



“Sporting Habitus”: Goals, Dilemmas, and Practical Pathways of College Physical Education

Mengxun Liu^{1*}

¹School of Physical Education, Jiangxi University of Technology, Jiangxi, 330022, China

Corresponding Author*: Mengxun Liu Email: 1421995374@qq.com

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords

Field-habitus theory
College physical education
Sporting habitus
Collaborative education
Whole-person cultivation

Published

10 June 2025

ABSTRACT

Drawing on Bourdieu’s “field-habitus” theory, this article analyzes the physical-education field and the formation of sporting habitus among college students. It points out that the three fields of family, school, and society exert profound influences on students’ sports-related cognition, habits, and values, jointly shaping their sporting habitus, which in turn reacts upon these fields. The goals of college physical education are clarified as cultivating correct sports values, fostering healthy exercise habits, and nurturing a positive sporting spirit to support students’ holistic development. However, current physical education faces problems such as marginalization, weakening, utilitarianism, superficiality, disciplinization, and symbolization. Accordingly, the article proposes practical pathways including integrating multiple fields to build a collaborative education ecosystem, rooting sports in students’ lifeworld to stimulate self-motivated participation, and deepening sports experiences to achieve spiritual elevation. These approaches aim to break through the limitations of single fields and promote a shift in physical education from “physical training” to “whole-person cultivation,” thereby laying a foundation for developing high-quality talent.

1. Introduction

Since General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized “promoting the all-round development of individuals” and “strengthening youth physical education” (Wan et al., 2025), the state has successively issued a series of policy documents to advance the development of physical education, such as the Opinions on Fully Strengthening and Improving School Physical Education in the New Era. These policies demonstrate the country’s strong commitment to physical education (Yue et al., 2025a). As an important component of cultivating well-rounded talent, college physical education is significant not only for improving students’ physical fitness and athletic skills, but also for shaping their moral character and values in a profound way (Yuqing et al., 2025). However, in practice, many problems have emerged. Physical education courses are marginalized, students show low enthusiasm for exercise, and the integration of physical

Citation: Liu, M. (2025). “Sporting habitus”: Goals, dilemmas, and practical pathways of college physical education. *The Journal of Interactive Social Sciences*, 1(2), 12-23.

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<https://doi.org/10.64744/tjiss.2025.56>

education with ideological and political education remains insufficient. These issues prevent physical education from fully performing its educational function (Chen et al., 2025c). Scholars have studied college physical education from various perspectives. Some rely on teaching experience, while others use empirical data for analysis. Most studies propose improvement strategies based on assessments of current conditions. Yet college physical education should not be limited to experiential summaries or empirical analysis. The introduction of appropriate theoretical frameworks is crucial for deepening understanding and optimizing teaching methods (Zhang et al., 2025).

Bourdieu's theory of field and habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) provides a new analytical perspective. This theory argues that field and habitus interact and together shape individual behavior. In the context of physical education, one must ask which specific fields influence college students and how their sporting habitus is formed. For contemporary college students who are about to enter society and face various challenges, it is important to determine from which aspects their sporting habitus should be shaped so that they can achieve physical and mental health and contribute to the nation and society in the future. Based on these considerations, this study focuses on college students in ordinary universities and examines the physical education field in which they are situated. By clarifying the goals of college physical education, analyzing existing problems, and exploring the internal mechanisms that shape sporting habitus, this study aims to identify more precise directions for improvement and to offer useful insights for the reform and development of college physical education.

2. The Physical Education Field of College Students and Their Sporting Habitus

As an important carrier of the integration of physical education and general education as well as moral education, physical education is a key link in implementing the educational principle of "health first". The subjective initiative and behavioral patterns of college students in sports participation are deeply shaped by the interaction of multiple fields, including family, school, and society. Bourdieu's theory of field and habitus provides a powerful theoretical tool for analyzing the practical mechanisms of college physical education and helps reveal the structural forces behind sports behavior.

2.1 Analysis of the Fields of College Physical Education

Bourdieu emphasized that understanding social phenomena requires examining "the field in which events occur and its internal logic" (Fowler, 2020). The physical education field is a network of relationships constructed by families, schools, and society through sports practice. Each field follows its own operational rules and, through interaction, jointly shapes the sporting habitus of students.

