

# A Case Study of Soccer Education in China's Leibo County

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## Abstract

As a team sport, soccer significantly enhances the overall qualities of students. Presently, China is earnestly striving to reform physical education (PE) and foster the growth of Chinese football. Leibo County, a remote and mountainous region in China with limited educational resources, has actively embraced these national policies. Nonetheless, factors such as the natural environment, historical context, and economic development have posed constraints on its progress in implementing these reforms. Therefore, in this study, the author adopted the literature review methods, questionnaire survey and field survey to investigate some of the junior and senior high schools in Leibo County. The study reveals that schools encounter challenges due to incomplete rules and regulations, a shortage of teachers and facilities, an imperfect admission system, infrastructure and underdeveloped curricula. This research offers data-driven support and guidance for the advancement of local physical education, along with practical strategies for enhancement. In conclusion, the researcher has examined these issues and put forth recommendations based on the findings. As a result, strengthening the integration of sports and education, increasing financial support, strengthening efforts on publicity, smoothing channels of targeted support for sports and organizing soccer competitions and encouraging students to participate will help promote football education in Leibo County.

## Keywords

Leibo County, Campus Soccer, Current Development Research

## 1. Introduction

Soccer, as a team sport, effectively improves students' comprehensive quality. Most Chinese people do love soccer but don't perform well in international competitions. So, China has worked hard on PE reform to promote football de-

velopment by restructuring the curriculum for youth while achieving targeted poverty alleviation (Liu & Ma, 2022; Su, 2022; Huang & Zou, 2021). Besides, China strides purposefully towards fostering the world's most beloved sport, delving into a discourse intertwining theoretical musings on sports' pervasive influence, notably football, in sculpting national pride and identity. This exposition culminates in the assertion that the Chinese state adeptly harnesses football's allure as a tool for wielding "soft power," bolstering diplomatic relations, situating itself prominently on both Asian and global stages. Simultaneously, it diligently amplifies its populace's sense of belonging and national identity (Júnior & Rodrigues, 2017). However, many obstacles exist in poor areas, such as slow economic development, unbalanced resource allocation, and a backward concept of physical education. Therefore, this paper studies these issues to provide data support and theoretical guidance for local PE reform. This study aimed to investigate soccer education in China's Leibo County based on the following reasons. First, contribute for the improvements of physical fitness for healthy personality in the country. As a team sport with multiple players, soccer is a great test of students' teamwork. Students are required to have a high sense of teamwork and achieve great coordination in the process of participation. Soccer can increase communication among students and develop their expression skills so that they can perform well in daily communication. At the same time, football contains sportsmanship. Students will be hard-working and durable under long-term training.

What's more, football games can encourage students to fight hard and make continuous progress to improve their professional level, enabling them to improve their spiritual quality in their studies. For one thing, including football in the curriculum can enrich students' extracurricular life and allow them to strengthen their exercise and be healthier in addition to their professional studies (Nagy & Tobak, 2015). For another, it helps ease students' tension in their studies and relax their body and mind during exercise. In addition, as an aerobic sport, football enables students to have a stronger memory and learn better, thus laying a foundation for teenagers' physical and mental development.

Second, to promote PE reform schools sports function. In recent years, China has intensified the PE reform and continued to increase sports activities among teenagers and higher-learning institutions for PE improvement. However, the PE reform in some provinces and cities is relatively slow, without clear reform objectives. Campus football provides an opportunity for this part of the schools. In the process of developing football, schools can integrate their sports resources and mobilize departments to promote the development of physical education. Campus football can also drive the development of other sports. Exposing students to various sports can further promote physical exercise and physical culture and create a good atmosphere for the gradual optimization of sports mechanisms and improvement of sports activities to accelerate football development in China (Huang & An, 2018; Dali, 2021). Third, to strengthen talent pool for better development of Chinese Football. As one of the world's most popular

sports, football enjoys wide popularity in China. However, the China national football team has not performed well in recent years in global matches. In 2004, FIFA acknowledged that football originated from Chinese Cuju (literally “kick-ball”). As the birthplace of football, China has failed to qualify for the World Cup several times.

Therefore, it is necessary for China to reform football education for the youth. Targeted skill development for students can explore their full potential and produce more outstanding talents for China’s football career. Campus football has a very wide distribution in China, with great differences in the development of places. We must focus on timeliness while developing campus football and endeavor to overcome unfavorable factors for the healthy development of campus football. We should not pay so much attention to the form that the form outweighs the content. Developing campus football deepens students’ understanding of football and improves their football skills. Only in this way can football win popularity in schools and attract more students to participate, thus achieving the goal of training national football talents and improving the overall development of football in China. Since 2009, the General Administration of Sport, the Ministry of Education and other authorities have introduced a series of policies to support campus football. It is a sign of China’s determination to expand the football population and revitalize football through the great development of campus football. Therefore, this study significantly contributes to sports activities in China’s Leibo County by conducting a case study of football education. To find out the results, literature review, field visit and survey questionnaire methods were applied.

