



Revisions. Policy implementation and challenges in sports development programs:
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Vol. 12, n.º 5; p. 1-40, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/tcvja045>

Policy implementation and challenges in sports development programs: a qualitative systematic review and thematic synthesis

Implementación de políticas en programas de desarrollo deportivo: revisión sistemática cualitativa y síntesis temática

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Editorial Schedule: Article received: 06/07/2026 Accepted: 24/08/2026 Published: 01/09/2026
<https://doi.org/10.55040/tcvja045>

To cite this article use the following reference:

Aliser, J.N.; Kusuma, D.W.Y.; Rahayu, T.; Aman, M.P.; Raterta, A., III; Sumartiningsih, S. (2026). Policy implementation and challenges in sports development programs: A qualitative systematic review and thematic synthesis. *Sportis Sci J*, 12(5), 1-40, <https://doi.org/10.55040/tcvja045>

Author contribution: J.N.A.: Conceptualization, methodology, literature search, study screening, quality appraisal, data synthesis, writing—original draft, manuscript preparation. D.W.Y.K.: Conceptualization, supervision, writing—review and editing. T.R.: Supervision, writing—review and editing. M.P.A.: Validation, writing—review and editing. A.R.III: Validation, writing—review and editing. S.S.: Supervision, writing—review and editing.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.



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Ethical aspects: Ethical approval was not required because this study is a qualitative systematic review based exclusively on published literature and did not involve human participants or the collection of primary data.

Abstract

Sports development programs (SDPs) aim to facilitate meaningful participation in sport, but their effectiveness depends not only on policy design but also on implementation and stakeholder experiences. This qualitative systematic review and thematic synthesis examined stakeholders' perspectives on policy implementation in SDPs across diverse international contexts. Following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, searches of Scopus, PubMed, and Google Scholar identified eligible qualitative and mixed-method studies published in English between 2020 and 2025. Twenty-five studies were included and appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Qualitative Checklist, and findings were synthesized using thematic synthesis. Five analytical themes emerged: (1) governance and financial pressures; (2) policy–practice gaps; (3) structural and capacity constraints; (4) power and inequality; and (5) cultural and motivational challenges. The findings indicate that SDP policies are not implemented linearly but are interpreted and enacted within organizational and sociocultural contexts shaped by governance pressures, resource limitations, organizational priorities, stakeholder interests, and cultural expectations. Although policies can strengthen accountability and standardization, they may also constrain organizational autonomy and locally responsive implementation. Effective SDP implementation therefore requires balanced governance that combines accountability with flexibility, adequate organizational capacity, meaningful stakeholder participation, and context-responsive strategies to expand sporting opportunities, promote inclusion, and reduce inequalities in access to sport.

Keywords: sports development programs; policy implementation; stakeholders' perspectives; sports governance

Resumen

Los programas de desarrollo deportivo (PDD) tienen como objetivo facilitar una participación significativa en el deporte, pero su eficacia depende no solo del diseño de las políticas, sino también de su implementación y de las experiencias de las partes interesadas. Esta revisión sistemática cualitativa y síntesis temática examinó las perspectivas de las partes interesadas sobre la implementación de políticas en los PDD en diversos contextos internacionales. Siguiendo las directrices PRISMA 2020, se realizaron búsquedas en Scopus, PubMed y Google Scholar para identificar estudios cualitativos y de métodos mixtos elegibles, publicados en inglés entre 2020 y 2025. Se incluyeron 25 estudios y se evaluó su calidad mediante la Lista de Verificación de Estudios Cualitativos del Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP), y los hallazgos se sintetizaron mediante síntesis temática. Surgieron cinco temas analíticos: (1) presiones de gobernanza y financieras; (2) brechas entre las políticas y la práctica; (3) limitaciones estructurales y de capacidad; (4) poder y desigualdad; y (5) desafíos culturales y motivacionales. Los hallazgos indican que las políticas de los PDD no se implementan de manera lineal, sino que son interpretadas y ejecutadas dentro de contextos organizacionales y



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socioculturales determinados por las presiones de gobernanza, las limitaciones de recursos, las prioridades organizacionales, los intereses de las partes interesadas y las expectativas culturales. Aunque las políticas pueden fortalecer la rendición de cuentas y la estandarización, también pueden limitar la autonomía organizacional y dificultar una implementación sensible a las necesidades locales. Por lo tanto, una implementación eficaz de los PDD requiere una gobernanza equilibrada que combine rendición de cuentas con flexibilidad, capacidad organizacional adecuada, participación significativa de las partes interesadas y estrategias sensibles al contexto para ampliar las oportunidades deportivas, promover la inclusión y reducir las desigualdades en el acceso al deporte.

Palabras clave: programas de desarrollo deportivo; implementación de políticas; gobernanza deportiva; perspectivas de los actores

Introduction

Sport development programs (SDPs) have expanded beyond promoting sport participation to addressing broader social and developmental objectives, including education, inclusion, youth empowerment, health, and community development (Alpay, 2021; Darnell, 2012). As governments and sport organizations increasingly use sport to achieve these objectives, SDP policies have become embedded within complex governance structures involving public agencies, educational institutions, sport organizations, communities, and other stakeholders. The effectiveness of these policies, however, depends not only on their design but also on how they are interpreted and enacted within different organizational and sociocultural contexts.

Effective SDP implementation requires organizational capacity, including staff training and support, planning, administrative support, accountability, and responsiveness to participants' needs (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2026). Policy implementation is not, however, a straightforward process of applying formal directives; it involves negotiation between policy requirements, organizational priorities, available resources, and professional judgment (Gagnås & Bjørndal, 2025). Recent research further demonstrates that implementation may be affected by limited organizational capacity, unclear guidance, coordination difficulties, and inadequate resources, particularly where policy responsibilities exceed the capacity of implementing organizations (Stewart et al., 2021; Rich & Losardo, 2025; Amornsriwatanakul et al., 2025).



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These conditions make policy implementation an important dimension of understanding how SDPs operate across diverse settings.

Existing qualitative research illustrates the complexity of these implementation conditions. Studies have reported the influence of funding structures, standardized monitoring, and organizational priorities on policy enactment (Gagnås & Bjørndal, 2025; Hammond et al., 2022; Annett & Darby, 2025). Other research has identified gaps between formal policy commitments and implementation, including limited administrative support, inconsistent communication, inadequate resources, and compliance-oriented practices (Christiaens & Brittain, 2023; Root et al., 2022; Saleeque & Phulkar, 2024). Structural constraints such as inadequate facilities, equipment, staffing, and time have also been reported across school, community, university, and sport settings (Jimeno, 2021; Letshokotla et al., 2024; Nesperos & Magbanua, 2025; Rich & Losardo, 2025). In addition, unequal stakeholder influence, differences in access to resources and opportunities, cultural expectations, and challenges related to motivation and inclusion further shape how policies are experienced and implemented (Strittmatter et al., 2024; Wickman & Andersson, 2025; Nemananzhe et al., 2025).

