saying 'I do not usually interact and work with my classmates as much as we had to in tennis class.' Critical educators must be cognisant that students can 'drop' classes in the beginning weeks and those that do not feel more democratic ways of learning meet their expectations may withdraw. This is to be expected when teaching counters prior learning experiences in university and educators should seek to respond by discussing and endeavouring to alleviate concerns of students. Students are accustomed to being told what to do and when to do it, especially since previous PE classes most likely upheld rhetoric of control and regulation of the body (Wright 2004; Azzarito, Simon, & Marttinen 2017). Student resistance to critical pedagogies is common and was expected by Shrehan, as it is difficult to 'go against the grain' in terms of disrupting hegemonic knowledge taken-for-granted as true (Ruiz and Fernandez-Balboa, 2005).

New experiences

Students who were able to adjust their expectations and continued with the class were able to have novel experiences. During her doctoral work at the southeastern US university, it became apparent to Shrehan that students with disabilities were largely segregated in schools during their childhood. Thus, by the time students come to university, they have very little exposure to people with disabilities as the trend of segregation continued into disability sport spaces at university. This meant that everyone who participated in the class identified as having never been introduced to wheelchair tennis, been in a wheelchair themselves, taken part in a

community tennis tournament, or volunteered at a national wheelchair sporting event. Charlotte emphasised the new experiences she had:

> One of my favourite aspects of the class was learning about wheelchair tennis. I have been at the university for 4 years and never knew that we had a wheelchair tennis team until this semester. When I saw in the syllabus that we would be having in-class sessions and volunteering opportunities with the wheelchair tennis team, I immediately started thinking about how different it would be from regular tennis. To my surprise, the rules weren't really different at all… In addition to learning about the rules, I really appreciate having the opportunity to not only volunteer with the team but also getting the chance to play wheelchair tennis for myself. I personally have never had to be in a wheelchair, so this was an entirely new experience for me.

Joel agreed and expressed his gratitude for the new experiences provided by the class: 'I am so grateful for having taken tennis this semester because of the many meaningful opportunities afforded to me. I never would have played in my first tennis tournament, [or] experienced wheelchair tennis in so many ways.' New and novel experiences can contribute to new ways of learning at university and can further student enjoyment (Hastie and Sinelnikov 2007). The new experiences were facilitated by an intentional and explicit immersion experience. Additionally, the class had multiple levels of exposure to wheelchair events and people with different abilities, which led to humbling moments of realisation about their own abilities.

Humbling encounters

Nario-Redmond, Godpodinov and Cobb (2017) have argued that simulating disabilities for non-disabled people problematic, 'built on the assumption that people cannot fully

understand the circumstances facing disabled people unless they know first-hand how disabled people seem to do what they do' (2). We would agree that wheelchair simulation activities, where non-disabled individuals use wheelchairs, cannot fully provide able-bodied students with true comprehension of the lived experiences of people in wheelchairs, nor should they attempt to provide affirmation of the existence of another's life. However, multiple challenging experiences, along with encounters with people with disabilities, can provoke students to re-think their own abilities and perspectives on disabilities (Sparkes et al. 2019). This can help to challenge, according to Maher et al. (2020), dominant deficit ways of thinking about and acting towards the disabled other. For example, the students in this study expected to be skilled at wheelchair tennis and, as they explained, were humbled to find out they were not as good as they expected:

> I had never been in a wheelchair before… I learnt a lot about perspective I guess from this, more than anything else, you know I didn't think it was gonna be something that was that hard and she [wheelchair tennis player] made it look really easy, but it was by no means something that I could just step into and be good at, so that was in a way humbling but also very just enlightening so that was kinda cool (Joel).

> I also really liked when we would play Beat the Professional. We played against the girl in the wheelchair and I was kind of expecting, I kind of thought we would all be better than her, I guess, because she was in a wheelchair, which is stupid of me to think because she was *soooo good* and I mean she made the wheelchair look easy and then when we got in a wheelchair the next

> class and it was just one of the hardest things I have ever done. I was kind of thinking, oh, well, she gets two bounces so that is plenty for her to go get it and hit it, that is a lot of time but when you are actually in the wheelchair, the upper body strength that you have to have just to move around its extremely hard... [wheelchair tennis player] was incredible. It was just a really cool class; it was very eye-opening. (Mary)

When Mary was playing against a wheelchair tennis player, she adopted a deficit perspective of disability by positioning the player as the 'other' body, perceiving that the player could not achieve the same level as her able-bodiedness. This is indicative of able-bodied normative assumptions about ability in corporeal practices such as PE. The 'other'/able-bodied dichotomy is a signifier of PE and sport spaces which relies heavily on physical performance as a marker of health (Lynch 2019; Lynch and Hill 2020). However, when Mary experienced playing in a wheelchair herself, her deficit opinion of the wheelchair player was disrupted and even changed. Suddenly, she was 'incredible', and Mary ascribed value and social capital to her opponent. Consequently, the class was 'eye-opening' and challenged the students' perspectives. In summary, the holistic requirements of the tennis class were met with initial shock, new experiences and humbling encounters but when combined, they encouraged students to question their abilities and beliefs about the abilities of the disabled 'other', thus fulfilling an essential element of critical pedagogy.

