



Original article. Learning through the body: college students' perceptions of physical education as a space for growth, belonging, and self-discovery. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-24, August 2026.

<https://doi.org/10.55040/q5bews74>

Learning through the body: college students' perceptions of physical education as a space for growth, belonging, and self-discovery

Aprender a través del cuerpo: percepciones de los estudiantes universitarios sobre la educación física como un espacio para el crecimiento, la pertenencia y el autodescubrimiento

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Editorial schedule: Article received 25/03/2026 Accepted: 26/06/2026 Published: 07/31/2026

<https://doi.org/10.55040/q5bews74>

To cite this article use the following reference:

Adigue, M.L.P.; Ramo, G.O.; Medina, E.T. (2026). Learning through the body: college students' perceptions of physical education as a space for growth, belonging, and self-discovery. *Sportis Sci J*, 12 (4), 1-24 <https://doi.org/10.55040/q5bews74>

Author contribution: The authors equally conceptualized the study, conducted data collection and analysis, and prepared the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest related to this study.

Ethical aspects: All research procedures were conducted in full compliance with established ethical standards. Appropriate permissions were secured, informed consent was obtained from participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process.



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Abstract

This study explored how Physical Education (PE) contributes to the holistic personal growth of students, extending beyond physical development to include psychological, emotional, and social dimensions. A qualitative research design employing a descriptive approach was used to examine the lived experiences of students. Twenty Physical Education students in the Philippines were purposively selected as participants based on their direct experiences in PE courses and their willingness to participate. Data were collected using a validated set of open-ended guiding questions that enabled participants to provide in-depth reflections on how PE influenced their personal growth and development. Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's framework, was employed to systematically identify patterns and generate meaningful themes from the data. The findings revealed seven key themes reflecting the role of PE in fostering confidence and self-belief, managing stress and promoting mental well-being, developing discipline and perseverance, enhancing emotional regulation and resilience, strengthening social relationships and a sense of belonging, increasing self-awareness and healthy lifestyle practices, and promoting personal growth through challenge and self-acceptance. These themes illustrate the multifaceted impact of PE as an educational tool that supports holistic student development. The study highlights the significance of PE not only in promoting physical fitness but also in cultivating essential life skills, emotional maturity, and social competence. Ultimately, the findings underscore the transformative potential of PE as a platform for nurturing well-rounded individuals who are equipped with the personal resources necessary for navigating academic and life challenges, emphasizing its integral role in the broader educational experience.

Keywords: confidence; emotional resilience; holistic development; personal growth; Physical Education

Resumen

Este estudio exploró cómo la Educación Física (EF) contribuye al desarrollo personal integral de los estudiantes, trascendiendo el desarrollo físico para incluir dimensiones psicológicas, emocionales y sociales. Se utilizó un diseño de investigación cualitativa con un enfoque descriptivo para examinar las experiencias vividas de los estudiantes. Veinte estudiantes de Educación Física en Filipinas fueron seleccionados de manera intencional como participantes, en función de sus experiencias directas en cursos de EF y su disposición a participar. Los datos se recopilaron mediante un conjunto validado de preguntas abiertas guía que permitió a los participantes ofrecer reflexiones en profundidad sobre cómo la EF influyó en su crecimiento y desarrollo personal. Se empleó el análisis temático, guiado por el marco de Braun y Clarke, para identificar sistemáticamente patrones y generar temas significativos a partir de los datos. Los resultados revelaron siete temas clave que reflejan el papel de la EF en el fortalecimiento de la confianza y la autoeficacia, la gestión del estrés y la promoción del bienestar mental, el desarrollo de la disciplina y la perseverancia, la mejora de la regulación emocional y la resiliencia, el fortalecimiento de las relaciones sociales y el sentido de pertenencia, el incremento de la autoconciencia y las prácticas de estilo de vida saludable, y la promoción del crecimiento personal a través del desafío y la autoaceptación. Estos temas ilustran el impacto multifacético de la EF como herramienta educativa que apoya el desarrollo



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integral del estudiante. El estudio destaca la importancia de la EF no solo en la promoción de la condición física, sino también en la formación de habilidades esenciales para la vida, la madurez emocional y la competencia social. En última instancia, los hallazgos subrayan el potencial transformador de la EF como una plataforma para formar individuos integrales, dotados de los recursos personales necesarios para afrontar los desafíos académicos y vitales, enfatizando su papel fundamental en la experiencia educativa más amplia.