First, the family serves as the starting point for the development of sports cognition and exercise habits. It is the primary soil for sports enlightenment (Stuij, 2015). Parents' sports participation (such as parent child exercise or a family fitness atmosphere) and their views on the value of sports (for example, "sports strengthen the body" or "sports distract from academic study") influence students' attitudes toward physical activity through intergenerational transmission. For instance, a parent who regularly participates in marathons may instill a concept of lifelong exercise, while a family that neglects sports may lead to a sense of distancing from

physical activity. Family economic capital and cultural capital also play key roles. Families with access to sports facilities or training resources are more likely to cultivate students' specialized athletic skills, thereby forming early tendencies in sporting habitus (Hu et al., 2025c).

Second, the school is the central field for systematic physical education. It plays a leading role through curriculum design, teacher guidance, and campus sports culture (Hu et al., 2025d). College physical education courses not only teach skills such as basketball and swimming but also embed moral and ideological elements such as teamwork and perseverance. Extracurricular activities, such as sports meets or club competitions, provide platforms for practice, strengthening students' awareness of rules and competition. Campus sports culture, including health initiatives or stories of successful athlete alumni, helps internalize the idea that "a healthy body is the foundation of talent". In addition, school resources, such as facility availability or coaching quality, directly influence exercise frequency, forming a mediating mechanism of "habitus choices shaped by field constraints" (Yuan et al., 2025a).

Third, society functions as a core field of value orientation. Nationwide fitness trends, such as the "marathon economy" or "community fitness circles", create a social atmosphere in which "exercise is fashionable", encouraging students to incorporate sports into daily life. The role model effect of athletes, such as the discipline of Su Bingtian or the multidimensional development of Gu Ailing, conveys the idea that sports involve more than competition and relate to self transcendence. However, biased societal perceptions of "athletic students" or utilitarian views of sports as merely tools for advancement may distort students' motivations. Social sports facilities, such as gyms and fitness apps, and various events, such as city orienteering or corporate sports meetings, offer diverse exercise settings and promote the transfer and adaptation of habitus across fields (Hu et al., 2025b).

Bourdieu pointed out that "the logic of a field determines the practical strategies of its actors". Family sports enlightenment, school based systematic training, and societal value guidance together form a three dimensional field of physical education. The internal rules of these fields, such as family preferences, school assessment standards, and social trends, shape students' sporting habitus. The habitus then reacts back on these fields, creating a dynamic cycle of structure and practice.

2.2 Examination of College Students' Sporting Habitus

Bourdieu argued that habitus is "embodied history", a lasting manifestation of field structures within individual behavior (Leaney, 2019). The sporting habitus of college students carries the marks of early experiences while also being reshaped by current fields. It can be examined from both diachronic and synchronic perspectives.

From a diachronic perspective, the formation of sporting habitus begins before college. Factors such as the quality of physical education in primary and secondary school, family investment in sports, and regional sports culture constitute the "pre structure" of habitus. For example, a student who has received long term badminton training is more likely to join a university team and maintain regular exercise. In contrast, students with little prior sports experience may experience "exercise anxiety" or passive participation. Bourdieu noted that "habitus is a generative structure". Early developed feelings of enjoyment or aversion toward sports continue to influence decisions in college and may eventually solidify into lifelong tendencies.

From a synchronic perspective, sporting habitus in universities reflects a two way interaction between field and habitus. On the one hand, schools guide the development of appropriate exercise habits through explicit rules such as course assessments and reward mechanisms, and through implicit rules such as teacher student interactions and peer influence. On the other hand, students' preexisting habitus, such as preferences for individual or team sports, shapes how they adapt to field rules. A student who prefers solitude may choose running or yoga, while an extroverted student may prefer basketball or volleyball. This reflects an active screening of the field by habitus. Meanwhile, societal influences shape habitus as well. Consumerism reinforces "gear worship", entertainment culture promotes the gamification of exercise, and health centered trends drive functional training. These forces create complex patterns of student sports behavior. Bourdieu noted that habitus is "a structured structure and a structuring structure". In adapting to sports culture, students may internalize mainstream values such as the "Healthy China" vision, but they may also be affected by alienating tendencies such as body anxiety driven by the pursuit of certain physical ideals.

