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Review Article

The Role of School Sport Participation and Sport Culture in Adolescents' Psychosocial Adjustment, Self-Efficacy, and Social Anxiety: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

Social anxiety, low self-efficacy and adjustment difficulties are common in adolescence, and schools need accessible contexts that can strengthen students' psychosocial resources. This narrative review examined the role of school sport participation and sport culture in adolescents' psychosocial adjustment, self-efficacy and social anxiety, drawing on literature published up to March 2026. Crossref, PubMed Central/Europe PMC, DOAJ, DergiPark and academic web search engines were searched, and peer-reviewed sources with verifiable digital object identifiers were synthesised thematically within self-efficacy theory, the exercise and self-esteem model, the cognitive-behavioural model of social anxiety, self-determination theory and positive youth development. Meta-analytic evidence and a 2026 systematic review of 189 studies indicate small-to-moderate benefits of sport and physical activity for overall well-being, mental health and self-esteem. Recent large-sample studies show that school and extracurricular sport, sport interest, parental involvement and physical literacy are associated with better school adjustment, higher self-esteem and life satisfaction, and stronger general and social self-efficacy, with resilience, self-esteem and peer attachment acting as mediators. Evidence on social anxiety is more nuanced: extracurricular sport and physical activity were associated with declining social anxiety in longitudinal and cross-lagged studies, and the relationship appears reciprocal, whereas cross-sectional comparisons of athletes and non-athletes in Türkiye did not consistently show lower social anxiety among athletes. The benefits appear to depend on team-based and sustained participation, need-supportive and mastery-oriented climates and the explicit teaching of life skills. Limitations of the literature include the predominance of cross-sectional self-report designs, single-item participation measures and samples from a few countries. A conceptual framework, figures summarising mechanisms and pooled effects, and recommended instruments are presented. Schools should offer inclusive, low-threshold sport formats, train coaches and physical education teachers in need-supportive practice and give socially anxious students graded opportunities to participate.

Keywords: Adolescence, psychosocial adjustment, school sport, self-efficacy, social anxiety

INTRODUCTION

Secondary school is one of the most socially demanding settings of the life course. Adolescents must negotiate new peer hierarchies, growing academic expectations and an intensified awareness of how they are evaluated by others. For many young people these demands are a source of growth, but for a sizeable minority they are associated with social anxiety, low confidence in their own capabilities and difficulties in adapting to school life. Social anxiety in adolescence is closely tied to peer relations: adolescents with higher social anxiety perceive less social acceptance and support from peers and describe their close friendships as less supportive and intimate (La Greca & Lopez, 1998). Cognitive-behavioural models explain how fear of negative evaluation, self-focused attention and avoidance maintain the problem, because avoidance deprives the person of corrective social experiences (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997).

Self-efficacy, defined as the belief in one's capability to organise and execute the actions required to manage prospective situations, is a central resource against these difficulties. Bandura (1977) proposed that self-efficacy beliefs are built from four sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion and physiological and affective states. Generalised self-efficacy has been shown to be a cross-culturally stable construct that relates to optimism, self-regulation and well-being (Luszczynska et al., 2005). Self-esteem and life satisfaction complete the picture of psychosocial adjustment: life satisfaction in youth is associated with positive intrapersonal, interpersonal, school and health outcomes and functions as an indicator of overall adaptation (Proctor et al., 2009).

School sport, comprising inter-school competitions, intramural leagues, school teams and sport clubs linked to physical education, is a context that may simultaneously provide all four sources of self-efficacy, repeated and structured social exposure, and opportunities for belonging and competence. The educational benefits claimed for physical education and school sport span physical, social, affective and cognitive domains (Bailey, 2006; Bailey et al., 2009), and school sport participation has been associated with academic achievement (Bradley et al., 2013). Yet the benefits are not guaranteed. The quality of the sport experience depends on the motivational climate created by coaches and teachers, on whether life skills are taught intentionally, and on the broader sport culture of the school and family (Bean & Forneris, 2016; Coakley, 2011; Holt et al., 2017).

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e-ISSN: 2519-1896/© 2026 ASI. All rights are reserved, including those for text and data mining, AI training, and similar technologies.

The present narrative review focuses on the joint role of *school sport participation* and *sport culture* in three outcome domains: psychosocial adjustment (including school and social adaptation, self-esteem and life satisfaction), general and social self-efficacy, and social anxiety. Sport culture is understood here as the values, interests, knowledge and social norms surrounding sport in an adolescent's life, including physical literacy, family and peer sport norms and the sport ethos of the school (Cairney et al., 2019; Edwards et al., 2017). The review covers literature published up to March 2026 and has three aims: (a) to synthesise theoretical mechanisms that explain how school sport and sport culture may influence these outcomes; (b) to summarise recent empirical evidence, including cross-lagged and mediation studies; and (c) to derive implications for schools, physical education teachers and coaches, as well as a research agenda suitable for studies indexed in international databases.

