

PERCEPTIONS ON THE ROLE OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN EDUCATION AND YOUTH WELLBEING: A STUDY ON HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to evaluate the place and importance of physical activity in education through the views of high school students and teachers. Using a qualitative methodology, semistructured interviews were conducted with physical education and sports teachers and students in high schools located in Hakkari and Van, Turkey. The sample consisted of 31 students (29% female, 71% male, mean age=15.32 years) and 15 teachers (47% female, 53% male, mean age=33.80 years). A phenomenological design was adopted to explore the perceived effects of physical activity on students' academic, personal, and social development. Findings suggest that physical activity contributes positively to students' motivation, physical fitness, responsibility, and life experience. However, time management difficulties and reduced study time were identified as negative aspects. Participants highlighted that sports classes and school teams enhance students' self-confidence, discipline, and social interaction skills. Challenges such as limited emphasis on sports in the education system, lack of specialised teachers and inadequate physical infrastructure were also noted. In addition, students' perceptions of violence during sports activities were examined, revealing various negative psychological effects. Overall, the study emphasises the need for regionally sensitive, balanced and well-structured physical activity programmes to support students' educational and developmental outcomes.

Keywords: Education; Physical activity; Physical education; Student perceptions; Youth wellbeing.

INTRODUCTION

Sport is an activity in which physical activity (PA) and competition are carried out within the framework of certain rules, which mostly supports the physical, social and mental development of individuals, makes strong social ties and covers different disciplines (Borge, 2021). Schools function as a structure of social life and encourage students to participate in sports activities organised both inside and outside the school and provide them with valuable skills (Habyarimana *et al.*, 2022).

The place of PA in the education system is important (Panda, 2024). By increasing communication and dialogue between students, physical activities not only develop positive attitudes, but also reinforce their sense of belonging and commitment to the school (Osterman, 2023). In addition to physical and psychological benefits, physical education (PE) and sports activities contribute to the creation of sociologically healthy individuals and societies (Martin-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, it has an important place in the education policies of developed societies. In addition, from the perspective of educators, sport is considered a fundamental discipline in the personality development of individuals and in a balanced evolution process (Ferry, 2016). Sportive activities are indisputably important in taking responsibility, gaining self-confidence and creating an independent character (Fradejas Medrano *et al.*, 2017). While sports also contribute to the social integration of individuals and the improvement of mental and physical health, it also reinforces the motivation to struggle and succeed with its competitive nature (Popek, 2024).

The literature provides information related to the different dimensions of sport in education. Prior research has explored the contributions of sport to the education system (Panda, 2024), its relationship with culture (Peter, 2015), and its role in the socialisation process (Martin-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2024) and school adaptation (Sağın & Güllü, 2020). Studies have also examined the relationship between sport and academic performance (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2023), as well as its impact on students' self-efficacy (Rogowska *et al.*, 2022). In addition, scholars have analysed the effects of sport on moral and values education (Šukys *et al.*, 2017) and its role in preventing behavioural addictions, particularly those related to digital device overuse (Cojocaru *et al.*, 2022). Other areas of focus include the influence of sport on PA, physical health, healthy behaviours and overall wellbeing (Turdalievich & Turdalievich, 2020; Roccliffe *et al.*, 2024), along with the experiences of teachers who deliver PE courses (Ferry, 2016). While this body of research provides a broad overview of sport's multifaceted contributions to education, there remains a gap in understanding how sport is experienced and perceived by both students and teachers within specific educational and regional contexts. This study addresses this gap by examining the role and significance of sport in the education system, focusing particularly on the views of high school teachers and students in the eastern regions of Turkey. To address this gap, the present study aimed to analyse the role and significance of sports in the education system, particularly from the perspectives of high school teachers and students. While examining the effects of sports activities on skills such as academic achievement, social development, discipline and teamwork, the study also evaluates teachers' views on the place of these activities within the educational curriculum. In this context, unlike previous studies that predominantly focus on the general effects of sports, this research explores the impact of sports on the educational process specifically for high school teachers and students through qualitative analysis. Conducted in Turkey's eastern regions, this study provides a unique contribution to the literature by detailing the regional differences and challenges in integrating sports into the education system.

METHOD

Study design

This research was conducted using qualitative research designs such as phenomenology. In qualitative research methods, events and perceptions are examined in a holistic and realistic manner in their natural environments (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). In the phenomenological

approach, how individuals attribute meaning to their experiences is centred (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In this study, the roles attributed to PA and sport within the education system were explored through semistructured interviews with high school teachers and students.

The interviews aimed to investigate the perceived effects of sport on academic achievement, personal and social development, school discipline and student health. The questions directed at teachers focused on the contribution of sports to academic success, the impact of school sports teams on student discipline, and whether sports are adequately represented in the education system. Additionally, the interviews explored teachers' views on the role of sports in promoting student health, supporting stress management and preventing violence through sport-based education programmes.

