
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Leveling the Playing Field: Enhancing Inclusion, Development, and Empowerment Through School Sports Participation

Austin Wontepaga Luguterah¹, John Sedofia², and Emmanuel Assasie³

¹Senior Lecturer, Department of Physical Education and Sport Studies, University of Ghana, Accra-Ghana

²Senior Lecturer, Department of Teacher Education, University of Ghana, Accra-Ghana

³Lecturer, Department of Physical Education and Sport Studies, University of Ghana, Accra-Ghana

Corresponding Author: Austin Wontepaga Luguterah, **E-mail:** aluguterah@ug.edu.gh

ABSTRACT

This converged, mixed-methods study investigates the role of school sports in promoting educational equity through its role in enabling inclusion, empowerment, and psychosocial development among Ghanaian students, coaches, and school administrators from diverse demographic backgrounds. For that, structured surveys were completed with 450 students and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 students, 5 coaches, and 5 administrators. On a quantitative level, sport participation was associated with markedly elevated self-esteem ($\Delta M=1.3$, $p<0.01$) and lower social exclusion ($\beta=-0.34$, $p<0.05$) with an amplified effect (low-income $\eta^2=0.12$; ethnic minorities $\eta^2=0.09$). Phenomenological interviews ($n=30$) exposed three transformative processes: (1) peer bonding and collective identity formation, (2) coach mentorship and the establishment of trust and resilience, and (3) transferable life skills that bridge the athletic and academic fields. Applying Sen's Capability Approach, findings suggest that sports serve as catalysts to turn available resources into capabilities when opportunities are equitably available. The study identifies structural and cultural barriers that sustain inequities and outlines policy solutions, mandatory inclusive curricula that address Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4.7 and trauma-informed coach training. Results reposition school sports as agents for holistic development and social justice in school systems.

KEYWORDS

School sports, youth empowerment, equity, social inclusion, youth development

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 February 2025

PUBLISHED: 22 February 2026

DOI: 10.32996/jspes.2026.6.1.2

1. Introduction

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in 2015 to be a universal call to action to eliminate poverty, protect the planet, and promote peace and prosperity for all by 2030. They offer an integrated worldwide approach for secure human and environmental development and cooperation. Yet despite decades of dedication to achieving equity in education internationally and particularly in relation to SDG 4 (Sustainable Development Goal 4), in which inclusive, equitable and quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all have been promoted, significant differences to educational outcomes persist. In a comprehensive global framework developed to help governments, educators, and institutions design, implement, and evaluate effective physical education (PE) policies and programs, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) highlights that inequalities among students are greatest in under resourced schools and marginalized groups who encounter organizational inhibitors to education and after-school experience (UNESCO, 2015).

UNESCO (2015) identified inequities as: under-resourced schools, inadequate facilities, unskilled educators, economic insecurity and inequality, sexism, marginalization of disabled students, lack of facilities, limited PE time and poor institutional initiatives on inclusion and gender equality in PE & after-school programmes. In such a context, school sports represent an attractive yet

underused tool for including and developing youth and enabling their capacity (Edwards, 2015; Karstensen, et al., 2024; Sangalli, & Smorgoni, 2025; Van der Veken, Lauwerier, & Willems, 2020).

In addition to promoting their physical health benefits, school sports create psychosocial competencies, social capital, and belonging to important drivers of youth development and social integration (Jiang, & Feng, 2024; Morgan, Parker, & Roberts, 2019). Yet, school sports are much more indicative of systemic injustices outside our walls, a microcosm for both inclusion and exclusion. Participation patterns often reflect divides based on socioeconomic status, cultural mores, gender hierarchies and institutional disparities (Bailey et al., 2013). Institutional disparities refer to those inequalities in structures across the entire education system, including policies and funding distributions, that perpetuate current disparities in athletics participation and student outcomes (Naylor, & Mifsud, 2019; Tandon, et al., 2021).

These gaps are symptom of larger systemic inequities related to socioeconomic, gender and regional divides making school sports both the reflection of, and perhaps a solution to, social exclusion. School sports programs in Ghana are framed as part of holistic education in the country, with a focus on health, discipline, teamwork, social cohesion, and talent development preparation for national and international competition (Sofo, & Asola, 2023). They occur at the basic, secondary, and tertiary levels, and they are at different levels with different structures. Fundamental schools stress participation and physical development, but they lack the resources. Secondary schools conduct structured interscholastic competitions and also act as talent centers. There are elite programs at tertiary institutions organized by Ghana Universities Sports Association, Technical Universities (Baidoo, 2022). The distribution of sports opportunities in school, depend mainly on school infrastructure, local resources, and cultural value ascribed to physical education. As a result, students from low-income families, ethnic minorities, girls and students with disabilities are frequently excluded. Although sports can help to dismantle exclusionary norms, they can also entrench exclusionary norms when equity does not permeate through the act of sport design and delivery (Spaaij, Knoppers, & Jeanes, 2020). As Lee, Pope, and Gao (2018) observe, traditional education literature and school sports policy have prioritized physical outcomes, such as cardiovascular health, motor coordination, and obesity prevention. These are important but barely scratch the surface of the potential power of sport.

The psychosocial aspect of participation is gaining attention from scholars, especially its significance for fostering resilience, leadership, cooperation, emotional regulation and agency (Bean, 2014; Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2012). These are important life skills such as those that contribute to school success, mental health and civic engagement but have been left out of the curriculum and policy agendas. This study is inspired by Amartya Sen's (1999) Capability Approach, which emphasizes enlarging people's concrete freedoms in order to live the lives that they believe are meaningful. Within this construct, sports act as conversion mechanisms, transmuting inputs (coaching, facilities, peer networks) into valued outcomes (confidence, teamwork, and belongingness to the community). So, school sports will matter more than just physically, but they will transform students' capabilities and provide important life pathways. These results may result in increased self-efficacy, communication and mentorship among marginalised youth—fundamental to long-term success. But those benefits depend on equitable access, and that remains uneven.

Structural and institutional barriers such as pay-to-play models, gendered roles, low disability accommodations and access patterns often fail to include the poor and disadvantaged (Spaaij, Magee, & Jeanes, 2014). Girls may be deterred by cultural norms that marginalize female athleticism - while students with disabilities are being excluded by lack of inclusive facilities or trained staff. Other financial challenges, including the cost to create uniforms and transportation, further segregate low-income families (Coalter, 2013). These systemic exclusions not only inhibit the developmental possibilities of school sports but also contribute to perpetuating social disadvantage. In response, this paper empirically tests the holistic implications of school sports participation in students from different socioeconomic, gender, and ethnic backgrounds. Employing a hybrid research design, we aim to elicit subtle understandings of how inclusive sports contexts develop youth. The research has three main objectives:

Assess if school sports reduce social exclusion. This includes investigating whether they promote belonging among marginalized students, who are sometimes rejected by peers and neglected by the institution, if inclusive sports are integrated in that context. To explore how sports enhance empowerment and life skills. The study discusses key competencies, such as self-efficacy, resilience, leadership, and emotional regulation, that are associated with education, mental well-being, and employability (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005).

To uncover barriers to equitable access. This aim investigates the cultural, institutional, and economic constraints which shape participation, and as a result helps inform inclusive policy and practice.

This study adds to recent literature that reframes school sports as a site of equity and generalized development, not merely the realm of athletics. This centered approach to experience challenges education systems to move away from token inclusion towards systemic, purposeful programs aimed at marginalized youth. When it is done as fairly as possible, school sports can be a central component of educational justice that helps all students develop the capacity to succeed at school and beyond.

2. Theoretical framework

Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (Sen, 1999) provides a robust and humanistic theoretical mechanism through which to explore how school sports can act as drivers of inclusion, development, and empowerment, especially in social contexts experiencing inequality. The Capability Approach, in contrast to resource allocation, concentrates attention on how individuals are capable or able, being referred to as their "capabilities" and "functionings." Sen's framework divides among multiple key concepts. Resources are things a person can access, like sports facilities, coaching, or equipment. But resources alone are not enough. The conversion factors may be personal (physical ability), social (cultural norms), and environmental (infrastructure) to enable a person to convert these resources into real opportunities. 'Functionings' refer to the attainable outcomes, or states of being — such as confidence, leadership, social inclusion, or leadership role. Capabilities also point to the actual freedoms or opportunities that a person has to accomplish these 'functionings' and live a life they like. In this light, as the Capability Approach suggests, whether and how you access sports is not more relevant than how you utilize that access, and what it does to your well-being and development that matters.

