

The Dilemmas and Coping Strategies of Cultivating Social Skills among College Students in Physical Education: A Qualitative Study Based on Social Learning Theory

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Abstract

College physical education plays a vital role in promoting the all-round development of university students, especially in the formation of social skills such as communication, teamwork, and social adaptation. However, this study found that physical education classes often fail to fully realize their socialization function in actual teaching. To gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, this study adopted social learning theory as its theoretical framework and used 12 university students from a comprehensive university in mainland China who had taken physical education courses as research subjects. Through semi-structured interviews, the study explored their real experiences in physical education classes. The results showed that college physical education faces four main dilemmas in cultivating social skills: First, the curriculum structure is singular and biased towards technical training, lacking learning situations that promote cooperation and communication; second, teachers tend to demonstrate techniques more often than social behaviors in the classroom, weakening the effect of observational learning; third, the quality of peer interaction is low, and cooperative relationships are often unstable or superficial due to differences in ability and group structure; fourth, some students reduce participation due to lack of interest, low self-efficacy, or fear of negative evaluation, limiting the natural development of social skills. Based on the above findings, this study proposes optimizations from multiple levels, including curriculum design, teacher demonstration, peer interaction, and learner support, to enhance the social value of physical education classes. The research results not only reveal the

structural problems in the cultivation of social skills in current higher education physical education but also provide theoretical references and practical insights for future teaching reforms and policy formulation.

Keywords: College Physical Education, Social Skills, Social Learning Theory, Higher Education, Learning Motivation

Introduction

Against the backdrop of higher education reform in the new era, physical education has gradually been regarded as a key component in promoting the all-round development of college students. Physical education courses not only bear the traditional functions of enhancing physical fitness, promoting health, and improving athletic ability, but also play an important role in social development, personality formation, and the cultivation of social skills. With the implementation of the "Outline of the Plan for Building a Strong Education Nation (2024-2035)" and a series of national policies, higher education physical education has been given the mission of "cultivating people through sports" (Ministry of Education and other five departments, 2025). These policies emphasize that through the integration of physical education and sports, curriculum innovation, and the implementation of the "health first" concept, higher education physical education can play a more profound educational role in promoting students' physical fitness, character, and social adaptability.

In recent years, researchers have generally pointed out that physical education courses possess inherent advantages in social interaction, serving as an important arena for cultivating college students' communication, teamwork, and emotional regulation abilities (Camacho-Sánchez et al., 2023; Merma-Molina et al., 2023). However, in practice, higher education physical education still faces numerous limitations. For example, some university physical education courses suffer from monotonous content, arbitrary scheduling, and are even reduced or canceled during final week, preventing them from fully realizing their socialization function (Sohu News, 2024). Simultaneously, some physical education teachers remain stuck in traditional, competition-oriented teaching philosophies, neglecting the importance of sportsmanship, values education, and the cultivation of social skills (People's Daily Online Hubei Channel, 2024). These problems prevent higher education physical education from effectively realizing its potential in promoting students' social skills development.

From a student's perspective, university students generally recognize the importance of physical activity. Surveys show that over 90% of university students believe that participating in sports activities has a positive impact on their health and life, with many expecting to improve their physical fitness, reduce stress, and improve their mood through sports (People's Daily Online Education Channel, 2021). However, in their actual learning experiences, students still lack in areas such as knowledge construction related to sports activities, opportunities for collaborative learning, the quality of peer interaction, and emotional support. These phenomena reflect that while physical education courses possess the advantage of social interaction, their function in cultivating social skills is still limited by various factors including institutional mechanisms, curriculum design, and teaching methods.

At the theoretical level, Bandura's social learning theory (Bandura, 1986; Bandura & Walters, 1977) provides an important perspective for exploring the development of social

skills in physical education. Social learning theory posits that individual behavior arises from the interaction of environment, personal factors, and behavior, with observational learning, imitation, and social interaction playing a central role in the learning process. Physical education courses, which emphasize cooperation, competition, and interaction, provide an ideal environment for social learning. However, if the classroom environment, teacher demonstrations, peer interaction, or feedback mechanisms lack systematic design, their function in promoting social skills is difficult to achieve (Reed et al., 2023). Against this backdrop, how to design physical education teaching scenarios based on the principles of social learning theory, guide student participation in interaction, enhance opportunities for observational learning, and promote positive feedback has become a crucial issue that urgently needs to be addressed in higher education physical education.