The remainder part of this study is organized as follows. Section two provides the education and economic background of Leibo County. Section three presents the literature review. Section four contains method of analysis. Section five provides a robustness analysis. Section six reports the causality test

## **2. Background**

### **2.1. History and Education of Leibo County**

In ancient times, Leibo was settled by ethnic groups of southwest China. Ethnic groups have been scattered here since the Shang, Zhou and Qin dynasties. It was established as Tanglang County in 135 BC (the sixth year under Emperor Wu’s reign of the Han dynasty in the Jianyuan era) and renamed Qianjie County subordinate to Qianwei Prefecture at the end of the Han dynasty. In the third year of the Shu-Han dynasty in the Jianxing era, it was renamed Mahu County, the place where Zhuge Liang in the Three Kingdoms period conquered Nanzhong. So, there are many relics and legends related to the Three Kingdoms in Leibo. During the Yuan and Ming dynasties, Mahu Prefecture was set up in today’s Huanglang Town and its surrounding areas. In the Qing dynasty, Leibo Hall (Wei) was set up in today’s county seat. In 1914 (the third year of The Republic of China), Leibo Hall was changed into a county, and the Leibo County Gover-

nor's Office was set up. In August 1950, Leibo County was set up, subordinate to the Leshan Special Zone of Sichuan Province. In 1956, it came under the administration of the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture.

As the eastern portion of Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Leibo County lies on the northern bank of the Jinsha River in the Hengduan Mountains in southwest China. It covers an area of 2932 km<sup>2</sup>, with mountainous areas accounting for 84%. The county has gullies, high mountains, steep slopes, deep valleys, and cliffs. Its population and schools are scattered, so students should have to travel over mountains to get to school. This county has jurisdiction over 21 villages and towns with a population of 283,000, of which 59.4% are people from ethnic groups dominated by Yi. Leibo used to be a severe poverty-stricken county of ethnic groups in the hinterland of Liangshan. It is a resettlement county for two great national hydropower projects of Xiluodu and Xiangjiaba hydropower plants, as well as a county under a regional development plan in the Wumeng Mountain area. The state also names it the "Hometown of Yi Folk Songs in China", "Top County of High-quality Navel Orange in China" and "Hometown of Meng Huo".

With poverty alleviation as the focus in recent years, Leibo has promoted the balanced development of compulsory education and intensified efforts to control dropouts. With various key support projects for education, such as "One Village, One Kindergarten" and "Comprehensive Improvement of Running Conditions of Schools with Weak Compulsory Education in Poor Areas", Leibo has promoted the rapid development of ethnic education and brought about great changes in secondary education, compulsory education and preschool education (Huang & Zou, 2021; Huang & An, 2018). This has further stimulated people's desire for a good educational environment, good educational resources and better teaching quality.

However, owing to factors such as the natural environment, historical background, and economic development, Leibo County's educational infrastructure is relatively deficient, with a particular weakness in its teaching staff. Recruiting and retaining teachers in rural schools proves to be a daunting task (Dali, 2021). Furthermore, the presence of incomplete curricula and inadequately qualified educators has resulted in higher rates of school choice and student dropouts (Dali, 2021). Consequently, the prominent educational challenge confronting Leibo County is centered on enhancing the competence of teachers in ethnic regions, elevating classroom teaching quality, and striving for a well-rounded development of ethnic education, which has become a critical and precarious issue.

To that end, Leibo has made great efforts to explore the way for education improvement. With the targeted support of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, Leibo has taken education as the fundamental solution to poverty alleviation. It hopes to use favorable support to overcome the unfavorable historical environment with the efforts of all. It also expects to solve the shortage of quality educational resources in rural schools in a relatively short period of

time and strives to improve the competence of teachers at all levels to make classes more efficient and achieve equity and improvement in education (Dali, 2021).

## **2.2. Challenges for Football Education Development in the Country**

As a key county in poverty alleviation and development, Leibo County has in recent years, under the guidance of the rural revitalization strategy and the strong support of social poverty alleviation forces, grasped the keynote of poverty alleviation through education and promoted the development of physical education such as football (Liu & Ma, 2022). In summary, Leibo County has made some progress in promoting PE development in terms of pattern, speed and scale; meanwhile, there is still much to go with the goal of high-quality development of rural PE in the new era (Dali, 2021). Insufficient emphasis on poverty alleviation through sports, challenges of football education development due to remote location, lack of infrastructure and educational resources and backward school facilities and unbalanced resource allocation are among the challenges for football education development. These issues are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Over the past thirty years, Leibo County has made significant progress in various undertakings with increasing economic support from the state, including targeted poverty alleviation and more funds and support for poverty eradication. However, as the old saying goes, “It is better to teach a man how to fish than to give him fish”. In addition to changes in the social landscape, children’s physical and mental health is also a favorable condition for poverty alleviation. Hence, the utilization of sports for poverty alleviation assumes a pivotal role in the broader rural revitalization strategy. Over the recent years, both national and provincial governments have enacted a range of policies aimed at fostering the rural rejuvenation of Leibo County. But the investment in PE is far less than that in areas such as rural education, medical and health care, and infrastructure, leading to a large gap in its PE development with some ethnic regions such as Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang) and Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture (Yanbian). For example, in Xinjiang, more than 1000 schools have school teams. More than 100,000 children attend football training regularly, and outstanding players will join various clubs every year.