METHOD

Research design

The study was conducted as a narrative review, which allows theoretical frameworks and empirical findings from sport psychology, developmental psychology, educational sciences and public health to be integrated. Because the target outcomes are measured with diverse instruments and designs, a statistical pooling of effects was not attempted; instead, pooled estimates reported in existing meta-analyses were summarised.

Literature search and selection

Keyword searches were conducted in the Crossref metadata database, PubMed Central/Europe PMC, the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), DergiPark and academic web search engines, and the reference lists of key reviews were screened (Eime et al., 2013; Opstoel et al., 2020; Panza et al., 2020). Search strings combined population terms (adolescen*, high school, secondary school, student*, youth), exposure terms (school sport*, extracurricular sport, interscholastic, team sport, sport participation, physical exercise, physical literacy, sport culture) and outcome terms (psychosocial adjustment, social adaptation, school adjustment, self-efficacy, social anxiety, self-esteem, life satisfaction). Peer-reviewed sources published up to 31 March 2026 were eligible; seminal theoretical and psychometric works were included irrespective of date. Priority was given to samples aged 12 to 18 years; studies with university students were used only to illustrate mechanisms and were explicitly labelled as such. Only sources with a DOI were cited, and the bibliographic metadata of every cited source were verified against Crossref records.

Synthesis

Evidence was organised into four themes: (a) theoretical mechanisms, (b) school sport, sport culture and psychosocial adjustment, (c) sport and self-efficacy, and (d) sport and social anxiety. Meta-analytic findings were prioritised over single studies, and longitudinal and cross-lagged designs over cross-sectional designs when drawing conclusions.

FINDINGS

Theoretical mechanisms

Five complementary perspectives explain how school sport and sport culture may influence adolescents' psychosocial adjustment. Fig 1 integrates them into a single framework in which participation and sport culture operate through mastery and vicarious experiences, structured social exposure, belonging and competence, and the quality of adult-led climates.

