

Physical Education, culture and school: from difference as inequality to otherness as a possibility

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to understand how differences are signified and represented by students in Physical Education classes. It is an ethnography conducted in a State school in the municipality of Campinas, SP. This is an incursion which led us to understand that the differences between the students constituted parameters to define unequal opportunities, prejudice and sectarianism. Therefore, our understanding of the differences was permeated by a certain measure of reductionism, as they perceived the “other” only through her/his most conspicuous characteristics, clouding the complexity of the cultural dynamics. Finally, we understand that differences should be considered within the perspective of otherness, aided by a cross-cultural perspective of education.

Keywords: Physical Education. Education. Prejudice. Gender identity.

1 INTRODUCTION

Let us imagine a school during class time: teachers giving classes, involved students, quiet hallways where silence is only broken when a student is walking to class; at the school yard the janitors do their jobs in the kitchen there are people making lunch; in the offices some people are handling the paperwork or talking to patrons, and there is a Physical Education (PE) class in progress in the gym: excited students, mindful teacher(s) and the quiet is taken over by everyone talking to everybody at the same time. There is a break for

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drinking water, talking to the teacher and then they resume the activity.

It could be that this description will not fit the reality of some schools, where it is the rule in other ones. This snapshot seems to be devoid of surprises about the day-by-day of a school, especially in relation to PE classes. However, from this broader and more distanced point-of-view there is the risk of overlooking the cultural dynamics that can be observed via a “closer and insider’s look”, in allusion to Magnani (2002). By taking a closer and insider’s look it is possible to follow the dynamics of social actors that are part of different symbolic contexts, which unveil the complex cultural web that envelopes it.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand how differences¹ are significant and represented by students in PE classes. The intention is to enable access to other arguments in the debate of difference and diversity in PE that is so trendy nowadays. According to Geertz (1989), theoretical ideas put forth by new studies are adopted from related studies and refined during the process, which in turn are applied to new interpretative problems. “Studies are built upon other studies [...] they dive even deeper into the same issues” (GEERTZ, 1989, p. 35).

2 METHODOLOGY

The study is designed as an ethnography, e.g. “dense description” as per Geertz (1989). It was carried out in a school under the umbrella of the Network of Schools in the State of São Paulo (REE/SP), in the municipality of Campinas.

1 We understand the difference as an explicative category of cultural diversity. According to Ortiz (2000), cultural diversity cannot be regarded as a difference. According to the author, every difference is socially produced and carries a symbolic and historical meaning. If only the symbolic meaning is taken into account, there is the risk of isolation within a form relativism of little consequence. Affirming the historical meaning of cultural diversity is subjecting it to the materiality of interests and social conflicts (ORTIZ, 2000). Therefore, diversity arises in concrete situations presented hereunder.

Data was collected during a two-month school term via observing PE classes of one of the 8th grades, as well as via non-structured interviewing of both the teacher and students.

During the two-month period under study (August-September 2005), the sport under investigation was volleyball. Twelve of the sixteen scheduled classes were observed to help decipher “weird” codes, read between the lines, perceive behaviors, “fish” for discourses and statements, interpret meanings, and ultimately filter what has and has not been said by the social actors in relation to the study’s subject matter (OLIVEIRA; DAOLIO, 2007). This intention was necessary based on Geertz’s assumption of culture as “a system intertwined with symbols that can be interpreted”.

[...] it is not a power to which social events, behaviors and institutions or processes can be casually attributed; it is a context within which they can be intelligibly described, i.e. described with density. (GEERTZ, 1989, p. 24)

In this sense, this study assessed the four characteristics of an ethnography or “dense description” as per Geertz: 1. an ethnography is interpretative; 2. It interprets the flow of the social discourse; 3. the relevant interpretation consists of trying to save what is “said” in a discourse of the possibility of extinguishing it and setting it in a manner that can be studied, and 4. It is microscopic.

The actions are in consonance with what the author calls “complex specificity” or “circumstantiality”. This is precisely how this type of material that ensues from field work – mainly qualitative, highly participative and carried out in “confined” contexts that “megaconcepts” can acquire every manner of sensitive actuality that enables thinking about them not just realistically and concretely, but also creatively and imaginatively with them (GEERTZ, 1989).

