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Becoming activist teacher educators: The learning journeys of two physical education cooperating teachers in a school–university partnership

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Abstract

Since the late 20th century, school–university partnerships have been promoted as collaborative efforts in teacher education. Traditionally, in such partnerships, university teacher educators oversaw cooperating teachers who supervised pre-service teachers (PSTs) in a hierarchical structure. In parallel with a growing movement for teacher educators to adopt activist roles challenging societal oppressions, recent shifts have recognised cooperating teachers as co-educators who collaborate and share knowledge. This paper explores this school–university partnership by questioning: (a) What were the learning journeys experienced by the cooperating teachers in a school–university partnership? and (b) To what extent did their learning journeys align with the concept of activist teacher educators? Designed as participatory action research (PAR), this project was established between public schools and one university engaged in the Institutional Programme of Teaching Initiation (PIBID) in Brazil.

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Participants included a university lecturer and two cooperating teachers. Throughout the 18-month duration of the project, data were collected from various sources, including weekly meetings, participants' diaries, final interviews, and artefacts produced by the group. Through thematic analysis, three themes were developed: (a) creating democratic spaces with PSTs, (b) practitioner inquiry as a means to transform teaching practice, and (c) micro-social changes to improve the profession, demonstrated through activism in new PIBID projects or initiatives with education administration. This study underscores the role of cooperating teachers as activist educators in fostering collaborative and social justice-oriented teacher education processes, contributing to ongoing discourse on reflective practice and collaborative partnerships.

Keywords

Third space, professional learning, mentor teachers, pre-service teachers, democratic education, social justice

Introduction

A body of literature suggests that school–university partnerships should involve collaboration between educational institutions at both levels, teacher education programmes at universities and the schools where pre-service teachers (PSTs) engage in their practicum or field experiences (Bradbury and Acquaro, 2022). Cooperating teachers, who are usually experienced educators within the school setting, play a crucial role in these partnerships (Clarke et al., 2014; Murray et al., 2021). It is intended that cooperating teachers collaborate with PSTs, providing guidance, feedback, and support as they navigate their teaching roles (Amaral-da-Cunha et al., 2018, 2020; Clarke et al., 2014). Likewise, university faculty members, working closely with cooperating teachers, must ensure that PSTs and cooperating teachers receive support, working as boundary-crossers to create a fruitful third space that intertwines theory and practice (White, 2019; Zeichner, 2010). This collaborative effort between universities, schools, cooperating teachers, and university faculty should foster a learning environment for and with PSTs, preparing them for the challenges and responsibilities of the teaching profession (Ellis et al., 2020; Wexler, 2020; Young and MacPhail, 2015).

Yet, despite calls within the educational literature and the pursuit of more equitable and productive features by diverse school–university partnership projects, the reality often shows school–university partnerships reproducing tiered environments (Young et al., 2015; Zeichner, 2020) perpetuated by a power imbalance between university lecturers, cooperating teachers, and PSTs (Chambers and Armour, 2012; Clarke et al., 2014). In this sense, such partnerships could be seen as a trio reflecting a hierarchical organisation where university supervisors overshadow teachers and PSTs in terms of content knowledge (Clarke et al., 2014). In their turn, cooperating teachers, often perceived as maestros or role models, would deliver their models of practice (Ellis et al., 2020). Finally, PSTs are perceived as those having little knowledge or skill: passive learners. With the recognition of school–university partnerships as essential to the overall education of future teachers (White, 2019), there is a call for a more equitable system in which cooperating teachers become not only role models, but a second type of teacher educator (Murray et al., 2021) who, through collaboration and social interaction, engage in the exchange of ideas and the

co-construction of knowledge with PSTs (Ellis et al., 2020). Yet, to enable cooperating teachers to excel as teacher educators, a fundamental change in how the university treats and perceives them is essential.

Concurrent with the call for cooperating teachers to become teacher educators, there is another body of knowledge endorsing the need for all who serve as teacher educators to become activist teacher educators (Diniz-Pereira, 2013; Freire, 1987; Oyler et al., 2017). At the core, an activist teacher educator embodies a commitment to collective action challenging the status quo in education, being against various forms of oppression, including capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy, racism, LGBTQI+ phobia, and ableism (Diniz-Pereira, 2013; Freire, 1987). In physical education (PE), several scholars (e.g. Fernández-Balboa, 1995; Luguetti and McLachlan, 2021; Ovens, 2014) have analysed how teacher educators conceptualise and practice social justice pedagogies, offering insights into how one becomes an activist teacher educator. Those studies, among other things, addressed the challenges that university-based teacher educators faced when working with PSTs, highlighting struggles to negotiate power relations with PSTs. Thus, while we have a body of research about teacher education efforts in enacting social justice pedagogies in PE with PSTs, there is a gap in understanding cooperating teachers' journeys in becoming and acting as teacher educators and/or activist teacher educators.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore the learning journey of two cooperating teachers immersed in a school–university partnership. Specifically, we address the following research questions: (a) What were the learning journeys experienced by two cooperating teachers in a school–university partnership? and (b) To what extent did their learning journeys align with the concept of activist teacher educators? In this work, we campaign for cooperating teachers as activist teacher educators who are co-leaders of a collaborative, non-hierarchical, and social justice-oriented teacher education process that occurs in partnerships between schools, universities and communities (Gonçalves et al., 2025; Oyler et al., 2017; Young et al., 2015).

