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# CIRCUS IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION TRAINING: BODY AND EXPERIENCE BASED ON THE SOCIAL CIRCUS AT THE UNIVERSITY PROJECT

*CIRCO NOS PROCESSOS FORMATIVOS DA GRADUAÇÃO EM EDUCAÇÃO FÍSICA: CORPO E EXPERIÊNCIA A PARTIR DO PROJETO CIRCO SOCIAL NA UNIVERSIDADE*

*CIRCO EN LA FORMACIÓN EN EDUCACIÓN FÍSICA: CUERPO Y EXPERIENCIA A PARTIR DEL PROYECTO CIRCO SOCIAL EN LA UNIVERSIDAD*

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**Abstract:** This article presents, analyzes, and critically reflects on the pedagogical actions developed within the CIRCUNESP Project – Social Circus at the University, discussing how its circus practices, grounded in an expanded understanding of body and movement, foster reflections on ways of teaching, learning, and experiencing the body in Physical Education training. Adopting a qualitative and theoretical-reflexive approach, the study problematizes the meanings produced by this pedagogical proposal, understanding university extension as a legitimate space for knowledge production and experience as a methodological and epistemological axis. Drawing on body studies, phenomenology, and critical pedagogies, it questions biologicist and positivist rationalities that remain present in the field. As a result, the article advances an expanded understanding of social circus, conceiving it as a bodily language capable of placing participants' bodies at the center of their formative processes, as a place of experience, creation, and subjectivity production.

**Keywords:** Physical Education. Social circus. Body. Experience.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Circus arts constitute a field of bodily knowledge historically constructed from experience, direct transmission, and the relationship between body, movement, and creation. More than just a form for show, the circus can be understood as a cultural and pedagogical practice that produces knowledge through the body in action, articulating technique, risk, error, and sensitivity in unique formative processes (Silva, 2003; Ângelo, 2009; Duprat; Bortoleto, 2015). It is within this horizon that the CIRCUNESP Project – Social Circus at the University – takes place, developed at a Brazilian public university.

CIRCUNESP emerges in the university context as a pedagogical proposition that challenges hegemonic ways of understanding the body in Physical Education training. Although circus arts and Physical Education share body and movement as central axes, the meanings attributed to these dimensions do not always converge (Ontañón; Duprat; Bortoleto, 2012). While the circus has historically been organized based on empirical knowledge passed down through generations and guided by the experience lived of the body in action (Silva, 2003), physical education training often goes, in many contexts, through biologicist and positivist discourses that tend to reduce the body to functional, measurable, and normative parameters (Bracht, 2006; Freitas; Brasil; Silva, 2006; Hunger *et al.*, 2009; Castro; Gonçalves, 2009).

This tension permeates pedagogical practices, curricula, and modes of prescribing and evaluating bodies, frequently guided by a biomedical rationality that relegates the historical, cultural, and sensitive dimensions of bodily practices to a secondary position (Silva *et al.,* 2009). In contrast, circus arts offer a fertile ground for other relationships with the body in which error, risk, and experimentation constitute central elements of learning (Ângelo, 2009; Bortoleto, 2011; Tucunduva; Bortoleto, 2019).

In this context, CIRCUNESP is configured as a space for pedagogical experimentation in which circus modalities such as acrobatics, aerial arts, balancing, and juggling are mobilized not only as technical content, but as triggers for formative experiences that engage the body in its sensitive, relational, and political dimensions. Their pedagogical choices shift the focus away from prescription and control towards listening, creation, and the collective construction of knowledge.

Located within the public university, the project falls within the field of social and educational circus, engaging with experiences that combine circus practices, education, and social action (Abreu; Silva, 2009; Lopes; Silva, 2024). In this sense, CIRCUNESP challenges the relationships between university extension, professional training, and knowledge production, affirming the circus as a legitimate field of knowledge and pedagogical intervention in higher education.

Given this, the present work aims to present, analyze, and critically reflect on the pedagogical actions developed by CIRCUNESP, discussing how its circus practices based on a broad conception of body and movement raise reflections on

the ways of teaching, learning, and experiencing the body in the context of Physical Education training.