On the other hand, questions posed to students addressed the influence of sports on academic motivation, the contribution of team sports to social skills and the adequacy of school sports facilities. Students were also asked about the barriers they face in participating in PE classes and school sports teams, as well as their views on how school administrations could promote student engagement in sport activities.

The study was conducted in the Turkish provinces of Hakkâri and Van. Demographic and sociocultural factors played a critical role in the selection of these regions. Located in the eastern and southeastern parts of Turkey, these provinces are characterised by ethnic and cultural diversity. Such demographic features may influence perceptions of both the education system and the role of sport within it. Additionally, economic and social conditions in these regions may affect access to educational opportunities and participation in sports activities.

This study can help to identify the specific needs and challenges concerning the education system and the role of sport in these provinces. Furthermore, findings from this research may inform the development of more inclusive and effective national education policies and sport programmes. Therefore, the selection of these provinces is expected to contribute to the broader advancement of educational and sporting practices in Turkey.

Participants

The population of the research consisted of high school students in the city centres and districts of Hakkâri and Van, Turkey, as well as PE and sports teachers who were teaching at the high school level. Since the study focused on the role of sports in education, it is important to note that the participating teachers were exclusively from the field of PE and sports, ensuring a targeted perspective on the research topic. In phenomenology studies, researchers carefully select their samples to include individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon or event (Rubin & Babbie, 2016). In this study, the purposeful random sampling method was preferred to serve the purpose and objectivity of the research. This approach enhances the credibility of the study and allows for richer data collection (Flick, 2014). The selection of high schools was based on specific criteria, including geographical diversity (schools from both urban and rural areas), the availability of well-structured PE classes as part of the formal curriculum and school-organised sports activities outside regular class hours, as well as the willingness of administrators and teachers to participate in the study. By ensuring the inclusion of schools with varying resources, student demographics and sports engagement levels, the

sample aimed to provide a comprehensive perspective on the role of sports in education across different school contexts. In this regard, 33 high school students and 16 PE and sports teachers from various high schools were included in the research.

In the literature, sample size can vary between 5 and 25; however, it is stated that approximately 30 participants may be sufficient for in-depth interviews (Patton, 2005; Neuman, 2014; Subedi, 2021; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). In this study, it was thought that the number of students ($n=33$) and teachers ($n=16$) adequately represented the population of the research. After the data collection process, the number of students was updated to 31 and the number of teachers to 15, in line with expert opinions. Additionally, participating students were coded as S1, S2, etc. and teachers were coded as T1, T2, etc. Demographic data about the participants are given in Table 1.

Data collection

One of the most frequently used interview methods in qualitative research is the semistructured interview form (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). As a result of the detailed literature review conducted by the researchers, a semistructured interview form was developed in accordance with the purpose of the research. The interview forms used in this study contained different contents for the participating students and teachers.

The form prepared for students consisted of nine questions covering different topics. These topics included the impact of sports on academic success; the effect of team sports and sports-related courses on academic motivation and their contribution to personal development and emotional health; the effect of team sports on social skills; evaluation of school sports opportunities; barriers to participation in sports activities; and expectations of participation in sports activities from school. The interviews with students lasted approximately 45 minutes on average.

The form for teachers consisted of eight questions addressing issues such as the effects of sports on students' academic success, personal and social development, in-school behaviour and physical health, the representation of sports in the education system, the balance between sports and academic courses, and the role of sports programmes in protecting students from violence. The interviews conducted with teachers lasted approximately 40 minutes on average.

Researchers collected data through face-to-face interviews with participants. In this study, where participation was voluntary, participants were informed in detail about the research process and all necessary permissions were obtained. The interviews cover a period of approximately 1 month.

According to Krefting (1991), the concepts of validity and reliability used in quantitative research should be replaced by the expression of 'credibility' in qualitative research. One of the ways to increase credibility is expert review (Guba & Lincoln, 1982, cited in Başkale, 2016). In this study, to ensure the internal validity of the semistructured interview form, the form was reviewed by three expert academicians specialising in education, sports sciences and psychology. Based on their feedback, it was determined that the interview form was suitable for the purpose of the study, ensuring that the questions effectively addressed the research

objectives and were appropriate for the target participants. The data obtained from the first 33 student and 16 teacher participants selected by the purposeful random sampling method were also presented to the experts, and as a result of the analysis of these data, it was concluded that the participation of two students and one teacher did not serve the purpose of the study, and it was recommended to remove these data. The researchers accepted this recommendation of the experts and removed the data of the relevant participants from the study.

