

How School-Based Cheerleading Activities Promote Students' Physical Literacy and Participation

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Abstract: In recent years, as schools have introduced more physical education and sports activities, their educational value has gradually attracted more attention. Cheerleading is both exercise and art that can help students improve their physical fitness and enjoy life at the university. The three main contents of physical literacy in this study are physical fitness, healthy habits and sportsmanship. Based on the theory of student engagement, this paper will investigate the educational mechanisms of cheerleading activities in four areas: physical fitness, moral education, participation in events, and cultural inheritance. Based on the above analysis, the all-round exercise practice of cheerleading can help students improve their physical fitness, and the nature of group projects can also be used to teach moral education. The "league + cup competition" system at China Pharmaceutical University and the "curriculum—training—competition—culture" model of Hunan Women's University have both expanded the scope of participation on campus through event organisation and school-based curriculum construction. The realisation of the educational function of cheerleading depends on whether the curriculum teaching, event organisation and cultural construction can form effective cooperation at the institutional level.

Keywords: Campus cheerleading; Physical literacy; Campus participation; Integration of sports and education; School sports; Student engagement.

1. Introduction

In November 2025, the Ministry of Education and five other departments jointly issued the "Opinions on Implementing the Strong Physical Fitness Plan" (Document No. 1 of the Department of Physical Health and Arts Education [2025]), putting forward a series of measures to deepen the reform of sports teaching and build a training and competition system. In particular, it requires the application of the educational idea of "health first" and further integration of sports and education. This policy orientation means that the selection and implementation of school sports programmes face a dual task: they should promote the all-round development of students' physical fitness and serve the purpose of comprehensive education. Cheerleading first arrived in China in 2002, was designated an official event in 2010, and was later introduced to schools by the Ministry of Education in 2014. After more than 20 years of development, it has covered all stages of education and formed the educational idea of "good morality, good study, good temperament, and good skills". Campus participation refers to the degree of students' participation and sense of belonging in school sports life, and it is also a necessary condition for evaluating the effect of sports education. Research on physical literacy has also been progressing from a theoretical standpoint: on the one hand, some scholars have developed a measurement system covering the five dimensions of sports awareness, knowledge, skills, behaviour and physical fitness [1]; on the other hand, based on the A City (anonymised) Education Quality Comprehensive Evaluation Project, the evaluation framework has set up three first-level indicators of physical ability, health behaviour and sports morality, with nine secondary indicators such as physical condition, movement skills, etc. [2]. The two research paths offer different perspectives on physical literacy, but they have not been connected so far. Most of the existing research on cheerleading has focused on verifying the teaching effect or

discussing a particular aspect of physical literacy, and few studies have integrated cheerleading activities, physical literacy and campus participation into the same analytical framework. This gap is the problem that this study will address: How do campus cheerleading activities promote students' physical literacy and a sense of belonging to the campus, and under what conditions is this effective?

2. Physical Literacy and Campus Participation: The Theoretical Link of Cheerleading Activities

Physical Literacy is a multi-faceted idea. The 2022 edition of the "Compulsory Education Physical Education and Health Curriculum Standards" lists the three contents as athletic ability, healthy behaviour and sportsmanship. Based on the independent construction of the middle school students' physical literacy evaluation index system by the A City (anonymised) Education Quality Comprehensive Evaluation Project, these three dimensions are also used as the first-level indicators, and nine secondary indicators, such as physical condition and sports skills, have been established. The two systems point in the same direction, and thus physical literacy is not only about running and jumping ability but also encompasses sportsmanship, character and health habits.