Becoming activist teacher educators

A call for the exploration of teachers' and teacher educators' activism to transform education is a recurrent theme in the literature (Freire, 1987, 2005; Sachs, 2001). In her seminal work, Sachs acknowledges that an activist professional identity is the result of a democratic education with emancipatory intentions 'to reduce or eliminate exploitation, inequality and oppression' in schools and universities (Sachs, 2001: 157). Current discussions repeatedly advocate for the exploration of activist teacher educators' identity, impact, and roles, revealing their enactment of counter-hegemonic pedagogies and practices as powerful tools to dismantle oppressive educational structures and practices (Diniz-Pereira, 2013; Freire, 1987; Oyler et al., 2017). These educators, collectively organised, rally against the way schooling and universities are sometimes purposefully organised to reproduce the status quo (Oyler et al., 2017). Their activism transcends traditional forms of protest and organisation; it extends to the creation of inclusive programmes and events that harness the emancipatory potential of education. In this sense, the development of activist teacher educator identities is grounded in the tension between the traditional role of educational institutions to produce compliant citizens and the aspirational vision of a society characterised by equality and respect for all beings (Oyler et al., 2017).

Activist teacher educators' identities require educators to: (a) take action in collaboration with people and (b) acknowledge the continuous process of being and becoming activist educators. First, creating an identity as an activist teacher educator goes beyond pedagogies and curricula;

being an activist teacher educator requires taking action to fight for a more just world (Freire, 1987). Identity construction is not only situated as a discursive act but also an experiential one. Emphasising the significance of action for activist teacher educators is pivotal in understanding the power of collaboration for change. In this context, the term activist teacher educators resonates, as opposed to critical educators or social justice teachers. Activist teacher educators criticise those individuals who claim to uphold the principles of critical pedagogy in theory alone yet fail to translate these beliefs into action within their teaching practice or engagement in social movements (Montaño et al., 2002). Moreover, the essence of social action lies in collaboration, recognising that meaningful change necessitates collective endeavour and engagement with diverse populations. Thus, the journey towards social justice in education involves not only the implementation of inclusive pedagogies, but also the cultivation of critical consciousness, community connections, and collaborative efforts to envision equitable educational systems (Oyler et al., 2017).

Second, activist teacher educators recognise that the journey towards activist educator identities is a continuous process of being and becoming, deeply intertwined with personal histories, life experiences, and sociocultural contexts (Diniz-Pereira, 2013; Freire, 2005). Central to this process is conscientisation, or the development of a critical consciousness, on the part of individuals who have been marginalised by the dominant forces in society (Freire, 1987). Through conscientisation, individuals learn to perceive and confront social, political, and economic contradictions, leading to a transformed understanding of self and others in the world (Oyler et al., 2017). Additionally, the process of becoming an activist teacher educator is always grounded in collaboration with others: teachers, families, and/or community members.

The unique aspect of cooperating teachers' activism lies in their direct impact on teacher education. As activist teacher educators, cooperating teachers act to change their own teaching context while contributing to the socialisation of PSTs in their new profession in a manner intended to dismantle oppressive educational structures and foster social justice within a nurturing and democratic third space formed between school, university, and community (Zeichner, 2020). With this, PSTs are introduced to the political essence of the teaching profession, which as Freire (2005) argues, is not only about teaching and learning but, at the same time, about collectively advocating for better conditions as educational professionals.

Methodology

This study is a participatory action research (PAR) project. PAR supports the belief that knowledge is rooted in social relations, and is more powerful when produced collaboratively through action (Carr and Kemmis, 2004). PAR was chosen for this project as it involves dialogue, critical reflection, and action in and about people's situations (Freire, 1987). In this study, the co-creation of the learning community, between a university teacher educator and two cooperating teachers mentoring 10 PSTs each, included a spiral cycle of planning–acting–observing–reflecting (Carr and Kemmis, 2004; Freire, 1987).

Background of Institutional Programme of Teaching Initiation (PIBID) and context of the study

Despite several positive initiatives and improvements in Brazilian education, the reality is that the educational system is still precarious and dominated by an uncritical and authoritarian view of

education (da Cunha et al., 2024; Nunes and Oliveira, 2017). In Brazil, teacher education school placements in general are isolated and competitive teaching practices occurring most frequently at the end of the PSTs' degree (Souza Neto et al., 2015). Due to this history, the PIBID has been valued in Brazil as a government initiative to introduce PSTs earlier (first or second years) to the profession in a field experience guided by both university lecturers and cooperating teachers (Ferreira et al., 2022). It also serves as continuing professional development for all participants. Additionally, the 18-month scholarship provided to participants offers financial support during the programme (ABMES, 2019).

The generic PIBID programme structure consists of one university lecturer, one cooperating teacher working in one public school, and 10 PSTs who, organised in small groups, would attend the cooperating teacher's school to observe lessons and engage in teaching activities. The programme is not a curricular placement; instead, it is an extra-curricular activity PSTs can apply for. In the 2020–2022 cycle, more than 300 universities were granted PIBID funding in Brazil, an initiative that embraced different subject areas; this present study occurred in two schools simultaneously in the PE area and was called the PIBID-PE.