Analysis of data

One of the critical stages of qualitative research is data analysis (Bingham, 2023). At the end of the analysis process, the results obtained and perspectives shape the findings. In this study, common methods adopted in the literature such as transcribing interviews, coding, keeping a researcher diary and creating categories were used to analyse qualitative data. Firstly, each participant's interview was transcribed. Then, the data were divided into meaningful units and coded while preserving the integrity of meaning. The data were transferred to tables to label the participants' statements without any alterations. The coding process was not pre-established before the research but was shaped according to the participants' responses. To support the manual analysis and ensure systematic coding, MAXQDA 2022, which is qualitative data analysis software, was used to organise codes, track emerging themes and visualise data patterns. Additionally, a researcher diary was kept (White, 2021), which helped establish a connection between raw data and theoretical ideas. During this process, the researchers conducted extensive readings of previously taken notes and coding. In the final stage, the patterns obtained from the answers to the research questions were brought together, and categories were created by identifying common themes through manual coding and thematic analysis conducted by the researchers.

Ethical considerations

Within the scope of the data collection process of the research, the necessary approval was obtained from Hakkâri University for the ethical approval needed before proceeding to the data collection stage (Document date and issue number: 20.02.2024-75608).

RESULTS

Upon examining Table 1, it is evident that the sample comprises 31 students and 15 teachers. Within the student cohort, females constituted 29% (9 students), while males represented 71% (22 students). The average age of the students was 15.32 years. The distribution across grade levels indicates that 13% of students were in 9th grade (4 students), 58% in 10th grade (18 students), 13% in 11th grade (4 students), and 16% in 12th grade (5 students).

Analysing the teacher demographics, 47% were female (7 teachers) and 53% were male (8 teachers), with an average age of 33.80 years. Educational qualifications among teachers show that 73% possessed a bachelor's degree (11 teachers) and 27% held a postgraduate degree (4 teachers). Regarding tenure, 20% had served for 1-5 years (3 teachers), 60% for 6-10 years (9 teachers) and 20% for more than 11 years (3 teachers).

Table 1. **DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF THE PARTICIPANTS (n)**

	Student (n=31)	Teacher (n=15)
Gender		
Male	9	7
Female	22	8
Average age, years	15.32	33.80
Grade level		
9	4	
10	18	
11	4	
12	5	
Education level		
Bachelor degree		11
Postgraduate degree		4
Number of duty years		
1–5		3
6–10		9
11 and above		3

Students' perceptions of the educational benefits and challenges of sports

Table 2 contains the distribution of the data analysis on students' views on the effects of sports in terms of themes, categories, codes and frequencies.

Table 2. ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' OPINIONS ON THE EFFECTS OF SPORTS ACTIVITIES ON EDUCATION

Themes	Interview questions	Categories	Codes	Frequency
Sports and academic success	What are the effects of sports on students' study habits and academic success?	Negative effects	Falling behind in classes, not having time to study, training fatigue, increased stress	9
		Positive effects	Increased motivation, being fit and active, gaining responsibility awareness and gaining experience	8
		The relationship between sports and academic success	Positive contribution to academic success, problem of focusing on lessons, balance of sports and lessons	8
		Challenges of a balanced approach	Difficulty in time management, effort to focus on two areas, negativities and fatigue	5
	What are the contributions of school sports teams to educational life?	Social contributions	Making new friends, socialising, increasing communication skills, good memories	8
		Personal development and knowledge acquisition	Self-improvement, gaining knowledge, learning techniques, becoming a coach-athlete	6
		Self-confidence and mental health	Increased self-confidence, improved mental health, increased energy, being more active	4
		Academic success	Increasing school success, motivation for classes, team success	4
	What are the effects of sports lessons and activities on students' motivation and interest in classes?	Positive effects	Increased energy and desire, coming to school with excitement, increased motivation, gaining self-confidence and experience, socialisation	20
		Challenges and negative effects	Neglecting lessons, fatigue and weakness, difficulty focusing on lessons, difficulty in time management, inability to participate in activities	10
Personal and social development	What are the effects of sports on personal development and self-confidence?	Increased self-confidence	Self-confidence, increased self-confidence, self-development and experience gain	12
		Physical development and health	Physical strength and development, healthy life, good physical development	9
		Self-improvement	Increased personal development, change in appearance, development of skills, gaining balance and discipline	9
		Motivation and energy	Increased motivation, being energetic and willing, ambition, moving fast, acceleration of reflexes	5
		Social and psychological effects	Socialisation, self-expression, expanding the social circle	3
	What are the effects of sports on stress management and emotional health?	Therapy, emotional relief and healing	Therapy, emotional relaxation, relieving the tiredness of the day, being at peace with oneself	18
		Self-confidence and motivation	Increased self-confidence, increased motivation, feeling better	6
		Stress and pressure	Training and lesson stress, teacher pressure	2

