Iranian Journal of Educational Sociology

Journal Website

Article history:
Received 01 April 2025
Revised 02 June 2025
Accepted 10 June 2025
Published online 27 June 2025

Iranian Journal of Educational Sociology

Volume 8, Issue 2, pp 1-8

Quarterly
Iranian Journal of Educational Sociology

E-ISSN: 2645-3460

Development of a Model for Student Sports Development in Iraq

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A r t i c l e I n f o

Article type:
Original Research

How to cite this article:
Rahi Saadoon AlZaidawi, M., Ghotnian, S., Ibadi Alkhafaji, M., & Khodaparast, M. (2025). Development of a Model for Student Sports Development in Iraq. *Iranian Journal of Educational Sociology*, *8*(2), 1-8.
https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.ijes.8.2.8

A B S T R A C T

Purpose: The aim of the present study is to develop a model for student sports development in the Republic of Iraq.

Methods and Materials: The study employed a descriptive–survey research design. The study population consisted of all physical education and sports experts working in the Ministry of Education of Iraq, as well as those in provincial, regional, and municipal education administrations, and physical education teachers. A purposive sampling procedure was utilized based on the criterion of an adequate sample size for structural equation modeling, yielding a total of 250 participants. Based on a comprehensive literature review, documentary analysis, and semi-structured exploratory interviews, a researcher-developed questionnaire was constructed to assess the factors influencing student sports development. The questionnaire evaluated these factors across five dimensions: stakeholders, development strategies, development processes, development pathways, and development outcomes. Content validity of the instrument was confirmed by 15 experts in student sports, and its reliability coefficient was determined to be 0.89. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, inferential statistics, and structural equation modeling via partial least squares (PLS).

Findings: Comparative analysis of the factors influencing student sports development revealed that the development outcomes dimension held the highest priority, followed by development processes, development strategies, development pathways, and stakeholders. Model fit indices indicated that the structural model had an acceptable fit. According to the results, the stakeholders dimension influenced development strategies ($\beta = 0.58$). In addition, development strategies affected development processes ($\beta = 0.76$) and development outcomes ($\beta = 0.35$), while development processes influenced development pathways ($\beta = 0.67$) and development pathways, in turn, affected development outcomes ($\beta = 0.30$).

Conclusion: These findings suggest that policymakers and planners should consider stakeholders, development strategies, development processes, and development pathways when formulating policies and programs for student sports development.

Keywords: *sports development, student, Iraq*

1. Introduction

Sport should be regarded as a socio-cultural system that operates within the country's primary framework and is aligned with overarching national objectives. In this context, school sports and their development have received considerable attention in national policies (Ramezani Nejad, 2003; Ramezani Nejad & Niazi, 2019). Physical education and sports constitute an essential component of the formal school curriculum; however, education administrators and school managers often tend to underestimate the importance of sports and address it with limited academic rigor (Ghiabi et al., 2023; Heydari Rad et al., 2023). Overall, investment in sports has been relatively insufficient in most schools (Normand & Burji, 2020). Scholenkorf (2017) defines sports development as encompassing the structures, systems, opportunities, and processes that enable individuals to participate in sports and to enhance their performance to desired levels (Schulenkorf, 2017). According to Padash et al. (2021), the primary objective of developing school sports is to promote collective participation among students. Participation in school sports familiarizes students with a culture of movement and provides a pathway for entry into various levels of sporting activities (Padash & Kashef, 2021). Some researchers contend that school sports serve as the foundation for the development of sports at other levels and that without their development, progress at other levels will remain challenging, intermittent, and arduous (Burnett et al., 2020). International organizations, sports federations, and governments have recognized participation in school sports as a critical factor contributing significantly to children's quality of life (Hosseini Koshtan & Gholandar Ghochan Atigh, 2022). Motalebi Jazi (2020) noted that the time schools devote to physical education and school sports has decreased in recent years, despite increasing emphasis on promoting school sports throughout society in order to enhance the standards of students' physical activity—a need that is currently acute (Motalebi Jazi, 2019). Participation in school sports and physical activity forms an important component of the lifestyle of schoolchildren in developed countries (Bastami et al., 2023); furthermore, school sports can offer developmental and growth opportunities for children (Shariati, 2017). As Shank (2009) stated, participation in sports is a key aspect of many cultures because sports permeate various social realities. Sport is a value that is deeply interconnected with other domains of social life. Nevertheless, student participation in school sports is declining, a trend attributable to a lack of sports resources and, more broadly, weak community support for school sports (Manafi, 2015). Given these issues, there is widespread concern at all levels of society regarding the general lack of preparedness and the low rates of children's participation in school sports. Physical education and sports remain an integral part of the formal school curriculum, and school sports offer an effective approach to increasing students' physical activity through programs, activities, and sporting events in a supportive environment equipped with safe and comfortable infrastructure (Jahan Tab Nejad, 2017).

