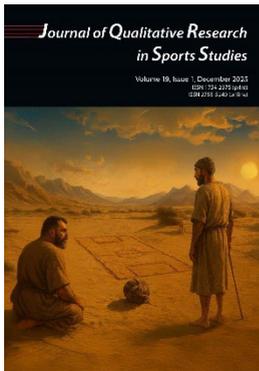


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Sustainable development for Physical Education in China: A research proposal

¹ Mehvish Bashir (Hunan Normal University, Changsha, China)

² Clive Palmer (University of Lancashire, Preston, UK)

³ David Grecic (University of Lancashire, Preston, UK)

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Sustainable development for Physical Education in China: A research proposal

Mehvish Bashir¹, Clive Palmer² and David Grecic²

¹ Hunan Normal University, Changsha, Hunan, China.

² University of Lancashire, Preston, UK.

Keywords: *Physical Education, Sustainable Development Goals, China, UNESCO*

Abstract

Physical Education is increasingly positioned as a curriculum space through which schools can contribute to Sustainable Development Goals, yet little is known about how sustainability is conceptualised and enacted in Chinese PE. This doctoral study investigates how sustainability and SDG-related ideas are defined, integrated and assessed in school PE in China. It combines a scoping review of Chinese- and English-language literature on PE, sustainability and the SDGs, with semi-structured interviews with physical education teachers in Changsha. The review will map targeted SDGs, key conceptualisations, and reported pedagogical and assessment approaches. Interview data will be thematically analysed to examine teachers' awareness of Education for Sustainable Development, perceived contributions of PE to sustainability, and contextual constraints shaping practice. The study will provide a consolidated account of sustainability in Chinese PE and generate context-sensitive recommendations for curriculum, assessment and teacher learning.

Introduction

The role of education in addressing sustainability challenges, such as environmental degradation, social inequality, and economic instability, is well established. At global level, the urbanization and advanced technology trends have led to significant decline in physical activity, leading to increase the role of Physical Education in delivering critical health benefits of physical activity (Bailey *et al.*, 2013; Breuer *et al.*, 2015). Sustainability which is 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (United Nations Brundtland Commission, 1987), is the solution to these issues (Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2017). In 2015, the United Nations (UN) introduced the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a universal call to achieve sustainable development by 2030. These goals encompass a wide range of interconnected issues, such as gender equality, climate action, quality education, aiming to create a more sustainable and equitable future for all (United Nations, 2015). To achieve these goals, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has



been identified as a critical tool in developing the knowledge, attitudes, values, competencies that motivates and empower learners to contribute to sustainable development (UNESCO, 2014). This has driven educational transformation and reform (Wright, Cain and Monsour, 2015), with the aim of systematically integrating ESD into education policies, framework and curricula that establish standards for learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2014).

PE can contribute to the SDGs by fostering environmental awareness, social responsibility, and individual well-being (Sachs, 2015). In Physical Education (PE), we mean more than environmental awareness or occasional outdoor activities. Sustainable PE comprises durable, equitable and health-enhancing practices that teachers can enact day-to-day under real constraints such as large classes, limited facilities, timetable pressures and assessment demands, while also safeguarding teacher wellbeing. Sustainability, therefore, implies a fit between aims (e.g., physical literacy, inclusion, lifelong activity) and methods (task design, grouping, feedback, assessment) that can endure over time. It also implies attention to the ‘assessment ecology’ of PE, that is, how the things we measure and value shape what is taught and learned (Kirk, 2010; Quennerstedt, 2019).

In the Chinese context, sustainability is articulated through ecological civilization which is a governing paradigm that seeks the long-term harmonization of economic and social development with ecological limits (Xue *et al.*, 2023). This also underpins the [Chinese] state’s shift to ‘high-quality’ development which is defined as being: innovation-led, coordinated, green, open and shared (Wang and Liu, 2023). This macro-frame diffuses into education and health policy where Healthy China 2030 links population health to cleaner environments and active-living systems (Pineo *et al.*, 2021), while the revised Physical Education and Health Curriculum Standards reflect the evolution of a ‘health-first’ ideology in school PE (Tan, Liu and Shao, 2017). Recent studies trace this shift from ‘strengthening physique’ to ‘fostering virtue through education,’ broadening what counts as valuable PE learning and practice (An *et al.*, 2022).

