

Navigating Dual Identities: Educational Equity, Social Identity, and Cultural Capital among Vocational Student-Athletes in China

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Abstract

This study examines the intersecting challenges of educational equity, social identity construction, and cultural capital accumulation among student-athletes in Chinese higher vocational colleges. Drawing on Bourdieu's cultural capital theory and social identity theory, this research investigates how vocational student-athletes navigate dual roles while confronting systemic barriers in resource allocation, identity formation, and capital conversion. Through a comprehensive analysis of recent policy developments and empirical evidence from 2020-2025, this study reveals that vocational student-athletes face unique disadvantages compared to their university counterparts, including limited academic support systems, stigmatized social identities, and constrained pathways for converting athletic achievements into educational or career advantages. The findings highlight critical policy implementation gaps in China's sports-education integration initiatives, particularly in vocational education contexts. This study contributes to the literature by extending cultural capital and social identity frameworks to the under-researched population of vocational student-athletes, offering theoretical insights and practical implications for promoting educational equity and supporting dual-career development in vocational education systems.

Keywords: Vocational Education, Student-Athletes, Educational Equity, Social Identity, Cultural Capital, Sports-Education Integration, China

Introduction

Vocational student-athletes—students enrolled in higher vocational colleges who simultaneously pursue technical education and competitive sports—have become an increasingly visible yet understudied population in China's evolving education landscape. As China accelerates the expansion and upgrading of its vocational education system, vocational colleges now enroll more than ten million students, playing a central role in cultivating the skilled workforce needed for economic transformation (Ministry of Education, 2024). Within this massified system, students who combine intensive training and competition with

demanding vocational curricula are not only important for campus sports development, but also for broader national goals related to talent cultivation, youth development, and building a “strong sports nation.” Understanding how vocational student-athletes navigate their dual pathways is therefore crucial for advancing educational equity and realizing the policy vision of integrated sports and education.

Despite ambitious reforms in both vocational education and sports-education integration, vocational student-athletes remain largely invisible in policy discourse and academic research. Recent national plans, such as the National Vocational Education Reform Implementation Plan (State Council, 2019) and the State Council’s (2020) “Opinions on Deepening the Integration of Sports and Education,” emphasize expanding high-quality vocational education opportunities and alleviating contradictions between study and training. However, these documents and subsequent implementation guidelines focus primarily on ordinary universities and elite sports schools, with limited attention to vocational colleges as key sites of sports-education integration. This omission is problematic because vocational education occupies a structurally disadvantaged position within China’s stratified education system, and vocational students often come from families and regions with fewer educational resources and less cultural capital (Jin et al., 2024; Peng et al., 2023). When intensive athletic participation is added to this already unequal context, vocational student-athletes may face heightened risks of academic marginalization, identity conflict, and constrained social mobility.

The topic of vocational student-athletes is therefore important for at least three reasons. First, from an educational equity perspective, this group tests whether national policies to “expand vocational education” and “integrate sports and education” are implemented in ways that genuinely benefit students in less privileged institutions rather than reproducing existing hierarchies between universities and vocational colleges. Second, from a youth development perspective, participation in competitive sport can provide health benefits, psychosocial resources, and social networks that potentially enhance students’ life chances—but only if institutions create conditions where athletic capital can be converted into educational and career advantages rather than becoming a source of additional burden. Third, from a system governance perspective, vocational colleges are under growing pressure to demonstrate both employment outcomes and student development outcomes; whether and how they support student-athletes has direct implications for evaluating the effectiveness of ongoing vocational education and sports-education reforms.

This study draws on Bourdieu’s (1986) cultural capital theory and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) to systematically explore how vocational student-athletes navigate their dual roles within this complex policy and institutional environment. Cultural capital theory helps explain whether and how athletic skills, competition achievements, and sports-related reputations can be recognized and transformed into valued resources in the fields of education and work. Social identity theory, in turn, illuminates how vocational student-athletes construct and negotiate multiple identities—as athletes, vocational students, and future technical professionals—within a social context that often stigmatizes both vocational education and student-athlete academic ability. Bringing these theoretical perspectives together in the vocational education context addresses a clear gap in the existing literature,

which has largely focused on university student-athletes in elite academic institutions while overlooking those in vocational settings.