## 2 CIRCUNESP AS A PEDAGOGICAL PROPOSAL

### 2.1 FOUNDATIONS AND INTENTIONS OF THE PROJECT

"The circus is above all the materialization of movement traversing our bodies" (Angelo, 2009, p. 97) and CIRCUNESP is anchored in the understanding of circus arts as a field of bodily knowledge historically constituted from experience, direct transmission, and the inseparable relationship between body, movement, and creation. This understanding shifts the focus from a purely show-based perspective to a cultural and pedagogical practice capable of generating knowledge through the body in action in formative processes that transcend the normative and prescriptive logics of traditional education. As Ermínia Silva (2003) pointed out, when analyzing circus learning methods, a pedagogy of the body becomes evident that is founded on experiences lived, observation, and sharing between generations in which the circus constituted until the mid-20th century as an important training school for its own artists:

> What was most interesting of all was that this learning was acquired under the circus tent, mainly through oral tradition. The circus, from the end of the last century until about 1950, was an important school that trained its own members (Silva, 2003, p. 34).

In this article, social circus is not understood as an exclusive synonym for interventions aimed at contexts of socioeconomic vulnerability, but as a broader field of pedagogical and cultural practices committed to diversity, human development, and the production of subjectivities. It is obviously recognized that its historical constitution is linked to actions mainly aimed at children and adolescents in situations of social vulnerability (Lobo; Cassoli, 2006; Guedes, 2013; Somme; Bortoleto, 2024; Bortoleto *et al.*, 2024), but without limiting its formative potential to this scope. From this perspective, the social circus is affirmed as an ethical-political proposition that mobilizes circus arts as a device for cultural access, collective creation, and reflection on the body and its experiences. It is within this broader understanding that CIRCUNESP positions itself within the field of social circus, not as a welfare or compensatory action, but as an extension practice that challenges normative rationalities in Physical Education training and believes in the circus experience as a space for critical, sensitive, and pluralistic education.

The concept of the body that guides the project departs from biological and instrumentalized readings, while understanding it instead as a historical, relational, and political instance of experience. From this perspective, the body is not taken as a natural, neutral, or merely functional given, but as a place of perception, creation, and production of meaning through which subjects relate to themselves, to others, and to the world. This understanding is similar to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2006) for whom the body is not an object external to consciousness, but the very condition of experience and existence in the world.

However, recognizing the body as a lived experience does not imply conceiving of it as a purely internal sphere or detached from historical and social determinations. On the contrary, it is precisely because it is a place of presence, action, and relationship that the body also becomes the target of political, disciplinary, and institutional investments. At this point, the dialog with Michel Foucault (1997, 2010) allows us to understand that bodies are traversed by devices of power that organize gestures, behaviors, times, and modes of presence, producing forms of regulation, normalization, and subjectivation. Thus, the phenomenological understanding of the lived body and Foucault's problematization of power processes are not mutually exclusive; they are rather articulated insofar as they allow one to think of the body simultaneously as a sensible experience and as a historically contested territory.

It is from this articulation that CIRCUNESP rejects training models focused exclusively on prescription, on the measurement and control of bodies, opting instead for circus practices that prioritize listening, creation, play, experimentation, and the collective construction of knowledge. This critique, however, does not intend to homogenize the field of Physical Education nor to disregard the existence within universities of educational proposals committed to the pedagogical, cultural, and social dimensions of human movement. Rather, it is a matter of recognizing that Physical Education training constitutes a plural and contested field where different epistemological and pedagogical frameworks coexist. By positioning itself in this field, CIRCUNESP approaches perspectives that seek to broaden the understanding of the body beyond reducing it to an object of performance, prescription, or normalization.

In line with this understanding, the project's pedagogical approach prioritizes practices in which the body is experienced as the subject of the experience and not merely as a support for technical execution. By stating that "there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself" (Merleau-Ponty, 2006, p. 6), phenomenology offers a decisive foundation for thinking about the circus as a bodily language capable of mobilizing presence, sensitivity, relationship, and creation. It is within this horizon that the pedagogical choices of CIRCUNESP are inscribed, guided by an understanding of the body that at the same time recognizes lived experience and problematizes the mechanisms that have historically sought to regulate it.

