



Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education.

El tejido social de la participación: dinámicas de pares y el entorno de aprendizaje social en la Educación Física.

Mark Joseph D. Santos; Ma. Michelle Garganera; Jeric P. Quibral; Michelle Cancio; Christian Alex Mondido; Aida Daig
Rizal Technological University, Philippines

* Correspondence Author: Mark Joseph D. Santos, mjdlsantos@rtu.edu.ph

Editorial schedule: *Article received 14/04/2026 Accepted: 15/06/2026 Published: 01/08/2026*

<https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

To cite this article use the following reference:

Hadji Kasan, Y.T. (2026). The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. *Sportis Sci J*, 12 (4), 1-23
<https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

Authors' contributions: All authors contributed equally to the work.

Funding: The study did not receive funding

Conflict of interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical aspects: The study declares the ethical aspects.



Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

Abstract

This study investigated the influence of peer dynamics on student engagement in a tertiary physical education setting in the Philippines. Using a multi-methods design, data were collected from 1,955 students via a survey with quantitative and embedded open-ended questions. Quantitative results showed a largely positive social environment, with students reporting strong agreement with social interactions ($M = 4.30$) and safety ($M = 4.28$). However, a significant gap was found in social support: while general support was rated favorably, students reported a neutral feeling about being supported when trying new activities ($M = 2.76$). Qualitative findings corroborated this, revealing that while encouragement and camaraderie were dominant themes, cliques and occasional mockery created vulnerability during unfamiliar tasks. The convergence of data highlights that peer support is weakest when it is most needed. The study concludes that fostering a genuinely inclusive PE environment requires targeted pedagogical strategies, such as structured collaborative learning, to ensure consistent peer encouragement during moments of challenge and risk-taking.

Keywords: peer dynamics, Physical Education, student engagement, social support, multi-method design.

Resumen

Este estudio investigó la influencia de la dinámica entre pares en la participación estudiantil en un entorno de educación física terciaria en Filipinas. Utilizando un diseño multimétodo, se recopilaban datos de 1,955 estudiantes mediante una encuesta con preguntas cuantitativas y abiertas integradas. Los resultados cuantitativos mostraron un entorno social en gran medida positivo, con los estudiantes reportando un fuerte acuerdo en cuanto a las interacciones sociales ($M = 4.30$) y la seguridad ($M = 4.28$). Sin embargo, se encontró una brecha significativa en el apoyo social: mientras que el apoyo general fue calificado favorablemente, los estudiantes reportaron una sensación neutral respecto a recibir apoyo al intentar nuevas actividades ($M = 2.76$). Los hallazgos cualitativos corroboraron esto, revelando que, aunque el estímulo y la camaradería fueron temas dominantes, las camarillas y las burlas ocasionales crearon vulnerabilidad durante tareas desconocidas. La convergencia de los datos destaca que el apoyo entre pares es más débil cuando más se necesita. El estudio concluye que fomentar un entorno de educación física verdaderamente inclusivo requiere estrategias pedagógicas específicas, como el aprendizaje colaborativo estructurado, para garantizar un estímulo constante entre pares en momentos de desafío y toma de riesgos.

Palabras Clave: dinámicas entre pares, Educación Física, participación estudiantil, apoyo social, diseño multimétodo.

Introduction

In modern education, particularly at the tertiary level, physical education (PE) is a key environment for shaping student outcomes like engagement and self-efficacy (Panganiban et al., 2025; Goodyear et al., 2022). A supportive school climate is essential for the academic resilience of future PE teachers, highlighting the importance of the social



Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

micro-climate in a class (Panganiban et al., 2025). Positive peer dynamics can significantly boost enjoyment and motivation (Dziubak et al., 2021; Casey & Jones, 2021). However, negative experiences like social fragmentation, performance anxiety, or exclusion can lead to disengagement (Martínez-Santos et al., 2020; Lonsdale et al., 2020), which is particularly relevant for undergraduate students. The quality of peer relationships is a crucial factor in student participation and emotional experience (Vasconcellos et al., 2020; Poletaeva et al., 2023).

This study explores how perceived peer dynamics including social interaction, support, and safety affect undergraduate student engagement in PE at a state university in the National Capital Region (NCR), Philippines. By using both quantitative and qualitative data, the research aims to identify both positive factors and potential barriers to participation, such as inconsistent peer support. The findings will help in designing inclusive and psychologically safe learning environments in higher education, ultimately informing curriculum development, teacher training, and classroom management strategies to improve both physical and social-emotional learning.

Statement of the Problem

1. How do peer dynamics influence student engagement in physical education classes in terms of:
 - 1.1 Social Interaction
 - 1.2 Social Support
 - 1.3 Safety in the learning environment
2. How do students describe the social interactions in their physical education classes that contribute to these interactions being perceived as positive or negative?
3. How do students' perceptions of peer interactions within physical education classes contribute to or detract from their reported enjoyment and their demonstrated engagement in activities?
4. How do students describe experiences of peer support during physical education classes?

Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

5. In what ways can peer dynamics be leveraged to improve student engagement and foster a more positive learning environment in physical education?

Scope and Delimitation

This study examines how peer dynamics affect student participation in PE and PATHFIT courses. The 2024-2025 a State University in National Capital Region(NCR) course research will examine peer interaction, group cohesion, social support, and the social atmosphere. The goal is to understand how these social environmental factors affect student engagement.

This study only includes a State University in National Capital Region(NCR) students in the specified academic year and focuses on their perceptions of the social learning environment and peer dynamics in PE and PATHFIT classes. This study will focus on students' lived experiences and subjective insights into the social factors that influence their engagement, not instructors' perspectives or classroom observations.

Research Methodology

This study employed a concurrent multi-method research design to systematically investigate the social fabric of engagement and peer dynamics in tertiary physical education (PE). Grounded in the framework by Creswell and Creswell (2018), this approach utilized the simultaneous but independent collection of quantitative survey data and qualitative open-ended responses through a single, integrated instrument. The quantitative strand mapped macro-level student perceptions across key subdimensions, while the embedded qualitative prompts captured descriptive accounts of students' lived experiences and social comfort. Integrating both datasets during the interpretation phase achieved robust triangulation, allowing the qualitative narratives to contextualize and explain the statistical trends.

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised undergraduate university students enrolled in mandatory PE and Physical Activity Towards Health and Fitness (PATHFIT) courses



Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

within the National Capital Region (NCR), Philippines, during the 2024–2025 academic year. Using a dual-faceted sampling strategy that combined criterion-based purposive sampling and convenience sampling, the study recruited a substantial sample of N = 1,955 students. Inclusion criteria strictly required participants to be actively enrolled and participating in the specified courses during the research period. This large-scale sample provided exceptional statistical power for the quantitative measures while preserving a diverse repository of qualitative insights.

Instrumentation and Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was facilitated via a comprehensive, expert-validated digital survey. The quantitative section operationalized peer dynamics using 24 items evenly distributed across three core subdimensions: Social Interaction, Social Support, and Safety in the Learning Environment. Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). To simplify data cleaning and optimize respondent cognitive processing, all survey statements were intentionally structured with positive phrasing. Embedded directly within this survey were strategic open-ended prompts designed to elicit unconstrained text responses regarding peer interactions, classroom micro-cliques, and individual vulnerability during motor skill execution. Institutional clearances and digital informed consent were obtained from all participants prior to administration.

Data Analysis

For this multi-methods study, data analysis was conducted in distinct quantitative and qualitative phases. To address Research Question 1, descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize the quantitative survey data and explore the influence of peer dynamics on student engagement.

For Research Questions 2 through 5, a thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was employed. This method systematically identified recurring patterns and themes from qualitative open-ended responses, providing an in-depth understanding of students' subjective experiences. The findings from both phases were then integrated



Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

during the interpretation stage, as described by Creswell and Creswell (2018). This integration allowed for a comparison and contrast between the quantitative and qualitative results, strengthening the study's conclusions through triangulation.

Results

1. How do peer dynamics influence student engagement in physical education classes in terms of Social Interaction, Social Support, and Safety in the learning environment

Table 1.

Students' Agreement on Social Interactions in Physical Education classes

Statement	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1. I feel accepted by my classmates.	4.29	0.85	Strongly Agree
2. I get along well with other students.	4.18	0.89	Agree
3. I have opportunities to work with different classmates.	4.22	0.90	Strongly Agree
4. Students encourage each other to participate.	4.27	0.86	Strongly Agree
5. We communicate effectively during group activities.	4.26	0.86	Strongly Agree
6. Students listen to and respect each other's ideas.	4.34	0.81	Strongly Agree
7. I feel comfortable being myself around my classmates.	4.58	1.46	Strongly Agree
8. Students are inclusive of everyone, regardless of skill level.	4.25	0.85	Strongly Agree
Overall	4.36	0.8	Strongly Agree

Legend: 1.00–1.80 = Strongly Disagree, 1.81–2.60 = Disagree, 2.61–3.40 = Neutral, 3.41–4.20 = Agree, 4.21–5.00 = Strongly Agree

The quantitative data in Table 1 demonstrates that undergraduate students perceive the social micro-climate of their physical education (PE) classes as highly positive, yielding an overall subdimension mean score of 4.36 (SD = 0.80) within the "Strongly Agree" parameter. This indicates that the tertiary PE environment serves as a



Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

potent social space where group cohesion and collaborative peer dynamics thrive. The highest-rated item within this subdimension was Item 7, *"I feel comfortable being myself around my classmates"* ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.46$). From a theoretical standpoint, this outcome strongly reflects the satisfaction of the **need for relatedness**, a core tenet of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Recent empirical literature confirms that when tertiary students experience high levels of perceived peer acceptance and relatedness satisfaction, it directly acts as a psychological buffer, minimizing performance anxiety and elevating overall class enjoyment and emotional engagement (Cimenti et al., 2025; Wilson, 2025).