Based on the above issues, this study aims to explore the dilemmas faced by higher education physical education in cultivating students' social skills, and proposes feasible teaching improvement strategies based on Bandura's social learning theory. The study will focus on analyzing how the interactive structure, teacher role, peer relationships, and curriculum system in higher education physical education classes affect the development of students' social skills, and proposes improvement paths centered on cooperative learning, teacher demonstration, curriculum reform, and optimization of evaluation mechanisms. The goal of this study is to provide theoretical support and practical suggestions for the reform of higher education physical education, enabling the physical education curriculum to truly fulfill its educational function of promoting students' socialization and contributing to the construction of a strong education and sports nation.

Literature Review

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory is based on Bandura's social cognitive theory, whose core argument emphasizes that individual behavior is formed by the interaction of personal factors, behavior, and environment (Bandura, 1986). Unlike traditional behaviorism, which views behavior as a passive response to external stimuli, social cognitive theory points out that learning is active and cognitive; learners form new behavioral patterns through the process of observing, processing, and internalizing information (de la Fuente et al., 2023). Therefore, learning not only relies on direct experience but may also stem from vicarious learning through observing the behavior of others, and is influenced by internal factors such as self-efficacy and motivation (Li & Hua, 2022).

Building upon this foundation, Bandura and Walters (1977) further emphasized the crucial roles of observational learning, imitation, and social interaction in learning through their social learning theory. The social learning process typically comprises four stages: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. By observing the successes or failures of others, learners can form cognitive judgments about the consequences of their actions, thereby regulating their own behavior (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Related research indicates that social learning mechanisms not only explain the acquisition of knowledge and skills but can also be used to understand the development of emotions and behaviors; for example, the formation of social anxiety is closely related to social interaction experience (Zinbarg et al., 2022). This demonstrates the broad applicability of social learning theory in research on psychological development and social behavior.

In educational contexts, social learning theory provides an important framework for understanding classroom interaction, teacher demonstration, and peer collaboration. Reed et al. (2023) found that student performance significantly improved when social learning elements such as feedback, interaction, and demonstration were added to online courses, demonstrating the influence of observational learning and social presence on learning outcomes. Furthermore, with the rapid development of educational technology, virtual reality (VR) and social networking environments offer new avenues to support social learning. Marougkas et al. (2023) pointed out that VR can enhance learners' interaction and participation through immersive experiences, making learning a process of co-constructing meaning. In summary, social learning theory not only offers insights for traditional classrooms but also provides important theoretical support for exploring the cultivation of social skills in digital teaching and physical education.

Social Skills

Social skills are generally defined as social behaviors exhibited by individuals in specific cultural and social contexts that lead to positive outcomes, including elements such as communication skills, teamwork skills, self-expression, emotion regulation, and polite behavior. Research indicates that strong social skills not only affect university students' academic performance but also their adaptability to the learning environment. Insufficient communication skills, lack of self-confidence, or inappropriate emotional expression can all contribute to adjustment difficulties during university studies (Jardim & Soares, 2023). Therefore, higher education institutions should actively build supportive social environments for students, such as providing lectures, seminars, outdoor activities, and diverse opportunities for social interaction, to promote the development of their social competence (Gul et al., 2023).

In recent years, with the reform of higher education and changes in industrial structure, the importance of social skills has become increasingly prominent. Research shows that emphasizing only knowledge and technical skills is no longer sufficient to meet the demands of the modern labor market; instead, a comprehensive education that integrates personal development goals and emphasizes social and emotional skills is key to enhancing students' employability (Goulart et al., 2022). Employers generally consider soft skills to be just as important as hard skills, especially in workplace situations such as teamwork, communication, problem-solving, and cross-cultural interaction, where social skills have become a crucial indicator influencing recruitment and career advancement (Prada et al., 2022). Therefore, university education must incorporate social skills into its curriculum and strengthen their role in the teaching and learning process.

In the transition from school to the workplace, social skills play an irreplaceable role in students' career development. Ibourk and El Aynaoui (2023) point out that although automation and artificial intelligence can replace some functions, real social interaction, teamwork, and emotional understanding cannot be effectively replaced by machines. Flexible teamwork, interpersonal collaboration, and workplace communication still highly rely on human social skills. Therefore, while cultivating students' professional knowledge and technical skills, higher education should also emphasize the development of their social skills to enhance graduates' adaptability and competitiveness in modern society. In conclusion,

social skills are not only a key factor in academic success but also a core competency for future workplace survival and development.

Physical Education

Physical education not only focuses on cultivating physical fitness and athletic skills, but its value extends to cognitive, emotional, and social levels. Research indicates that physical education courses can promote sustainability awareness, environmental consciousness, professional ethics, and teamwork skills (Merma-Molina et al., 2023). From a socio-cultural perspective, physical education also plays a vital role in promoting gender equality, inclusivity, and social justice. Therefore, the training of contemporary physical education teachers should not be limited to technical instruction but should integrate sports culture with a wide range of social issues to form a more forward-looking and comprehensive perspective on physical education.