Sports opportunities and participation	What are the effects of participation in team sports on social skills?	Communication and social harmony	Getting along well with everyone, development of communication skills	8
		Social contributions and experience	New friendships, increased socialisation, gaining experience, come out of one's shell	8
		Group dynamics and sense of unity	Unity, common goal, being part of the team	5
		Leadership and management skills	Revitalising the leadership spirit and increasing management skills	2
		Contribution to motivation and morale	Boosting morale of the team, convincing them of success, focusing on the match	2
	What aspects of sports opportunities at school need to be evaluated and improved?	Lack of sports field and equipment	There are no sports and athletics fields, no training areas for every branch, no equipment.	15
		Social and psychological health	Stress reduction, emotional relaxation and stress relief techniques	10
		Lack of education and trainers	Lack of coaches, lack of training materials, lack of interest from teachers	5
		Motivation and participation	Taking more sports classes, more emphasis, increased motivation	5
	What are the barriers to participation in school sports classes and teams?	Lack of facilities and materials	Lack of space to exercise, lack of equipment, service shortage, lack of clothing	9
		Age and branch restrictions	Age restrictions, limited right to choose a branch	4
		Adaptation and time management issues	Adaptation problem between courses, difficulty in time management	2
		Training and training challenges	Pressure from teachers, difficulty of training	2
		Social and personal obstacles	Discord within the team, lack of confidence in one's own performance	2
	What are the school's strategies to encourage participation in sporting events?	Facility, materials and support services	Providing facilities and materials, financial and logistical support, eliminating obstacles	14
		Training, motivation and performance	Boosting the training and motivation, supporting talent and performance	5
		Individual participation and effort	Focusing on student interests and needs, diversification of PE lessons, discipline and order, individual participation and effort.	5
		Social and cultural activities	Social and cultural events	3

In Table 2, under “Sports and academic success”, it is stated that sports have positive effects such as increased motivation, being fit, awareness of responsibility and gaining experience. Participants highlight the impact of sports on discipline and personal development: interest and participation in sports enables them to work in a disciplined manner and improve themselves, with them saying that doing sports increases motivation to learn and performance at school. However, the difficulty of creating a balanced programme between sports and classes is also expressed and attention drawn to the difficulties of balancing sports with academic responsibilities.

In the “Contributions of school sports teams to educational life” section, the importance of developing social skills, increasing self-confidence and teamwork comes to the fore. The opportunities and personal development opportunities offered by sports teams to students are stated, with the comments “*Being in the school sports team allows me to improve myself and learn new things*” (S30) and “*Being an athlete offers me the potential to become a coach or national athlete*” (S16).

The benefits of sports lessons and activities to students can be exemplified by the following statements: “*Sports activities at our school help me improve myself socially and culturally*” Participant S25 emphasised the social contributions of sports. The statement “*Doing sports increases my motivation and helps me stay both fit and active*” (S23) highlights the physical and motivational benefits of sports. The difficulties of doing sports are emphasised with the comments “*I want to do sports, but there are not enough facilities and materials in our school*” (S2) and “*My family wants me to focus on my lessons rather than sports, so I cannot spare much time for sports*” (S4). Therefore, the truth of the lack of facilities and importance of academic success is underlined.

Teachers’ views on the educational, social, and health impacts of sports

Table 3 contains the thematic, categorical, coding and frequency distribution of an analysis of teachers’ views on the effects of sports.

Table 3. ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE AND EFFECTS OF SPORTS IN EDUCATION BASED ON TEACHER OPINIONS

Themes	Interview questions	Categories	Codes	Frequency
Educational value of sports	In your opinion, how do sports activities influence students' academic success?	Positive impact	Significant benefit, adaptation, stress management, self-discovery	11
		Increase the physical and mental capacity	Increase in physical and mental capacity, increase in cognitive skills	7
	How do you think sports classes contribute to the personal and social development of students?	Social interaction and communication	Interaction, communication, socialisation, friendship, initiative	17
		Self-confidence and self-expression	Self-confidence, self-expression, self-disclosure, quick thinking, decision making	10
		Compliance with rules and discipline	Obedying sports rules, obeying rules in life	3
		emotional management	Controlling your emotions, coping with defeat	2
		Tournament and social events	Tournaments, social events, interaction with different schools	2
	In your opinion, how do school sports teams affect student discipline and in-school behaviour?	Discipline and proper behaviour	Maintaining discipline, obeying the rules, acting more responsibly, being systematic	13
		Social behaviour and teamwork	Cooperation, solidarity, sharing, team harmony, increased ownership, sense of duty	6
		Positive behaviour change	Decrease in irresponsible behaviour, positive atmosphere, being more respectful and participatory	4
	How do students perceive and respond to violent incidents that occur during sports activities?	Negative perception and impact	Fear, prejudice, negative impact, negativity, sudden shock, displaying similar behaviours	11
		Reactions to violence	Avoiding punishment, responding to violence with violence, defensive, appeasement attitude	6
		Educational approaches	The teaching that sports is not just about winning, disapproving of violence, friendship and fair play	3
The place of sports in the education	How do you evaluate the representation and importance of sports in the current education system?	Inadequate representation of sports in education	Low number of classes, lack of expert teachers, sports being left in the background	7
		Managerial and administrative deficiencies	Administrators who do not like sports, place excessive emphasis on academic success	4