In this context, the circus body can be understood as a body that is constituted in relation to instability, risk, and error, demanding from the subjects continuous processes of attention, reorganization, and creation in the face of the unpredictable. Far from being experienced merely as mistakes to be corrected, error and risk become an integral part of the formative experience itself, fostering learning that involves listening, adaptation, sensitivity, and invention. This dynamic allows bringing the circus body closer to the notion of 'other-bodies' proposed by Godoy (2023), according to which no body is constituted in isolation, but always in coordination with other bodies, objects, spaces, forces, and affects. In the case of circus practices, this means recognizing that the body is formed in relation to apparatus, materials, partners, supports, imbalances, and specific temporalities of the practice, producing unique ways of perceiving, acting, and creating. Within the CIRCUNESP framework,

this understanding underpins pedagogical choices that value error, experimentation, and the relationship between participants as constitutive dimensions of the learning processes.

In CIRCUNESP, error is not treated as a fault to be corrected, but as a condition for creation and learning, recognizing that it is through the experience of limits (Favari *et al.*, 2021), trial, and wandering that shifts in ways of acting and existing are produced. This understanding engages with Fábio Ângelo (2009) and Dal Gallo (2010) in affirming the integral character of the body-student and mobilizing physical, symbolic, emotional, and relational dimensions in circus pedagogical processes.

**Figure 1 -** First circus performance by CIRCUNESP at a cultural event held in a public square in the city of Rio Claro, where the project is based, in the state of São Paulo.



Source: CIRCUNESP collection (2022).

By valuing the uniqueness of learning paths and the diversity of bodies, CIRCUNESP distances itself from pedagogical models oriented towards high performance and the standardization of movements. Its pedagogical intentions do not aim at technical homogenization nor at the production of ideal performances, but at creating educational environments in which each individual can experience their limits, recognize their potential, and construct their own meanings for their relationship with the body, with movement, and with the collective. Thus, the project affirms the circus as a field of resistance to the logics of control and prescription that permeate university training in Physical Education by focusing on the body as a place of experience, creation, and production of subjectivities.

The pedagogical concepts that guide CIRCUNESP directly influence how the project is designed as an educational practice and a field of knowledge production within the university. By challenging the positivist and biologistic rationalities historically present in Physical Education training, the project rejects investigative models that dissociate subject and object, theory and practice, intervention and analysis. It is from these conceptions that the methodological path adopted is outlined, understood not as a procedure external to the pedagogical experience, but as a construction implicated in its own dynamics. The methodological approaches that support this choice are explained below.

## 2.2 METHODOLOGY AS EXPERIENCE: A THEORETICAL-REFLECTIVE JOURNEY

This article is presented as a study with a qualitative approach, of a theoretical-reflective nature, constructed from the systematization of the pedagogical experience developed from the CIRCUNESP Project – Social Circus at the University, carried out at UNESP on its Rio Claro Campus. The empirical investigation is based on the articulation between documents and records produced by the extension project and theoretical frameworks, taking the pedagogical experience as the axis of analysis. Based on this systematization, a critical and situated reflection is developed on a pedagogical proposition in circus arts elaborated through the intertwining of educational practice, pedagogical thought, and theoretical foundations.

The methodological approach understands the method not as a set of predefined technical procedures, but as a path constructed within the process of reflection and writing itself in line with perspectives that recognize experience as a constitutive dimension of knowledge production in education (Gatti, 2010; Minayo, 2014). In this direction, the systematization of experience is an analytical process that allows turning lived practice into a knowledge object through its organization, reconstruction, and critical interpretation, helping to understand the logic of the experience, the factors that make it up, and the lessons learned along the way (Holiday, 2006; Torres Carrillo, 2017, 2024).

In this sense it approaches the reflections of Larrosa (2002) where experience is less about the event itself and more about the effects it produces on subjects, traversing and transforming them—an understanding that supports the methodological choice adopted in this work. The reflection presented in this text is therefore based, as axes of systematization, on the analysis of the project's pedagogical documents such as lesson structure and models, on visual records of the circus activities, and on cultural actions carried out linked to the historical trajectory of CIRCUNESP and to discussions in the literature specialized in circus, Physical Education, and philosophical and sociological studies of the body. These materials are not treated as empirical data to be objectively analyzed, but as support for the systematization of pedagogical choices, formative intentions, and modes of organization of circus practices developed within the scope of the project.