In terms of teaching strategies, gamified learning is gradually becoming an important trend in physical education. Games, by their very nature, emphasize interaction, competition, and cooperation, providing students with a natural arena for practicing social behaviors and developing collaborative skills. Research shows that gamified instruction not only enhances learning motivation but also creates abundant opportunities for cooperation and communication (Camacho-Sánchez et al., 2023). Furthermore, with the rapid development of digital technology, social networks, virtual classrooms, and interactive platforms (such as Edmodo) are also widely used in physical education. Related research indicates that instructional design combining gamification and digital platforms can enhance student engagement, improve the quality of interaction, and promote sustained participation in physical activities (Montiel-Ruiz et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, physical education has multiple positive impacts on students' physical and mental development. Sports activities can promote teamwork, boost self-confidence, and improve neuroregulation, reduce anxiety, and enhance attention at a physiological level (Yang et al., 2021). However, higher education physical education still faces certain challenges in practice, such as overemphasizing skills instruction while neglecting theoretical learning and values education, leading to a lack of student initiative and lifelong exercise awareness. In recent years, information and communication technology (ICT) and blended learning models have been proposed as directions for improvement. Studies have shown that combining online self-directed learning with offline collaborative activities can enhance learning motivation, improve teacher-student interaction, and promote emotional exchange (Wang et al., 2022).

In summary, physical education holds significant potential in students' socialization, but its educational function is still constrained by curriculum structure, teaching philosophy, and interaction models in actual teaching. To gain a deeper understanding of the true state of higher education physical education in cultivating students' social skills, it is necessary to start from the actual experiences of learners and teachers, exploring their specific feelings and perspectives on classroom interaction, collaborative situations, and learning participation through qualitative interviews. Therefore, the next chapter will introduce the interview research method used in this study to further reveal the main challenges and key influencing factors of higher education physical education in cultivating social skills.

Research Methods

This study aims to explore the main challenges faced by college physical education in cultivating students' social skills, and to analyze the impact of classroom environment, teacher demonstration, and peer interaction on students' socialization development based on social learning theory. Given the contextual and interactive nature of social skills development, quantitative data alone are insufficient to represent students' authentic experiences in physical education classes. Therefore, this study employs an exploratory design within a qualitative research approach. The research methodology primarily utilizes semi-structured interviews, focusing on college students' participation experiences, interaction patterns, and subjective feelings about learning social skills in physical education classes, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the socialization mechanisms and potential limitations in physical education.

The study subjects were 12 undergraduate students from a comprehensive university in mainland China, all of whom had taken physical education courses. Purposeful sampling was used to include students of different genders, types of physical education courses, and levels of sports participation to ensure the diversity and richness of the data. Interviews were conducted one-on-one and lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. The interview outline for this study was designed based on three core aspects formed by social learning theory and literature review, specifically including: (1) Physical education class experience and participation motivation, such as "What is your overall feeling about physical education class?" and "What content in the class is most attractive to you?"; (2) Classroom interaction and social skills development, including "Do you have the opportunity to cooperate with classmates? Please give an example." and "Does the teacher's demonstration or teaching method affect your communication or cooperative behavior?"; (3) Difficulties, limitations, and improvement needs, such as "Have you encountered any problems that affect interaction in class?" and "How should physical education classes be adjusted to promote social skills development?". All interviews were conducted with the informed consent of the participants and were recorded to ensure the integrity of the data.

Interview data were processed using thematic analysis, following steps including data familiarization, coding, thematic summarization, and contextual interpretation. The study employed social learning theory as its primary analytical framework, categorizing data into themes such as environmental factors, interactive behaviors, and individual factors, and further identifying structural and pedagogical challenges students face in developing social skills. To enhance the credibility of the research, verbatim transcription, participant verification, and cross-data comparisons were conducted. Strict adherence to research ethics was maintained, with participant information anonymized to ensure confidentiality and academic rigor throughout the research process.

Interview Results

The Curriculum Structure is Simplistic and Lacks Learning Contexts that Promote Social skills

Most students surveyed generally reflected that current university physical education courses still focus on skills training, with classes primarily emphasizing the achievement of technical movements and neglecting learning activities that promote communication, collaboration, and strategic discussion. Students pointed out:

"Most of the time in PE class, the teacher explains the movements, and we practice along with them. There's simply no time to talk or discuss with classmates." (Interviewee A)

"Some classes are just running laps and doing exercises; the content is the same all semester long." (Interviewee F)

Furthermore, some students interviewed mentioned that, due to course requirements, teachers tend to use a "fixed process—repetitive practice" approach to ensure the completion of teaching targets. Meanwhile, some schools experience insufficient class time and physical education classes being squeezed out at the end of the semester, resulting in students lacking a stable learning experience.