In conjunction with the PIBID-PE programme, a research project based on the concept of teachers' democratic professionalism (Sachs, 2001, 2016) was developed. In this project, we designed the school–university partnership around a learning community (Lave and Wenger, 1991) that worked together to create a less hierarchical third space (Zeichner, 2020) that would foster participants' agency and challenge power inequalities. While the details of this project can be seen elsewhere (Gonçalves et al., 2025), it is important to highlight the main points that made such a partnership unique in the Brazilian PE context.

The partnership trio consisted of the university lecturer acting as programme coordinator and learning community facilitator, two cooperating teachers who worked in one public school each, located in socially vulnerable areas of Brazil, and the PSTs who attended those schools in small groups. In this partnership, the cooperating teachers were acknowledged as co-leaders of the programme. Instead of adopting a top-down approach, which is often the norm in Brazil, where university lecturers oversee cooperating teachers and those teachers supervise the PSTs, this group formed a democratic course of action. This course of action ranged from the reciprocal relationship between the university supervisor and the cooperating teachers to the sharing of decisions with the PSTs. In the former relationship, the university supervisor and cooperating teachers formed a learning community with the intent of each member having an active role in co-designing the PIBID-PE project and their learning impacting their individual teaching practice. In the latter relationship, the programme was organised based on listening and responding to PSTs' learning needs (Oliver and Oesterreich, 2013) and PSTs sharing in small responsibilities (e.g. meeting agendas, uniforms, and social events). While this democratic dynamic had the potential to dismantle the top-down approach adopted in school–university partnerships in Brazil (Ferreira et al., 2022), it also brought challenges to the group. It was in this complex, but nurturing, third space that cooperating teachers' learning journeys evolved.

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from Luiza's previous university. Participants were informed about the research objectives and assured that their decision to participate would not affect their involvement in the PIBID-PE. Informed consent forms were completed online and securely stored. Micro-ethics were considered, especially due to potential power imbalances among university lecturers, cooperating teachers, and PSTs. Frequent meetings between the lecturer and teachers helped negotiate power dynamics, fostering a collaborative environment where all voices were valued. This approach aligns with the principles

of PAR, emphasising local adaptation, transparency, and open dialogue for ethical participation (Lugueti et al., 2024).

Participants

Luiza was the 35-year-old university lecturer and teacher educator responsible for coordinating the PIBID-PE group. During her 5 years teaching at that university, she worked with teachers' professional development and learning communities as her area of research, was part of PSTs' placements committee, and had knowledge of the PIBID-PE programme and its possibilities in terms of a collaborative design. In 2019, she was invited to coordinate the 2020–2022 PIBID-PE cycle and invited Leonardo and Kamila to apply for the cooperating teacher positions. After being shortlisted in the selection process, they became part of the PIBID-PE. Luiza had a previous relationship with both cooperating teachers. Leonardo and Kamila studied at the same university where Luiza was a lecturer and were involved in different projects in the Bachelor of Physical Education. For example, Leonardo contributed to Luiza's teaching projects by welcoming PSTs for visits and observation practices, while Kamila was Luiza's student during her undergraduate degree.

When this project started, Leonardo, 34 years old, had 12 years of experience teaching PE in primary and early childhood education in Brazil's public schools. He worked full-time (40 hours) at a considered exemplary school in a socially vulnerable area and holds a permanent position. Currently, he is part of the municipal education secretary team. Although experienced, the PIBID-PE was his first role as a cooperating teacher, working with PSTs during PE classes. Before the project began, he viewed the PIBID-PE as financial support and a chance for professional development, networking, and pursuing a Master's degree.

Kamila was 25 years old and had 5 years of teaching experience. She teaches PE at the secondary level and works part-time (20 hours) in a permanent position at a school also located in a socially vulnerable area. Like Leonardo, the PIBID-PE was her first experience working as a cooperating teacher. When entering the project, Kamila imagined her role to be observing the PSTs teaching. Like Leonardo, she accepted the challenge of leading the project with Luiza.

Luiza's role in the project included administrative duties of the programme (e.g. reports and scholarship management), as well as the learning community facilitation. Leonardo and Kamila each hosted a group of PSTs in their respective schools, who would observe their teaching practice and teach some classes under their supervision and guidance. Their responsibilities also included facilitating group activities during Luiza's maternity leave. Both cooperating teachers developed their pedagogical practices based on the official curriculum documents that guide PE. They sought to develop the content in multiple dimensions, addressing physical, but also historical, social and cultural, aspects. Kamila and Leonardo employed a teacher-directed teaching style, and their approach was not student-centred, even though some minor student voice possibilities existed.

Co-designing a democratic school–university partnership

The group entered this project with different expectations and needs, which included the cooperating teachers' traditional understanding of how a school–university partnership can be structured. They agreed, however, to collaboratively engage in the design of a meaningful project in the face of the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic period. In their first meeting, Luiza shared her desire to foster a school–university partnership that would be collaborative instead of hierarchical and based on social justice discussions and practices. She invited

Leonardo and Kamila to immerse themselves in a PAR (Carr and Kemmis, 2004) as a learning community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The cooperating teachers were concerned about such an undertaking, as they felt vulnerable due to their lack of experience with a democratic and collaborative approach and the cooperating teacher role. Thus, as a group, they decided to engage in reading about and discussing these topics in parallel with their planning and actions in the PIBID-PE. Therefore, Kamila and Leonardo assumed a more passive and complacent position at the beginning of the programme. Luiza, even though having the clear aim of building a democratic structure for the group's professional development, had never co-designed a programme within a learning community. In each week and phase of the PAR, they were all learning about a democratic approach and how to decrease the power issues that were strongly present when they first came together.