Palabras clave: confianza; resiliencia emocional; desarrollo holístico; crecimiento personal; Educación Física

Introduction

Physical Education (PE) has traditionally been conceptualized as a subject focused on developing students' physical fitness and reducing risk factors associated with sedentary lifestyles (Mainsbridge et al., 2025). However, growing evidence indicates that its impact extends far beyond physiological outcomes, encompassing a wide range of psychological, emotional, and social benefits that contribute to holistic student development (Mwaanga & Chifita, 2025). Regular involvement in structured physical activity within educational settings has been associated with enhanced mental health, improved emotional regulation, and positive psychosocial functioning in children and adolescents (Baena-Morales et al., 2021). These suggest that PE plays a pivotal role not only in physical growth but also in shaping students' self-perceptions, coping strategies, and overall quality of life (Siedentop & Van der Mars, 2022).

Empirical studies have demonstrated that PE interventions can significantly enhance students' emotional well-being, reducing levels of anxiety and social stress while promoting self-esteem and general psychological security (Adel et al., 2025). For example, structured PE programs have been linked to improvements in somatic and personality anxiety measures among young learners, indicating that regular participation in physical activity contributes to emotional stabilization and mental balance (Whalen et al., 2021). Systematic reviews similarly posit that PE and school sports are effective frameworks for fostering personal growth and psychological well-being, facilitating skills such as autonomy, self-acceptance, and environmental mastery within youth populations (Barba-Martín et al., 2020).

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Beyond emotional well-being, research highlights the importance of physical activity for developing psychological resources such as self-efficacy and resilience (Adewojo, 2025). Studies with adolescents reveal that engagement in regular physical activity can strengthen psychological resilience, which in turn enhances beliefs about one's competence and ability to manage challenges (Hognestad et al., 2022). These psychosocial benefits are not only relevant for emotional health but also for students' broader self-concept, facilitating positive self-identity and confidence that extends into academic and social domains (Uhlenbrock & Meier, 2021). Moreover, physical activity's buffering effect against anxiety and depression supports its role as a preventive strategy for mental health concerns, a finding that emerging research continues to corroborate (Haegele et al., 2021).

Importantly, the relationship between PE and psychological outcomes appears to be multidimensional and interactive (Corbin, 2021). Studies emphasize the mediating roles of psychological constructs such as self-control and perceived social support in the connection between physical activity and psychological capital, suggesting that the benefits of PE are embedded within broader social and cognitive processes (Burson et al., 2021). These insights align with contemporary educational perspectives that conceptualize learning environments as ecosystems where social interaction, emotional regulation, and cognitive engagement co-occur and influence individual growth (Spencer et al., 2020).

Within the Philippine educational context, PE is mandated as a core subject across basic and tertiary education, primarily to promote physical fitness, health, and active lifestyles. While a growing body of research has documented the psychological, emotional, and social benefits associated with participation in physical activity, much of this evidence has focused on measurable outcomes such as self-esteem, well-being, motivation, and social competence. Consequently, less attention has been given to understanding how students themselves interpret and make meaning of these experiences within PE settings, particularly in relation to their broader personal development and identity formation.

This gap is important because personal growth is not merely an outcome of participation in physical activity but also an embodied and reflective process through



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which students construct self-understanding, develop resilience, negotiate social relationships, and form a sense of belonging. PE provides unique learning experiences that engage the body, emotions, and social interactions simultaneously, making it a distinct educational space for holistic development. Despite this potential, limited qualitative research has explored how students perceive these embodied experiences and how they contribute to their evolving identities, self-concepts, and personal growth, especially within the Philippine higher education context.

Therefore, the present study investigates the following central question: In what ways, if any, has PE helped you grow as a person, not just physically but also mentally or emotionally? By centering students' voices and lived experiences, this study contributes to the literature by moving beyond outcome-based perspectives and examining PE as a meaningful context for embodied learning, identity development, and holistic human growth. The findings provide deeper insight into how students experience PE as a space for self-discovery, belonging, and personal transformation, thereby offering evidence that can inform the design of more developmentally responsive and student-centered PE curricula.