3 THE SCHOOL UNDER STUDY AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION CLASSES

The school is not merely part of the individuals' life, but rather it is part of their personal projects. When they place their many aspirations on the school they give it the social legitimacy that values it as an educational institution. According to Gusmão (2003), the school is a venue of sociability, of successes and failures, of winning and losing, of unveilings and concealments, of life and denying life. It is a sociocultural venue.

In this sense, according to Dauster (1996), the school seems to be a privileged institution in that it enables the actors to experience different world visions, fosters contact and the Exchange of experiences and meanings perceived in the school scenario at hand.

The school under study is a large facility that takes up a whole block, enclosed by a wall that is not very high. It caters to three neighborhoods that do not fall under the classification of upper class or outskirts, all of which are interlinked, making up a micro-region in the north part of the city.

The school's internal organization is divided between three buildings and two sports courts that are separated by a long mesh wire fence² that can be accessed only through a gate that is locked for most of the time with chain and a padlock. Courts can only be accessed during PE classes and when there is a teacher in attendance.

In relation to PE classes, it was perceived that students look forward to them. It was common for students to be excited on their way to a class:

“It is not uncommon to see students excited and looking forward to having a PE class – they cannot contain their energy and joy

2 According to the teacher, the mesh fence prevents idle students from disturbing classes and the ball from hitting bystanders, and other incidents.

while they leave the classroom. In this case, their enthusiasm for PE is combined with their need to experience other relationships in the school.” (AYOUB, 2005, p. 2264).

This study observed that students would gather in a disorderly manner in front of the sports court gate before each class. They would wait for the PE teacher anxiously as soon as recess was over,³ and some students would be waiting by the gate even earlier.

Class 8B had 36 students, which comprised 15 boys and 21 girls aged 14-17 years old. According to the PE teacher, it was a difficult class, where students treated each other disrespectfully, and sometimes even the teacher: “You need a lot of patience and perseverance to handle this class.”

Class 8B had two fifty-minute PE classes every week at the sole discretion of the teacher, but they took place on the same day: “[...] it was better to work with two classes back-to-back because fifty minutes was not enough” (teacher).

PE classes followed a traditional routine. Despite being coed, the teacher divided the class according to gender. She believed it was easier to work with homogenous groups, in which both boys and girls felt more comfortable. She also said that when she started her teaching career this type of gender-grouping also occurred in relation to teachers. Men would teach boys and women were in charge of girls. In a certain way, the teacher had become used to a certain class format. She also mentioned the fact that boys are physically stronger than girls, and that the latter could get hurt. According to Saraiva (2005), the daily routine of PE classes for private and public schools is still marked by the resistance of mixing boys and girls, both in relation to students and teachers.

After the warm-up, the teacher would stay with one group in the covered volleyball court and send the other group

³ They had PE class right after their recess.

to play soccer outside. When the bell rang for the end of one period, the groups would change places.

It was interesting to note that in spite of soccer being part of the syllabus of the previous quarter it was still part of the syllabus for the whole year. However, the teacher's attention and intervention was limited to volleyball, where the soccer match was a mere recreational activity or something to fill in time. When she was asked why soccer still played such an important role, the teacher replied that the students had a "passion" for it and complained when they could not play: "All they want to do is to play soccer."

On the other hand, the volleyball classes did not spur the same amount of enthusiasm. The teacher would give priority to the game itself and with other classes she would even teach the fundamentals, e.g. saque, toque, manchete, etc., but because class 8B was 'difficult' she did not bother: "They would complain!"

The teacher divided the class into two teams and started the game, walking around to give instructions and keep the score. The rules of professional volleyball were somewhat flexible but served as the model.

Since the class was divided into two groups and played two different games (volleyball and soccer), we chose to observe both, not prioritizing either. By following the activities sometimes in the indoor and sometimes in the outdoor court, or even going back and forth, it was possible to gain a wide range of perception on the theme under study, which is presented below.

However, our purpose is not to give a comprehensive report, as according to Geertz (1989, p. 39), "The cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete and what is worse, the deeper it is studied, the less complete it is", but rather to address these perceptions.

According to Fonseca (1999), “each case is not a case”⁴ but particular data that opens the way to broader interpretations. As per Geertz (1989, p. 31), broader and abstract interpretations stem from extensive knowledge of extremely small issues.

