

# From Exam Orientation to Educational Value: Rethinking Junior High School Football Education in China

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v14-i4/26837>

**Published Online:** 10 November 2025

## Abstract

Under the comprehensive reform of the Physical Education Entrance Examination in China, football has become an essential component of junior high school physical education as one of the elective test items. To explore the current situation of football education under exam-oriented pressure, this study selected ten junior high schools in Nanchang City as research subjects. Using questionnaires, literature review, and classroom observation, the study analyzed the implementation of football courses in terms of teaching content, teacher allocation, facilities, student participation, and policy influence. The results show that while the PE entrance examination has increased the importance attached to football education, the curriculum remains largely exam-oriented, with overly simplified teaching content and insufficient focus on tactics, theory, and match experience. The shortage of qualified teachers, uneven resource distribution, and limited professional development opportunities restrict the quality of football instruction. Students' participation is mainly motivated by exam requirements rather than genuine interest, and the educational and formative value of football has not been fully realized. Moreover, policy implementation at the grassroots level remains weak, showing a gap between official directives and actual practice. The study concludes that to enhance the effectiveness of football education, it is necessary to restructure curricula, strengthen teacher training, improve facility and resource allocation, and reform evaluation mechanisms, thereby transforming football courses from an exam-driven model to an educational and value-oriented one. This transformation will promote students' physical health, teamwork, and holistic development.

**Keywords:** Physical Education Entrance Examination, Junior High School Football, Curriculum Implementation, Examination-Oriented Education, Campus Football

## Introduction

Physical education (PE) plays a fundamental role in cultivating students' physical fitness, moral development, and lifelong participation in sports (Ismail et al., 2024; Mazlumi, 1999). With the continuous advancement of China's education reform, the status of PE has been

elevated from a marginal subject to a core component of holistic education (Jin AiJing, 2013; Yan et al., 2021). Against this backdrop, the Physical Education Entrance Examination (PEEE) has become a key mechanism for evaluating not only students' physical competence but also the overall quality of school-based PE programs (Dong et al., 2023). The implementation of the PEEE has effectively increased the visibility and participation of PE across schools, however, it has also generated growing concern about the examination-oriented tendencies that may undermine the broader educational goals of physical education (Thorburn, 2019). Among various PE disciplines, football education holds a particularly significant position (Анікеєнко et al., 2023). As one of the most influential and widely promoted sports in Chinese schools, football contributes to the realization of the Healthy China 2030 strategy and the National Campus Football Development Plan (Gao et al., 2021; LIU et al., 2021). The inclusion of football as an elective subject in the PEEE reflects the government's determination to advance youth football and strengthen physical education reform (Siedentop & Van der Mars, 2022). Nevertheless, a persistent gap exists between policy intent and educational practice (Broekkamp & Van Hout-Wolters, 2007). In many schools, football instruction remains narrowly focused on test preparation. Lessons are dominated by repetitive drills—such as juggling, passing, and shooting—while students receive limited exposure to tactical understanding, teamwork, and game-based learning (García-Ceberino et al., 2020a). Consequently, the intrinsic educational value of football, such as cooperation, discipline, and cultural identity, is often neglected (Alfurqan et al., 2024; Muratov, 2025a).

In addition, the lack of qualified teachers and limited teaching resources further constrain the quality of football education (Song, 2023a). Many schools rely on general PE teachers rather than specialized football instructors, resulting in weak curriculum design and limited pedagogical innovation (Dixon, 2020). Moreover, the shortage of standard football fields and insufficient facilities exacerbate this challenge (Yang, 2025). Some schools face the dilemma of “courses without fields” or “fields that cannot be effectively used,” leading to fragmented and unsystematic instruction. Such misalignments between policy and practice weaken the overall effectiveness of the reform (Peng et al., 2023).

From the students' perspective, although the PEEE has raised awareness of football, learning motivation tends to be utilitarian rather than interest-driven (Tendinha et al., 2021a). A large proportion of students choose football simply because it is perceived as an “easier option” for scoring higher marks, rather than from genuine enthusiasm (Zhao & Meng, 2021). Their understanding of football remains confined to technical skills, with little appreciation for its cultural or moral dimensions. This phenomenon not only limits the developmental value of the curriculum but also hinders the formation of a lasting football culture on campus.

