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Collaborating for (Game) Change(rs): Negotiating and Building Meaningful Action Research Partnerships

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See table of contents

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Article abstract

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COLLABORATING FOR (GAME) CHANGE(RS): NEGOTIATING AND BUILDING MEANINGFUL ACTION RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

Sport- and physical activity-related participatory action research (PAR) often involves voluntary partnerships spanning institutions, organizations, and jurisdictions. Negotiating and maintaining multi-stakeholder and multi-jurisdictional research partnerships can be likened to a delicate balancing act fraught with potential challenges and strains impacting project outcomes (e.g., waning commitment, emerging external factors, new and/or revised stakeholder/organizational requirements, fidelity to the necessary care given when working with community partners and participants). This article presents PAR as a methodology in sport and physical activity that can potentially engage all research participants as co-researchers, sharing power equitably. Recognizing the need for continued attention and action in this area, we provide an overview of PAR in practice, identifying significant ideas and principles. Additionally, we outline Game Changers—a PAR project involving students with various disabilities, schools, PE teachers, coaches, national and community sport partners, and university researchers. Based on lessons learned from this multi-stakeholder and multi-jurisdictional research project, we interrogate the possibilities associated with engaging in PAR by exploring challenges and opportunities related to sport and physical activity-focused PAR.

KEY WORDS: Action research partnerships; Participatory action research (PAR); Sport and physical activity interventions; Youth with disabilities

INTRODUCTION AND KEY TERMS

We're all in this together! Better together! It takes a village! At the heart of these common idioms is the notion that collective or collaborative problem-solving approaches are desirable, if not necessary, keys to success. Participatory action research (PAR) can be characterized as a collaborative and systematic research approach that brings together researchers and community partners affected by a particular social issue to study, generate insights, and effect change (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Cornish et al., 2023; Kim, 2016). Indeed, PAR might involve collective efforts by multiple partners from various institutions (e.g., universities), organizations (e.g., stakeholder groups), and jurisdictions (e.g., multiple school boards). Such PAR partnerships provide hope for growth and learning opportunities for all partners involved in the research, leading to a desired transformation in a system's held values, beliefs, and structures (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Fals Borda, 2001).

The variety and complexity of research partners in sport and physical activity might include government agencies (e.g., Sport Canada, Economic and Social Development Canada), national and provincial non-governmental organizations (e.g., Physical and Health Education Canada [PHE Canada], provincial Special Olympics organizations), district school boards, individual schools, youth, and university researchers. Collaborations of this kind may serve as entry points for sharing expertise, learning from peers, improving outcomes for research participants, leveraging valued research capacity, and offering a platform for multi-pronged knowledge mobilization efforts (White et al., 2004). Notwithstanding these possibilities, negotiating and maintaining multi-stakeholder and multi-jurisdictional research partnerships is a delicate balancing act fraught with potential challenges that may impact project outcomes (Tezier et al., 2022). For example, waning commitment, emerging external factors, new and/or revised individual stakeholder/organizational requirements, and inadequate fidelity to agreed-upon roles and responsibilities can threaten the iterative process involving university-researchers, community partners, and stakeholders engaged in PAR. With such diverse partners, it is vital for those engaged in PAR to draw upon their unique skill sets, knowledge, interests, and life experiences. PAR partnerships require the collaborative development of a research project, which allows for the identification and incorporation of contextual factors; such a disposition enables the promotion of the engagement, empowerment, and ownership of the research participants (Tezier et al., 2022). More importantly, PAR partnerships should give voice and agency to co-researcher participants so as to cultivate what Ponic et al. (2010) aptly dubbed 'power-with' partnerships—rooted in efforts to share power and decision-making in collaborative and inclusive ways (Tett, 2005).

This article presents PAR as a research methodology in sport and physical activity—one that engages all research participants as co-researchers sharing power equitably, so that they may develop knowledge and improve outcomes for all (Jacobs, 2018). We provide an overview of PAR in practice, identifying significant ideas and principles. Additionally, we provide an overview of an ongoing PAR project (Robinson et al., 2023) involving sport (e.g., soccer, basketball) and physical activity (e.g., leisure and/or recreation activities such as walking and yoga) for students with disabilities. Finally, from a university-researcher

perspective, we discuss some of the challenges and opportunities related to doing PAR in sport and physical activity.