Another example is Yanbian, where there is at least one football training ground for teenagers in each city, county, and district and special funds for local football development (Huang & An, 2018). In contrast, the Bagu Township Central School, 60 km from Leibo County, did not have its first football pitch among rural primary schools until 2017, allowing children in remote villages to realize their dream of playing football. Later, the ultra-high utilization rate of the pitch led to severe wear and tear of the artificial turfs. Even worse, the rubber running track surface began to break down, and the concrete basketball court became slippery, posing a safety hazard for students and teachers doing sports.

This pitch was not rebuilt until the temporary cadres of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and the National Supervisory Commission were informed of the situation after a coordinated effort. This shows that Leibo County needs further attention from government departments due to insufficient investment in football education and hindered PE development.

Located in the east of Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture on the southwest edge of Sichuan Province, Leibo County is adjacent to the Jinsha River and surrounded by mountains. There are many mountains, steep slopes and cliffs, with mountainous areas accounting for more than 84%. Overall, the county is quite inaccessible with poor information transfer, restricting its development of football education to a certain extent.

1) As for resource allocation: Situated in a distant region of western China, Leibo County's limited economic progress has imposed significant limitations on its advancement in science and technology, education, culture, healthcare, and the fight against poverty. Given this context, the primary focus on economic development has naturally led to relatively minimal support for sports-related poverty alleviation efforts (Liu & Ma, 2022; Su, 2022).

2) As for PE fitness consciousness: Leibo County has a large proportion of rural areas where cultural and leisure facilities are limited. In recent years, the improvement of sports and fitness facilities for village farmers has raised public awareness of "sports+" and improved their mental outlook. However, they are still less enthusiastic about professional sports like football. Parents generally believe that there is an irreconcilable contradiction between physical training and learning, resulting in their objections to campus football.

3) As for coordinated development: There is no strong bond between internal and external football activities in Leibo County, with little cooperation among schools, authorities, and social organizations and groups outside the county. Leibo County has obvious shortcomings in improving campus football entrusted training mechanism, the innovation of campus football talent cultivation, and integrating social resources for special funds. In January 2018, the Education Department of Sichuan Province issued the Implementation Opinions on Further Promotion of Youth Campus Football in Sichuan Province. This supported Leibo County to cooperate with Sichuan Education Informatization and Big Data Center, Xinhua Winshare Publishing and Media Co., Ltd., and Chengdu Shijiyifeng Sports Culture Communication Co., Ltd. in the organization of public welfare activities such as the "Football for Dreams". More or less, these activities attracted attention outside the county and improved the local football education development. However, in the long run, such infrequent activities have little impact and fail to create a long-lasting and effective incentive for football education.

Facilities and educational resources lay a foundation for the smooth development of football education. However, the remote areas are in dire need of football equipment and infrastructure improvement. There are 47 townships, 272 villages, and 9 communities in Leibo County, with a population of 276,000.

Among the population, 57.5% are people from ethnic groups dominated by Yi. A large proportion of rural areas has led to poor economic development of the county. Leibo County has received strong support from the government and social organizations as a key target of poverty alleviation (Liu & Ma, 2022; Su, 2022). For example, the Leibo area received various equipment and materials worth of nearly RMB 300,000 for football education from the 2019 “Football for Dreams” public education campaign, including football apparatus and teaching software system and resources. However, Leibo still faces the dilemma of inadequate infrastructure and difficulty in professionalizing football education due to the integrated factors, including poor regional development, the limited influence of such activities, and the lack of a special fund system for football education (Dali, 2021). Details are as follows: 1) Inadequate infrastructure in schools. Quite a few football fields in rural primary schools are small with worn rubber surfaces; 2) Limited funds for football training in schools. Most students come from low-income families and do not have professional equipment for football training; 3) Incompetent teachers. To a large extent, the professional competence of teachers determines the quality of football teaching in primary and secondary schools (Huang & Zou, 2021; Huang & An, 2018). In many primary and secondary schools in Leibo County, most football teachers have not received professional football education, so they have limited football ability with backward football education concepts; 4) Few competition opportunities and experience. Competition is an effective platform for information access, resource integration, deficiency discovery, and skill development. At present, football education in Leibo County is still confined to physical exercise. Few activities have been carried out around player selection, football team building, teaching training and competition growth, leading to less professional football education.

Schools’ “hardware” in Leibo County is not well equipped. Located in economically backward poor areas, the schools are operating on a tight budget. This has had a serious impact on the size of the school and its infrastructure. Inadequate sports equipment and unregulated sports venues prevent schools from providing proper and effective PE. In addition, under the non-standard management measures, there are no strict rules and regulations for obsolescence and renewal of sports equipment and venues in schools, and there is no overall plan for equipment purchase.