From the perspective of field and habitus, analyzing college physical education requires attention to how family, school, and society structurally shape sporting habitus, and how habitus in turn influences sports practice. This perspective provides an important entry point for building a coordinated education system that integrates family, school, and society. By improving the sports environment in each field, such as fostering a supportive family atmosphere, innovating school curricula, and creating a healthy social sports culture, educators can guide students toward positive sporting habitus characterized by autonomous participation, lifelong benefits, and value elevation. This enables a shift from passive exercise to active cultivation of the body.

3. Main Goals of College Physical Education

General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized that "sports carry the dreams of national prosperity and national rejuvenation", clearly affirming the importance of physical education for both personal growth and national development. The main goals of college physical education are to cultivate correct values about sports, develop good exercise habits, and foster the spirit of sports, thereby supporting students' all-round development.

3.1 Establishing Correct Values About Sports

The core of college physical education is to help students develop correct values about sports, which cover multiple dimensions such as sports cognition, attitudes, and emotions (Yuan et al., 2025b).

First, students need to develop a scientific understanding of the value of sports. The assertion that "a strong sports sector makes China strong, and national prosperity supports the flourishing of sports" summarizes the importance of sports for national development and personal growth, highlighting the connection between sports, national prosperity, and national rejuvenation. This understanding is the foundation for forming correct values about sports among college students.

Second, it is essential to cultivate positive attitudes toward sports participation. Encouraging a proactive attitude is central to sports education. Only when students genuinely recognize the value of sports and regard physical activity as an indispensable part of life can they transform understanding into real behavior. Instructors in colleges should stimulate students' interest by helping them realize that sports bring not only physical training but also emotional pleasure and

stress relief, thus motivating them to participate voluntarily, engage seriously in exercise, and overcome challenges in sports.

Third, sports education should strengthen students' emotional identification with sports culture. Creating an atmosphere that respects and cherishes sports is crucial. From Olympic athletes who bring honor to the country, such as Su Bingtian breaking the Asian sprint record or Gu Ailing excelling in freestyle skiing, to grassroots sports promoters, these figures vividly demonstrate the power and appeal of sports. Promoting such role models can enhance students' identification with and pride in sports culture, helping them respect sports, honor every participant, and appreciate every achievement (Chen et al., 2025a).

3.2 Developing Good Exercise Habits

While the cultivation of correct sports values is the foundation, the ultimate goal of physical education is to foster good exercise habits, which include regular and scientific exercise.

First, students should develop regular exercise habits. The ancient saying “flowing water does not stagnate, and a frequently used door hinge does not rot” emphasizes the importance of consistency in movement. General Secretary Xi Jinping stated that “national fitness is the basic guarantee for enhancing the health, strength, and happiness of all people” (Hu, 2025b). Regular exercise is a key approach to maintaining health. College students should cultivate habits such as exercising at fixed times and for appropriate durations, for example, running every morning or regularly participating in ball sports. Through long-term persistence, students can overcome laziness, resist unhealthy lifestyles such as excessive sedentary behavior, and make exercise an indispensable part of daily life (Hu et al., 2025a).

Second, students should develop scientific exercise habits. Scientific exercise is essential for ensuring effectiveness and preventing injuries. As the saying goes, “haste makes waste”. Physical activity must follow scientific principles. College students should learn basic knowledge in exercise physiology and sports nutrition, understand their physical condition and exercise characteristics, and choose appropriate sports, intensity levels, and durations.

3.3 Fostering a Positive Spirit of Sports

The spirit of sports is an important force that promotes personal growth and social progress. Cultivating this spirit is essential for both the comprehensive development of college students and the prosperity of national sports (Yue et al., 2025b). The values advocated by General Secretary Xi Jinping, such as perseverance, teamwork, and striving for excellence, are the driving forces behind China's progress in sports. The spirit of sports is rooted in physical activity, manifested through action, and serves as the mental support that drives athletes and sports enthusiasts to continually challenge themselves (Hu and Huang, 2025).

First, the spirit of sports contributes to the spiritual strength needed for national rejuvenation. The Party encourages the promotion of the spirit of sports, inspiring the people to strive for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Victories in sports competitions can enhance national pride and unity. As future pillars of the nation, college students who cultivate the spirit of sports strengthen their national confidence and contribute to the nation's development through strong spiritual motivation.

Second, the spirit of sports supports the fundamental educational mission of fostering virtue.