“Actually, this is the scope of our analyses in relation to broader contexts that together with theoretical implications recommend general attention and justify our effort in building them.” (GEERTZ, 1989, p. 31)

4 DIFFERENCES AND INEQUALITIES

Visiting a school to observe PE classes of a certain class, e.g. class 8B, in order to understand the importance of the differences and how they are represented by students within this context revealed a scenario of deformities that extrapolated the local routine. The observed differences served as the guiding parameters of unequal opportunities, prejudice and sectarianism in classes based on stereotypes.

This factor leads to the following notes that are presented below; it seems there still is a certain ‘naturalistic’⁵ outdated trace despite the advances in the discussion of culture and the understanding of differences in the educational processes that are driven by academic production in the learning and PE field.⁶

4 Fonseca (1999) shows in his work that relativist philosophy whereby ‘each case beyond the individual case. In one of his examples he mentions a researcher who claims that in his study he used ethnography via quasi-therapeutic interviews in his ‘field research’. In face of the fact, the author states her concern with individuals who work with anthropology, specifically ethnography, without adequate background. Instead of endeavoring in an interdisciplinary work their findings are neither here nor there, where the researcher’s own perception of culture abounds. Hence, she states that ethnography ‘each case is not a different case’.

5 We note that this fact does not affect only PE; the ‘naturalistic’ explanation to understand differences is also hegemonic in other school subjects. “Boys are better at math because their logical-mathematic thinking is better; girls, on the other hand, do better in literature and arts because they are naturally more ‘sensitive’. These affirmations were repeated by Betti (1992 and 1994) and Bracht (1992), to mention but a few.

6 Specifically in Daolio (1995, 1998, 2003 and 2004), Soares et al. (1992), Kunz (1991 and 1994).

Under this study, exclusion, prejudice and stereotypes were identified in the performance of some of the actors involved. Chubby girls, effeminate boys, black kids or even the ‘uncoordinated’⁷ determined some hardships presented hereunder.

The hostility between boys and girls in PE classes was observed throughout the study. Both genders competed for space and status. The aggravating factor of this situation was that the class was divided into groups by the teacher, as aforementioned. When the teacher divided the class by gender, the legitimacy of the fact was consequently incorporated in the students’ behavior.

It is noted that PE teachers have difficulty in getting rid of certain prejudice and propose a practice that fosters equal opportunities to all students – boys and girls – respecting their differences and interests (DAOLIO, 2003, p. 115).

In relation to boys vs. girls sectarianism, the case of Carolina⁸ stands out. Of all the students in her class, she stood out because of her intense participation and high sports skills. However, her peers called her ‘chubby’. We sampled out Carolina because she detained three factors for exclusion, i.e. she was a girl, chubby and skilled in sports. These features exposed her to jokes, as observed in every instance where she joined an activity. When Carolina played volleyball, she was criticized for being overweight. Right after a volleyball move, one of the girls caught the ball and took advantage of the teacher’s momentary absence to ask the other students: “Guys, what’s the difference between the ball and ‘chubby’s’ boobs? Hard to tell, right?!”(followed by laughter).

It was obvious that Carolina tried not to take offense by ignoring the mean remarks. When she played soccer, criticism was about the fact that she was a girl and skilled. In this

7 The subject that is commonly called ‘bad’ in sports, e.g. uncoordinated.

8 For privacy purposes, subjects were given pseudonyms.

particular class, both girls and boys were not flexible to having a girl playing soccer.⁹ In the case of class 8B, there was never a soccer match with boys and girls. Perhaps the class perceived that in the soccer milieu girls should play the role of mere expectations. For the duration of the study, it was noted that girls in that class played soccer only three times. It was as if they regarded soccer as less important when it was played by girls, and as such worthy of fewer privileges than when boys were involved. In terms of Carolina's skills in sports, it was considered a male trait and not something desirable in a girl.

Another actor worthy of note in the tense boys versus girls relationship was Eduardo. He was also treated as a 'poof' because of his effeminate mannerisms and behavior, and was not included in the activities. Similar to what occurred with Carolina, Eduardo was very participative, but often gave up joining the class because of the derogatory remarks made by his peers. Another feature that helped in keeping Eduardo from joining the activities was that fact that he was the least skilled player and had a hard time following the teacher's instructions. During one of the classes, Eduardo had to leave the volleyball game because of the relentless verbal abuse thrown at him. He sat next to the teacher and decided to keep the score. Leaving the game seemed to "take a weight off his shoulders" and he was more 'content' just watching.