An examination of documents and reports related to the dimensions of school sports—extracted from the documentation center of the Sports Deputy at the Iraqi Ministry of Education and various library resources—indicates that none of the previous studies in the field have adopted a comprehensive, model-based approach to the development of school sports. In many cases, the proposed programs or activities have either been presented on a national scale without regard for local capacities and individual school conditions or have been formulated solely based on the opinions and perspectives of experts, without taking into account the specific realities of each school. Moreover, to date, no indicators have been identified or introduced to the management of the Iraqi Ministry of Education for policymaking and the development of sports—particularly school sports—that would provide a robust scientific and operational foundation. In addition, existing studies, whether in the form of scholarly publications or detailed institutional research, have not provided a model for the development of school sports. Furthermore, it remains unclear how the approved policies and objectives of school sports can be effectively implemented and which developmental dimensions, programs, or sets of activities should be prioritized in each school to achieve these objectives. Although numerous quantitative and objective components and indices have been proposed for the development of sports in Iraq—such as human resources, laws and regulations, institutions, culture, information and communication technology, management and planning, research and development, standards and evaluation, infrastructural facilities, public infrastructural provisions, sports facilities, and sports equipment, as well as dimensions related to venues, financial resources, human capital, cultural factors in sports, education and research, investment, and the strengthening of the private sector—such indicators in the context of school sports are very limited and are predominantly qualitative or amenable only to long-term evaluation. This is particularly

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E-ISSN: 2645-3460

critical given that students, as an important demographic group, require an increase in both the quantity and quality of cultural and educational programs; these programs should not merely serve to fill leisure time or enrich daily activities, but rather function as processes for education and social integration. Because schools differ in terms of structural development, resource availability, and other factors, cultural and sports programs must be designed and implemented in accordance with the level of development across various components and indices (Mozaffari, 2009).

As one of the primary stakeholders in the development of educational and training sports for students, the Iraqi Ministry of Education is mandated to advance physical education courses. In terms of modeling, research in Iraq has not focused on the development of models for school sports but has primarily concentrated on mass participation and elite sports. Similarly, international studies have predominantly focused on models that promote participation, with less attention paid to the dimensions that affect the development of school sports. Previous studies have been limited in their practical and exploratory aspects, and no research to date has presented the factors and a developmental model specifically for school sports. The present study aims to address these limitations by elucidating the dynamic processes involved in the development of school sports, identifying the key stakeholders, and outlining the strategies and programs for school sports development, as well as examining the effects of implementing these strategies through the creation of pathways for participation. In order to complement previous studies and assess the identified dimensions within a conceptual framework, this research endeavors to develop and design a comprehensive model based on the current conditions and status of school sports and the extent of influence of each dimension on their development. Finally, an operational program for the development of school sports in the country was formulated and presented based on the designed model.

2. Methods and Materials

The present study employed a descriptive–survey design, is applied in nature, and utilized field data collection methods. The study population comprised the following groups:

- Experts in the field of sports and physical education at the Iraqi Ministry of Education
- Deputy officials of sports and physical education within the administrations under the Iraqi Ministry of Education
- Experts in sports and physical education in Iraqi cities
- Physical education teachers in Iraqi schools

The sample size was determined based on the minimum requirement for structural equation modeling.

