

PHYSICAL EDUCATION AT SCHOOL AND THE SOCIAL MARKERS OF DIFFERENCE: TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES

EDUCAÇÃO FÍSICA ESCOLAR E OS MARCADORES SOCIAIS DA DIFERENÇA:
PERSPECTIVAS DOCENTES

EDUCACIÓN FÍSICA ESCOLAR Y MARCADORES SOCIALES DE DIFERENCIA:
PERSPECTIVAS DE DOCENTES

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Abstract

Social markers of difference are present in all social institutions and are visible in everyday school life and Physical Education classes. Developing a critical and emancipatory Physical Education that is based on social justice requires intentionally including discussions about difference and various forms of inequality in the curriculum. This study aimed to understand why Physical Education teachers choose to include Social Markers of Difference as a curriculum theme and to analyze how they develop teaching practices to address this topic in their classes. A qualitative study was conducted with eight Physical Education teachers. Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Thematic Analysis. Experiences from social and family backgrounds, along with a critical view of education and Physical Education, emerged as the main factors encouraging the deliberate and systematic inclusion of social markers in the curriculum. Ethnic-racial and gender relations were the most frequently mentioned markers, although socio-economic status and sexual orientation were also noted. Ultimately, it is vital to highlight the value of listening to these stories and recognizing that such knowledge can be a powerful tool to inspire other teachers, fostering a democratic Physical Education grounded in social justice.

Keywords: School; Critical consciousness; Social justice.

Resumo

Presentes em todas as instituições sociais, os marcadores sociais da diferença se evidenciam no cotidiano escolar e no ensino da Educação Física. A construção de uma Educação Física crítica e libertadora, pautada na justiça social, demanda que o debate sobre as diferenças e as diferentes formas de desigualdade sejam intencionalmente inseridas no currículo. O objetivo desta pesquisa foi compreender por que professoras e professores de Educação Física decidiram fazer dos marcadores sociais da diferença um tema do currículo escolar, e analisar como eles e elas constroem práticas pedagógicas que visam abordar o tema em suas aulas. Para atingir o objetivo proposto, foi realizada uma pesquisa qualitativa com a participação de oito professoras e professores de Educação Física. Foram realizadas entrevistas semiestruturadas individuais, interpretadas com a aplicação da Análise Temática. A experiência social e familiar, assim como a concepção crítica de educação e de Educação Física foram apontados por eles e elas como os fatores que estimularam a inserção intencional e sistematizada dos marcadores sociais como temática do currículo escolar. As relações étnico-raciais e de gênero foram os marcadores predominantes nos relatos analisados, mas as relações socioeconômicas e a orientação sexual também foram mencionadas. Por fim, podemos destacar a importância de escutar esses relatos e

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entender que esses saberes podem ser uma ferramenta poderosa para inspirar outras/outros docentes em suas ações pedagógicas, por uma Educação Física Escolar democrática, pautada na justiça social.

Palavras-chave: Escola; Consciência Crítica; Justiça Social.

Resumen

Presentes en todas las instituciones sociales, los marcadores sociales de la diferencia se manifiestan en la vida cotidiana escolar y en la enseñanza de la Educación Física. La construcción de una Educación Física crítica y liberadora, basada en la justicia social, exige que el debate sobre las diferencias y las distintas formas de desigualdad sea intencionalmente incorporado al currículo. El objetivo de esta investigación fue comprender por qué profesoras y profesores de Educación Física decidieron incluir los Marcadores Sociales de la Diferencia en el currículo escolar y analizar cómo construyen prácticas pedagógicas para abordar este tema en sus clases. Para alcanzar este objetivo, se realizó una investigación cualitativa con la participación de ocho docentes de Educación Física. Se llevaron a cabo entrevistas individuales semiestructuradas, interpretadas mediante Análisis Temático. Las experiencias sociales y familiares, así como una concepción crítica de la educación y de la Educación Física, fueron señaladas como los factores que motivaron la inclusión intencional y sistemática de los marcadores sociales como tema curricular. Las relaciones étnico-raciales y de género fueron los marcadores más destacados en los relatos analizados, aunque también se mencionaron las relaciones socioeconómicas y la orientación sexual. Finalmente, cabe destacar la importancia de escuchar estos relatos y comprender que estos saberes pueden ser una herramienta poderosa para inspirar a otros/as docentes en sus prácticas pedagógicas, en busca de una Educación Física Escolar democrática y basada en la justicia social.