In face of this scenario, where Carolina and Eduardo were important actors, it is possible to understand that the concepts related to gender identity that supported the actions of the other students was based on the "naturalization" of

9 The phenomenon whereby soccer is 'almost' exclusively played by boys in these classes based on the assertion by Moura (2005), who affirms that soccer in Brazil "is a male-dominated field. In his words, soccer can be a contact sport strongly associated with the male stereotype, proud and physically strong, as opposed to the female stereotype that is timid, fragile and dependent. In this sense, it is possible to understand the secondary role played by women in the Brazilian soccer milieu and even in PE classes. A study by Oliveira (2001, p. 136) shows an ad for the School Games of an important Brazilian capital city, which says: "If you didn't make the team, make it to the bleachers". The message was reinforced by the picture of a pompon that is typically a 'cheerleader thing'.

differences between both, as if they ensued merely from bio-physiological compositions of the male and female body, which is a narrow-minded perception. According to Mead (1971), sexual culture creates a stereotype that separates individuals since childhood, whereby they should follow male or female roles determined by the society they live in.

Daolio (2003) believes there is a specific cultural construction for the male and female body. The author also affirms that in relation to boys, even before they are born they are expected to meet the requirements of security and superiority associated with a man that will continue into the next generation. On the other hand, in relation to girls, the author affirms that the expectations are of delicacy and nurturing.

Under this study, both Carolina and Eduardo had their participation in the classes curtailed given that they failed to meet the stereotypes expected for boys and girls. Eduardo did not fit the masculine 'ideal' because he failed to display the boldness typical of boys his age and was not good at sports. Likewise, Carolina did not fit the docile and passive profile associate with the female 'ideal'. Both facts were enough to relegate them to an inferior level.

However, this study did not pertain solely to gender-related aspects. Other outstanding aspects were related to skills in Physical Education classes.

In relation to the skill with the ball, the yardstick was determined by the rules applied to professional soccer. Any technique¹⁰ that did not meet the level of performance of great soccer players was made fun of and in some factors would cause that player to have less actual playing time. The most gifted students had both a better status and more playing time compared to the unskilled ones. Oliveira (2006) notes that in this case the right technique is the one followed from

¹⁰ According to Marcel Mauss (2003), technique was deemed as they way human beings know how to perform.

professional soccer and the wrong one is any that did not comply with the former.

The same behavior was observed in volleyball. Even when the teacher allowed for rules to be bent she was always intervening to “correct” certain “disturbing” technical moves. Hence, different “moves” (techniques) devised by the students to solve a problem or overcome a hurdle were not valued.

This study observed that when a certain way of playing volleyball or soccer is preferred for the PE classes for class 8B or any other venue the result is that certain types of performance are mocked, thus fostering prejudice and sectarianism. Boys and girls that were not good players or were unskilled, or that were not ‘a ‘natural’ played a secondary role during classes, and in some cases did not even join those classes.

Another factor that stood out was the fact that the teacher divided the group of boys that played soccer. When this study was first started, we thought that this fact would benefit the best players, which actually occurred in some cases, but that was not the only yardstick. As well as skill, it took into account a certain measure of belonging to that group, which was evidenced by the visibility of some characteristics, namely: resisting volleyball practice because it was considered a “girly thing”; displaying hostile behavior to colleagues by making derogatory remarks; not mingling with the girls and keeping the teacher at arm’s length. Not all students had all these characteristics that apparently were to give legitimacy to the status enjoyed by the boys.

In relation to the prejudice displayed to black children, we observed a situation where this occurred. During a class, the teacher suggested a mixed volleyball game. Mateus, a boy who was left out of the game to talk to a girl at the bleachers, was constantly riled by his classmates that were playing. The

most repeated was calling Mateus ‘Maguila’¹¹ and other similar offensive comments to get him to leave the girl and join the game, which he did. While he was playing, Mateus missed an important shot, whereby the rest of the team yelled at him: “That’s why you’re black!”