DEVELOPMENT, KEY THINKERS, AND CURRENT USES AND APPLICATIONS OF PAR: CREATING A CULTURE OF RECOGNITION AND RESPONSIVENESS

Founded on the tenets of interpretive (understanding the inequities from the context of the community) and critical (examining the systemic inequities that disadvantage specific communities) theories, PAR empowers co-researchers to create conditions for sustainable change (Frisby et al., 1997). Further, situated within Freire's (1987) notion of praxis, PAR partnerships enable co-researchers to act together to transform their reality through an iterative process involving continous critical reflection and action.

Equity and inclusion are foundational principles of PAR. Accordingly, PAR seeks to recognize and respond to individuals' unique needs and circumstances, helping co-researchers address social inequities, facilitate meaningful and lasting partnerships, and empower communities (Israel et al., 2003; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Largely for these reasons, PAR approaches are gaining in popularity in sport and physical activity research amongst youth (Fitzgerald et al., 2020). With a shift away from traditional methods of "researching on to researching with young people" (Fitzgerald et al., 2020, p. 423), there is also an understanding that PAR may be "appropriate when researchers seek to understand the experiences of those involved, affected by or excluded from various forms of sport and physical activity" (Holt et al., 2013, p. 334). Fals Borda (1979) stated we "investigate reality in order to transform it" (p. 203). Understanding what is meaningful to our partner communities requires a commitment to each community or partner and recognition of individuals' unique circumstances and, more broadly, the partner community at large (Wood & McAteer, 2017).

Luguetti and Oliver (2018) have noted that although there is a general concern with equity in sport (e.g., the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport [2022], supported by many Canadian athletes, has called for a public inquiry into the toxic nature of sport in Canada), traditional forms of research in sport may contribute to the inequities that appear to be inherent to sport. PAR in sport can move us away from research that develops sports programs and interventions led and developed by adults to research in a Freirean (1987) context for and with the research participants, emphasizing dialogue, mutual learning, and the empowerment of all involved. Luguetti and Oliver (2018) have reported that few sports studies have sought to disrupt inequities using participatory methods. However, there is a clear movement towards engaging in PAR in sport (e.g., see Ferkins et al., 2010; Frisby et al., 1997, 2005; Robinson et al., 2023). Frisby et al. (1997) have stated that PAR has the "potential to provide a new perspective by bringing those outside the physical activity system in contact with those who control service provision, policy development, and knowledge production in order to promote social and organizational change" (p. 9). As with our own *Game Changers* research project (Barrett et al., forthcoming; Robinson et al., 2023; Walters et al., forthcoming), studies using PAR in sport have focused on disrupting inequities based on various forms of marginalization and hegemony. To this, Frisby et al. (2005) have offered "the argument underpinning the rise of participatory forms of research (in sport) is that the relevance and trustworthiness of the data, collected with the aim of improving the

human condition, is enhanced when research participants are actively involved in the knowledge production process" (p. 368). Participants in this type of research are often engaged in co-creating and sharing conditions that will support or facilitate action leading to changes in practice as a response to phenomena, disparities, or processes impacting communities (Bradbury-Huang, 2010; Kemmis et al., 2014). Perhaps as we see sport increasingly giving athletes a voice, research approaches like PAR may gain wider recognition and usage.

EXAMPLES FROM OUR WORK

A Collective Call to Action: *Game Changers*, A Sport Canada-funded Pilot Project
Researchers have determined that 22% of Canadians aged 15 or older identify as living with a disability (Statistics Canada, 2018). In 2022, the Canadian Disability Participation Project (CDPP) and its partners completed a first-of-its-kind comprehensive assessment of physical activity data for children and youth with disabilities. Through a disability-specific lens, the CDPP analyzed and reported on a series of widely accepted children and youth physical activity indicators. The organization gave Canada a grade of 'C+' for 'Organized Sport & Physical Activity for Children and Adolescents with Disabilities' (Arbour-Nicitopoulos & CDPP, 2022). Children and youth with disabilities often face limited sport choices, and those that are available often present accessibility challenges for prospective participants (PHE Canada & Zakaria, 2023; Robinson et al., 2023). Beyond sport, others have described the challenges Canadian children and youth with disabilities face as an ongoing human rights issue whereby access to full participation continues to be limited (ParticipACTION, 2022).