The core mission of education is to cultivate moral character, and physical education plays a vital role in this process. Elements of the sports spirit, such as perseverance, teamwork, and respect, align closely with the mission of developing moral character. Integrating the sports spirit into higher education helps build students' willpower, teamwork abilities, and virtues of respect, enabling them to grow into well-rounded socialist builders and successors who embody the core values of socialism (Hu, 2025).

Third, the spirit of sports motivates college students to pursue a beautiful life. The sports spirit inspires students to adopt active and healthy lifestyles and to achieve personal aspirations. When facing academic or life pressures, the ideas of self-challenge and surpassing limits encourage students to confront difficulties with courage. Through sports participation, they can release stress and develop a positive mindset. For example, by completing a marathon through determination and perseverance, students not only improve themselves but also gain confidence and enrich their passion for life, thus pursuing a beautiful life through practical action.

4. Key Challenges in College Physical Education

The Opinions on Deepening the Integration of Sports and Education to Promote the Healthy Development of Young People clearly states the need to uphold the principle of "health first" and requires that physical education run through the entire process of talent cultivation. Although universities have accumulated extensive experience in improving fitness and developing athletic skills, conflicts among multiple fields and deviations in educational goals have produced widespread phenomena of "loss of subjectivity" and "loss of value". These superficial tendencies highlight deep structural contradictions that must be addressed.

4.1 Marginalization and Weakening of College Physical Education

On the one hand, the rupture of collaboration among the three major fields is prominent. First, the family field suffers from missing sports enlightenment. Due to the persistence of exam oriented thinking, many families regard physical education as a minor subject or even a waste of time, ignoring its essential role in character formation. Parents' sedentary lifestyles set negative examples, causing college students to lack an innate belief that "exercise is a necessity of life". Some families support sports training only as a means of academic advancement rather than to cultivate lifelong exercise habits, resulting in a split between "short term skill acquisition" and "long term lack of interest".

Second, the school field often reduces the value of physical education. University sports programs frequently fall into a narrow view that limits physical education to physical training and skill instruction, neglecting its essence of character building. Curricula focus too heavily on technical skills and weaken the cultivation of sports spirit. Extracurricular sports activities are often task driven and fail to deeply motivate students' interests. In some universities, limited facilities constrain students' opportunities for free exercise, causing physical education to become merely a "course schedule" rather than a "lifestyle guide" (Deng et al., 2025).

Third, the social field displays distorted values about sports. Public perception is polarized. One view combines "sports are useless" with excessive entertainment, undermining the educational meaning of sports. Another trend, driven by consumerism, creates "symbolic sports practices" that prioritize buying premium gear or going to popular gyms over genuine physical experience and spiritual growth. In addition, workplace cultures such as "996" and the

glorification of overtime shape a pessimistic expectation that “there will be no time to exercise after entering the workforce”, weakening students’ belief in lifelong exercise.

On the other hand, the weakening of sporting habitus reduces motivation for physical practice. Due to the “aftereffects of exam oriented education”, many college students experience gaps in physical ability. In primary and secondary school, physical education was often marginalized, resulting in weak basic fitness and an increased sense of difficulty toward sports in university (Yang et al., 2025). Meanwhile, physical education that focuses mainly on classroom instruction and standardized tests does not cultivate enjoyment or meaningful engagement, causing students to perceive sports as tasks rather than interests. Fragmented entertainment on social media further consumes exercise time. Fitness influencers often create body anxiety without fostering real action. Esports and mobile games replace real physical activities, leading to a split where students intellectually acknowledge the importance of exercise but repeatedly postpone actual participation.

4.2 Utilitarianism and Superficiality in College Physical Education

The goal of “what kind of person to cultivate” has become overly utilitarian, shifting from “cultivating the body” to “cultivating scores”. College physical education often departs from its core mission of shaping character and falls into the trap of instrumental rationality. Some universities equate physical education with metrics such as test pass rates or competition results, reducing students to carriers of performance data instead of holistic persons. The integration of ideological education into physical education is sometimes overly mechanical and fails to facilitate genuine internalization of values. In some cases, athletic recruitment is treated as a tool for institutional achievement, while the cultivation of cultural literacy and sports spirit is neglected. This creates imbalances where students possess strong skills but underdeveloped character, contradicting the essential goal of “educating through sports”.