At the same time, childhood and adolescent obesity in China has risen markedly over recent decades, with national school surveys showing persistent upward trends and widening disparities across groups and regions (Hong *et al.*, 2023). This elevates the stakes for school-based PE as a curriculum subject linked to health and equity, reinforcing the need to understand whether sustainability ideas in PE are being defined and enacted in ways that are teachable and durable under Chinese school conditions (Chen *et al.*, 2022; Huang *et al.*, 2022). Within this context, Quality Physical Education (QPE) provides the implementation frame for translating sustainability aims into curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (UNESCO, 2015). This positions PE as a subject with cognitive, social and affective outcomes e.g. the *CARE Curriculum* (Grecic and Palmer, 2021), not being merely exercise time (Lear

and Palmer, 2008; Sprake and Temple, 2016) which is directly relevant to China's current reforms. Yet, while existing work in China examines health-first reforms and competence-based curricula (An *et al.*, 2022; Yang, Tian and Madni, 2025), there is no consolidated account of how sustainability is defined, perceived and assessed in Chinese PE curricula and lessons. No published study combines a systematic mapping of SDG constructs in Chinese PE with original qualitative evidence on PE teachers' interpretations and the assessment ecology through which these ideas are enacted.

Literature Review

Global context: PE and SDGs

Sport and physical activity are broadly acknowledged as drivers of sustainable development and as key avenues for advancing progress toward the 17 SDGs. (United Nations, 2017; World Health Organization, 2019). Within schooling, PE can support the SDGs by fostering physical health, environmental stewardship, and social inclusion (Bailey, 2006; Lohmann, Tittlbach and Steinbauer, 2024). The literature identifies eight SDG goals where links are clearest (Baena-Morales *et al.*, 2021):

- good health and well-being (#3),
- quality education (#4),
- gender equality (#5),
- decent work and economic growth (#8),
- reducing inequality (#10),
- responsible consumption and production (#12),
- climate action (#13),
- peace, justice, and strong institutions (#16)

For instance, PE directly contributes to SDG 3 by promoting physical activity and fitness, and advances SDG 4 and SDG 10 through inclusive practices that foster social integration and promote equal opportunities for all students (Davis, 2012; Sánchez-Hernández *et al.*, 2018). With carefully designed content e.g., outdoor education (Palmer, 2021), nature-based tasks (Keech and Gray, 2023), or critical discussions about sporting goods and facility use (Orunaboka and Nwachukwu, 2012), PE can support SDG 12 by raising awareness of sustainable practices in sport and recreation and can nurture active citizenship relevant to SDG 13 and SDG 16 (UNESCO, 2014; Baena-Morales *et al.*, 2021).

Evidence across sustainability's three dimensions indicates that holistic Health and Physical Education (HPE) aligns with social, environmental, and economic development; for example, nature-based programmes can strengthen knowledge, behaviours and attitudes toward sustainability (Santos-Pastor *et al.*, 2022; Royet *et al.*, 2024); and innovations such as 'plogging' which is an outdoor exercise that

intertwines physical activity with litter collection, illustrate how fitness and environmental consciousness can be integrated (Martínez-Mirambell *et al.*, 2023; Welch, Palmer, Pryle and Byrne, 2023). Cultivating lifelong activity habits is associated with downstream economic benefits via population health and employability, though these effects are typically realised at system level rather than within single lessons (Henriksson *et al.*, 2020). However, the practical uptake of sustainable development within PE remains at an ‘embryonic stage’, while the curriculum affords environmentally focused tasks (e.g., climbing and other nature-based activities) and cross-cutting protection projects (Olive and Enright, 2021; Thorpe, Brice and Clark, 2021; Welch, Taylor and Gard, 2021), but day-to-day implementation is uneven. However, the research by Keech and Gray (2023) is a good example of nature-based learning embedded across the curriculum at an international school in central Europe.