Methods

Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically adopting a descriptive approach. Qualitative research is an approach that seeks to understand and interpret individuals' experiences, perceptions, and meanings within their natural context, providing rich and in-depth insights into complex phenomena (Królicka et al., 2021). A descriptive approach, on the other hand, aims to systematically and accurately describe the characteristics of a particular phenomenon as experienced by participants, without manipulating variables or testing hypotheses (Leavy, 2022).

The qualitative descriptive design was considered the most appropriate for this study as it allows an in-depth exploration of students' personal growth experiences in PE, capturing their perspectives and reflections in a detailed and holistic manner. This approach ensures that the nuances of participants' experiences are preserved and



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represented authentically, providing meaningful insights into the impact of PE beyond physical outcomes.

Participants and sampling

The study involved 20 undergraduate students enrolled in Physical Education courses at a state university in the Philippines. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a technique that involves intentionally choosing individuals who can provide rich and relevant information regarding the phenomenon under investigation criteria (Andrade, 2021). Eligible participants were required to be currently enrolled in a Physical Education course, have completed at least one semester of PE instruction, and be willing to share their experiences through open-ended responses. Students who were not enrolled in PE courses during the data collection period or who declined participation were excluded from the study.

The participants ranged in age from approximately 18 to 23 years old and represented both male and female students from various academic programs and year levels. Of the 20 participants, 11 were female and 9 were male. Participants came from different degree programs, including education, agriculture, business, and allied fields, and were enrolled across first- to fourth-year levels of study. This variation was considered beneficial because it provided diverse perspectives on how PE contributes to personal growth across different academic backgrounds.

Recruitment was conducted through coordination with course instructors and class announcements. Interested students were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. Those who met the inclusion criteria and provided informed consent were included in the study. This sampling strategy was appropriate because it ensured that participants had direct experience with PE courses and could provide meaningful reflections on how these experiences contributed to their personal, emotional, social, and psychological development.

Research instrument

Data were collected using a researcher-developed set of open-ended guiding questions designed to explore students' perceptions of how Physical Education contributed to their personal growth beyond physical development. The instrument was



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subjected to expert validation to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the objectives of the study. The open-ended format allowed participants to freely express their experiences, reflections, and perceptions without being constrained by predetermined response categories, thereby generating rich and nuanced qualitative data.

The guiding questions focused on students' experiences of personal, emotional, social, and psychological development through participation in Physical Education. Sample questions included: "In what ways, if any, has Physical Education helped you grow as a person beyond physical fitness?"; "How has your participation in Physical Education influenced your confidence, emotions, or relationships with others?"; "Can you describe a meaningful experience in Physical Education that contributed to your personal development?"; and "What lessons or values have you learned from Physical Education that you apply in your daily life?" Follow-up probing questions were used when necessary to encourage elaboration and obtain deeper insights into participants' experiences.

The instrument underwent careful review to ensure that the questions were understandable, comprehensive, and capable of eliciting detailed reflections related to the phenomenon under investigation. This approach facilitated the collection of in-depth narratives that captured both the breadth and depth of students' perceptions regarding the role of Physical Education in their holistic growth and development.

Data gathering procedures

Data were collected through individual open-ended interviews designed to elicit participants' reflections on how Physical Education contributed to their personal growth beyond physical development. Participants were provided with a validated set of guiding questions that encouraged them to share detailed experiences related to their psychological, emotional, and social development. Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes and was conducted in a quiet and comfortable setting to facilitate open communication. With participants' informed consent, the interviews were audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim, and all transcripts were carefully reviewed against the original recordings to verify accuracy and preserve the authenticity of participants' responses. To maintain confidentiality, identifying information was removed during transcription and participants were assigned pseudonyms or codes prior to analysis.



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Data analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke, which includes familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (Hennink et al., 2020). Initially, all participant responses were read and reread to facilitate immersion in the data and to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. Meaningful statements and recurring ideas were then identified and assigned initial codes. The coding process was conducted independently by two researchers to enhance analytical rigor and reduce individual bias. Following independent coding, the researchers compared and discussed their coding decisions, resolving discrepancies through consensus until agreement was achieved.

After the coding process, related codes were grouped into broader categories and examined for patterns and relationships. These categories were subsequently refined into preliminary themes, which were reviewed against the original data to ensure that they accurately represented participants' experiences. Through an iterative process of refinement and discussion, seven final themes were generated and clearly defined. An audit trail documenting coding decisions, theme development, and analytical reflections was maintained throughout the study to ensure transparency and dependability.