Astin's (1984) theory of student engagement can be applied to study participation in college life. The more physical and mental energy students have to study, the better their grades will be. Campus participation in sports refers to the extent to which students take part in sports clubs, competitions and campus culture. There is a cycle: the improvement of physical literacy will enhance students' ability and willingness to participate in sports activities, and deep participation will in turn promote the continuous development of all dimensions of physical literacy. The two theoretical systems in this paper provide the basis for the analysis of this relationship; they are not absolute truths, but the two empirical studies offer indirect

support. A study of 1,165 undergraduate students in two waves of prospective observation found that perceived campus sports environment ($r = 0.316$), peer support ($r = 0.475$), and perceived physical literacy ($r = 0.662$) were all positively correlated with physical health levels [3]. Another study with 408 primary school students directly used physical literacy as the dependent variable and found that the school sports activity policy environment was significantly positively correlated with physical literacy, with $r = 0.59$ for boys and $r = 0.48$ for girls ($p < 0.01$) [4]. The two studies had different levels of dependent variables, but the direction was the same.

Cheerleading is a sport that combines physical fitness, special skills and competition performance, and thus covers the three types of athletic ability, healthy behaviour and sportsmanship. Cheerleading has been described as "low threshold, strong interaction, and high display degree", and, due to its characteristics of collective cooperation and public performance, it is easy for students to feel a sense of belonging. A group of movements needs the cooperation of 8-24 people to be realised. The demand for cooperation has made everyone more serious. At the policy level, there is also encouragement; the "Opinions on Implementing the Plan for Strong Physical Fitness of Students" calls for "broadly forming sports interest groups, clubs and associations", and a new pattern has emerged: "everyone has a project, every class has activities, every school has a feature, and every week has competitions"—this is in line with the form of cheerleading activities.

3. Promoting Abilities through Sports: The Cultivation of Athletic Ability and Healthy Behaviors by Cheerleading

The Foundation of physical literacy is athletic ability. The forms of movement in cheerleading include dance, gymnastics, jumping, skills and tumbling, etc., and require flexibility, coordination, strength endurance and rhythm. The national cheerleading athlete technical level standards in China have three components for evaluation: class hours, individual ability tests, and complete movement tests; the complete movement test directly assesses students' proficiency in sports skills. From the perspective of movement characteristics, jumping movements have a higher requirement for lower limb explosive power, and flexibility movements directly act on indicators such as sit-and-reach, and there is a certain correspondence between them and physical test items.

Existing teaching experiments have provided support for the promotion effect of cheerleading on athletic ability. In an experiment with third-grade students from Jinma Primary School in Shijiazhuang City as the subjects, after 18 sessions of systematic teaching, the experimental class showed significant improvements in 50-meter run, sit-and-reach, one-minute rope skipping, etc. [5] In the high school stage, another study with high school girls from Binzhou Middle School as the subjects measured ten physical fitness indicators such as lung capacity, sit-and-reach, standing long jump, 50-meter run, and 800-meter run, to investigate the intervention effect of cheerleading teaching on these indicators [6]. Although the educational stages and sample groups of the two studies were different, the results of both showed the same thing: all-around movement training in

cheerleading positively affects all indicators of physical fitness.

Cheerleading also has some good habits for people in general. It cultivates good posture, character and a good mind simultaneously. The movements are relatively regular and interesting; therefore, the students will not be tired of learning them through repetition. When cheerleading is organised during the break, the benefits will also reach the students who do not join this course. Hefei Experimental School organises a 20-minute cheerleading break every afternoon, uses rhythm as a link, and helps students form a daily exercise habit by gradually turning exercise into a habit [7]. The practice at Jiangyin Zhutang Central Primary School is different. It is a 30-minute special break time that combines the movement rhythm of cheerleading with endurance running and physical fitness challenges to incorporate sports activities into students' daily lives on campus [8]. The practices of both schools show that once cheerleading is added to the break time, its effect of promoting healthy behaviour can reach all students, not just the members of the cheerleading team or a few people in the elective courses.

4. Promoting Sports Morality: The Shaping Function of Cheerleading

The three components of sports morality are sportsmanship, ethics and values, and character. It is a feature that is often ignored in physical literacy [9]. In the evaluation criteria for "four-good athletes" in cheerleading, "good character" is listed as the first item, and it inherently has an educational purpose. From the perspective of the form of sport, cheerleading is a group activity, so the performance of each member is closely linked to the overall effect of the team; thus, the formation needs precise coordination, and technical movements such as lifts require members to have sufficient trust. The shouts and slogans on the court are based on the emotions of the crowd. Together, these attributes provide a practical basis for moral education.