Palabras clave: Escuela; Conciencia Crítica; Justicia Social.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing body of research seeking to understand how teachers in general and Physical Education teachers attempt to implement critical pedagogical practices in Basic Education that are committed to social justice (Filgueiras *et al.*, 2024; Philpot *et al.*, 2015; Philpot, 2023; Gerdin *et al.*, 2020; Scoringe, Philpot & Bruce, 2021; Meir, 2020). The findings highlight the significant influence of Freirean thought, and it is possible to identify an appreciation for dialogue between teachers and students, which is evident, for example, in the joint design of curricula and lesson plans (Meir, 2020; Scoringe, Philpot & Bruce, 2021). In addition to dialogue, the problematization of the selected themes was also identified in Gerdin *et al.*'s (2020) work as a means of stimulating students' critical awareness.

The analysis of these studies shows that the implementation of critical pedagogies in Physical Education also involves dialogue about social inequality. Analyzing recent Brazilian research on social justice, Filgueiras *et al.* (2024) found that social inequality has been the central theme of both academic studies and classroom practices. Gerdin *et al.* (2020) and Philpot *et al.* (2021) also observed teachers' concern with developing lessons that discuss inequality. However, this discussion is often limited to internal school factors, focusing on creating equity within the classroom. In both studies, the authors argue for the need to address the social construction of inequality as a curricular theme, thereby broadening the discussion.

Paulo Freire stated in his book *Cartas à Cristina: reflexões sobre minha vida e minha praxis* (Reflections on my life and my praxis) the need and the importance of encouraging reflection on social reality, with inequality being part of it. He affirms:

Progressive educators must bring life itself into their classrooms. Through a critical reading of everyday reality, they must analyze, together with their students, the shocking events and inconsistencies of our democracy. They should present students with examples of discrimination drawn from daily experience—discrimination based on race, class, or gender; examples of disrespect for public property, of violence, and of arbitrariness—and analyze them as points of aggressive contradiction to what I have called the vocation for being more, the essential nature of women and men throughout history. (Freire, 1994, pp. 155-156)

Following this premise, we understand that social inequality often manifests itself through social markers of difference, defined by Melo, Malfitano, and Lopes (2020, p. 13) as a theoretical-conceptual tool for analyzing systems and categories of classification that structure social life, making it possible to understand the mechanisms of inequality and the production of asymmetries.

As Santos (2017) explains, schools have historically been structured as spaces that seek homogeneity, thereby denying difference. This denial often contributes to the reproduction of inequality and to the processes that classify and constitute social markers of difference. However, drawing on Freire's (1994) conceptions, we believe that schools can also serve as spaces where the construction of such markers is problematized.

Accordingly, we adopted a critical research approach aimed at social transformation and the pursuit of a more just society. Inspired by Freire, hooks (2017) introduces the notion of education grounded in transformative pedagogy and the practice of freedom, in which students take responsibility for their own choices and learning, engaging with themes that foster awareness of race, gender, and social class.

The author believes that the classroom should be understood as a community space in which teachers are not the sole agents responsible for its dynamics. From this perspective, it becomes essential to value each student's presence and recognize that everyone contributes to and shapes the learning process, enabling reflection and re-examination in an education that allows for transgression. This view considers students' experiences and social representations, as well as how they understand and act within their environments. To make this possible, social markers of difference must be intentionally included as a topic within the school curriculum.

Understanding how income, race-ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation—as well as other social markers of difference—manifest and are constructed within the context of Physical Education is essential for developing pedagogical practices aligned with the fundamental objectives established by Article 3 of the Brazilian Federal Constitution. It is the duty of all educators to promote the good of all, ***without prejudice of origin, race, sex, color, age, or any other forms of discrimination***, as determined by item IV of that article (Brasil, 1988, authors' emphasis). The social responsibility of teachers has

been underscored in official curriculum documents for Physical Education, such as the *Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais (National Curriculum Parameters)*.

