

Sustainable Development of Youth Sports Talent Cultivation in China under Sports-Education Integration: A Multi-Governance Perspective

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Abstract: *Sustainable youth sports talent cultivation is essential for balancing athletic performance with educational and social development. Within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), sports-education integration has become an important strategy for promoting sustainable youth sports systems. This study examines youth sports talent cultivation in China from a multi-governance perspective using a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design combining surveys and interviews. The results show that sports-education integration significantly supports balanced athlete development, including athletic sustainability, academic balance, and psychological well-being. Multi-governance coordination further enhances these outcomes by improving stakeholder collaboration and policy implementation. This study demonstrates how sports-education integration and collaborative governance contribute to SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), providing theoretical and policy insights for sustainable youth sports development.*

Keywords: Sports-Education Integration; Youth Sports Talent Development; Multi-Governance; Sustainable Development; SDG3、SDG4、SDG17

1. Introduction

Sustainable development has become a central global agenda shaping reforms in health, education, and public governance. Since the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, sport and physical education have increasingly been framed as strategic instruments for advancing human development-particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education). Evidence suggests that sport and physical activity can support population health, social inclusion, and educational outcomes by strengthening physical literacy, psychosocial well-being, and learning-related competencies (Dai et al., 2020; Baena-Morales et al., 2021). In this sense, youth sport is not only a performance-oriented domain but also a sustainability-relevant social system in which health, education, and long-term development intersect.

Within this agenda, youth sports talent cultivation represents a critical policy field where sustainability concerns are especially salient. The development of youth talents must address not only athletic performance but also educational attainment, well-being, and post-sport life chances-issues often conceptualized in the “dual career” and holistic development literature. Yet, international discussions repeatedly note that sustainability in youth talent systems

depends on whether sport training demands are institutionally aligned with education provision and welfare safeguards (Lundvall, 2023). Where such alignment is weak, fragmented responsibilities and competing sectoral logics can create persistent tensions between learning and training, undermining both educational quality and sustainable athlete development.

Against this background, sports-education integration has emerged as a major reform orientation in many countries, aiming to reduce system fragmentation by linking schools, sport organizations, and public authorities through shared goals, resources, and pathways. In the field of physical education, research on education for sustainable development highlights that sustainability-oriented outcomes require institutional support beyond curriculum design, including organizational coordination and governance mechanisms that enable inclusive participation and long-term capacity building (Klapperski-van der Wal, 2023). This implies that sustainability in youth sports talent cultivation is not merely a technical training issue but also a governance issue.

China has increasingly promoted sports-education integration as a national strategy to strengthen youth physical development and expand talent cultivation pathways. However, emerging empirical research in China indicates that integration is often challenged by multi-actor coordination barriers-such as uneven resource distribution, inconsistent implementation across institutions, and unresolved conflicts between academic progression and high-intensity training (Jiang & Wang, 2024). These challenges highlight the need for governance-oriented analysis that can explain how coordination is (or is not) achieved across sport and education systems and how such coordination shapes sustainability-relevant outcomes.

Multi-governance and collaborative governance perspectives offer a useful lens for addressing this problem. Collaborative governance theory argues that complex public issues require cross-boundary cooperation, shared decision-making, and resource pooling among interdependent actors (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Applied to youth sports talent cultivation, a multi-governance perspective emphasizes how the sustainability of talent systems depends on the quality of cross-sector coordination, including policy alignment, operational collaboration, and accountability arrangements spanning sport authorities, education institutions, schools, and other embedded stakeholders.

Despite growing attention to sports-education integration, there remains limited research that explicitly connects (a) sustainability goals (SDG 3/4), (b) integrated sport-education reforms, and (c) multi-governance mechanisms as explanatory drivers of youth talent cultivation outcomes in China. To address this gap, the present study examines sustainable youth sports talent cultivation in China under sports-education integration from a multi-governance perspective.

Accordingly, the study is guided by two research questions:

- RQ1: How do multi-governance coordination mechanisms within sports-education integration influence the sustainability of youth sports talent cultivation in China (e.g., balancing training demands with educational quality and well-being aligned with SDG 3 and SDG 4)?
- RQ2: What multi-governance pathways can strengthen cross-sector coordination (sport-education) to support sustainable youth sports talent cultivation outcomes in China?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sustainable Development Goals and Sports Education

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a global policy framework that links social development, public health, and educational transformation. Among the 17 SDGs, sport and physical education are particularly associated with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education). Recent research highlights that sport serves as an effective platform for promoting physical health, social inclusion, and lifelong learning competencies, thereby contributing to sustainable development outcomes (Dai et al., 2020; Baena-Morales et al., 2021).