Despite these contributions, the evidence remains dispersed across different SDP contexts and levels of implementation. Existing studies tend to examine specific organizational, national, or policy contexts, making it difficult to understand how governance, policy–practice gaps, organizational capacity, power relations, and cultural and motivational conditions interact across settings. A qualitative systematic review and thematic synthesis can therefore provide a more integrated understanding of stakeholders' experiences and perceptions of SDP policy implementation and the challenges encountered during enactment. Within Sport Sciences and Physical Education, such an understanding is important because policy implementation shapes opportunities for sport participation, organizational practice, inclusion, and the delivery of sports development programs across diverse settings. Accordingly, this review aimed to synthesize qualitative evidence on stakeholders' perceptions of policy implementation and related challenges in sports development programs across diverse settings, including higher education, school-based, community-based, and other organized sport contexts, and to answer



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the research question: *How do stakeholders perceive policy implementation and challenges in sports development programs?*

Theoretical Framework

This qualitative systematic review draws on Policy Enactment Theory (Braun et al., 2011; Lingard & Sellar, 2013) as an interpretive framework for understanding how sport-related policies and development initiatives are enacted within different organizational and sociocultural contexts. Policy Enactment Theory conceptualizes policy implementation as an active process in which policies are interpreted and translated by actors within particular institutional conditions, rather than implemented as straightforward or linear directives. This perspective is relevant to the present review because stakeholders' experiences of policy implementation may be shaped by organizational capacity, resources, governance arrangements, institutional priorities, and local context

Policy Enactment Theory was used as a subsequent interpretive framework rather than as a deductive coding framework. The thematic synthesis was conducted inductively through line-by-line coding and the development of descriptive and analytical themes. Following the synthesis, the theory was used to interpret and contextualize the resulting themes, particularly how stakeholders negotiate, adapt, and respond to policy requirements across diverse sport-development settings.

Methods

This qualitative systematic review was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The quality of included studies was evaluated using the CASP (Long et al., 2020). The study protocol was registered with Open Science Framework (OSF) to enhance the transparency and methodological rigor of this review (<https://osf.io/ztcfk/>).

Search Strategy

Scopus and PubMed were selected as the primary electronic databases because of their broad multidisciplinary coverage of peer-reviewed literature relevant to sports development,



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education, psychology, health sciences, and policy research. SPORTDiscus and Web of Science were not included because institutional access was unavailable to the research team. Scopus and PubMed were searched to identify empirical studies examining policy implementation and challenges in sports development and related physical activity contexts. Search terms were developed using the PICO framework and combined using Boolean operators (AND, OR) to maximize the retrieval of potentially relevant studies (MacFarlane et al., 2022).

To enhance the comprehensiveness of the search and reduce the possibility of missing potentially relevant studies not indexed in the primary databases, Google Scholar was used as a supplementary search source. Google Scholar was searched using the core search terms and publication period (2020–2025). Retrieved records from Google Scholar, together with records from Scopus and PubMed, were imported into Rayyan for deduplication and subsequent screening using the predefined eligibility criteria.

Database-Specific Search Procedures

The database searches were conducted using the Boolean combinations of terms presented in Table 1. Scopus and PubMed served as the primary electronic databases, while Google Scholar was used as a supplementary search source. Because the original search histories for these databases were no longer available at the time of revision, the exact historical search dates and database-specific fields could not be independently verified. The original search strategies were therefore reconstructed from the registered OSF protocol and the search terms and procedures retained in the review documentation.

Following the initial search and preliminary screening, the Context component of the eligibility criteria was broadened from higher education to include school-based, community-based, and other organized sports development settings. The Population and Phenomenon of Interest remained unchanged, and records previously excluded solely because they did not meet the original higher-education Context were reconsidered using the revised eligibility criteria.

An updated search was conducted on August 13, 2026, using Scopus, PubMed, and Google Scholar. The updated search strategies reported in Table 1 are the actual search strings used during this rerun. For Scopus, the search was conducted using the TITLE-ABS-KEY field



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and limited to English-language publications from 2020 to 2025. For PubMed, the Boolean query in Table 1 was used, followed by filters for publication period (2020–2025), English language, and full-text availability. Google Scholar was searched using the exact phrase “sports development” “policy implementation,” with the publication period limited to 2020–2025. The search yielded 640 records. All retrieved records were imported into Rayyan for deduplication and screening using the revised eligibility criteria.

TABLE 1. Database-Specific Search Strategies for the Updated Search

Database	Search Strategy
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY(("sports development" OR "sports development program*" OR "sport development" OR "sport development program*" OR "sports program*" OR "sport program*" OR "sport organization*" OR "sporting organization*" OR "organized sport*") AND ("policy implementation" OR governance OR "policy enactment") AND ("higher education" OR university* OR college* OR "tertiary education" OR school* OR "school-based sport*" OR community* OR "community-based sport*" OR "organized sport*" OR "sport organization*" OR "sporting organization*")) AND PUBYEAR > 2019 AND PUBYEAR < 2026 AND LANGUAGE(english)
PubMed	(sports development OR sports program OR sports programs OR university sports OR collegiate sports OR athletic program OR athletic programs) AND (policy implementation OR governance OR policy enactment) AND (higher education OR university OR universities OR college OR colleges OR tertiary education OR school OR schools OR school-based sport OR school-based sports OR community OR communities OR community-based sport OR community-based sports OR organized sport OR organized sports OR sport organization OR sport organizations OR sporting organization OR sporting organizations) AND (challenge OR barrier OR issue OR constraint OR obstacle)
Google Scholar	"sports development" "policy implementation"

Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility criteria were established using the PICO framework to address the research question (Lockwood et al., 2015). The framework was selected because it is well suited to qualitative evidence synthesis and facilitates the identification of studies examining stakeholders' experiences within a defined phenomenon and context. Mixed-methods studies were eligible when qualitative findings could be extracted and synthesized independently, whereas studies reporting only quantitative findings were excluded. Eligible studies were peer-



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reviewed, published in English between 2020 and 2025, and reported original qualitative evidence. Opinion papers, editorials, book chapters, commentaries, conference proceedings, theses, and dissertations were excluded.

The final Context criterion included higher education institutions, schools, community-based programs, and other organized sports development settings. For this review, sports development programs (SDPs) were treated as an umbrella term encompassing organized sport-related programs, policies, and initiatives implemented to support participation, performance, inclusion, health, youth development, or organizational development. The included studies therefore covered school and collegiate sport, community-based and disability-inclusive sport, youth and elite sport development, sport-for-development initiatives, and sport-specific policies such as return-to-sport policies. These contexts were not assumed to be conceptually equivalent; rather, they were synthesized because they shared the phenomenon of stakeholders interpreting and enacting sport-related policy or program expectations within organizational settings. Contextual differences in program purpose, organizational structure, and stakeholder roles were retained during synthesis and considered when interpreting the findings.

Protocol Deviation and Refinement of the Context Criterion

The review protocol was registered in the OSF Registries on February 16, 2026, under a Generalized Systematic Review Registration. The registered protocol initially defined the Context as sports development programs within higher education institutions, specifically colleges and universities. During initial screening, this restriction yielded limited relevant qualitative evidence; therefore, the Context criterion was broadened to include school-based, community-based, and other organized sports development settings. The Population and Phenomenon of Interest remained unchanged. Records previously excluded solely because they did not meet the original higher-education Context were reconsidered using the revised criterion before final eligibility decisions and thematic synthesis. Because this modification was not specified in the registered protocol, it constitutes a protocol deviation. The modification occurred after initial screening and before final eligibility decisions and thematic synthesis;



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however, its exact date could not be established retrospectively from the available review records. The deviation is therefore documented retrospectively in this manuscript.