The Common National Curriculum Base (BNCC) (Brasil, 2018), although not explored in depth, also advocates for an educational practice committed to equity and to the establishment of social relations based on the recognition and appreciation of human diversity, as well as on the fight against all forms of discrimination.

Among the studies that analyze social markers of difference in the teaching of Physical Education, we can find several reports of pedagogical experiences in which these markers are made into themes of discussion. Rocha *et al.* (2017) contributed to promoting respect for diversity and to conversations on prejudice through the teaching and experience of *capoeira*. Araújo and Freire (2017) developed a project that involved a group of students in analyzing how gender relations manifest in Physical Education and in sports practices. Farias *et al.* (2021) carried out a project aimed at valuing and recognizing the knowledge produced by peoples of African and Indigenous cultures. Velloso *et al.* (2023) presented an experience conducted with high school students that encouraged debate on how gender, class, race, inclusion, and religion intersect in shaping the bodily practices involved in these martial arts.

These and other studies allow us to understand that there are Physical Education teachers who intentionally include social markers of difference and social inequality among the themes that make up their curricula. What has motivated these teachers? How do they incorporate social markers of difference into their classes to promote a democratic education grounded in social justice?

To answer these questions, the present study sought to understand why Physical Education teachers decided to make Social Markers of Difference a theme in the school curriculum and to analyze, based on their accounts, how they design pedagogical practices that address these markers in their classes.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

To achieve the objectives proposed in this study, a qualitative research approach was adopted—one that seeks to engage with the context of the reality under investigation and to understand the meanings, beliefs, and ideas held by participants regarding the topic being studied (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994). The research is also descriptive, as it aims to present and interpret the investigated reality without intending to intervene in it (Triviños, 1987).

To carry out the study, participants were selected who met a specific criterion: being teachers who include social markers of difference as a theme in their classes. Therefore, participants were chosen intentionally (Gil, 2008). Accessibility was used as the selection criterion, and individuals with the desired profile were identified through contacts within our professional network. Initially, we followed informal recommendations from teachers and students in the Master's and Doctoral Programs at Universidade São Judas, asking whether they knew teachers who met the inclusion criteria. This allowed us to expand our contact network. Participants were also invited to suggest other teachers who incorporated social markers as a theme in their teaching.

After identifying potential participants, we sent them an invitation by email, along with a link to an online form. Upon confirming their interest and availability to participate, each teacher provided information about their initial and continuing education, teaching experience, and professional background. After this stage, eight teachers (six women and two men) agreed to participate in the second phase of the study, during which semi-structured interviews were conducted (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994).

Each interview was conducted individually and lasted between 43 and 72 minutes. Since the teachers lived in different cities across southeastern Brazil, interviews were conducted virtually to facilitate participation. The semi-structured interview is among the most commonly used techniques in qualitative research, and one of its main strengths lies in the flexibility of interaction between interviewer and interviewee. This format allows the researcher to adjust the sequence of questions in the pre-designed guide and to add new questions to expand or deepen the information provided by the participants (Kallio *et al.*, 2016; Kvale, 2007).

All interviews were recorded and transcribed, after which they were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Within this framework, the researchers play a central role in interpreting the information and constructing themes through a reflective process aligned with the theoretical assumptions adopted. Our reflexive process began by taking notes during and after each interview. The analysis continued during the transcription stage, when we revisited the conversations. As we started reading the transcripts, faced with the volume of information, we opted to develop the following guiding questions for the analysis: why do teachers believe that discussions on inequality should take place in Physical Education classes? How do teachers report incorporating inequality as a theme in their lessons? Which specific themes were selected?

Throughout the analysis, we created tables for each research question, organized into four columns per participant. This structure enabled us to select excerpts from the interviews and identify potential themes. In the subsequent stage, these themes were reviewed, refined, and renamed until the final categorization was established, allowing for the discussion and presentation of results (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Souza, 2009).

All procedures described here were previously approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Universidade São Judas Tadeu (CAAE 57845122.5.0000.0089).

