

# How Physical Education Develops University Students' Social Skills in China: A Dual Perspective

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**DOI Link:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v14-i4/27094>

**Published Online:** 11 December 2025

## Abstract

Physical education (PE) not only enhances students' physical fitness but also plays a crucial role in cultivating essential social competencies. Despite demonstrating strong academic and professional knowledge, many Chinese university students still lack comprehensive competencies—particularly communication, coordination, and workplace adaptability. Guided by Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory, this qualitative study explores how university PE contributes to developing interpersonal skills, teamwork ability, emotional quotient (EQ), persuasion and presentation skills, respect and responsibility. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with PE teachers and university students to examine their perceptions and experiences. The findings reveal that both teachers and students view PE as an effective platform for social skills development. Cooperative and competitive learning environments in PE classes are shown to enhance interpersonal skills, teamwork ability, EQ, persuasion and presentation skills and respect and responsibility. However, results varies due to differences in teaching design, class size, and learning atmosphere. Based on the actual situation, this study has proposed corresponding solutions to address these issues. This study enriches theoretical understandings of PE's social function and provides practical implications for optimizing curriculum design to cultivate socially competent, holistically developed university students.

**Keywords:** Physical Education, Higher Education, Social Skills, SLT Theory, SDT Theory

## Introduction

A fundamental purpose of education is to cultivate well-rounded individuals who develop morally, intellectually, physically, aesthetically, and practically. In the process of personal growth, multiple factors interact to shape an individual's character and competence, and

physical education (PE) stands out as a pivotal element—not merely for enhancing physical fitness and physiological functioning, but as a cornerstone of holistic development (Jian, 2022). Defined as a systematic instructional process designed to improve students' physical condition and motor skills while fostering lifelong health knowledge and habits (Ma & Zhao, 2019), PE exerts far-reaching influences beyond physical ability: studies have linked it to psychological development, personality formation, value shaping, and professional ethics (Cagongon & Osorno, 2023), while also contributing to long-term health maintenance through sustained physical activity engagement (Liu, 2022). Against the backdrop of China's ongoing efforts to elevate education quality, PE has increasingly integrated into the core of holistic education, aligning closely with the nation's quality-oriented education goals (Fu, 2018).

In recent years, PE in China—particularly within higher education—has undergone profound reform, driven by the government's emphasis on comprehensive quality education (Liu & Li, 2017). As hubs for nurturing high-level talent, universities are mandated to prioritize students' all-around development and cultivate adaptable, well-balanced modern citizens. Most Chinese universities now operate under an integrated educational framework encompassing moral, intellectual, physical, and aesthetic development, where PE plays an irreplaceable role in promoting physical and mental health, character building, and social adaptability. To reinforce these objectives, national authorities—including the Ministry of Education and the General Administration of Sport—have issued a series of policy directives, such as *The Outline for Building a Leading Sports Nation* (General Office of the State Council, 2019), *Opinions on Strengthening and Improving School Physical Education in the New Era* (General Office of the State Council, 2020), and *Guidelines for Physical Education Curriculum in Higher Education Institutions (Trial)* (Ministry of Education, 2021). Collectively, these policies position PE as a foundational component of China's educational modernization, with the 2021 guidelines explicitly mandating that university PE should help students "enjoy physical activity, improve fitness, strengthen personal character, and cultivate perseverance"—goals inherently linked to social skill development.

Despite these policy advancements and the intended role of PE in fostering social adaptability, empirical evidence reveals persistent deficiencies in Chinese university students' social skills. *The Report on the Social Attitudes of Chinese University Students* (Liu & Zang, 2023) highlights relatively low levels of social trust and perceived fairness among undergraduates, indicating challenges in social integration and institutional engagement. Complementary research further identifies gaps in social-emotional competence, including weaknesses in self-awareness, self-management, interpersonal communication, and responsible decision-making (Zhang, 2023). Additionally, many students report feelings of isolation and inadequate communication skills during the transition from academic to professional environments, perpetuating concerns about their social adaptability (Linfei et al., 2021). These observations create a critical disconnect: while national policies and educational frameworks position PE as a catalyst for holistic development—including social skill acquisition—current research and real-world outcomes suggest that this potential remains under-explored and underutilized.