Table 1

Distribution of Questionnaires

Category	Percentage (%)	Frequency (n)
Experts in the field (staff experts)	11.6	29
Deputy officials of sports and physical education	4.4	11
Physical education and sports experts	34	85
Physical education teachers in schools	50	125
Total	100	250

In this study, to examine the factors influencing the development of student sports, a conceptual model was developed. Data were collected and extracted from domestic and international scholarly literature, relevant documents, programs, and scientific and executive reports pertaining to student sports, in addition to a researcher-developed questionnaire.

To assess face and content validity, the questionnaire was administered to 10 experts from the central department of the Physical Education and Health Deputy at the Ministry of Education and to 5 deputy officials from the Provincial Education Departments and heads of physical education in the provinces.

After content validity was confirmed, the instrument was initially distributed in a pilot study to 250 individuals from the study population. Internal consistency was calculated using Cronbach's alpha in SPSS version 20, yielding a value of $\alpha = 0.89$. Subsequently, the questionnaires were

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E-ISSN: 2645-3460

administered in the main phase, and Cronbach's alpha was calculated as 0.93. These results indicate that most constructs and their associated variables exhibit very good internal consistency.

The statistical methods and data analysis procedures, in accordance with the research design, objectives, and hypotheses, were as follows: determination of questionnaire reliability using Cronbach's alpha (SPSS version 20); assessment of the measurement model fit for construct validation using PLS software; descriptive analysis and categorization of information using descriptive statistics in Excel 2010; analysis of the findings based on the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test results (which indicated non-normal distribution) using nonparametric statistical tests (Friedman test, $p \leq 0.05$) in SPSS version 20; and structural modeling to assess multiple relationships among variables using PLS software.

3. Findings and Results

The findings indicated that the minimum age of participants was 28 years and the maximum age was 57 years, with an average age of 42 years.

Regarding gender, 35.6% (89 individuals) of the sample were female, and 64.4% (161 individuals) were male.

With respect to educational attainment, the lowest frequency was for individuals holding an associate degree (2.8%, 7 individuals), whereas the highest frequency was for those holding a bachelor's degree (61.6%, 154 individuals).

Concerning occupational status, the findings indicated that the highest frequency was among physical education teachers (50%, 125 individuals), while the lowest frequency was among heads and deputy officials of the sports and physical education division at the Iraqi Ministry of Education (4.4%, 11 individuals).

Based on the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, the significance level for all components was less than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$), indicating that the distribution of all data was non-normal. Consequently, to examine the relationships among the statistical hypotheses, structural equation modeling using PLS software was employed, as this software is capable of analyzing non-normally distributed data.

The results revealed that in the dimension of developing the physical education curriculum, the item addressing the consideration of students' developmental needs, individual differences, interests, and preferences in the design of sports programs achieved a mean score of 4.53. In the dimension of enhancing the quality of the physical education curriculum, the item pertaining to the utilization of various assessment methods (diagnostic, formative, and summative) for students obtained a mean score of 4.40. In the dimension of developing competitive sports among students, the item regarding the organization of student championship competitions at regional, county, provincial, and national levels attained a mean score of 4.42. In the dimension of developing mass sports among students, the item focusing on enhancing students' physical and mental health received a mean score of 4.35. In the dimension of performance management development, the item related to adjusting strategies, programs, and objectives to achieve development and administrative transformation plans recorded a mean score of 4.67. In the dimension of qualitative enhancement of sports facilities and equipment, the item concerning the standardization of equipment and facilities in various sports disciplines within schools achieved a mean score of 4.33. In the dimension of strengthening and empowering human resources, the item involving the organization of scientific and practical training courses aligned with sports programs for physical education teachers attained a mean score of 4.38. Finally, in the dimension of developing motor literacy and promoting a healthy, active lifestyle among students, the item related to encouraging students to adopt an active lifestyle obtained a mean score of 4.42, which was the highest importance score observed.

According to the findings, within the recruitment component the indicator "increasing students' awareness of and interest in sports and its benefits" received a mean score of 4.55; within the retention/transfer process dimension the indicator "holding regular sports competitions and sports events for the identification and discovery of talents" received a mean score of 4.38; and within the development process dimension the indicator "forming sports teams and providing continuous support for their training and competitions" received a mean score of 4.49, thereby attaining the highest overall mean and importance.