Building on these considerations, this article investigates three interrelated dimensions of vocational student-athlete experiences: (1) the equity of educational resources and institutional recognition available to them compared with other students; (2) the processes through which they construct, integrate, or struggle with their social identities; and (3) the mechanisms by which their athletic capital is, or is not, converted into educational and career opportunities. By focusing on vocational student-athletes, the study provides several practical benefits. For policy makers, it offers evidence for calibrating sports-education integration and vocational education reforms so that implementation does not neglect students in non-elite institutions. For vocational college leaders and administrators, it identifies concrete institutional barriers and potential support strategies—such as flexible academic arrangements, tailored advising, and recognition mechanisms for athletic achievements—that can improve student outcomes and institutional performance. For coaches, teachers, and student-affairs staff, it clarifies the psychological and identity challenges faced by vocational student-athletes, enabling more targeted academic, psychological, and career guidance. Finally, for vocational student-athletes themselves, the study contributes to making their experiences visible and valued, creating knowledge that can inform more inclusive and supportive educational environments.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural Capital Theory

Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital theory posits that individuals possess different forms of capital—embodied, objectified, and institutionalized—that can be leveraged for social advantage. For student-athletes, embodied capital manifests in athletic skills and physical capabilities, while institutionalized capital includes competition awards, certifications, and official recognition of athletic achievements. Recent research has refined understanding of how these capital forms operate in educational contexts, with particular attention to their conversion mechanisms and field-specific valuations (Jin et al., 2024).

In vocational education settings, questions emerge about whether and how athletic capital translates into academic advantages or career opportunities. While university student-athletes may benefit from prestigious institutional affiliations and established pathways for capital conversion, vocational student-athletes operate within educational systems that traditionally prioritize technical skill development and immediate workforce readiness. This structural difference potentially limits opportunities for athletic capital to be recognized and rewarded within academic and professional contexts.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides a framework for understanding how individuals derive self-concept from group memberships and manage multiple social identities. Recent applications to student-athlete populations have demonstrated that athletic identity can serve as both a psychological resource and a potential constraint, depending on contextual factors and individual circumstances (Parker et al., 2021; Graupensperger et al., 2024). Research indicates that student-athletes with strong athletic identities may experience enhanced well-being and reduced stress during educational

transitions, but may also face challenges when athletic and academic identities conflict or when athletic identity becomes exclusive (Niehues et al., 2025).

For vocational student-athletes, identity dynamics may be particularly complex. They must integrate not just dual roles as athletes and students, but also navigate the stigmatized status of vocational education within China's academic hierarchy. Research on Chinese vocational education reveals persistent social perceptions positioning vocational pathways as inferior to academic routes (Ozer & Perc, 2020). When combined with potential stereotypes about student-athletes' academic abilities, vocational student-athletes may experience what can be termed 'dual marginalization'—disadvantaged both as vocational students and as athletes in academic contexts.

Educational Equity in Vocational Education Contexts

China's vocational education system faces ongoing challenges related to equity and quality despite significant policy investments and expansion efforts. Recent research on higher vocational education reveals substantial regional disparities in educational resources and quality, with imbalanced development particularly affecting students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Peng et al., 2023). The supply-demand gap in vocational education varies significantly across provinces, with some regions experiencing severe shortages while others face overcapacity issues.

For student-athletes within this system, equity concerns are magnified. Time demands of athletic training create significant constraints on academic engagement, yet vocational colleges often lack the specialized support systems common in universities with established athletic programs. The 2024 policy reforms requiring athletes to achieve 80% of provincial undergraduate admission score thresholds have intensified academic pressures while maintaining rigorous training demands (Ministry of Education & State Sports Administration, 2021). This policy shift reflects broader efforts to ensure academic standards but may inadvertently disadvantage vocational student-athletes who already face limited academic support infrastructure.