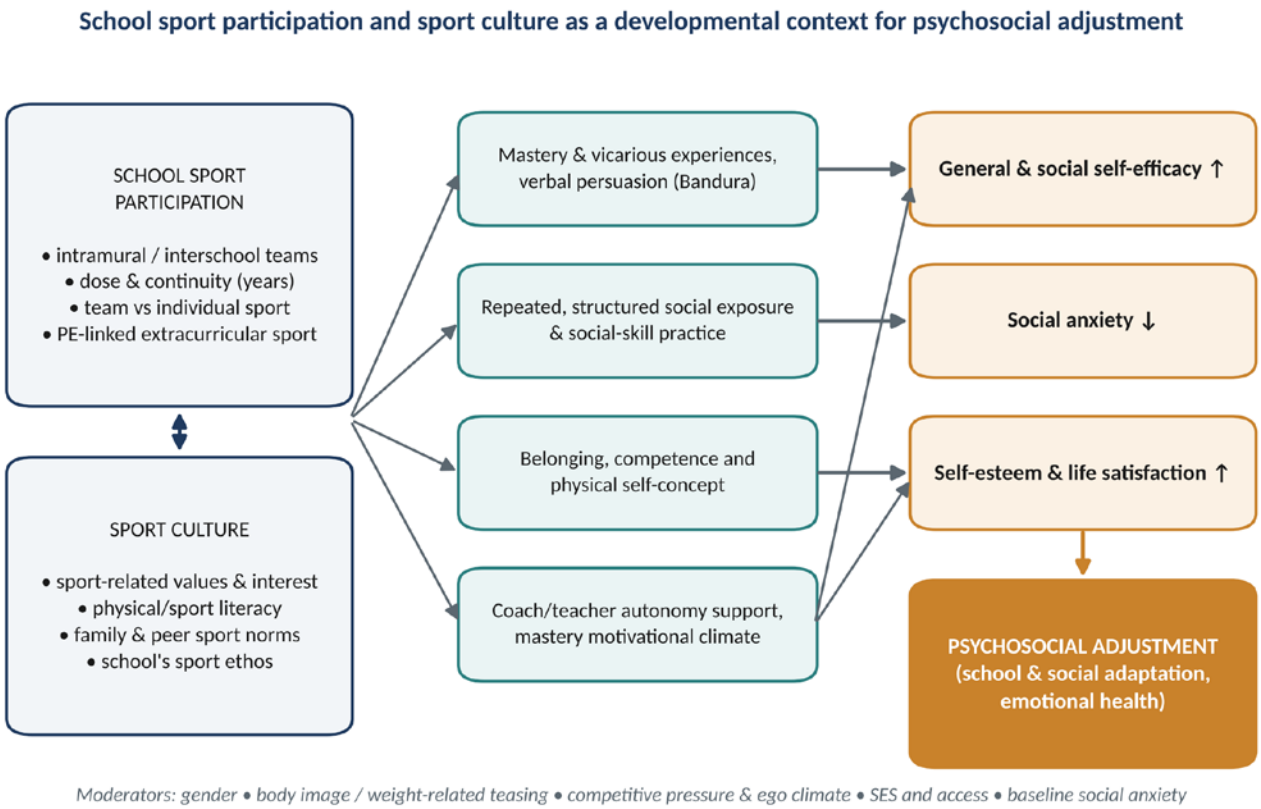

Fig 1. Conceptual framework linking school sport participation and sport culture to self-efficacy, social anxiety, self-esteem, life satisfaction and psychosocial adjustment (developed by the author)

Self-efficacy theory: Bandura's (1977) social-cognitive account offers the most direct explanation of why school sport may build confidence. Training and competition provide graded mastery experiences, teammates of similar age provide models whose success raises observers' expectations, coaches and physical education teachers provide verbal persuasion, and athletes repeatedly learn to interpret pre-competitive arousal as readiness rather than threat. Fig 2 maps these four sources onto typical school sport experiences. Physical self-efficacy, i.e., perceived physical ability and confidence in self-presentation of physical skills (Ryckman et al., 1982), is the most proximal outcome; whether gains generalise to academic and social self-efficacy is an empirical question, and life-skills research suggests that transfer is more likely when it is taught explicitly rather than assumed (Bean et al., 2018; Gould & Carson, 2008).

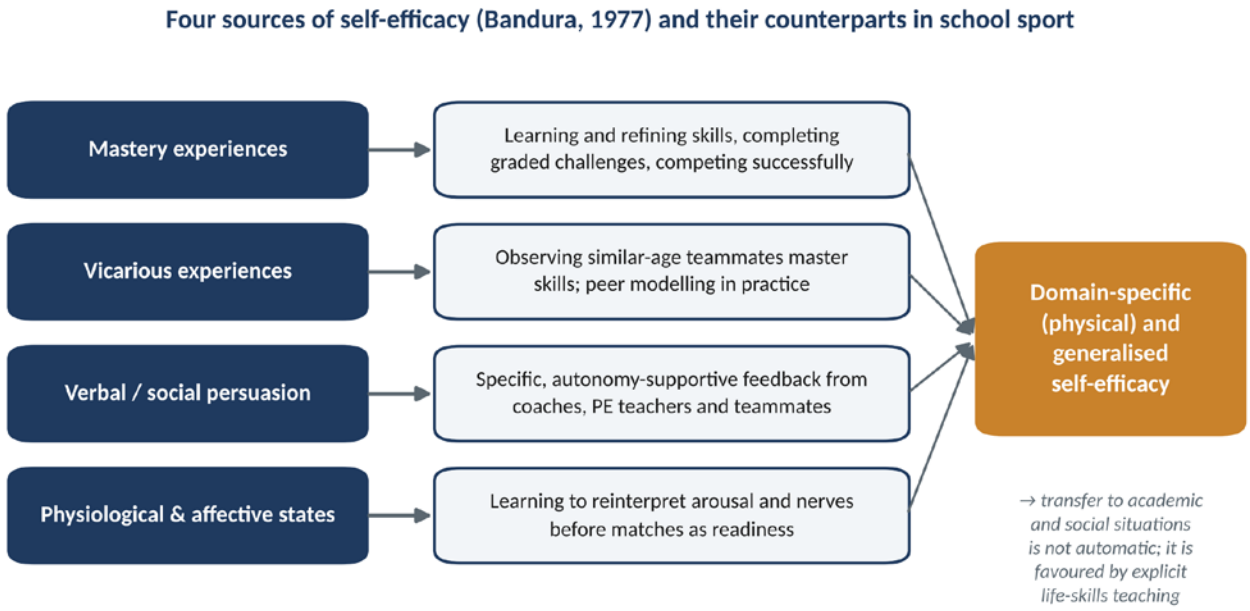

Fig 2. The four sources of self-efficacy and their counterparts in school sport (developed by the author on the basis of Bandura, 1977; Bean et al., 2018)

Exercise and self-esteem model: Sonstroem and Morgan (1989) proposed a hierarchical model in which physical activity first increases physical self-efficacy, which in turn raises perceived physical competence and physical acceptance, and these domain-specific self-perceptions eventually contribute to global self-esteem. Meta-analytic data support the lower levels of this hierarchy: across 64 studies, physical activity correlated with perceived physical competence (r = .30), perceived fitness (r = .26) and general physical self-concept (r = .25) but only weakly with perceived appearance (r = .12) (Babic et al., 2014), and in randomised trials physical activity interventions improved self-concept (g = 0.49) and self-worth (g = 0.31) in children and adolescents, with stronger effects in school and gymnasium settings (Liu et al., 2015).