While theoretical alignment between PE and the SDGs is now well-articulated (Dudfield, and Malcolm, 2015; MINEPS VI, 2015; Lynch, 2016; Iberoamerican Sports Council, 2019; Baena-Morales and González-Villora, 2023), it is essential to understand how in-service PE teachers themselves view the possible links between PE, the SDGs, and sustainable development. The teacher perspective is crucial to understanding whether and how these opportunities are enacted. Existing work indicates that many PE teachers value sustainability but lack conceptual control and training (Royet *et al.*, 2024). Against this backdrop, physical literacy (PL) and UNESCO’s QPE guidelines are best understood as teacher-facing implementation resources for teachers, rather than abstract policy slogans. PL offers a coherent rationale for lesson design, assessment, and progression, against SDG-relevant outcomes, for example SDG 4 on quality education, which may be visible in everyday practice of PE lessons (UNESCO, 2015; Lynch, 2016).

Chinese context: PE and SDGs

Educating for a Sustainable Future (ESD) has been on China’s agenda since the 1990s (Guo wu yuan, 1994), with early ESD pilots (e.g., UNESCO’s Educating for a Sustainable Future: Environment, Population and Sustainable Development (EPD)) scaling to more than 1,000 schools by 2009 (Lee and Huang, 2009). In the 2010s, the domestic ecological civilisation agenda reframed sustainability, linking ecological protection with development and filtering into education policy (Meng *et al.*, 2021), with priorities focused on fostering diligence and thrift, building environmental awareness, and shaping values that support sustainable development (Zhou and Lee, 2022).

Although China has made significant strides toward achieving SDGs (UNDP, 2020), ESD has not been officially defined with a sector-wide framework in education (Cheng and Yu, 2022; Li, Xi and Zhu, 2022). In most policies, ESD functions largely as a symbolic reference to education and sustainable development

without a clear and operational conceptualization (Li, Xi and Zhu, 2022). Furthermore, detailed municipal-level ESD guidelines and implementation plans for education stakeholders are notably lacking (Witoszek, 2018), leading to partial and uneven enactment across the education sector particularly in PE. The government has introduced policies aimed at promoting physical health and well-being among students, such as the Healthy China 2030, which aligns with SDG 3 (Tan, Liu and Shao, 2017), but the Chinese education system is highly centralized, and it places heavy priority on exam results and academic performance (OECD, 2020). Chinese PE teachers report growing awareness of sustainability but limited training and resources to integrate these concepts into teaching (An *et al.*, 2022). Together, these conditions highlight the need for context-specific studies of how sustainability is understood and enacted in Chinese schools and PE. This also raises the question of PE's status as a curriculum subject delivering broad competencies, rather than merely scheduled exercise, within China's evolving standards (UNESCO, 2015/2021; Tan, Liu and Shao, 2017).

Gaps in the literature which locate this proposal for research

While there is a growing body of literature on the role of education in promoting sustainability, the role of PE in achieving the SDGs remains vague. Consequently, a series of gaps, or more, opportunities for research present themselves.

First, most studies have focused on Western contexts, with limited analysis from non-Western systems such as China, where sociocultural and educational systems differ significantly.

Second, qualitative research exploring Chinese PE teachers' perceptions of their role in advancing the SDGs is limited (Chen and Chen, 2022). In China, there is still relatively little research that explicitly examines teachers' roles in ESD, even though ESD was introduced nearly three decades ago (Han, 2015; Zhou, 2020).

Third, prior work on holistic HPE and the SDGs is often too generic invoking the SDGs as a mere label rather than engaging specific SDG targets; recent reviews therefore call for studies that analyse contributions to concrete targets and are designed for real PE lessons (Baena-Morales and González-Villora, 2023).

Fourth and finally, ESD relies on teachers to cultivate learners' sustainability competencies (Rieckmann, Mindt and Gardiner, 2017), there is a need for research that examines the specific challenges and opportunities faced by Chinese Physical Education Teachers (PETs) in integrating SDGs into their teaching practice (An *et al.*, 2022).

No published study yet combines: (1) systematic mapping of how SDGs are defined and used in Chinese PE (with attention to targets), and (2) original qualitative evidence on PE teachers' interpretations and the assessment ecology through which

these ideas are enacted. This study will address these gaps by analysing how sustainability is conceptualised in Chinese PETs' awareness, attitudes and classroom practices regarding the SDGs, to inform teachable and durable approaches to sustainability in PE.