Acting together, they organised a weekly schedule formed by a small self-reflective spiral of cycles of planning–acting–observing–reflecting (Carr and Kemmis, 2004), where Leonardo, Kamila, and Luiza engaged in listening to PSTs in order to respond to their needs and design strategies that would facilitate their learning. After a period of group introduction, the cooperating teachers, PSTs and facilitator, who formed the whole group, found themselves motivated by the question of: what makes PE classes meaningful for school students and society? To unpack this initial question, the whole group engaged in different events, from reading articles to observing, teaching, and reflecting on their own lessons. Specifically, the weekly self-reflective cycles included Tuesday meetings, when Kamila, Leonardo, and Luiza planned the upcoming days after reflecting upon community actions of the past week. Additionally, during the week PSTs and cooperating teachers worked together on the two school sites. These events ranged from PSTs' PE class observations to peer teaching practices. PSTs also assisted the cooperating teachers during the classes (e.g. student and equipment management, assessments, and lesson planning). Cooperating teachers, in turn, more than working with PSTs, supported them and observed their actions continually. Finally, on Fridays, the whole group debriefed about the previous week, which nurtured Kamila, Luiza, and Leonardo's reflections. By slowly engaging in this weekly process, they co-designed the PIBID-PE in three phases.

It is important to note that some strategies within each phase happened in parallel, while a phase itself started after the co-designing group reflected on the previous phase and planned the following one. Even though the PIBID-PE calendar was not aligned with the school year calendar, the co-designing group tried to match both schedules as follows: Phase 1 from October 2020 to February 2021, Phase 2 from March to July 2021, and Phase 3 from August to December 2021. The remaining months were dedicated to group self-evaluation and final reports. The challenges faced and the group philosophy are described elsewhere (Gonçalves et al., 2025), while the Supplementary Material summarises the strategies adopted.

Data sources and analysis

Data sources for this project included weekly meetings (39 in total) among the co-designing group, cooperating teachers' and university lecturer's diaries, final interviews, and artefacts from the group. Meetings were held via Google Meet, recorded, and transcribed in Portuguese. An external interviewer, with experience in qualitative studies, conducted individual semi-structured interviews lasting about one hour each. These interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The diaries were shared and filled out weekly at first, then monthly in the project's last semester. Although data collection began with the PIBID-PE in 2020, it was extended to 2024 to accommodate ongoing reflections and observations by the co-designing group, who maintained contact via

WhatsApp (audio and text messages) and email, which were also documented as artefacts. Additionally, artefacts included conference presentations, lesson plans, and meeting agendas.

Data analysis involved inductive and iterative analysis using reflexive thematic analysis (TA) methods (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Importantly, as this study is part of a larger project, the first phase of reflexive TA, which involved dataset familiarisation (Braun and Clarke, 2022), began when the dataset was organised into three main groups: cooperating teachers' learning, PSTs' learning, and group functioning. While the analysis regarding group functioning can be found elsewhere (Gonçalves et al., 2025), the following description of analysis focuses on the cooperating teachers' learning journeys and how they interweaved with the activist teachers' framework.

The second phase of reflexive TA involves data coding. In this phase, codes that referred to cooperating teachers' learning were extracted from the weekly Tuesday meeting transcriptions, diaries, and interview transcriptions, and were read in full by Luiza. She made comments in the margins of these documents highlighting potential codes, such as 'from teacher to facilitator', 'research or practitioner inquiry', and 'impact of practice'. While the authors were well versed in the action research and learning communities concepts, the refinement of potential themes in the third phase of reflexive TA only occurred after the contact with the literature about activist teachers. When immersed in this literature, we started to notice that teachers' learning journeys demonstrated, and could be analysed from, the emergence of activist teacher educators' identities.

Through an inductive and deductive analysis, three themes were generated: (a) creating democratic spaces with PSTs, (b) practitioner inquiry to transform teaching practice, and (c) micro-social changes to enhance the profession. In the fourth phase of reflexive TA, Leonardo and Kamila reviewed provisional codes against the original data to ensure the accuracy of the themes, while sub-themes helped organise complex ideas. The fifth phase involved Missy and Carla (co-authors) checking interpretations and reflecting on the concept of activist teacher educators. Finally, the themes were named, and results were formulated to address the research questions.

Different trustworthiness criteria were adopted, including triangulation of the data sources, prolonged engagement through PAR, and member checking weekly and during the data analysis stage (Cho and Trent, 2006). Additionally, as described, collaborative coding and analysis were adopted (Braun and Clarke, 2022), which added researcher triangulation as a form of trustworthiness. Finally, the group counted on a critical friend to challenge its assumptions and help interpret challenging moments (Baskerville and Goldblatt, 2009).

Findings

By collectively engaging in this project, the cooperating teachers initiated their trajectory of becoming activist teacher educators. In this journey, we saw glances of emerging activist identities detailed in the following themes.

Cooperating teachers' journeys in creating democratic spaces with PSTs

This theme explores the cooperating teachers' learning journeys while fostering a democratic space with PSTs. In these spaces collective decisions and responsibilities were pursued, listening to respond was adopted as a way to operate, and affective connections were created among participants (Gonçalves et al., 2025). By the situated learning nature of this project (Lave and Wenger, 1991), two distinct approaches presented themselves: one centred on nurturing and caring principles, while the other prioritised modelling exemplary teaching practices for PSTs. Through an

action-reflection process and collaboration, the cooperating teachers seized every opportunity to reflect on their roles within the group and deepen their understanding of their learning journeys. This process facilitated a manifestation of the group's development, allowing the cooperating teachers to assess their progress, acknowledge achievements, and identify areas for growth.