Social anxiety and exposure: According to the cognitive-behavioural model of social anxiety, fear of negative evaluation and avoidance of social situations maintain anxiety because they prevent disconfirming experiences (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). Team-based school sport inherently involves repeated, predictable and goal-oriented social exposure in which attention is directed toward a shared task rather than toward the self. Such exposure, combined with shared group membership, may reduce social anxiety. At the same time, sport is an evaluative context (performance in front of peers, selection, competition), so for highly anxious adolescents the same context can be threatening; the motivational climate is therefore a likely moderator.

Self-determination and positive youth development: SDT explains why the quality of the sport experience matters. Teaching and coaching that support autonomy, competence and relatedness are associated with autonomous motivation and positive outcomes in physical education (Vasconcellos et al., 2020). PYD perspectives add that organised activities give adolescents experiences of initiative, emotional regulation, teamwork and social skills that are less frequent in classrooms (Hansen et al., 2003; Larson, 2000). Positive outcomes depend on deliberately structuring the sport context, for example through explicit life-skills teaching, rather than on participation per se (Bean & Forneris, 2016; Holt et al., 2017). In this context, Turhal (2026) highlighted the psychosocial relevance of safe sport environments, identifying psychological safety, supportive coach–athlete relationships, social support and positive motivational climates as important considerations for athlete well-being.

Sport culture as a distal resource: Sport culture can be understood as the "soil" in which school sport participation grows. Physical literacy, i.e., the motivation, confidence, competence and knowledge needed to value physical activity (Edwards et al., 2017), has been proposed as a resource for resilience in children and youth (Jefferies et al., 2019) and as a determinant of health through both behavioural and psychosocial pathways (Cairney et al., 2019). Family and peer sport norms shape adolescents' interest in sport and their continued involvement in it. These cultural resources are expected to sustain participation and to amplify its psychosocial benefits (Fig 1).

Overview of recent evidence

Table 1 summarises recent empirical studies published between 2024 and March 2026 that are directly relevant to the review questions. Most studies were conducted in China, Northern and Western Europe and Türkiye; designs were predominantly cross-sectional with mediation models, complemented by prospective cohorts, cross-lagged panels and a large systematic review.

Table 1. Recent empirical studies (2024–2026) on school sport, sport culture and psychosocial outcomes in adolescents

Study	Sample and setting	Design	Exposure	Main findings
Zheng et al. (2025)	12,257 Chinese junior high school students	Longitudinal survey, multiple mediation	Parental sport involvement, sport interest, extracurricular sport	Parental involvement predicted school adjustment directly and via sport interest and extracurricular sport participation (including a chained path)
Grasaas et al. (2025)	90,091 Norwegian adolescents	Cross-sectional	Current sport vs dropout	Participants reported less school stress and more teacher care and belonging
Equinet et al. (2025)	2,970 Dutch youth, ages 10 to 13	Prospective cohort	Sport hours and type	Sport predicted higher self-esteem via social acceptance and athletic competence; team and non-aesthetic sports more favourable
Fernandes et al. (2024)	1,053 Portuguese adolescents	Cross-sectional, mediation	Sport participation	Life satisfaction linked to sport indirectly via emotional intelligence and self-esteem
Grasaas & Sandbakk (2025)	26,171 Norwegian adolescents in 18 sports	Cross-sectional vs national data	Sport discipline and category	Higher life satisfaction than national values, particularly in girls
Peng et al. (2025)	1,613 Chinese adolescents	Cross-sectional, SEM	Physical exercise	Exercise predicted self-efficacy; resilience mediated about 44% of the effect; invariant across sex
Leng et al. (2025)	1,230 Chinese adolescents	Cross-sectional, chain mediation	Physical activity	Lower academic stress directly and via general self-efficacy and resilience
Yıldırım et al. (2024)	Turkish adolescents (athletes and non-athletes)	Cross-sectional	Sport participation	Athletes higher in social self-efficacy; social anxiety did not differ; self-efficacy negatively related to social anxiety
Üstündağ et al. (2025)	352 Turkish sport high school students, 15–18 years	Cross-sectional	Sport-school enrolment	Girls reported more social anxiety; social anxiety related to weaker communication skills
Zhu et al. (2025)	1,022 Chinese students, 10–18 years	Cross-sectional, moderated mediation	Physical literacy	Physical literacy related to mental health via resilience; physical activity moderated the first path
Zhou & Yang (2026)	989 Chinese adolescents, 10–14 years	Three-wave cross-lagged, 12 months	Physical activity	Physical activity and social anxiety negatively predicted each other over time
Kong et al. (2026)	1,099 Chinese students, grades 5–9	Cross-sectional, SEM	Green exercise	Self-efficacy partially mediated lower kinesiophobia
Heller et al. (2025)	Swiss longitudinal follow-up, 2007–2022	15-year prospective	Childhood sport volume and mode	Over 2 h/week of sport associated with a reduction in social anxiety; sport mode not significant
Wade et al. (2026)	189 studies, 5–17 years	Systematic review	Sport participation	Better self-esteem, life satisfaction, interpersonal skills and belonging and fewer depressive/anxiety symptoms; team sport more consistent