What distinguishes this study from existing literature is its focused exploration of the mechanisms through which PE shapes university students' social skills within the unique context of China's quality-oriented education reform. Unlike most prior research that either emphasizes PE's physical or academic outcomes or offers broad correlations between PE and

social development, this study adopts a dual-perspective (teachers and students) qualitative approach to unpack the specific processes. Through which PE fosters key social competencies. In terms of contributions to social science, this research enriches the interdisciplinary dialogue between sports sociology and education sociology by empirically validating the role of PE as a socialization agent in higher education. It also addresses the gap in non-Western contexts by providing context-specific evidence for how formal PE systems interact with cultural and policy environments to shape young adults' social development, offering valuable insights for scholars studying holistic education, youth socialization, and policy implementation globally.

To address this gap, the present study aims to systematically investigate how university PE in China promotes students' social skills. By employing interviews with both PE teachers and students, the research explores the underlying mechanisms through which PE contributes to the development of key social competencies, including communication skills, teamwork abilities, emotional quotient (EQ), respect, responsibility, and persuasion skills. Ultimately, this study seeks to clarify the strategic role of PE in cultivating high-quality, socially competent talent, thereby providing theoretical insights and practical recommendations for optimizing PE curriculum design in alignment with China's holistic education goals.

## Literature Review

### *Social Learning Theory Framework*

Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT) suggests that individuals develop new behaviors through observation, imitation, and interaction with others (Bandura, 1986). In the context of PE, this theory appears particularly applicable because students frequently participate in shared learning situations where they watch and respond to their peers, work in groups, and receive immediate feedback. Such environments naturally expose students to social cues that may contribute to the development of interpersonal and collaborative skills.

A number of studies have pointed out that PE can help foster social skills when cooperative learning structures are intentionally embedded. Research indicates that participation in cooperative or team-based PE activities contributes to improvements in teamwork, empathy, communication, and conflict-resolution abilities (Zhou & Colomer, 2024). Meanwhile, social-emotional training interventions implemented within PE lessons have been shown to enhance interpersonal interaction and emotional awareness (Malinauskas & Malinauskienė, 2021), suggesting that social benefits are not merely incidental. These findings align with SLT principles: students learn prosocial behaviors not only through direct instruction but also through observation of peers and teachers in real-time social settings.

Beyond classroom instruction, extracurricular involvement has also been reported as an important pathway for social development. University workshops and activity-based participation were found to improve social adaptability and interpersonal competence (Erol, 2023), while engagement in sports clubs was associated with higher levels of cooperative behavior and professional conduct (Jamal, 2012). These extracurricular environments provide ongoing opportunities for students to model and internalize effective social behaviors, reinforcing SLT's emphasis on learning within social contexts.

Furthermore, research demonstrates that PE also contributes to students' emotional well-being, which indirectly strengthens their social interactions. For example, increased

participation in physical activity was found to boost perceived social support through better emotional competence and self-esteem (Shu et al., 2024). These findings reinforce the SLT proposition that social behavior and emotional functioning are shaped by reciprocal interactions between individuals and their social environments. In summary, PE aligns strongly with the principles of SLT by providing a dynamic environment in which students can observe, practice, and internalize social behaviors.

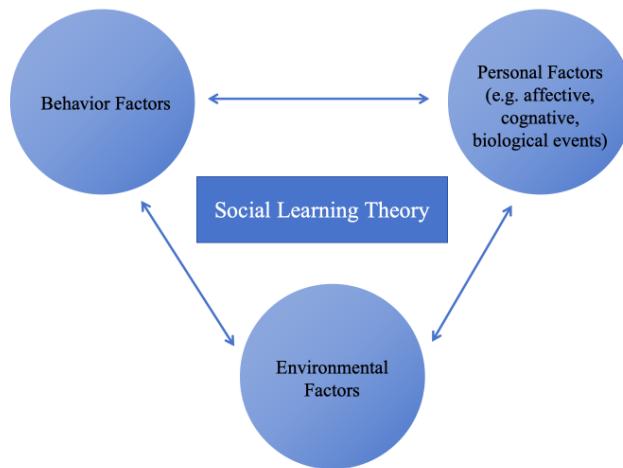


Figure 1 Social Learning Theory Framework

#### *Self-Determination Theory Framework*

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), proposed by Deci and Ryan, offers a comprehensive framework for understanding human motivation. SDT emphasizes three innate psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—that are essential for intrinsic motivation and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2008). These needs are highly relevant to students' experiences in PE, where motivation plays a crucial role in participation, learning, and social development.