TABLE 2. Expanded criteria inclusion and exclusion for qualitative systematic review using the PICO framework

	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Population (P)	Stakeholders directly involved in the implementation of SDPs in institutional or organizational sport settings, including sports administrators, coaches, policymakers, student-athletes, and program implementers.	Studies that do not involve stakeholders directly in sports development policy implementation.
Phenomenon of Interest (I)	Stakeholders' perspectives on policy implementation and challenges in SDPs	Studies not addressing perspectives on policy implementation and challenges in SDPs
Context (Co)	Studies have been conducted across diverse sports development contexts, including higher education institutions, schools, community-based programs, and other organizational sports systems.	Studies not conducted within SDPs or lacking a policy implementation context.

Study Selection

The study selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). Records identified through Scopus, PubMed, and Google Scholar were imported into Rayyan for deduplication and screening. Rayyan, a web-based systematic review platform, was used to facilitate blinded screening and the efficient management of records (Ouzzani et al., 2016). Following duplicate removal, titles and abstracts were reviewed independently by two reviewers using the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria based on the PICO framework. Potentially eligible records were subsequently retrieved for full-text assessment. The reviewers independently reviewed the records, and questions regarding the eligibility or exclusion of specific articles were discussed to reach consensus. The complete study selection process is presented in the PRISMA flow diagram in Figure 1



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Quality Appraisal

The studies included in this qualitative systematic review were evaluated using the CASP checklist. The checklist provided a structured framework for assessing methodological strengths and limitations across the included studies (Long et al., 2020). The CASP checklist assesses the clarity of the study aims, the suitability of the qualitative methodology, the recruitment strategy, reflexivity, ethical considerations, the trustworthiness of the data analysis, and the significance of the findings (CASP, 2025). Each item was systematically appraised and rated as "Yes," "No," or "Cannot Tell." Annotations were provided to clarify the strengths and weaknesses of each qualitative study. The methodological appraisal informed the interpretation of the synthesized findings. Studies with "Cannot Tell" or "No" ratings were not excluded but were interpreted more cautiously, particularly where methodological reporting was limited. No numerical weighting was assigned to individual studies.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Key information from each study was extracted using standardized procedures. Data extraction was conducted by the primary reviewer, and the extracted information included bibliographic details, research design, participant characteristics, and principal qualitative findings. The majority of the synthesized findings were derived from participant quotations and directly reported participant perspectives in the primary studies, while a smaller number of findings reflected qualitative interpretations reported by the original study authors.

Qualitative findings were synthesized using thematic synthesis (Jowsey et al., 2021). The primary reviewer conducted the initial line-by-line coding of relevant texts, followed by the development of descriptive and analytical themes (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Manual coding in Microsoft Excel was used to organize and systematize the codes. Codes were iteratively reviewed against the original study findings to ensure that they accurately represented the reported evidence. The second reviewer subsequently checked and verified the coding, particularly codes requiring clarification or modification. Differences in coding or interpretation were discussed and resolved through consensus. Related codes were grouped into descriptive themes that remained close to the content of the primary studies. These descriptive

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themes were subsequently compared across studies and interpreted at a higher level to develop analytical themes representing broader patterns in policy implementation. Examples of the progression from primary findings and initial codes through descriptive themes to analytical themes are provided in Supplementary Table S3.

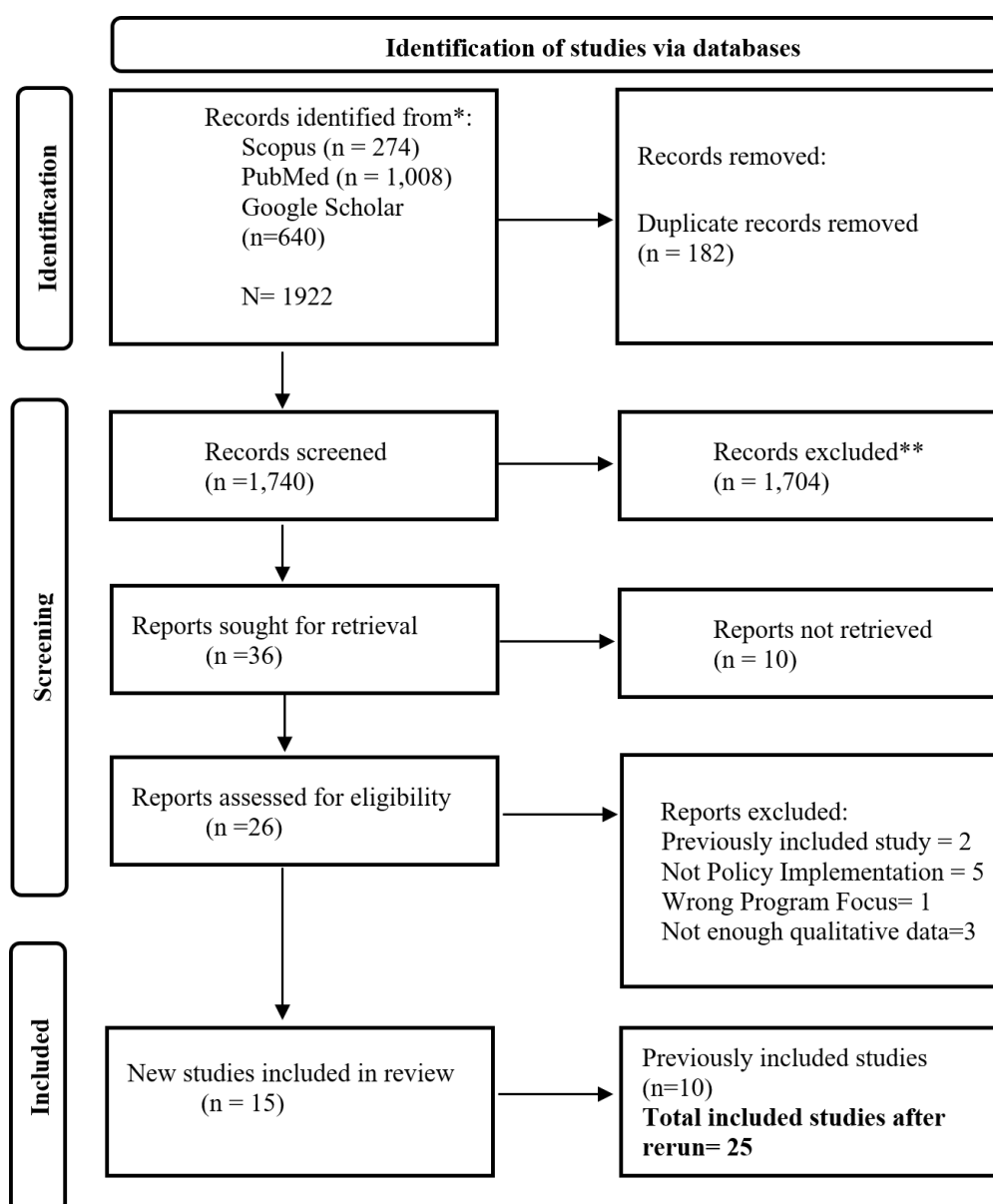


FIGURE 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Second Search Rerun



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Characteristics of Included Studies

Twenty-five studies, as presented in Figure 1, were included in this qualitative systematic review and thematic synthesis. Published between 2021 and 2025, the studies represented diverse sport development contexts across Australia ($n = 3$), Norway ($n = 3$), Canada ($n = 2$), the Philippines ($n = 2$), South Africa ($n = 2$), the United Kingdom ($n = 2$), and the United States ($n = 2$). Brazil, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Nigeria, Sweden, Thailand, and the Saudi Arabia–Oman context were each represented by one study, while one study did not specify the country.