To establish trustworthiness, the researchers employed credibility procedures such as peer debriefing and continuous comparison of themes with the raw data. Data collection and analysis proceeded concurrently, and thematic saturation was considered achieved when no new codes, categories, or themes emerged from successive participant responses. This systematic approach ensured that the resulting themes authentically reflected students' perceptions of how Physical Education contributed to their personal growth, well-being, and holistic development.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the appropriate Institutional Review Board prior to data collection, ensuring that all procedures complied with established research ethics standards for studies involving human participants. All participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, their rights, and the



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voluntary nature of their involvement, and written informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Measures were implemented to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, with all responses securely stored and used solely for academic research purposes. Participants were also assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, thereby upholding respect for autonomy and ethical integrity throughout the research process.

Results

Table 1 presents the emerging themes on how students perceive their personal growth through PE. It summarizes each theme along with its core essence, representative participant quotes (translated into English), and the co-occurring relationships with other themes. This table provides a clear overview of the ways in which PE contributes not only to physical development but also to students' mental, emotional, and social growth.

Table. Themes on the Personal Growth Experiences of Students through PE

Theme	Description / Essence	Representative Quotes (Translated in English)	Co-occurring Themes / Relationships
1. Building Confidence and Self-Belief	PE helped students develop confidence in their abilities and encouraged them to believe in themselves. Through performing activities, participating in sports or dance, and overcoming challenges, students gained courage to express themselves and recognize their personal capabilities. This growth in confidence contributed to improved self-esteem and a stronger sense of personal identity.	“PE helped me grow physically, mentally, and emotionally. It built my confidence and taught me to believe in myself.” “Through PE, I learned to show what I can do and give my best in every activity.” “PE made me more confident in myself and encouraged me to try new things.”	Frequently appears alongside discipline and perseverance, as confidence often developed through effort and improvement. Also linked with emotional resilience, where overcoming challenges strengthened self-belief.
2. Managing Stress and Supporting Mental Well-being	Students perceived PE as an important outlet for relieving academic stress and maintaining mental health. Engaging in physical activities helped them feel refreshed, relaxed, and emotionally balanced. The activities provided a mental break from academic demands	“I always notice that I feel refreshed and relaxed after PE, which helps me concentrate in my next subject.” “PE helps me lessen stress and support my mental health.” “It enhances my way of thinking and reduces the stress I am feeling.”	Often connected with emotional regulation, since stress relief contributes to emotional stability. Also related to social connection, as interacting with classmates during activities helped



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	and improved their concentration for other subjects.		reduce academic pressure.
3. Developing Discipline, Perseverance, and Responsibility	PE taught students the importance of discipline, patience, and consistent effort. Through practice, following instructions, and striving to improve physical skills, students developed habits of responsibility and commitment. These experiences encouraged goal-setting and reinforced the value of hard work in achieving personal growth.	"PE has helped me grow by strengthening my self-discipline." "It helped me become hardworking and patient in achieving my goals." "PE taught me discipline, patience, and perseverance, especially during difficult activities."	Strongly connected with confidence development, since perseverance often resulted in improved self-belief. It also overlaps with emotional resilience, particularly when students continued working despite difficulties or failure.
4. Learning Emotional Control and Resilience	Students described how PE helped them regulate their emotions and remain calm during challenging situations such as competitions or difficult tasks. Through these experiences, they learned to accept failure, handle pressure, and maintain emotional balance. This process fostered resilience and emotional maturity.	"I learned to control my emotions and stay calm under pressure." "PE taught me to accept failure and try again." "It helped me become stronger emotionally and more resilient."	Closely linked with discipline and perseverance, since resilience often developed through repeated practice and effort. Also associated with confidence building, as successfully overcoming emotional challenges increased self-belief.
5. Strengthening Social Relationships and Sense of Belonging	PE created opportunities for social interaction and collaboration among students. Through group activities, sports, and dance, participants developed friendships and stronger bonds with classmates. These relationships provided emotional support and made their academic life more enjoyable and manageable.	"Because of these activities, I got to know my classmates more and build strong bonds with them." "They made my college life bearable and less stressful." "PE improved my teamwork skills and communication."	Often co-occurs with stress reduction, as social interactions helped alleviate academic pressure. Also related to confidence development, since supportive peers encouraged participation and self-expression.
6. Increasing Self-Awareness and Healthy Lifestyle Practices	Students reported becoming more aware of their health, daily habits, and physical well-being through PE lessons and activities. This awareness influenced their diet, exercise routines, and lifestyle choices. As a result, students developed a more holistic understanding of maintaining physical and mental health.	"PE helped me become more aware of what I eat and what I do in my daily activities." "It taught me how to maintain my body and my health." "I learned that being physically fit also requires emotional and mental stability."	Often connected with discipline, since maintaining healthy habits requires consistent effort. It also overlaps with mental well-being, as awareness of health supports emotional and psychological balance.



