

# Lack of Interest Cultivation: The Impact of Exam-Oriented Education on Chinese School Physical Education

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## Abstract

**Background:** Despite the potential benefits of sports in promoting physical and mental health, many Chinese students exhibit a lack of interest and reluctance to do sports. Even after more than a decade of physical education experience, from primary school through university. Consequently, the physical fitness of Chinese college students has been declining. In response, the Chinese government has issued many official guidelines aimed at improving the physical fitness of teenagers through school sports programs. However, despite these efforts, the physical fitness of Chinese college students continues to decline annually, with increasing rates of obesity and myopia. **Materials and Methods:** This study was conducted at a college in southwest China, and participants were recruited through direct recruitment. A total of five sophomore volunteers participated in the study. Semi-structured interviews were employed to gain insights into their sports experiences from primary school to college. By analyzing their experiences, we aim to elucidate the reasons behind the persistent disinterest of Chinese students in sports despite more than a decade of physical education. **Results:** The teaching content of physical education in Chinese schools is monotonous and fails to engage students. Moreover, the teaching methods employed by physical education teachers lack variety and fail to elicit the enjoyment of sports activities during physical education classes. **Conclusions:** The current approach to physical education deprives students of the joy of sports, focusing predominantly on repetitive skills training and physical exercises. This approach contributes to students' aversion to physical education and gradual loss of interest in participating in sports.

**Keywords:** Physical Education, PE Classes, Sports Motivation, Sports Participation, Exam-Oriented Education.

## Introduction

### Background

Since 1990, Chinese schools have recognized the importance of physical education in enhancing students' physical well-being and fostering a lifelong commitment to physical activity. A significant milestone was reached in 1990 when the Chinese government

introduced the School Physical Education Regulations, which mandated the inclusion of physical education classes in schools (China National Education Commission, National Sports Commission, 1990). Subsequently, in 2007, the government released a directive stipulating that schools should ensure students engage in one hour of exercise daily (The CPC Central Committee and the State Council, 2007).

To further emphasize the importance of physical education, the Ministry of Education proposed in 2016 that students' performance in this area be included in the comprehensive evaluation of college entrance examination qualifications (Xinhua News Agency, 2016). The initiative aims to emphasize the value of physical education and promote its integration into the holistic development of students. In addition, in 2020, the Ministry of Education issued a document encouraging primary and secondary schools to offer physical education classes every day (Xinhua News Agency, 2020). The measure aims to ensure regular physical activity and reinforces the government's commitment to improving the overall physical health of young people.

A series of policies issued by the Chinese government reflect its efforts to improve the physical health of adolescents and emphasize the importance of physical education in the education system.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The ability of physical activity to prevent disease, promote physical and mental health, and improve learning and work productivity has been documented by numerous studies (Kotarska *et al.*, 2021). However, despite these numerous benefits, global data from the World Health Organization reveals a worrying trend of under-participation in sports among adolescents worldwide. A survey conducted by the World Health Organization reported that 34.3% of university students had never done any physical activity (WHO, 2018).

Chinese college students also have insufficient exercise. According to the History of the Development of Chinese Students' Physical Fitness Monitoring, the physical fitness level of Chinese college students has declined year by year, and the rates of obesity and myopia have continued to rise (Guangming Daily, 2017). It is puzzling to note that despite receiving more than a decade of sports skills education through physical education (PE) classes from primary school to university, Chinese college students still exhibit a lack of interest in sports. This phenomenon warrants investigation to understand the underlying reasons behind the loss of interest in sports among Chinese students, despite their extensive exposure to sports skills education. This study aims to explore this perplexing phenomenon and shed light on the factors contributing to the diminishing interest in sports among Chinese college students.

### **Material & methods**

#### **Study Design**

A case study design was adopted for this research to address the research question of why. Case studies are appropriate in situations where an in-depth exploration of a specific phenomenon is required (Yin, 1994). According to Yin's recommendation, a case study approach was deemed suitable for this study. However, the limited sample size might result in potential underrepresentation.

#### **Participants**

The study was conducted at a university located in southwest China. The participants consisted exclusively of sophomores. Following the suggestion of Dempsey *et al* (2015),

participants were recruited directly. Initially, some students were observed to lack interest in participating in sports. Subsequently, these individuals were approached to establish trust, and invitations to participate in the research were sent out, emphasizing the voluntary nature of their involvement. Ultimately, five students voluntarily agreed to take part in this study, demonstrating their continued willingness even after receiving further details about the research.