The contribution of sports to student health	What are your views on the role and importance of maintaining a balance between academic subjects and sports classes in providing a holistic education?	Physical and financial means	Insufficient physical conditions, insufficient financial resources, lack of infrastructure and equipment	4
		Problems in educational approaches	Training methods leading to injuries, lack of importance to educational values, conflict between sports and academic success	3
		Sports and social values	Athletes' inability to reflect social values, failure to raise conscious athletes, underestimation of the role of sports in education.	3
		Need for balance	Mental and physical balancing, balanced progress, complementing each other, discharge	7
		Positive interaction	Sports increase academic success, reinforce theoretical knowledge, and increase self-confidence.	7
		Holistic approach in education	Theoretical and practical integrity, team sports and mathematical thinking	3
		Lack of balance	Imbalance of number of classes, imbalance of mental and physical fatigue	3
	In your opinion, how do sports classes contribute to the physical health of students?	Physical development and health	Height and weight development, muscle endurance, physical development, healthy living, anatomical posture and movement development, being fit, staying vigorous	13
		Healthy living habits	Breathing, warm-up exercises, avoiding obesity, energy release, muscle development	7
		Development of engine features	Flexibility, strength, mobility	3
		Psychological and aesthetic effects	Appearance perception, psychological positive transfer	2
	How do you think sports education programmes contribute to protecting students from violence and risky behaviours?	Awareness-raising and education	Raising awareness about violence in sports, anti-violence programmes, support from sports psychologists, increasing public awareness of sports, and training for coaches and athletes	6
		Role model behaviours and values	Positive behaviour of professional athletes, exemplary behaviour of managers and coaches, emphasis on the values of sports	4
		Codes of conduct and discretion	Cautions, congratulations for positive behaviour, reducing peer bullying,	4
		Sports infrastructure, habits and social support	Regular exercise, necessary follow-ups and material support, provision of sports areas and materials, support from parents	4
		Family and community supported approach	Family support and change in society's mentality, emphasising the difference between good and bad with family support	2

In Table 3, under the theme “Educational value of sports”, it is stated that sports have a positive impact on students’ academic success. One educator stating “*Exercising seems to help students focus on their studies and perform better in exams*” (T3) and another, “*Regular exercise is known to increase both the physical and mental capacities of individuals*” (T1) support this view.

On the topic “The contribution of sports lessons to the personal and social development of students”, it is emphasised that sports make important contributions to areas such as social interaction, self-confidence and discipline.

Teachers talked about the experiences of students, saying “*A student on the football team improves his social skills by interacting with his teammates*” (T6), “*Students participating in martial arts become aware of the importance of training, discipline and following the rules,*” (T15), and “*Individuals who attend dance courses expand their social circles by meeting new people*” (T4).

Regarding the “Effects of school sports teams on student discipline and in-school behaviour”, it is stated that team sports positively change behaviours such as maintaining discipline, obeying the rules and behaving responsibly. For example, making quick decisions in basketball matches “*Making quick decisions in basketball matches improves players’ decision-making abilities*” (T8) and team sports and mathematical thinking providing a holistic educational experience “*Considering different fields such as team sports and mathematical thinking together, it offers students a more holistic educational experience*” (T2) are expressed.

Finally, the theme “The impact of sports on student health” reveals the importance of sports on physical health, healthy living habits and psychological effects. The contribution of regular PA to the fight against obesity “*Regular PA [physical activity] supports muscle development by increasing the energy discharge of students in the fight against obesity*” (T11) and the role of sports classes in gaining healthy living habits “*Sports classes provide students healthy living habits such as correct breathing, warm-up exercises and proper body movements*” (T10) are highlighted. Additionally, it has been experienced that sporting events have an important role in encouraging positive behaviour and reducing peer bullying “*I have experienced that sporting events have an important role in reducing peer bullying by encouraging positive behaviour among students and taking appropriate precautions before and after the competition*” (T7).

DISCUSSION

Discussion of findings regarding the analysis of students’ opinions on the effects of sports activities on education

Sports and academic success theme

This study highlights a multifaceted relationship between PA and students’ academic outcomes. While some participants described how engaging in sports enhanced their academic performance, others highlighted challenges related to focus, time management, and fatigue. These results align with existing literature suggesting that PA can positively impact academic success and study habits (Zheng & Zheng, 2023; Wang *et al.*, 2024), particularly when sports participation is goal-oriented and structured to support educational aims (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2024). However, the presence of contradictory experiences among students is also consistent with studies that report a negative association between sports-related self-efficacy and academic achievement – especially among male students involved in competitive sports

(Shoval *et al.*, 2021). These contrasting perspectives emphasise the complexity of this relationship and point to the critical role of effective time management and focused engagement in balancing academic and athletic commitments.