Autonomy refers to a sense of choice and personal control. Studies indicate that when PE teachers adopt autonomy-supportive approaches—such as offering activity options, encouraging personal opinions, and using constructive communication—students show higher intrinsic motivation and greater willingness to participate both inside and outside the classroom (Hagger et al., 2003; Curran & Standage, 2017; Wang & Chen, 2021). Competence, understood as a belief in one's capability to perform tasks, can be strengthened through incremental skill guidance and appropriate challenge levels; such environments have been found to enhance students' engagement, social interaction, and confidence (Ding & Sugiyama, 2018).

Relatedness, the experience of feeling accepted and connected, also plays a role in shaping social outcomes in PE. Supportive class climates that promote trust, belonging and collaborative behavior have been associated with improved participation and prosocial tendencies (Pelikan et al., 2021). Research further suggests that SDT-aligned PE programs contribute to broader interpersonal qualities such as empathy, responsibility, cooperation, and leadership (Júnior et al., 2021), reflecting that social development may occur when students can relate meaningfully to peers and teachers.

Evidence additionally shows that SDT-based instructional designs are linked with improved emotional well-being and psychological growth. Programs that intentionally integrate autonomy, skill mastery, and group connection have been found to enhance students' confidence and sustained motivation (Springer, 2013). Overall, SDT provides a useful framework for understanding how PE may influence not only physical participation but also social development when learning conditions address autonomy, competence, and relatedness simultaneously.

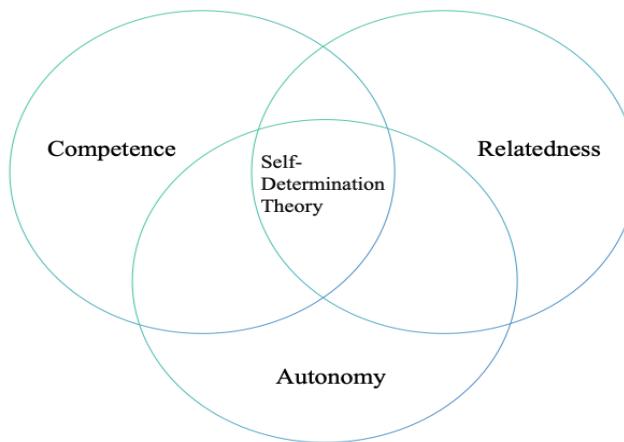


Figure 2 Self-Determination Theory Framework

#### *Research Gap*

Existing research predominantly focuses on how PE enhances students' physical health and psychological development, yet far fewer studies investigate its role in fostering the social skills of university students. Much of the current literature relies on quantitative methods and focuses largely on primary and secondary school populations. As a result, there is limited qualitative exploration of how university students and PE instructors perceive the social-development function of PE at the tertiary level.

Moreover, research has yet to fully examine how specific contextual factors—such as teaching strategies, class size, teacher-student dynamics, environmental conditions, and student motivation—shape the social-learning experiences within university PE programs. Few studies incorporate both teacher and student perspectives, and even fewer analyze the unique environmental and cultural contexts of specific regions within China.

To address these gaps, the present study conducts in-depth interviews with PE teachers and university students from higher education institutions in Harbin, Heilongjiang Province. This dual-perspective, context-sensitive qualitative approach aims to develop a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which PE promotes university students' social skills development.

#### *Research Methods*

To address the limitations identified in existing research, this study adopts a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews to explore the perceptions and experiences of PE teachers and university students in Harbin, Heilongjiang Province. This method enables an in-

depth examination of how PE contributes to the development of university students' social skills, including interpersonal skills, teamwork ability, EQ, respect and responsibility, and persuasion and presentation abilities.