### **Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary method for data collection in this study. Semi-structured interviews facilitate knowledge exchange and foster a collaborative relationship between researchers and participants (Elliott, 2005). Through face-to-face interviews, we aimed to gain insight into the participants' experiences of engaging in sports activities from primary school to university.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process encompassed several key steps. First, the recorded interviews were transcribed into written text. Second, a comprehensive review of the transcribed data was conducted to capture the overall essence of the collected information. Third, a coding procedure was implemented to categorize text fragments into meaningful themes. Finally, the analysis results were described using descriptive language.

## **Results**

### **The Impact of Exam-Oriented Education on Physical Education**

In recent years, the Chinese government has made efforts to move away from test-oriented education (The CPC Central Committee and the State Council, 2007). However, students still face certain realities. At each stage of their education, Chinese students are required to take entrance examinations (from primary school to junior high school, junior high school to high school, and high school to university). They strive for better academic performance to secure admission to reputable schools, often sacrificing their sports activities. As expressed by the respondents:

"My parents constantly emphasize the importance of studying hard to get into university. They believe that without good academic performance, I won't be able to attend university or find a good job in the future. Even my teachers reinforce this notion, telling us that only through diligent studying can we have a successful life. I've come to realize this, and it compels me to dedicate more time to studying."

To elevate the significance of physical education within the school curriculum, the Ministry of Education has included it as a subject in the middle school entrance examination (examination from junior high school to senior high school). However, this change has led to the content of physical education becoming solely focused on exam preparation. Physical education teachers are unable to tailor their teaching to suit students' needs, resulting in students being deprived of the joy and excitement of sports activities. Respondents shared their experiences in PE classes:

"Our junior high school PE classes primarily revolve around practicing for the senior high school entrance examination. Every session is centered around preparing for the exam. For instance, basketball practice entails dribbling around a pole. It's not playing basketball; it's simply rehearsing for the test. Moreover, physical education

classes in senior high school are often canceled or occupied by other subjects."

### **The Challenges of Traditional Physical Education Methods**

For a considerable period, physical education in China has exhibited a common characteristic. PE teachers possess a limited understanding of comprehensive physical education teaching and tend to overlook students' needs during instruction. Many PE teachers are reluctant to learn and enhance their teaching abilities, resulting in a monotonous teaching approach and a uniform PE class structure. Typically, PE teachers explain and demonstrate exercises, followed by asking students to imitate and practice them. To maintain order, most teachers organize students into neat lines, engaging them in identical exercises. For students, this approach fails to inspire enthusiasm for sports. As expressed by the respondents:

"Our PE classes are dull and rigid. We are constantly expected to adhere to the teacher's demands. Once a teacher demonstrates a particular action, we have to repeat it over and over again. I used to love playing basketball, but the practice in our physical education class is nothing like the basketball I envisioned. There are no engaging games; it's just tedious dribbling practice. It's boring."

"I fail to comprehend why, when the teacher instructs us to practice shooting in basketball, we are required to line up. It seems like a waste of time."

### **Students' Disconnection with Physical Education**

Chinese PE teachers often acknowledge the paradox that students enjoy sports but dislike PE classes (Yuan, 2009). This represents the current reality of physical education in China. While sports are inherently enjoyable, physical education fails to captivate the interest of most students. Respondents highlighted this phenomenon:

"I love watching football games. During the football World Cup, I even stayed up all night just to watch the matches. I also enjoy playing basketball and football. I wish PE class would allow us to engage in our favorite sports. Unfortunately, every PE class is filled with designated exercises, and we rarely get the opportunity to freely play the sports we love."

### **Insufficient Sports Facilities**

When discussing students' participation in sports activities, it is crucial not to overlook the significance of adequate sports facilities. Venues and equipment play a vital role in facilitating sports teaching activities. Insufficient or poor-quality sports equipment can directly impact students' interest and enthusiasm for engaging in sports. Unfortunately, the lack of sports facilities has become a common issue in Chinese schools, highlighting a prevailing problem resulting from outdated perspectives on school sports and limited funding. Some schools suffer from inadequate sports equipment, substandard quality, inconsistent playing surfaces, and outdated facilities. This issue was corroborated by the feedback received:

"In our basketball class, we have a total of thirty students, but we only have ten basketballs available. During dribbling practice, we have to divide ourselves into three groups, with one group actively engaging while the other two groups have to wait their turn. In a single Physical Education class, my access to a basketball is quite limited."

"I am fond of playing badminton, but all our classes take place outdoors. As soon as the wind picks up, the shuttlecocks fly away, hindering our ability to fully enjoy the game. Playing badminton indoors would provide us with a better opportunity

to appreciate its true essence."