In response to this concern, PHE Canada initiated *Game Changers*, a Sport Canada-funded participant-focused project aimed at improving school sport participation by youth with disabilities. The pilot project (Barrett et al., forthcoming; Robinson et al., 2023; Walters et al., forthcoming) was aimed at increasing participation, exploring and understanding factors that influence retention, and targeting stereotypes and perceptions associated with school sport participation for youth with disabilities (PHE Canada & Zakaria, 2023). As part of the conceptualization process of the project, a PAR team was assembled to work with PHE Canada, prospective provincial partners including Special Olympics, community champions (teachers and educational assistants), other school personnel, parents/guardians, and participant youth with disabilities. Our PAR efforts would be characterized as engaging, practical, people-centred, power-conscious, and pertinent to communities and their constituent stakeholders (Kemmis et al., 2014; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003; Rich & Misener, 2017). We hoped that,

> through the development and delivery of specialized inclusive school sport programming and leadership development, including mentorship and sport-specific tactics, strategies, and knowledge, students with disabilities [would] be better positioned to engage in sport programming and take on coaching and mentoring roles with their peers. The programming and leadership components [would] lead to sport for social development and increased participation of youth with disabilities in sport. (PHE Canada & Zakaria, 2023, p. 3)

Reflecting upon our study experiences and serving in our roles as university-researcher partners, the remainder of this article focuses on a series of considerations and approaches that we believe support collaboration and meaningful PAR partnerships between community members, researchers, and stakeholder groups. Specifically, we explore the importance of (a) creating a culture rooted in recognition of the unique needs and circumstances of our partners, (b) building and sustaining trust, and (c) empowering partnerships in action using a two-track reflective approach, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Empower Partnerships
in Action, through
Reflection

Build and Sustain Trusting
Partnerships

Create a Culture that Recognizes Partners'
Unique Needs and Circumstances

Figure 1. Supporting Collaboration and Meaningful Partnerships

Within the sections that follow, we have endeavoured to juxtapose our PAR experiences with relevant and related literature within each section. We conclude our article with a series of lessons learned and recommendations for researchers preparing for engagement with community partners.

CREATING A CULTURE OF RECOGNITION AND RESPONSIVENESS

Equity and inclusion are widely accepted as foundations of PAR. Recognizing and responding to individuals' unique needs, factors, and circumstances can help co-researchers and address social inequalities, facilitate meaningful and lasting partnerships, and empower the community (Israel et al., 2003; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). At the outset of all PAR approaches, efforts should be directed first toward clarifying the distinctions between equality and equity as they pertain to a project. Equality, as we see it, encompasses sharing funding, resources, training, and support(s), so that one may provide the "same" opportunities for all. Being fair in PAR work requires the essential recognition that not all are treated equally. When we consider the concept of equity, especially within the context of PAR, equity provides us with an essential ethical foundation upon which judgments regarding disparities and fairness help determine how our funding, resources, training, support(s), and opportunities are administered.

Inclusive efforts to maximize partner engagement and empowerment underpin efforts to make explicit the intersecting factors that influence how those from marginalized populations such as youth with disabilities experience sport and physical activity. Attending to those problematic decisions whereby some are not treated equally requires that co-researchers purposefully engage in joint efforts to create an inclusive culture that

encourages active participation by all partners. We, as researchers, can foster inclusive cultures by providing training and capacity-building opportunities at the outset and throughout the project; doing so can help all engage meaningfully in PAR efforts (Flicker & Nixon, 2015). Promoting inclusion in our work also means providing a voice to individuals and groups from different backgrounds (Wester et al., 2021). Engaging in ongoing dialogue with the community to help all find meaning and utility in research processes and outcomes (Rich & Misener, 2020), while identifying and addressing power sharing and imbalances (Rumsey et al., 2022) are essential activities that serve to remove potential systemic barriers that may unintentionally disadvantage PAR partners. As privileged university researchers working with marginalized co-researchers, we must negotiate and balance the power structures inherent to traditional forms of research. Of note, children and youth are not frequently engaged in PAR, and often the collaboration has not been meaningful, limiting the agency afforded to them as co-researchers. However, as researchers, we can use our standing to bring attention to the cause and help inform the broader community initiating systemic change (Wood & McAteer, 2017).

READY, SET, GET TO KNOW: BUILDING AND SUSTAINING PARTNERSHIPS
Collaboration and partnership between university-researchers and community members in PAR are fundamental to the collective effort required to identify and address community problems meaningfully (Morris, 2016). Duran et al. (2013) have noted "there is not one starting place, no single technique, no magic bullet for the development of relationships and partnerships with communities" (p. 48). We wholeheartedly agree with this assertion and offer some suggestions from the literature to support PAR university-researchers' efforts to build and sustain partnerships with community co-researchers.