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7. Personal Growth through Challenge and Self-Acceptance	Some students experienced deeper personal reflection through challenges encountered in PE. Struggling with certain activities encouraged them to accept their weaknesses, develop humility, and appreciate the growth process. These experiences helped them understand that personal development involves embracing limitations and learning from them.	"I realized that no one is good at everything, and that is okay." "PE taught me humility and patience with myself." "I learned to celebrate small progress instead of comparing myself with others."	Strongly related to emotional resilience, as self-acceptance develops through overcoming challenges. Also linked with confidence building, since recognizing personal growth gradually strengthens self-belief.
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Discussion

Building Confidence and Self-Belief. From the perspective of the participants, PE helped them develop a stronger sense of confidence and self-belief, enabling them to recognize their abilities and perform tasks with courage and determination. This means that PE serves as more than just a physical training platform; it functions as a space where students actively engage in self-discovery and skill demonstration. This implies that by overcoming challenges, participating in activities, and receiving feedback, students gradually strengthen their self-esteem and belief in their personal capabilities. To wit, according to the research participants:

"PE helped me grow physically, mentally, and emotionally. It built my confidence and taught me to believe in myself." – P12

"Through PE, I learned to show what I can do and give my best in every activity." – P20

These findings are consistent with prior research demonstrating that engagement in structured physical activities fosters self-efficacy and personal empowerment among learners (Ponsaran, 2024). Studies have emphasized that PE provides opportunities for mastery experiences, which enhance students' confidence in both academic and social domains (Baena-Morales & González-Villora, 2023). Additionally, research suggests that success in physical tasks and challenges reinforces self-perception, encouraging a

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positive self-concept and resilience that extends beyond physical performance (Etkin, 2024).

Managing stress and supporting mental well-being.

Participants highlighted that PE serves as an important outlet for relieving academic pressure and maintaining mental balance. This means that beyond improving physical health, PE provides students with opportunities to refresh their minds, regain focus, and alleviate stress. This implies that engagement in physical activity can contribute to emotional stability, mental clarity, and a sense of psychological relief, which are essential for coping with the demands of academic life. To wit, according to the research participants:

"I always notice that I feel refreshed and relaxed after PE, which helps me concentrate in my next subject." – P13.

"PE helps me lessen stress and support my mental health." – P17.

These observations align with prior studies showing that regular participation in physical activities promotes mental well-being, reduces stress, and enhances cognitive focus (Wee et al., 2021). Evidence also indicates that school-based PE can act as a preventive measure against psychological strain, contributing to lower levels of anxiety and improved emotional regulation among students (Mitchell & Walton-Fisette, 2021). Furthermore, research highlights that structured PE programs provide a controlled environment where students can experience mental relaxation while simultaneously developing social and emotional competencies (Almusawi et al., 2021).

Developing discipline, perseverance, and responsibility.

Participants described that PE helped them cultivate discipline, patience, and a sense of responsibility through consistent practice and goal-oriented activities. This means that PE provides a structured environment where students learn to regulate their behaviors, commit to regular practice, and work steadily toward achieving objectives. This implies that the development of these personal qualities through PE not only benefits physical performance but also reinforces self-management, persistence, and the capacity to handle challenges effectively. To wit, according to the research participants:



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"PE has helped me grow by strengthening my self-discipline." – P11

"It helped me become hardworking and patient in achieving my goals." – P16

These findings are supported by prior research indicating that participation in physical activities enhances self-regulation, perseverance, and goal-directed behavior among students (Goodwin et al., 2022). Studies also show that repeated engagement in challenging physical tasks fosters resilience and a disciplined approach to learning, which translates into broader life skills (R. J. L. Tagare & Villaluz, 2021). Moreover, the literature highlights that PE serves as a context where students develop habits of consistency and accountability, contributing to personal growth that extends beyond the classroom (Martín-Rodríguez & Madrigal-Cerezo, 2025).