The studies involved diverse stakeholder groups, including sport administrators and managers, policymakers, coaches, teachers, athletes, youth representatives, and individuals with disabilities. Sample sizes varied substantially across studies, ranging from 5 to 236 participants, reflecting differences in study design and participant groups. Most studies employed qualitative designs, primarily using semi-structured or in-depth interviews, while others incorporated focus group discussions, questionnaires, document analysis, or observation. Three studies used mixed-methods approaches: Saleeque and Phulkar (2024) combined a structured questionnaire with semi-structured interviews; Till et al. (2022) used an online survey with quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis of open-ended responses; and Amornsriwatanakul et al. (2025) combined document review, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and an online survey.

The included studies covered school-, community-, university-, academy-, national sport organization-, disability sport-, and sport-for-development contexts. Although these settings and policy/program objects differed, all studies addressed how sport-related policies, programs, or development initiatives were implemented, enacted, or experienced by relevant stakeholders, including the challenges encountered during implementation. This shared phenomenon provided the basis for synthesizing findings across contexts, while the analysis retained context-specific differences in how implementation challenges were reported. Detailed characteristics and evidence for the 25 included studies, including country, setting, participants, methodology, key findings, CASP concerns, and thematic contributions, are provided in Supplementary Table S1.



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Methodological Quality Appraisal

CASP was used as a structured appraisal framework rather than as a numerical quality-scoring system; therefore, no overall quality score or ranking was assigned to the included studies. Twenty-five studies were appraised using the CASP Qualitative Checklist. Overall, the included studies demonstrated generally strong methodological reporting, with most clearly stating their aims, using appropriate qualitative approaches, recruiting participants with relevant experience, and presenting systematic data collection and analysis procedures. The majority employed semi-structured or in-depth interviews, with several incorporating focus group discussions, questionnaires, document analysis, or observation. For mixed-methods studies, the CASP Qualitative Checklist was applied specifically to the qualitative components, as only qualitative findings were eligible for extraction and synthesis. Most studies also reported appropriate ethical procedures, including informed consent, confidentiality, and institutional or research ethics approval. Data analysis was generally rigorous, with thematic analysis, discourse analysis, reflexive thematic analysis, consensual qualitative research, phenomenological analysis, and framework-based approaches used across the studies. Several studies further strengthened credibility through triangulation, member checking, intercoder agreement, multiple analysts, peer debriefing, reflexive journaling, or critical-friend review.

For studies receiving “Cannot Tell” or “No” judgments, the assessments reflected specific limitations in methodological reporting rather than an overall quality score. The most consistent concern involved researcher–participant relationships and reflexivity, with several studies providing limited information on researcher positionality, prior relationships with participants, or potential researcher influence on data collection and interpretation. Other concerns involved insufficient reporting of qualitative design, data-collection procedures, ethical safeguards, and analytic processes. Jimeno (2021) showed the broadest methodological reporting limitations, including the qualitative design, interview procedures, reflexivity, ethics, and data analysis, while Nemananzhe et al. (2025) provided limited detail on interview and focus-group procedures. Saleeque and Phulkar (2024) provided limited methodological detail for the qualitative component of their mixed-methods study, and Teshome et al. (2022) provided limited information on verification of the analysis.



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TABLE 3. Critical Appraisal of Included Studies Using CASP Qualitative Checklist

Study	CASP Checklist									
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
1. Annett & Darby (2025)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
2. Gagnås & Bjørndal (2025)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	CT	Y	Y	Y	Y
3. Christiaens & Brittain (2023)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
4. Hammond et al. (2022)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
5. Root et al. (2022)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	CT	Y	Y	Y	Y
6. Letshokotla et al. (2024)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
7. Saleeque & Phulkar (2024)	Y	CT	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
8. Nesperos & Magbanua (2025)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	CT	Y	Y	Y	Y
9. Jimeno (2021)	Y	Y	CT	Y	CT	N	CT	CT	Y	Y
10. Palheta et al. (2022)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
11. Strittmatter et al. (2024)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	CT	Y	Y	Y	Y
12. Stewart et al. (2021)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	CT	Y	Y	Y	Y
13. Rich & Losardo (2025)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	CT	Y	Y	Y	Y
14. Olstad et al. (2021)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	CT	Y	Y	Y	Y
15. Till et al. (2022)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	CT	Y	Y	Y	Y
16. Amornsriwatanakul et al. (2025)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	CT	Y	Y	Y	Y
17. Gardner et al. (2025)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
18. Alzahrani et al. (2024)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	CT	Y	Y	Y	Y
19. Foley et al. (2023)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	CT	Y	Y	Y	Y
20. Wickman & Andersson (2025)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	CT	Y	Y	Y	Y
21. Nemaranzhe et al. (2025)	Y	Y	Y	Y	CT	CT	Y	Y	Y	Y
22. Oluwasanu et al. (2021)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	CT	Y	Y	Y	Y
23. Kossman et al. (2021)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	CT	Y	Y	Y	Y
24. Teshome et al. (2022)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	CT	Y	CT	Y	Y
25. Charway et al. (2023)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Note: A = Clarity of aims; B = Qualitative methodology appropriate; C = Research design appropriate; D = Recruitment strategy appropriate; E = Data collection rigorous; F = Researcher–participant relationship considered; G = Ethical considerations addressed; H = Data analysis rigorous; I = Clear statement of findings; J = Value of the research. Y = Yes; CT = Cannot Tell (insufficient methodological detail reported in the original study); N = No

Despite these limitations, the appraisal indicated that the evidence base was predominantly methodologically sound and sufficiently robust for thematic synthesis. The identified limitations primarily concerned reporting transparency rather than fundamental flaws



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in study design, and most studies demonstrated clear alignment between their research aims, methodological approaches, data collection, and analysis. CASP findings were considered when interpreting the synthesized evidence. Findings from studies with “Cannot Tell” or “No” ratings were not excluded; however, their contributions were interpreted more cautiously and given less interpretive weight where methodological reporting was limited. No study with methodological uncertainty was used as the sole basis for an overarching theme or conclusion. Overall, the appraisal supports the credibility of the synthesized findings while highlighting the need for greater reflexive reporting and methodological transparency in future qualitative research on sport development policy implementation.

Thematic Synthesis

This section presents the qualitative findings synthesized from twenty-five studies. In alignment with the research question, recurring patterns were identified and organized into themes and sub-themes representing shared experiences and perspectives on policy implementation and challenges in SDPs.

