The Role of Sports Management in Shaping Cohesion among Rural Children

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Abstract. With the rapid development of the economy, accelerated social transformation, and increasing population mobility, migrant workers are unable to bring their children with them, resulting in a substantial population of left-behind children in rural regions. The psychological health problems faced by these children not only affect their personal development but may also have long-term consequences for their future social adaptability. Existing studies have paid considerable attention to such psychological challenges. At the same time, growing research has begun to highlight the lack of social resources and the limited access to sports activities among rural children. Against this backdrop, this paper focuses on the physical health issues of rural children and examines the underlying causes of their limited access to social resources, education, and sports opportunities, such as incomplete family structures and absence of parental care, unequal distribution of educational resources, and insufficient educational quality. Based on these challenges, the paper proposes targeted strategies, including strengthening family care and educational functions, optimizing the allocation of educational resources and improving teaching quality, and enhancing social support systems. The goal is to provide useful references and guidance for improving sports participation, cooperation, and overall development among left-behind children in rural areas.

1 Introduction

Exercise is an important means of promoting social interaction, cooperation, and cohesion, and this is particularly true for children and adolescents. Children and young people account for nearly 40% of the world's population and are among the most vulnerable groups [1]. In rural areas, sports serve not only to improve farmers' health and diversify their lifestyles but also as a vital channel for preserving and transmitting traditional sports culture. Globally, more than half of the health disparities between the wealthiest and poorest populations are concentrated among children and adolescents. Newborns and young children require warmth and proper nutrition for survival, but they also need social interaction and nurturing in order to achieve optimal development. As they grow into adulthood, they face the challenge of adopting healthy behaviours. For rural children, these challenges are compounded by limited educational resources and simplified modes of socialization. Thus, the development of rural

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sports warrants serious attention, since children—whether in China or elsewhere—should enjoy equal educational opportunities and rights.

Self-concept refers to the way individuals perceive themselves. It not only helps maintain internal consistency and establish self-identity but also shapes how people interpret experiences, regulate meaningful behaviours in the face of difficulties, and discover their purpose in life. A positive self-concept leads individuals to view themselves as unique and valuable, filled with passion for life, while a negative self-concept results in self-denial, diminished self-worth, and lack of direction. In 2012, China's Ministry of Education issued the Guidelines for the Learning and Development of Children Aged 3–6, which identified self-respect, self-confidence, and autonomy as core objectives in children's social development [2]. Given the foundational role of childhood in shaping an individual's future, many scholars now argue that this period must be comprehensively and individually cultivated. From the perspective of physical development, sports education is a critical component of children's growth and will have long-term implications.

However, sports education in China remains relatively weak and is concentrated mainly in urban areas. Rural sports programs lag significantly behind in terms of personnel, facilities, and training. Although government investment in rural sports has increased and nationwide surveys show improvements in infrastructure, serious regional disparities remain. In some poor towns, there are no standard tracks or basketball courts at all, while wealthier towns have better facilities but restrict public access, keeping resources largely unavailable to children. On average, the per capita area of sports facilities available to rural residents is still below the national level [3]. Moreover, the limited facilities that do exist are often poorly maintained, underutilized, or mainly used by elderly residents and women rather than children. Equipment is frequently outdated, and safety issues are common. Overall, the situation of rural sports infrastructure remains far from satisfactory. The scarcity of sports facilities, combined with a lack of awareness among stakeholders regarding the social and cohesive functions of sports, has further hindered rural children's development. In China's countryside, both teachers and students continue to prioritize academic learning, channelling limited resources toward science education. This entrenched mindset leaves children with little time for sports, weakening their ability to build social ties through physical activity and reinforcing the undervaluation of sports.

This paper explores how sports management and the design of activities can help address the issue of insufficient cohesion among rural children. By analysing the current challenges facing rural sports, it aims to provide theoretical and practical references for education and policymaking in rural areas. Taking the lack of cohesion among rural children as a starting point, the study seeks to uncover the deeper causes and identify pathways for improvement [4]. In the context of persistent urban–rural disparities, rural children—especially left-behind children—face incomplete family structures, insufficient educational resources, and limited social support. These conditions hinder their psychological development and social adaptation, depriving them of stable peer relationships and a sense of belonging. The absence of cohesion not only undermines self-identity and social competence but also negatively impacts their future learning, integration into society, and long-term development.