A quasi-experimental study of 250 undergraduate students provided quantitative evidence for the moral education function of cheerleading. The four modules of the 16-week teaching intervention in the cheerleading course were: value guidance, skill improvement, physical and mental development, and evaluation feedback. There were 125 students in the experimental group and 125 in the control group. The results showed that the experimental group performed significantly better than the control group in terms of moral values, civic responsibility and national identity ($p < 0.01$). Qualitative analysis has shown that the team has good cohesion, resilience and cultural pride [10]. It can be seen that the moral education function of cheerleading is not an "automatic result" of the sport; therefore, teachers need to intentionally include the aim of moral cultivation in their teaching plans.

The practice at Nanchang University shows the effect of institutional design on moral education. According to China National Radio Network, the university's "100-county collaborative program for sending teaching and training to the grassroots" has covered almost 100 counties and led to more than 100,000 teenagers participating in cheerleading competitions [11]. The teachers and students of the school team went deep into county and township schools as "trainers", changed their role from "competitors" to "service providers", and exercised a sense of responsibility and social

commitment in practice. Hunan Women's University's "four-dimensional cultivation model of courses—training—competition—culture" provided an example of internal institutional design: Cheerleading is a mandatory course for all students, and based on this, a three-level echelon system of "school team—college team—club" has been established, forming an educational loop of "building a foundation in class, strengthening skills in training, and showcasing style in competitions", allowing students at different levels to find their own places [12].

5. Promoting Integration through Competitions: The Promotion Mechanism of Cheerleading Competitions and Campus Participation

The foundation of campus participation is whether students are willing to take part in school activities. In terms of the theory of student engagement, the following three strengths motivate students to participate in cheerleading. First, this sport has a low entry barrier and is suitable for students of all physical fitness levels, thus promoting "full participation". Second, cheerleading is display-oriented; shouts, encouragement and performances on the court provide strong emotional experiences and a sense of identity for participants [13]. Third, in a group setting, each member can take on a specific role in the team and form a network of mutual dependence with others.

The competition system is a way to motivate people to participate in the above activities. The "Opinions on Implementing the Plan for Strong Physical Fitness of Students" require the vigorous development of class competitions and inter-school competitions. Primary and secondary schools organise two all-encompassing sports meetings or sports festivals each year to ensure that all students can participate in school-level competitions regularly. Cheerleading competitions are also suitable for this system; there are various types of competitions, such as class-level or performance competitions, as well as grade-level and school-wide competitions. Liu Su, the secretary of the Sports Department at China Pharmaceutical University, has stated that the university's cheerleading club is open to all students for selection, and among the best students, a school team will be formed; a "league + cup competition" system has been established by the university, and before participating in the school-level competition, classes will also hold selections to form a "everyone participates, class competitions" model. The hierarchical competition system at the class level, then the department level, and finally the university level has expanded the scope of campus participation from a few students with excellent athletic abilities to a larger group of students.

Cheerleading is also a type of exercise that can be used to add some colour to the school's graduation ceremony. The cheerleading team of China Pharmaceutical University not only took first place in the Southeast Division of the 2023 Chinese University Basketball League Cheerleading Championship [14], but also appeared as a "youth cheering group" of 80 students at the semi-final of the "Su Super League" on October 18, 2025. The dance group added life to the uniform movements and flexible formations, and the skills group performed high-difficulty moves such as lifts and throws [15]. These public demonstrations at the

extracurricular competition and the opening ceremony of the university sports meet gave students an opportunity to show off their talents in front of the entire school and even the public. The boost in self-confidence and sense of belonging will not be achieved through classroom sports activities.