In this case, the fact of being black labeled him as less skilled and the reason why he missed the shot, according to the offenders, as if the fact that he was black had any relation with a technical move. However, he was highly praised when he played soccer. Why? Maybe because he was skilled with the ball using his feet? Possibly, however, we observed that his popularity in soccer was such, not so much for his skill but because he had a ‘cool’ way of playing, which was also a stereotype of black people, especially in Brazil where this race is admired by aficionados of *samba* and *Carnaval*.

According to Candau (2002), this mindset is very much how society thinks, whereby people are classified according to the features of a given social group. This is narrow-minded cultural perception, which points to the unbending separation of social groups according to their visibly different features that in turn conceal the whole array of the social mindset and sets aside the dynamic process of culture.

In our opinion, these differences involve both the appearance of individuals, the way they interact and their worldview; ultimately, according to Gusmão (2003), in all aspects of our lives, even those where we do not even suspect it exists.

Therefore, data hereunder shows that the Other that has a different appearance represented the Other that is unequal, tolerated but stigmatized. An inferior Other that when expressing his or her differences experiences clear interaction inequality.

11 There are two prejudiced allusions: one to a cartoon of a monkey called Maguila, and the other to the black boxer called Maguila. We also note that the latter was given his nickname because of that cartoon.

5 OTHERNESS AND INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION AS A POSSIBILITY

We concluded that when closely observing the day-by-day activities of eighth grade PE in order to understand how differences are signified and represented, we identified a limiting and reducing scenario in terms of understanding the Other.

When differences were broken down they presented a mosaic of distorted pieces, where each revealed its own measure of prejudice, dividing and ignoring the different ways of being, thinking and experiencing the world. Therefore, the way people live and/or express themselves was not taken into account, nor how they are part of one of the many possible cultural standards.

Under this study, prejudice and inequalities – both in terms of access and participating in classes – and sectarianism observed arose from certain differences presented by the social actors, which were not understood in the whole array of social relationships. Being chubby, black or ‘uncoordinated’, or simply by having certain behavior associated with the opposite gender, as in the case of Eduardo, established the level of class participation and certain limitations.

When cultural differences are studied under a stereotyped perspective, only one of the external manifestations and peculiarities of cultural phenomena are addressed. Social actors that cause these cultural manifestation are then not valued, nor is it possible to understand the density, dynamics and complexity of the meaning they weave (FLEURI, 2003, p. 24).

Presently, endorsing the valuing and the respect of differences in education and PE seem to meet with less resistance. However, it is a matter of concern that the school milieus still affected by concepts that ensue from certain naturalistic outdated traces that are pointed out under this

study reach proportions capable of triggering prejudice, sectarianism and unequal opportunities.

Therefore, we agree with Fleuri (2003) that is necessary to take a leap to otherness. Understanding that there are different ways of expressing oneself in the world, of pondering over it, and living and performing in it, and that both Eduardo and Carolina, or any other actor in this story, are not more or less equal, but rather, are different. And as such, they can also bring their contribution to the table.

Therefore, we share with Oliveira (2006) the opinion that the principles of otherness and intercultural education are the way to deal with unequal opportunities, prejudice and sectarianism that are still part of some aspects of school life, aware of the possible limitations and that it is a starting point for establishing any type of social relationship in any school scenario.

Hence, otherness is possibly on the way to facing tension ensuing from the cultural diversity addressed hereunder.

Otherness is revealed by the fact that *who I am and who the other is* does not occur linearly and exclusively, but rather as a play of multiple images and diversity.

Knowing who I am and who the other is depends on who I am, what I believe I am, whom I live with and why. It also depends on the considerations of the other on these issues and about oneself; it is within this process that each individual becomes the *person and the subject* member of a group, culture and society. It also depends on where we focus our perception. They are processes ensuing from cultural contexts that shape and form us, which in turn result in our understanding the world and how we behave with equality and diversity (GUSMÃO, 2003, p. 87).

To this end, intercultural education is expressed. These assumptions lead to understanding that there are differences that necessarily should be part of the learning syllabus of students, enabling the contact with the 'other' – the diverse – establishing an advantageous and mutual dialogue, whereby there is the possibility of a single perception.