Consequences of critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogies centre the lived experiences of marginalised groups and engage students in dialogical processes of sharing and co-constructing knowledge (Giroux 1988; McLaren 1998). In this study, the outcome of dialogical teaching methods embedded within

immersion experiences were evidenced by the meaningful relationships the class created and changing perspectives. Each participant, to varying degrees, raised their critical awareness and social responsiveness. In doing so, Shrehan and the students collectively destabilised damaging neoliberal discourse that couches individuals as responsible for their own successes and failures in achieving widely accepted 'truths' regarding health/physicality (Azzarito 2012; Evans, Davies, and Wright 2004; Fitzpatrick and Tinning, 2014).

Building a community through meaningful relationships

Critical pedagogy facilitates community development and relationships; universities are pillars in the development of human flourishing and incremental social reform (Tinning 2019). In this paper, we demonstrate that humans flourish when they work together and appreciate difference. An integral part of the class was democratic participation: learning to listen to one another, teach one another, respect one another and communicate effectively, both in and out of class times. This led to meaningful relationships between the students and Shrehan. Hannah explained:

> I was able to experience the feeling of working as a team and interacting with other classmates as we sought to sharpen our skills alongside one another. I feel that I grew close to the rest of the class as the semester went on, as we all learned each other's distinct personalities and how to help each other perform at our best. I loved playing with my teammates and Shrehan, especially rallying in class. I was able to play against players of all different levels and learned a great deal - especially from high-level players. We all worked to be supportive of one another and promote a safe environment in which we could succeed with encouragement fail without embarrassment.

Sara agreed: 'I have not only rediscovered my love for the sport of tennis but also made so many meaningful friendships…we learned a lot about each other and ourselves.' Making friends at university and as an adult can be challenging, as Mary reflected:

> The last day of class I looked around at my classmates with a heavy heart. They were my friends now. The people I feared to look dumb in front of I now goofed off with and joked with outside of class. I forgot how easy it was to make friends when you have people around you with similar interests.

The challenges of making friends as a young adult in university indirectly reflects a neoliberal discourse of competition, in which students understand their peers as competition towards personal and professional successes (or failures). The setup of the class facilitated numerous challenges to existing power dynamics which maintain hierarchical hegemonies of control, such as a neoliberal discourse of competition (Evans & Davies, 2015; Lorente-Catalan & Kirk, 2014). Furthermore, while meaningful relationships can be created when engaged in competitive sport play, it can be argued that movement has a greater purpose, enjoyment and ability to foster community (Lynch and Sargent in Press). As Charlotte noted:

> Wheelchair tennis also taught me about getting involved in the community, which I wish I had learned before my senior year. I also learned so much more about working as a team. As an only child, that is often a difficult concept for me to embrace so I really appreciate the opportunity to practice teamwork. One thing that I learned about myself was that I really enjoy teaching my classmates about tennis. There was just something so rewarding about teaching someone a skill that they can use to be successful in a sport. However, I think that my favorite lesson from this class was that it is okay to lose and that tennis can be

> enjoyable regardless….I enjoy the fact that my grade wasn't based on whether or not I had perfect form when I served, but rather passed on the amount of effort that I put in. I feel like this is a concept that is often overlooked in many of my core classes.

Charlotte's narrative embodied all of Shrehan's mantras that informed the course design and pedagogies. First, as an experienced tennis player, Charlotte taught her peers how to achieve certain movement skills, demonstrating the idea of *we all have different abilities*. Second, Charlotte expressed how enjoyment can come from teaching others rather than from a grade or competition, which matches the *sport is for enjoyment for all individuals* part of Shrehan's mantra. Finally, Charlotte recognised the importance of actively participating in her local community, demonstrating the third part of the mantra- *sport has the potential to create a positive community and do social good*. Furthermore, the class encouraged Charlotte to problematise grading procedures in other classes. We concur with Livingston (1996) and Hastie and Sinelnikov (2007), students should be graded through innovative authentic methods that move away from performance-related measures. Assessment should provide accurate and meaningful understandings about students' progress and learning within the learning environment. In order to do so, classes should require, assess, and assign a high value to items such as participation, teamwork, effort, and student reflectivity.