"The final physical education class is often taken up by other classes, and even if the teacher wants to lead cooperative games, there's no time." (Interviewee J)

These phenomena make physical education courses difficult to serve as an effective context for students to develop communication, cooperation, and peer interaction, thus limiting the possibility of "learning through interaction, observation, and imitation" as emphasized by social learning theory.

Insufficient Teacher Demonstration and Guidance Hinder the Formation of Positive Social Learning Patterns

Interview data shows that teachers are the primary objects of students' observation and imitation; however, in actual classrooms, teacher demonstrations mostly remain at the technical level, with less emphasis on social behaviors such as teamwork, cooperative attitudes, and communication methods. For example:

"The teacher mainly teaches how to do the movements, and rarely talks about how to divide the work and cooperate." (Interviewee C)

"The teacher focuses more on the standard of the movements and doesn't remind us much about how to communicate with our teammates." (Interviewee H)

Some students also mentioned that the teacher was rather authoritative in the classroom with little interaction, resulting in a one-way transmission of information and making it difficult for students to ask questions or participate in discussions.

"Some teachers are quite serious, and we don't dare to communicate with them much, so we just do what they say." (Interviewee D)

Because social learning theory emphasizes the importance of modeling and interaction, if teachers do not demonstrate positive communication, cooperation, and encouraging feedback in the classroom, students will find it difficult to observe how social skills are applied from the teachers, thus weakening the guiding role of physical education in socialization learning.

Peer Interaction is Superficial, Cooperative Relationships are Unstable and Affected by Differences in Ability

Although physical education classes should provide ample opportunities for peer interaction, interview results show that student interactions typically remain at a superficial level, such as "coordinating movements" and "completing tasks," lacking in-depth communication or collaborative problem-solving experiences.

"We will collaborate, but usually it's just to get the job done; there's no real discussion about how to do it better." (Respondent K)

Furthermore, differences in athletic ability are considered a significant factor influencing social experiences. Students with weaker abilities are typically more passive and less willing to participate in group discussions.

"I'm not very athletic and I'm afraid of holding others back, so I don't dare to talk much." (Respondent E)

Some students also pointed out that group work often becomes merely a formality:

"After being divided into groups, many people just did their own thing and there was no real collaboration." (Respondent B)

This low quality of interaction prevents peers from serving as effective learning models and reduces students' opportunities to observe and imitate social behavior, which falls short of the "vicarious learning" emphasized in social learning theory.

Insufficient Student Motivation and Psychological Factors Limit the Development of Social Skills

In the interviews, some students mentioned that their main purpose for participating in physical education classes was still to "earn credits" and "get by," rather than to actively seek communication or team experience.

"To be honest, I only came to class to get credits; I never thought about learning things like teamwork." (Interviewee L)

Lack of interest and low self-efficacy are also reasons that limit interaction. For example:

"When I'm not very good at sports, I lack confidence and try to stay silent as much as possible." (Respondent G)

Some students may reduce their willingness to cooperate with classmates due to concerns about poor performance, peer evaluation, or embarrassment. These psychological factors further weaken students' engagement in interactive activities, limiting the social learning outcomes of physical education classes.

From the perspective of social learning theory, these personal factors can influence learners' motivation in observation, imitation and interaction, all of which are necessary prerequisites for the successful development of social skills.

Strategies to Enhance the Socialization Function of College Sports

Based on the research findings, this study reveals that the challenges in cultivating social skills in higher education physical education stem primarily from four aspects: curriculum structure, teaching methods, peer interaction, and student motivation. Therefore, the construction of coping strategies must be adjusted simultaneously from three aspects: "teaching environment—social interaction—learner factors," in accordance with the logic of social learning theory. Firstly, at the curriculum level, higher education physical education courses should move away from a single-skill training orientation and shift towards a teaching structure with social interaction value. For example, appropriately increasing teamwork tasks in ball games, physical fitness, or outdoor courses allows students to practice communication, negotiation, and strategy discussion in real-world collaboration. The curriculum should not only emphasize technical achievement but also guide students to form common goals, role divisions, and collective engagement through task design, thereby promoting socialized

learning. More importantly, cooperative situations provide students with opportunities to observe others and imitate behavior, making the classroom more aligned with Bandura's emphasis on the "observational learning" mechanism.