There is a general emphasis on academic performance and neglect of athletic performance among parents, grassroots schools, and government education administrations. Consequently, physical education in economically disadvantaged regions is merely a nominal presence. In general, society tends to diminish the significance of physical education, viewing it as an activity that competes with extracurricular pursuits, thereby discouraging students’ participation in sports. Additionally, schools assign varying levels of importance to physical fitness assessments, rendering physical education tests a mere formality. To compound matters, physical education instructors often lack the enthusiasm and innovative approach necessary for effective and engaging teaching, as well as a genuine pas-

sion for their profession.

Located in a remote part of western China, Leibo County's poor economic development has hampered its development of science and technology, education, culture and health services. Against this backdrop, with economic development as the first priority, sports for poverty alleviation have received limited support.

### 3. Literature Review

This section reviews and overviews relevant literature on physical education (football). And the focus here will be literature on football education since this paper centers around football. Specifically, the author collected, read, and analyzed domestic and international research materials on football, including papers, news and media reports, blog posts, and government/NGO/think tank reports, and provided a brief overview of the currently existing research on football education based on the actual situation of Leibo County, to provide a reference for future research

#### 3.1. International Research

Football education in schools constitutes a very important part of the football construction system in Germany. First, football education can provide a continuous supply of back-up talents for professional teams; Second, scientific cultivation and training concepts can guarantee both the quality and quantity of athletes. This is why Germany has long dominated the world football. Germany has developed a campus football development plan for this. Undoubtedly, the key point is the policy on football teachers in schools. Every year, 2,000 college students majoring in sports will participate in professional training for football coaches, which means that a large number of full-time football teachers will join the public schools for football education every year.

Brazil, known as the Kingdom of Football, has many top football players that put the world to shame. It is very representative of campus football education. It is found that the main reasons for the title Kingdom of Football are as follows: First, Brazil attaches great importance to football lessons and makes football compulsory in primary and secondary education so that students can have good football skills by the end of basic education (Huang & An, 2018). Second, schools in Brazil have deep a partnership with football clubs. Even if some youth athletes do not have the opportunity to join youth professional football teams, they can still play football at school. Third, Brazil emphasizes medical coverage for football education. Such medical support can further promote the development of football education in schools.

#### 3.2. International Research

Reserve talents play an important part in campus football education. Football education aims to develop both all-rounders and professionals to ensure the



supply of talented players for football. In China, the low literacy of reserve professional football players is as contrary to the overall development of students as the poor athletic performance of ordinary students. Besides, Chinese scholars have done some research on the current campus football education and concluded that the campus football education is now on the right way, but the problems are just as obvious. Football education in China is still in its infancy and faces three major problems: insufficient teachers, venues and funds. Also, campus football is not only a sport but also a comprehensive education for students. Nowadays, students are faced with stiff social competition and a complex employment environment. Football education is there to develop the ability of students to withstand setbacks and face adversity. At present, most schools pay too much attention to students' academic performance, resulting in the prevalence of utilitarian education. This exam-based education model is going to extremes, yet education is about developing a better-rounded person and enriching his or her life in various ways. That is the significance of football education in schools. There are already many studies on the training, teenage reserve talent and development of campus football education, but there are few studies on schools' PE management. Moreover, these studies do not distinguish the types of schools, and there is a serious lack of empirical case studies on the management of campus football education.

According to the analysis in the previous chapter, Leibo County has put poverty alleviation through education into practice in recent years. It has striven to find solutions to improve the quality of education and has made overall progress in school running and education. However, many factors, such as the natural environment, social history and economic development, still hinder the development of physical education. For example, Leibo County still faces many problems, including insufficient attention to PE in rural revitalization, remote location, and the lack of infrastructure and educational resources (Dali, 2021; Yang, 2022).

### **3.3. Domestic Research**

Studies on PE in poor areas are not only to support the development of national policies but also to help children in the areas have a healthy and happy childhood, to ensure the overall development of students, and to balance the gap between education in poor areas and urban areas.

This paper will encourage teachers to update their educational ideas and promote their work motivation. Teachers are more organizers and instructors of students' learning than a messenger of knowledge. Teachers also need to help students gradually develop a healthy and correct outlook on life and values while learning. Teaching students how to learn is more important than teaching them knowledge. In the economic era, if teachers are to be competent in their work, they must constantly update their ideas and be creative. Experience alone is far from enough to realize educational innovation. We must carry out scientific research on education and learn from it.

This paper will also serve as a reference for the authorities concerned and promote their steady progress in local education reform. In the context of targeted poverty alleviation, it is necessary to further reform the current situation and way of physical education in poor areas (Liu & Ma, 2022; Su, 2022). This paper has investigated local PE development in-depth, pointed out the existing problems, and provided guidance and feasible suggestions for the optimization of local education reform.