Kamila demonstrated a caring and nurturing approach with PSTs. She invested in creating different social moments with them, such as offering some PSTs a lift to school, organising social events with the group, and sharing her vulnerabilities as a beginning PE teacher:

I think that with the PSTs at school, my role was more to show them that the teacher can make mistakes, and this is fine. So, when I had to interfere in their class, they were okay with that, and then I talked to them and said: 'Are you calmer now? The class was upside down, but did you see that we can do it differently? Just be calm'. So, I think we created a bond of friendship [...]. I think I was able to bring them a lighter way of being a teacher in the chaos that is the school. (Kamila, Interview)

Kamila was always concerned about PSTs' development and how she could guide them by adopting a democratic approach based on open conversations and one-on-one interaction. She, however, faced challenges in developing such an approach. For her, this was one of the most difficult aspects of her new teacher educator role. Several times she mentioned that it would be easier to adopt a directive approach with PSTs. Instead, she let them make mistakes and learn through experience and critical reflection:

The process of teaching others to teach is the hardest thing I have ever done in my life! Seeing the PSTs making mistakes during classes, and letting them go through this process was horrible at first. Then it became less difficult! I understood that their time is different, and it is certainly not the same as mine. Looking at each one with empathy and understanding that I was once in their shoes, and still am, is very complex. There were a lot of emotions, I had to look for a psychologist! And, it was great. (Kamila, Diary)

Leonardo also faced challenges during his learning journey to create democratic spaces with PSTs. He started the programme concerned about how to model the best practice he could for those PSTs. He stated, '[...] My main role was that role of reference. You are there to be observed, to serve as a model for the PSTs, a model not in the sense that it has to be 100% right, but for good and for bad' (Interview). By engaging in and attempting to lead a democratic group, he could discover that it was possible to combine a modelling approach with collaborative ways of supporting PSTs:

Group management is challenging for me, as I have always had a proactive and individualistic profile. Being aware of PSTs' individual characteristics and needs is a great learning process (and it is not easy!). The learning community's clear rules and collaborative decision-making have been very useful for leading PSTs. (Leonardo, Diary)

Leonardo started his journey pressured by a modelling approach that required of him the exhaustive work of being there 100% for the PSTs. He learned during the process that equally important to modelling best practices was to look profoundly at the individual and their specific needs.

Another challenge was presented when Leonardo and Kamila had to lead the programme due to Luiza's maternity leave. In their understanding, even though a collaborative and democratic

approach was introduced to the group, power issues were always present. It was clear that they recognised Luiza as the group reference, and they struggled to take turns in the leadership position:

I see two factors that happened, first, this reference person is no longer in the group, the person who made the decisions; she remained in the group but behind the scenes. And the second point, were our challenges in assuming this role, of having this responsibility with the PSTs. (Leonardo, Interview)

By living this process together, Leonardo and Kamila were learning with each other and changing themselves based on each other's ways of being and doing. Additionally, they were learning through their common struggles. Reflecting on his changes since the start of the project, Leonardo mentioned, 'I learned that I need to be flexible when speaking, guiding, and leading. [...] This is a relationship not with PSTs, but with equal partners. I learned to try to be more human, to listen to others more' (Interview). Leonardo was likely observing and adopting some ways of doing that Kamila was used to. On the other hand, Kamila reflected on some aspects she could improve in her practice based on her continuing contact with Leonardo: 'I was a mirror for PSTs. I had to be there supporting my students and the PSTs. So, I said, "No, it's my responsibility, I have to speak at some moments more firmly, others not so much, but it's mine"' (Interview).

Luiza summarised and recognised the cooperating teachers' changes in her diary:

I am impressed with how Leonardo manages to reflect on the impacts of the programme on him and PSTs. And I feel that Kamila is learning from him because he always speaks first, she waits to listen to him, then she reflects and gives her opinion. On the other hand, she is always concerned with strategies for working with PSTs, always thinking about new things and he learns this from her as well. (Luiza, Diary)

While Leonardo and Kamila developed different ways of being a cooperating teacher and creating democratic spaces with PSTs, they also learned with each other and changed themselves during this journey. Leonardo started the project concerned only about modelling best practices but later recognised the importance of creating relationships with PSTs and demonstrating care. Kamila believed her strongest point as a cooperating teacher was to create friendships with PSTs. She then realised that PSTs needed more than a friend; they needed someone to assume the responsibility to guide them during their learning process. Finally, even though both cooperating teachers were learning how to create democratic spaces with PSTs through engaging in the PIBID programme as a learning community alongside Luiza, the power issues that were strongly present in the group since the first day continued to represent this school–university partnership though with a softer approach.

Practitioner inquiry as a means to transform teaching practice

The second theme presents the cooperating teachers' investment in practitioner inquiry research and its impact on their teaching careers while maintaining alignment with their practice. Practitioner inquiry allows teachers, teacher educators and researchers to investigate and improve their own practice by considering the cycles of action and reflection (Carr and Kemmis, 2004). Both cooperating teachers decided to pursue a Master's degree after the programme finished as a way to better understand the importance of practitioner inquiry in transforming their teaching practices. They engaged in presenting their work at conferences, which not only honed their skills in data analysis

and academic writing, but also deepened their understanding of the action-reflection process inherent in their research endeavours.