By adopting experience (Larrosa, 2002; Holiday, 2006; Torres Carrillo, 2017, 2024; Godoy; Scaglia, 2024) as a methodological axis, the article makes explicit its limitations and refusals; that is, it does not seek to evaluate impacts, measure results, or establish universal models for teaching circus arts. Its objective is to share a possible pedagogy of circus arts within the university context, understanding its outreach as a legitimate space for knowledge production and pedagogical reflection as an ethical-political exercise of resistance to the positivist and biologistic rationalities historically present in Physical Education training. This methodological option falls within the field of qualitative research in education that recognizes pedagogical experience as a legitimate source of knowledge production (Bogdan; Biklen, 1994; Gatti, 2010; Minayo, 2014).

By understanding the methodology as experience and writing as a gesture of pedagogical systematization, it becomes necessary to explain how these concepts materialize in the circus practices developed in the project. The following section presents the pedagogical choices that organize CIRCUNESP in its daily meetings, highlighting the connection between training in Physical Education, circus practices, and the production of bodily meanings.

## 2.3 CIRCUS PRACTICES AND PEDAGOGICAL CHOICES

### 2.3.1 Circus Arts, Physical Education training, and body pedagogy

Circus arts represent a relevant pedagogical possibility for training in Physical Education (Duprat; Bortoleto, 2007; Ontañón; Duprat; Bortoleto, 2012; Ontañón; Bortoleto, 2014), especially because they broaden understandings about the body and its experiences. In many cases, students in training and community participants approach these practices with a limited understanding of their subjective, symbolic, and relational dimensions, which are frequently reduced in the field's hegemonic discourse to physiological or functional benefits (Rangel-Betti; Betti, 1996; Betti, 2005).

**Figure 2 -** Cultural activity with other university circus extension programs (Circo da Barra – IA UNESP and CIRCOIA – IA Unicamp).



Source: CIRCUNESP collection (2023).

By incorporating Circus Arts into the university context, CIRCUNESP challenges this rationality by proposing bodily experiences that mobilize not only physical and motor skills, but also processes of attention, listening, sensitivity, creation, and interaction with others. From this perspective, human movement is understood as a historically produced social and cultural practice laden with meanings and permeated by values, power relations, and pedagogical intentions (Bracht, 1999). This is a pedagogy that recognizes the body as a place of experience and production of meaning, distancing itself from mechanistic and biological conceptions still present in Physical Education training (Kunz, 2004; Bracht, 1999).

Within this context, the project proposal addresses the need for initial training capable of articulating professional practice with the ethical dimension of caring for



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others. Given that the discourse and professional practice of Physical Education professionals hold a position of social authority and trust, there is a need for training processes that go beyond the technical-instrumental realm and incorporate a broader understanding of the corporeality of the individuals with whom they work.

By combining experiences of technical refinement, creative exploration, error, and experimentation, the circus practices developed in CIRCUNESP constitute a fertile ground for this pedagogical shift. Within the project, these dimensions are understood as complementary, allowing each participant to construct unique learning paths in dialog with their physical limitations, rhythms, and potential. Instead of subordinating participation to pre-established performance standards or to a standardized execution of gestures, CIRCUNESP organizes its practices through games, guided training, and collective creation processes in which learning is built through experimentation, interaction with others, and the progressive expansion of autonomy.

In this sense, the circus is affirmed as a bodily and cultural practice historically produced and recontextualized within the scope of a university extension capable of shifting normative expectations of performance by valuing processes of creation, experimentation, and collective elaboration of experience. As Godoy (2023) suggests, creating implies moving between uncertainty and desire—a process in which the expansion of the subject is achieved not through conformity to a pre-existing form, but through the invention of unique ways of acting and composing with the world. Drawing on Spinoza (2021), the aim is to understand freedom less as a finished result and more as a power produced within the very process of creation.

From this perspective, CIRCUNESP situates itself within the realm of body pedagogies that resist the logics of control, normalization, and productivity, embracing the circus experience as an expressive, educational, and formative language within the university context of Physical Education.