To sum up, through the survey and research of 120 schools in Leibo County, this study has identified both the subjective and objective factors that restrict the PE development of schools in this area and proposed some practical solutions to serve as theoretical support and guidance for their PE development.

#### 4. Research Methods

This chapter is a description of the research methods used in this paper. Specifically, the author selected the appropriate subject of investigation and used the methods of literature research, field visits, and questionnaire survey to further analyze the development and existing problems of football education in Leibo County. The data was collected using literature review, field visit and survey questionnaire.

After searching and consulting CNKI and various international Internet search engines, the author collected a huge number of literature on football education at home and abroad and categorized them to provide an adequate theoretical basis for this paper. After field research, the author learned about the venues and equipment of three schools in Leibo County, as well as the organization of class-based leagues and teaching of football courses in some schools, and collected and sorted out the photos and programs of campus football activities in the schools.

Moreover, a questionnaire survey is a widely used method in social surveys at home and abroad. A questionnaire is a form with questions used for statistics and surveys. It is a method in which the researcher gathers reliable information by measuring the problem under study with controlled measurements. This method has more advantages, such as high efficiency of production and collection, and great objectivity and uniformity; however, there are also some shortcomings, such as misleading questions and low response rate and efficiency. In this paper, according to the actual situation of the research, a survey questionnaire was made under this method, together with the appropriate research subjects, to further investigate the development of football education in Leibo County. We used random sample selection method.

#### 5. Research Subjects and Questionnaire Design

There are few existing studies on football education in China. In order to ensure the scientific and rigorous nature of the questionnaire, the questionnaire design was adopted from those already used by domestic scholars and modified in ac-

cordance with the actual situation of Leibo County and the research needs of the article. See the appendix page for details. In Leibo County, there are 120 schools of all levels and types. These include two combined secondary schools, nine regular junior secondary schools (with two 9-year schools), 50 primary schools (with six village-level combined primary schools), and 31 extension centers of primary schools that are composed of five schools run by the education department (including one with only a few students), 22 private schools, and several county-level preschool education centers combined as one under the “one village, one kindergarten” program. There are also 50 boarding schools (including 11 secondary and 39 primary schools).

There are 4098 faculty members and off-campus teachers at all schools in the county. Specifically, there are 340 faculty members and 882 off-campus teachers in preschool education, including 774 teachers from ethnic groups and 223 full-time teachers. Primary schools (both schools and extension centers) have 1599 faculty members, including 741 teachers from ethnic groups and 1561 full-time teachers. Moreover, 1277 faculty members work in secondary schools (regular junior secondary schools, 9-year schools, and combined secondary schools), including 646 female teachers, 479 individuals from ethnic groups, and 1,260 full-time teachers. (Source: Statistical Communiqué of the Leibo County on the 2021 National Economic and Social Development)

A total of 196 students from 4 secondary schools and 3 grades in Leibo County were randomly selected for this survey. Each student was given a questionnaire, and 196 questionnaires were collected, with 190 valid ones, an effective rate of 97%.

## 6. Results and Findings

These questionnaires showed the following findings on the development of campus football in secondary schools in Leibo County.

### 6.1. Interest in Football

This pie chart in **Figure 1** below shows that students have a relatively high enthusiasm for football. Nearly 27.59% of them in the four secondary schools expressed their love for this sport and about a quarter of them could become potential football lovers with effective encouragement. In short, football has a good foundation for development. But football is less attractive compared to classic sports like basketball, badminton, and table tennis, as it is a fresh sport that has just been promoted. Secondary schools also lack enough guidance measures to get those students who love football to participate in it.

### 6.2. Infrastructure

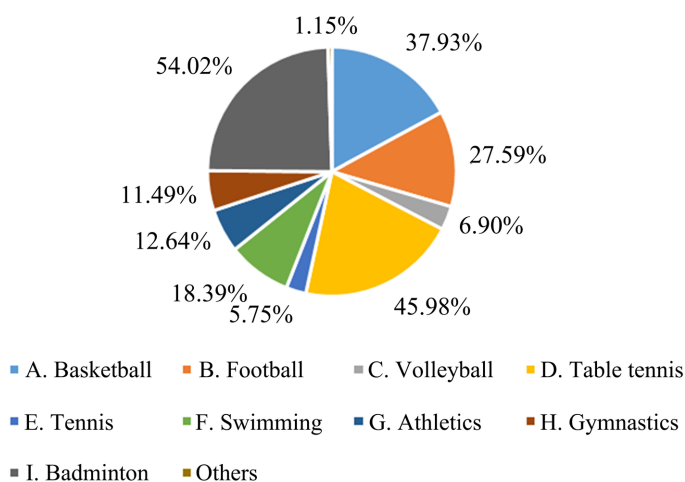
There are still serious deficiencies in the football infrastructure of secondary schools in Leibo County. Among the four schools, only two have football pitches covered with artificial turfs, while the other two only have grassless

fields, without equipment or coaches for student players. All of these are serious problems.