In relation to the current investigation, the Capability Approach offers a lens through which to consider if school sports can expand or close gaps in student freedoms of real flourishing, particularly for the marginalized who are due to their socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, or disability. School sports are conversion tools and help students to convert what is on hand available to them into their capacity toward what they can do. For instance, a poor college student might not have any social network or a position of leadership at first. But by participating in school sports to an active degree, that student may get peer support, learn from one peer, and be recognized, forming important 'functionings' such as self-expression and resilience.

However, not all students benefit equally from school sports due to unequal conversion factors. Others might be hindered by gender stereotypes discouraging females from joining, restricted access for disabled students, or transportation problems in rural geographies. The following barriers obstruct the ability of sports resources to change into relevant capabilities. To achieve real inclusion and equity, the Capability Approach focuses on the need to explore these structural inequalities and ultimately, dismantle them.

In this framework, development and empowerment are far from being limited to participation. True development happens when students are free and supported to learn agency, leading, decision making, shaping of their futures, and taking the initiative. For example, when a female student is invited to take on a role as a captain of a team, she is exercising her ability to lead, a position promoted by supportive coaching and an inclusive school atmosphere.

There are also important implications of this epistemological position for policy. Using the Capability Approach, we argue that school sports programs need to be purposeful and responsive to the diverse student needs and lived experiences. Policies should provide adaptive equipment for disabled students, training for coaches on inclusive and anti-discriminatory practices, and embed sports into broader psychosocial and educational support systems that address student well-being.

3. Educational Equity and School Sports

Promoting educational equity has become a focus in global education agendas (Montjourides, 2022), especially under frameworks like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, which stipulates inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for "all" (Agbedahin, 2019; UNESCO, 2020). Nevertheless, the contribution school sport makes to educational equality is still under-examined. Long regarded as ancillary to academic study, school sports are increasingly seen as vehicles designed to encourage inclusion, facilitate human development and promote equality; particularly for disadvantaged communities.

On this point, sport in schools serves as a source of pull, appealing and allowing it to appeal to students of lower social status. Educational equity does not only relate to equal opportunities but also fairness in outcomes, options and resources, particularly for students who face inequality, due to race, gender, disability or socio-economic status (OECD, 2018). It requires removing barriers to participation, tackling structural injustices, and helping all students to thrive (Gorard & See, 2009). Equity, therefore, needs to reach well beyond academics and include after school and physical activities such as sport, and can play a large part in student development and social interaction.

School sports have been shown to foster noncognitive outcomes (ie, self-esteem, leadership, emotional resilience, and social connectivity), which are vital for promoting academic success and holistic well-being (Bailey, 2006; Eime et al., 2013). School sports participation is associated with better student engagement, peer relationships, and reduced dropout rates (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). These positive benefits are particularly evident for marginalized students, and sports, as a mode of social capital construction and accessing opportunities previously marginalized in educational communities, play a critical role to marginalized students (Coalter 2013). Through school sports, students like these especially those from low-income families can access structured environments, mentorship, and teamwork that tend to be lacking in their home environment (Holt et al., 2017).

These experiences mitigate educational disadvantage and provide alternative pathways to success. In a similar vein, ethnic minority students tend to attribute greater school belonging to team sports to their experiences of cultural belonging to reduce cultural marginalization and contribute to a sense of belonging in school (Spaaij et al., 2014). But school sports programs can perpetuate the inequities which they seek to disrupt. Opportunities are divided, influenced by a lack of access to funding, facilities, personnel and cultural attitudes. Schools in low income or in rural settings often do not have, or have little adequate resources for, infrastructure, experienced coaches, and inclusive programs (Lindsey & Grattan, 2012).

Gender-based exclusion is rife in school sports. Traditional gender norms often prevent girls from participating in sports, especially in conservative societies where athleticism and feminine ideals have the opposite of an equal value in the struggle of athleticism against the ideals of femininity in their culture. Girls often have no role models, not enough free playtime to begin with, and also no program catered toward their interests. Also disabled students find that facilities are not designed to accommodate them, there is low access to flexible sport choices and insufficient adapted sports, staff are poorly trained (Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000). Sports are seen as men's sport for girls to participate in this way. Recent studies recommend the need for deliberate, equity-based sports policies in schools (Giannitsopoulou, 2020; Gregory, Williams, & Johnson, 2021). Such policies range from ensuring equality of access regardless of socioeconomic status, to promoting girls' sport and facilities that are disability-inclusive to institutionalizing anti-discrimination in coaching and physical education curricula (UNESCO, 2015; Casey, et al., 2012). Projects such as Sport for Development and inclusive physical education models are examples of how sport programs can be integrated into and used as spaces of empowerment, resilience, and academic success (Bailey et al., 2013). Partnerships with schools, local sports clubs, and NGOs have been identified as strategies through which to expand access (Ibsen & Levinsen, 2019; Slegers, 2019).

These collaborations provide technical resources, coaching expertise and provide targeted after-school programs for underrepresented groups (Spaaij 2009). Yet academics stress a requirement for critical supervision and community action to prevent the replication of existing inequalities. School sports are a powerful tool by which educational equity can be promoted through greater inclusion, life skills, and social mobility (Penney, 2012). Yet to fulfill this potential means challenging systemic barriers and reimagining sports programs as inclusive, accessible and aligned with higher-level approaches to educational justice. True investment in equity must sit at the center, not at the fringe, of every child's right to a high-quality education.

4. Sports as a Vehicle for Empowerment

The role of sports in modern setting have moved beyond mere recreation and entertainment, into vital social, psychological, or developmental domains. Among the most persuasive narratives in sports research is the idea that it has potential as vehicle for empowerment especially in marginalized areas (Hammond-Graf, 2021; Murungu, 2023). Empowerment here refers to a process whereby individuals or communities achieve empowerment, or in this case individuals or communities take control of their life, become confident, build competencies, gain capabilities and influence their surroundings (Zimmerman, 2000).

Empowerment relatedness for sport takes place at the personal and the community levels. This results in self-efficacy, resilience, and leadership among individuals and greater social capital and collective agency for communities (Nicholson & Hoye, 2008). Coakley (2011) argues that sport provides positive environments for young people to explore identity development, as well as identify goals and meaning under positive mentorship and inclusive policies. Yet, empowerment by means of sport does not represent an end in itself, and is contingent upon program development, design, framework, and values (Camiré et al., 2012).

There is a strong empirical relationship between sport participation and empowerment at the psychological level (Castillo-Jiménez et al., 2022; Lim & Dixon, 2017). Adolescents participating in organized sport have higher self-esteem, self-efficacy, and emotion regulation if programs are designed for personal development (Holt et al., 2017). Girls, in particular, do well in sports settings that recognize their strengths and subvert constrained gender roles that have been found to inhibit agency (Brady, 2005). For disadvantaged youth, sports can provide a supportive and psychologically safe space to establish confidence and autonomy. Fraser-Thomas et al. (2005) demonstrated that there is a significant increase in intrinsic motivation and autonomy with regard to sport involvement in systematic and supportive contexts.

These results are in resonance with Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory that posits competence, autonomy, and relatedness to be essential elements of empowerment frequently found in engagement in sport meaningfully. There is also a great deal about social empowerment in sports. It enhances social relationships, language ability, and teamwork (Karstensen et al., 2024). Attachment to a team enhances social inclusion and reduces loneliness (Eime et al., 2013). For immigrant and minority youth, sport stimulates intercultural dialogue, supporting the removal of linguistic and cultural barriers and a building of relational ties (Spaaij, 2015).