### 2.3.2 Historical formation and pedagogical organization of CIRCUNESP

This topic presents the experience of CIRCUNESP, an extension initiative developed at the Rio Claro campus of São Paulo State University (UNESP) that integrates circus practices, Physical Education training, and community engagement. Created in 2021 amidst the resumption of in-person activities following the COVID-19 pandemic, the project emerged from an institutional call for cultural initiatives aimed at supporting student retention, creating a space for physical experimentation, social interaction, and learning through circus arts.

Initially titled “Investigations into the Manipulation and Experimental Construction of Juggling Props,” the project adopted this discipline as a gateway to the circus world due to its accessible, playful, and inclusive nature. The weekly meetings brought together students from various fields of study and participants from the wider community, fostering a diverse environment for learning and expanding one’s bodily

repertoire. The group's development resulted in cultural interventions at institutional events, highlighting the potential of circus arts in the university context.

In 2022, the project was renewed through a new institutional call for proposals, adopting the name CIRCUNESP Project – Social Circus at the University and more explicitly stating its pedagogical orientation linked to the field of social circus. This shift does not represent a break with the previous proposal, but a conceptual and political deepening in which the circus comes to be understood as an educational practice capable of fostering processes of socialization, artistic creation, human development, and the production of subjectivities. By adopting the social circus as its guiding principle, the project reaffirms its historical commitment to actions aimed at welcoming individuals in diverse contexts, recognizing, however, that such practices can and should also extend to young people, adults, and the elderly who are part of the university community and its surroundings.

Following this reorganization, the meetings began to take place twice a week, lasting an average of two hours, and were held in the Artistic Gymnastics Gymnasium located within the university's Physical Education Department. Although based in this institutional space, CIRCUNESP is not limited to the Physical Education audience, since it remains open to students from different fields of knowledge and to the community at large, reaffirming university outreach as a field for knowledge production and cultural circulation.

Throughout its history, CIRCUNESP has mobilized approximately 60 participants with an average of 15 to 20 per meeting. Although Physical Education students have been regularly involved in the project—about eight since the beginning—the majority of the group has been composed of students from other undergraduate courses such as Pedagogy, Mathematics, Geography, Geology, Biology, and Physics. There was also recurring participation by about 10 members of the external community, primarily from peripheral neighborhoods surrounding the campus, including children aged 9 to 12 from public schools in the city. Despite some turnover, the group showed relative stability, fostering connections, continuity in training processes, and strengthening the outreach aspect of the proposal.

CIRCUNESP's historical and organizational structure is linked to its pedagogical choices. The institutional conditions of its creation, the expansion of the project, and its insertion into the field of university extension (Coelho, 2014; Ontañón *et al*., 2016; Santos Rodrigues *et al*., 2020; Tyszka; Kronbauer, 2023; Ontañón; Oliveira, 2023) created a learning environment where circus practices are organized around intentions that prioritize experience, playfulness, creativity, and bodily diversity. It is from this intertwining of context, conception, and practice that the modes of organizing the meetings take shape.

**Figure 3 -** Participants of CIRCUNESP in a social action carried out on the premises of a public school on the outskirts of the city of Rio Claro/SP.



Source: CIRCUNESP collection (2024).

2.3.3 Play, games, and popular culture in the pedagogical organization of meetings

In CIRCUNESP, the element of play is not understood as an accessory resource or motivational strategy, but rather as a pedagogical principle that structures circus practices. This understanding shifts the game from a merely instrumental function to position it as a specific form of relationship with the world, with the body, and with others, marked by the provisional suspension of the productive and normative logics that permeate Physical Education training (Godoy, 2023).

In dialog with Huizinga (1999), play is understood as an activity endowed with meaning in itself, which establishes a time-space distinct from ordinary life in which rules, gestures, and relationships are reorganized in a unique manner. This suspension does not imply alienation, but creates conditions for bodily experiences more open to invention, to unpredictability, and to encounters, which are elements central to circus language. From this perspective, the game operates as a field of experimentation in which error, risk, and instability cease to be flaws to be eliminated and become the very material of learning.

The pedagogy of play, as discussed by Brougère (1998) and Favari *et al*. (2021), allows us to understand playfulness as a cultural phenomenon, permeated by historically constructed values, symbols, and forms of socialization. In CIRCUNESP, this dimension is articulated with Brazilian popular culture understood not as a folklorized repertoire, but as a living field of knowledge, memories, and resistances (Arantes, 1985). By incorporating games, play, and bodily dynamics originating from this cultural universe, the project challenges hegemonic models of corporeality based on efficiency, control, and standardization of gestures.