Scholars have increasingly emphasized the educational function of sport in fostering sustainability-related competencies. Physical education has been identified as a critical domain for developing environmental awareness, social responsibility, and cooperative learning skills, which are fundamental components of education for sustainable development (Lundvall, 2023). Furthermore, sport participation has been shown to promote youth well-being and psychosocial development, reinforcing its importance as a sustainable social intervention (González et al., 2025).

Despite the growing recognition of sport as a tool for sustainable development, several studies argue that the integration of sustainability principles into sports education systems remains limited. Many sport development policies continue to prioritize competitive performance outcomes while neglecting the long-term educational and social development of youth participants (Klaperski-van der Wal, 2023). This indicates the necessity of re-examining sports education systems from a sustainability perspective.

2.2 Sports-Education Integration and Youth Sports Talent Development

Sports-education integration has emerged as a key policy approach to addressing structural conflicts between athletic training and academic education. The integration model emphasizes coordinated institutional arrangements that allow young athletes to simultaneously pursue sports training and educational development. Research on dual career development highlights that integrated sport-education systems significantly improve athlete well-being, academic achievement, and long-term career sustainability (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019).

In China, sports-education integration has undergone significant policy transformation over the past decade. Historically, China's sports talent training system relied heavily on sports institutions, often resulting in academic disadvantages for young athletes. Recent policy reforms have aimed to establish school-based training models and promote cooperation between sports authorities and educational institutions (Chen et al., 2025). These reforms reflect a transition toward diversified youth sports development pathways that align with international talent development trends.

However, empirical studies suggest that challenges remain in implementing sports-education integration in China. These challenges include institutional fragmentation, inconsistent policy execution, and insufficient coordination between educational and sports organizations (Jiang & Wang, 2024). Such structural problems limit the effectiveness and sustainability of youth sports talent cultivation systems.

2.3 Multi-Governance Theory and Cross-Sector Coordination

Multi-governance theory provides an analytical framework for understanding how complex public systems operate through collaborative interactions among multiple stakeholders. Unlike traditional hierarchical governance models, multi-governance emphasizes shared responsibility, institutional coordination, and stakeholder participation in policy implementation (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

In youth sports development, multi-governance mechanisms play a crucial role in integrating resources across sport organizations, educational institutions, government agencies, and community actors. Studies indicate that collaborative governance structures enhance resource efficiency, improve policy implementation, and support sustainable athlete development systems (Song, 2025).

International research also suggests that sustainable youth sports talent development requires cross-sector coordination that balances competitive training with educational and welfare considerations. Systems that involve multiple stakeholders are more likely to achieve long-term development outcomes compared to centralized governance structures (Houlihan & Green, 2008).

2.4 Research Gaps

Although existing studies provide valuable insights into sustainable sports education, sports-education integration, and collaborative governance, several research gaps remain.

First, most SDG-related sports research focuses on physical activity participation and health promotion rather than on structured youth sports talent cultivation systems (Baena-Morales et al., 2021; Dai et al., 2020). While these studies highlight the contribution of sport to sustainable development, limited attention has been paid to long-term talent development within competitive youth sports contexts.

Second, research on sports-education integration often examines dual career development or institutional alignment (Jiang & Wang, 2024; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019), but rarely analyzes governance coordination mechanisms from a multi-governance perspective.

Third, although collaborative governance has been widely discussed in public administration (Ansell & Gash, 2008), empirical studies linking governance mechanisms with SDG-oriented sustainable youth sports development, particularly in China, remain limited.

Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by examining sustainable youth sports talent cultivation in China through the combined analytical lens of sports-education integration and multi-governance theory.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to examine sustainable youth sports talent cultivation in China under the framework of sports-education integration and multi-governance theory. Specifically, the study applies an explanatory sequential design, in which quantitative data collection and analysis are followed by qualitative investigation to provide deeper interpretation of empirical findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The quantitative phase aims to examine relationships between sports-education integration practices, multi-governance coordination mechanisms, and sustainable talent cultivation outcomes. The qualitative phase explores stakeholder perceptions, institutional coordination processes, and implementation challenges, thereby enhancing the explanatory depth of the study. The integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches allows for comprehensive analysis of governance mechanisms influencing sustainable youth sports development.