#### *Research Setting and Participant Selection*

Harbin, the capital city of Heilongjiang Province, provides a highly suitable context for this study. As one of the major economic, cultural, and educational centers in Northeast China, the region possesses a well-established higher education system with a diverse range of comprehensive and specialized universities. Its development level and educational characteristics make it representative of PE practices in Northeast China. In addition, Harbin's long and severe winters significantly influence PE curriculum design, activity organization, and student participation patterns. These environmental conditions shape the ways in which PE activities are implemented, thus offering a unique context to examine how physical environments affect students' motivation, engagement, and social interactions.

The participants consisted of PE teachers with multiple years of teaching experience and university students of different genders, disciplines, and academic backgrounds. The number of people selected by the teacher was five, while the number selected by the students was fifteen. This diverse sampling ensured the representativeness and richness of data, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the social-developmental function of university PE.

#### *Interview Framework and Question Design*

The semi-structured interview format allowed for both consistency and flexibility, ensuring that core themes were explored while still permitting participants to elaborate on personal experiences. Interview questions were designed to investigate how PE influences five major dimensions of social skills:

- a) interpersonal skills,
- b) teamwork ability,
- c) EQ,
- d) respect and responsibility,
- e) persuasion and presentation skills.

Below is the finalized question framework used for interviewing both PE teachers and students:

Table 1

*Question Design for Interviews between University PE Teachers and University Students*

Topic	Interview Questions (for PE teachers)	Interview Questions (for university students)
Interpersonal Skills	a) What unique roles do you think PE plays in helping students build good interpersonal skills?	a) Do you think taking part in PE helps you build friendships with your classmates more easily?
	b) In the teaching process, do you consciously design activities to help students improve their interpersonal interactions skills? Please give examples to illustrate.	b) Have you ever learned how to get along or communicate better with others in PE?
	c) How do you observe and evaluate the changes or progress of students in interpersonal skills?	c) How does the interpersonal skills in PE affect your daily life?
Teamwork Ability	a) What type of PE do you think can best cultivate students' team-work ability? Why?	a) How do you usually deal with differences or conflicts within a team?
	b) What are the common cooperation or conflict issues that students encounter in team activities? How do you usually guide them to solve these problems?	b) Do you think that PE teachers have played a positive guiding role in team-work cooperation?
EQ	a) Do you think PE can help students better regulate their emotions and cope with setbacks?	a) Have you ever experienced emotional ups and downs during PE? Did these experiences help you understand your emotions better?
	b) When students experience emotional fluctuations during competitions, what methods do you usually adopt to guide them?	b) Have you learned to manage stress and emotions in competitions or group activities?
	c) Do you consciously cultivate students' empathy or self-awareness?	c) Do you think PE help you better understand others' feelings?
Respect and Responsibility	a) How do you cultivate students' respect for rules, teachers and peers through classroom teaching?	a) What's your opinion on the emphasis on rules and fair play in PE?
	b) Do you think PE can effectively enhance students' sense of responsibility? Please share some	b) Does participating in PE make you more responsible or team-oriented?
	c) How do you balance the relationship between competitiveness and the spirit of respect and responsibility?	c) In PE, how do you show respect to your peers or teachers?
Persuasion and Presentation Skills	a) How do you think PE can promote students' persuasion ability or presentation skills?	a) Do you feel that you are more willing to speak up or express yourself in PE?
	b) How do you think teachers can enhance students' persuasive and presentation skills through PE?	b) Does PE help you be more persuasive when discussing, coordinating or leading with others?

### *Interview Results*

Through in-depth one-on-one and group interviews with PE teachers and university students from several higher education institutions in Harbin, this study systematically examined the perceived role and impact of PE on students' social skills development. Interview data revealed how students' interpersonal skills, teamwork ability, EQ, responsibility and respect, and persuasion and presentation abilities evolve throughout their participation in PE. The interviews not only revealed the positive effects of PE in cultivating social skills, but also exposed some key problems in current teaching practices. The following issues are particularly prominent.

### *Curriculum Focuses on Technical Training While Neglecting Social Skills*

University PE still largely prioritizes the mastery of technical skills and the improvement of physical fitness, with relatively insufficient attention paid to the development of social skills. Many courses follow traditional teaching models centered on technical training, such as basketball dribbling, long-distance running endurance training, or the teaching of basic martial arts movement sequences. These activities focus more on individual performance than on collaborative learning processes. Although team PE (such as football, volleyball, or relay races) inherently require communication and cooperation, related social interactions often occur naturally, lacking systematic instructional design support. Teachers generally acknowledge that while they occasionally encourage group work or peer practice in their teaching, the development of social skills is rarely established as a clear curriculum objective. Therefore, the implementation of social skills strategies varies considerably across PE educators, primarily depending on individual teaching philosophies rather than a consistent and standardized instructional framework.