Overall, the football curriculum under the PEEE framework reflects a broader tension between policy-driven reform and educational practice (Paveling et al., 2019). The challenge lies in balancing exam requirements with the cultivation of physical literacy and personal growth (Alesi et al., 2015). Addressing this issue requires transforming football education from a test-oriented activity into a value-oriented learning process that embodies the holistic educational goals of physical education (Lundvall & Fröberg, 2023). This study takes ten junior high schools in Nanchang as its research sample. It systematically investigates the current state of football curriculum implementation, including curriculum design, teaching content,

teacher allocation, facility resources, and student participation. The study aims to reveal the impact of the PEEE on football education, identify existing challenges, and propose targeted strategies for improvement.

Theoretically, this research enriches the literature on school PE under examination-oriented reforms and extends the discourse on campus football within the context of educational evaluation transformation. Practically, it provides valuable implications for policy-makers, school administrators, and frontline teachers, offering evidence-based insights for enhancing curriculum quality, reforming evaluation systems, and promoting the integration of football into holistic student development.

## Research Subjects and Methods

### *Research Subjects*

This article takes 10 middle schools in Nanchang City (Nanchang No.1 Middle School, No.2 Middle School, No.5 Middle School, No.6 Middle School, Baixing School, Chang'en Central Primary School, Jinghui School, Yuming School, Xin Yuehu School, and Xin Yuehu School Part Two) as the research subjects.

## Research Methods

### *Questionnaire Survey Method*

10 middle schools in Nanchang City were randomly selected to distribute questionnaires. In each school, 4 teacher questionnaires and 30 student questionnaires (10 for each grade from grade 7 to grade 9) were randomly distributed. The questionnaires were distributed and collected on-site by some of the teachers and students. From December 2023 to April 2024, 45 teacher questionnaires and 300 student questionnaires were distributed, and 45 and 285 were collected respectively. The valid questionnaires were 45 and 265, with validity rates of 100.0% and 92.9%, and the recovery rates were 100.0% and 95% (Table 1).

Table 1

*Overview of Questionnaire Distribution, Collection, Validity, and Response Rate*

Respondent Type	Questionnaires Distributed	Questionnaires Collected	Valid Questionnaires	Return Rate (%)	Valid Response
Teachers	45	45	45	100.0	100.0
Students	300	285	265	95	92.9

### *Validity Test of the Questionnaire*

The questionnaire was designed and refined with the assistance of experienced teacher, professional football educators, and academic experts to ensure its content validity.

Table 2

*Expert Validity Evaluation (N = 6)*

Category of Experts	Professors	Associate Professors	Lecturers	Total
Number	2	2	2	5
Proportion (%)	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%	100%

The evaluation criteria consisted of four levels: "Very Appropriate," "Fairly Appropriate," "Average," and "Inappropriate." The results of the expert assessment suggested that the

questionnaire adequately captured the intended research content, exhibited satisfactory validity, and was suitable for use in this study. Overall, the instrument was deemed capable of objectively reflecting the topics investigated.

Table 3

*Assessment of Questionnaire Appropriateness (N = 6)*

	<b>Very Appropriate</b>	<b>Fairly Appropriate</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Inappropriate</b>	<b>Total</b>
Number	1	4	1	0	6
Proportion (%)	16.6%	66.7%	16.6%	0	100%

#### *Reliability Test of the Questionnaire*

The reliability of the questionnaire was tested using the test–retest method (Table 4). After an interval of one month (30 days), 15 teachers and 25 students were randomly selected from the ten participating schools to complete the same questionnaire under identical conditions. A total of 15 teacher questionnaires and 25 student questionnaires were collected, among which 15 and 23 were valid, resulting in recovery rates of 100.0% and 93.3%, and valid rates of 100.0% and 86.7%, respectively. The reliability coefficients for teachers and students were  $R_1 = 0.82$  and  $R_2 = 0.76$ , indicating that the questionnaire demonstrated a high level of reliability and met the requirements for this study.