3.2 Research Participants and Sampling

The study focuses on stakeholders involved in youth sports talent cultivation in China, including student-athletes, coaches, and sports education administrators. Participants are selected from sports schools, secondary schools with sports training programs, and related educational institutions.

A stratified sampling strategy was adopted in the quantitative phase to ensure representation across different institutional types and stakeholder groups. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed, and 368 valid responses were obtained, yielding an effective response rate of 92.0%. The final sample included student-athletes and sports training personnel.

For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling was used to select 14 participants, including school administrators, coaches, and policy implementers, to obtain in-depth perspectives on governance coordination and sports-education integration practices.

3.3 Research Instruments

3.3.1 Questionnaire Survey

A structured questionnaire is developed to measure three key dimensions:

- i. Sports-Education Integration Implementation**
 - Coordination between academic education and sports training
 - Institutional support and policy implementation
 - Educational resource availability
- ii. Multi-Governance Coordination Mechanisms**
 - Stakeholder collaboration effectiveness
 - Resource integration and communication efficiency
 - Policy coordination and governance participation
- iii. Sustainable Youth Sports Talent Development Outcomes**
 - Athletic performance sustainability
 - Academic development and dual-career balance
 - Psychological well-being and long-term career adaptability

All items are measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire is developed based on validated instruments from prior studies on dual career development and collaborative governance.

3.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are conducted to explore stakeholder experiences and governance processes related to sports-education integration. Interview questions focus on:

- Institutional coordination practices
- Policy implementation challenges
- Stakeholder collaboration mechanisms
- Perceived impacts on sustainable talent cultivation

Each interview is expected to last 30-45 minutes and is conducted either face-to-face or through online communication platforms.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection is conducted in two stages. In the quantitative phase, questionnaires are distributed through both online survey platforms and paper-based administration. Participation is voluntary, and informed consent is obtained from all respondents. Confidentiality and anonymity are ensured throughout the research process.

In the qualitative phase, interviews are conducted after preliminary quantitative analysis to clarify and expand empirical findings. All interviews are audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed for thematic analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 27.0 statistical software. Descriptive statistics are applied to examine overall levels of sports-education integration and governance coordination. Pearson correlation analysis and regression analysis are conducted to examine relationships among variables. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha is performed to assess internal consistency of measurement scales.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts are coded to identify key themes related to governance coordination, institutional collaboration, and sustainability challenges. Data integration is conducted by comparing quantitative findings with qualitative insights to enhance analytical validity.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study follows ethical research standards. Participants are informed about the research objectives, confidentiality policies, and voluntary participation rights. Written informed consent is obtained prior to data collection. All collected data are stored securely and used solely for academic research purposes.

4. Findings

4.1 Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

To examine the current status of sports-education integration, multi-governance coordination, and sustainable youth sports talent cultivation in China, descriptive statistical analysis was conducted. Table 1 presents the mean scores, standard deviations, and distribution ranges of the main variables.

The results indicate that sports-education integration implementation demonstrated a moderate-to-high level ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.42$), suggesting that most respondents perceived institutional coordination between sports training and academic education to be relatively effective. Multi-governance coordination mechanisms showed a slightly lower average score ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.47$), reflecting variation in stakeholder collaboration effectiveness across institutions.

Sustainable youth sports talent cultivation outcomes recorded relatively high scores across three dimensions, including athletic development sustainability (M = 3.88, SD = 0.39), academic development balance (M = 3.75, SD = 0.44), and psychological well-being (M = 3.79, SD = 0.41). These findings suggest that integrated sports-education systems in China have begun to support balanced youth development, although governance coordination remains an area requiring improvement.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Main Variables (N = 368)

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Sports-Education Integration	368	3.81	0.42	2.45	4.86
Multi-Governance Coordination	368	3.65	0.47	2.18	4.79
Athletic Development Sustainability	368	3.88	0.39	2.72	4.91
Academic Development Balance	368	3.75	0.44	2.36	4.85
Psychological Well-Being	368	3.79	0.41	2.48	4.88

Note: All variables were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Sports-Education Integration reflects coordination between academic education and sports training systems. Multi-Governance Coordination measures stakeholder collaboration and cross-sector governance effectiveness. Sustainable Talent Development Outcomes include three dimensions: athletic sustainability, academic balance, and psychological well-being.

4.2 Relationships Between Governance Mechanisms and Talent Development

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine relationships between sports-education integration, multi-governance coordination, and sustainable talent cultivation outcomes (Table 2).