SOCIAL MARKERS OF DIFFERENCE AS A THEME: RELEVANCE AND MEANING

To begin the presentation of the information obtained during the research process, we describe some characteristics of the eight teachers—six women and two men—who agreed to participate in this study. The youngest participant was 22 years old, and the oldest was 48. All of them work in the public school system

and have more than three years of experience teaching Physical Education—table 1 details other relevant information.

Table 1 – Identification and Professional Education

Identification		Professional Background	
Name and Duration of Interview	Age	Year of Graduation	Years of Experience
Laura 1hr10m47s	36	2008	14 years
Luz 51m	37	2008	14 years
Marcos 45m55s	33	2011	11 years
Denise 43m59s	33	2011	8 years
Tiago 1hr12m25s	34	2008	13 years
Vitória 56m58s	48	1999	11 years
Marcia 1hr10m06s	33	2015	3 years and 8 months
Luana 1hr02s	29	2015	4 years

Source: Prepared by the authors

It can be observed that all participants have teaching experience, and that five of the eight have been working in Basic Education for more than ten years. Their weekly workload ranges from 30 to 40 hours, and, except for Denise and Marcos, all of them work in a single school. Seven of the eight participants teach at the elementary level (Table 2).

From the participants' accounts of their professional trajectories, it was possible to note that their choice to pursue a degree in Physical Education stemmed from their enjoyment and practice of different sports during childhood and adolescence. We also found that none of the participants initially intended to work in schools or in the field of education. Today, almost all the teachers interviewed work exclusively in Basic Education. One female and one male teacher also teach in higher education, and one female teacher works in an extracurricular educational project. It is important to emphasize that among the interviewees, only one teaches at the high school level.

During the interviews, we sought to identify each participant's perspective on the teaching of Physical Education at school—specifically, the objectives they aim to achieve and what they find most satisfying or dissatisfying in their professional practice. From their statements, it was possible to observe that a critical conception of education emerges in their discourse, as they seek to make their classes a space for social transformation. We also identified their intention to promote meaningful learning and to foster students' awareness in pursuit of a fairer society.

Table 2 – Professional Practice

Name	Weekly Teaching Load (hours)	Number of schools	Teaching Level	School Network
Laura	40hr	1	High School	Instituto Federal São Paulo
Luana	30hr	1	Elementary School I and II	São Paulo City Hall
Marcos	40hr	2	Elementary School II	Rio de Janeiro
Denise	40hr	3	Early Childhood Education and Elementary School I	Santo André City Hall
Tiago	30hr	1	Elementary School I	São Paulo City Hall
Vitória	30hr	1	Elementary School I and II	São Paulo City Hall
Marcia	40hr	1	Early Childhood Education and Elementary School I	Santo André City Hall
Luz	30hr	1	Early Childhood Education and Elementary School I	Santo André City Hall

Source: Prepared by the authors

As Paulo Freire (1994) stated, bringing students' reality into classroom discussions is essential for developing critical consciousness, thereby contributing to social justice and the potential transformation of society. According to hooks (2020, p. 34), [...] critical thinking is an interactive process that requires participation from both teacher and students. Thus, to nurture critical thinking, all those involved in the educational process must be engaged in the classroom. Incorporating students' experiences helps them feel like active participants in the teaching–learning process.

Managing a classroom as a dialogical space—where every voice and experience matters—can increase students' engagement and result in more meaningful learning. From this perspective, hooks (2017) introduces the concept of *engaged pedagogy*, which emphasizes that learning is most effective when there is interaction between teachers and students. As the author notes, [...] all students, not only those from marginalized groups, seem more willing to participate vigorously in classroom discussions when they perceive a direct connection to their own lives (hooks, 2017, p. 118).