In social empowerment, the role of mentorship, especially by coaches, is paramount. Coaches are trusted adults in and of themselves, representing trust, modelling leadership, defining accountability to expectations, and reinforcing prosocial behavior (González et al., 2016). Camiré et al. (2012) emphasise that coach education is critical because empowerment increases when coaches create a team culture that encourages both growth and inclusivity. Structurally, sports can provide opportunities for communities to act against inequality.

Within the Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) framework, programs have advanced gender equity, youth leadership, and health education in situations characterized by poverty and exclusion (Schulenkorf et al., 2016). Initiatives like Girls on the Run and Kick It Out are examples of how sport-based interventions engage individuals as civic citizens and develop leadership pipelines for marginalized populations. Yet, academics warn of romanticizing sport's empowering power if access and equity aren't part of the equation. Coalter (2013) cautioned that if games are not designed inclusively, they have the potential to reinforce social hierarchies. There is a real and significant impact on access to empowering sports programs by marginalized groups driven by cost, discrimination, ableism, and geographic isolation (Lindsey & Grattan, 2012). There are also intersectional identities determinative of empowerment outcomes. For girls and women, sport provides a unique opportunity to exercise bodily autonomy, lead, and express themselves in a public forum, particularly those that are patriarchal (Hargreaves, 2000).

However, deeply rooted gender stereotypes, limited female coaches, and few women in positions of leadership status are still constraints on female participation in sports. Participation in inclusive sport, for persons with disabilities, gives them the chance of self-expression and social inclusion. Participation also improves self-image, reduces stigma, and enhances peer interactions (Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000). When sport is purposefully designed inclusively in response to context, it can serve as a powerful tool for psychological, social, and structural empowerment in general. Sport alone can't solve systemic inequities; it can offer individuals and communities the tools, the relationships, and the confidence necessary to navigate and resist them. So empowerment efforts in sports should fall under broader frameworks of educational equity, social justice, and human development.

5. Sports and Social Inclusion.

Social inclusion refers to the process by the members of society, both individual and group, being able to fully participate with one another and for society at large regardless of race, gender, disability, wealth category, or any others (Yadav & Longchar, 2018). Most recently, sport has developed as a means of leisure and social engagement. Researchers, policy mavens and professionals in sport see sport more and more as an arena from which marginalized individuals, communities (Spaaij et al., 2014) are enabled and empowered on one hand, to confront disadvantage on the other, mobilise together with themselves or one of more than one member of a particular society and create a common identity in order to overcome exclusion.

For researchers, advocates and politicians from inside sport are looking at it as a vehicle for challenging stigmatization and for promoting community involvement and inclusivity (Spaaij et al.). Social inclusion in sports is more than just about taking part. Inclusive sport approaches seek to break down structural barriers and anti-competitive practices, removing the roadblocks to access to sports' health, physical, social and psychological value of sports, for the underprivileged minorities to access the impact of sport. According to Misener and Darcy (2014) the inspection of sport and sports participation in sport, its role as an inclusive space is determined by sport being designed to foster equity, diversity and good social life, rather than discrimination and participation being an illusion (e.g. It has been established that participation in sport has been associated with high levels of social bonding, peer bonding and social integration within the community).

Team sports also support interpersonal trust, communication skills and a shared sense of purpose and among youth groups and amongst immigrant groups (Elling et al., 2001). Such consequences give rise to "social capital", the networks and norms that foster joint action (Putnam, 2000). In one case, Spaaij (2015) found structured teams that developed local attachments and intercultural friendships in refugee communities through sport programs. Seippel (2006) found a similar result in that active youth were more likely to acquire inclusive attitudes, which would positively impact civic values and democratic engagement. Sport has special significance for socially excluded communities, such as ethnic minorities, children with disabilities, low-income youth and women and girls. Equity programs enable these groups to build confidence, skills and social networks that enable education, employment and community life (Brady, 2005). For individuals with disabilities, inclusive sport is known to enhance mobility, social ability, and self-concept.

Goodwin and Watkinson (2000) argue that through inclusive physical education and after school programme students with disabilities can be seen and feel normal in the regular classroom environment. But they also warn that tokenistic inclusion, if not backed by funding, training, and attitudinal change, can perpetuate exclusionary dynamics. Sport is also crucial in promoting gender inclusion. Research suggests sport participation raises girls' self-esteem, leadership, and peer respect (Chawansky, 2005). Challenges including lack of facilities that all females use as a part of coaching, lack of female coaches and cultural barriers to female involvement are still limiting the progress (Scraton et al., 2005). Because sport is so promising, but it is not in and of itself inclusive. Unconsciously, it can act to reproduce social rank stratifications. Coalter (2013) cautions that competitive sport tends to favour individuals of the privileged, even if with their pre-existing resources and capabilities, and marginalized, within certain categories.

Accessibility to participation opportunities is severely constrained for example by cost, inaccessible infrastructure, discriminatory attitudes, and cultural disconnects (Lindsey & Grattan, 2012). Spaaij et al. (2014), sporting activities aimed at improving performance risk leaving people with inadequate physical capabilities and experience out of it. In order to mitigate this, scholars

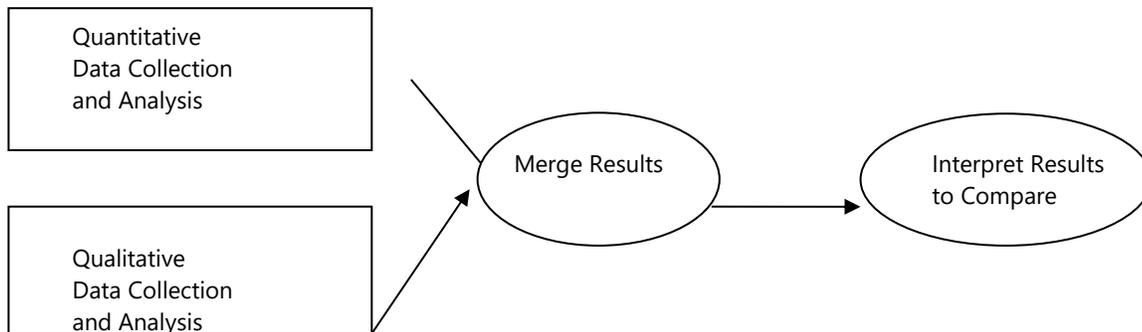
have proposed to sport-for-inclusion programmes that stress relational development, sense of ownership by local communities, relational development and of community, and social justice. Efficient and effective inclusive sport programs, these are described in Jeanes (2011) as following the following common tenets: affordability, cultural relevance, cultural responsiveness, sport specific coaching, inclusion (inclusive coaching), safe places to play, inclusion for everyone, and the inclusion of the voice of the participant. And when education and mentoring parts are incorporated into the mix, those programs that integrate these aspects into the mix are likely to achieve long term embedding in society, especially when the program is framed by education and mentoring as a part of the programme. These components help the athlete learn how to work with a community. Building partnerships with schools, community-based organizations and local governments to reach out to a broader range of stakeholders would broaden the reach and capacity for such programs. Schulenkorf et al. (2016) show that multi-stakeholder initiatives have effectively utilized sport for reconciliation, poverty reduction and the reconciliation of youth in post-conflict and underprivileged areas. Indeed, sport has the capability to be an effective instrument of social inclusion, but only when it is intentional, just and community-centric. Authentic sport inclusion also means more than just being able to find or play the right games it requires changing institutional practices that do not favor and privilege privileged players and those who do but support them. Sport needs to be included in wider frames of education, social inclusion and human rights to unlock inclusion.

6. Methods

6.1 Design

To comprehensively investigate the multifaceted impact of school sports on student inclusion, development, and empowerment, this study adopted a convergent mixed-methods research design. In this design, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected concurrently but analyzed separately before being integrated in the interpretation phase (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This methodological approach was chosen for its capacity to simultaneously gather and integrate both numerical and narrative data, enabling a deeper understanding of the phenomenon than either method alone could provide (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Figure 1 gives a pictorial representation of the convergent mixed methods design.

Figure 1: The Convergent Mixed Methods Design



Source: Adopted from Creswell, J. W. & J. D. Creswell (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (5th edition)*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, Inc.