At the outset, university-researchers can demonstrate their commitment to the community by leveraging existing capacity (e.g., relationships and partnerships with non-governmental organizations, service organizations, school districts, and schools) and by investing the necessary time in relationship-building activities to get to know community members and their needs, concerns, and priorities (Wood & McAteer, 2017). Israel et al. (2013) have explained that developing relationships based on mutual respect and trust is critical in building trust in PAR. These efforts ought to also enable researchers to show respect for their community members' cultures and traditions. For example, leveraging capacity in the context of our study (Robinson et al., 2023) involved asset mapping exercises whereby we identified existing social networks, human capital, and school communities with interest and/or experience in providing sport opportunities to students with disabilities.

PAR enables researchers to recognize a community's unique skills and expertise (Luguetti et al., 2023). This necessary learning takes place, in part, through informal visits and conversations with research participants and other community members (Frisby et al., 1997). Information gleaned from casual conversations help inform more formal efforts to understand and serve research partners through shared participation in several subsequent tasks as demonstrated from our work. That is, PHE Canada's *Game Changers* included the following: introductory one-day workshop; ongoing school visits; reflective conversations with students, teachers, and educational assistants after each school visit; construction of

pre-and post-project surveys and formal interview questions; interviews with teachers, educational assistants, and students; and analysis of the data with co-researchers.

PAR researchers are challenged to continually re-evaluate some necessary factors in their work. More specifically, PAR researchers must (a) ensure open and honest communication and (b) set mechanisms in place for partners to have a voice in the decision-making process so that they may be empowered as co-researchers who contribute to the research process (Tezier et al., 2022), and, in alignment with Grant et al. (2008), (c) be transparent and inclusive about the goals and intents of the research, so that they may meet the needs of community members throughout the ongoing cycles of research. Encouraging open dialogue and information sharing is essential in building and sustaining relationships throughout a PAR project (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008).

To build and sustain trust with partners, researchers should ensure that community needs and priorities drive the research and that the findings are accessible and actionable to the community (Horowitz et al., 2009). Equally important, care and effort to ensure that the community views the research as relevant and valuable is crucial. Even with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, power-sharing is sometimes unpredictable and necessarily flexible, leading to solutions or approaches to emergent problems (Frisby et al., 2005; Robinson et al., 2023). Ongoing collaboration ensures partners stay committed to the programming and research process, leading to effective and sustainable outcomes (Cargo & Mercer, 2008).

EMPOWERING PARTNERSHIPS IN ACTION: A TWO-TRACK REFLECTIVE APPROACH

PAR researchers often work as members of broad and multi-partner teams comprised of members who may present with competing interests and differing views about how such partnerships ought to be conceptualized and maintained (Galuppo et al., 2010). The goodwill necessary at the outset of conceptualization of the research (Minkler, 2004) and feelings of empowerment (Bessaha et al., 2020) are often palpable at the onset of a project or in the early days and stages of PAR. However, these must be constantly attended to with vigour and purpose in order to be maintained. With respect to developing and maintaining partnerships, Duran et al. (2013) have noted the importance of engaging in "ongoing self-reflection about the inevitable challenges of initiating, nurturing and maintaining partnerships" (p. 44).

The cyclical nature of PAR supports self-reflection. However, Mackay (2016) has suggested we think of PAR as "not a series of iterative cycles that lead on from each other but rather a self-reflecting spiral that is continuous" (p. 1). Considering PAR as an ongoing spiral supports the idea that participants determine the path forward when engaged in the research process. Relatedly, our approach to working with and alongside our *Game Changers* partners was to operationalize an interwoven two-track reflective partnership approach, as illustrated in Figure 2.
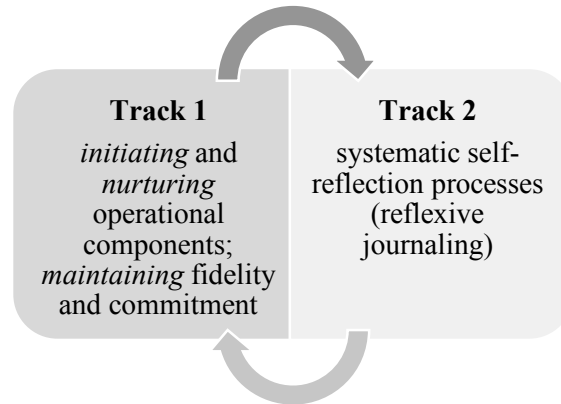
Track 1

initiating and *nurturing* operational components; *maintaining* fidelity and commitment