The intention to transform society and make it more equitable is another fundamental aspect of the critical perspective on education, as reflected in the following excerpts from participants' interviews:

I hope that students become aware that these issues exist and that they also exist in the world of bodily practices. I want them not to reproduce these behaviors in society, in their daily lives, when they engage in leisure activities, when they play, or when they discuss bodily practices—I want them to be able to transform society in this way. (Laura)

[...] I fell in love with education itself—its possibilities, its social importance, its significance for children—and with the daily struggle to ensure quality education that truly contributes to society, transforming it rather than merely perpetuating what already exists. (Denise)

From these accounts, we can observe teachers' ongoing commitment to providing a high-quality education grounded in critical and emancipatory principles. Within this framework, they strive to create spaces and strategies that empower students—as political and reflective individuals—to become protagonists of their own learning. Working with the theme of *social markers of difference* contributes to achieving curricular justice in schools. However, resistance persists in society, which often fails to recognize the breadth and potential of Physical Education. This is evident in the teachers' responses about what they find most discouraging in their profession, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

It really bothers me when colleagues from other areas—or even from within our own field—still hold a reductionist view of what we do. There's still a lot of prejudice in many spaces. Sometimes I participate in collectives or discussion groups, and people often ask, 'Man, what do you mean? How do you discuss social markers in Physical Education?' (Marcos)

To understand the meanings underlying their pedagogical practice, teachers were also asked about the factors that led them to address social markers of difference in their work. The importance of initial training, mentioned by six participants, was evident. The following excerpts from Denise and Márcia illustrate this point:

Since my undergraduate studies, certain issues have always bothered me. As I studied curriculum and post-critical theories—which address not only class but also gender and race—the ideas began to make more sense. It felt more aligned with the kind of education I believe in. (Denise)

[...] When I entered the Physical Education program at USP, my entire perspective on education changed. There, I was introduced to different approaches to Physical Education. (Márcia)

It is also noteworthy that several participants highlighted influences that went beyond their coursework during university life. Marcos and Luana emphasized the importance of participating in study groups, while Denise and

Vitória pointed to their involvement in student organizations at their universities. Vitória also mentioned that her participation in other student-led initiatives, such as USP's *Núcleo de Consciência Negra* (Black Consciousness Center), shaped her understanding of social markers of difference. Laura, in turn, shared that her mandatory internship experience introduced her to school life and encouraged her interest in the field. Continuing education was also mentioned as an essential factor by Vitória and Luz.

Participants further described other experiences they considered significant. Luz shared that discussions on social markers were present in her family since childhood. She also believes that her ethnic identity profoundly influences her teaching practice:

[...] I'm the daughter of activists, and because of that activism, my mother was rarely at home—she was always engaged in the movement. So, I grew up surrounded by anti-racist discussions. [...] The education of ethnic-racial relations is an ethnic commitment. Since the moment I understood myself as a Black woman—in other words, always—these issues have been central to my work. (Luz)

Vitória also highlighted the relevance of autonomy and representation. She explained that her sexual orientation plays a key role in the value she attributes to working with gender-related themes in her classes:

Of course, my standpoint is critical. I identify as a non-binary lesbian person. So, my lived experience regarding sexual orientation and gender is ever-present. That's why I've dedicated myself to studying prejudice within the school environment. (Vitória)

SOCIAL MARKERS OF DIFFERENCE IN TEACHERS' PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE

In interviewing the teachers, we sought to understand how they approach social markers of difference in their classes, identifying the themes they select, the methodologies they adopt, and how they plan their teaching practice. Although we did not observe the classes being implemented, the teachers' accounts enable us to understand their intentions and to identify experiences they consider significant.

From the discussions, we identified different perspectives among participants. Vitória and Luz argue that working with social markers of difference is already embedded in their everyday practice and discussions—that is, it does not need to be formally planned. In their view, addressing this theme should already be rooted in professional practice as an act of resistance and struggle.

If I have to include specific content, I bring in African games and play activities. If it's about specifying something, then yes! But in 98% of cases, it doesn't appear

in the lesson plan because that's precisely the point—it shouldn't have to. This should already be part of the teacher's own practice. (Luz)

It shows up in day-to-day life; there's no way around it. That's why—as I mentioned before—it's already part of our practice. It's not something I'm thinking of doing or planning to do; it's already there. Whenever something comes up, be it a discussion, a question, I intervene. I can't help it. Even when I tell myself, 'I'm not going to say anything,' I already have. (Vitória)

Although these arguments are valid and social markers do indeed appear constantly in school contexts, deliberate and reflective planning can allow for the creation of learning experiences that foster awareness and critical engagement more effectively for each class. This understanding predominates among participants such as Laura, Tiago, Denise, Marcos, Luana, and Márcia, who state that they intentionally plan their lessons to address social markers of difference and consider this planning essential.