Learning emotional control and resilience.

Participants expressed that PE helped them regulate their emotions, remain calm under pressure, and persevere through challenging tasks. This means that PE functions as a learning environment where students confront difficulties and develop strategies to manage frustration, disappointment, and anxiety. This implies that the experiences gained in PE foster emotional maturity and resilience, enabling students to adapt to stressors not only in school but in broader life contexts. To wit, according to the research participants:

"I learned to control my emotions and stay calm under pressure." –
P4

"PE taught me to accept failure and try again." – P7

These findings are consistent with previous studies indicating that engagement in physical activity enhances emotional regulation and resilience in learners (Estevan et al., 2021). Research suggests that PE provides controlled opportunities for students to experience setbacks, develop coping strategies, and build perseverance, which strengthens overall psychological well-being (White et al., 2021). Furthermore, studies highlight that success in managing emotions during physical challenges contributes to greater self-confidence and adaptive functioning in other academic and social domains (Valiyev et al., 2025).

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Strengthening social relationships and sense of belonging.

Participants indicated that PE provided opportunities for meaningful social interaction, collaboration, and peer bonding. This means that through group activities, team sports, and cooperative tasks, students not only engage in physical exercise but also develop interpersonal skills and a sense of community. This implies that PE contributes to the social dimension of personal growth, fostering friendships, communication, and emotional support that enhance students' overall well-being. To wit, according to the research participants:

“Because of these activities, I got to know my classmates more and build strong bonds with them.” – P19

“They made my college life bearable and less stressful.” – P16

These observations align with research demonstrating that participation in school-based physical activities strengthens social cohesion, teamwork, and peer support among students (Santos et al., 2024). Studies also highlight that collaborative PE activities promote a sense of belonging and social integration, which is associated with reduced anxiety and increased motivation for learning (Alfrey & O'Connor, 2024). Additionally, evidence suggests that social interactions in PE contexts reinforce positive behaviors, empathy, and interpersonal competence, further supporting holistic student development (R. L. Tagare, 2023).

Increasing self-awareness and healthy lifestyle practices.

Participants reported that PE heightened their awareness of personal health, daily habits, and overall well-being. This means that engaging in PE activities encouraged students to monitor their diet, maintain regular exercise routines, and reflect on the choices that affect their physical and mental health. This implies that PE not only promotes physical fitness but also facilitates conscious decision-making and self-management, contributing to a more holistic approach to personal development. To wit, according to the research participants:

“PE helped me become more aware of what I eat and what I do in my daily activities.” – P12

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Another participant stated: "It taught me how to maintain my body and my health." – P8

These findings are consistent with prior studies highlighting that structured PE programs enhance students' health literacy and promote long-term engagement in healthy behaviors (Perez-Ordas et al., 2022). Research also suggests that increased self-awareness through physical activity is associated with improved self-regulation and personal accountability in maintaining wellness (Guo et al., 2023). Furthermore, evidence indicates that students who develop conscious health habits through PE experience greater psychological and physical benefits, linking lifestyle awareness to overall well-being and academic performance (Tariq & Sergio, 2025).

Personal growth through challenge and self-acceptance.

Participants highlighted that PE provided opportunities to confront personal limitations and reflect on their own abilities, fostering humility and self-acceptance. This means that struggling with difficult activities or facing challenges outside their comfort zones encouraged students to recognize their weaknesses while appreciating their progress. This implies that PE serves as a transformative space for personal reflection, where growth is not only measured by physical performance but also by the development of emotional maturity and resilience. To wit, according to the research participants:

"I realized that no one is good at everything, and that is okay." – P13

"PE taught me humility and patience with myself." – P13

These findings align with prior research emphasizing that engagement in physical activities promotes introspection, resilience, and adaptive coping strategies among students (Choi et al., 2022). Studies suggest that confronting challenges in PE encourages learners to embrace a growth mindset, understand the value of persistence, and develop empathy for others' struggles (Leo et al., 2022). Additionally, research highlights that recognizing personal limitations and celebrating small achievements through PE contributes to self-efficacy and overall psychological well-being, reinforcing holistic development (Vasilopoulos & Ellefson, 2021).