Family cultural capital plays a critical role in educational opportunities and outcomes within vocational education. Research by Jin et al. (2024) demonstrates that family educational involvement and home resources significantly influence vocational college admission opportunities in China. For student-athletes from low-income or rural families, limited family cultural capital compounds the challenges of balancing athletic and academic demands, creating cumulative disadvantages that persist throughout their educational trajectories.

Social Identity Construction Among Vocational Student-Athletes

Recent scholarship on student-athlete identity has revealed complex relationships between athletic and academic identities across different educational contexts. Research conducted among adolescent student-athletes demonstrates that athletic identification typically exceeds academic identification, with implications for motivation and performance in both domains (Niehues et al., 2025). However, the strength of these identities and their interrelationships vary significantly based on institutional context, support systems, and individual circumstances.

For vocational student-athletes, identity construction processes may differ substantially from patterns observed in traditional university settings. The vocational education context emphasizes practical skill development and direct workforce integration rather than academic achievement in traditional disciplines. This orientation may create unique tensions for student-athletes who must reconcile athletic identities with emerging professional identities as future technicians, nurses, or skilled workers. Research on student-athlete social identity indicates that having multiple, compatible social identities can enhance well-being and reduce stress during educational transitions (Parker et al., 2021). However, when identities conflict or when one identity is stigmatized, individuals may experience identity distress and psychological challenges.

The phenomenon of stereotype threat presents particular concerns for vocational student-athletes. Research documents that student-athletes frequently face negative stereotypes regarding academic ability, with perceptions that they are 'excellent in sports but ordinary in academics' (Yin et al., 2024). When combined with societal perceptions of vocational education as a 'second choice,' vocational student-athletes may experience compounded stereotype threat that undermines both academic engagement and athletic performance. Studies examining identity and stereotype threat among student-athletes suggest that interventions helping individuals recognize and value multiple identities can mitigate negative effects and enhance academic outcomes (Aronson et al., 2020).

Cultural Capital Conversion Mechanisms in Vocational Settings

The conversion of athletic capital into academic or career advantages represents a critical but understudied dimension of student-athlete experiences. While elite university athletes may benefit from institutional mechanisms that recognize and reward athletic achievements through academic accommodations, scholarship support, and career placement assistance, vocational colleges often lack comparable infrastructure. Research examining career transitions among college student-athletes highlights the importance of institutional support for converting athletic experiences into transferable skills and career opportunities (Samuel et al., 2020).

In China's vocational education context, the relationship between athletic capital and academic/career outcomes remains poorly understood. The 2024 'Single Admission Plan for Students with Sports Specialties' allows free major choice, yet practical implementation lacks supporting structures to help student-athletes leverage athletic achievements. Research on cultural capital in educational settings indicates that conversion mechanisms depend critically on institutional recognition and field-specific valuation patterns (Breinholt & Jæger, 2020). When educational institutions fail to recognize or value athletic capital, students cannot effectively convert this resource into academic advantages or enhanced career prospects.

The role of family cultural capital in facilitating or constraining athletic capital conversion deserves particular attention. Research demonstrates that family background and parental involvement significantly influence how students navigate educational systems and access opportunities (Jin et al., 2024). For student-athletes from families with limited educational or sports-related cultural capital, the pathway from athletic achievement to educational success or career advancement may be particularly unclear and difficult to navigate. This suggests

that institutional support systems become especially critical for disadvantaged students who lack family resources to compensate for systemic barriers.

Policy Implementation and Sports-Education Integration

China has implemented ambitious policies aimed at integrating sports and education systems, reflecting recognition that traditional separation between these domains undermines both athletic development and holistic education. The State Council's 2020 'Opinions on Deepening the Integration of Sports and Education' and subsequent implementation plans (2020-2023, 2022-2025) articulate comprehensive frameworks for coordination between sports and education sectors. These policies emphasize alleviating study-training contradictions, promoting well-rounded development, and establishing integrated support systems across educational levels.

However, research on policy implementation in Chinese education consistently reveals substantial gaps between policy mandates and on-ground practice. Studies examining sports-education integration initiatives document organizational conflicts, resource constraints, and institutional resistance that impede effective implementation (Wang et al., 2022). The integration of sports and education involves multiple government departments—primarily the General Administration of Sport and Ministry of Education—whose different objectives and organizational cultures can create coordination challenges and policy conflicts.