Within the intercultural perspective, education is no longer presumed as a process that shapes concepts, values and attitudes based on a unidirectional, unidimensional and unifocal relationship, carried out by linear and hierarchizing procedures. Education is then understood as the process built from the tense and intense relationship between different individuals, creating interactive contexts that establish a dynamic connection with different cultural contexts. These, in turn, are dynamically connected with different cultural contexts whereby individuals develop their identities and become a creative and adequately *formative* environment, i.e. structuring movements for subjective and sociocultural identification (FLEURI, 2003, p. 31-32).

Within this perspective, differences would occur in a different scenario, whereby instead of establishing a scenario of unequal opportunities for Eduardo and Carolina, it would foster equal access. However, this should not homogenize the actors, but rather use their diversity as the starting point for an advantageous dialogue; a scenario free of prejudice and subjugation, as in the case of Mateus, would foster new understanding of differences and learning with the different 'other'. Instead of establishing certain forms of sectarianism it would drive democratic sharing (OLIVEIRA, 2006).

However, we note that the road to establishing a different meaning for understanding differences is shifty and prone to certain traps. In other words, if not addressed with a measure of 'care', there is the risk of making the 'other' a

commonality, extreme relativism, absolute universal concepts or new submissions and subjugations.

It should also be taken into account that PE in schools is carried out under a measure of expectation of tradition. Predominantly hands-on sports classes should be offered to students of both genders in a differentiated manner in order to reserve the characteristics of each group. If this script is radically denied it could meet with huge resistance from students, to the point that it would render impossible any attempt to change. However, the opposite situation would also not be desirable, as once tradition was reinforced the possibilities of new types of reordering would be lost. In face of this deadlock, where would the possibility lay? We believe that in dialogue, based on the words of the teacher: “We need to be patient and to persevere”.

This action (dialogue) between teachers and students would enable the two points denied in the social relations observed in PE classes under this study: exchanging and sharing. But not a common way of sharing, in the sense of merely knowing the ‘other’ and tolerating him or her, but in a more comprehensive sense of learning from this ‘other’. Enabling the understanding that there are differences and that they are part of the human pallet. The “Other” is a possible “I”.

The reason, agreeing with Fleuri (2003, p. 32) based on Paulo Freire, “[...] people educate themselves in relationships mediated by the world, at the same time that their respective cultural and social world are transformed, mediated by the very people in the relationship.”

For the time being, we believe that this debate should be further studied and undergo new queries, which under this study point to education with new values, attitudes, stands and understanding that leads to dialogue and to otherness, both relevant and necessary.

Educação Física, cultura e escola: da diferença como desigualdade à alteridade como possibilidade

Resumo: Este estudo objetiva compreender como as diferenças são significadas e representadas pelos alunos nas aulas de educação física. Trata-se de uma etnografia desenvolvida numa escola pública do município de Campinas-SP. Tal incursão levou-nos à compreensão de que as diferenças apresentadas pelos alunos constituíram parâmetros definidores de desigualdade de oportunidades, preconceitos e sectarismos. Assim, o entendimento das diferenças esteve permeado por certos reducionismos, enxergando o “outro” somente por suas características mais visíveis, obscurecendo a complexidade da dinâmica cultural. Por fim, compreendemos que é desejável que as diferenças sejam consideradas na ótica da alteridade subsidiada por uma perspectiva intercultural de educação.

Palavras-chave: Educação Física. Educação. Preconceito. Identidade de gênero.

Educación Física, cultura y escuela: de la diferencia como desigualdad a la alteridad como posibilidad.

Resumen: Este estudio tiene el objetivo de comprender como las diferencias son significadas y representadas por los alumnos en clases de Educación Física. Se trata de una etnografía conducida en una escuela pública en la municipalidad de Campinas, SP. Tal incursión nos llevó a la comprensión de que las diferencias presentadas por los alumnos constituyeron parámetros definidores de desigualdad de oportunidades, prejuicios y sectarismos. Así, el entendimiento de las diferencias estuvo impregnado por ciertos reducciones, percibiendo al ‘otro’ únicamente por sus características más visibles, obscureciendo la complejidad de la dinámica cultural. Por fin, comprendemos que es deseable que las diferencias sean consideradas en la óptica de la alteridad subsidiada por una perspectiva intercultural de educación.

Palabras clave: Educación Física. Educación. Prejuicio. Identidad de género.

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