Note. SEM = structural equation modelling.

School sport, sport culture and psychosocial adjustment

Overall evidence: The most recent meta-analysis of health-related outcomes of youth sport participation found that, compared with non-participants, participants had better overall health and well-being (d = 0.23) and lower mental ill-being, including anxiety, depressive and stress symptoms (d = −0.25), whereas the pooled difference for social outcomes was small and not statistically significant (d = −0.08) (Bengtsson et al., 2025). A meta-analysis of 30 controlled trials in typically developing children and adolescents likewise showed that physical activity interventions produce a modest but significant improvement in mental health (SMD = 0.37), although the certainty of evidence was rated low (Fu et al., 2025). The most comprehensive recent synthesis, a systematic review of 189 studies of children and adolescents aged 5 to 17 published in March 2026, linked sport participation with higher self-esteem and life satisfaction, fewer depressive and anxiety symptoms, and better interpersonal skills, prosocial behaviour and belonging; team sports showed stronger and more consistent benefits than individual sports, and self-perceptions, peer belonging and social support were proposed as the central mechanisms of an updated "Mental Health through Sport" model (Wade et al., 2026). This update extends the earlier adult model (Eather et al., 2023) and the original youth review, which had already concluded that team sport was associated with greater psychosocial benefit than individual activity (Eime et al., 2013). Domain matters as well: in a multilevel meta-analysis of 98 studies, school sport was inversely associated with mental ill-health (r = −.09), whereas physical education showed no association (White et al., 2017). Personal and social development in physical education and sport also depends on the pedagogical approach (Opstoel et al., 2020). Key pooled estimates are summarised in Fig 3.