The role of school sports teams in educational life appears to extend beyond academic performance, offering substantial contributions particularly in the areas of social and personal development. This aligns with previous research showing that participation in school football teams enhances educational engagement, supports knowledge transfer, strengthens socialisation, fosters competitive identity, and contributes to self-esteem and psychological wellbeing (Cho & Lee, 2021; Abel *et al.*, 2024). While the present findings suggest that the academic benefits of school sports teams are relatively limited compared with their broader developmental impact, they nonetheless reinforce the idea that such extracurricular involvement supports students holistically. Consequently, evaluating the educational value of school sports teams requires a comprehensive perspective that accounts not only for academic gains but also for the social, emotional and personal growth they facilitate.

The analysis of sport lessons and related activities reveals a nuanced influence on students' motivation and academic engagement. This dual nature is also reflected in the literature, where students often benefit from both academic and athletic support services, yet face difficulties such as irregular school attendance due to intensive training and competition commitments (Thompson *et al.*, 2022). These complexities underline the importance of structuring sport-related programming in ways that maximise motivational benefits while minimising academic disruption. Addressing such challenges is critical for integrating sports meaningfully into school curricula and for fostering sustained student interest and engagement in academic learning.

Personal and social development theme

Self-confidence emerges as a particularly prominent dimension of personal development influenced by sports. Beyond this, the role of PA in promoting physical health and wellbeing is well recognised. The literature reinforces the broader personal benefits of sports, pointing to enhanced socialisation, teamwork and personal growth (Swanson *et al.*, 2022). Motivation, as a critical element of sports participation, has been positively associated with academic performance (Alsoub, 2023), suggesting that the motivational effects of sports may extend beyond the field. In rural settings, the engagement in folk sports appears to support both physical health and emotional wellbeing (Zheng & Zheng, 2023), while involvement in sports more generally has been linked to improved self-regulation (García *et al.*, 2023). These contributions suggest that sports play an important developmental role, particularly in cultivating self-confidence and promoting holistic wellbeing, and should be integrated thoughtfully into educational settings to maximise their potential impact.

The positive role of sports in managing stress and supporting emotional wellbeing has drawn increasing scholarly attention. Rather than merely offering physical benefits, sports appear to function in a therapeutic capacity, promoting emotional relief and psychological resilience. Research has highlighted links between sports participation and enhanced self-confidence, improved motivation, and a more stable emotional state (Ort *et al.*, 2023; Wang *et al.*, 2024; Woolf *et al.*, 2024). These associations suggest that integrating sports into students' routines can be a valuable strategy for supporting mental health in educational settings. Nevertheless, it

is important to acknowledge the potential downsides, such as heightened stress levels and performance-related anxiety, which may emerge in competitive or high-pressure environments. Balancing these benefits and risks is essential for maximising the emotional advantages of sports while minimising unintended psychological strain.

The role of team sports in cultivating social skills has been widely recognised, particularly regarding communication, social cohesion and experiential learning. These experiences appear to contribute meaningfully to students' ability to navigate group settings, develop interpersonal relationships and foster a sense of unity. Although gains in leadership and motivational impact seem less pronounced, participation in sports environments still offers valuable opportunities for practising social adaptation and group collaboration. This aligns with studies emphasising the role of sports in enhancing interpersonal competence, teamwork and social adaptability (Xue & Li, 2023; Wang *et al.*, 2024). Promoting team-based activities in educational settings may therefore be instrumental in strengthening students' social foundations, especially when efforts are made to include structured support for leadership development and inclusive communication practices.

Sports opportunities and participation theme

The evaluation of school-based sports opportunities points to broader systemic issues that may hinder student engagement and wellbeing. The limited availability of sports facilities, equipment, and qualified instructors suggests structural barriers that go beyond individual motivation. These constraints not only reduce participation but also restrict the potential of sports programmes to support students' social and emotional development. Emphasising stress reduction and emotional support through sports appears particularly important, especially in settings where academic pressure is high. The existing literature echoes these concerns, linking low levels of student participation to infrastructural deficits and inadequate course offerings (Oldridge-Turner *et al.*, 2022; Caneva *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, repeated calls for the expansion of PE programmes (Obeid, 2022) highlight the urgency of developing more inclusive and comprehensive sports curricula that can respond to both physical and psychosocial needs of students.

Various challenges and limitations emerge as major barriers to students' participation in PE lessons and school-based sports teams. Rather than being isolated issues, these barriers reflect broader institutional and contextual shortcomings that limit access and inclusivity in school sports. Addressing factors such as adaptation difficulties, time constraints and limited instructional support requires not only infrastructural improvements but also tailored pedagogical approaches. The literature supports this perspective, highlighting recurring structural challenges in different educational settings (Oldridge-Turner *et al.*, 2022; Caneva *et al.*, 2023). Recommendations to improve the availability of trained staff, suitable facilities and adequate equipment (Caneva *et al.*, 2023) underscore the need for comprehensive strategies. Therefore, fostering sustained student engagement in school sports demands systemic changes that go beyond the physical environment and also include curricular and instructional innovations.