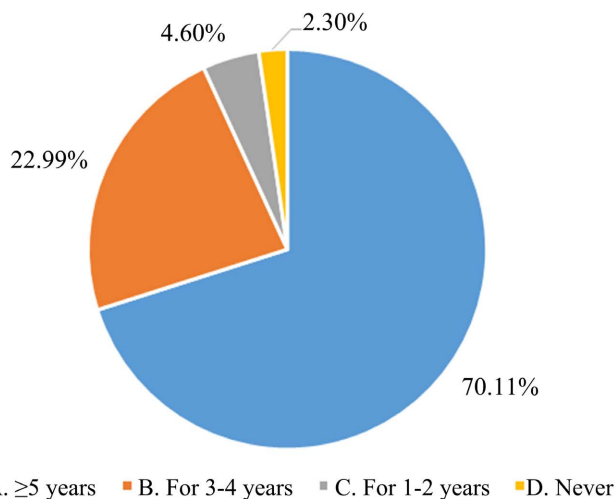
According to **Figure 2**, 70% of the students had never participated in football activities. Reasons for this include lack of publicity in schools, parents' indifferent attitudes toward participation, and some students' concern about the impact of playing football on their studies. Only 2.3% of the students participated in football activities for 4 - 5 years. As for weekly frequency, 41.36% of the students do not engage in any football activity and 40% of them seldom play football (**Figure 3**). Only 10% of the students could play football twice or more a week, but the overall frequency is still low.

### 6.3. Football Course

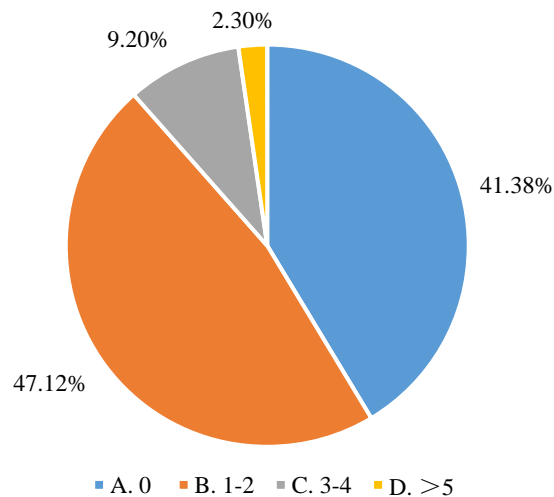
There is also much to do for secondary schools in Leibo County to offer and improve football courses. Only two secondary schools in Leibo County offer football



**Figure 1.** Students' interest in sports at secondary schools in Leibo County.



**Figure 2.** Number of years of students' participation in football at middle schools in Leibo County.



**Figure 3.** Frequency of students' participation in football at middle schools in Leibo County.

courses, and some negatively respond to the overall organization of campus football promotion activity launched by Leibo County.

## 7. Findings and Policy Implications

As a key county in poverty alleviation and development, Leibo County has in recent years, under the guidance of the rural revitalization strategy and the strong support of social poverty alleviation forces, grasped the keynote of poverty alleviation through education and promoted the development of physical education such as football (Liu & Ma, 2022). In summary, Leibo County has made some progress in promoting PE development in terms of pattern, speed and scale; meanwhile, there is still much to go with the goal of high-quality development of rural PE in the new era. Specific development bottlenecks are as follows:

### 7.1. Insufficient Emphasis on Poverty Alleviation through Sports in Rural Revitalization

Over the past thirty years, Leibo County has made significant progress in various undertakings with increasing economic support from the state, including targeted poverty alleviation and more funds and support for poverty eradication. However, as the old saying goes, "It is better to teach a man how to fish than to give him fish. In addition to changes in the social landscape, children's physical and mental health is also a favorable condition for poverty alleviation. Therefore, poverty alleviation through sports is crucial to the rural revitalization strategy (Liu & Ma, 2022). In recent years, the national and provincial governments have formulated a series of policies for the rural revitalization of Leibo County. But the investment in PE is far less than that in areas such as rural education, medical and health care, and infrastructure, leading to a large gap in its PE development with some ethnic regions such as Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region

(Xinjiang) and Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture (Yanbian). For example, in Xinjiang, there are more than 1000 schools with school teams. More than 100,000 children attend football training on a regular basis, and every year the outstanding players will join various clubs. Another example is Yanbian, where there is at least one football training ground for teenagers in each city, county, and district and special funds for local football development (Huang & An, 2018; Dali, 2021). In contrast, the Bagu Township Central School, 60 km from Leibo County, did not have its first football pitch among rural primary schools in the county until 2017, allowing children in remote villages to realize their dream of playing football. Later, the ultra-high utilization rate of the pitch led to severe wear and tear of the artificial turfs. Even worse, the rubber running track surface began to break down, and the concrete basketball court became slippery, posing a safety hazard for students and teachers doing sports. This pitch was not rebuilt until the temporary cadres of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and the National Supervisory Commission were informed of the situation after a coordinated effort. This shows that Leibo County needs further attention from government departments due to its insufficient investment in football education and hindered PE development.