The recurrence of themes across contexts did not imply that implementation challenges were experienced uniformly. Their manifestations varied by sport setting. Higher education and collegiate contexts emphasized institutional governance, administrative support, financial resources, and policy coordination; school-based settings highlighted resource and facility limitations, scheduling, workload, and stakeholder support; community and disability sport contexts emphasized organizational capacity, inclusion, funding, and policy enactment; while elite, youth, and sport-for-development settings highlighted governance, stakeholder interests, partnerships, and program delivery. Thus, the synthesis identifies cross-context implementation patterns while recognizing the contextual conditions shaping their expression. Methodological quality was considered in interpreting these patterns, with greater confidence given to findings supported across stronger studies and greater caution applied where methodological reporting was limited.



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Governance and Financial Pressures on Policy Implementation

The analytical theme of governance and financial pressures on policy implementation emerged from three descriptive themes: *funding-driven policy compliance*, *policy standardization and performance monitoring*, and *organizational interests in policy implementation*. These capture how funding conditions, governance systems, and organizational priorities shape the interpretation and implementation of SDP policies.

Funding-Driven Policy Compliance

Several studies reported financial constraints affecting the implementation and continuation of sport development programs across school, community, university, and inclusive sport settings (Gagnås & Bjørndal, 2025; Hammond et al., 2022; Jimeno, 2021; Letshokotla et al., 2024; Nesperos & Magbanua, 2025; Saleeque & Phulkar, 2024). Gagnås and Bjørndal (2025) described financial support as necessary to carry out intended activities, with one participant stating, “...without the financial support, you can't do things the way you want.” Across settings, reported constraints included insufficient funding for facilities, staffing, tournaments, and program activities, as well as limited government support for disability-inclusive sport (Hammond et al., 2022; Letshokotla et al., 2024; Nesperos & Magbanua, 2025; Saleeque & Phulkar, 2024).

Resource prioritization and implementation costs also affected programs. Olstad et al. (2021) reported reluctance among some school leaders to allocate additional resources to swimming, while Foley et al. (2023) identified unexpected staff-time and technical costs. Charway et al. (2023) reported instances in which allocated government funding had not reached the intended organization. Thus, financial constraints involved not only funding shortages but also competing priorities, unanticipated costs, and gaps between allocated and received support.



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Policy Standardization and Performance Monitoring

Policy standardization and performance monitoring were reported as features of SDP implementation across the included studies. Gagnås and Bjørndal (2025) described standardized evaluation and reporting systems involving predefined objectives and measurable indicators, alongside increased administrative responsibilities associated with documentation. One participant noted, *“We have to systematise our development work in order to keep up...But these must never become so rigid that you’re no longer allowed to express yourself.”* Stewart et al. (2021) reported that policies could be adapted across sport levels, including variations for elite and community settings, although large-scale implementation was difficult to monitor continuously.

Monitoring practices varied across sectors. Alzahrani et al. (2024) reported that different ministries conducted separate national surveys with differing results, while participants were uncertain about the extent to which the resulting data informed policies and interventions across education and sport. Teshome et al. (2022) reported limited program monitoring and a lack of timely evaluation and feedback for improvement, with one study finding stating that *“program monitoring and evaluation, and provision of timely feedback for improvement were entirely absent.”* Root et al. (2022) reported administrative support and inter-organizational collaboration as part of the implementation process.

Organizational Interests in Policy Implementation

Organizational interests and priorities were reported across several sport development settings. Annett and Darby (2025) found that a UK university’s sport-for-development program in Malawi aligned with institutional missions and strategic priorities, including reputation and international engagement. One participant noted, *“...there have got to be other drawers to attract students, because it’s highly competitive and much goes in reputation.”* Saleeque and Phulkar (2024) reported ethical commercialization as a strategy for sustaining university sports programs, with one participant stating, *“Commercialization, if done ethically, can be a game changer for university sports.”* Till et al. (2022) reported competing priorities among coaches,



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including winning and personal reputation over participant well-being, while parents and administrators prioritized immediate success over longer-term program objectives.

Organizational commitment and readiness also influenced implementation. Wickman and Andersson (2025) reported that federations could not simply be required to adopt activities such as boccia or showdown without a receiving organization willing to assume responsibility. Oluwasanu et al. (2021) reported that some school principals and teachers considered physical education less important than academic subjects such as Mathematics, English, and Chemistry, affecting investment in PHE. Teshome et al. (2022) similarly reported that “*the program does not seem to matter for those who are in charge of its implementation.*”

Gaps Between Policy and Practice

The analytical theme of gaps between policy and practice was derived from three descriptive themes: *inclusion policies and implementation challenges*, *symbolic or compliance-based implementation*, and *limited administrative support and authority*. These themes capture the discrepancy between policy intentions and the realities of SDP implementation

Inclusion Policies vs. Implementation Challenges

Several studies reported gaps between formal inclusion policies and their implementation within sport and physical-activity settings. Christiaens and Brittain (2023) found that inclusion policies did not always address structural barriers to participation. One participant noted, “*...still have people saying we do not cater for disabled people.*” The study also reported that standardized inclusion procedures did not necessarily address individual participation needs, requiring practitioners to develop approaches for individual participants. Stewart et al. (2021) reported difficulties developing policies where scientific guidance was evolving, with one participant stating, “*I think it’s definitely hard to get right... the science isn’t conclusive so it’s hard to put a policy together when the space is ever changing.*” Amornsriwatanakul et al. (2025) reported that PA promotion among children and youth remained “*fragmented, unsustainable, and less effective,*” while Nemaranzhe et al. (2025) reported limited support and resources for implementing inclusion policies.



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Policy requirements also did not consistently align with implementation conditions across educational and sporting contexts. Oluwasanu et al. (2021) reported that although PHE was compulsory, school authorities, parents, and the wider community often prioritized other subjects, while government policies and poor road connectivity contributed to the discontinuation of cross-country activities. Kossman et al. (2021) reported conflicting policy requirements, including differences between state policies, practice requirements, and NATA recommendations. In contrast, Wickman and Andersson (2025) described inclusion in practice as participation alongside other children rather than separation, with one participant stating that children with Down syndrome “*shouldn't be placed somewhere else, separated and invisible.*”

Symbolic or Compliance-Based Implementation

Multiple studies reported compliance-oriented or symbolic forms of policy implementation in relation to accountability requirements and institutional constraints. Hammond et al. (2022) found that organizations frequently demonstrated compliance through reporting rather than comprehensive program integration, with disability sport remaining administratively separate despite formal integration policies. Root et al. (2022) similarly reported that translating policy into practice was more challenging than policy development, with one participant observing, “*It was much easier putting things down on paper... and then once we disseminated our plan to our coaching staff and student-athletes, I think that was more challenging in terms of getting everyone kind of on the same page.*” Strittmatter et al. (2024) reported tokenistic youth participation, with one participant stating, “*I still feel that we are there to fill up the quota. Then they take the rest (of the real businesses) with the rest of the people they trust.*” Saleeque and Phulkar (2024) similarly reported that university sporting facilities remained underused because policies did not support external collaboration, with one participant stating, “*Our facilities remain underused because we don't have policies encouraging external collaborations.*”



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Limited Administrative Support and Authority

Limited administrative support, unclear guidance, and weak coordination were frequently reported as barriers to SDP implementation. Jimeno (2021) reported insufficient support from school superiors, while Root et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of administrative leadership in communicating and implementing policies. Strittmatter et al. (2024) identified a lack of direction from higher authorities, with one participant stating, *“We have no guidelines, no steering from above.”* Stewart et al. (2021) reported difficulties accessing clear policy information, while Olstad et al. (2021) identified limited guidance on required resources and called for greater government support for instructors, scheduling, and staffing. Olstad et al. (2021) also reported limited professional collaboration, with greater dialogue between teachers and instructors not prioritized by school leaders. Rich and Losardo (2025) reported inadequate oversight and accountability when facilities were unavailable, while Kossman et al. (2021) identified insufficient implementation personnel to support accountability and respond to implementation needs.