The process of “how to cultivate people” also becomes superficial, resulting in broken educational chains. Physical education lacks top level design and displays fragmented programming. Course content is repetitive and disconnected from foundational physical education in earlier schooling. Teachers often prioritize skills over theory, limiting their ability to guide students in understanding the relationship between sports and life (Hu and Huang, 2025). Campus sports culture is often performative rather than substantive, failing to create an ecosystem where everyone participates and benefits for life. Integration between sports and moral or intellectual education remains at the slogan level. For example, team sports are underutilized for teaching responsibility, and injury prevention or rehabilitation is seldom used to teach life education. As a result, students receive physical training but not holistic development.

4.3 Disciplinary and Symbolic Tendencies in College Physical Education

Educational methods have become disciplinary, shifting from “autonomous participation” to “passive compliance”. Standardized assessments in physical education constrain individuality. Physical fitness tests rely solely on pass thresholds and ignore individual differences. Teaching focuses excessively on technical correctness, discouraging diverse forms of participation, and reinforcing a mentality of exercising only for testing purposes. Some universities even use physical training as a punitive measure, distorting the positive motivational value of sports and creating negative associations that contradict the goals of enjoying and loving physical activity (Hu, 2025a).

The evaluation system has become symbolic, shifting from “holistic development” to “data worship”. Physical education assessment falls into a quantitative trap. Comprehensive evaluations rely mainly on visible indicators such as test scores and competition awards, while neglecting hidden qualities such as exercise habits, sports ethics, and social adaptability. Evaluation subjects are limited, lacking self evaluation, peer evaluation, and community involvement. Evaluation processes are static and fail to track long term behavior changes. This symbolic evaluation encourages students to participate selectively for extra points rather than from intrinsic motivation. As a result, physical education becomes a symbolic item on transcripts and loses its deeper value of promoting healthy character formation (Xiang et al., 2025).

5. Practical Pathways for College Physical Education

Based on Bourdieu’s theory of field and habitus, college physical education must break through the limitations of single field intervention and build a coordinated system in which the family provides the foundation, schools consolidate development, and society offers empowerment. Through everyday experience and value oriented guidance, the internal motivation of sporting habitus can be activated, enabling the shift from “physical training” to “holistic cultivation”.

5.1 Integrating Multiple Fields to Build a Collaborative Educational Ecosystem

The effectiveness of physical education depends on the systematic collaboration of the family, school, and social fields. It is necessary to break the fragmented pattern in which each field acts independently and form a multidimensional educational community.

First, strengthening the emotional foundation of sports enlightenment. The family serves as the primary incubator of sporting habitus. Its core function is to foster subconscious identification with the idea that “exercise is life” through emotional bonding and behavioral modeling. Families should be encouraged to adopt the concept of a “family sports community” by participating together in parent child cycling, family badminton matches, and other activities. Parents should use their own active lifestyle to convey shared values of healthy living and avoid reducing sports to a tool for academic advantage or rapid weight loss. Instead of valuing only performance, families should emphasize emotional experiences during exercise, helping children form a positive link between sports and enjoyment. Based on household resources, children should be guided to explore a variety of sports, avoiding “elite sport worship” shaped by economic capital and instead developing skills that are applicable throughout life (Chen et al., 2025b).

Second, strengthening the institutional foundation of sports literacy. Universities must move beyond the low level goal of physical fitness standards and establish an integrated curriculum system that combines skill instruction, psychological development, and value guidance. Physical education reform should continue the integration of sports and moral education. For example, team sports such as basketball and soccer can incorporate education on collectivism, while post game reviews can help students understand the interdependence between individuals and teams. Courses in traditional Chinese sports such as martial arts or tai chi can strengthen cultural confidence by explaining philosophical ideas such as “softness overcoming strength” and “harmony between humans and nature”, creating resonance between skill learning and spiritual development.

A new ecosystem that integrates class and extracurricular activities should be developed.

Breaking the time and space limitations of the classroom, a practice chain that links “curriculum, clubs, competitions, and volunteer service” can be established. Courses teach basic skills, clubs allow deepening of interests, campus leagues build competitiveness and teamwork, and community sports volunteer work develops social responsibility. Personalized exercise prescriptions should be provided for students who struggle with fitness tests to avoid the negative effects of one size fits all assessments. Smart sports facilities should remain open all day, while fitness apps should be used to track long term behavior, transforming physical education from a periodic task to an everyday habit.