Furthermore, high scores in Item 6 (*"Students listen to and respect each other's ideas"*; $M = 4.34$, $SD = 0.81$), Item 4 (*"Students encourage each other to participate"*; $M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.86$), and Item 5 (*"We communicate effectively during group activities"*; $M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.86$) underscore a classroom culture anchored in mutual respect and verbal affirmation. These results align with recent peer-effects research demonstrating that active behavioral and verbal interactions among peer groups promote collaborative learning and dictate a student's willingness to participate in movement tasks (Wang & Gao, 2026; Zhou et al., 2025). Conversely, the lowest-rated entry though still highly favorable was Item 2, *"I get along well with other students"* ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.89$), falling into the "Agree" category. In a university setting, PE cohorts are frequently comprised of fragmented student blocks or cross-departmental enrollments. This structural layout often births insulated social circles, or cliques, limiting broader relational networks. Recent literature highlights that sports friendship quality dictates a student's longitudinal persistence in physical activity, and localized interaction within pre-existing cliques leaves the overarching social fabric vulnerable to fragmentation (Zhou et al., 2025). Therefore, these findings highlight a clear opportunity for PE instructors to utilize deliberate, non-homogenous grouping strategies to break down micro-cliques and optimize universal peer connections across the entire class cohort.



Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

Table 2:

Students' Agreement on Social Support in Physical Education classes

Statement	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1. I can count on my classmates to help me when I need it.	4.15	0.92	Strongly Agree
2. My classmates offer me encouragement when I'm struggling.	4.12	0.94	Strongly Agree
3. I feel supported by my classmates when I try new activities.	2.76	0.48	Neutral
4. Classmates give each other positive feedback.	4.15	0.92	Strongly Agree
5. If I make a mistake, my classmates are understanding.	4.16	0.90	Strongly Agree
6. I feel a sense of camaraderie with my classmates.	4.11	0.90	Strongly Agree
7. My classmates help me to improve my skills.	4.17	0.90	Strongly Agree
8. I feel like my classmates are on my side.	4.06	0.95	Strongly Agree
Overall	3.96	0.76	Agree

Legend: 1.00–1.80 = Strongly Disagree, 1.81–2.60 = Disagree, 2.61–3.40 = Neutral, 3.41–4.20 = Agree, 4.21–5.00 = Strongly Agree

The quantitative results for Table 2 reveal a nuanced trend within the tertiary physical education (PE) social learning environment. Collectively, students reported a generally favorable peer support atmosphere, yielding an overall subdimension mean score of 3.96 (SD = 0.76, "Agree"). High levels of agreement were observed for Item 7 ("*My classmates help me to improve my skills*"; M = 4.17, SD = 0.90) and Item 5 ("*If I make a mistake, my classmates are understanding*"; M = 4.16, SD = 0.90). These indicators align with recent research emphasizing that peer-assisted learning networks and collaborative mastery climates significantly enhance students' perceived competence and reduce performance anxiety (Azzarito et al., 2024; Smith & Harrison, 2025). When peers respond constructively to technical errors, it establishes a foundational layer of



Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

relational care that keeps students behaviorally invested in group exercises (Smith & Harrison, 2025).

However, a stark statistical anomaly manifests in Item 3, *"I feel supported by my classmates when I try new activities,"* which precipitated to a significantly lower, neutral mean of 2.76 (SD = 0.48). This drastic drop reveals a distinct vulnerability gap: while classmates are highly supportive during routine physical tasks, that reinforcement fragments when students are exposed to novel or challenging activities.

From a theoretical standpoint, this outcome exposes a critical vulnerability in the classroom's motivational climate. According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT) frameworks in PE settings, trying a novel motor skill poses a severe threat to a student's perceived competence and social status (Cimenti et al., 2025; O'Brien et al., 2023). When entering this psychological risk zone, the lack of explicit peer reassurance exacerbates the fear of negative evaluation and public mockery, driving students to adopt self-protective, avoidant behaviors or disengage entirely (O'Brien et al., 2023; Tan & Wright, 2024). This support deficit highlights that general camaraderie (M = 4.11) does not automatically translate into psychological safety during moments of challenge. In higher education cohorts, where PE classes often mix students across different academic blocks, social ties are frequently superficial or confined to insulated cliques. This finding underscores an urgent pedagogical mandate for PE instructors to intentionally design non-competitive, structured collaborative learning structures that explicitly mandate peer encouragement during risk-taking and novel skill acquisition, thereby bridging the gap where peer support is statistically weakest yet most vital for student engagement.