Track 2

systematic self-reflection processes (reflexive journaling)

Figure 2. Two-track Reflective Partnership Approach

On one track, we first initiated and conceptualized the operational components of our *Game Changers* work with and amongst our partners. We then considered, at the outset of the project, what efforts would be required by all partners to nurture the operational components of the *Game Changers* research (Barrett et al., forthcoming; Robinson et al., 2023; Walters et al., forthcoming). Finally, and together, we engaged in a forecasting exercise to consider what would be necessary to maintain fidelity and commitment across the defined timeframes proposed for the research project. Those initial efforts fostered engagement, ownership, and empowerment across our partner groups.

Perhaps of greater importance, the other interwoven track involved the operationalization and execution of a conscious and systematic approach to self-reflection within each initiating, nurturing, and maintaining phase. In the initiating phase, we first considered the importance of building those important inclusive relationships and applying our reflections across the various social locations within and beyond our PAR work. We believed self-reflection could help us interrogate how our identity, beliefs, judgments, and social location(s) could influence our PAR relationships and the associated research. This was achieved by maintaining a journal where we researchers noted insights, assumptions, thoughts, and feelings. Preparing for and then reflecting upon our interactions within this partnership phase was helpful. We considered the impacts of our positionality as educators, coaches, and university researchers. We also considered the many interactions with participants and partners in the research, particularly how power dynamics and social, local, cultural, and personal backgrounds were potentially hindering or facilitating partnership development (Muhammad et al., 2015). This journaling included questions for consideration, prompting notes, and cueing information about our partners that helped us empathize with and engage more meaningfully as active listeners with our partners.

In the nurturing phase of our partnership development, learning about our partners was an iterative process. As we gained a deeper understanding of our research partners and their community, the ensuing empowerment led to greater engagement in the operational components of the research through formally scheduled group reflections. These formal meetings allowed the partners to discuss and find efficiencies in the *Game Changers* intervention, manage and mitigate conflict, and ensure that their own needs and priorities

were met. Those formal reflection events led to changes in the functioning of *Game Changers* but, more importantly, strengthened personal relationships. Active listening, empathy, and humility led to continued opportunities for additional informal reflective conversations, which helped to enhance commitment to the partnership and the broader research.

As PAR projects progress, maintaining integrity and fidelity to partner interests and broader project processes can become challenging for all involved; some have referred to PAR's messiness and inherent uncertainty (Fitzgerald et al., 2020). Cook (2009) has defined this messiness as "the interface between the known and the nearly known, between knowledge in used and tacit knowledge as yet to be useful" and goes on to suggest that this messy area is "a vital element for seeing, disrupting, analysing, learning, knowing, and changing" (p. 277). Self-reflection efforts to initiate and nurture partnerships in PAR's conceptualization and early phases differ from those in maintaining as the research unfolds. As time passes, researchers and their partners need to be more flexible and adaptable as changing needs and priorities may be identified through an increasingly iterative and relational process in which learning, reflecting together, and adapting may serve as central foci in one's efforts.

Formal collective self-reflection practices should be leveraged. They may look like formal in-person meetings, regular email progress updates with all partners, and increasingly informal conversations. Measures of success for PAR partnerships will continue to be predicated on the researchers' ability to embrace and navigate challenging situations, moving the research forward in response to partners' growth, learning, and development. The spiral of activity, inherent to PAR, may result in adjusted outcomes requiring the partnership to work together to navigate the messiness of PAR (Cook, 2009). Measurements of success in PAR come from the researchers' ability to pivot and respond to the needs of the participants in working towards the desired change or transformation in a system's values, beliefs, and structures in support of the co-researchers (Fals Borda, 2001). Relatedly, PAR practitioners must be explicit about the messiness of doing this type of research to maintain the rigour and authenticity of their work (Cook, 2009; Fitzgerald et al., 2021). Partnerships in PAR may contribute to the messiness, the partners (e.g., youth, students with disabilities, educators, service organizations, university researchers), the research site (schools, sporting clubs, service organizations), funding organizations, and more, who all have a stake in the success of the research. As Boyle et al. (2023) have aptly put it,