Several key strategies have been identified as effective in promoting student participation in school sports activities. Beyond logistical improvements such as better facilities, equipment and support services, there is a need to adopt a holistic framework that also addresses psychological, motivational and cultural dimensions. While institutional interventions lay the foundation, the long-term success of these efforts depends on fostering student agency and creating inclusive environments that value individual effort. Embedding social and cultural activities into sports programming, for instance, may enhance students' sense of belonging and motivation. The literature underscores the importance of strengthening both health and education infrastructures (Oldridge-Turner *et al.*, 2022; Caneva *et al.*, 2023), while also pointing to the necessity of overcoming structural limitations like the shortage of qualified personnel. Furthermore, cognitive strategies – such as mindfulness training and emotional self-regulation techniques – are increasingly recognised for their potential to enhance students' academic focus and wellbeing (Tarrasch & Berger, 2022). Collectively, these insights emphasise the need for a multidimensional and student-centred approach to effectively increase participation in school-based sports.

Discussion of findings regarding the analysis of the role and effects of sports in education based on teacher opinions

Theme of the educational value of sports

The findings suggest that sports may have a positive influence on students' academic success. This influence appears to extend beyond PA itself, involving a combination of psychological, cognitive, and social factors that support students' holistic development. Enhanced adaptability, stress management, and self-awareness – though previously associated with academic performance – should be viewed as part of a broader developmental process fostered by sustained engagement in sports. In line with this, studies emphasise the dual role of sports in strengthening both physical and mental wellbeing (Zhang & Shi, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2023), while also pointing to the long-term cognitive benefits of an active lifestyle (Guimarães *et al.*, 2023). The association between sports participation and psychological resilience, cognitive focus and wellbeing (Wang *et al.*, 2024) reinforces the view that educational institutions should treat PA not merely as a supplementary programme, but as a strategic tool to enhance learning environments. Thus, incorporating sports into school curricula may serve as a valuable means of supporting academic outcomes through its multidimensional effects.

Sports lessons contribute to students' personal and social development, resulting in a range of important outcomes. The emphasis placed on social interaction and communication within these lessons can be seen as a platform for broader developmental gains, such as the enhancement of self-confidence and self-expression. While these lessons foster positive interpersonal dynamics, their relatively limited impact on emotional regulation and rule compliance suggests a need for more structured approaches in these areas. The opportunity for inter-school interaction through sports events and tournaments not only reinforces social learning but also cultivates a sense of identity and belonging among students. Previous studies (Cho & Lee, 2021; Swanson *et al.*, 2022; Abel *et al.*, 2023; Woolf *et al.*, 2024) further affirm that the social and psychological benefits of sports extend into areas such as self-esteem, cooperation and responsibility. These insights suggest that sports lessons hold considerable potential as tools for holistic education, though targeted enhancements may be needed to address certain developmental gaps.

School sports teams play a crucial role in shaping student discipline and in-school behaviour, yielding several significant outcomes. The structured nature of these environments appears to support the internalisation of school norms and expectations, which may explain the observed increase in rule compliance and responsibility among participants. Enhanced cooperation and solidarity within teams are not only reflections of effective teamwork but also serve as mechanisms through which students assume greater ownership of their roles. The reduction in irresponsible behaviours and the promotion of a respectful school atmosphere can be viewed as byproducts of these dynamics. As emphasised in the literature, participation in school sports teams reinforces students' connection to education and supports their social and emotional development (Cho & Lee, 2021; Xue & Li, 2023; Abel *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, improvements in self-assessment, adaptability and healthy routines – alongside gains in discipline and time management – highlight the transformative potential of these programmes (Machida-Kosuga & Kohno, 2023). Thus, school sports teams appear to serve not only as athletic platforms but also as effective educational tools for fostering behavioural and social growth.

Various findings shed light on how students perceive and respond to violent incidents during sports activities. The prevalence of fear, prejudice and avoidance behaviours may reflect a deeper concern about the social and disciplinary consequences of such events. These reactions point to the need for a shift in how sports are framed within educational settings – beyond mere competition towards the reinforcement of ethical values like fair play and friendship. The literature highlights that violence in sports is often linked to broader social and cultural narratives, where aggression may be normalised or even rewarded (Fortier *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, tackling violence requires more than reactive measures; it involves actively shaping student perceptions and behaviours through educational strategies. Promoting fair play, mutual respect and prosocial attitudes has been shown to mitigate violent tendencies, especially when these values are embedded in the sports environment (Ludwiczak & Bronikowska, 2022). Taken together, these insights suggest that preventive efforts must focus on both individual attitudes and institutional approaches to effectively reduce violence and foster a healthier sporting culture among students.