Change in perspectives

Each student within this study identified a change in their perspectives towards those with a disability. The combined nature of immersion and disability events were able to challenge students' previously held deficit assumptions towards people with a disability. Mary, in particular, shared her previously held assumptions:

> At first, I felt bad for them—the people in wheelchairs I mean. How did they do anything? It must be so hard to get around and play a sport in a wheelchair. Boy, was I wrong! Hard? Maybe impossible? They did not have that term in their vocabulary. We had the privilege of playing against one of the wheelchair tennis players and, for lack of a better phrase; I got my ass handed to me. These girls could move a wheelchair and tennis racquet simultaneously quicker than I could have ever dreamed of moving my feet. We also got to try the wheelchairs out for ourselves. This was eye-opening. I could barely gather the arm strength to move the chair one centimetre, much less, focus on hitting a ball. After this session, I no longer felt unbothered to work their tournament. In fact, I felt honoured. I got to work their tournament. They are strong brave badasses.

Feelings of honour and privilege were a vast change to Mary's initial response regarding the course requirements (e.g. not wanting to 'waste' her Saturdays). In agreement, Hannah recounted the experiences with the wheelchair tennis team made her realise the 'privilege of having working legs' and that being able-bodied meant unearned opportunities/advantages.

While Mary and Hannah experienced a noticeable shift in their worldview, other participants' perspectives still demonstrated underpinnings of ableist language and deficit understandings. For example, Joel characterised one of the wheelchair tennis players as 'forced into a chair' rather than a wheelchair user. Sara stressed that 'watching the wheelchair tennis team made me re-examine my definition of adversity and perseverance. I am proud to have spent time with them and learned about their athletics.' While Sara displayed empathy in this quote, a closer examination reveals and undercurrent of pity, where the wheelchair users are constructed as an 'other' (e.g. 'them,' 'their athletics'). In summary, even with the self-identified changes in

perspective, an element of problematic language was still present in participants' narratives. This finding presents the danger that 'one-off' courses present. Ideally, a scaffolded and sequenced series of learning is the ideal condition to challenge perspectives.

Conclusions

The overall purpose of this paper was to explore the extent to which a critical pedagogical approach in PE and HE can challenge normative ableist notions of (dis)ability through a disability-specific, critically orientated, tennis class. The findings highlighted that the PE activity tennis class using critical pedagogy was impactful for all the participants. Some participants raised their critical awareness and became more empathetic while others became socially responsive and saw their role in the community more holistically. Despite their initial shock at the critical pedagogies enacted within the course, the new experiences of working with wheelchair users and disability simulations humbled students and contributed to the disruption of their deficit understandings of disability. As a result of the critical approach, participants in the class developed a strong sense of community and meaningful relationships with one another while simultaneously destabilising invisible yet pervasive discourses of ableism.

There was a noticeable change in participants during the 15-week course and this was a result of Shrehan's intense organisation and preparation prior to the start, something that can be labour-intensive for university staff. This entailed making community links beforehand in order to be ready to "jump in" from day one. Shrehan also included several disability immersion experiences and one simulating disability experience in her planning. Simulating disabilities can increase feelings and displays of empathy but may also leave 'people feeling more confused, anxious, embarrassed, helpless, and vulnerable to becoming disabled themselves' (Nario-Redmond et al.

2017, 7). However, the participants' narratives upheld the idea that simulating disabilities can facilitate empathy but in combination with other disability events and critical pedagogies; simulations can also raise critical consciousness. Furthermore, none of the participants in this study shared feelings of being confused, anxious, embarrassed, helpless or vulnerable to becoming disabled. Maher et al. (2020) have indicated scepticism about implementing simulations without in-depth planning, thought and criticality and we would agree; it would not be an appropriate pedagogy for educators in activity courses who typically have little pedagogical experience (Wahl-Alexander and Curtner-Smith 2018). Instead, experienced educators who have intentional and explicit methods for teaching sociocultural issues are recommended for effective disability simulations (Walton-Fisette et al. 2018). Said another way, 'we need *mindful* teaching and more specifically we need *critically mindful* teaching… teachers should have criticality as the forever-present lens through which they reflect on their teaching practice' (Tinning 2020, 10). When educators are able to critically mindfully teach, we suggest that they can open the conditions for a more socially just society.

Postscript:

The recent global pandemic, and associated implementation of social distancing and restricted access to appropriate spaces, means that university staff, students and teachers are having to think differently about PE/HE. Here, it is vitally important that the PE experiences of students with disabilities are considered. Therefore, future research is needed that explores how students with disabilities can be stretched and challenged in PE/HE, like their peers, during lessons that will have to abide by social distancing, personal protective equipment and sanitizing protocols.

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