This connection between circus, playfulness, and popular culture supports a conception of education that values the plurality of bodies and experiences, recognizing learning as a relational and situated process. As Mendes (2020), Favari *et al.* (2021), Scaglia, Fabiani and Godoy (2020), and Godoy and Scaglia (2024) point out, the game favors the collective construction of knowledge, dialog, and the expansion of the motor and symbolic repertoire of the subjects involved. In CIRCUNESP, these principles underpin a pedagogical approach that relies on the power of play as a means of producing meaning, connections, and subjectivities, affirming the circus as a cultural and educational practice committed to holistic physical development.

### 2.3.4 Didactic-operational organization of circus practices in CIRCUNESP

In light of the pedagogical intentions and formative principles previously discussed, the circus practices developed in CIRCUNESP are organized in such a way as to ensure coherence between theoretical conception and educational action without resorting to rigid models or closed protocols. The didactic-operational organization of the meetings is structured as a recurring and flexible system sensitive to the individual characteristics of the participants, the specificities of the circus modalities, and the ongoing training processes.

The meetings have an average duration of 90 minutes and are generally structured in three interconnected stages. The first stage is intended for bodily activation and the sensitive preparation of the participants through practices that transition from more general movements to specific actions related to the circus discipline being developed. More than just preparing the body for practice, this moment aims to foster attention, presence, and openness to the experience.

The second phase involves games and play, often originating from Brazilian popular culture, in dialog with the technical and expressive principles of circus arts. The game is understood as a pedagogical tool that legitimizes playfulness, error, and experimentation as constitutive dimensions of learning. It is in this context that modalities such as acrobatics, aerial arts, balancing, juggling, and clowning develop by articulating technical exploration, body investigation, and collective relationships in a perspective that shifts the focus from standardized execution to the shared construction of experience (Kunz, 2004; Betti, 2005).

As participants increase their familiarity with circus arts and build trusting relationships with the group and the space, the practices begin to include moments of greater autonomy referred to in the project as guided training. In these moments, the pedagogical mediation shifts from direct guidance to dialogical accompaniment, favoring unique learning paths and the exploration of each participant's technical and expressive possibilities.

A fragment of this dynamic experience occurred in a meeting where participants were divided into groups organized around different circus disciplines—juggling, acrobatics, balancing, and aerial arts—and were challenged to collectively construct small body compositions based on a randomly selected feeling such as joy, sadness, love, or anger. Each group is encouraged to use the fundamentals of their

discipline to create circus actions and sequences capable of expressing the feeling received so that the other participants can recognize it. More than simply reproducing predefined gestures, the activity required collective negotiation, experimentation, a sensitive reading of movement, and the invention of expressive possibilities within each circus language. Situations like this demonstrate how CIRCUNESP articulates technical exploration, creation, and collective work without subordinating learning to the standardized execution of movements, but instead favors experimental paths in which each group builds its solutions in dialog with its own rhythms, repertoires, and ways of composing with others.

**Figure 4 -** Acrobatic activities (top left), aerial arts (top right), balancing acts (bottom left), and juggling (bottom right) at CIRCUNESP events held at the Department of Physical Education.



Source: CIRCUNESP collection (2024).

At certain points in the training process, especially when participants demonstrate greater body confidence and engagement with the practice, rehearsal and creation processes for circus acts are developed, whether individual or as a group. These practice sessions do not have a productivist or spectacularizing purpose, but rather a development of lived experience in which the subjects more explicitly assume the role of artist-creators. The creation of the acts involves aesthetic choices, collective reflections, and experimentation, always respecting the rhythms, desires, and limits of each participant.

In this way, the didactic-operational organization of CIRCUNESP embodies a circus pedagogy guided by experience, playfulness, creation, and the collective construction of knowledge. More than organizing content or technical sequences, this structure seeks to create conditions for participants to construct unique educational paths in which the body is experienced as a place of relationship, learning, and the production of meaning.