6.2 Data Collection Procedure

Quantitative data collection involved administering questionnaires to all 450 senior high school students. After obtaining permission to conduct the study in the selected schools, the researchers visited each school on a separate day. With the help of some teachers, the students assembled in one classroom after the day's lessons had ended. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants, after which they were given hard-copy questionnaires to complete. It took about 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The participants were allowed to keep the pens that the researchers provided as a token of appreciation. After administering the questionnaire, the participants selected for interviews in each school were interviewed one-on-one on the same day. Two coaches and one school head who were physically not present in the schools on the days of data collection were interviewed via telephone. All interviews were recorded using an audio recorder. The collection of both quantitative and qualitative data took three weeks to complete, one week in each school.

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines consistent with the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and the Belmont Report. Access to the research sites was obtained from the school heads. Before participating, individuals received detailed information about the research and provided signed informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by securing participant identities and storing all data safely.

6.3 Participants

This study employed a multi-stage sampling strategy to ensure both the relevance of the research sites and the diversity of the participant pool. Eight Senior High Schools were purposively selected from three geographically diverse regions of Ghana, specifically chosen for their established level of sports and extracurricular activities to provide a rich context for the investigation. Within these schools, the research utilized a convergent mixed-methods approach for data collection.

The quantitative component involved administering structured surveys to 450 students aged 14–18. A stratified sampling technique was applied to this group to guarantee representation across key socio-economic, gender, and ethnic lines. To complement and contextualize these broad numerical patterns, the qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews with 30 participants. This group included 20 students, 5 sports coaches, and 5 school administrators, who were recruited via purposive sampling. This intentional selection was designed to capture marginalized voices often underrepresented in sports scholarship, ensuring the final sample was both diverse and representative of the student population. The details are in Table 1.

6.4 Materials

Quantitative data for this study were collected using three instruments. The survey instruments included:

- The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), a validated 10-item measure widely used to assess students' global self-worth and psychological well-being (Rosenberg, 1965).
- The Sense of Belonging Scale (SBS), 5-point Likert scale, with 12 items which is validated across populations including university students, nursing students, older adults, and immigrant populations, with consistently strong reliability and construct validity. It has been used to evaluate perceived social inclusion, peer acceptance, and integration within the school and sports environment (Goodenow, 1993).
- The Youth Leadership Inventory (YLI), a psychometric tool that measures students' perceptions of their leadership abilities in areas such as communication, initiative, and teamwork (Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1990). It is a 5-point Likert scale, with 14 items validate for specific settings such as schools, youth clubs, or sports programs.

The adopted instrument measured self-worth and personal confidence, students perceived social inclusion, peer support, and integration, as well as communication, teamwork, and initiative in school and sports. This adopted instrument allows the researcher to capture self-esteem, belonging, and leadership in a single integrated measure, making it highly relevant to school sports and student development.

A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect the qualitative aspect of the data. The interview guide was informed by the Capability Approach framework (Sen, 1999) and focused on eliciting narratives about lived experiences in school sports, challenges to inclusion, perceived personal growth, and institutional enablers or barriers.

6.5 Data Analysis

The study employed a convergent mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative data through methodological triangulation to rigorously examine school sports' impact. This approach enhanced the findings' credibility, validity, and depth by cross-verifying results across data sources (Denzin, 2012). Quantitative analysis revealed statistical relationships between sports participation and psychosocial outcomes, while thematic analysis of qualitative data contextualized these patterns within students' lived experiences. The synthesis of numerical trends with personal narratives provided a holistic, multi-dimensional understanding of how school sports either foster or inhibit empowerment and inclusion, particularly for marginalized groups (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), yielding nuanced and actionable insights.

6.5.1 Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data collected from 450 student survey respondents were analyzed using SPSS version 27, a robust statistical software package that facilitates data management and complex statistical modelling. First, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies) were generated to provide an overview of participant characteristics and baseline measures of key psychological constructs include self-esteem, belonging, and leadership. This helped to contextualize the demographic diversity

of the sample, spanning gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity, to establish baseline levels of sports participation and associated psychosocial outcomes.

To explore group differences in developmental outcomes based on levels of sports participation, an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted. This method was particularly suited to examining whether students who participated in school sports exhibited significantly different levels of self-esteem, sense of belonging, or leadership compared to their less active or non-participating peers. For instance, one-way ANOVA tests helped isolate whether participants scored higher on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale or the Youth Leadership Inventory (Table 3).

In addition, multiple linear regression analyses were employed to determine the predictive strength of specific variables, such as sports participation frequency, coach support, and school type, on outcomes like social inclusion and leadership development (Table 4). This approach enabled the examination of how much variance in students' psychosocial well-being could be attributed to their engagement in structured sports programs, controlling for other demographic factors (Bean et al., 2021). Regression outputs included standardized beta coefficients and significance levels, providing insight into which factors most strongly influenced youth empowerment.

Socioeconomic status (SES) was computed as a composite index of parental education, occupation, and household income. Scores were standardized and grouped into *low* (bottom 33%), *mid* (middle 33%), and *high* (top 33%) categories.

Sports participation level was determined based on frequency, duration, and competitive level of engagement in organized school sports. Composite scores (0–9) were grouped as *none* (0), *low* (1–4), and *high* (5–9).

6.5.2 Qualitative Analysis

Thematic analysis offers a clear, step-by-step process for identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring patterns (themes) across the data set, enabling the researcher to highlight both commonalities and unique insights across participant groups. Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) for this study was necessary because it provided a flexible, rigorous, and participant-centered method for identifying and interpreting patterns within diverse qualitative data. It ensured that marginalized perspectives were systematically and authentically represented, supporting the study's overarching aim of inclusivity and contextual depth in understanding school sports experiences.

The qualitative component of the study involved the systematic coding and analysis of 30 transcribed interviews with students, coaches, and school administrators. This analysis followed the well-established six-phase framework for thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), conducted using NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software that facilitates the organization and synthesis of complex narrative data.

Coding was both deductive and inductive. Deductive codes were derived from existing literature on inclusion and youth development in sports (e.g., empowerment, access barriers, mentorship), while inductive codes emerged organically from participant responses, allowing for the identification of unexpected but meaningful insights (Nowell et al., 2017). This dual approach ensured both theoretical alignment and data-driven discovery.

Through iterative coding, categories were refined into overarching themes capturing the nuanced ways in which sports influenced students' identities, interpersonal relationships, and perceived agency. Key emergent themes included *peer bonding as a source of belonging*, *the role of coaches as transformational mentors*, and *the transferability of skills from sports to academic and social contexts*. This thematic structure provided depth and context to the statistical findings and offered a holistic narrative of youth experience within school sports.

7. Results

7.1 Quantitative Results

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics and key variables of the study.
Table 2.

Demographic characteristics and key variables

| Variable | Measurement Scale | Mean (M) | Standard Deviation (SD) | Grouping | Frequency / % |
|----------------------------|--------------------|----------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Gender | Male | - | - | 247 | 55% |
| | Female | - | - | 203 | 45% |
| Socioeconomic Status | Low | - | - | 171 | 38% |
| | Mid | - | - | 198 | 44% |
| | High | - | - | 81 | 18% |
| Ethnicity | Minority | - | - | 189 | 42% |
| | Majority | - | - | 261 | 58% |
| Sports Participation Level | None | - | - | 120 | 27% |
| | Low | - | - | 150 | 33% |
| | High | - | - | 180 | 40% |
| Self-Esteem (RSES) | Likert Scale (1–5) | 3.52 | 0.92 | Non-participants: 2.8 | Participants: 4.1 (p < .01) |
| Sense of Belonging (SBS) | Likert Scale (1–5) | 3.65 | 0.85 | - | - |
| Youth Leadership Inventory | Likert Scale (1–5) | 3.48 | 0.88 | - | - |
| Coach Support (rating) | Likert Scale (1–5) | 3.90 | 0.78 | - | - |

Table 3.