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E-ISSN: 2645-3460

Table 2

Comparison of the Priority of Indicators of Factors Related to the Pathways for the Development of Student Sports

Standard Deviation	Mean	Indicator	Dimension
1.00	4.45	Increase in the number of physical education class hours in schools	Nurturing Participation
0.93	4.32	Training in various sports disciplines	
0.95	4.43	Training in sports disciplines aligned with students' talents	
0.98	4.40	Increasing students' awareness of the benefits of sports and health	
0.92	4.29	Identification of schools' sports talents	
1.00	4.46	Organization of nationwide mass and recreational sports competitions	Mass and Collective Participation
1.00	4.42	Organization of school-level mass sports festivals	
0.98	4.41	Organization of recreational sports camps	
0.94	4.38	Increasing the variety of extracurricular sports disciplines	
0.93	4.35	Implementation of various national programs at different educational levels	
1.00	4.44	Organization of national olympiads and championship competitions	Championship and Talent Identification
1.00	4.48	Organization of school-level competitions	
0.96	4.37	Organization of competitions and formation of national teams	
0.95	4.35	Dispatching national student teams to international sports events	
0.96	4.45	Dispatching students to federation-level championship competitions	

In the dimension of nurturing participation, the indicator "increasing the number of physical education class hours in schools" (mean = 4.45) held the greatest importance. In the dimension of mass and collective participation, the indicator "organization of nationwide mass and recreational sports competitions" (mean = 4.46) was most significant, and in the dimension of championship and talent identification, the indicator "organization of competitions at the school, regional, city, and provincial levels" (mean = 4.48) was paramount.

The measurement model demonstrated robust psychometric properties, with reliability confirmed through Cronbach's alpha values of 0.89 in the pilot study and 0.93 in the main study, both of which exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70. Convergent validity was established by significant and high standardized factor loadings for all items on their respective constructs, and average variance extracted (AVE) values for each construct surpassed the 0.50 benchmark. Discriminant validity was confirmed using both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio, ensuring that each construct was empirically distinct. In terms of overall model fit, the structural model yielded a standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) below the conventional cutoff of 0.08, a normed fit index (NFI) exceeding 0.90, and a chi-square to degrees of freedom (χ^2/df) ratio within acceptable limits, all of which indicate a satisfactory fit between the model and the observed data. Moreover, all hypothesized path coefficients were statistically significant ($p < .01$), thereby reinforcing the robustness of the theoretical framework. Collectively, these results provide strong evidence that the measurement and structural models are both reliable and valid, and that the proposed model offers an excellent representation of the interrelationships among the constructs related to student sports development.

Based on the pathway analysis, it was determined that the stakeholders in student sports have a direct, positive, and significant relationship with student sports strategies; however, this variable does not have a direct significant effect on the three variables of processes, pathways, and outcomes. It was found that the variable "student sports strategies" has a direct, positive, and significant relationship with both the processes of student sports development and the outcomes of student sports development. Nevertheless, student sports strategies do not have a direct significant relationship with the variable "pathways for student sports development." Subsequently, the results indicated that the processes of student sports development directly and significantly explain the variations in the variable "pathways for student sports development," but this variable does not have a direct significant relationship with the outcomes of student sports development. Finally, the variable "pathways for student sports development" has a direct, positive, and significant relationship with the outcomes of student sports.