[...] Problematising these issues does require good planning and preparation on the teacher's part—otherwise, you end up reproducing the same thing. I try to do that in my classes. It's not easy, but I make a constant effort. (Marcos)

Look, skipping planning once in a while is one thing. But always? I keep thinking—you want to bring photos, films, you want to build something. You can't just do that on the spot. You need time to prepare, even to make sure you have the necessary material. You have to build an idea: start here because I want them to begin there, then deconstruct, and gradually arrive where I want them to get. That's the sequence I keep thinking about. (Márcia)

In some cases, students are involved in the planning process, as Laura explains:

At the beginning of 2020, we were working on volleyball at school, and then the pandemic hit. We re-planned together, and we were discussing volleyball. At the time, the discussion around Tiffany, the transgender volleyball player, was very present in the media... (Laura)

According to Araújo and Freire (2017), addressing social markers of difference should not happen only when certain situations or conflicts emerge in class. We agree with the authors and understand that lesson planning is fundamental to the study of any topic. The markers must be treated as curricular knowledge and, as such, should be approached through planning, selecting teaching methods and resources that align with the learning objectives. However, the absence of planning does not exclude the possibility of discussing these themes spontaneously. Even in unplanned contexts, it is always important to address social markers—especially when discriminatory situations arise—as Vitória and Luz's practices demonstrate.

All participating teachers reported that social markers of difference appear explicitly in their schools' Political-Pedagogical Project (PPP). Marcos and Laura emphasized that the theme is one of the core pillars of the projects implemented in their institutions, in accordance with the principles of the *Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação* (LDB, or National Education Guidelines and Framework Law in English) (BRASIL, 2018a).

In our Physical Education Department's PPT, the focus on social markers is central. We have a document that establishes this, and we try—one way or another—to bring it into our practices as much as possible. It's clearly defined and a key concern for our department. (Marcos)

It's part of the Institutional Development Plan (PDI) of all Federal Institutes in São Paulo, not just my campus specifically. (Laura)

Conversely, Vitória, Denise, and Luz highlight another perspective, noting that social markers are sometimes included in the PPP merely to comply with legal requirements. In such cases, actual implementation tends to occur through individual initiatives and projects rather than collective, institutional efforts. For Luz, the teacher's own identity has been one of the main factors motivating engagement with this topic.

[...] Many times, it appears only because of curricular components. But, as I mentioned, in the PPP this discussion often exists only on paper. Unfortunately, this topic still tends to be better embraced by teachers who are women, Black, Indigenous, or have disabilities. In these cases, they speak with personal conviction, driven by their own discomfort. It's there because it's the law—but there isn't discussion. (Luz)

Thus, from the teachers' perspective, social markers are often addressed in class simply because they are a compulsory part of the curriculum. This is the case with Laws 10.639/03 and 11.645/08, which establish the mandatory teaching of Afro-Brazilian, African, and Indigenous history and culture throughout the curriculum—requirements that are still far from being fully implemented (Mendonça, Freire, & Miranda, 2020).

Corsino and Conceição (2016) argue that addressing discrimination should not occur merely to fulfill a legal mandate. Discussing this theme must be understood as

[...] an act of transgression, in the sense that bell hooks describes—as a possibility for dialogue and transformation. An act that questions the foundations upon which old and stagnant curricular models were built—models of a colonizing pedagogical practice incapable of giving voice to those who do not fit within the historically established norms of what is considered possible. (Corsino & Conceição, 2016, p. 2)

The Themes Addressed in Class

From the teachers' accounts, it was possible to identify the bodily practices selected for their lessons. Among these, African and Indigenous games, different sports modalities, capoeira, dance, and discussions on activities for boys and girls stand out as themes that permeate their pedagogical practices in exploring social markers of difference. Table 3 summarizes this information and highlights that intersectionality is present in many of the practices reported by the teachers. In other words, within a single theme, teachers often promote debate and reflection on multiple social markers simultaneously.