> being open to negotiating discomfort or tensions that might emerge in action research requires a reflexive stance—one that also orients us towards a praxis stance. This move simultaneously provides opportunities for building relational trust and rapport and establishing all participants as the experts of the sites they are attempting to understand and change. Thus, all parties must always preserve critical reflexivity, mutual respect, openness, and praxis for a successful outcome. Such a stance is undermined when reporting action research sanitises the research process and neglects the truths that come from a reflexive praxis stance. (p. 9)

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES
With the following challenges and opportunities, we seek to refine and support PAR researchers' efforts to develop and maintain partnerships. The challenges and opportunities, as we see it, are informed by our pilot project efforts (Barrett et al., forthcoming; Robinson et al., 2023; Walters et al., forthcoming), an honest appraisal of our PAR work here, and the literature.

Sport in Schools: Politicized and Problematized Spaces
Our *Game Changers* PAR was situated within the context of a Canadian education system wherein each province/territory owns all responsibilities associated with management of K–16 education. Almost universally, school districts within each province/territory are governed by elected trustees and school district employees serving a defined geographic area. Decision-making in school systems, on its own, is complicated and confounded increasingly by politicized agendas by the numerous stakeholders, including but not limited to trustees, board/district officials, elected governments, school communities, education unions, parents/guardians, and students—each with their sphere of influence on schools. School sport, much like recreational, elite, or professional sport, is not immune from political influence. School sport participants and supporters may confront broader social, cultural, and political issues that include, for example, the following: role of school sport in education, teacher-coach role conflict, inequitable funding, participation, and gender (in)equity.

As second-career academics (previously, we were all public-school teachers), we engaged with our co-researcher partners already having a rich understanding of the provincial education systems, and a cursory understanding of gaps and challenges associated with the provision of school sport opportunities for students with disabilities. We were also fortunate to have a partner in PHE Canada, which has a longstanding, service-oriented reputation and established relationships with schools and school sport communities. Leveraging that institutional knowledge, expertise, and existing partner reputation and relationships helped us navigate those politicized and problematized spaces where and when tensions emerged. Additionally, our research project benefitted from a relationship with the Youth Development Coordinator of Special Olympics Nova Scotia. As a co-researcher, they supported building relationships and provided foundational knowledge and understanding to assist the partnership in achieving its goals. We suggest PAR university-researchers across all sport spaces, including school sport, ensure that partner recruitment always includes grassroots community groups or individuals with well-established understandings of the complex social issues or phenomena impacting prospective partner communities. We would take that notion a step further and suggest that university-researchers work with or help assemble diverse partner teams with varied voices, experience, and perspectives—all of which may provide the team with the political acumen necessary to prepare for the messiness that often ensues in PAR work.

'Outsider' to 'Insider' Efforts for Researchers
McDougall and Henderson-Brooks (2021) have explained that those who do PAR need an awareness of their insider-to-outsider positionality, especially when working with

vulnerable populations. Often, we, as university-researchers, found ourselves as outsiders focused on the 'research'-related components of the PAR project. Indeed, with so many contributing partners, our expertise and involvement were placed principally upon this, just as others' expertise and involvement were placed elsewhere. For example, PHE Canada organized and delivered the introductory workshop experiences, and teachers and educational assistants supported, on a daily basis, youth's efforts to develop and implement sport programming. With ourselves positioned as (mostly) outsiders throughout the PAR, only afterwards did we fully appreciate how if we had more of an insider position, we might have been able to learn alongside our student co-researchers and keep efforts more aligned with students'unique needs, challenges, and desires associated with the *Game Changers* project. This is not to suggest that partnering schools did not adhere to students' stated needs, identified challenges, and individual desires as hoped and expected, but we certainly found some 'drift' from the initial *Game Changers* goals—drift that might have been interrupted if we (or our PHE Canada partners) had been insiders participating in all school level activities all along.