Table 4

*Reliability Test of the Questionnaire (N = 40)*

<b>Respondent Group</b>	<b>Retest Sample Size</b>	<b>Interval (Days)</b>	<b>Correlation Coefficient (r)</b>
Teachers	15	30	$R_1=0.82$
Students	25	30	$R_2=0.76$

## **Results**

### *Total Physical Education Class Hours and Weekly Football Lessons*

The number of class hours is a fundamental guarantee for the normal implementation of physical education and health courses. However, due to the influence of the “exam-oriented education system,” schools and parents place much greater emphasis on academic subjects than on physical education, resulting in a reduction of PE class hours. After the government issued relevant documents specifying the requirements for physical education courses in primary and secondary schools, most schools began to follow the PE curriculum standards to ensure compliance.

According to the investigation, all ten surveyed schools in Nanchang’s Xinjian District have set up Physical Education and Health courses, with an average of two classes every two weeks. In the ninth grade, students typically have two PE classes per week or more. Nevertheless, field research revealed that the phenomenon of PE lessons being occupied by other academic subjects still exists in some schools (Table 5).

Table 5

*Weekly Football Class Hours in Junior High Schools of Nanchang City*

School	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9
DYXX	More than 2 classes	1 class	Less than 1 class
SYXX	More than 2 classes	2 classes	1 class
JHXX	2 classes	2 classes	1 class
DEXX	More than 2 classes	2 classes	Less than 2 classes
DSXX	More than 2 classes	1 class	1 class
YMXX	2 classes	2 classes	Less than 1 class
XYXX	More than 2 classes	2 classes	1 class
BXXX	More than 2 classes	2 classes	2 classes
DLXX	More than 1 class	1 class	Less than 1 class
DQXX	2 classes	1 class	Less than 1 class

As football is one of the elective events in the Physical Education Entrance Examination, some students choose football as their test item. This choice is particularly common among students who have limited exposure to other sports, as they tend to regard football as a “lifeline” for passing the PE examination. To meet students’ examination needs, some schools include football instruction within the Physical Education and Health curriculum. However, due to constraints in class hours, field availability, and teaching staff, the number of football-specific courses remains limited.

A few schools, such as DEXX, offered up to 18 class hours of specialized football training in Grades 7 and 8. Nevertheless, by Grade 9, as academic pressure increases, the actual number of football teaching hours in many schools falls far below the curriculum standard, as observed in schools such as DQXX, DLXX, and YMXX. Only a small number of schools allocate more than 20% of their total PE hours to football courses in the final year, and this proportion is largely supplemented by extended after-class training sessions rather than regular curriculum hours.

*Analysis of Football Teaching Content*

In practice, football requires mastery of numerous techniques, many of which are highly complex. Fundamental skills, theoretical knowledge, game rules, and basic tactics are all essential components of football education. If classroom teaching focuses solely on juggling to prepare students for the Physical Education Entrance Examination, students will be unable to truly experience the charm and enjoyment of football, thus losing interest in the sport. Moreover, they will fail to develop complete football skills or understand its theoretical foundations.

In teaching practice, many teachers tend to emphasize the exam-related content while neglecting broader aspects of football education. For instance, if ball juggling is part of the PE examination, teachers often limit their lessons exclusively to juggling drills. This phenomenon is prevalent in the surveyed schools. Among the 40 PE teachers surveyed, nine had no experience teaching football courses. Of the remaining 31 teachers, 74.4% focused solely on passing and shooting techniques; only 7.0% incorporated football theory, rules, and tactical instruction; and merely 3.0% included content such as flank attacks and defensive strategies. The detailed statistics of football teaching content among PE teachers in junior high schools in Nanchang’s Xinjian District are presented in Table 6.