## 3 BODY, EXPERIENCE, AND TRAINING IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION: EPISTEMOLOGICAL TENSIONS AND SHIFTS

University-level training in Physical Education, historically marked by the pursuit of scientific legitimacy, has been largely consolidated based on a biomedical and positivist rationality in which the body is understood as a measurable object that is subject to control, prescription, and optimization. From this perspective, bodily practices tend to be reduced to their physiological or functional effects, assuming an instrumental character that frequently empties their symbolic, historical, affective, and relational dimensions.

Such rationality encounters evident limits when confronted with the concept of experience, understood neither as mere episodic experience nor as an accumulation of stimuli, but as a sensitive and singular process of the constitution of the subject. As Silva *et al.* point out (2009), experience involves regions of perception and sensitivity that escape full rationalization, which makes it difficult to reduce it to scientific logic. The authors put it this way:

> These characteristics make it difficult to turn experience into an object of knowledge for scientific rationality, which tends to reduce bodily practices to motor behavior, exercise, or mere physical activity (Silva *et al*., 2009, p. 10–11).

This tension relates to the very academic constitution of the area, which for decades has privileged investigations of a biological nature, especially in the fields of exercise physiology, motor development, and movement control. As shown by Hunger *et al.* (2009), this orientation has contributed to the scientific recognition of Physical Education, but also to the distancing of the cultural and subjective dimensions of the body in curricula and formative practices, favoring its objectification through technical and physiological indicators (Silva *et al*., 2009).

Recognizing the limitations of this epistemological framework does not imply denying the relevance of biophysiological knowledge for professional practice, but rather questioning its hegemony in university education. In this sense, Oliveira (2005) points to the need to systematically incorporate the affective and relational dimensions of the body, understanding them as constitutive—and not accessory—to the formative process in Physical Education.

An important shift in this debate can be observed in the field of School Physical Education, especially since the consolidation of the concept of body culture proposed by Soares and colleagues (2012). By understanding bodily practices as historically symbolic forms, this perspective breaks with the centrality of physical fitness as a pedagogical goal and repositions the body as a place for producing senses and meanings. Further developments of this theoretical framework also appear in Betti (2009), Bracht (2019), and Kunz (2004) who broaden the field of understanding of human movement beyond naturalistic explanations. This expansion movement is also expressed in documents such as the National Common Curriculum Base (Brazil, 2018), which recognizes that bodily practices enable aesthetic, playful, and cultural experiences, highlighting the opening of a field of epistemological dispute where bodily experience comes to be considered a legitimate form of knowledge.

Within this context, the proposal of Human Motricity developed by Manuel Sérgio (1995) gains relevance by criticizing the Cartesian legacy that separates body and mind and reduces the movement to a mechanical phenomenon. For the author, the body must be understood as a subject in action constituted in relation to the world. As Sérgio (2007, p. 19) states, “It is through the body that one exists and acts in the world. Thus, the fact that we exist presupposes our own body, the body as subject and not so much the body as object,” thus shifting Physical Education from a logic of administering body-objects to an understanding of the movement as a historical, cultural, and existential expression of subjects.

It is within this field of tension that CIRCUNESP is situated, affirming circus practices as a pedagogical possibility capable of placing the body back at the center of university education, not as an object of control, but as a place of experience, relationship, and production of meaning. By organizing its practices around experimentation, creation, and listening, the project shifts circus technique from being an end in itself to conceiving it as a formative mediation. In this context, the circus emerges as a bodily language that critically engages with Physical Education, opening up possibilities for other ways of thinking about, teaching, and experiencing the body within a university environment.

## 4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article aimed to present, analyze, and critically reflect on the pedagogical actions developed by the CIRCUNESP Project – Social Circus at the University, discussing how its circus practices based on a broad conception of body and movement raise reflections on the ways of teaching, learning, and experiencing the body in Physical Education training. Throughout the text we have sought to explain the theoretical foundations, pedagogical intentions, and didactic-operational choices that underpin the project, understanding the circus as a cultural and educational practice that produces knowledge through bodily experience.

By incorporating circus arts into the university context, CIRCUNESP challenges hegemonic ways of understanding the body and professional training in Physical Education, which have historically been marked by biologicist, prescriptive, and instrumental rationalities. Without denying the importance of basic biological knowledge, the project focuses on broadening the educational perspective, recognizing the body as a place of experience, creation, relationship, and production of meaning—a dimension frequently relegated to a secondary position in university curricula.