Secondly, teachers play a crucial role as social learning role models in physical education classes. This study found that teachers' teaching methods tend to focus on technology transfer, with less attention paid to communication, emotions, and team relationships during interactions. Therefore, the strategy recommendations emphasize that teachers should strengthen social demonstration behaviors. During the teaching process, teachers' language, attitudes, and interaction methods themselves serve as references for students' learning. For example, encouraging teammates, accepting differences, and providing positive support all directly influence the direction of students' imitation and internalization. Teachers should not only incorporate explanations of cooperative strategies into technology demonstrations but also promote discussion, feedback, and reflection in classroom organization, making students realize that interaction itself is also learning content. Furthermore, universities can incorporate social skills education, cooperative learning methods, and interactive psychology training into their teacher professional development systems, enabling teachers to possess the professional ability to guide social behavior in the classroom and provide students with a more socially valuable learning environment.

Finally, enhancing students' motivation and willingness to participate is also key to promoting social skills development. This study shows that some students reduce classroom interaction due to insufficient interest, ability differences, or psychological pressure; therefore, strategies should focus on learning support. Increasing the diversity and selectivity of physical education courses will help students participate based on their interests, and interest itself can enhance engagement. Furthermore, creating a psychologically safe classroom atmosphere is crucial. Teachers who reduce negative evaluations of mistakes, weaken competitive humiliation, and replace criticism with encouragement can effectively enhance students' willingness to express themselves, participate, and cooperate. When students feel respected and accepted, their social behavior is more likely to occur proactively. Overall, enhanced motivation, emotional support, and value perception will jointly strengthen students' self-efficacy in social interactions, increasing their likelihood of practicing social skills in physical education classes.

In conclusion, by integrating curriculum design, teacher demonstration, and learner support, the limitations of social skills development in current physical education classes can be effectively addressed, allowing physical education to once again become an important arena for promoting students' socialization. This strategy not only addresses the practical issues raised in the interviews of this study but also aligns closely with the "interaction between environment, behavior, and individual" emphasized in social learning theory, possessing both theoretical and practical significance.

Conclusion

This study, centered on social learning theory, explores the real experiences, challenges, and underlying structural reasons of higher education physical education in cultivating students' social skills through in-depth interviews with 12 university students. The results show that despite the inherent interactivity and cooperation of physical education courses,

multiple limitations exist in promoting students' communication, teamwork, and social adaptation skills. These limitations include a simplistic curriculum structure, insufficient teacher demonstration, low-quality peer interaction, and insufficient student motivation. These factors collectively affect students' socialization learning process in physical education classes, making it difficult for physical education to fulfill its intended social education function in practice.

From the perspective of social learning theory, students' social skill development depends on the dynamic interaction of environmental context, observation and demonstration, and their own participation. However, this study found that many classroom situations lack effective collaborative structures, making it difficult for students to obtain sufficient opportunities for interaction; teachers mainly conduct technical instruction in the classroom, and their demonstrations fail to effectively focus on social elements; peer interactions are often superficial or limited by ability differences, making it difficult to form high-quality mutual learning relationships; and some students reduce their active participation due to insufficient interest or low self-efficacy, making it difficult for learning behaviors to develop naturally through imitation and reflection. These difficulties indicate that if higher education physical education is to truly achieve the goals of moral education and promoting students' all-round development, it needs to re-examine the design logic and interaction mechanisms of physical education teaching.

This study not only reveals the practical problems in cultivating social skills in higher education physical education, but also further emphasizes the explanatory power of social learning theory in physical education research. The study found that the reason physical education courses fail to fully realize their socialization function is not due to a lack of potential in the activities themselves, but rather because the teaching organization, interaction structure, and learning atmosphere are insufficient to support the natural occurrence of observational learning and collaborative behavior. Therefore, a more systematic adjustment in curriculum design, teacher demonstration, and learner support in physical education will help rebuild the interactive quality of physical education classes, making them an important arena for students to practice communication, collaboration, and socio-emotional expression.

Overall, higher education physical education possesses irreplaceable value in cultivating social skills. The analysis and strategies proposed in this study not only address current practical challenges but also provide a feasible path for future physical education reform. Through a more interactive, social, and supportive learning environment, physical education classes can become a crucial foundation for promoting students' social development, personality formation, and lifelong exercise awareness. Future research could further expand the sample types, include different institutions and sports, or incorporate teacher interviews to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the social learning mechanisms within physical education, thereby providing deeper theoretical and practical support for higher education physical education reform.

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