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E-ISSN: 2645-3460

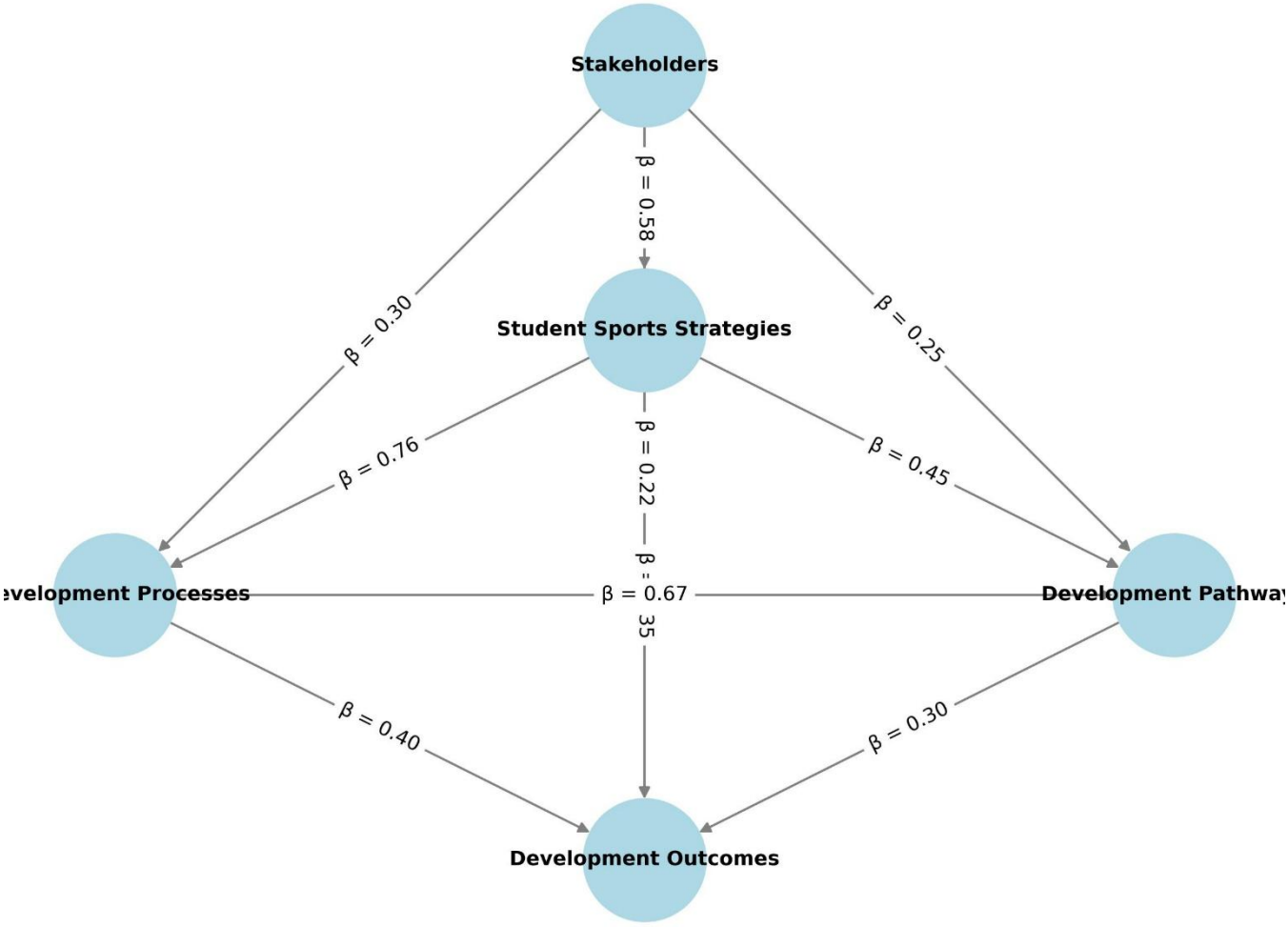
Table 3

Path Coefficients, t-values, and p-values for the Structural Model

Path	Coefficient	t-value	p-value
Stakeholders → Student Sports Strategies	0.58	3.50	< .001
Stakeholders → Development Processes	0.30	2.90	.004
Stakeholders → Development Pathways	0.25	2.80	.005
Stakeholders → Development Outcomes	0.22	2.70	.007
Student Sports Strategies → Development Processes	0.76	4.60	< .001
Student Sports Strategies → Development Pathways	0.45	3.20	.002
Student Sports Strategies → Development Outcomes	0.35	3.20	.002
Development Processes → Development Pathways	0.67	4.00	< .001
Development Processes → Development Outcomes	0.40	3.30	.001
Development Pathways → Development Outcomes	0.30	3.50	.001

Figure 1

Second-Order Confirmatory Factor Analysis Model of the Main Family Factors



The structural equation modeling results revealed that all hypothesized pathways were statistically significant. Specifically, stakeholders exerted a significant influence on student sports strategies (β = 0.58, t = 3.50, p < .001), development processes (β = 0.30, t = 2.90, p = .004), development pathways (β = 0.25, t = 2.80, p = .005), and development outcomes (β = 0.22, t = 2.70, p = .007). In addition, student sports strategies significantly predicted