This lack of systematic integration leads to inconsistent outcomes in students' social skills development across different classes. Without clear goals, structured activity design, and effective assessment mechanisms, the potential value of PE in promoting interpersonal skills, teamwork, and other key social competencies has not been fully explored and realized.

### *Limited Interaction Quality in Large-Class Teaching Environments*

In PE instruction, excessively large class sizes are a major obstacle to meaningful interaction. In many universities, a PE class can have 40 to 50 students, posing a significant challenge for instructors trying to foster collaborative activities or closely monitor group dynamics. Under these constraints, organizing complex team tasks—such as strategic exercises, group rotations, or collaborative challenges—becomes extremely difficult. Instructors report that managing such large groups makes it nearly impossible to observe individual student interactions, mediate conflicts, or provide tailored guidance on communication and teamwork. This lack of personalized attention particularly affects introverted students, who often report staying on the periphery of activities. Some students indicate they tend to avoid expressing opinions, initiating interactions, or taking on leadership roles because they feel ignored within the large group.

One student described the situation this way: "The class is so big, what I say doesn't matter. Others make decisions quickly, and I just passively follow along". Over time, this passive participation undermines students' sense of engagement and reduces opportunities

to practice social skills. Therefore, the combination of large class sizes and limited teacher supervision leads to an imbalance in learning experiences and social development outcomes.

#### *Single-Dimensional Assessment Reducing Motivation for Collaboration*

Current evaluation systems in university PE overwhelmingly emphasize attendance, physical fitness test results (e.g., vital capacity, long-distance running), and technical skill performance. Behaviors that reflect social development—such as cooperation, leadership, conflict management, or empathy—are seldom included in formal assessment criteria. Students frequently reported that because these social behaviors do not influence their grades, they feel little incentive to engage deeply in teamwork ability or interpersonal skills during PE. Several openly admitted prioritizing their own performance rather than group outcomes, acknowledging that collaborative behaviors are “extra effort that doesn’t count.”

The absence of process-oriented assessment inadvertently signals that social interaction is secondary. This evaluation bias not only reduces students’ motivation to collaborate but also restricts teachers’ willingness to design activities centered on teamwork or communication, further reinforcing a technical-centric approach to PE instruction.

#### *Skill Barriers Triggering Social Anxiety and Withdrawal Tendencies*

A number of students—especially those with limited sports experience or weak foundational skills—expressed significant anxiety during PE. This anxiety often stemmed from fear of under performing, making mistakes, or being judged by peers. In high skill requirements PE, technical anxiety was particularly pronounced. One first-year student described her experience vividly: lacking prior swimming experience, she struggled with basic breathing techniques while her peers appeared more competent. After hearing classmates whisper about her performance, she felt embarrassed and gradually avoided participating in group activities. She explained: “It’s not that I don’t want to learn, but I’m afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at. The more nervous I am, the less I dare to ask for help.” Such anxiety not only affects participation but also discourages students from engaging in peer communication and collaboration.

PE teachers also acknowledged the difficulty of balancing technical instruction, differentiated support, and inclusive classroom climates within limited class hours (often only 90 minutes per week). The workload has increased significantly as teachers must not only complete the prescribed teaching content but also cater to the adaptation needs of students at different levels, and strive to create an inclusive and supportive classroom atmosphere. Many teachers have stated that the ideal of “student-centered” interactive teaching is difficult to fully implement in practice.

#### *Limited Extracurricular Provision Restricting Social Participation Ways*

Extracurricular sports activities play an essential role in sustaining long-term social engagement, yet many students reported limited access to such opportunities. Universities in Harbin often face constraints such as limited indoor facilities, shortages of qualified instructors, and competition among clubs for space and resources—challenges exacerbated by harsh winter climates. Students described difficulties joining PE clubs due to high join requirements, restricted recruitment periods, or limited capacity. Those who were unable to join clubs often lacked alternative avenues to participate in organized team sports. As a result,

extracurricular PE activities tend to benefit only a small group of highly active or skilled students, while the majority remain passive observers.