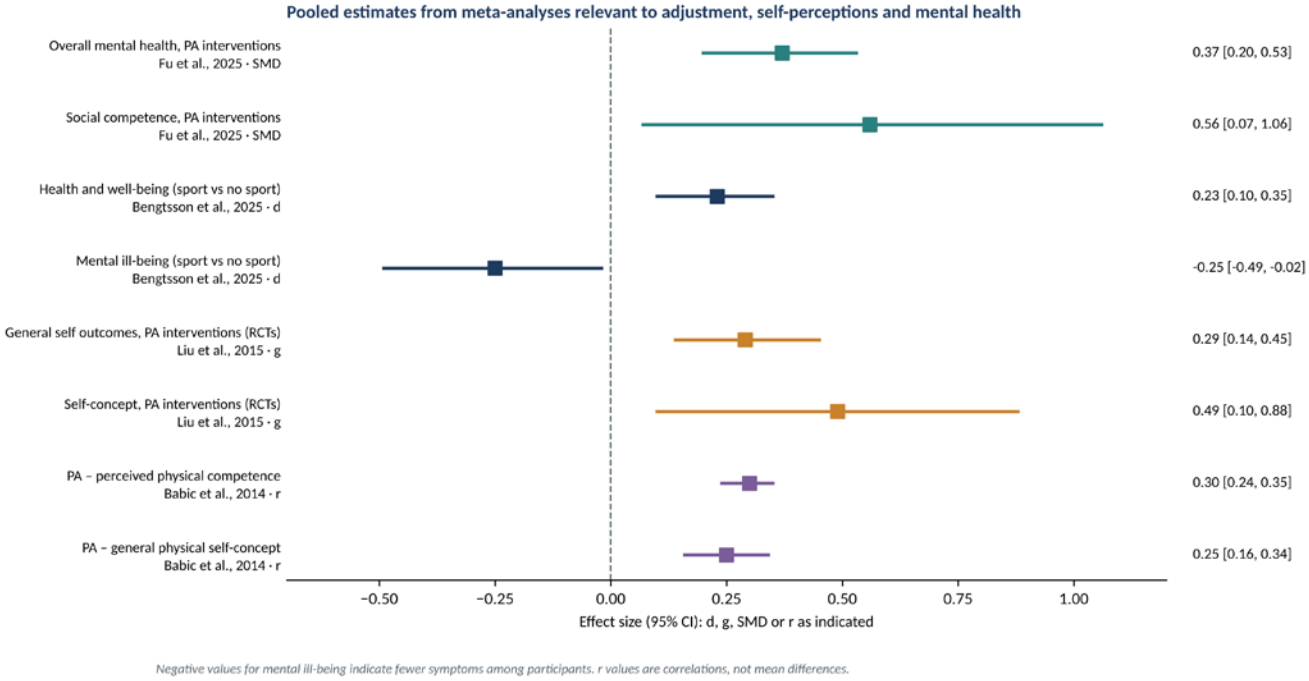

Fig 3. Pooled estimates reported in meta-analyses of sport and physical activity in children and adolescents (compiled by the author from Babic et al., 2014; Bengtsson et al., 2025; Fu et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2015)

School-based and extracurricular sport: Extracurricular sport has been one of the most consistent correlates of positive school adjustment in longitudinal studies of adolescents (Eccles et al., 2003; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). In an analysis of longitudinal survey data from 12,257 Chinese junior high school students, parental involvement in youth sport was associated with better school adjustment both directly and indirectly, through higher sport interest and greater extracurricular sport participation; a chained pathway from interest to participation was also observed (Zheng et al., 2025). This finding is particularly informative for the present review because sport interest and family involvement are components of sport culture, and they operated through participation to influence adjustment. In a nationwide Norwegian sample of 90,091 adolescents, current sport participants reported less school stress and tiredness and more perceived teacher care and sense of belonging than adolescents who had dropped out of sport; participants also came from families with higher socioeconomic status (Grasaas et al., 2025), which underlines that access to sport is socially patterned.

Self-esteem and life satisfaction: Prospective cohort data from 2,970 Dutch youth showed that more weekly hours of sport at age 10 predicted higher self-esteem at age 13, mainly through social acceptance and athletic competence, while individual and aesthetic sports were associated with lower self-esteem than team and non-aesthetic sports (Equinet et al., 2025). In 1,053 Portuguese adolescents, sport participation was related to life satisfaction indirectly through emotional intelligence and self-esteem, and team sport participants reported higher emotional intelligence and self-esteem than non-participants (Fernandes et al., 2024). Using national survey data on 26,171 Norwegian adolescents in 18 sports, Grasaas and Sandbakk (2025) found that sport participants reported higher life satisfaction than national reference values, particularly girls. Similarly, Çeviker et al. (2023) found that university students actively participating in sport reported significantly higher life satisfaction than their non-active counterparts, providing complementary evidence from a Turkish university sample. Longitudinal data from 695 Dutch children aged 10 to 12 linked sport club membership and higher sport frequency with fewer internalising problems and more prosocial behaviour (Moeijes et al., 2018), and matched comparisons in a US cohort showed that adolescents who played sport reported better self-rated and mental health in early adulthood than peers without after-school activities (Kokandakar et al., 2025). Mechanistically, studies with university students show that physical exercise relates to social adaptation through peer attachment and self-esteem acting in sequence (Xing & Ge, 2025; Zhou et al., 2024); because these samples are older, the findings should be generalised to high school students with caution. Beyond self-esteem and life satisfaction, psychological well-being is also relevant to psychosocial adjustment in sport-related educational contexts. In a study involving sport management students in Türkiye, Turhal et al. (2026) reported associations among future anxiety, mental toughness and psychological well-being, offering complementary evidence from a university population.

Youth at risk: A Campbell systematic review of organised sport for at-risk youth found too few rigorous studies to draw firm conclusions; two studies indicated sizeable improvements in overall psychosocial adjustment, whereas three showed no meaningful change in depressive symptoms, and most evidence came from North America (Filges et al., 2024). Earlier reviews of physical activity programmes for at-risk youth similarly reported promising but inconsistent effects on social and emotional well-being (Lubans et al., 2012).

School sport and self-efficacy

Direct and mediated associations: Recent large-sample studies support the proposition that sport and exercise strengthen self-efficacy. In 1,613 Chinese adolescents, physical exercise predicted greater self-efficacy both directly and through psychological resilience, which accounted for roughly 44% of the total effect, and the model was invariant across boys and girls (Peng et al., 2025). In another sample of 1,230 adolescents, physical activity was associated with lower academic stress directly and indirectly through general self-efficacy and resilience, including a serial pathway (Leng et al., 2025). Self-efficacy also partially mediated the association between green (outdoor) exercise and lower kinesiophobia, i.e., fear of movement, in 1,099 students aged 10 to 15 (Kong et al., 2026). These results position self-efficacy as both an outcome of sport and a mechanism through which sport may influence other adjustment indicators.