2 Analysis

2.1 Lack of Systematic Sports Education and Resource Investment

At present, rural areas in China generally face low levels of economic development and inadequate social security systems [5]. Combined with the prolonged absence of parents, who are often unable to provide care and effective guidance, left-behind children experience a

range of problems in terms of physical health, social adaptation, and behavioural development. To address these issues, effective sports management can be considered one of the key solutions. Currently, sports facilities in rural schools are outdated, and there is a shortage of professional physical education teachers. Children have few opportunities to engage in cooperative activities with shared goals, which has weakened their sense of teamwork. In rural school settings, sports activities are limited in variety, students are offered few choices, and physical education lacks proper structure and standards. As a result, the sports education of left-behind children is often neglected, hindering their opportunities for exercise.

However, physical activity during childhood is crucial for healthy development and should not vary drastically simply due to geographical or socioeconomic conditions [6]. For rural children, their physical health is heavily influenced by the availability and quality of school physical education classes and extracurricular sports activities. Furthermore, the level of attention paid by school leadership, the design of sports curricula, the condition of school facilities, the guidance of teachers, the organization of extracurricular programs, and even the daily school schedule all directly and indirectly affect the extent to which left-behind children can participate in sports. The root causes of these problems are relatively straightforward: the challenges facing left-behind children in rural areas are byproducts of China's stage of social and economic transition. These issues reflect the social costs of development, costs that have so far been borne mainly by rural families themselves, but which could be addressed through the joint efforts of the state, government, and wider society.

2.2 Inadequate Family and Social Support

High-quality development is the inevitable path for school sports in China under the new era [7]. The advancement of school sports must place quality at the centre, shifting from insufficient and uneven provision toward balanced, equitable, and high-quality development, with the ultimate goal of continuously enhancing students' sense of achievement, satisfaction, and well-being in physical education. Sports curricula that emphasize rule learning, competition experiences, and cooperative activities can effectively convey the core concepts of life education. For instance, learning sports rules teaches students the importance of discipline and respect for regulations, which form the foundation of social life. Through competition, students also learn the principles of fair play, honesty, and trustworthiness, while recognizing that rules exist to safeguard the rights and safety of all participants. This is closely aligned with life education, which emphasizes legal awareness, moral norms, and social order. During adolescence, students' cognitive abilities develop rapidly, and they begin to focus on self-awareness. However, their mental maturity is still incomplete, and emotional fluctuations are common, often leading to feelings of insecurity and psychological stress. For rural students, who grow up in disadvantaged living and educational environments, these factors can foster tendencies toward helplessness, low self-esteem, and emotional neglect. In addition, widespread exposure to electronic devices and the complexity of online environments have accelerated the onset of physiological maturity, frequently resulting in imbalances between physical, psychological, and moral development. These imbalances, in turn, give rise to value confusion and a sense of aimlessness.

Youth sports development is thus both an old and a new challenge. At present, it stands at the crossroads of persistent contradictions and emerging problems. In the process of promoting high-quality development of school sports, numerous barriers remain to be overcome. Although the importance of sports education is becoming increasingly recognized in society, many parents still adhere to traditional perceptions. They often regard physical activity merely as extracurricular entertainment or leisure, rather than as an integral part of the education system. Such views reveal a serious misunderstanding [8]. Parents tend to place

excessive emphasis on their children's competitive results, equating success with victory, while neglecting the deeper educational value of sports. As a result, the construction of family sports culture is frequently overlooked. In environments where children lack sufficient encouragement and proper guidance at home, they cannot fully benefit from sports activities, which hinder their holistic development. This not only affects their physical and mental health but also limits their competitiveness in future social life.