One-Way ANOVA Summary: Self-Esteem by Sports Participation

| Group | Mean Self-Esteem | F-value | p-value |
|-------------------|------------------|---------|---------|
| Non-Participants | 2.8 | 12.45 | < 0.01 |
| High Participants | 4.1 | | |

Table 4.

Multiple Linear Regression: Predictors of Social Inclusion (DV)

| Independent Variable | Standardized Beta (β) | p-value |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|-----------|
| Sports Participation | -0.34 | 0.02 |
| Coach Support | 0.41 | 0.01 |
| School Type (Urban/Rural) | 0.08 | 0.28 (NS) |

Interpretation of Key Values

- Self-esteem was significantly higher among participants in school sports ($M = 4.1$) than non-participants ($M = 2.8$), with $p < 0.01$, indicating a strong effect of participation.
- Social inclusion was significantly predicted by coach support ($\beta = 0.41, p = 0.01$) and sports participation ($\beta = -0.34, p = 0.02$).

7.2 Qualitative Results

Thematic analysis of 30 semi-structured interviews with students, coaches, and school administrators revealed four dominant and interrelated themes: peer bonding, mentorship, skill transfer, and structural barriers. These themes reflect how structured school

sports participation fosters psychosocial growth and social inclusion, particularly among marginalized and underrepresented student populations.

Peer Bonding

Participants across socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds repeatedly emphasized that sports created a sense of belonging that extended beyond the playing field. For many, sports teams acted as surrogate families, bridging social divides and offering emotional safety. A 16-year-old female student stated that:

"I didn't really have friends when I moved to school, but joining the volleyball team changed everything. We're like sisters now, we eat together, we study together, we even look out for each other when someone is going through stuff."

A student from a rural community who attends school in the urban community remarked similarly that:

"I never felt like I fit in because of where I am coming from, but in football, that didn't matter. We understood each other on the pitch. That was enough to build trust."

Students from low-income backgrounds noted that sports participation levelled the social playing field, allowing them to interact on equal terms with peers they might otherwise never connect with. A 17-year-old male student, from a low-income background, stated that:

"It's the only time I feel like everyone is the same. No one cares if your shoes are old or if you came from a poor home. On the field, we're just teammates."

Mentorship

A second theme highlighted the transformational role of coaches, particularly in contexts where adult mentorship is lacking due to family instability or community constraints. Many students described their coaches as the first adults who recognized their potential and encouraged them to pursue excellence, both athletically and academically. A 17-year-old female student explained that:

"My coach was the first person to say I was good at something. I didn't believe in myself until he kept pushing me to try out for leadership roles. Now I help organize our team events."

A 14-year-old male student also stated that:

"At home, I don't have a dad. So, when Coach checks up on me after games or asks about school, it really means something. It makes me want to do better."

Coaches were also credited with instilling values such as discipline, resilience, and perseverance. For students with behavioural or academic challenges, the sports environment, guided by empathetic coaches, provided a constructive outlet. A 17-year-old male student recounted that:

"I used to get into fights a lot. My coach helped me control my anger through basketball. Now I talk things out more, and I've stayed out of trouble."

Skill Transfer

The third theme underscores how the competencies learned in sports translate into broader life contexts, particularly academics and interpersonal relationships. Students spoke about developing communication skills, time management, conflict resolution, and leadership through team interactions. An 18-year-old female volleyball captain stated that:

"Being a team captain taught me how to manage people. Now, when we do group assignments, I take the initiative to divide tasks, encourage people, just like during matches."

A 16-year-old female student also stated that:

"Sports made me more confident to speak up in class. Before, I used to sit in the back and say nothing. But in netball, I learned that I had to communicate, or we'd lose. That helped me with presentations."

School administrators and coaches also observed improved classroom behaviour and academic engagement among students involved in regular sports activities. A School administrator remarked that:

"In my school, students who are active in sports tend to show up more regularly, complete tasks better, and show higher levels of self-discipline. It's like they carry the team mentality into the classroom. Kudos to their coaches."

For students with disabilities, adapted sports experiences fostered not only physical participation but also a stronger self-concept. A 15-year-old student with mobility impairment stated that:

"I used to feel isolated in class. But after being part of the inclusive adapted soccer team, formed by the Physical Education (PE) Teacher, I feel proud. I am now vocal in the classroom."

Together, these themes illustrate the transformational power of inclusive school sports. By creating supportive peer networks, enabling meaningful mentorship, and developing transferable life skills, sports emerge not only as sites of physical activity but also as platforms for social inclusion and empowerment. These insights affirm the importance of equitable access to school sports as a strategy for leveling the playing field across demographic boundaries.

Structural Barriers

The third theme focused on the systemic, institutional, and environmental obstacles that limit or prevent students from equitably accessing and participating in sports. Unlike individual barriers (like lack of interest or time), structural barriers are embedded in the way schools, policies, and resources are organized. A school administrator remarked that:

"The cost of equipment, and sometimes even transportation, prevents many students from taking part in sports. While sports should be a vehicle for inclusion, the reality is that families with limited financial means often prioritize basic needs over extracurricular activities".

In essence, the statement means that economic inequality limits access to sports, turning what should be an inclusive activity into one that excludes underprivileged students.

The respondents highlighted gender norms in society that shape access to school sports for boys and girls. A physical Education teacher explained that:

"There's still a lingering belief that sports are primarily for boys. Girls who show interest in athletics are sometimes discouraged, either by parents or peers, with comments like 'sports make girls less feminine.' These stereotypes not only affect girls' confidence but also limit the support they receive. For example, football is prioritized for boys, while girls' teams often receive less funding, equipment, and playing time."

Gender stereotyping creates unequal opportunities in sports. Girls are discouraged both socially and materially, which lowers their participation and prevents them from enjoying the same benefits as boys. As much as some PE teachers practice inclusive adapted sports, there are still challenges with inclusive sports in the schools. Most of the PE teachers do not have adequate capacity to handle inclusive sports programmes. A parent recounted that:

"My son loves sports, but there are no adaptive programs in the school. The fields are not wheelchair accessible, and PE teachers are not trained to integrate children with disabilities. It sends the message that these students are an afterthought, rather than valued participants in school sports."

The absence of inclusive structures makes children with disabilities feel invisible or unimportant; instead of being seen as equal members of the school community, they are sidelined, reinforcing stigma and inequality.

8. Discussion

This study sought to understand how school sports foster inclusion, development, and empowerment among senior high school students. The empirical findings from both the quantitative and qualitative strands of this mixed-method study strongly affirm the transformative potential of school sports participation in fostering social inclusion, personal development, and youth empowerment. Together, these data sets present a compelling argument that school sports can serve as a powerful equalizing force, especially for marginalized groups across lines of gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and ability.

8.1 Enhancing Self-Esteem and Belonging Through Participation

The most statistically robust finding from the analysis was the significant relationship between sports participation and self-esteem. Students who actively participated in school sports reported substantially higher self-esteem ($M = 4.1$) compared to their non-participating peers ($M = 2.8$), a difference that was statistically significant (ANOVA: $F = 12.45$, $p < 0.01$). This outcome resonates with an established body of research demonstrating that structured participation in sports enhances psychological well-being by promoting self-efficacy, personal mastery, and recognition (Eime et al., 2013; Bailey, 2006).

Sports participation creates contexts in which students experience achievement, competence, and social validation, which are key ingredients for developing stable self-concept and self-worth. Through sustained engagement, students learn to set goals, confront challenges, and celebrate incremental successes, which collectively reinforce their self-esteem and intrinsic motivation. These processes echo self-determination theory, wherein autonomy, competence, and relatedness fuel internal motivation and confidence.