By engaging in a process of dialogue and reflection, Leonardo and Kamila started to see improvements in their practice by connecting their experiences to their writing. Kamila exemplified how this praxis (Freire, 1987) materialised in her daily life:

At the meeting with Leonardo and Luiza, I understood much better about the community of practice, as we are in the process of writing an abstract for an event. The process of writing what I'm experiencing is helping me a lot to understand it because by reporting what I'm experiencing for a third person to understand, I can see what is still confusing to me. (Kamila, Diary)

Kamila was making sense of her ideas when reflecting on her teaching practice and the connection with theory. She and Leonardo engaged in this dialogical process at different moments during the programme. For example, when the group partnered with different PIBID groups to share their practice, Luiza could see their development and connection with their practice. She tried to make this explicit to facilitate the awareness process. When debriefing after one meeting, Luiza shared:

I understand what you're saying about 'Oh, I felt there was a lack of theoretical foundation'. But what we are doing in practice is something that you are appropriating yourselves from. So that's it, you are their teacher educators, you know what strategies we are using. Kamila, for example, always thinks 'What strategy are we going to use to promote their voice?' Leonardo is always thinking about something as well. I realise that you two are part of the process. I was very proud when I realised that you are aware of what we are designing here. (Co-designing Group Meeting)

Being introduced to an academic environment led the cooperating teachers to a tentative focus on theory. Luiza reinforced that both walk together and the process of action-reflection was impacting their practice.

At the end of the project, Leonardo examined his beliefs and ways of doing as well and could recognise changes in his practices. Being observed as a model triggered reflections on his professional identity:

The opportunity to participate in PIBID made me look critically at my work. In many moments, an epistemological gap took over me. I thought this was very good, as it made me look at my structures and analyse my way of thinking about PE. We often do things without thinking much about them [...] I perceive my pedagogical practice to be more robust, and attentive to details, which the presence of PSTs observing classes provided. (Leonardo, Diary)

Leonardo was able to debrief about the impact of the action-reflection process on his daily practice and started to flirt with a Master's degree to progress his career. Leonardo's journey makes explicit the challenges teachers face during their careers in Brazil. In a meeting, the group was trying to help him reflect on how to progress and the barriers he would have to overcome:

Leonardo: They [municipal administration] don't provide paid leave.
Luiza: This is difficult.

- Leonardo: But if you think about it, the difference between Honour's degree and Master's degree is 5%.
- Luiza: Yes, and since you are going to spend a year without receiving a salary, you would have to get a scholarship which is \$1500 reais [Brazilian currency]. Does it support a family of three children? \$1500?
- Leonardo: This doesn't even pay for the milk.
- Luiza: You have to think strategically, Leonardo. I see that you are in doubt, you keep flirting with it, you go back and forth, and you then say, 'I don't want an academic life'.
- Leonardo: Honestly, today I thought about doing it because of the salary increase.

While academic life was not attractive to him, Leonardo always demonstrated interest in investigating his practice. Thus, if a Master by Research was not an option, he was determined to find a different route to progress in his career while embedding research in his practice.

Leonardo found in the Master of Education a chance to align research to teaching practice. In Brazil, the Master of Education, or Professional Master, is designed to address teachers' needs and expectations. It is offered by public universities, free from fees, and usually classes are on Fridays and Saturdays; the research project must be aligned with teachers' school practice. After being approved for one of these programmes, Leonardo supported Kamila to engage in the same trajectory.

Kamila initiated her Master's degree with a project that would investigate her experiences with the PIBID project. Leonardo was developing a study about problem-based learning in his PE classes. After the PIBID ended, the cooperating teachers and Luiza kept in contact in their WhatsApp group. They were accustomed to seeking assistance, sharing updates and challenges faced and envisioning new projects:

- Leonardo: There is an article that motivates me to pursue a PhD: 'methodological principles for quality school PE'.
- Luiza: Wow, are you already thinking about a PhD? Your Master's degree has been good so far, right?
- Leonardo: Yes and this is because of a certain PIBID and a teacher who encouraged people to break out of inertia.
- Luiza: It is not just this. It is you! You are discovering other things you can be and do while being this wonderful teacher. (Artefacts)

Debating about project ideas, Leonardo shared new expectations in his career and recognised the PIBID and the group as the trigger to look forward to improving in the profession. Through practitioner inquiry, Leonardo and Kamila became aware of their needs and desires and could envision the next steps in their careers aligned with their teaching practice. At the same time, they started to act to transform their context, contributing to the improvement of the teaching profession.

Micro-social changes to improve the profession

The final theme elucidates the investment of cooperating teachers in their practice to enhance the teaching profession. After completing this project, Kamila embarked on a new PIBID project, implementing a democratic approach with PSTs, thereby fostering a more inclusive and participatory learning environment. Meanwhile, Leonardo initiated dialogue with municipal education administration, actively contributing to the production of teaching materials and disseminating knowledge about learning communities. Through critical reflection on their professional circumstances, both educators had taken proactive steps to negotiate and transform their realities.