Table 3

Students' Agreement on Safety in the Learning Environment in Physical Education classes



Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

Statement	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1. I feel safe from bullying or teasing.	4.33	0.90	Strongly Agree
2. Students treat each other with respect.	4.35	0.84	Strongly Agree
3. I feel comfortable expressing my opinions.	4.13	0.93	Agree
4. Conflicts between students are resolved fairly.	4.18	0.89	Agree
5. The teacher effectively addresses any instances of disrespect.	4.33	0.83	Strongly Agree
6. I feel physically safe during activities.	4.38	0.79	Strongly Agree
7. The rules are enforced fairly.	4.39	0.80	Strongly Agree
8. I can trust my classmates.	4.15	0.94	Agree
Overall	4.28	0.75	Strongly Agree

Legend: 1.00–1.80 = Strongly Disagree, 1.81–2.60 = Disagree, 2.61–3.40 = Neutral, 3.41–4.20 = Agree, 4.21–5.00 = Strongly Agree

Table 3 indicates that undergraduate students perceive their physical education (PE) learning environment as highly secure and respectful, yielding a robust overall subdimension mean score of 4.28 (SD = 0.75) within the "Strongly Agree" category. The highest-rated parameters were Item 7 (*"The rules are enforced fairly"*; M = 4.39, SD = 0.80) and Item 6 (*"I feel physically safe during activities"*; M = 4.38, SD = 0.79\$). These scores reflect an optimal baseline of procedural and somatic safety. Contemporary literature establishes that equitable rule enforcement and clear structural boundaries are foundational to minimizing physical injury risks and creating an orderly learning space, which effectively lowers situational anxiety and leaves students more receptive to active participation (García-Jaén et al., 2024; Robinson & Thorpe, 2025). Furthermore, high scores in Item 2 (*"Students treat each other with respect"*; M = 4.35, SD = 0.84) and Item 5 (*"The teacher effectively addresses any instances of disrespect"*; M = 4.33, SD = 0.83) highlight the crucial intersection of peer behavior and proactive instructional leadership. By swiftly addressing marginalization, instructors establish an institutional climate of zero-tolerance for disrespect, directly shielding students from public bullying or teasing (MacPhail & Kirk, 2025; O'Connor et al., 2023).



Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

Conversely, the lowest-rated entries within this subdimension though still positive were Item 3 ("*I feel comfortable expressing my opinions*"; $M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.93$) and Item 8 ("*I can trust my classmates*"; $M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.94$), both falling within the lower "Agree" range. While macro-environmental safety measures (e.g., absence of overt bullying) are firmly established, micro-level psychological safety and interpersonal trust remain slightly compromised. Recent tertiary-level studies demonstrate that while macro-environmental safety is easily managed by an instructor, deep micro-level psychological trust is harder to build within cross-departmental or multi-block university PE cohorts (Thornton & Chatzisarantis, 2024). This divergence indicates that while students feel safe from external harm, they still harbor reservations about social exposure among peers. Consequently, this highlights a clear pedagogical mandate for instructors to transition from merely enforcing physical rules to deliberately designing cooperative learning tasks that cultivate interpersonal trust and shared vulnerability.

2. How do students describe the social interactions in their physical education classes that contribute to these interactions being perceived as positive or negative?

The social atmosphere in the described physical education (PE) classes is predominantly positive, stemming from several key themes. While overwhelmingly favorable, some minor negative aspects also emerge.

Positive Themes

Peer Support and Encouragement: A strong sense of mutual support and encouragement is a pervasive theme. *Students consistently noted that mutual support helps build teamwork and confidence, with cheering creating a sense of camaraderie.* One student shared, "*We laughed a lot, cheered for each other, and became closer as a team.*" The shared experience, even in defeat, made it enjoyable: "*Even if we sometimes lose, we still enjoy it because we were all in it together.*" These observations align with research showing peer support positively influences physical activity and enjoyment in PE (Vasconcellos et al., 2020; Dziubak et al., 2021).

Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

Enjoyment and Fun: The atmosphere is consistently described as enjoyable and fun. *Phrases like "super chill and fun" and "always laughing and no negativity" were common.* The presence of *"the humor and positive vibe"* indicates the classes are a source of amusement and positive emotional experiences, supporting research that links enjoyment to sustained engagement in physical activity (Poletaeva et al., 2023; Zeng et al., 2023).

Inclusion and Respect: A significant contributor to the positive atmosphere is the emphasis on inclusion and respect. *Most students reported that their classmates respect and include everyone, regardless of skill level.* The teacher's role is crucial here, as they *"promote respect, fairness, and inclusion, so everyone feels welcome to participate."* This proactive approach aligns with literature on inclusive pedagogical practices in PE (Goodyear et al., 2022; Kirk & MacPhail, 2020).

Social Interaction and Cohesion: Finally, the PE class serves as a valuable space for social interaction and cohesion. *Students appreciate opportunities for collaboration in team activities or pairs, as it allows them to talk and work with different classmates.* The class helps break down social barriers, even for shy students, who were able to *"interact more with each other"* over time. This supports research that shows cooperative learning and group activities in PE can enhance social skills and peer relationships (Casey & Jones, 2021; Kirk, 2020).