Researching within a school can be problematic because we could not attend school daily during the research period, nor should we have, as our interest was restricted to activities directly related to the PAR project. However, school teachers and students interact daily, have a more informed understanding of the rules, regulations, and procedures that guide schools, and ultimately, have a more established relationship. Fitzgerald et al. (2021) have explained that however messy, when working with young people, specifically in sport and physical education, PAR is an attractive form of research as it offers opportunities for authentic inclusion, providing a voice for youth. Nevertheless, they have suggested, and Cook (2009) agrees, that we must embrace this messiness and reveal how it may have influenced our research. While we suspect the partnering schools would have welcomed greater involvement on our part, it was neither feasible nor economical. So, this lesson leads to our recommendation: university-researchers ought to aim for insider positions—in so far as it is possible, warranted, or welcomed—when engaging in similar types of sport-related PAR.

Collaborating on the R in PAR
Our PAR process included the familiar and foundational stages of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Lewin, 1946; Robinson et al., 2023). All our co-researcher partners (physical education and special education teachers, students, educational assistants, other school personnel, coaches, national and community sport partners) played some roles in some of these stages. Certainly, teachers, educational assistants, and students were major players when it came to planning, acting, and reflecting. But these major players had no real role with respect to having some input into the research methods used to collect (and/or analyze) data. PAR seeks to democratize the research process, engaging and offering a voice to research participants in a manner not found in traditional researcher-driven methodologies (Young, 2013). While addressing issues of power, hierarchy, and rules that maintain the status quo, not all participants in PAR will engage equitably in the research (Jacobs, 2018; Kearney et al., 2013; Langhout & Thomas, 2010; White et al., 2004). Though students provided data as participants, they were not invited to provide any insight into what sorts of measures made sense to them, or that might be most useful to them. These decisions were

made by other co-researchers, with the support and input offered by PHE Canada, teachers, and parents of our students with disabilities. So, while some may advocate for power sharing to welcome input by more (or all) partners into these decisions and responsibilities, we did not. This was not a principled decision by us but was, rather, a practical one. Bounded and restricted by pressing time constraints (to access grant funding), our universities' Research Ethics Board requirements (to provide detailed data gathering and analysis overviews before beginning PAR), and research ethics approval from the school board and fitting within each school's calendar/timetable made this difficult-to-impossible. Of note, Krogh (1996), a leader in participatory research with people living with disabilities, suggested that the roles and responsibilities of all co-researchers must be identified. Further, these contributions must align with the research goals, and while some of the students in *Game Changers* were non-communicative and developmentally disabled, genuine participation in the PAR process demanded their engagement (Doe & Whyte, 2000). So, though we did not invite these important co-researcher partners to help make decisions related to these PAR research tasks, others must know that doing so should generally be possible and, in many cases, may be ideal.

Research as an Agent of Change

A motivating factor for us as researchers to engage in PAR and what distinguishes it from most other forms of inquiry is that "it offers participants opportunities to share and create conditions for themselves to actively develop forms of action that are in response to their own unmet needs or undesirable conditions, while also co-building and establishing communities of practice" (Robinson et al., 2023, p. 4). As researchers, we hope to initiate change with and through the efforts and engagement of the research partners. The success of PAR partnerships are often rooted in intrinsic actions and not necessarily in self-serving proclamations of partner commitment based on ill-conceived assumptions regarding researcher-partner relationships. When considering our *Game Changers* PAR work, we chose a path of service to our partners, grounded upon researcher positionality, reflection in action, ongoing dialogue, and humility. Throughout our *Game Changers* project, we leaned into celebrating the work of our co-researcher partners. We encourage our colleagues in sport to be mindful and modest when considering how one can build and sustain PAR partnerships. Hard work and commitment to meeting the needs and priorities identified by one's partners, without proclaiming it are more likely to be recognized. Doing so emphasizes processes and outcomes to achieve desirable outcomes for partners. In our case, this approach, in part, also opened larger-scale opportunities to continue with project efforts across Canada.

CONCLUSION

This article presents our point of view on negotiating and building sport- and physical activity-focused PAR partnerships. We assert that it is not our attempt here to be prescriptive. In no way are we here to suggest we offer *the* way but rather, it is our hope that our considerations, approaches, examples, challenges, and opportunities shared will serve as food for thought and/or discussion points for PAR researchers and partner teams to PAR researchers working within the sport context. In our own work, we were able to find *our* way to informed and evidence-based ways to building and sustaining PAR partnerships. Those

efforts were guided by: (a) a desire to help our partners find meaning in the work, (b) reflective practices embedded as core components of both operational and human element interactions, and (c) attending, with great care, to proactively and concomitantly attending to inclusivity and equity as fundamental underpinnings of our work. ◼

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