One sophomore recounted failing to join the university football club due to limited spots and scheduling conflicts. During winter, outdoor fields were unusable, and indoor spaces were prioritized for existing members, leaving him without opportunities for team-based sports participation. He eventually resorted to exercising alone in the dormitory, losing a valuable pathway for developing communication skills and social connections.

## Discussion

Drawing upon the findings of this study, strengthening the role of university PE in enhancing students' social skills requires systematic reform at the curriculum, instructional, assessment, psychological, and extracurricular levels. The following recommendations are proposed to optimize teaching effectiveness and fully leverage the social development function of PE. This will enable them to exercise their communication skills, enhance their sense of collective belonging, develop emotional management and a sense of responsibility in real interactions, and ultimately achieve the full release of the educational value of PE.

### *Embed Social Skills Competence as Core Objectives*

The cultivation of social skills must move from a supporting role in university curriculum goals to a central focus, becoming a key indicator for measuring teaching effectiveness. Social skills in PE are never accidental achievements but require a systematically designed core competency. For PE to effectively cultivate social skills, the key is to formulate specific and measurable goals that align with professional scenarios, rather than simply shouting empty slogans like "improving team spirit." These goals must be closely linked to the core scenarios of PE teaching, training, and competition, covering key dimensions such as communication, cooperation, empathy, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution. For example, in a ball PE, goals could include: "In 3-person team tactical drills, being able to respond to each other's movements using concise commands and adjust the rhythm of cooperation based on teammates' condition"; "After a match, being able to objectively analyze teammates' mistakes and offer suggestions for improvement using encouraging language" and "When faced with controversial refereeing decisions, being able to control emotions and rationally appeal according to procedures." These goals are anchored to real-life scenarios in PE, making it easier for teachers to demonstrate and for students to practice, thus avoiding the "vagueness" of social skills cultivation.

At the same time, the PE system needs to transform into a comprehensive model that deeply integrates "technical and tactical training + interpersonal skills development," seamlessly embedding interpersonal skills training into every aspect of technical and tactical instruction, allowing students to "learn by practicing" in real PE scenarios. For example, in a soccer PE, a scenario of "adjusting tactics in the last 10 minutes after falling behind by one goal" can be set up, allowing students to take on the roles of captain, forward, and defender, practicing rapid communication and tactical consensus under pressure; in a basketball PE, "mixed-level physical fitness group matches" can be conducted, allowing students to learn to consider teammates of varying strengths and allocate offensive opportunities reasonably. When teachers guide students to negotiate solutions in a timely manner, social skills can be naturally improved during the process of organizing activities. This model, where "technical

and tactical improvement and interpersonal growth are synchronized," allows students to truly internalize social skills into professional competence.

#### *Enhancing Student Interaction and Engagement in Large-Scale PE Classes*

In large-scale PE settings, with numerous students and diverse interaction scenarios, it's crucial to optimize organizational strategies and improve assessment mechanisms to ensure the effective development of social skills and prevent some students from becoming marginalized due to a lack of participation. Regarding organizational strategies, group rotation and role assignment systems are effective means to enhance the quality of interaction. For example, in track and field PE, students can be divided into groups of 6-8 based on their physical fitness and skill strengths. Each group can have fixed roles such as "technical demonstrator," "action recorder," "progress coordinator," and "encourager." Roles can rotate after each event (e.g., sprint, long jump, shot put). This way, the "technical demonstrator" learns to clearly explain the key points of the movements, the "progress coordinator" coordinates the group's training pace and reminds members to be punctual, and the "encourager" observes teammates' performance and provides timely positive feedback. Each student has a clear task, preventing anyone from slacking off and allowing them to develop communication and teamwork skills through different roles. In team ball PE, a "position rotation system" can be implemented, allowing students to take turns experiencing different positions such as forward, midfielder, and defender. This allows them to learn perspective-taking as they adapt to the demands of each role—for example, a student who usually plays forward will better understand "why it's important to pass back to defend" when switched to defender. This hands-on experience fosters empathy far more effective than simple tactical explanations.