It is important to emphasize that this text does not aim to evaluate results, measure impacts, or establish universal parameters for circus education. This is a theoretical-pedagogical reflection anchored in the extension experience of the project, which acknowledges its methodological limitations and refusals by choosing to share a path rather than a model. In this sense, CIRCUNESP is presented as a possibility for circus pedagogy built from specific ethical, political, and pedagogical choices linked to a particular institutional and historical context.

By valuing playfulness, games, popular culture, and body diversity, the practices developed in the project affirm circus as a powerful bodily language for university education, capable of producing shifts in the ways of teaching, learning, and understanding the body within Physical Education. These shifts are neither intended to be conclusive nor generalizable, but rather indicative of possible paths for thinking about the education of the body beyond logics of control, standardization, and performance.

Finally, it is hoped that the proposal presented here can contribute to strengthening the dialog between circus arts, Physical Education, and universities, adding to other experiences, research, and practices that have been consolidating circus arts as a legitimate field of knowledge production. Rather than offering definitive answers, this article serves as an invitation to reflection, experimentation, and the collective construction of circus pedagogies committed to experience, plurality, and human development in higher education.

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**Resumo:** Este artigo apresenta, analisa e reflete criticamente sobre as ações pedagógicas desenvolvidas no Projeto CIRCUNESP – Circo Social na Universidade, discutindo como suas práticas circenses, fundamentadas em uma concepção ampliada de corpo e movimento, suscitam reflexões sobre os modos de ensinar, aprender e experienciar o corpo na formação em Educação Física. De natureza qualitativa e teórico-reflexiva, o estudo problematiza os sentidos produzidos por essa proposição pedagógica, compreendendo a extensão universitária como espaço legítimo de produção de conhecimento e a experiência como eixo metodológico e epistemológico. Em diálogo com estudos do corpo, da fenomenologia e das pedagogias críticas, tensionam-se racionalidades biologicistas e positivistas ainda presentes na área. Como resultado, o artigo sustenta uma compreensão ampliada de circo social, entendendo-o como linguagem corporal capaz de recolocar o corpo dos participantes do projeto no centro de seus processos formativos, como lugar de experiência, criação e produção de subjetividades.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação Física. Circo social. Corpo. Experiência.

**Resumen:** Este artículo presenta, analiza y reflexiona críticamente sobre las acciones pedagógicas desarrolladas en el Proyecto CIRCUNESP – Circo Social en la Universidad, discutiendo cómo sus prácticas circenses, fundamentadas en una concepción ampliada del cuerpo y del movimiento, suscitan reflexiones sobre las formas de enseñar, aprender y experimentar el cuerpo en la formación en Educación Física. Desde un enfoque cualitativo y teórico-reflexivo, problematiza los sentidos producidos por esta propuesta pedagógica, comprendiendo la extensión universitaria como espacio legítimo de producción de conocimiento y la experiencia como eje metodológico y epistemológico. En diálogo con los estudios del cuerpo, la fenomenología y las pedagogías críticas, cuestiona racionalidades biologicistas y positivistas aún presentes en el área. Como resultado, sostiene una comprensión ampliada del circo social, entendiéndolo como un lenguaje corporal que reubica el cuerpo de los participantes del proyecto en el centro de sus procesos formativos, como lugar de experiencia, creación y producción de subjetividades.

**Palabras clave:** Educación Física. Circo social. Cuerpo. Experiencia.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are professors from the Physical Education course at UNESP Rio Claro who are part of the review board and are familiar with the actions/activities carried out by the CIRCUNESP Project.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**William Olielo Pereira:** Conception and design of the study; development of the theoretical framework; definition of the methodological approach; investigation and systematization of the pedagogical experience of the CIRCUNESP project; conceptual dialogs in the field of Circus Pedagogy; drafting of the original manuscript; critical review and final editing of the text.

**Luis Bruno de Godoy:** Contributions to the theoretical conception of the study; conceptual dialogs in the fields of circus, philosophy, and experience; academic supervision; critical-reflective contributions to the manuscript; critical review of the manuscript with intellectual contributions to the central argument; conceptual provocations in the field of Physical Education; grammatical and editorial review.

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## RESEARCH DATA AVAILABILITY

The research data is only available upon request.

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