2.3 Absence of Scientific Sports Management and Activity Design

Similarly, compared with children living in urban areas, rural children rely even more on external support from relevant departments and personnel to promote sports activities. In the context of rural schools where left-behind children are concentrated, it is essential to draw upon local resources from multiple dimensions to broaden the functions of school-based sports education and maximize the use of existing resources. At present, however, a key problem facing rural schools is the absence of systematic planning and institutional arrangements to ensure the proper implementation of sports programs. Without standardized rules and mechanisms, it is difficult to safeguard the healthy growth of left-behind children or establish long-term frameworks that encourage their sustained participation in physical activities. Moreover, little effort has been made to designate personnel responsible for organizing and supervising school sports, such as the "Sunshine Sports" program, which could help guide children toward developing lifelong awareness and habits of exercise. Another issue lies in the weak supervision of policy implementation. In many rural areas, schools fail to meet the requirements for offering sufficient physical education classes or providing adequate sports equipment [9]. School leaders and educators often do not place enough emphasis on physical education or on the physical health of left-behind children. As a result, the delivery of sports curricula and the organization of extracurricular programs are frequently obstructed. Some sports teachers, however, have attempted to adapt by making use of local conditions and resources to create distinctive, engaging sports activities, thereby stimulating students' interest and supporting the development of a positive school sports culture. Despite these efforts, the management of rural sports funding remains problematic. Since financial allocations are distributed by county-level governments, township-level organizers frequently encounter shortages and delays in funding. Although initiatives such as the National Farmers' Fitness Project and the "Snow Charcoal Project" launched by the General Administration of Sport have significantly improved rural sports infrastructure and facilities, the absence of proper management and usage systems has resulted in widespread deterioration. Many pieces of sports equipment are now damaged, and numerous sports fields have been abandoned.

3 Solutions

3.1 Addressing Educational and Resource Deficiencies

A cooperative mechanism between government and society should be established to increase investment in sports facilities for rural schools. At present, the quality of teaching staff in small-scale schools is constrained by policies related to staffing, allocation, incentives, and training. From the perspective of staffing and deployment, the "separation of powers" across human resources, finance, and administration creates significant limitations: education departments have no authority to recruit, staffing departments determine the number of positions based on teacher–student ratios, and financial departments allocate salaries according to the number of approved positions. Under this system, even though schools

submit annual requests for additional teachers, these demands are rarely met. The obstacle lies in staffing restrictions. Compared with the national standard ratio of 1:19 for primary schools, most small-scale schools maintain ratios between 1:10 and 1:3, which appear to indicate overstaffing. However, when calculated by the number of teachers per class, the ratio is closer to 1.5:1, revealing a serious shortage [10]. This means that teachers are often responsible for multiple classes, resulting in excessive workloads and chronic understaffing. Moreover, the lack of a long-term teacher exchange mechanism within counties exacerbates the issue. Instead of supporting small-scale schools, larger township schools sometimes attract their best teachers with better incentives, further weakening the faculty base in smaller institutions.

To address these challenges, initiatives such as a "Rural Sports Volunteer Program" should be promoted, allowing university students or sports professionals to serve as short-term coaches in rural areas. In addition, innovative school-running models should be explored, such as forming "horizontal alliances" among schools with similar development conditions and "vertical alliances" among schools of different sizes and characteristics. By sharing resources, these alliances can improve school management, facilitate teacher exchange, promote educational reform, enhance curriculum design, optimize the use of funds and facilities, and expand student activities, ultimately achieving collaborative progress.

3.2 Enhancing Family and Social Support

Organizing "family–school sports days," where parents and children participate together, can help strengthen family support and engagement. On the societal level, enterprises and social organizations should be encouraged to contribute to the development and management of family sports resources [11]. For instance, companies may donate sports equipment or funds to support family-based sports activities, while social organizations can recruit volunteers to provide guidance and consultation services for families. Another crucial step is to improve the openness and sharing of sports facilities. Schools and communities should increase public access to their facilities, providing families with more convenient spaces for physical activity. Cross-regional sharing of sports resources should also be promoted to achieve more efficient allocation and utilization. Sports education is not merely the transmission of physical skills but a process that fosters children's comprehensive development. For small-scale schools, their educational, cultural, and social value should form the foundation for their long-term sustainability. County-level governments should also consider multiple factors—including geography, population distribution, economic conditions, cultural traditions, and school capacity—when planning school layouts, making use of GIS technology and qualitative analysis methods to optimize educational arrangements.