Social self-efficacy: Social self-efficacy, i.e., confidence in initiating and maintaining social interactions, is the facet most relevant to social anxiety. In a Turkish study of adolescents, athletes reported higher social self-efficacy than non-athletes, and social self-efficacy was moderately and negatively correlated with social anxiety; however, social anxiety itself did not differ between athletes and non-athletes (Yıldırım et al., 2024). This pattern suggests that sport may first strengthen social confidence and only later, or only under certain conditions, reduce anxiety.

Sport culture and physical literacy: Physical literacy, a measurable component of sport culture, was linked to better mental health in 1,022 Chinese students aged 10 to 18, with resilience mediating the association and physical activity strengthening the link between physical literacy and resilience (Zhu et al., 2025). Among 729 secondary school students, physical literacy predicted greater mental toughness, athletic mental energy and positive achievement emotions and lower negative psychological states (Wu et al., 2025). These findings support the view that sport culture is not merely a background variable but an active psychological resource (Cairney et al., 2019; Jefferies et al., 2019).

School sport and social anxiety

Longitudinal and cross-lagged evidence: A longitudinal Swiss study of primary school children identified extracurricular sport participation as a potential buffer against the development of social anxiety symptoms (Schumacher Dimech & Seiler, 2011). A small 15-year Swiss longitudinal follow-up (2007–2022) showed that social anxiety decreased over time and that childhood sport participation of more than two hours per week was associated with a reduction in social anxiety, whereas sport mode (team versus individual) was not significantly associated with it, and perceived social support acted as a confounder of the association (Heller et al., 2025). More recently, a three-wave cross-lagged study of 989 Chinese adolescents aged 10 to 14 found that physical activity and social anxiety negatively predicted each other over 12 months, indicating a reciprocal cycle in which low activity increases anxiety and higher anxiety reduces activity (Zhou & Yang, 2026). This reciprocity is illustrated in Fig 4 and has important implications: adolescents who would benefit most from sport may be the least likely to join, unless schools deliberately lower the threshold for entry.

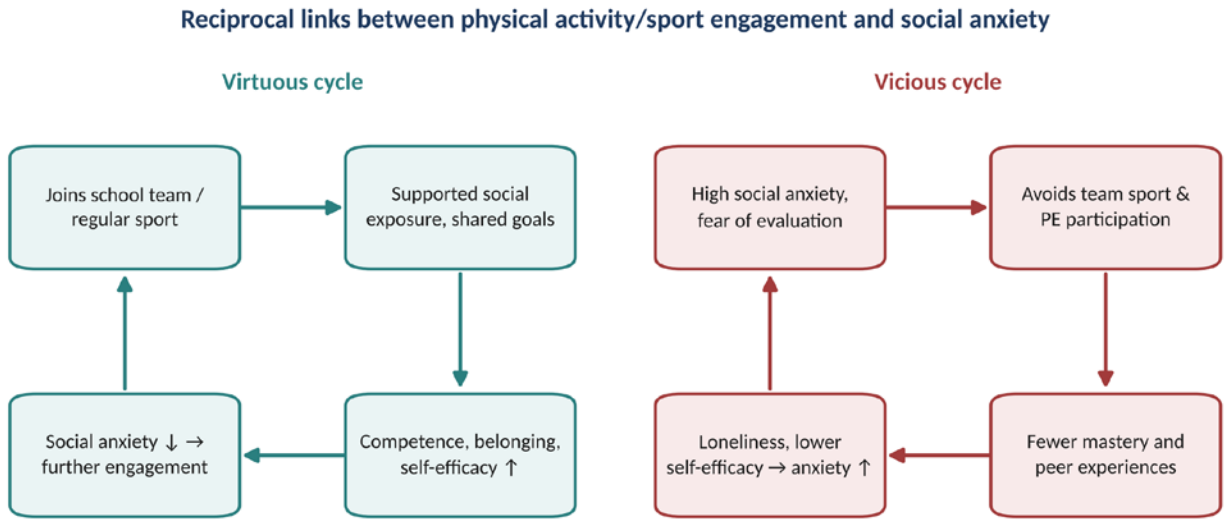

Fig 4. Virtuous and vicious cycles linking sport engagement and social anxiety in adolescence (developed by the author on the basis of Rapee & Heimberg, 1997; Schumacher Dimech & Seiler, 2011; Zhou & Yang, 2026)