Simultaneously, establishing a teaching assistant or student collaborative guidance mechanism can further compensate for the difficulty teachers face in providing comprehensive support during large-scale teaching. Students with strong skills and communication abilities can be selected from professional PE majors to serve as "collaborative instructors," assisting teachers in group management. This "teacher-led + student-assisted" model not only improves PE interaction efficiency but also allows collaborative instructors to develop their organizational and communication skills in practice, achieving mutual learning and growth.

#### *Implement Multi-Dimensional Evaluation System*

In current PE, student performance evaluations often focus on physical fitness test scores and the degree of mastery of motor skills, such as quantifiable indicators like 50-meter sprint time, standing long jump distance, or basketball dribbling time around cones. While this results-oriented assessment method is highly practical, it easily overlooks key qualities students demonstrate during the learning process, such as teamwork, responsibility and respect, EQ, persuasion and presentation skills and interpersonal communication. To more comprehensively reflect student growth, it is necessary to construct a comprehensive evaluation system encompassing multiple dimensions. This multi-dimensional evaluation system should break through the limitations of the traditional "grades-only" approach and include students' behavioral performance in PE. For example, in team projects such as basketball games or relay training, teachers can observe whether students actively communicate tactics with teammates, whether they encourage teammates when they make

mistakes, and whether they can rationally handle conflicts. In group cooperative exercises, attention should be paid to whether students take on assigned tasks, respect others' opinions, and have organizational and coordination awareness. These non-technical aspects are also important manifestations of the educational value of PE.

To improve the objectivity and comprehensiveness of the evaluation, a multi-stakeholder participation evaluation method should be adopted. Teachers, acting as facilitators, can record changes in students' behavior through daily observation, forming formative feedback. Peer assessment helps students learn to appreciate others and understand differences in team roles; for example, after completing a cooperative obstacle course, group members can evaluate each other's cooperation and support. Self-assessment guides students to reflect on their performance in emotional control, effort, and cooperative attitude, promoting the development of their sense of autonomy. These three assessment methods complement each other, enhancing the authenticity of the evaluation and cultivating students' responsible attitude and critical thinking.

This assessment system not only more closely reflects the realities of PE but also helps guide teaching from a "skills-oriented" to a "competency-oriented" approach, truly achieving learning and teaching improvement through assessment, and promoting the simultaneous development of students' social abilities while they engage in PE.

#### *Enhancing Psychological Support and Inclusive Teaching*

PE is not only a process of physical exercise, but also a crucial aspect of students' psychological development and social adaptation. In actual PE, students exhibit significant differences in their physical fitness, personality traits, and emotional states. Some students are athletically gifted, outgoing, and enjoy participating in various activities; while others, due to weaker physiques, poor coordination, or past failures, experience tension or even resistance towards PE. Therefore, teachers should pay close attention to students' psychological needs and implement more targeted, personalized teaching to ensure that every student experiences respect, security, and a sense of accomplishment in PE. In teaching practice, differentiated instruction is an effective approach. For example, when teaching long jump, different difficulty levels can be set based on students' abilities: for students with weaker foundations, starting with approach rhythm exercises or low-height takeoffs can focus on building confidence and mastering basic movements; while for more capable students, challenging them with complete techniques or increasing distance requirements can be beneficial. Through differentiated task design, every student can experience progress, thereby reducing frustration caused by ability differences.

Creating a tolerant and supportive PE atmosphere is particularly crucial. Teachers should clearly convey positive concepts such as "effort is more important than results," and avoid publicly criticizing or comparing student performance. When students make mistakes, they should be given timely encouragement. For individual students exhibiting significant anxiety, low self-esteem, or social avoidance tendencies, schools can, when necessary, collaborate with psychological counselors to conduct appropriate psychological interventions. For example, individual talks can be used to understand their concerns, or short-term group counseling sessions can be arranged to help students alleviate negative emotions towards PE. Simultaneously, establishing peer support mechanisms, such as forming "PE buddy" groups

where outgoing and empathetic students actively accompany and encourage students, can effectively enhance their willingness to participate and their sense of belonging.

By focusing on psychological needs, implementing differentiated instruction, and building a supportive environment, PE can truly become a platform for promoting the coordinated physical and mental development of all students, allowing each student to reap the benefits of growth through positive effort.