It is equally important to raise parental awareness of the deeper significance of sports education. Multiple channels can be used for this purpose [12]. For example, expert seminars can be organized where scholars in the field of sports education explain its essence and long-term impact, helping parents better understand its role in shaping their children's futures. At the same time, schools, as the main platforms for sports education, should strengthen communication with parents through parent meetings and home visits, explaining the objectives and content of school-based sports education and encouraging parents to actively participate in their children's development. Currently, however, the governance of school sports in China faces many difficulties and challenges. Specifically, a collaborative framework involving government, society, schools, and families has not yet been fully established. The division of responsibilities and authority between different government departments remains unclear, while the degree, depth, and coordination of social participation in school sports governance remain insufficient. As a result, the functions of family sports, school sports, and community sports are fragmented, lacking integration and continuity. This

imbalance has constrained reforms and weakened the long-term support that school sports could otherwise receive from families and society [13]. Moreover, school-based teaching and learning in sports often lack effective extension and supplementation outside the classroom, as various stakeholders have not yet achieved synchronized and coordinated action.

In the context of digital transformation, school sports governance also faces the challenge of integrating modern technologies such as artificial intelligence, the internet, and big data. The development and application of digital resources for school sports have lagged the overall progress of educational informatization. Accelerating the integration of digital technologies into the governance of school sports and empowering high-quality development through technological innovation have thus become urgent priorities.

3.3 Improving Management and Activity Design

A scientific sports management plan should be developed, incorporating elements such as team competitions, cooperative challenges, and role-based participation. The key actors responsible for policy implementation include local education authorities, sports administrations, school principals, coaches, and physical education teachers [14]. To ensure effective execution, it is necessary to strengthen training and communication regarding school sports policies, thereby deepening implementers' understanding, enhancing their sense of responsibility, and fostering consensus among them. In addition, supporting measures and complementary policies should be refined and aligned with overarching strategies and core directives, ensuring that implementation is consistent and effective. A long-term supervision and evaluation mechanism should also be established. Education authorities should create specialized institutions and teams to monitor and evaluate the implementation of school sports policies or actively introduce independent third-party evaluation mechanisms for youth sports. These mechanisms must maintain independence and authority and employ scientifically designed quantitative indicators to regularly assess and monitor policy execution. Public opinion should also play a supervisory role, with multiple channels of oversight incorporated into the system. Furthermore, accountability mechanisms and reward–penalty systems should be established to ensure the durability and enforcement of school sports policies.

Drawing on sports psychology and developmental psychology, long-term programs should be designed to suit children's characteristics—for example, cooperative league formats organized by teams [15]. Motivation is most effective when it reaches an optimal level: within certain limits, learning efficiency rises as motivation increases, but once it surpasses a threshold, efficiency begins to decline. For relatively easy tasks, the optimal motivation level is higher, while for more difficult tasks, the optimal level is lower. Therefore, organizers of educational and ecological activities should carefully consider the level of difficulty of learning objectives. At the start of an activity, motivation should be appropriately stimulated to foster internal drive toward goals such as "mastering certain knowledge" or "discovering specific patterns." This approach helps sustain children's focused attention during the activity. Moreover, ecological education venues are typically rich in information. To reduce interference from irrelevant stimuli and support memory consolidation, activity routes should be designed according to predetermined educational content. Where comprehensive exhibition systems are available, routes can follow thematic divisions. In less equipped environments, organizers should emphasize content with greater relevance and frequency of occurrence, providing conditions that facilitate the transition from short-term to long-term memory. Repetition of similar objects or scenarios allows children to engage in unconscious review, thereby strengthening learning outcomes.

4 Conclusion

This study has analyzed the role of sports management in fostering cohesion among rural children. It shows that with continued labor migration and unequal educational resources, left-behind children face systemic challenges such as insufficient sports education, lack of social support, and weak self-identity, all of which reduce their cohesion and adaptability. Three main issues were identified: inadequate investment in sports education, limited family and social support, and unscientific sports management and activity design. In response, this paper recommends strengthening government–society cooperation to improve sports resources, creating platforms for family and social engagement, and promoting scientific management and long-term activity design. Sports should be recognized not only as physical exercise but also as a powerful tool for building social cohesion, promoting mental health, and supporting children's holistic development. Through collaboration among schools, families, society, and policymakers, sports management can enhance children's self-identity, cooperative skills, and sense of belonging. Future work should further integrate interdisciplinary perspectives and digital technologies to reduce urban–rural disparities, advance educational equity, and promote the all-round development of rural children.

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