Theoretical framework

This research will draw on the theoretical framework of ESD, which emphasises the importance of equipping learners with the skills, knowledge and attitudes required to live sustainably (Dai and Menhas, 2020). ESD encourages the inclusion of sustainability principles into all aspects of education, from curricula to pedagogical strategies, and fosters a holistic approach to addressing global challenges.

In previous studies, researchers have argued that PE can serve as a significant channel for promoting sustainability (Dudfield, and Malcolm, 2015; MINEPS VI, 2015; Lynch, 2016; Iberoamerican Sports Council, 2019; Baena-Morales and González-Víllora, 2023). However, despite the recognised potential of PE, the specific ways in which PE teachers can integrate sustainability principles into their teaching remain unexplored. This study will build on work by authors who have examined the role of PE in contributing to the SDGs in Western contexts, using their findings as a foundation for analysis in the Chinese context. This framework will guide the investigation of how PE teachers in China perceive their role in promoting sustainable development and the challenges they encounter.

Research aims

The primary aim of this doctoral study is to understand sustainability in China and to explore how PE Teachers in China perceive and understand the SDGs and their potential contribution to these goals through their teaching. Specifically, the study seeks to achieve the following aims:

1. Map how sustainability is understood, framed and integrated in PE in China.
2. Analyse how prior literature describes relationships between PE and SDGs in China.
3. Explore the awareness and understanding of SDGs and ESD among PE Teachers in China.

Research questions

The research will focus on the following key questions:

1. What research has been conducted on PE and Education for sustainability in China so far?
2. How can the relationship between PE and specific SDGs in China can be described?
3. To what extent are Chinese PETs aware of the ESD, and how do they perceive PE's contributions and assessment practices to SDGs?

Methodology

Scoping review of literature

For research questions 1 and 2, a scoping review is appropriate for mapping the existing research, identifying key features of work linking PE and the SDGs, and clarifying how these studies have been designed and carried out, e.g. Armstrong *et al.* (2011); Munn *et al.* (2018). The process for this review will follow guidelines outlined by Arksey and O'Malley in 2005, which has a five-stage methodological design:

- 1) identifying the research questions,
- (2) identifying relevant studies,
- (3) selecting studies,
- (4) organizing the data, and
- (5) collating, summarizing, and reporting the results.

This approach has been used in recent extensive literature reviews by, for example, Fjellner, Varea and Barker (2024) and also, Rief, Oesterhelt and Amesberger, (2024).

Field research: semi-structured interviews

For research question 3, a qualitative research design will be adopted to examine how PE teachers in China perceive these sustainability issues. The study will involve semi-structured interviews with active PETs, selected from schools in Changsha city, Hunan Province, in central China. Interviews are widely used in qualitative research to capture subjective experiences and meaning-making processes (Silverman, 2013), allowing participants to articulate their perceptions. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) emphasise, all qualitative research should incorporate reflexivity, acknowledging the researcher's influence on the data collection and interpretation processes. Reflexivity will be integrated throughout this study, including the desk-top scoping of literature phase, to recognise biases and enhance the rigor of findings. Palmer and Griggs (2010) further highlight that qualitative research in sports studies benefits from a systematic, yet flexible approach to interviewing, ensuring data validity while accommodating the complexities of participant narratives.

Moreover, Silverman (2013) cautions against interpretive biases inherent in qualitative interviews, emphasising the importance of recognising how interviewees may construct their responses in reaction to the research setting. This study will mitigate these biases by using open-ended, narrative-inducing questions (Gunaratnam and Oliviere, 2009), that allow participants to share experiences without excessive prompting and employing active listening techniques to encourage deep reflection and honest responses.

The interview data will be analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), a widely used approach for identifying recurring patterns in qualitative data

(Grecic and Crowther, 2022; Palmer, 2025). Thematic categories will include knowledge of SDGs, perceptions of PE's contribution to sustainability, barriers to implementation, and recommendations for improvement. To ensure methodological rigor, the study will triangulate findings by cross-referencing themes with relevant literature and other data sources (Mays and Pope, 1995).