#### *Strengthening Extracurricular and Community PE Ecosystem*

The development of social skills relies heavily on sustained extracurricular PE. While PE in the classroom provides students with basic motor skills and health knowledge, the real opportunities to foster interpersonal skills, teamwork, and a sense of responsibility often arise from independent participation and long-term practice during leisure time. Extracurricular PE not only extend students' participation time but also provide them with a platform to develop comprehensive abilities in unstructured, real-world social situations. Universities should actively expand the number and types of PE clubs to meet the diverse needs of students with different interests, abilities, and backgrounds.

Simultaneously, it is essential to improve the utilization efficiency of PE venues and facilities. Many universities face issues such as limited venue resources, limited opening hours, or uneven distribution, which hinders student participation. Schools can improve utilization by optimizing reservation systems, extending opening hours, and implementing staggered usage. Especially in cold regions where outdoor PE are limited in winter, it is crucial to develop alternative PE programs suitable for the season, such as indoor ice rinks, skiing courses, or winter long-distance running programs, to ensure students can participate in PE throughout the year. Furthermore, promoting student participation in PE volunteer services and community PE cooperation is also an important way to expand socialization pathways. Universities can establish partnerships with nearby primary and secondary schools, community centers, or non-profit organizations to organize students to provide fitness guidance, children's sports games instruction, or flexibility training services for the elderly in real-world communities. This allows students to learn to listen to needs, adjust their communication methods, and take responsibility in real-world settings, thus truly transforming them from "PE participants" to "PE service providers".

Through comprehensive reforms such as sustained participation beyond the curriculum, resource guarantees, and innovative mechanisms, university PE can break through traditional limitations, moving beyond simply meeting physical fitness standards or achieving competitive results. It can become a crucial vehicle for cultivating students' leadership, organizational skills, and social responsibility, truly realizing its unique and far-reaching educational value in promoting students' all-round development and socialization.

#### **Conclusions**

Research results indicate that university PE not only fulfill the fundamental task of improving students' physical fitness but also play an irreplaceable role in promoting their social development. Students frequently engage in communication and coordination, role division, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution. These real-world interactions effectively foster their communication and collaboration skills, teamwork awareness, and

emotional management abilities. Furthermore, in competitions or collaborative tasks, students learn to respect rules, accept differences, and take responsibility. By expressing their opinions, seeking support, or persuading teammates, they enhance their verbal communication and interpersonal influence, gradually forming a well-rounded social personality.

Based on SLT, individuals acquire social skills by observing the behavior of others and its consequences. Group work, peer demonstrations, and teacher-student interaction in PE provide rich contexts for this observational learning. Meanwhile, SDT emphasizes that autonomy, competence, and belonging are key factors in stimulating intrinsic motivation. In interactive and collaborative teaching settings, students gain recognition by completing challenging tasks, enhancing their sense of competence; and feel accepted and supported in teamwork, further strengthening their sense of belonging. The fulfillment of these psychological needs further motivates students to actively participate in social interactions, internalizing and sustaining their social skills.

Therefore, social skills should be explicitly included as one of the core objectives of university PE, giving it equal importance to physical development and skill mastery. In instructional design, cooperative games, team challenges, and role-playing mechanisms can be added to encourage students to practice listening, negotiation, and leadership in real-world situations. Heterogeneous grouping strategies should be adopted to promote cooperation among students with different personalities and abilities, enhancing inclusive participation. Regarding the evaluation system, diverse assessment methods should be introduced, such as peer review, process recording, and reflective journals, focusing on students' contributions and the quality of their interactions within the team. Simultaneously, the extracurricular PE system should be strengthened, supporting students in establishing their own PE clubs, providing professional guidance and resource guarantees, promoting collaboration between on-campus and off-campus sports, and expanding the breadth and depth of students' social interactions.

Future research can expand the sample size to include PE across different regions and types of universities, providing in-depth analysis of policy implementation, the degree of change in teachers' teaching philosophies, and students' actual experiences. Longitudinal studies can also explore the long-term development trajectory of social skills in PE participation, providing a scientific basis for optimizing teaching management and formulating more targeted policies. Only in this way can university PE truly transform from a single function of "physical fitness" to a comprehensive platform for "cultivating character and mind," playing a more profound and lasting educational role in the comprehensive development of students' qualities.

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