Table 6

*Distribution of Football Teaching Content among PE Teachers (N = 31)*

Teaching Content	Number of Teachers	Percentage (%)
Football Theory	2	7
<b>Football Game Rules</b>	2	7
Passing and Shooting Techniques	24	74.4
Basic Techniques (Defense and Offense)	2	7
Matches	1	3

According to the data presented in Table 6, football juggling has been officially included as a test item in the Physical Education Entrance Examination in Nanchang. However, other fundamental football skills that are not directly assessed in the exam are often neglected by teachers and therefore rarely taught. Football theory, in particular, is essential for helping students gain a deeper understanding of the sport's essence and the fundamentals of playing football correctly. It also contributes to developing students' awareness of teamwork and mutual support. Learning about match rules, basic techniques, and fundamental tactics forms the foundation for students to actively participate in football activities. The application of technical and tactical skills in real game situations represents the core of football education. Without such comprehensive instruction, students may master isolated techniques but fail to understand the strategic and cooperative aspects that define football as a collective and dynamic sport.

*Students' Participation in the Football Test*

According to the data in Table 7, the number of students who chose football as their Physical Education Entrance Examination event was the highest, followed by basketball, with volleyball ranking third. The smallest proportion of students selected other events, most of whom were those with specific athletic specialties preparing to enter high school through talent-based programs. Among the three major ball games, football is considered to have a relatively lower technical difficulty, which is the main reason for its popularity among students. In contrast, students who selected volleyball or basketball generally possessed prior experience or foundational skills in those sports, which influenced their choice of examination event.

Table 7

*Distribution of Students' Physical Education Test Choices (N = 285)*

Course	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Football	96	33.68
Volleyball	76	26.66
Basketball	89	31.22
Others	24	8.42

**Football Teaching in Junior High Schools of Nanchang***Current Situation of Football Classroom Teaching*

Basic training forms the core component of football courses, as the teaching process in football cannot be separated from skill development. All teachers included warm-up activities and technical drills in their lessons; however, tactical and physical training were often missing. The investigation revealed that only 15% of the teachers incorporated tactical training, while 47.5% arranged physical fitness training.

As shown in Table 8, the main objective of football teaching in junior high schools is largely determined by the requirements of the Physical Education Entrance Examination. This reflects the profound influence of the examination-oriented “command baton” on football curriculum instruction. As a result, exam preparation has become the primary goal of football teaching, while the technical and tactical aspects of football training receive limited attention from students. Everything in the teaching process tends to yield to academic advancement.

Table 8

*Football Teaching and Training Content (N = 40)*

Content	Number	Percentage (%)
Physical Fitness Training	19	47.5
Tactical Training	6	15
Basic Techniques	40	100

*Teacher–Student Ratio in Junior High School Football Classes*

According to the Provisional Basic Standards for School Physical Education and Health Conditions issued by the state, at least one physical education teacher is required for every six to seven classes in junior high schools. Currently, some junior high schools in Nanchang have a relatively large student population, with class sizes ranging from 50 to 60 students, while others have fewer students, with approximately 30 to 40 students per class. Based on theoretical standards, the ratio of physical education teachers to students should be approximately 1:300. To examine the actual situation in Nanchang’s junior high schools, this study calculated the total number of physical education teachers and total number of junior high school students in each sampled school, and then determined the specific teacher–student ratios accordingly ( Table 9).

From a teaching perspective, the development of football programs in Nanchang’s junior high schools is constrained by the insufficient number of physical education teachers. Since PE teachers are required to cover multiple sports disciplines, it is difficult for them to dedicate sufficient time and energy to football instruction. As a result, football often receives inadequate attention in the curriculum. This situation has led to some students having little or no opportunity to participate in football activities, while also limiting teachers’ professional growth in this field. Except for a few high-quality schools, the shortage of qualified PE teachers is a common issue affecting the implementation of football programs in Nanchang’s junior high schools. To promote the sustainable development of football education, schools should adopt a series of measures—such as increasing the number of teachers, providing specialized training, and establishing cooperative partnerships—to ensure that students have adequate opportunities to engage in football learning and practice.