Third, expanding the social spaces for sports practice. The social field should integrate sports into the broader context of the Healthy China initiative and promote the idea that sports represent social participation. Companies and communities should open sports facilities and offer low cost or free training, breaking the barriers of expensive or exclusive spaces. Sports organizations can cooperate with universities to host events that take students beyond the campus. Media should focus on sports spirit instead of entertainment, telling stories of athletes’ perseverance and critiquing celebrity packaging driven by popularity metrics. Society should promote diverse standards of athletic beauty and oppose body anxiety and gear worship created by consumerism. Employers can include exercise habits and teamwork abilities in talent evaluations, while college career services can offer courses on “sports and the workplace”, reinforcing the concept that sports literacy is a key component of competitiveness.

5.2 Rooting Physical Education in Daily Life to Stimulate Autonomous Participation

The vitality of physical education lies in its deep integration with daily life. Through scene based experiences, everyday applications, and social participation, exercise can become a way of being for college students.

First, designing sports activities around everyday life. A system of micro exercises embedded in daily routines should be encouraged. To address habits such as prolonged sitting or staying up late, universities can promote dormitory fitness routines, stair climbing challenges in libraries, and short stretching sessions between classes. Ritualized events such as “21 day exercise challenges” and “graduation cycling tours around campus” can transform sports from occasional tasks to habitual life practices. Customization should also be supported by offering a “sports supermarket” model in which students freely select activities and form interest based groups, fostering autonomy and reducing disengagement.

Second, expanding sports practice toward social needs. Students can participate in community fitness programs or rural sports education initiatives linked to national strategies such as rural revitalization. Through these experiences, students deepen their understanding of how sports empower social development.

Third, linking sports to contemporary societal issues. Activities such as “campus green cycling day” can highlight carbon neutrality, while cultural festivals for traditional sports can promote cultural heritage. By embedding sports within broader social themes, students develop an awareness of how personal actions contribute to social progress, moving beyond merely physical participation.

5.3 Deepening Sports Experiences to Elevate Students from Physical Participation to Spiritual Identification

The ultimate goal of physical education is to elevate students' inner world through physical practice by balancing sensory joy with profound psychological identification (Huang et al., 2025b).

On the one hand, embodied cognition must be strengthened. Teaching should emphasize sensory awakening, encouraging students to reflect on bodily feelings during exercise and to understand concepts such as persistence and breakthrough through direct experience. Excessive reliance on performance data should be avoided. Students should instead learn to engage in meaningful dialogue with their own bodies. For students who struggle with sports, gradual empowerment approaches can be used. Fitness test failures should be recorded in "growth portfolios" that document improvement rather than simply labeling failure. Non competitive events can also be organized with awards such as "most improved" or "best teamwork" to ensure that all students find a sense of accomplishment instead of experiencing defeat (Huang et al., 2025a).

On the other hand, meaningful spiritual experiences should be constructed. Students should learn to cultivate resilience through sports by reflecting on challenges and transforming setbacks into opportunities for growth. Stories of ordinary athletes can help students understand that the value of sports lies in self transcendence rather than defeating others. Collective sports can help build shared values. Tactical cooperation in basketball demonstrates the need to prioritize collective goals. The baton handoff in relays teaches responsibility. Post game handshakes represent fairness and respect. Events such as the Chinese women's volleyball team's comeback victories or the ascent of Mount Everest by Chinese mountaineers can be used for classroom discussions, helping students connect sports spirit with national rejuvenation and transforming physical experience into a sense of responsibility for the nation.

6. Conclusion

The transformation of college physical education represents a shift from field imposed discipline to conscious habitus. Through emotional experiences within the family field, systematic development within the school field, and value empowerment from the social field, a spiral system of bodily practice, psychological identification, and value elevation can be constructed. When sporting habitus transcends external constraints and becomes a personal need for self realization, and when sports become not merely a course, task, or trend but a lifestyle and spiritual conviction, the goal of educating through sports can truly take root. This will cultivate a new generation with strong bodies, resilient minds, and firm values.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to all respondents who participated in this study.

Funding

There is no fundings for this work.

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