## **7.2. Challenges of Football Education Development Due to Remote Location**

Located in the east of Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture on the southwest edge of Sichuan Province, Leibo County is adjacent to the Jinsha River and surrounded by mountains. There are many mountains, steep slopes and cliffs, with mountainous areas accounting for more than 84%. On the whole, the county is quite inaccessible with poor information transfer, restricting its development of football education to a certain extent.

1) As for resource allocation: Located in a remote part of western China, Leibo County's poor economic development has imposed serious constraints on its development of science and technology, education, culture and health services, as well as the progress of poverty eradication. Against this backdrop, with economic development as the first priority, sports for poverty alleviation have naturally received limited support.

2) As for PE fitness consciousness: Leibo County has a large proportion of rural areas where cultural and leisure facilities are limited. In recent years, the improvement of sports and fitness facilities for village farmers has raised public awareness of "sports+" and improved their mental outlook. However, they are still less enthusiastic about professional sports like football. Parents generally believe that there is an irreconcilable contradiction between physical training and learning, resulting in their objections to campus football.

3) As for coordinated development: There is not a strong bond between internal and external football activities in Leibo County, with little cooperation among schools, authorities, and social organizations and groups outside the county. Leibo County has obvious shortcomings in the improvement of campus

football entrusted training mechanism, the innovation of campus football talent cultivation and the integration of social resources for special funds. In January 2018, the Education Department of Sichuan Province issued the Implementation Opinions on Further Promotion of Youth Campus Football in Sichuan Province. This supported Leibo County to cooperate with Sichuan Education Informatization and Big Data Center, Xinhua Winshare Publishing and Media Co., Ltd., and Chengdu Shijiyifeng Sports Culture Communication Co., Ltd. in the organization of public welfare activities such as the “Football for Dreams”. More or less, these activities attracted attention outside the county and improved the local football education development. However, in the long run, such infrequent activities have little impact and fail to create a long-lasting and effective incentive for football education.

### **7.3. Lack of Infrastructure and Educational Resources**

Facilities and educational resources lay a foundation for the smooth development of football education (Wicker, Hallmann, & Breuer, 2013). However, the remote areas are in dire need of football equipment and improvement of infrastructure. There are 47 townships, 272 villages, and 9 communities in Leibo County, with a population of 276,000. Among the population, 57.5% are people from ethnic groups dominated by Yi. A large proportion of rural areas has led to poor economic development of the county. Leibo County has received strong support from the government and social organizations as a key target of poverty alleviation. For example, the Leibo area received various equipment and materials worth nearly RMB 300,000 for football education from the 2019 “Football for Dreams” public education campaign, including football apparatus and teaching software system and resources. However, Leibo still faces the dilemma of inadequate infrastructure and difficulty in professionalizing football education due to the integrated factors, including poor regional development, the limited influence of such activities, and the lack of a special fund system for football education. Details are as follows: 1) Inadequate infrastructure in schools. Quite a few football fields in rural primary schools are small with worn rubber surfaces; 2) Limited funds for football training in schools. Most students come from low-income families and do not have professional equipment for football training; 3) Incompetent teachers. To a large extent, the professional competence of teachers determines the quality of football teaching in primary and secondary schools (Tu, 2020). In many primary and secondary schools in Leibo County, most of the football teachers have not received professional football education, so they themselves have limited football ability with backward football education concept; 4) Few competition opportunities and experience. Competition is an effective platform for information access, resource integration, deficiency discovery, and skill development. At present, football education in Leibo County is still confined to physical exercise. Few activities have been carried out around player selection, football team building, teaching training and competition

growth, leading to less professional football education.

#### 7.4. Strategy Exploration

There are many practical problems to be solved in Leibo County in terms of football education, including insufficient attention to poverty alleviation through sports, weak awareness of physical fitness, loose football partnerships, poor publicity, and lack of infrastructure and education resources. It is necessary for education departments, schools and every PE teacher in mountainous areas to find practical solutions to these dilemmas and try to create a safer and more comfortable football environment for students there and to further inspire their passion for both football and sports. Therefore, the following policy implications are forwarded.

1) Strengthening the integration of sports and education. Leibo's education and sports departments should work together to explore ways to cultivate excellent professional football players (Liu & Li, 2017; Lin, 2021). Specifically, the education departments are responsible for the overall planning, guidance and management of campus football, while the sports departments organize coaches from sports schools and elite retired athletes to carry out amateur football training for students. This will provide technical support and services for the development of campus football.

2) Increasing financial support. Functional departments of the Leibo County government can set up special funds for campus football activities to provide a financial guarantee for campus football. At the same time, active efforts should be made to encourage local enterprises, individuals and other social resources to provide financial support for the development of campus football (Kaplánová, 2020). Some qualified schools can also expand financing channels on their own to alleviate the shortage of funds. In terms of equipment, it is necessary to update and maintain some old equipment in time.