The findings reveal that sports-education integration is significantly positively correlated with athletic development sustainability ($r = .41, p < .01$), academic balance ($r = .46, p < .01$), and psychological well-being ($r = .39, p < .01$). These results indicate that stronger integration between sports training and educational systems contributes to balanced youth development.

Multi-governance coordination mechanisms also demonstrate significant positive correlations with sustainable talent cultivation outcomes. The strongest correlation was found between governance coordination and academic development balance ($r = .52, p < .01$), suggesting that cross-sector collaboration plays a particularly important role in addressing learning-training conflicts.

Table 2: Correlation Analysis (N = 368)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
Sports-Education Integration	1				
Multi-Governance Coordination	.48**	1			
Athletic Sustainability	.41**	.45**	1		
Academic Balance	.46**	.52**	.43**	1	
Psychological Well-Being	.39**	.44**	.47**	.49**	1

Note: Pearson correlation coefficients are reported. ** indicates statistical significance at $p < .01$. Higher correlation coefficients indicate stronger associations between variables.

4.3 Structural Relationship Model

Regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive relationships among the study variables. The results indicate that sports-education integration significantly predicts sustainable talent development outcomes ($\beta = .34, p < .001$). Multi-governance coordination also demonstrates a significant predictive effect ($\beta = .41, p < .001$).

Furthermore, mediation analysis suggests that governance coordination partially mediates the relationship between sports-education integration and sustainable talent development outcomes. This finding highlights the importance of governance mechanisms in translating policy integration into practical development outcomes.

Table 3: Regression Results (N = 368)

Predictor	β	t	p
Sports-Education Integration	.34	6.52	<.001
Multi-Governance Coordination	.41	7.18	<.001
$R^2 = .47$			

Note: Standardized regression coefficients (β) are reported. R^2 represents the proportion of variance explained by the regression model. Both predictors significantly contribute to sustainable youth sports talent development outcomes.

4.4 Conceptual Relationship Illustration

Figure 1 illustrates the relationships among sports-education integration, multi-governance coordination, and sustainable youth sports talent development. The framework reflects the interaction between institutional arrangements, governance processes, and development outcomes within youth sports systems.

Sports-education integration is positioned as the institutional foundation for youth sports talent cultivation. By promoting coordination between sports training and academic education, sports-education integration supports balanced athlete development and reduces structural conflicts between learning and training requirements.

Multi-governance coordination represents the collaborative processes among government agencies, educational institutions, sports organizations, and related stakeholders. Through policy coordination, resource integration, and stakeholder collaboration, governance coordination facilitates the effective implementation of sports-education integration and enhances system sustainability.

Sustainable youth sports talent development is conceptualized as a multidimensional outcome including athletic sustainability, academic balance, and psychological well-being. These dimensions reflect the holistic development objectives of youth sports systems and are consistent with the broader goals of sustainable development.

Overall, the framework suggests that sports-education integration contributes to sustainable youth sports talent development directly and indirectly through governance coordination mechanisms.

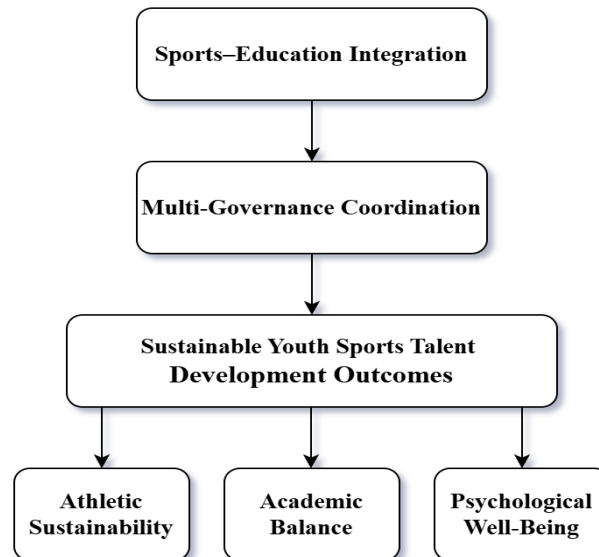


Figure 1: Structural Model of Sustainable Youth Sports Talent Cultivation

Note: Sports-Education Integration functions as the institutional basis of youth sports talent cultivation. Multi-Governance Coordination represents collaborative governance processes that support implementation. Sustainable Talent Development Outcomes include athletic sustainability, academic balance, and psychological well-being.