An analysis of the table reveals that all teachers reported addressing ethnic-racial relations in their classes. Seven also stated that they work with gender-related themes, while four participants mentioned addressing sexual orientation and socio-economic relations. It is important to emphasize that the table reflects only the information provided during the interviews; it is possible—and even likely—that other social markers are also addressed, even if they were not explicitly mentioned.

Table 3 - Social markers of difference and themes

Social marker of difference	Body practices - Themes	Teachers
Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Games and play activities (Hula hoop, Hopscotch, Jump rope, Spinning top) Sports modalities: Soccer Dance 	Márcia, Tiago, Denise, Laura, Luana, Vitória, and Luz
Ethnic-Racial Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sports modalities: Soccer, Artistic gymnastics, Fencing, Volleyball, Athletics, Water activities, Basketball Capoeira African and Indigenous games (Tug-of-war, Dodgeball, Shuttlecock) Dances (African dances, Samba, Samba-rock, Samba circle, Breakdance) Inclusion of immigrant students 	Márcia, Tiago, Marcos, Denise, Laura, Luana, Vitória, and Luz
Sexual Orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sports modalities: Soccer, Volleyball, Basketball 	Marcos, Denise, Laura, and Vitória
Social Class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funk Skateboarding Sports modalities: Soccer, Tennis, Equestrianism, Athletics 	Tiago, Denise, Luana, and Luz.

Source: Prepared by the authors

Vitória, Luana, Márcia, Luz, and Denise mention the inclusion of African and Indigenous games as one of the main themes in their classes to address

ethnic-racial relations. The teachers believe that, when contextualized, these practices foster knowledge about the history of these peoples, as well as recognition and reflection on cultural differences. Denise explains:

This year, with the 2nd and 3rd grades, we are working entirely on African and Indigenous heritage. We have been exploring dances, games, and play activities, bringing in the history behind the discrimination of these peoples—how they were treated, how Brazil was invaded rather than ‘discovered,’ how Indigenous peoples are still treated today, what happened with their supposed liberation, and where they went afterward. We also discuss whether racism still exists today—or not—and what has been normalized in sports. (Denise)

Vitória reports that around 80% of the topics addressed in her classes relate to issues of gender and sexual orientation. Tiago, Luana, and Laura state that the social class marker is also present in their classroom discussions.

From the accounts of Tiago, Denise, Laura, Luz, and Marcos, it was possible to identify an intention to connect the analysis of social markers of difference to the context of sports practice, as exemplified by the following excerpt from Marcos's interview:

We worked with water activities; the task was for them to create a sequence of movements using artistic swimming. Then, I brought in some images to give them an idea of what these movements might look like, and from there, I asked, ‘Who predominantly appears in these images?’ They immediately caught on - Wow, teacher, there are only white arms here, apparently only white people and women, right? It's interesting to think about this. What are your thoughts on this? What does this show? It took some effort for me to find images of men, and yes, some men participate in artistic swimming. Finding Black individuals or people with other body compositions was extremely difficult. (Marcos)

The teachers demonstrate an intentional effort to stimulate dialogue with their students by posing questions about the topic and developing strategies to encourage argumentation and critical reflection on social markers. Márcia, for instance, highlights her work with basketball, while Luana emphasizes the discussion of soccer:

I asked them, ‘What is basketball?’ before we started, because they had no reference point. I sat down with them and showed a video of LeBron James and Michael Jordan, explaining that there's an ongoing debate about who is the greatest. ‘Did you notice that most NBA players are Black?’ I then told them that, at first, things were different—the first Black player faced a lot of hardship. He was often kept from playing or only played for short periods. I kept the conversation going, explaining what racism is, and soon they began to share their own experiences—things they had gone through. The discussion just kept unfolding naturally. (Márcia)

When I talk about soccer, I bring up the salary differences between male and female players. These are themes present in their everyday lives, but they rarely reflect on them or make connections. So, why are players called monkeys? What

is the context behind that? I always bring these discussions up to make them think.
(Luana)

Laura, Luana, and Luz also mention encouraging reflection on the exclusion of people with disabilities. The teachers describe activities aimed at including students with disabilities in their classes. However, they do not report explicitly discussing this social marker or linking their lessons to the broader social realities faced by people with disabilities. Thus, rather than a thematic exploration of the marker itself, their approach focuses on creating an inclusive environment within the classroom—an outcome similar to that found in Gerdin *et al.* (2020) and Philpot *et al.* (2021).