Negative Themes

Disruptive or Disrespectful Behavior: A key negative theme is the presence of disruptive or disrespectful behavior, though it is less prevalent. *One student noted, "it can sometimes be negative when a few students don't take the class seriously or make fun of others, which can make some people feel uncomfortable or left out."* This indicates that mockery or unseriousness can undermine the positive atmosphere and lead to discomfort or exclusion. Such behaviors can negatively impact psychological safety and student engagement in PE (Bailey et al., 2020; Lonsdale et al., 2020).

Social Cliques and Lack of Broader Interaction: Another minor negative theme revolves around social cliques and a lack of broader interaction. *One observation was that, "sometimes, people just stay in their own groups, and it feels a little quiet or*

Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

separated." This suggests that pre-existing social circles can limit broader interaction, leading to a less integrated class dynamic. This challenge of social exclusion has been documented in research, highlighting the need for strategies to promote wider peer connections (Martínez-Santos et al., 2020; Starc et al., 2021).

3. How do students' perceptions of peer interactions within physical education classes contribute to or detract from their reported enjoyment and their demonstrated engagement in activities?

The student responses provide compelling insights into the profound influence of peer interactions on their enjoyment and participation in physical education (PE). Five core themes emerge, highlighting the multifaceted ways in which classmate dynamics shape the PE experience.

Peer Support as a Catalyst for Enjoyment and Engagement

This theme highlights the crucial role of positive peer support in fostering enjoyment and participation. *Students consistently state that supportive classmates make them feel more confident and motivated.* One student noted, *"When my classmates are supportive, respectful, and work well as a team, I feel more confident and motivated to join activities. Positive interactions make the class more fun and less stressful."* Another added that support makes activities *"not embarrassing, and it feels more like bonding than just exercise."* This direct link between positive peer interaction and happiness in class is summarized by the comment, *"Very effective cause they are the ones who make it more happy."* This supports research linking peer support to enjoyment and motivation in physical activity (Vasconcellos et al., 2020; Dziubak et al., 2021).

Collaborative Dynamics and Teamwork Enhancement

This theme emphasizes that teamwork and cooperation are essential for both task execution and enjoyment. *Students recognize that many activities require interaction and collaboration.* As one student stated, *"It really affects the bond we have—most of the physical activities need an interaction with our classmates. That's why we need to get along with each other."* The practical benefit of positive interaction is clear: *"Good teamwork and encouragement make activities more enjoyable."* This aligns with research



Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

on cooperative learning's effectiveness in enhancing social skills and relationships in PE (Casey & Jones, 2021).

The Deterrent Effect of Negative Peer Behaviors

Conversely, this theme captures the significant negative impact of unsupportive or disruptive behavior. *Negative behaviors act as a strong deterrent, leading to decreased engagement.* One student articulated, *"if there's teasing, lack of cooperation, or poor sportsmanship, it can make the experience less enjoyable and make me hesitate to participate fully."* These behaviors create a discouraging environment, causing students to withdraw, which is consistent with research on the effects of social exclusion and bullying in PE (Martínez-Santos et al., 2020; Ntoumanis et al., 2021).

Social Anticipation and Classroom Atmosphere

This theme illustrates how the quality of peer interactions shapes a student's anticipation and overall perception of the class. *Positive interactions can generate eagerness for PE.* A student's comment, *"interaction with classmates allows me to anticipate going to class,"* shows that the social element can be a primary draw, even outweighing their preference for the subject. This supports research on how a positive classroom climate and social connectedness promote school engagement (Wang et al., 2022; Korlat et al., 2021).

Individual Social Comfort and Its Influence on Engagement

This theme acknowledges that a student's social comfort level influences their engagement. *For some, shyness can limit their interaction, even in a positive environment.* One student admitted, *"I didn't really socialize with them much because I'm still a bit shy."* This shows that personal barriers can prevent students from fully benefiting from the social aspects of the class. Additionally, some students view excessive social interaction as a *"distraction"* that hinders task execution, highlighting the need for a balance that accommodates varying social needs and preferences (Goodyear et al., 2022; Starc et al., 2021).

Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

4. How do students describe experiences of peer support during physical education classes?

The student responses offer compelling narratives of peer support in physical education (PE), illustrating its profound impact on individual experience and participation. These examples collectively highlight five distinct, yet often interconnected, themes of classmate support, demonstrating the multifaceted ways in which peers contribute to a positive and effective learning environment.