## Discussion

Chinese school physical education aims to foster students' lifelong sports consciousness (State Council, 2016), encompassing the development of their ability and inclination towards positive exercise habits (Zhang *et al.*, 2009).

In this section, we explore students' sports participation with their motivation. Motivation is a psychological concept that drives individuals to take action or make choices among various alternatives. Motivation plays a vital role in the process of learning, as the absence or scarcity of motivation leads to limited or no learning (Singh & Pathak, 2017).

According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT) Deci & Ryan (2013), motivation can be classified into two types: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation arises when individuals engage in activities for the sheer enjoyment or challenge they offer. Conversely, extrinsic motivation involves engaging in activities to attain external rewards or avoid punishment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation is regarded as more autonomous, as it is not reliant on external rewards or punishments (Corte-Real *et al.*, 2008). Voluntary participation in sports activities originates from intrinsic motivation, which stems from genuine interest, enjoyment, and a sense of challenge. The absence of interest in sports during physical education classes can lead to a lack of intrinsic motivation. Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that intrinsic motivation is more autonomous, resulting in sustained and conscious engagement in sports activities.

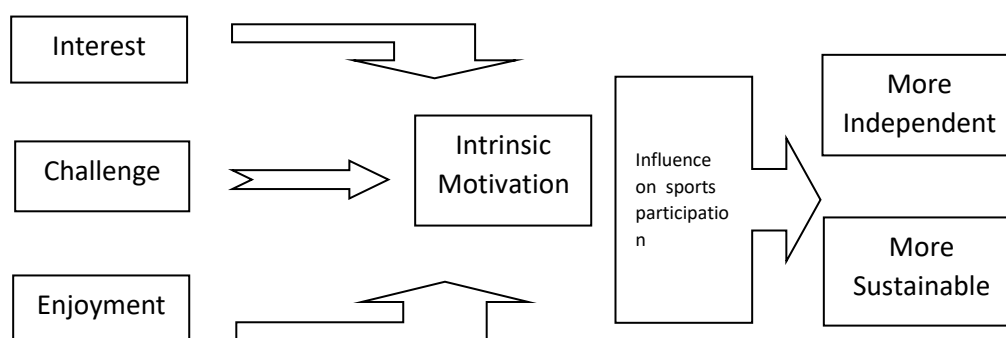


Figure 1 The Influence of Sports Intrinsic Motivation on Sports Participation

However, the reality of physical education in Chinese schools deviates from the intended goal of establishing a comprehensive physical education system. Physical education classes in junior high school primarily focus on the specific sports items tested in the senior high school entrance examination (Sun, 2022). The content of physical education becomes monotonous, diminishing students' interest in the subject. Such classes do not foster positive sports habits or cultivate students' lifelong sports consciousness. Moreover, in college-level physical education, teachers still rely on traditional teaching methods, and students passively participate in sports activities (Xu & Wang, 2023). This approach fails to generate genuine interest in sports among students and does not promote active engagement in sports training.

Physical education teachers should take into account students' characteristics, analyze their sports needs and interests, and develop teaching approaches that revolve around

students' interests. Failure to stimulate students' interest in learning will result in their reluctance to actively participate in sports activities. This not only dampens students' enthusiasm for physical education but also hinders the achievement of the goal of fostering lifelong physical education among students.

## **Conclusions & Suggestions**

### **Conclusions**

This study highlights the importance of aligning physical education with students' interests and needs, the results of this study reveal several factors that contribute to the decline in interest in sports among Chinese college students.

First, exam-oriented education leads to primacy of academic performance, with students often prioritizing academics over participation in sports. Physical education classes designed to promote a well-rounded education often focus solely on test prep, depriving students of the fun and excitement of sports.

Secondly, the excessive use of traditional physical education teaching methods by physical education teachers can not stimulate the enthusiasm of students. Monotonous teaching methods and unified teaching content make students limited opportunities to freely engage in their favorite sports, and sports become boring and boring.

Third, students love sports but lack interest in physical education. Although they like sports in their spare time, the rigidity and rules of physical education cannot attract their interest.

Finally, insufficient sports facilities hinder students from participating in sports. Insufficient equipment, poor-quality facilities, and limited resources hinder students' enthusiasm and commitment to sports.

### **Suggestions**

To address these issues, physical education teachers must consider students' characteristics, analyze their sports needs and interests, and design teaching approaches that align with their interests. By incorporating enjoyable and varied activities, teachers can stimulate students' intrinsic motivation and promote sustained and conscious participation in sports.

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