6. Cultivating People through Culture: A Long-Term Mechanism for Promoting Campus Participation through Cheerleading

The event system has solved the problem of participation opportunities, but whether the participation behaviour will be continuous depends on whether the campus sports culture has taken root. When cheerleading is no longer merely a school activity but has gradually become a respected cultural symbol for teachers and students, the participation of students in it will carry a more profound significance than that of a game, and the construction of this cultural atmosphere cannot be realized without the support of school-based courses. The practice of Chongqing Science City Fuli Nankai Primary School is to "focus on points—lines—surfaces" in a step-by-step manner, dividing the cheerleading course into basic, advanced and elite levels, and then connecting them in a closed loop of "learning—practicing—competing" so that students can maintain their motivation to participate as they advance [16]. The Fourth Primary School in Simao District, Pu'er City, is not the same. Red songs, local ethnic minority songs and the school song are combined in the creation of cheerleading activities during the break to integrate local culture and campus memories into this sport [17]. Although the practices of the two schools are different, their goals are the same: to change cheerleading from a type of exercise into a way to spread campus culture and local culture, and thus give participation a deeper sense of purpose.

Community organisations connect curriculum teaching with campus participation at the community level. Hunan Women's University adopts a three-level structure of "school team—college team—club" and enables students of different levels to find their own positions [18]. China Pharmaceutical University has established a channel of "popularisation of communities—improvement of school teams", first opening the selection to the entire school and then selecting the best to form a school team. Based on the above, the "100-County Linkage" public-benefit teaching activity of Nanchang University has taken another step forward. Li Min of Nanchang University organised a public-benefit training program that extended to rural and township schools, bringing cheerleading classes to the grassroots level. The students acted as "trainers" to visit rural and township schools and, in turn, became service providers. The growth experience that results from this change cannot be provided by campus activities [19]. Therefore, this paper believes that the practice shows the possibility of extending campus participation to society.

Based on the above practices, it can be seen that the mechanism for promoting campus participation through cheerleading consists of four interconnected links: school-based courses address "what to learn and how to learn", the event system addresses "what to compete and who will compete", cultural construction addresses "why it is worth participating", and community and public-benefit organisations address "how far the participation can go". Each link has its own focus and is connected to form the

institutional conditions that promote physical literacy and campus participation through cheerleading activities.

7. Conclusion

The Educational Functions of Campus Cheerleading Cover Many Areas. This paper will examine the five contents listed above: theoretical connection, cultivation of physical fitness and healthy habits, formation of sportsmanship, promotion of event participation, and cultural education. The following are the conclusions.

The three attributes of physical literacy—physical fitness, healthy behaviour and sportsmanship—all have corresponding manifestations in cheerleading activities. Cheerleading movements are all-encompassing, and as a group activity, they can be used to teach moral education. In addition, it has a low threshold and strong displayability, thus promoting wider participation. The improvement of physical literacy and an increase in participation by students at the university are closely related.

Based on the teaching experiments mentioned in the previous text, systematic cheerleading teaching has shown positive intervention effects on many physical fitness indicators and the dimension of sports morality for students; however, these results were not "automatically" achieved through the sports project. The teacher's planned organisation of teaching is the main reason. The progressive event structure can convert the advantages of cheerleading in terms of a low participation threshold and displayability into actual participation behaviour. School-based courses and community organisations take on the institutional function of sustaining participation, and, in conjunction with local culture and public-benefit services, can expand the educational value of campus participation beyond sports.

It should be pointed out that this paper only uses existing research results and practical cases; no new field data have been collected. The discussions are mainly at the level of the mechanism and do not provide detailed comparisons among students of different grades or different levels of participation. There is no uniform operational indicator for measuring campus participation in current research, and thus the actual situation cannot be known.

Future research can conduct follow-up surveys in specific schools to collect pre- and post-test data on students' physical literacy and participation behaviour, test the mutual promotion relationship between physical literacy and campus participation proposed in this article, and explore the role of institutional factors such as event systems and school-based courses. Differences among the grades will also be addressed.

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