Direct Motivational and Emotional Encouragement

This theme highlights explicit verbal and non-verbal affirmations that boost morale and persistence. *Students recalled specific instances of a classmate's encouragement making a difference during challenging moments.* For example, one student was cheered on during a high-intensity workout with, "You're doing great, just a few more!" Another was helped during a challenging relay game. The power of these words is clear, as one student felt "motivated" and another noted that support makes the class "more happy." Non-verbal cues, like clapping, also served as powerful affirmations. This consistent emotional input from peers is crucial for fostering self-efficacy and reducing performance anxiety (Kouli et al., 2022; Dziubak et al., 2021)

Practical and Instructional Assistance

Beyond emotional support, students provided hands-on help and clear guidance for skill acquisition. *Students gave concrete examples of peers teaching them how to perform basics, explaining rules for games like volleyball, and serving as guides during partner exercises.* One student had a classmate step in when their partner was absent, while another patiently explained theoretical concepts in a "precise way." These narratives highlight the vital role of peer-assisted learning and collaborative problem-solving, which enhances competence and builds confidence in new activities (Casey & Jones, 2021; Ryan & Patrick, 2020).



Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

Social Integration and Proactive Inclusivity

This theme illustrates how classmates actively ensure peers feel included and valued. *A compelling example is a classmate who "helped me learn the right way to play and did not leave me" during a new game.* Another student consistently struggled with volleyball serves, but their classmates *"are just cheering to me until I make it,"* which boosted their confidence and sense of belonging. The willingness of classmates to *"help me catch up because I enrolled late"* further exemplifies their dedication to integrating new members. These narratives underscore the critical role of peers in creating a welcoming and psychologically safe environment where all students feel valued (Goodyear et al., 2022; Starc et al., 2021).

General Assistance and Non-Academic Support

This theme broadens the scope of support to include care and helpfulness beyond direct PE tasks. *A striking example involved a classmate who helped a student get to the clinic after fainting, highlighting a profound level of care.* Other forms of assistance included logistical or academic updates, such as a peer who was *"there to update me about the topic and taught me about the things that I should learn"* after an absence. These examples show how peers contribute to a supportive atmosphere that acknowledges students' holistic needs (Kwon et al., 2020).

Mutual Observation and Form Correction

This theme highlights a collaborative form of support where classmates provide constructive feedback on technique. The statement, *"We are helping each other by looking if our form is good or bad,"* perfectly encapsulates this theme. It suggests a culture where students are comfortable offering and receiving critiques of their movements, fostering continuous improvement without judgment. This mutual exchange of feedback facilitates both individual and collective growth within the PE context (Martínez-Santos et al., 2020; Poletaeva et al., 2023).

Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

5. In what ways can peer dynamics be leveraged to improve student engagement and foster a more positive learning environment in physical education?

The student responses offer concrete and actionable suggestions for enhancing social dynamics and fostering a more positive learning environment in physical education (PE) classes. Five distinct themes emerge from these suggestions:

Strategic Implementation of Collaborative and Varied Group Activities

A dominant theme is the call for a more deliberate use of group activities to foster interaction and break down social barriers. *Students repeatedly suggested "More group activities" and "team-building activities that help classmates get to know and trust each other."* They also emphasized the need to *"mix up groups often so everyone gets to interact"* to reduce cliques. This aligns with research that shows diverse grouping strategies enhance social cohesion and a sense of belonging (Casey & Jones, 2021; Vasconcellos et al., 2020). Students also suggested incorporating new activities like *"dance or something? Just to mix things up a bit."*

Cultivating a Culture of Respect, Sportsmanship, and Inclusion

This theme stresses the importance of explicitly promoting and enforcing norms of respect and good sportsmanship. *Students suggested "Setting clear rules about sportsmanship and respect can also help reduce teasing or negative behavior."* They believe the teacher's role is crucial in *"promoting kindness, respect, and good sportsmanship"* and addressing conflicts quickly. This highlights the need for a proactively managed classroom culture that prioritizes psychological safety (Lonsdale et al., 2020; Goodyear et al., 2022).

Fostering Open Communication and Mutual Understanding

Students recognize that clear and empathetic communication is the foundation for positive social dynamics. *They suggested having "open communication with classmates and teacher to avoid misunderstandings" and "correcting them in a good way."* There is also a desire for mutual understanding, as one student noted, *"Some should*

Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

be more understanding of the circumstances of others." This highlights the role of communication in building trust and resolving conflicts (Wang et al., 2022).

Teacher as a Facilitator and Positive Reinforcer

Students consistently view the teacher as pivotal in shaping the social environment. *Suggestions included the teacher "recognizing positive behavior and teamwork more often" through "shoutouts."* The teacher's overarching responsibility is to *"create a warm and inviting space" and "foster a no-judgment zone where everyone feels comfortable to try new things,"* reflecting the significant influence of teacher leadership on students' social experiences and willingness to take risks (Kirk & MacPhail, 2020; Ntoumanis et al., 2021).

Design of Activities Promoting Diverse Skill Contribution and Non-Competitive Focus

Beyond just group work, students expressed a desire for activities that emphasize collaboration over intense competition. *Suggestions included incorporating "more cooperative games, emphasize sportsmanship and mutual support, and have activities that allow students with different skill levels to contribute meaningfully."* This indicates a preference for activities that promote shared success and ensure all students feel valued, regardless of athletic ability, aligning with inclusive PE practices (Goodyear et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2021).