Communication and coordination difficulties were also reported across organizational and governmental levels. Amornsriwatanakul et al. (2025) reported that stakeholders needed clearer guidance on integrating PA promotion into existing responsibilities and identified a need for a national coordinating body because implementation efforts remained fragmented. Alzahrani et al. (2024) similarly reported limited partnerships, reliance on individual initiatives, and bureaucratic delays in implementing policies and regulations. Foley et al. (2023) identified inadequate communication through limited program information, low awareness among parents and organizations, and conflicting information provided to members. Charway et al. (2023) reported calls for greater government involvement of organizations in implementation, with one participant stating, *“Government should use organisations like ours... then they should be involving us.”*



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Structural and Capacity Constraints

The analytical theme of structural and capacity constraints was derived from two descriptive themes: *infrastructure and facility constraints* and *limited time and workload pressures*. These themes capture how structural and capacity-related barriers affect organizations' ability to implement and sustain SDP initiatives

Infrastructure and Facility Constraints

Infrastructure, facility, and equipment constraints were reported as barriers to SDP implementation. Letshokotla et al. (2024) reported that limited space and a lack of indoor facilities in rural schools in Lephalale constrained sports grounds and the organization of sports activities and tournaments. One participant stated, *“One of the issues that we are currently facing is the yard space. As you know, soccer needs a bigger space; the learners are unfortunately unable to play in the school premises.”* Similar constraints were reported in Philippine schools, where inadequate facilities and equipment affected sports program delivery (Jimeno, 2021; Nesperos & Magbanua, 2025). Jimeno (2021) additionally reported concerns about facility budgets and inadequate training and competition equipment, while Teshome et al. (2022) reported insufficient facilities and equipment in both quality and quantity.

Limited facility access also affected the number and range of activities organizations could provide. Rich and Losardo (2025) reported that one program could accommodate only one team despite high demand because of limited gym time and coaching availability. One participant explained, *“There’s a lot of demand, we’ll have 30 kids try out for a team and we can pick one team because we only end with gym time for one team and we only have one coach.”* Oluwasanu et al. (2021) similarly reported that most schools lacked adequate equipment and, in some cases, had no PHE teacher, resulting in the absence of PHE lessons.

Limited Time and Pressure

Limited time and workload pressures were identified as constraints on SDP implementation, particularly in school settings. Letshokotla et al. (2024) reported difficulties



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promoting sports activities because of limited time, competing academic schedules, and workload demands. One participant stated, *“If the Department of Education decides to put sports in the curriculum, it should fit in the timetable like other subjects,”* while another reported, *“One other challenge that we have in the school is teachers’ workload, our work is too much...”* Similar constraints were reported in Philippine schools, including limited preparation time, competing demands, and inconsistent attendance among athletes and coaches (Jimeno, 2021; Nesperos & Magbanua, 2025). Till et al. (2022) described *“classes of 30+ students, 5 times a day”* and *“limited time frames we have with the participants”* as constraints on program delivery, while Palheta et al. (2022) reported limited time and participant-to-coach ratios as challenges in implementing training strategies and life-skills activities.

Time and workload pressures also affected administrative and program implementation tasks. Stewart et al. (2021) described under-resourcing in participation roles, with one staff member managing a *“massive portfolio.”* Rich and Losardo (2025) reported that off-court administrative tasks reduced time available for participation, while Foley et al. (2023) described voucher administration as *“an admin nightmare”* that required staff reassignment. Amornsriwatanakul et al. (2025) reported that PA promotion was perceived as an *“additional burden”* by stakeholders responsible for implementing the national plan. Kossman et al. (2021) similarly described workload pressures, with one participant stating, *“It’s like I don’t have time. I can’t do all of it. I could use a little help here.”*

Power and Inequality Within Sport Systems

The analytical theme of power and inequality within sport systems was derived from three descriptive themes: *unequal influence and knowledge hierarchies*, *structural inequalities in access to resources and opportunities*, and *challenges to organizational autonomy and identity*. Together, these themes capture how power imbalances and unequal access shape persistent challenges in SDP implementation.



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Unequal Influence and Knowledge Hierarchies

Several studies reported differences in stakeholder influence and participation in SDP decision-making. Annett and Darby (2025) described a partnership between a UK university and local practitioners in Malawi in which Global North actors were perceived as having greater authority and legitimacy in defining development priorities. One participant described sport as *“one element in the armoury of how the wealthy West can support development in Africa,”* while another reported that *“a white person in that setting has better knowledge than a black person... [creating] a platform from which the white person can speak and the black person can listen.”* Strittmatter et al. (2024) similarly reported restricted influence among young representatives in Norwegian sport, with one participant stating, *“We are only there to have a voice for the youth, and not for the rest.”* Participants also described professional qualifications as a condition for having their views recognized, stating that *“You have to take courses before you can have an opinion,”* while others reported being presented as inexperienced despite their knowledge and capabilities.

Limited involvement of local organizations and lower-level stakeholders was also reported by Charway et al. (2023). Participants stated that the National Sports Authority and sport ministry made decisions without involving their organizations or considering their existing structures. One participant explained, *“As we sit down here as individuals, we cannot take any decision until our leadership asks for our input but they don't.”* The study also reported concerns about insufficient institutional recognition, including legitimacy, promotion, and recognition.

Structural Inequalities in Access to Resources and Opportunities

Differences in access to resources, participation opportunities, and progression were reported across SDP settings. Gagnås and Bjørndal (2025) found that the Academy Classification framework in Norwegian boys' football academies placed greater emphasis on technical and academic knowledge, with one participant stating, *“If you're a young coach without an academic background, the Academy Classification framework must seem completely*



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incomprehensible.” The study also reported differences in academies’ capacity to meet formal requirements, with resource-rich academies better positioned to manage administrative demands. Letshokotla et al. (2024) identified restricted progression opportunities among learners in rural schools, including limited access to competitions beyond the local level and gender differences in participation. One participant reported that learners “*couldn’t go any further provincially and nationally since the competition was only held locally,*” while another noted that female learners participated less than male learners. Charway et al. (2023) similarly reported disproportionate allocation of national sports resources, with one participant stating, “*We concentrate so much on football in this country. In fact, two Black Stars matches can consume the whole budget for the year.*” Rich and Losardo (2025) further reported that service levels and the number of teams organizations could provide depended on volunteer availability, with one participant stating that it was “*wholly dependent on the number of volunteers.*”

Differences in access were also reported for facilities, equipment, professional development, and instructional time. Nemananzhe et al. (2025) reported insufficient adaptive equipment and inaccessible facilities, with participants describing situations in which learners had to be excluded or watch rather than participate. One participant stated, “*The fields are not made for wheelchairs, so sometimes I just watch instead of playing.*” Oluwasanu et al. (2021) reported differences in access to professional development, with seminars and workshops provided for Mathematics and English teachers but not PHE teachers. The study also reported differences in instructional time, with Mathematics scheduled five times per week compared with PHE once per week.