5. Discussion

5.1 The Role of Sports-Education Integration in Sustainable Talent Development

The findings demonstrate that sports-education integration plays a fundamental role in promoting sustainable youth sports talent development in China. The positive relationships between sports-education integration and multiple development outcomes suggest that coordinated educational and training systems contribute to balanced athlete development. These results support previous dual-career research indicating that integration between education and sport enhances athlete well-being and long-term development sustainability.

By reducing structural conflicts between academic education and athletic training, sports-education integration enables student-athletes to maintain academic progression while pursuing competitive training. This institutional coordination is particularly important for ensuring sustainable talent cultivation, as excessive specialization in sports training without educational support may limit athletes' long-term career opportunities. Therefore, sports-education integration serves as a critical institutional foundation for sustainable youth sports systems.

5.2 The Importance of Multi-Governance Coordination in Policy Implementation

The study highlights the significant influence of multi-governance coordination on sustainable youth sports talent development. The strong relationship between governance coordination and development outcomes suggests that cross-sector collaboration is essential for effective policy implementation. Collaborative governance theory emphasizes that complex public systems require coordination among multiple stakeholders to achieve sustainable outcomes.

In youth sports systems, multi-governance coordination facilitates communication among educational institutions, sports organizations, and government agencies. Through resource sharing and policy alignment, governance coordination improves the operational effectiveness of sports-education integration policies. The mediating role identified in this study further

suggests that governance coordination acts as a key mechanism that transforms institutional reforms into practical development outcomes.

5.3 Implications for Sustainable Development Goals

The findings of this study contribute to the understanding of SDG-oriented sports development. The positive relationship between sports-education integration and academic balance supports SDG 4, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education. The association between talent development and psychological well-being aligns with SDG 3, highlighting the role of sports in promoting mental health and overall well-being.

Furthermore, the importance of multi-governance coordination reflects SDG 17, which emphasizes partnerships and collaborative governance as drivers of sustainable development. The study demonstrates that achieving sustainability in youth sports requires integrated institutional arrangements and cross-sector governance collaboration.

5.4 Policy and Practical Implications

The study provides several policy implications. First, policymakers should strengthen cross-sector coordination mechanisms to enhance sports-education integration policies. Second, educational institutions and sports organizations should develop collaborative talent development pathways that balance academic and training requirements. Third, governance reforms should emphasize stakeholder participation and institutional cooperation to support sustainable youth sports development.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study examined sustainable youth sports talent cultivation in China under the framework of sports-education integration from a multi-governance perspective. By integrating institutional, governance, and developmental dimensions, the study provides empirical and theoretical insights into how coordinated sports and education systems contribute to sustainable youth sports development.

The findings indicate that sports-education integration serves as a fundamental institutional driver of sustainable talent development. Coordinated educational and training systems support not only athletic performance but also academic balance and psychological well-being among youth athletes. These results suggest that sustainable youth sports development requires balanced integration between education and training pathways rather than focusing solely on competitive performance.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the role of multi-governance coordination in sports-education integration. The findings demonstrate that collaborative governance mechanisms facilitate cross-sector coordination among government agencies, educational institutions, and sports organizations. The mediating role of governance coordination further suggests that institutional reforms must be supported by effective governance processes to achieve sustainable development outcomes in youth sports systems.

From a sustainable development perspective, the study advances understanding of SDG-oriented sports development. The integration of sports and education supports SDG 4 by promoting inclusive and quality education for student-athletes. The positive association

between talent development and psychological well-being contributes to SDG 3 by emphasizing the role of sports in promoting youth health and well-being. Additionally, the importance of collaborative governance reflects SDG 17 by highlighting the necessity of cross-sector partnerships in achieving sustainable youth sports systems.

6.3 Practical Implications

The study provides several practical implications for policymakers and practitioners. Policymakers should strengthen institutional coordination between sports and education sectors to enhance the effectiveness of talent cultivation systems. Educational institutions and sports organizations should develop integrated talent development pathways that balance training and academic requirements. Furthermore, governance reforms should encourage stakeholder participation and collaborative decision-making to support sustainable youth sports development.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the study primarily focuses on institutional and governance factors, while cultural and socio-economic influences on youth sports development require further investigation. Second, the cross-sectional research design limits the ability to examine long-term developmental outcomes. Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to explore dynamic changes in youth sports systems. Comparative studies across different regional or international contexts may also improve the generalizability of research findings.

6.5 Overall Conclusion

Overall, this study provides a multi-dimensional analytical framework for understanding sustainable youth sports talent cultivation in China and offers theoretical and policy insights for SDG-oriented sports education development.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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