Table 9

*Teacher–Student Ratios in Junior High School Physical Education in Nanchang*

School	Number of Teachers	Number of Students	Teacher–Student Ratio
DYXX	7	1436	1:205
SYXX	6	1529	1:255
JHXX	6	1329	1:221
DEXX	5	1100	1:220
DSXX	5	1803	1:360
YMXX	3	836	1:279
XYXX	5	1257	1:251
BXXX	6	2039	1:340
DLXX	5	1795	1:359
DQXX	5	1326	1:265

**Football Facilities and Equipment in Nanchang’s Junior High Schools***Football Equipment: Current Status and Analysis*

All junior high schools in Nanchang are equipped with footballs. Among them, two schools have 50 or fewer footballs, accounting for 20% of the total. One of these schools does not offer a specialized football course, but still possesses footballs, it possibly to prepare students for the Physical Education Entrance Examination or as a result of previously conducted football activities. Meanwhile, two schools have more than 201 footballs, also accounting for 20%. Footballs are among the easiest types of teaching equipment to provide, as they are essential for class activities and can be used for basic skill training such as juggling, which does not require a specialized football field. Football practice directly supports preparation for the PE examination, making it one of the most accessible and commonly equipped teaching resources in schools.

Table 10

*Statistics of Football Quantity Survey (Number of Schools = 10)*

Number of Footballs	≤ 50	51–100	101–200	≥ 201
Number of Schools	2	3	3	2
Percentage (%)	20	30	30	20

The reason for the limited number of goalposts is that the football requirements in the Physical Education Entrance Examination are not demanding in terms of field facilities. Even without goalposts, schools can still conduct football lessons effectively. Although every school has corner flags, reaching a 100% equipment rate, their actual use in teaching is limited. During football learning, students mainly practice isolated technical skills and rarely participate in formal matches. Only a small number of school team members take part in competitive games where corner flags are actually used.

Table 11

*Statistics of Other Football Equipment (Number of Schools = 10)*

Category	Goalposts	Corner Flags
Number of Schools	9	13
Percentage (%)	90	130



*Analysis of Teachers' and Students' Satisfaction with Football Facilities*

As shown in Table 12, 25.39% of teachers and students were “very satisfied,” 66.03% were “basically satisfied,” and 8.75% expressed dissatisfaction. The combined proportion of “very satisfied” and “basically satisfied” respondents reached 91.33%, while the level of dissatisfaction was only 8.57%. When comparing this satisfaction data with the actual field facility survey results, it was found that the existing football field and facility resources in schools do not fully meet the general requirements for football lessons. However, the overall satisfaction of teachers and students remains high, with only 8.57% expressing dissatisfaction. This indicates that the objective limitations of field and facility conditions are not the primary factors restricting football instruction. Rather, it suggests that football teaching in these schools relies less on field conditions, involving minimal physical confrontation and tactical competition. Consequently, the level of football instruction in junior high schools remains at a relatively basic stage.

Table 12

*Statistics of Teachers' and Students' Satisfaction on Football Facilities (N = 315)*

Satisfaction Level	Very Satisfied	Basically Satisfied	Dissatisfied
Teachers / Students (n)	80	208	27
Percentage (%)	25.39	66.03	8.57

**Discussion**

This study situated in the context of the deepening implementation of the Physical Education Entrance Examination (PEEE) policy, conducted an empirical investigation of football curriculum implementation in ten junior high schools in Nanchang. The findings reveal the developmental characteristics and major challenges faced by football education under examination pressure. The results show that the PEEE has, to some extent, increased schools' attention to football courses, raising both course availability and student participation rates. This policy-driven attention is often characterized by utilitarian and short-term motivations, schools focus primarily on improving exam scores, neglecting the broader educational role of football in fostering students' physical and mental development (Skelton, 2000).

In terms of curriculum content and teaching objectives, junior high school football programs demonstrate a strong examination-oriented tendency. Most schools concentrate their teaching on basic technical drills such as juggling, passing, and shooting, aligning lesson design with exam scoring standards. This results in insufficient guidance for cultivating students' interest, tactical understanding, and game experience (T. Yao et al., 2023). Although such “technical-monism” instruction may improve short-term performance, it diminishes the holistic educational value of the course. The study also found that football classes in some schools feature unstable scheduling, repetitive content, and one-dimensional evaluation systems, lacking progression and systematic structure (García-Ceberino et al., 2020b). In contrast, international practices in countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Japan emphasize teamwork, rule awareness, and cooperative learning in football education—highlighting its broader humanistic function (Muratov, 2025b). Therefore, China's

junior high school football curriculum still needs to shift from a technique-oriented to a competence-oriented educational philosophy.