The mean sense of belonging score ($M = 3.65$) further underscores the socio-emotional and communal benefits of school sports. Regression analysis revealed that both sports participation ($\beta = -0.34, p = 0.02$) and coach support ($\beta = 0.41, p = 0.01$) significantly predicted students' sense of social inclusion. The negative beta coefficient for sports participation though counterintuitive at first glance, likely reflects the direction of scale orientation, meaning that higher levels of participation correspond to lower levels of perceived exclusion, and thus, stronger inclusion. This dual statistical association indicates that participation alone enhances belonging, but the quality of coach–student interaction amplifies this effect, serving as a vital socio-relational anchor. In essence, participation provides the *space*, while mentorship provides the *emotional substance* that transforms involvement into belonging. Qualitative narratives powerfully illuminate these statistical patterns. Many students described their sports teams as “families” that offered trust, acceptance, and psychological safety. For students who had recently transferred schools, lived in economically deprived circumstances, or identified with ethnic minority groups, these teams provided rare environments of inclusion and affirmation. A 17-year-old female student reflected, “*We’re like sisters now; we eat together, we study together...*” Such accounts illustrate how sports transcend physical engagement to function as social ecosystems, where shared experiences cultivate empathy and dismantle feelings of isolation. As Fraser-Thomas et al. (2005) argue, structured youth sports facilitate positive peer bonding and a collective identity that buffers against social alienation.

8.2 Mentorship and Role Modelling

Beyond peer relations, mentorship by coaches emerged as a cornerstone of youth empowerment. Many participants described their coaches as the first adults to recognize their potential, provide guidance, and foster leadership. Quantitative results reinforce this sentiment: coach support significantly predicted social inclusion ($\beta = 0.41, p = 0.01$), indicating that adult mentorship within sports contexts is not merely peripheral but causally linked to youths' sense of belonging and value.

The interpretive weight of this finding lies in the psychosocial role of coaches as moral exemplars and emotional anchors, particularly for students navigating unstable family dynamics or limited adult supervision. A 15-year-old male student articulated this poignantly: “*At home, I don’t have a dad. So, when Coach checks up on me... it really means something.*” Such testimonies reveal that coaches often occupy surrogate parental roles, providing stability, affirmation, and ethical direction. This aligns with the literature on positive youth development, which positions mentors as catalysts for resilience, self-regulation, and social responsibility (Petitpas et al., 2005; Holt et al., 2017).

Importantly, mentorship in sports extends beyond emotional support to behavioural regulation and cognitive control. A student who had struggled with aggression remarked that basketball, under empathetic coaching, helped him “*control my anger.*” This reflects how structured sports environments is, when guided by reflective, equity-focused mentors become microcosms of moral learning, teaching accountability, patience, and empathy. Coaches thus serve as both facilitators of skill and architects of ethical consciousness, shaping the moral fabric of young athletes in ways that formal curricula often cannot.

8.3 Transfer of Skills and Empowerment

Perhaps the most transformative dimension of sports participation lies in the transferability of competencies acquired through play to broader life contexts. The thematic analysis revealed that skills developed in sports such as teamwork, leadership, resilience, and communication, were frequently applied to academic group work, peer relationships, and community initiatives.

For instance, an 18-year-old female student explained how her experience as a team captain empowered her to lead class projects confidently, while another noted that sports helped her become more assertive during class discussions. These experiences illustrate the capability approach (Sen, 1999), which posits that human development depends not only on access to resources but also on the conversion of these resources into functional capabilities. Sports serve as “conversion tools,” transforming opportunities (coaching, teamwork, discipline) into valuable outcomes such as confidence, agency, and social capital. Empirical studies reinforce this notion, linking sport-based programs to cognitive, emotional, and moral skill development (Camiré et al., 2012).

Furthermore, even students with disabilities reported a marked improvement in self-concept, agency, and social confidence through participation in adaptive sports. This underscores the transformative and inclusive potential of well-designed school programs that prioritize accessibility. It echoes the global call embedded in the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4, which advocates for inclusive and equitable quality education for all learners, regardless of ability (Abera, 2023). Inclusive sports

participation thus not only fosters empowerment but also enacts educational justice by validating diverse forms of achievement and participation.

8.4 Barriers to Equitable Access

Despite these documented benefits, several structural and cultural barriers impede equitable access to school sports. Economic hardship remains a significant constraint, limiting students' ability to afford sportswear, equipment, or transportation. Drawing on Sen's (1999) conception of poverty as capability deprivation, financial disadvantage restricts students from translating their enthusiasm for sports into active participation. When families must prioritize food and shelter, extracurricular opportunities are deprioritized, resulting in a cycle of exclusion from the psychosocial and educational benefits of sports participation.

Gendered social norms compound this exclusion. In many school contexts, sports are still perceived as "male domains", reflecting what Sen (1999) calls *unfreedoms* is socially constructed barriers that constrain agency. These stereotypes not only discourage girls from participation but are institutionally reinforced through unequal funding, limited equipment, and fewer competitive opportunities. Consequently, girls' sporting experiences are often undervalued, eroding their self-belief and leadership potential. This dynamic reproduces inequality and contradicts the inclusive ethos of education reform.

Similarly, students with disabilities face the most profound capability deprivation. Inaccessible facilities, lack of adaptive programs, and insufficient teacher training exclude them from meaningful engagement. As Sen (1999) asserts, justice demands the removal of obstacles that prevent individuals from functioning fully. Hence, the absence of inclusive sports structures does not merely represent logistical failure, it symbolically communicates that certain students are less valued within the school community. True inclusion requires deliberate policy interventions that provide adaptive equipment, trained facilitators, and barrier-free spaces for participation.

Collectively, these findings reveal that while sports are inherently empowering, structural inequities in access, gender norms, and disability inclusion undermine their transformative potential. Addressing these barriers requires systemic reforms, expanding adaptive infrastructure, reducing economic disparities, and fostering gender equity to ensure that every learner can exercise their substantive freedoms through participation.

Integrating statistical analysis with qualitative insights reaffirms the central thesis of this study: school sports are vital instruments of inclusion, identity formation, and empowerment. Quantitative findings demonstrate significant links between participation, self-esteem, and belonging, while qualitative narratives reveal the emotional and moral depth of these experiences. Together, they illustrate that sports cultivate not just athletes, but whole persons confident, connected, and capable of contributing meaningfully to their communities.

For policymakers and educational leaders, the implications are clear: sports should not be treated as a peripheral extracurricular activity, but as a core pillar of inclusive and holistic education reform. Investing in equitable, inclusive, and mentorship-rich sports programs is therefore not only an investment in physical development but in human potential, social justice, and educational transformation.

9. Policy Implications

Based on the evidence adduced from this study's findings, two central policy recommendations are proposed:

9.1 *Integration of Universal, Inclusive Sports Curricula*

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NaCCA) should embed inclusive, gender-sensitive, and culturally responsive sports programs as part of the national curriculum. This ensures that sports participation is not contingent on privilege or location.

9.2 *Mandatory Anti-Bias and Mentorship Training for Teacher-Coaches*

Teachers and coaches should receive specialized training in fostering inclusive team environments, addressing unconscious bias, and serving as effective mentors to all students, regardless of their background.

10. Conclusion.

This research highlights the transformative impact of school-based sport as a tool for inclusion, empowerment and all-roundness of youth development, in particular for disadvantaged students deprived of opportunities in education and sporting activities. Whilst universal principles such as the SDG 4, focus on inclusive, quality education, inequalities in participation reflect broader patterns of social/structural inequality. If designed deliberately and properly supported, school sports can ameliorate these inequalities through promoting psychosocial learning, developing social capital and engendering a sense of inclusion, which is an underserved part of traditional education policy.

This study, employing a mixed-methods approach, integrated quantitative questionnaires and qualitative interviews to explore how school sports foster inclusion, support empowerment and advancement. Quantitative analysis indicated that the participants and their school sports experience had a significantly higher subjective measure of themselves, self-esteem ($M = 4.1$), and positive self-concept—a measure that was significant ($p < 0.01$) for all students, than the non-participants ($M = 2.8$). Sports participation and coach support were identified as strong predictors of social inclusion based on regression, as well as participation and coach support – indicating that structured, purposeful sports programming led by empathetic and equity-minded mentors may alleviate social isolation and enhance peer connectedness.

Qualitative results extended this understanding by demonstrating that sports serve as relational ecosystems where trust, empathy, and shared identity are constructed. Students often characterized their teams as “second families,” a safe place to feel emotionally secure and beyond the narrow socioeconomic or cultural divides. For many in low-income households and in minority communities, sports have become equalizing environments in which merit, hard work, and teamwork have supplanted status as the order of the day.