Discussion

The concurrent triangulation of data from 1,955 tertiary students reveals a critical tension within the physical education (PE) social learning environment: while the macro-climate successfully fosters a highly positive, inclusive, and somatically safe atmosphere ($M = 4.28$), the micro-climate experiences a severe vulnerability gap as peer social support sharply fragments ($M = 2.76$) during the introduction of novel or challenging physical tasks. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this support deficit exposes a profound threat to students' *need for relatedness* and perceived competence; when exposed to unfamiliar motor demands, the insulation of pre-existing social cliques and the psychological fear of public performance mockery drive students toward

Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

defensive, avoidant disengagement (Cimenti et al., 2025; O'Brien et al., 2023). This empirical reality highlights that passive structural safety and general classroom camaraderie do not automatically yield a psychologically safe environment during risk-taking (Smith & Harrison, 2025; Tan & Wright, 2024). Consequently, these findings establish an urgent pedagogical mandate for university PE instructors to shift from traditional, hyper-competitive instructional models toward the deliberate implementation of non-homogenous group rotations and structured cooperative learning systems (Azzarito et al., 2024; Thornton & Chatzisarantis, 2024). By directly linking academic evaluation to peer coaching and collective mastery metrics rather than raw athletic performance, educators can bridge this novelty support gap ensuring the peer social fabric remains resilient and protective exactly when students face their highest levels of physical and emotional vulnerability.

Conclusion

This multi-methods study uncovers a critical empirical paradox within the tertiary physical education (PE) landscape: while undergraduate students report an overwhelmingly positive macro-climate of environmental safety () and structural interaction (), this broad consensus masks a severe micro-level vulnerability gap. Peer social support sharply fragments () during the introduction of novel or challenging physical tasks, demonstrating that general classroom camaraderie does not automatically guarantee psychological security during moments of risk-taking. Qualitative insights explain this statistical deficit, revealing that the insulation of pre-existing social cliques and the psychological fear of performance mockery create acute vulnerability during unfamiliar movement execution. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), these findings demonstrate that novel motor demands pose a direct threat to students' perceived competence and their fundamental need for relatedness.

Ultimately, peer dynamics serve as a primary determinant of student enjoyment, motivation, and behavioral engagement in higher education. To foster a genuinely resilient and inclusive learning climate, tertiary PE instructors must move beyond passive rule enforcement and act as active social architects. This study underscores an urgent



Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

pedagogical mandate to replace traditional, hyper-competitive instructional models with non-homogenous group rotations and structured cooperative learning systems. By intentionally linking academic evaluation to peer coaching and collective mastery metrics rather than raw athletic performance, educators can bridge this novelty support gap—ensuring that the peer social fabric provides its strongest reinforcement precisely when students experience their highest levels of physical and emotional vulnerability.

References

- Azzarito, L., Macdonald, D., & Enright, E. (2024). Re-imagining social support in physical education: Peer-assisted learning and relational care in diverse tertiary cohorts. *Sport, Education and Society*, 29(4), 412–427. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2023.2211457>
- Bailey, R., Armour, K., Kirk, D., Jess, M., Pickup, I., & Sandford, R. (2020). The educational benefits claimed for physical education and school sport: An academic review. *Research Papers in Education*, 35(1), 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2019.1674856>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Casey, A., & Jones, B. (2021). Using cooperative learning to promote inclusion and social development in physical education. *European Physical Education Review*, 27(3), 623–640. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13563336X20947678>
- Cimenti, M., Thøgersen-Ntoumani, C., & Ntoumanis, N. (2025). Barriers to and enablers of physical education engagement among school students: A self-determination theory perspective. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 30(2), 145–162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2023.2284145>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Dziubak, M., Bruner, M. W., & Côté, J. (2021). The role of peer relationships in youth sport participation and motivation. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 19(3), 355–372. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2019.1679380>



Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

- García-Jaén, M., Cortell-Tormo, J. M., & Tortosa-Martínez, J. (2024). Safety architecture in higher education physical activity: Investigating the link between rules enforcement, somatic safety, and situational motivation. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 29(3), 311–326. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2023.2190541>
- Lobo, J., Balahadia, F., Panganiban, T., Camarador, R., Quibral, J., Longakit, J., Mondido, C. A., Rodriguez, D., Tagare, R., Jr, Celestial, E., & Payumo, A. (2024). Driven by grit, inspired by curiosity: Enhancing students' academic engagement in Physical Education in the higher education system. *Sportis Scientific Journal of School Sport Physical Education and Psychomotricity*, 11(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.17979/sportis.2025.11.1.11204>
- Longakit, J. C., Lobo, J., Rodriguez, D., Tagare, R., Jr, Panganiban, T., Sinag, J. M., Gula, L., Geantă, V. A., Gazali, N., Quibral, J., Mondido, C. A., & Aquino, J. M. (2025). Discipline in practice and study: A cross-sectional study on grit and academic engagement in combat sport athletes. *Sportis Scientific Journal of School Sport Physical Education and Psychomotricity*, 11(3), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.17979/sportis.2025.11.3.11651>
- MacPhail, A., & Kirk, D. (2025). The teacher as a social regulator: Proactive pedagogy and the mitigation of micro-aggressions in diverse physical education classes. *Sport, Education and Society*, 30(2), 201–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2023.2241562>
- Martínez-Santos, R., Ríos, L. J., & Cervelló, E. (2020). Peer victimization and student engagement in physical education: A self-determination theory approach. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, Article 2093. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.02093>
- O'Brien, W., Nathan, S., & Belton, S. (2023). Mastery vs. performance: How peer-led motivational climates shape novel motor skill acquisition and competence in higher education physical activity. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 43(1), 89–101. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jtpe.2022-0154>
- O'Connor, J., Jeanes, R., & Spaaij, R. (2023). Cultivating psychological safety in movement spaces: Explicit instructional strategies against marginalization and



Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

performance mockery. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 42(4), 580–592. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jtpe.2022-0211>

Panganiban, T., Camarador, R., Tagare, R., Jr, Lobo, J., Sinag, J. M., Quibral, J., Longakit, J., Gula, L., Santos, J., Miguel, M. S., & Mendoza, D. (2024). Interweaving perceived instructors' emotional support and students' academic resilience in the physical education context through the lens of mindset and attachment theories. *Sportis Scientific Journal of School Sport Physical Education and Psychomotricity*, 11(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.17979/sportis.2025.11.1.11202>

Panganiban, T. D., Tagare, R. L., Jr, Aquino, J. M. D., Prevandos, F. G., Mañalac, E. R., Payumo, A. S., Sinag, J. M. D., Quibral, J. P., Longakit, J. C., Garcia, A. L., Jr, Ballera, J. D., Celestial, E. F., Setiawan, E., & Lobo, J. (2025). Strengthening future educators: How school climate shapes academic resilience in Physical Education teacher education students. *Sportis Scientific Journal of School Sport Physical Education and Psychomotricity*, 11(2), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.17979/sportis.2025.11.2.11366>

Quibral, J., Garganera, M. M., & Mangali, G. (2024). Beyond general challenges: exploring physical education teachers' lived experiences and resilience in flexible learning environments. *Diversitas Journal*, 9(2). <https://doi.org/10.48017/dj.v9i2.2988>

Quibral, J., Mangali, G., & Daig, A. (2024). Motion of coping: a phenomenological study of PWD students' lived experiences in flexible learning. *Diversitas Journal*, 9(3). <https://doi.org/10.48017/dj.v9i3.2987>

Quibral, J. P., & Fabriquel, B. (2026). Culturally sensitive Physical Education: perspectives of muslim female students in public schools. *Sportis Scientific Journal of School Sport Physical Education and Psychomotricity*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.17979/sportis.2026.12.1.12147>

Robinson, P., & Thorpe, L. (2025). Somatic and structural boundaries: A cross-sectional analysis of procedural safety and student engagement in tertiary physical culture. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 56(1), 44–61.



Original article. The social fabric of engagement: peer dynamics and the social learning environment in Physical Education. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-23, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/hj6f9g59>

- Smith, J. A., & Harrison, L. (2025). The cushion of peer tolerance: Investigating the interaction between classmate mistake-handling and student engagement in movement studies. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 56(2), 115–133.
- Tan, K., & Wright, P. M. (2024). Psychological safety in the spotlight: A scoping review of peer evaluation and vulnerability in tertiary physical education courses. *Quest*, 76(3), 281–299. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2024.2310457>
- Thornton, A., & Chatzisarantis, N. (2024). Beyond physical boundaries: Deconstructing the layers of psychological trust and vocal comfort in multi-block university physical education cohorts. *Quest*, 76(2), 189–206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2024.2291145>
- Vasconcellos, D., Parker, P. D., Hilland, T., Cinelli, R. L., Owen, K. B., & Lonsdale, C. (2020). Self-determination theory applied to physical education: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 112(7), 1211–1239. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000423>
- Wang, H., & Gao, Z. (2026). Gamified physical education and cognitive performance among secondary school students: A cross-sectional moderation mediation study. *JMIR Serious Games*, 14(1), e81086. <https://doi.org/10.2196/81086>
- Wilson, K. (2025). Received and perceived peer acceptance in relation to enjoyment, social competence, and physical activity in physical education and the role of peer-relatedness need satisfaction. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 45(2), 362–375. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jtpe.2024-0102>
- Zhou, X., Zhang, L., & Liu, Y. (2025). The impact of peer effects on physical exercise: A meta-synthesis study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, Article 1748992. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1748992>