Understanding the relationships that sustain the logic of oppression affecting bodies and cultures in society—and that are reflected in school education, particularly in Physical Education—Grando and Pinho (2016) help us recognize the importance of acknowledging the complexity inherent in the social construction of the body. According to the authors,

[...] the body is woven through the historical and social relations that constitute Brazilian society, and therefore also differentiated according to social markers such as access to material goods/class, family structure, gender and sexual orientation, age, ethnicity—race, religion, among other sociocultural dimensions that define individual identities. Each social group, shaped by specific socioeconomic, historical, and cultural conditions, produces a distinct body through particular forms of education—marking each person as unique within a given context and society. (Grando & Pinho, 2016, p. 26)

Grando and Pinho (2016, p. 25) also note that, within schools, they often encounter teachers holding a [...] stereotyped view of the corporeality of children, youth, and adults [...], thereby reinforcing the dominant culture. In contrast, the teachers in this study demonstrate an intentional effort to recognize and discuss bodily diversity in their classes, choosing to address the theme of *social markers of difference* as a means toward a democratic education committed to social justice.

The commitment to building this perspective has been advocated for several decades (Kirk, 2019; Scoringe, Philpot, & Bruce, 2021), giving rise to the critical pedagogies of Physical Education. Although inconsistencies and limitations remain in their development and, especially in their implementation (Fitzpatrick, 2019; Meir, 2020), given the socioeconomic challenges arising from neoliberalism, these pedagogies appear increasingly relevant and necessary today (Kirk, 2019; Fitzpatrick, 2019; Gerdin *et al.*, 2020). The teachers who participated in this study, through their narratives, show that this conception has, to some extent, guided their pedagogical practices within schools.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Revisiting the objectives of this research and considering the information gathered during the interviews and their subsequent analysis, it is possible to observe that working with social markers of difference within a curricular framework aimed at critical and problem-posing education—one that fosters critical and reflective thinking—is a complex and dynamic process. It highlights the importance of continuous study to advance the development of a school Physical Education curriculum grounded in social justice.

Specifically, this study sought to understand why Physical Education teachers choose to incorporate social markers of difference as themes in their classes and how they construct pedagogical practices that enable such inclusion. The analysis of the participants' accounts revealed that their work is driven by a critical conception of Physical Education and by a desire to design reflective lessons that promote awareness and encourage a broader understanding of the world—ultimately striving to challenge social inequalities and contribute to the transformation of society. This critical perspective stems not only from their social and familial experiences but also from their initial teacher education.

In this context, the teachers interviewed aim to ensure that, through engagement with social markers of difference, their students go beyond merely recognizing diversity and learn to position themselves critically in the face of social challenges and inequalities. Consistent with these intentions, the teachers reported carrying out deliberately planned practices oriented towards curricular justice. While the theme of social markers of difference is explicitly included in the political–pedagogical projects (PPP) of all participating schools, the decision to approach these topics often arises primarily from individual initiative rather than collective institutional planning.

We conclude this research with both satisfaction and conviction that the pedagogical practices investigated here represent a powerful pathway for inspiring teachers to reflect upon and advocate for a form of Physical Education committed to social justice. At the same time, we acknowledge the limitations of this study, as the chosen methodology allowed access only to the meanings attributed by teachers from their own experiences. Further studies will be necessary to explore the everyday realities of curriculum construction within schools, including how students engage in discussions on these themes and what perspectives they bring to the work developed by their teachers. Nonetheless, this research has generated new questions and possibilities for deepening the debate on the role of Physical Education in promoting equity and democratic education.

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