Coaches were at the center of this process and most often were adults first to see the potential of the students or provide guidance beyond playing on a field. The coaching they provided affected not only playing but also school work and discipline, and interpersonal interactions for them as an important player in young people’s development. Students also explained sports had given them life skills such as “resilience,” “communication,” “time management,” and “empathy.” Leaders of teams with responsibilities (team captains) were more likely as well as students with behavioral problems found healthy ways of coping and mood regulation.

Furthermore, adaptive sports programs enhanced self-concept and sense of agency among students with disabilities, stressing the importance of providing adaptive, accessible sports opportunities for students with disabilities at the school level. These results highlight the benefits of sports, not just in physical terms (e.g., in terms of physical fitness) but also in relation to psychological, social, and emotional development in the wider society. But the chances were not fairly shared.

Structural roadblocks such as restricted finances, gender bias, and poor infrastructure, the study found, kept those who would benefit most from the intervention away from the platform. Pay-to-play systems, cultural norms that suppress female athleticism, and an absence of adaptive equipment or inclusive facilities systematically limited access to opportunity for vulnerable groups. Such inequalities illustrate Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach which describes sports as “conversion tools” that only extend real freedoms to people when enabling conditions exist. Without access to equality, a potential of empowerment that comes from the playing field is never realized, and systemic issues of inequity in education and society are maintained. Systematic policy integration is critical for fully exploiting the developmental potential of school sport. National education frameworks should embed their efforts at sports as a critical enabler of inclusive, holistic learning, rather than as a peripheral after-school activity. This can occur through a myriad of inter-linked mechanisms of legislation, curriculum, policy design, and teacher development.

There should be an explicit recognition of Physical Education (PE) and School Sports as vital to all aspects of cognitive, social, and emotional learning when it comes to the National Education Acts. Incorporating sports at the heart of curricular policy systems leads to equitable funding, staffing for, and accountability of sports as it would with any academic subject. Harmonizing national strategic needs with international frameworks such as UNESCO’s Quality Physical Education (QPE) and the African Union’s Agenda 2063, for example, would facilitate convergence between the education, health, and the youth development domain, positioning sports as a lever for lifelong learning and social integration.

A supplementary approach is that of creating a National School Sports Policy (NSSP). Governments need to establish a policy framework that clearly establishes roles and responsibilities and the coordination mechanisms to help facilitate different sectors. The NSSP should establish inclusion targets for girls, rural, and students with disabilities; at the same time they should also require minimum capital projects to be budgeted (infrastructure or equipment). It should also define quantifiable benchmarks such as participation statistics, health outcomes, and coverage of professional training in order to drive accountability.

Sports participation by all through frames like these becomes not a privilege to which some gain, but it becomes a right for all students regardless of level or race. School sports should be explicitly linked with Outcomes of Physical and Health Education (PHE), as not only an effective way of teaching students new skills, but also teaching them how to use their knowledge to develop, develop and develop others, and learn critical moral and social skills including cooperation, leadership, integrity, fairness, and respect. Schools can institutionalise the shift through the creation of Sports and Wellness Committees who oversee the organisation of activities, gender- and disability-compatibility initiatives and community partnerships. What is more, by promoting competency-based assessments, schools would have the opportunity to assess, as well as physical results, abilities like cooperation and the quality of fair play, not just physical performance as indicators of full holistic learning.

The successful conservation of these reforms demands mobilization of resources and public–private partnership. Governments can also work towards the reward of corporate sponsorships, local cooperation and NGO collaboration to fund sports facilities, equipment and scholarships. This is consistent with SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), which promotes partnerships to further the cause of equity and inclusion. Local sports clubs and federations can also play a role in providing mentoring and technical knowledge (through their mentorship) to build schools-to-community sports pathways that take young people beyond school.

Training and capacity building for coaches and educators, as the human drivers of inclusion and empowerment, also are a central feature of efficient policy implementation.

To prepare future educators for mixed needs classroom teacher education institutions should integrate sports pedagogy, diverse coaching approaches, equity teaching approaches in its bachelor and diploma programs. Certifications (which are created in cooperation with universities and sports agencies) could also be utilized to professionalize School Coaching and to provide uniform standards. For professional teachers, CPD would be concentrated toward gender-sensitive and culturally responsive pedagogy, adaptive physical education to learners at all levels, and trainings for mentors with psychosocial support. As Petitpas et al. (2005) and Holt, & Fifer, (2018) suggest, "empathetic mentorship enhances students' emotional regulation, resilience and moral growth." Outside of training, we should institutionalize interdisciplinary collaboration that connects educators, health officers and social workers to foster students' well-being.

To guarantee the success of the students, governments need to implement dedicated budgets for facilities, subsidize participation costs for disadvantaged students and guarantee transportation access for rural learners. In case of infrastructure, partnerships with the communities and sponsors can enhance the chances in impoverished areas while access for students with disabilities should be guaranteed by building accessible infrastructure. Ensuring that socioeconomic or physical constraints don't prevent any learner from participating, as Sen (1999) proposed, could allow for the extension of human freedoms and the dismantling of structural inequities.

School sports need to be reframed as a necessary contributor to inclusive education and social progress. Sports embedded in national policies, investment in human capacity, as well as measures to counter systemic inequities can help to develop resilient, self-assured, socially embedded young people. We should not define success by medals or podium, but by the extent to which participation contributes, and not detracts, to the growth of capabilities, belonging and narrowing educational gaps. By investing sustainably and reforming policy, global nations can deliver upon the transformative potential of SDG 4, in which all learners regardless of background will have the chance to succeed via sport.

Funding: The authors declare that no financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Competing interest: The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

- [1]. Abera, H. G. (2023). The role of education in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): A global evidence-based research article. *International Journal of Social Science and Education Research Studies*, 3(01), 67-81. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55677/ijssers/V0311Y2023-09>, Impact Factor: 4.638
- [2]. Agbedahin, A. V. (2019). Sustainable development, education for sustainable development, and the 2030 agenda for sustainable development: Emergence, efficacy, eminence, and future. *Sustainable Development*, 27(4), 669-680. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.1931>
- [3]. Baidoo, J. H. (2022). Managerial Factors Influencing the Performance of Ghana University Sports Teams at Competitions (Doctoral dissertation, University of Cape Coast).
- [4]. Bailey, R. (2006). Physical education and sport in schools: A review of benefits and outcomes. *Journal of School Health*, 76(8), 397-401. DOI: 10.1111/j.1746-1561.2006.00132.x
- [5]. Brady, M. (2005). Creating safe spaces and building social assets for young women in the developing world: A new role for sports. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 33(1/2), 35-49. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40005500>
- [6]. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- [7]. Camiré, M., Trudel, P., & Forneris, T. (2012). Coaching and transferring life skills: Philosophies and strategies used by model high school coaches. *The Sport Psychologist*, 26(2), 243-260.
 - a. <https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.26.2.243>
- [8]. Casey, M. M., Eime, R. M., Payne, W. R., & Harvey, J. T. (2012). Using a socioecological approach to examine participation in sport and physical activity among rural adolescent girls. *Qualitative Health Research*, 22(8), 1103-1112.
 - a. DOI: 10.1177/1049732309338198
- [9]. Castillo-Jiménez, N., López-Walle, J. M., Tomás, I., Tristán, J., Duda, J. L., & Balaguer, I. (2022). Empowering and disempowering motivational climates, mediating psychological processes, and future intentions of sport participation. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(2), 896. DOI: 10.3390/ijerph19020896
- [10]. Coakley, J. (2011). Youth sports: What counts as "positive development?" *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 35(3), 306-324. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723511417311>
- [11]. Coalter, F. (2013). *Sport for development: What game are we playing?* Abingdon, Routledge. ISBN : 1-135-17361-3