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Implications for education

The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of PE as a developmental and social space in which students construct meaning, negotiate identities, and cultivate interpersonal relationships through embodied experiences. Rather than functioning solely as a venue for physical activity and skill acquisition, PE emerged as a context where students actively engaged in processes of self-discovery, confidence building, and social connection. Participants' narratives suggest that experiences of challenge, achievement, collaboration, and reflection within PE classes enabled them to develop a stronger sense of self-efficacy, resilience, and personal competence. These findings support the view that learning in PE extends beyond the physical domain and involves the holistic development of students as individuals who learn about themselves and others through movement-based experiences.

The findings also highlight the social nature of PE as a setting where belonging and interpersonal relationships are fostered. Students described how cooperative activities, team-based tasks, and shared experiences created opportunities for meaningful social interaction, mutual support, and the development of positive peer relationships. Such experiences contributed to feelings of inclusion and connectedness, suggesting that PE serves as a unique educational environment where social bonds are cultivated through collective participation and embodied engagement. This perspective extends traditional understandings of PE by emphasizing its role not only in promoting physical competence but also in creating communities of practice that support students' emotional and social development.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings reinforce holistic and embodied learning perspectives that conceptualize education as an integrated process involving cognitive, emotional, social, and physical dimensions. The results align with theories of positive youth development and social learning by demonstrating how mastery experiences, peer interactions, and supportive learning environments facilitate the acquisition of personal and interpersonal competencies. Moreover, the findings contribute to emerging scholarship that positions PE as an important site for identity formation and psychosocial growth, where students develop self-understanding through lived bodily

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experiences and social participation. By illustrating how confidence, belonging, and self-discovery emerge through engagement in PE, the study advances the argument that physical education should be recognized as a meaningful developmental context rather than merely a curricular space for promoting physical fitness.

These insights have important implications for educational policy and practice. They suggest that PE curricula should intentionally incorporate reflective activities, collaborative learning experiences, and opportunities for personal meaning-making to maximize students' holistic development. Furthermore, the findings underscore the pivotal role of PE teachers as facilitators of developmental and social learning, highlighting the need for pedagogical approaches that foster not only physical competence but also emotional well-being, social connectedness, and personal growth. Recognizing PE as a developmental and social space may help educators and policymakers better appreciate its broader educational value and its contribution to the formation of well-rounded, resilient, and socially engaged individuals.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of literature that recognizes PE as more than a vehicle for physical fitness by demonstrating how students experience it as a meaningful space for personal transformation, self-discovery, and holistic development. Through the voices of students, the findings reveal that PE fosters confidence, emotional resilience, self-awareness, social connectedness, discipline, and healthy lifestyle practices, illustrating the interconnected nature of physical, psychological, emotional, and social growth. These findings extend existing knowledge by highlighting how students construct meaning from their embodied experiences in PE and how these experiences contribute to identity formation, personal growth, and a stronger sense of belonging within educational settings.

Viewed through the lens of holistic and embodied learning, the findings suggest that PE serves as a unique educational environment where learning occurs not only through cognitive engagement but also through movement, interpersonal interaction, emotional experiences, and reflective practice. The study underscores the importance of recognizing the body as a site of learning and development, reinforcing the idea that



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meaningful educational experiences emerge from the integration of physical, emotional, social, and personal dimensions of human growth. In this regard, PE should be understood as an essential component of student development rather than merely a complementary subject focused on physical activity.

The findings also carry important implications for educational practice. PE educators should intentionally design learning experiences that promote reflection, collaboration, personal challenge, and emotional engagement alongside physical skill development. Curriculum developers and policymakers may likewise consider strengthening PE programs to support broader developmental outcomes such as resilience, self-confidence, emotional well-being, and social belonging. By creating inclusive and supportive learning environments, PE can become a powerful context for nurturing students' lifelong capacities for adaptation, self-understanding, and well-being.

Limitations and future research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the study was conducted within a single higher education institution, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts. Second, the data relied on participants' self-reported experiences, making the findings susceptible to recall errors and social desirability bias, wherein participants may have presented their experiences in a more favorable manner. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the study captured perceptions at a single point in time and therefore could not examine how personal growth through Physical Education evolves over time. Future research may address these limitations by conducting multi-site investigations across diverse educational settings, employing longitudinal designs to examine developmental changes, integrating mixed-methods approaches to strengthen understanding through methodological triangulation, and undertaking comparative studies across student groups, institutions, or cultural contexts to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Physical Education's role in holistic student development.



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