3) Strengthening efforts on publicity. Relevant departments should strengthen the efforts to publicize football education in Leibo County with the help of traditional media and new media. Sichuan Radio and Television Science and Technology Education Channel, also known as the SCTV-8, has launched its original weekly youth football program "Sichuan Campus Football" to spread the concept and spirit of campus football and promote the development of campus football in Sichuan Province. This program has received warm responses and great attention from the public and has become a stage for children who love football to showcase themselves. Therefore, primary and secondary schools in Leibo County can develop some typical cases about football development and publicize them through media platforms such as "Sichuan Campus Football" (Dali, 2021).

4) Smoothing channels of targeted support for sports. Relevant departments should put in place the decisions and arrangements by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on the collaboration between the eastern and west-



ern regions and attract developed cities in the east to provide targeted and special sports assistance to Leibo County. With sports as the first priority, the county should continue to improve the assistance mechanism, expand the assistance model, and strengthen cross-border cooperation to promote resource complementarity and talent exchange.

5) For the county to vigorously promote the development of campus football education, it is essential to recruit professional football coaches (Galdino, Lesch, & Wicker, 2022). Therefore, the superior education departments and schools in Leibo County can integrate the “bringing in” strategy with the “self-development” strategy to reinforce the campus football teacher team and improve teachers’ professional skills and theoretical knowledge about football. The first is the “bringing in” strategy, which means education departments and schools should recruit external football coaches and instructors to ensure at least two professional football teachers are available for each school featuring football education and ensure that schools in mountainous areas will not fail to carry out campus football education normally due to insufficient teachers. The second is the “self-development” strategy, which means education departments and schools should carry out special training for physical education teachers in mountainous schools in a planned way and strengthen internal and external exchanges by sending teachers to study in other parts of the country. Schools can also cooperate with colleges, universities, and professional football clubs to guide students to carry out football training, learn from their valuable experience, improve the football teaching level of physical education teachers, and update their football teaching philosophy

6) In poor mountainous areas like Leibo County, schools, society and families do not have a keen understanding of football education and are likely to consider football training as an act to sap will and waste money, which will have a negative impact on learning. Parents are more concerned about their children’s grades, so there is an obvious contradiction between learning and training. Therefore, promoting the all-around development of students’ morality, intelligence and physical fitness is essential.

7) Primary and secondary schools in Leibo County should step up efforts on the publicity of campus football and create a sound atmosphere for campus football. They should fully leverage their existing resources to hold a series of football cultural activities, such as theme class meetings and handwritten newspapers, so as to encourage students to participate in football activities, understand football, and be familiar with football and love football. Besides, students and parents should be guided to establish a correct concept of youth development and stimulate students’ interest and enthusiasm for football (Zhou et al., 2020; Zhong, 2023). We should take the development of campus football as an important path to cultivate students with both ability and merit, and football cultural festivals and club activities as important platforms to cultivate talent so as to foster students’ will, improve their personality, and promote their all-round

development of morality, intelligence, physical fitness, aesthetics and labor. In addition, we should take campus football as the starting point to drive the comprehensive reform of campus sports and facilitate its implementation and development. Efforts shall also be made to guide students in actively participating in sports activities and gradually developing exercise habits, which will effectively improve students' physical fitness and promote their physical and mental health development.

8) Schools in mountainous areas of Leibo County are short on sports resources, and they can't construct standard football fields and purchase sufficient equipment and facilities in a short time. Therefore, physical education teachers should take into account schools' existing sports resources in football teaching and make active exploration based on these resources (Black et al., 2019). Moreover, efforts should also be made to improve students' teamwork spirit in football training and encourage them to give full play to their own advantages and skills in practical sports, thus improving their multi-faceted literacy.

9) Relevant departments should actively organize football competitions and encourage students to participate. Efforts should also be made to organize on-campus football matches, intensify exchanges with off-campus football organizations, and improve the amateur football training network.

## 8. Conclusion

Football is a very popular activity among teenagers. It not only plays a vital role in promoting students' physical and mental development in mountainous areas but also opens a window for them to understand the outside world. Therefore, it is imperative to give great impetus to football education and promotion of campus football in mountainous areas of Leibo County and guide schools, social organizations and families in the county to support youth football. Guided by policies on campus football education, the education department of Leibo County should integrate the "bringing in" strategy with the "self-development" strategy to bring in football coaches with a high level of competence, carry out the special training for PE teachers in a planned manner, and strengthen internal and external exchanges. In addition, it is necessary to enhance the awareness of football education among schools and families, build football culture in mountainous areas, and highlight the educational value of football training. It is also crucial to formulate a reasonable teaching plan with the characteristics of Leibo County and improve the competition system and level of campus football in mountainous areas. The rapid development of campus football in the mountainous area of Leibo County requires joint efforts from all parties. Only in this way can the county truly achieve the goal of promoting poverty alleviation through sports and realize the football dream of students in the mountainous area.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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