In vocational education contexts, implementation challenges may be particularly acute. Vocational colleges face intense pressures to demonstrate employment outcomes and technical competency development, potentially viewing athletic programs as peripheral to core institutional missions. The 2025 guidelines on China's vocational education development emphasize industry-education integration and skill development aligned with economic priorities (Ministry of Education, 2025). Within this policy framework, supporting student-athletes requires dedicating resources to populations who may not directly contribute to measurable employment or technical certification outcomes that institutions are evaluated upon.

Recent policy developments indicate growing recognition of these challenges. The National Fitness Plan (2021-2025) emphasizes integration of physical education, physical health, and sports development across educational sectors. The revised Sports Law (2022) explicitly prioritizes youth physical education and commits to sports-education integration with equal emphasis on academic learning and physical development. However, translating these broad policy commitments into concrete support systems for vocational student-athletes requires sustained implementation efforts, resource allocation, and institutional culture change.

Discussion and Implications

This analysis reveals that vocational student-athletes in China face distinctive challenges rooted in the intersection of educational stratification, identity formation, and policy implementation gaps. Unlike their counterparts in elite universities, vocational student-athletes navigate educational contexts that are both under-resourced relative to academic institutions and poorly equipped to support dual-career pathways. The theoretical

frameworks of cultural capital and social identity theory illuminate different dimensions of these challenges while pointing toward potential intervention strategies.

From a cultural capital perspective, the limited recognition and valuation of athletic achievements within vocational education systems constrains student-athletes' ability to leverage athletic capital for academic or career advantages. This suggests the need for institutional mechanisms that explicitly recognize diverse forms of capital and create pathways for conversion. Such mechanisms might include academic credit for athletic achievements, integration of sports-related competencies into vocational training programs, and career guidance services that help student-athletes identify and articulate transferable skills developed through athletics.

From a social identity perspective, supporting vocational student-athletes requires attention to identity validation and integration processes. Research indicates that possessing multiple, compatible social identities can enhance well-being, but conflicts between identities or stigmatization of particular identities creates psychological strain (Graupensperger et al., 2024). Interventions should focus on helping student-athletes recognize value in all aspects of their identities while developing strategies for managing potential conflicts between athletic, academic, and professional role demands. Programs like 'Groups 4 Health' that help individuals map and maximize benefits from multiple group memberships may offer useful models for supporting vocational student-athletes.

Policy implications emerge at multiple levels. At the institutional level, vocational colleges need dedicated support systems for student-athletes, including academic advising sensitive to training schedules, flexible course delivery options, and peer support programs connecting student-athletes across institutions. At the policy level, sports-education integration initiatives must specifically address vocational education contexts rather than assuming that frameworks designed for traditional universities will transfer effectively. This may require designated funding streams, specialized training for vocational college staff, and accountability mechanisms that incentivize institutions to support student-athlete success.

Conclusion

This study contributes to understanding of vocational student-athletes by examining educational equity, social identity construction, and cultural capital dynamics within a previously under-researched educational context. The findings reveal that vocational student-athletes face distinctive challenges stemming from the intersection of educational stratification, identity negotiation, and limited institutional support systems. While China has made substantial policy commitments to sports-education integration, implementation gaps persist, particularly within vocational education settings.

Future research should examine vocational student-athlete experiences through empirical investigation, including longitudinal studies tracking identity development and career outcomes, comparative analyses across different institutional contexts, and program evaluations assessing intervention effectiveness. Additionally, research should explore how family background, gender, sport type, and regional location shape student-athlete experiences and outcomes within vocational education systems.

Ultimately, supporting vocational student-athletes requires systemic approaches addressing multiple dimensions of disadvantage. By combining insights from cultural capital theory, social identity theory, and policy implementation research, this study provides frameworks for understanding current challenges and identifying pathways toward more equitable and supportive educational environments. As China continues expanding vocational education while promoting sports-education integration, attention to the unique needs and experiences of vocational student-athletes becomes increasingly critical for achieving policy goals of inclusive development and holistic education.

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