The theme of the place of sports in the education system

The evaluation of sports representation within the education system reveals several critical deficiencies and challenges. These issues point not only to structural and resource-based shortcomings, such as the scarcity of qualified personnel and limited course offerings, but also to deeper systemic problems regarding the philosophical positioning of sports within education. The marginalisation of sports in the educational agenda reflects a broader undervaluation of its pedagogical and developmental potential. Existing literature underscores the importance of cultivating a supportive motivational climate through qualified coaching, which can enhance both athletic and academic engagement (Notario-Alonso *et al.*, 2022; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2024). However, the gap between theory and practice is widened by inadequate pedagogical approaches, insufficient emphasis on values education, and training methods that compromise student wellbeing. In this context, the lack of integration between academic and athletic demands becomes particularly salient. While some studies advocate for institutional prioritisation of sports to improve educational and health outcomes (Oldridge-Turner *et al.*, 2022), others warn against the risks associated with overly intensive training, which can result in physical harm and disengagement (Miranda-Comas *et al.*, 2022). The literature increasingly

calls for the development of holistic educational models that align academic learning with mental, physical and social development (Wang *et al.*, 2024). These perspectives collectively highlight the need for structural reform and philosophical realignment to ensure that sports occupy a meaningful and balanced place within the broader educational landscape.

The theme of the impact of sports on student health

Sports classes have a positive influence on students' physical health, yielding a range of important benefits. Beyond the immediate outcomes such as improved physical fitness and posture, their long-term value lies in fostering sustainable health behaviours and physical literacy. However, the relatively limited effect of these classes on specific motor skills and psychological or aesthetic outcomes highlights a need for more tailored and diverse instructional approaches. This suggests that while current programmes successfully promote general wellbeing, they may fall short in cultivating more specialised competencies. The broader literature reinforces the significant impact of PA on youth health, emphasising not only its contribution to physical development but also to mental and cognitive wellbeing (Wong *et al.*, 2023). These insights indicate that to maximise their benefits, sports classes should be restructured with a more holistic focus – integrating physical, mental and skill-based objectives into a cohesive pedagogical model that supports lifelong health and fitness habits.

Various strategies and approaches underscore the critical role of sports education programmes in protecting students from violence. While awareness-raising and value-oriented interventions are often highlighted as effective, their success depends on how well they are integrated into a broader educational and social framework. The promotion of prosocial behaviours and reduction of peer bullying, for example, suggest that sports can function not only as a physical outlet but also as a vehicle for social learning. Moreover, the presence of supportive infrastructure and social networks points to the importance of contextual and environmental factors in violence prevention. The literature further underscores the significance of family and community engagement, indicating that student protection cannot be fully achieved without a parallel shift in societal attitudes towards violence and sports. According to Obeid (2022), ensuring equitable access to quality sports programmes that respond to individual needs is a key strategy. Similarly, Jugl *et al.* (2023) emphasise that violence prevention is most effective when improvements in sports participation are accompanied by educational support. These findings imply that the protective potential of sports lies in the implementation of multidimensional strategies that bring together pedagogical, environmental and sociocultural components in a coherent manner.

Limitations

This study has certain limitations. Firstly, the limited sample size and regional focus of the study may limit the generalisability of the results obtained. Additionally, the research's focus on a specific group of teachers and students may fail to represent the experiences and views of other groups. Despite this, the results of the study provide important insights for high school teachers and students regarding the role of PA in the education system. The research emphasises that PA has a positive effect on students' physical health, discipline acquisition, social interaction and motivation. These results show that PA should be emphasised more in education systems in places similar to this region and that PA can contribute to the overall development of students.

CONCLUSION

This study examined perceptions on the role of PA in education and youth wellbeing by focusing on the views of high school teachers and students in the eastern regions of Turkey. While existing literature has extensively documented the impact of PA on education, this research distinguishes itself by adopting a qualitative approach and focusing on a relatively underexplored regional context. The findings indicate that participation in PA positively influences students' physical health, social skill development, motivation and acquisition of discipline. Both students and teachers reported that PA contributes meaningfully to academic performance, personal development and social competence. However, they also highlighted key challenges, including inadequate sports facilities and difficulties in balancing academic responsibilities with extracurricular sports activities. This analysis offers valuable insights into measures that can enhance students' engagement in sports and underscores the need for structural and curricular adjustments. Importantly, it presents region-specific data on how sports can be more effectively integrated into the curriculum while supporting students' academic and social balance. Furthermore, teachers' perspectives offer practical implications for curriculum reform, positioning this study as a potential guide for future educational policies aimed at strengthening the role of sports in schools.

STATEMENTS AND DECLARATIONS

Author contributions

The authors have equally contributed to this study.

Conflict of interest

There is no potential conflict of interest in this study.

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Data availability

Due to the ethical considerations and the protection of participants' confidentiality, the data are not available in a public repository with a DOI. However, they are securely stored in private institutional records and can be shared upon reasonable request, in accordance with the study's ethical approval.

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