Challenges to Organizational Autonomy and Identity

SDP policy implementation presented challenges for organizations seeking to integrate broader policy requirements while maintaining existing services and organizational identity. Christiaens and Brittain (2023) emphasized inclusive choice in disability sport provision, with one participant stating that “*sport and physical activity should be available for everyone whenever and wherever they want it.*” Hammond et al. (2022) reported concerns that integration into mainstream structures could affect service quality, athlete voice, and program continuity.



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One participant referred to the potential *“loss of service, quality, and voice”* and expressed concern that changes in funding could result in programs being *“cut to a quarter of what it is right now.”* Rich and Losardo (2025) similarly reported that access to sporting facilities could depend on external authorities, with one participant stating that access to gyms was *“at the mercy of the school boards.”* These studies reported constraints related to maintaining services, accessing facilities, and responding to external policy and administrative requirements.

Organizational identity and ownership were also reported as areas of concern. Gardner et al. (2025) found that changes to established practices could affect perceptions of school identity, with one participant stating, *“It did take away from the identity of the school that some of the community do look for.”* Teshome et al. (2022) reported unclear program ownership between school and sports authorities, with one participant stating, *“The owner of the program is the school office, but 90% is owned by the sports commission.”* Till et al. (2022) additionally reported competition between sports as a barrier to collaboration, with scheduling conflicts between games and training limiting opportunities for inter-organizational cooperation.

Cultural and Motivation Challenges

The analytical theme of cultural and motivational challenges was derived from three descriptive themes: *cultural norm conflicts*, *challenges to motivation and participation*, and *capacity and knowledge gaps*. These themes capture how cultural, motivational, and competency-related conditions shape stakeholder engagement and the implementation of SDP initiatives.

Cultural Norm Conflicts

Multiple studies reported the influence of cultural norms, traditions, and performance expectations on SDP implementation. Palheta et al. (2022) reported that competitive sport cultures could conflict with programs emphasizing broader youth development. One participant stated, *“Adults want youth to compete, to win games and championships. For them, sport is just that.”* Till et al. (2022) reported a longer-term challenge related to athletes’ strong focus on rugby, with participants describing the need for cultural change through greater emphasis on



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physical literacy in primary and secondary education. Gardner et al. (2025) identified tradition as an implementation barrier and reported community expectations surrounding formal uniforms and established values of pride, respect, and dignity. Kossman et al. (2021) similarly reported resistance to changes in established practices, describing an “*old-school mentality*” among some coaches.

Sport-specific norms were also reported in relation to participation and inclusion. Wickman and Andersson (2025) reported strong norms regarding expected behavior in sport and described greater participation difficulties among individuals who differed from these norms in relation to disability, skin color, socioeconomic status, age, or sexual orientation. Palheta et al. (2022) further reported limited parental interest in the program’s broader developmental objectives, with greater emphasis placed on skill development and performance.

Challenges to Motivation and Participation

Challenges related to motivation and participation were reported across several SDP settings. Letshokotla et al. (2024) reported that school sports programs encouraged participation, teamwork, and competitive engagement, while Jimeno (2021) identified inconsistent athlete attendance as a challenge, with one participant stating, “*Sometimes, if there is a practice, the athlete is not attending.*” Palheta et al. (2022) reported lower engagement among older youth in life-skills activities, with participants aged 14–17 described as less receptive to discussions of behaviors and values. Till et al. (2022) similarly reported difficulties motivating youth to participate, including those with “*little to no connection with physical activity outside of school.*”

Participation challenges were also reported in relation to inclusion and stakeholder commitment. Nemaranzhe et al. (2025) reported peer exclusion, with one participant stating, “*Some friends include me, but others don’t want me to play with them.*” The study also reported limited teacher commitment, with some teachers viewing inclusive activities as additional work rather than necessary for all learners.



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Capacity and Knowledge Gaps

Gaps in practitioner knowledge, professional preparation, and implementation guidance were reported across several SDP settings. Palheta et al. (2022) found that youth sport programs lacked structured guidance for coaches delivering life-skills activities, with one participant stating, *“We don’t have a manual that helps coaches teach life skills.”* Christiaens and Brittain (2023) similarly reported that coaches lacked strategic approaches for including persons with disabilities in sport. Till et al. (2022) reported practitioners’ acknowledgement of limited knowledge, while Olstad et al. (2021) identified inadequate professional preparation in swimming education and the need for continued training. Nemananzhe et al. (2025) likewise reported the need for workshops and training to support inclusive sport implementation.

Implementation preparedness and access to specialist support were also reported as challenges. Wickman and Andersson (2025) found that organizations expressed willingness to implement initiatives but lacked sufficient knowledge, resources, and capability. One participant stated, *“The willingness is probably there, but the knowledge, the resources, and the capability are definitely not fully in place.”* Another described distancing themselves from an initiative because of limited knowledge and fear of making mistakes and called for an expert center to provide support. Stewart et al. (2021) also reported difficulties communicating with specific stakeholder groups and obtaining their feedback.

Discussion

This qualitative systematic review and thematic synthesis examined stakeholders’ perspectives on SDP policy implementation across the contexts represented in 25 included studies. Five analytical themes emerged: governance and financial pressures; policy–practice gaps; structural and capacity constraints; power and inequality; and cultural and motivational challenges. Rather than identifying isolated implementation barriers, the synthesis demonstrates how governance pressures, resource constraints, organizational capacity, power relations, and cultural expectations interact to shape how policies are enacted across different sport-development contexts.



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Governance and financial conditions shape how SDP policies are enacted across organizational settings. Funding and governance mechanisms can function both as enabling conditions and sources of organizational pressure, while standardized monitoring and reporting can strengthen accountability but also create administrative demands and constrain organizational capacity. Organizational interests further shape which policy priorities receive attention, particularly when reputation, commercialization, competitive success, or institutional priorities compete with broader SDP objectives. These dynamics are consistent with existing studies showing that governance mechanisms can strengthen accountability and organizational performance while also influencing organizational autonomy and priorities (Parent & Hoyer, 2018; Grix, 2009). SDP governance can therefore be understood as a negotiated process in which funding, accountability requirements, organizational interests, and implementation priorities interact to shape policy enactment.

These governance conditions help explain the persistent gap between formal policy commitments and implementation. Policy adoption does not guarantee substantive implementation when organizational conditions do not support policy enactment. Operational guidance, administrative support, coordination, and resources influence how formal requirements are translated into practice, while compliance-oriented approaches may produce symbolic implementation rather than substantive change (Hammond et al., 2022; Root et al., 2022; Strittmatter et al., 2024). Consistent with implementation research, policies developed at higher administrative levels may encounter different institutional realities during enactment (Ali et al., 2024; Rich & Losardo, 2025). The policy–practice gap therefore reflects not only limitations in policy design but also the organizational and local conditions through which policies are interpreted and enacted.

However, capacity is not distributed equally across sport systems. The synthesis indicates that implementation can reproduce existing inequalities when authority, expertise, resources, and opportunities are unevenly distributed among stakeholders and organizations. Unequal access to resources and decision-making influence suggests that implementation is shaped not only by organizational capacity but also by whose knowledge and interests are recognized within the process. These dynamics are consistent with evidence linking disparities



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in sport participation to unequal access to economic, social, and cultural resources (Mudd et al., 2024) and resonate with broader concerns that standardized development approaches may overlook local realities (Giles, 2012). Power and inequality are therefore integral to policy implementation because they influence whose knowledge is recognized, whose interests are prioritized, and who gains access to SDP resources and opportunities.