Teachers' professional competence and school resource allocation are key determinants of curriculum quality. The study reveals that football courses generally suffer from a shortage of qualified teachers and limited specialization. Most instructors are general physical education teachers with insufficient football expertise and curriculum design ability. Owing to teacher shortages and heavy workloads, some schools adopt temporary or part-time teaching arrangements, resulting in discontinuity and superficial instruction. Although basic facilities and equipment are available, the proportion of standard football fields remains low. Some schools experience a "course without field" phenomenon or have fields that cannot be used effectively. Multi-functional sharing of facilities further constrains instructional space and efficiency. Such misalignment between policy goals and educational infrastructure undermines the intended outcomes of policy implementation.

From the student perspective, while the PEEE has heightened students' awareness of football, their learning motivation remains largely utilitarian(Tendinha et al., 2021b). Approximately one-third of students choose football as their exam event mainly because it is perceived as "easier to score," rather than out of genuine interest. Their understanding of football remains limited to exam-related skills, with shallow appreciation of football culture, values, and rules. The study also notes that student engagement correlates strongly with teaching methods: traditional lecture-based instruction leads to low motivation, whereas lessons involving group games, cooperative tasks, or playful competitions significantly enhance enthusiasm. This suggests that exam orientation has weakened the intrinsic enjoyment and educational significance of football classes, highlighting the need for more student-centered pedagogical designs(Ghaleb, 2024). From a macro-policy perspective, several national initiatives—such as the Healthy China 2030 Plan, the School Physical Education Reform Program for the New Era, and the Overall Plan for Deepening the Reform of Educational Evaluation—have provided strong institutional support for school sports and campus football(G. Yao et al., 2021). However, this study found a policy implementation gap characterized by the phenomenon of being "enthusiastic at the top but lukewarm at the bottom." Some schools demonstrate limited understanding and weak execution of policies, causing a disconnection between football courses and overall educational goals. Policy support often remains at the document level, lacking concrete implementation in curriculum design, evaluation systems, and resource allocation(Hasballah, 2024).

Although the reform of the Physical Education Entrance Examination has created opportunities for the development of junior high school football education, challenges remain, including exam-oriented tendencies, insufficient resources, low teacher specialization, and incomplete policy enforcement(Song, 2023b). Achieving high-quality development of football curricula requires coordinated reforms in educational philosophy, curriculum design, teacher training, and institutional support(Zhang & Tian, 2021). The transformation from "exam-oriented sports" to "competence-oriented sports," and from "skill training" to "holistic education," is essential for realizing the true educational value of football in junior high schools(Muratov, 2025c).

## Conclusion

This study investigated the current implementation of junior high school football education within the context of China's Physical Education Entrance Examination (PEEE) reform. The results indicate that the PEEE has improved the visibility and participation of football courses, yet the curriculum remains dominated by examination-oriented objectives. Teaching content is largely limited to basic technical drills, while issues such as insufficient teacher specialization, unbalanced resource allocation, and low student interest persist. Schools often regard football as an exam preparation tool rather than as a means of promoting holistic development.

To address these challenges, a shift from skill-based to competence-oriented education is essential. Football curricula should emphasize technical skills, tactical understanding, competitive practice, and cultural awareness, allowing students to experience both the physical and moral dimensions of sport. Teacher professionalization must also be strengthened through systematic training, inter-school collaboration, and the inclusion of qualified external coaches. These measures would enhance instructional design and teaching quality.

Moreover, optimizing resource allocation and improving field and equipment conditions are critical for equitable access to football education. The evaluation system of the PEEE should evolve toward multi-dimensional assessment, focusing on process learning and overall competence rather than technical performance alone. In essence, the development of junior high school football education requires a coordinated effort among educational philosophy, teacher capacity, resource management, and policy implementation. The ultimate goal is to transform football teaching from exam-driven instruction to value-oriented education, thereby realizing the broader aim of physical education—to nurture healthy, skilled, and socially responsible students.

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