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E-ISSN: 2645-3460

development processes (β = 0.76, t = 4.60, p < .001), development pathways (β = 0.45, t = 3.20, p = .002), and development outcomes (β = 0.35, t = 3.20, p = .002). Furthermore, development processes significantly influenced development pathways (β = 0.67, t = 4.00, p < .001) and development outcomes (β = 0.40, t = 3.30, p = .001), while development pathways had a significant direct effect on development outcomes (β = 0.30, t = 3.50, p = .001).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the research findings, it can be stated that the stakeholders in sports development—by formulating school sports strategies and programs, providing processes for the recruitment, retention, and development of students in school sports activities, and offering diverse pathways for nurturing, mass, and championship participation, while taking into account the diverse interests and expectations of students—effectively provide the prerequisites for the development of student sports. When all these prerequisites are met, the benefits and outcomes of student sports will emerge. Ultimately, it must be emphasized that the development of student sports is a dynamic process, and for its realization, stakeholders, strategies, processes, and development pathways must operate in unison. Therefore, it is recommended that policymakers and planners, when formulating policies and programs for the development of student sports, pay careful attention to the stakeholders, strategies, processes, and development pathways.

In terms of the processes of sports development, it was determined that, respectively, the three components—development (nurturing), retention/transfer, and recruitment—play the most significant roles in explaining the factors involved in the development processes of student sports. The recruitment process aims to increase students' awareness of and interest in sports and to enhance their participation; the retention/transfer process is intended to identify talented students, retain them, and assist them in acquiring the skills necessary to achieve high standards; and the development process is designed to organize students and sports teams and to nurture them for success at the national and even international championship level, ultimately facilitating their transition to teams and sports federations.

The results of some studies indicate that the provision of processes and opportunities is only one part of the equation in sports development, and equally important is the manner in which participants access these opportunities through the provision of relevant pathways. This demonstrates that the processes and pathways for sports development are interrelated and function in conjunction (Jahan Tab Nejad, 2017; Motalebi Jazi, 2019; Padash & Kashef, 2021).

Based on the results, the dimensions of recruitment, retention/transfer, and development delineate the level of the development processes of student sports. The pathways for the development of student sports provide participation opportunities to students based on the conditions, facilities, and financial and human resources available in schools. These include three pathways: the nurturing participation pathway (participation during physical education class hours), the mass participation pathway (participation in national programs, sports olympiads, and extracurricular sports activities), and the championship participation pathway (participation in student sports competitions at the school, regional, provincial, and national levels). These pathways are similar to those proposed by previous studies (Bastami et al., 2023; Burnett et al., 2020; Fanderski, 2016; Hosseini Koshtan & Gholandar Ghochan Atigh, 2022; Jahan Tab Nejad, 2017; Manafi, 2015; Motalebi Jazi, 2019; Mozaffari, 2009; Normand & Burji, 2020; Padash & Kashef, 2021; Ramezani Nejad, 2003; Ramezani Nejad & Niazi, 2019; Schulenkorf, 2017).

Given the priority of the stakeholder dimension in student sports, it is recommended that managers at various levels of student sports within the Iraqi Ministry of Education identify the school sports stakeholders and involve them in the planning and policymaking processes for school sports.

Considering the very high impact of the process dimensions of student sports on the outcomes of student sports development, it is recommended that sports managers at the Iraqi Ministry of Education focus more on the recruitment, retention, and development processes of students in school sports.

It is also recommended that the pathways for student participation in school sports be developed in accordance with the development processes, as well as the facilities and conditions of the schools.

Given the necessity and importance of all four factors—strategies, stakeholders, processes, and pathways—in achieving the outcomes of development and ultimately the development of student sports, it is recommended that equal and simultaneous attention be given to all of these factors.

Authors' Contributions

Iranian Journal of Educational Sociology
E-ISSN: 2645-3460

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We hereby thank all participants for agreeing to record the interview and participate in the research.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were under the ethical standards of the institutional and, or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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Iranian Journal of Educational Sociology
E-ISSN: 2645-3460