Beyond organizational structures and resource distribution, SDP implementation is embedded within cultural and motivational contexts. Formal policy objectives may encounter resistance when they conflict with established competitive cultures, traditions, expectations, and stakeholder attitudes. This suggests that implementation depends not only on whether appropriate structures and resources are available, but also on how stakeholders understand and value the objectives being introduced. Research similarly emphasizes the influence of psychological, social, and sociocultural conditions on sport participation, particularly among disadvantaged populations (Nelson et al., 2022; Ossai & Nwabuwe, 2025). SDP implementation therefore involves the negotiation of policy objectives with existing cultural meanings, motivations, competencies, and relationships through which stakeholders engage with sport.

Taken together, these interconnected conditions support Policy Enactment Theory's conceptualization of policy implementation as a process of interpretation, negotiation, and reconstruction rather than simple compliance (Braun et al., 2011; Lingard & Sellar, 2013). The synthesis indicates that stakeholders interpret policy requirements in relation to available resources, organizational priorities, professional roles, power relations, and local cultural conditions. Governance and funding shape the conditions of enactment, structural capacity influences what organizations can practically deliver, and policy–practice gaps emerge when formal requirements encounter different operational realities. Power relations and cultural conditions further influence whose interpretations and priorities shape implementation. SDP implementation is therefore best understood as a context-dependent process in which policy is shaped through interaction between formal expectations and the organizational and sociocultural environments in which it is enacted (Weng, 2024).



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Overall, effective SDP policy implementation requires more than well-designed policies. It requires adequate organizational capacity, clear implementation mechanisms, meaningful stakeholder participation, equitable opportunities, and flexibility to respond to local contexts (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2026). Governance systems must balance accountability with sufficient flexibility to accommodate differences in organizational capacity and sociocultural conditions. Policy effectiveness therefore depends not simply on policy adoption, but on how policies are interpreted, negotiated, and enacted within sport organizations and their stakeholder contexts.

Strengths and Limitations

This qualitative systematic review and thematic synthesis provides a systematic synthesis of stakeholders' perspectives on policy implementation in sports development programs across diverse international contexts. A major strength of the review is the application of a transparent and systematic methodology guided by the PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021), the PICo framework for qualitative evidence synthesis (Lockwood et al., 2015), and the CASP Qualitative Checklist to assess the methodological quality of the included studies (Long et al., 2020). Furthermore, thematic synthesis enabled the integration of findings across heterogeneous settings, allowing the development of higher-order analytical themes that extend beyond the conclusions of individual studies (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The supplementary use of Google Scholar broadened the retrieval of potentially relevant evidence.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the review included only studies published in English and indexed in the selected databases; consequently, relevant evidence published in other languages or indexed exclusively in databases such as SPORTDiscus or Web of Science may not have been retrieved. The review may also be subject to publication bias because unpublished or less accessible evidence was not included. Second, although the review initially focused on higher education settings, the Context component of the PICo framework was broadened following preliminary screening because only a limited number of eligible qualitative studies addressed the phenomenon of interest. This modification was not specified in the registered protocol and therefore represents a protocol deviation that



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may have introduced a risk of selection bias. However, the modification was limited to the Context component; the Population, Phenomenon of Interest, study design, language, publication period, and other eligibility requirements remained unchanged. Records previously excluded solely because they did not meet the original higher-education Context were reconsidered using the revised criterion, which was applied consistently during the final selection process. This broader Context may limit the transferability of the findings to specific sport-development settings, particularly because the included studies varied across higher education, school-based, community, disability, elite, and sport-for-development contexts.

Although the included studies represented diverse international contexts, the geographic distribution of the evidence was uneven and did not provide comprehensive global coverage. The findings should therefore be interpreted as reflecting selected international contexts rather than universal patterns of policy implementation. The included studies also represented diverse sport-development contexts, including higher education and collegiate sport, school-based sport, community and disability sport, elite and organized sport, youth sport development, and sport-for-development initiatives. Although the synthesis identified recurring implementation patterns across these contexts, the differences in organizational structures, program purposes, and stakeholder roles may limit the direct transferability of the findings to any single sport-development setting. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as context-sensitive patterns identified across the included studies rather than as a comprehensive characterization of sports development systems globally.

Another limitation concerns the use of Google Scholar as a supplementary search source. Although its inclusion broadened the retrieval of potentially relevant evidence, Google Scholar's ranking and indexing mechanisms are not fully transparent and may change over time (Boeker et al., 2013). Consequently, the search may not have identified all potentially relevant studies, particularly those with lower relevance rankings or limited indexing visibility.

Methodological appraisal identified variations in the reporting of reflexivity, triangulation, interview procedures, and analytical transparency across the included studies. These variations were considered when interpreting the synthesized findings, with findings from studies with greater methodological uncertainty given less interpretive weight where



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reporting was limited. Nevertheless, such variations may still have influenced the depth and credibility of individual findings. Future primary studies should strengthen methodological rigor through transparent research designs, detailed data-collection procedures, diverse recruitment strategies, and triangulation to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative findings (Carter et al., 2014). Explicit ethical safeguards and reflexive practices are likewise important for ensuring research integrity and minimizing the influence of researcher positionality on data interpretation (Mirza et al., 2023; Sibbald et al., 2025).

Finally, as with all qualitative evidence syntheses, the generation and interpretation of analytical themes involved researchers' judgment despite the use of systematic coding procedures, quality appraisal, and consensus discussions to enhance trustworthiness (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Future qualitative systematic reviews may strengthen the evidence base by incorporating additional discipline-specific databases, including non-English literature where feasible, and examining policy implementation within more specific sports development contexts, particularly higher education institutions.

Conclusion

The success of SDPs depends on the implementation of policies within complex contexts, where multiple levels of governance, institutional pressures, organizational capacities, structural constraints, power dynamics, and sociocultural factors interact. In light of this, this review contributes to sport development scholarship by providing a deeper understanding of how governance mechanisms, accountability demands, and performance frameworks can simultaneously support SDP standardization while constraining the autonomy of sport actors and limiting locally responsive policy implementation. Across the contexts represented in the included studies, the findings indicate that SDP implementation is best understood as a context-dependent process shaped by the interaction of these conditions rather than by policy directives alone.

These findings suggest several implications for practice and policy. Addressing these challenges requires a balanced governance approach that provides flexibility, adequate support systems, and sufficient organizational capacity. Sporting organizations also need to develop



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context-responsive strategies that create opportunities for participation, promote inclusive programs, and address inequalities in access to sport. These implications should be considered in relation to the specific organizational and sociocultural contexts in which SDPs are implemented rather than as universally applicable prescriptions.

Acknowledgement

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used during manuscript preparation for language refinement, conceptual brainstorming, preliminary coding support, and initial translation of the title, abstract, and keywords into Spanish. AI-generated coding suggestions and translations were critically reviewed, refined, and verified by the authors. All final coding decisions, thematic development, data synthesis, interpretation, conclusions, and the accuracy of the Spanish translation remained the authors' sole responsibility.

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