After the PIBID ended, Leonardo and Kamila started moving in different directions while still having the support of each other and Luiza. Kamila became the cooperating teacher of a new PIBID group that did not have the same democratic structure as she was used to. Acting independently, Kamila looked for Luiza's support to implement a more collaborative and democratic approach with her PSTs. She organised a collaborative document with her PSTs to plan their intervention with them. She took a screenshot of this document and shared it with Luiza via WhatsApp:

Kamila: Look, I'm doing what you taught me because PSTs only do reports and monthly meetings. [...] Rules are, they have to go to school, hand in their report, and if they're absent, we have to cut them off.

Luiza: I see, but in the second semester you have the chance to start something with them. Sit down with them at the end of the observation period, ask questions, and listen to them! Plan with them! You know how to do it, right?

Kamila: I'm going to try, for now, everyone is a little lost. But I'm calm, breathing, and respecting the process of getting to know each other. (Artefacts)

Kamila was facing a challenging scenario when immersed in the new PIBID. Instead of accepting such an approach, she was trying to invest in a more horizontal and caring leadership approach to working with PSTs during the project.

Kamila was also acting with teachers from her school and two other schools in the neighbourhood. Impacted by the PIBID, this group of teachers felt motivated to study critical pedagogy in education. Kamila explained:

Regarding the study group at school, the idea came up last year [2022]. The teachers kept asking about the PSTs from PIBID, 'Are they finishing, are they studying?' Then we decided to set up a group to continue studying. Because we said [pause] it's kind of like... I don't know, contradictory. You tell the PSTs to study but we didn't study. Then this idea became a reality this year [2023]. We started a group at school where we read the chapters of the book and debriefed about them. The first was *Escola e Democracia* (Demerval Saviani), we read and discussed it and so on trying to relate it to our practice. Now we are trying to read another book, which is *Os Conteúdos Escolares e Ressureição dos Mortos* (Newton Duarte). (Artefacts)

The authors mentioned in Kamila's message are well known in Brazil for their work with critical pedagogy. Their approaches are based on social justice, challenging the Brazilian education system in socially vulnerable contexts. Importantly, even though these books

might seem heavy in theory, Kamila explained that motivated by the initial PIBID project, teachers were reading these books with a focus on their practice.

While Kamila was fostering a democratic approach to the new PIBID and investing in critical pedagogy alongside other teachers from her school and surroundings, Leonardo was participating in municipal administration actions, fostering a learning community in his school, and writing about his research and practice. He emailed Luiza to update her about the news and to listen to some feedback:

I launched some community of practice ideas in a text that will be included in a thematic book by the municipal administration. There was a change in the PE team there and the new people have some cool initiatives, which is really good. [...] They organized a course to exchange experiences between teachers in municipal schools and a thematic book will be launched with lesson plans shared by teachers. I sent a unit plan on chess and, alongside a colleague, we also wrote a material for primary education. Take a look! (Artefacts)

Leonardo was acting in various directions, mainly disseminating his work to impact his local network of teachers. His journey illustrates a proactive role in transforming his reality. More than writing chapters and sharing unit plans, he has been recognised in his city and by the municipal administration team as a leader acting to improve the PE profession. Earlier in 2024 he texted Kamila and Luiza, saying that he was invited to work in the municipal administration office. More than actions in a municipal sphere, he was acting in his own school. Leonardo shared how he was organising a learning community with his school colleagues:

Leonardo: We started a community of practice here at my school with PE teachers. We had two meetings. It's fortnightly. We raise topics of interest to everyone and study some papers. The first was about methodological principles. The second is about problem-based learning.

Luiza: Wow, this is really cool!

Leonardo: PIBID structure is serving as a model for us.

Luiza: So proud of you! (Artefacts)

Leonardo initiated the PIBID project by assuming he was comfortable with an individualistic approach, yet, in the end, he was working collaboratively in different areas of action towards improvement in the PE profession.

While both cooperating teachers initiated this project assuming their lack of knowledge and practice with a democratic and collaborative approach to education, throughout their learning journeys they demonstrated not only a commitment to this within the PIBID-PE by acting as teacher educators, but also taking action and applying this co-constructed knowledge to their micro-social context.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper explored the learning journeys of two cooperating teachers in a school–university partnership. Recognised as co-teacher educators, these teachers collaborated and shared knowledge, directly influencing PSTs' professional learning (Ellis et al., 2020; Kemmis et al., 2014; Murray et al., 2021). The journeys relayed here illuminate the democratic process, acknowledging

cooperating teachers as integral members of a triad, alongside PSTs and university staff (Clarke et al., 2014; Ellis et al., 2020; Kemmis et al., 2014). Their journeys resulted in change and growth which, though not designed as such, aligned with the premises of activist educators. Under the lens of the activist theory, their journeys, as an interesting story, unfurl around three main aspects: (a) the importance of democratic and collaborative practices in the cooperating teachers' journeys; (b) the insights gained from taking action towards social justice, highlighting the emergence of activist teacher educator identities; and (c) the continuous process of being and becoming activist teacher educators.