- [12]. Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE. ISBN 1483346986, 9781483346984
- [13]. Creswell, J. W. & J. D. Creswell (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th edition). Los Angeles: Sage Publications, Inc.
- [14]. Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01
- [15]. Denzin, N. K. (2017). *The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods*. New York, Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315134543>
- [16]. Edwards, M. B. (2015). The role of sport in community capacity building: An examination of sport for development research and practice. *Sport management review*, 18(1), 6–19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2013.08.008>
- [17]. Eime, R. M., Young, J. A., Harvey, J. T., Charity, M. J., & Payne, W. R. (2013). A systematic review of the psychological and social benefits of participation in sport. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 10(1), 98. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1479-5868-10-98>
- [18]. Fraser-Thomas, J., Côté, J., & Deakin, J. (2005). Youth sport programs: An avenue to foster positive youth development. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 10(1), 19–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1740898042000334890>
- [19]. Fredricks, J. A., & Eccles, J. S. (2006). Is extracurricular participation associated with beneficial outcomes? Concurrent and longitudinal relations. *Developmental Psychology*, 42(4), 698–713. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.42.4.698>
- [20]. Giannitsopoulou, S. J. (2020). *What happens beyond the talking: A critical policy analysis of sport and recreation equity policies in higher education* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota]. <http://hdl.handle.net/1807/103265>
- [21]. Goodenow, C. (1993). The psychological sense of school membership among adolescents. *Psychology in the Schools*, 30(1), 79–90. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6807\(199301\)30:1<79::AID-PITS2310300113>3.0.CO;2-X](https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6807(199301)30:1<79::AID-PITS2310300113>3.0.CO;2-X)
- [22]. Goodwin, D. L., & Watkinson, E. J. (2000). Inclusive physical education from the perspective of students with physical disabilities. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 17(2), 144–160. <https://doi.org/10.1123/apaq.17.2.144>
- [23]. Gorard, S., & See, B. H. (2009). The impact of socio-economic status on participation and attainment in science. *International Journal of Science Education*, 31(14), 1947–1969. DOI:10.1080/03057260802681821
- [24]. Gregory, A., Osher, D., Bear, G. G., Jagers, R. J., & Sprague, J. R. (2021). Good intentions are not enough: Centering equity in school discipline reform. *School Psychology Review*, 50(2–3), 206–220. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2020.1861911>
- [25]. Hammond-Graf, J. S. (2021). *Utilizing sport as a vehicle for the process of empowerment for women* [Master’s thesis, Frostburg State University].
- [26]. Hargreaves, J. (2000). *Heroines of sport: The politics of difference and identity*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203466063>
- [27]. Holt, N. L., Neely, K. C., Slater, L. G., Camiré, M., Côté, J., Fraser-Thomas, J., & Tamminen, K. A. (2017). A grounded theory of positive youth development through sport. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 10(1), 1–49. doi: 10.1080/1750984X.2016.1180704
- [28]. Holt, L. J., & Fifer, J. E. (2018). Peer mentor characteristics that predict supportive relationships with first-year students: Implications for peer mentor programming and first-year student retention. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 20(1), 67–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025116650685>
- [29]. Ibsen, B., & Levinsen, K. (2019). Collaboration between sports clubs and public institutions. *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 16(2), 187–204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2019.1610619>
- [30]. Jiang, Y., & Feng, B. (2024). How Children’s Sports Participation Influences School Engagement Levels. *Revista de Psicología del Deporte (Journal of Sport Psychology)*, 33(2), 37–45. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2025-30760-004>
- [31]. Karstensen, V., Piskorz-Ryń, O., Karna, W., Lee, A., & Gottschlich, D. (2024). The role of sports in promoting social inclusion and health in marginalized communities. *International Journal of Sport Studies for Health*, 7(3). <https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.intjssh.7.3.6>
- [32]. Lim, S. Y., & Dixon, M. A. (2017). A conceptual framework of sport participation and women’s empowerment. *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 22(5), 400–413. Lim, S. Y., & Dixon, M. A. (2017). A conceptual framework of sport participation and women’s empowerment. *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 22(5), 400–413.
- [33]. Lindsey, I., & Grattan, A. (2012). An ‘international movement’? Decentring sport-for-development. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 4(1), 91–110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2011.627360>
- [34]. Montjourides, P. (2022). *Is this the future we want? Understanding the legitimacy of international education agendas. The example of equity in education* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Montreal]. <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.89624>
- [35]. Morgan, H., Parker, A., & Roberts, W. (2019). Community sport programmes and social inclusion: what role for positive psychological capital?. *Sport in Society*, 22(6), 1100–1114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2019.1565397>
- [36]. Murungu, R. (2023). Leveraging sports as a vehicle for youth employment and economic empowerment: A sports for Kenyan youth employment case study. *OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development*, 16(09), 57–64.
- [37]. Naylor, R., & Mifsud, N. (2019). *Structural inequality in higher education: Creating institutional cultures that enable all students*. Perth: National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/structural-inequality-retention-equity-students/>
- [38]. Nicholson, M., & Hoye, R. (2008). *Sport and social capital*. London: Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780080569727>
- [39]. OECD. (2018). *Equity in education: Breaking down barriers to social mobility*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264073234-en>
- [40]. Penney, D. (2012). Equality, equity and inclusion in physical education and school sport. In A. Laker (Ed.), *Sociology of sport and physical education* (pp. 110–128). London: Routledge. ISBN 0-415-23594-4
- [41]. Petitpas, A. J., Cornelius, A. E., Van Raalte, J. L., & Jones, T. (2005). A framework for planning youth sport programs that foster psychosocial development. *The sport psychologist*, 19(1), 63–80. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.19.1.63>
- [42]. Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. New Jersey, Princeton University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183pjhh>

- [43]. Sangalli, S., & Smorgoni, G. (2025). Empowering disadvantaged youth through sports-based interventions. *ITALIAN JOURNAL OF HEALTH EDUCATION, SPORT AND INCLUSIVE DIDACTICS*, 9(2). <https://doi.org/10.32043/gsd.v9i2.1449>
- [44]. Schulenkorf, N., Sherry, E., & Rowe, K. (2016). *Sport for development: An introduction to theory and practice*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.1123/JSM.2014-0263>
- [45]. Scraton, S., Fasting, K., Pfister, G., & Buel, A. (2005). It's still a man's game? The experiences of top-level European women footballers. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 40(4), 289–304. DOI:10.1177/101269099034002001
- [46]. Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford, Oxford University Press. ISBN 0198297580, 9780198297581
- [47]. Slegers, P. (2019). Understanding school-NGO partnerships. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 57(4), 322–328. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-03-2019-0053>
- [48]. Sofo, S., & Asola, E. F. (2023). Ghana's New Physical Education Curriculum for Primary Schools: An Analysis and Future Directions. *Canadian Journal of Educational and Social Studies*, 3(6), 1-14. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53103/cjess.v3i6.182>
- [49]. Spaaij, R. (2009). Sport as a vehicle for social mobility and regulation of disadvantaged urban youth. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 44(2–3), 247–264. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690209338415>
- [50]. Spaaij, R. (2015). Refugee youth, belonging and community sport. *Leisure Studies*, 34(3), 303–318. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2014.893006>
- [51]. Spaaij, R., Magee, J., & Jeanes, R. (2014). *Sport and social exclusion in global society*. London, Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203066584>
- [52]. Tandon, P. S., Kroshus, E., Olsen, K., Garrett, K., Qu, P., & McCleery, J. (2021). Socioeconomic inequities in youth participation in physical activity and sports. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 18(13), 6946.
- [53]. UNESCO. (2015). *Quality physical education: Guidelines for policy-makers*. SBN 978-92-3-100059-1
- [54]. Van der Veken, K., Lauwerier, E., & Willems, S. (2020). "To mean something to someone": sport-for-development as a lever for social inclusion. *International journal for equity in health*, 19(1), 11. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-019-1119-7>
- [55]. Zimmerman, B. J., & Martinez-Pons, M. (1990). Student differences in self-regulated learning. *Educational Psychologist*, 25(1), 17–25. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.82.1.51>
- [56]. Zimmerman, M. A. (2000). Empowerment theory: Psychological, organizational and community levels of analysis. In J. Rappaport & E. Seidman (Eds.), *Handbook of community psychology* (pp. 43–63). Springer. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4615-4193-6_2