1. Member checking will be conducted, where select participants will review the interpretations of their responses to confirm accuracy (QRGP, 2008; McKim, 2023; Lloyd, Hyett and Kenny, 2024).
2. Reflexive journaling will be maintained throughout the research process to document the researcher's evolving perspectives and potential biases (Meyer and Willis, 2019; Turner, 2020; Olmos-Vega *et al.*, 2022).

Conclusion

This study will afford valuable insights into the perspectives of Chinese PE teachers regarding their role in promoting sustainable development through PE. Specifically, this research will provide:

1. A systematic overview of how sustainability is conceptualized and incorporated within PE in China.
2. Identification of key themes, gaps and trends, in the existing literature regarding the relationship between PE and sustainability.
3. Insights into the level of awareness and understanding of SDGs and ESD among Chinese PE teachers.
4. Identification of barriers and challenges that limit teachers' engagement with sustainability-related content in PE curricula.
5. Recommendations for integrating sustainability into teacher learning, assessment design and curriculum in China.
6. Contribution to international debates on the role of PE in achieving SDGs, especially in non-Western contexts.

Original contributions to knowledge

This doctoral research will make significant contributions to knowledge that will enhance the quality of educational experience from Chinese Physical Education, adding momentum to the existing tide-of-change for PE provision in China, for example, Grecic *et al.*'s (2024) *A New Era for Physical Education ... in China*. In particular, this research has the potential to yield transformation for:

1. For educators: It will provide insights into how PE teachers in China perceive their role in advancing sustainability and what support they require to integrate SDGs into their teaching practice.

2. For policymakers: The study will inform the development of policies and strategies for integration SDGs into the Chinese education system via PE.
3. For global discourse: The findings from China will diversify evidence on PE and the SDGs.

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JQRSS Author Profiles

Mehvish Bashir¹ is a doctoral researcher in Physical Education and sustainable development at the University of Lancashire. She is also a research co-ordinator for CUPEST, the joint Research and Knowledge Exchange Centre for *University Physical Education and Sports Training*. Mehvish is based at the University of Lancashire campus in Hunan Normal University, Changsha City in central China.

Clive Palmer² is a research supervisor in the School of Health Social Work and Sport, and the Doctoral Education Lead in the Graduate Research School for the University of Lancashire. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9925-2811>  Email: capalmer@lanacshire.ac.uk

David Grecic³ Professor of Sport and Physical Education, School of Health, Social Work and Sport, University of Lancashire, Preston, UK. Email: dgregic1@lancashire.ac.uk

Reviewer Comments

This research proposal presents a highly compelling and timely investigation into how Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are conceptualised and enacted within Physical Education (PE) in China. Its strongest feature is its clear identification of a genuine gap in the existing literature, although global scholarship increasingly recognises the role of PE in advancing sustainability, little is known about how these ideas translate into Chinese educational contexts. By foregrounding this gap, the proposal makes a persuasive argument for the importance and originality of the study. The proposal for doctoral research is well-structured, with a strong theoretical grounding in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and UNESCO's Quality Physical Education (QPE) framework. Its integration of global, national, and disciplinary perspectives demonstrates an impressive command of both international literature and Chinese policy landscapes. The discussion of ecological civilisation, Healthy China 2030, and China's evolving PE standards is particularly valuable, offering a nuanced and culturally informed backdrop for the investigation.

Methodologically, the proposal is robust and thoughtfully designed. The combination of a scoping review and thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews ensures both breadth and depth. The inclusion of reflexivity, member-checking, and triangulation further reflects a sophisticated understanding of qualitative rigor. The attention to 'assessment ecology', teacher interpretations, and contextual constraints highlights important, often overlooked, mechanisms shaping sustainability practices in PE. The anticipated contributions are significant. The study promises to generate a consolidated account of sustainability in Chinese PE, provide evidence-based recommendations for curriculum and teacher development, and enrich global debates by offering insights from a non-Western context that is rarely represented in SDG-focused PE research. Overall, this is a mature, coherent, and impactful proposal that has strong potential to make a meaningful scholarly and practical contribution to sustainability and Physical Education research.