First, the democratic structure of the partnership, which included collaboration to co-design the project, horizontal relationships between participants, and a long-term action-reflection process, contributed to the process of becoming activist teacher educators in their schools. Different strategies were used to tackle the power imbalance present in such partnerships. The teachers were protagonists of their learning journeys where they explored key practices, such as being a democratic facilitator of the group, valuing practitioner inquiry as central in their development, and enacting micro-social change for their profession inside and outside their classrooms. According to Kemmis et al. (2014), mentoring is a contested practice where teachers may assume different professional identities depending on the context and social relationships it entails. In the case of this study, the cooperating teachers were immersed in a learning community focused on co-designing a school-university partnership that adopted democratic and collaborative endeavours with PSTs and a university lecturer (Gonçalves et al., 2025). As mentioned, at the core of the activist theory concept is the ability to collaborate, recognising that micro-social change requires collective action (Oyler et al., 2017). Even though collective actions were taken, it is still important to recognise and discuss in future studies the existing power imbalance in these partnerships. Although this imbalance softened during this project, unequal positions could have impacted the lack of leadership identity development in cooperating teachers.

Second, the cooperating teachers' journeys further aligned with the concept of activist teacher educators (Diniz-Pereira, 2013; Freire, 1987; Montañó et al., 2002; Oyler et al., 2017; Sachs, 2001). They engaged in a learning journey to become activist teacher educators, taking action and investing in collaborative efforts to change their individual teaching contexts. Leonardo and Kamila were not beginning teachers; they were immersed in and accustomed to the education system in Brazil. They began this project demonstrating a complacent position from which they could easily complain about specific aspects of the system yet were not equipped to act against this system. They, however, accepted the challenge of co-designing a different space than that to which they were accustomed. When a part of a democratic and horizontal space of a learning community, they started leaving the position of complacent citizen and began questioning the municipal administration (Leonardo), or, as in Kamila's case, implementing leadership ways that prioritise students' voices and a caring approach.

Their way of protesting against the educational system was to take action in collaboration with their colleagues (Oyler et al., 2017). For example, they put groups of teachers together to collectively study and try to understand critical theory and apply this to practice or joined small communities that listen to their peers' needs and ideas. As cooperating teachers, they became recognised as potential leaders, as they acted to organise conferences and write chapters to disseminate their practice. These cooperating teachers, acting as activist teachers and activist teacher educators, stood up for what they envisioned in education, not only for PSTs' education but for their reality as teachers as well.

Third, the cooperating teachers' journeys demonstrate the continuous and long-term process of being and becoming an activist teacher educator. They transformed themselves from more

individualist teachers to those who were critically aware of their role as teacher educators. They demonstrated different approaches to education; Kamila adopted a caring approach with PSTs, while Leonardo looked to model best practices for them. Throughout the process, they kept their own identities and ways of being, but also, given the situated and collaborative nature of their learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991), they learned with each other and assumed glances of each other's identities, understanding that both approaches could walk together and were necessary to facilitate PSTs' learning. Interestingly, they were changing while becoming aware of the oppressive education system that surrounded them (Freire, 1987). Through conscientisation, they became aware of their role in creating a democratic and horizontal space with PSTs and others around them. Leonardo noticed he should improve his communication with PSTs, treating them as equals, while Kamila invested in creating spaces with PSTs to help them in their learning process using collaborative planning and fostering respectful relationships.

Through an experiential and dialogical process, they could engage in praxis and flip their thinking to an activist teacher educator approach. Importantly, and recognising the challenging and continuing nature of their learning journey, this project can be considered their starting point. If in the beginning, they were learning about democratic and collaborative ways to design the programmes, at the end they ventured to apply their new ways of being and doing in their practice in order to improve the profession. It was not pure activism, and also, not only criticism (Freire, 1987); based on dialogue and praxis, they were assuming activist identities.

To the best of our knowledge, this was the first study that reimagined the role of cooperating teachers by using the activist teacher educator lens. This study involved two teachers and one university lecturer in a precarious context. The approach to the school–university partnership adopted was not without moments of doubt and discouragement for the cooperating teachers and the university lecturer. While not an aim of this study, it would be interesting to understand the emotions associated with the development of activist teachers' identities. Additionally, while the power relationships established in the community were presented, they were not addressed in depth. Understanding their impact on activist teacher educator identity and how they might be further reduced would be beneficial. Ultimately, this study may have raised more questions than answers. For example, what is the role of the university lecturer in nurturing spaces for cooperating teachers to flourish as activist teacher educators? Was the university lecturer an activist teacher educator herself? What does the continuum of becoming an activist teacher educator look like? What are the steps and roles activist teacher educators assume? Furthermore, and maybe more importantly, what is the impact of this process on PSTs' learning? Will activist PE change what happens in the name of PE in schools and the lives of children and youth? It is expected that further studies advance knowledge related to those questions as well and invest in understanding activist theory in the PE teacher education (PETE) area.

The findings of this study might influence our practices as teacher educators, whether in universities or schools. To initiate meaningful change in the field of PETE, we must first examine our operational methods within this space. By embracing our roles as activist teacher educators, we need to be mindful of the systems we are part of and commit to working collaboratively with all stakeholders. This collaboration can help facilitate small yet impactful transformations in our educational contexts. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognise that not all universities provide the same level of opportunity regarding placements or practicum programmes. Thus, we should analyse our circumstances and seek out avenues for change that enhance school–university partnerships, specifically by fostering a democratic and collaborative approach to teacher education. Lastly, we need to acknowledge that building partnerships with schools and communities can be a time-intensive and challenging endeavour. In this

study, although scholarships were offered to support participants, the additional workload for the university lecturer and cooperating teachers was evident. Therefore, continued advocacy for professional conditions that enable democratic school–university partnerships to thrive without becoming burdensome is vital. By addressing these considerations, we can create a more supportive and effective environment for teacher education.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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