Athletes and sport high school students: Among 352 Turkish sport high school students aged 15 to 18, girls reported more social anxiety than boys, and higher social anxiety, particularly fear of negative evaluation and social avoidance, was associated with weaker communication skills (Üstündağ et al., 2025). These data show that being enrolled in a sport-focused school does

not by itself protect against social anxiety and that girls may need specific attention. In college students, physical exercise was associated with lower social anxiety directly and through positive thinking and mental toughness acting in sequence (Jiang et al., 2025).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This narrative review examined the role of school sport participation and sport culture in adolescents' psychosocial adjustment, self-efficacy and social anxiety. Overall, the literature supports a modest but meaningful positive role. Meta-analyses and a large 2026 systematic review show small-to-medium benefits of sport and physical activity for well-being, mental ill-being, self-esteem and mental health in general, with more consistent benefits for team sport (Bengtsson et al., 2025; Fu et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2015; Wade et al., 2026), and recent large-sample studies converge on self-efficacy, resilience, self-esteem and peer attachment as the mechanisms through which these benefits occur (Peng et al., 2025; Leng et al., 2025; Equinet et al., 2025; Fernandes et al., 2024). The evidence on social anxiety is the most nuanced: extracurricular sport appeared to buffer the development of social anxiety in children and higher childhood sport volume was associated with declining social anxiety over 15 years (Heller et al., 2025; Schumacher Dimech & Seiler, 2011), and physical activity and social anxiety predict each other reciprocally in adolescents (Zhou & Yang, 2026), but cross-sectional comparisons of athletes and non-athletes do not always show lower social anxiety among athletes (Yıldırım et al., 2024; Üstündağ et al., 2025).

These findings can be interpreted through the framework proposed in Fig 1. School sport offers mastery and vicarious experiences and constructive feedback, which are the core sources of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), and repeated, task-focused social exposure that can disconfirm fears of negative evaluation (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). However, the same context also involves public performance, selection and competition. Whether school sport functions as therapeutic exposure or as an additional stressor probably depends on the motivational climate, the adolescent's baseline anxiety, body image and gender, and the extent to which coaches deliberately structure the experience (Bean & Forneris, 2016; Vasconcellos et al., 2020). The reciprocal relationship between activity and social anxiety further implies that the most anxious students are at risk of self-selecting out of school sport, which would widen rather than narrow psychosocial inequalities unless schools actively lower participation barriers.

Sport culture appears to operate as a distal resource that supports both entry into and persistence in school sport. Sport interest and parental involvement predicted school adjustment through extracurricular sport participation (Zheng et al., 2025), and physical literacy was related to better mental health through resilience (Zhu et al., 2025). These results suggest that interventions should target not only participation but also the motivation, confidence, knowledge and social norms that make sport personally meaningful (Cairney et al., 2019).

Several limitations of the current evidence base should be noted. Most studies are cross-sectional and rely on self-report, which precludes causal conclusions and inflates shared-method variance. Many mechanism studies used university samples, and a large share of recent mediation studies come from a single country context, which limits generalisability. Sport participation is often measured with single items that do not distinguish school sport from club sport, team from individual sport, or recreational from licensed participation. Finally, publication bias toward positive mediation findings cannot be excluded. Table 2 summarises validated instruments that can strengthen future studies.

Table 2. Recommended instruments for future studies on school sport, self-efficacy, social anxiety and psychosocial adjustment

Construct	Instrument (source)	Content and notes
General self-efficacy	General Self-Efficacy Scale (Luszczynska et al., 2005)	10-item unidimensional measure validated across multiple cultures
Physical self-efficacy	Physical Self-Efficacy Scale (Ryckman et al., 1982)	Perceived physical ability and physical self-presentation confidence
Social anxiety	Social Anxiety Scale for Adolescents (La Greca & Lopez, 1998)	Fear of negative evaluation and social avoidance and distress in new and general situations
Life satisfaction	Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985)	5-item global judgement of life satisfaction
Adolescent well-being	EPOCH Measure (Kern et al., 2016)	Engagement, perseverance, optimism, connectedness, happiness
Psychological needs in sport/PE	Need-support and need-satisfaction measures used in SDT research (Vasconcellos et al., 2020)	Autonomy, competence and relatedness; capture the quality of the motivational climate
Sport culture / physical literacy	Physical literacy frameworks (Cairney et al., 2019; Edwards et al., 2017)	Motivation, confidence, competence and knowledge related to physical activity and sport

Note. Instruments should be used in versions whose validity and reliability have been established for the target population and language.

Conclusion

School sport participation and a supportive sport culture are associated with better psychosocial adjustment, higher self-efficacy and, under favourable conditions, lower social anxiety in adolescents. The benefits appear to be strongest for team-based, sustained and need-supportive participation and to operate through self-efficacy, resilience, self-esteem and peer

relationships. Because social anxiety and sport avoidance can reinforce each other, inclusive and psychologically safe school sport is essential if its benefits are to reach the students who need them most.

Recommendations

For practice: (a) offer low-threshold, non-selective school sport formats (intramural leagues, cooperative games, mixed-ability teams) alongside competitive teams; (b) train physical education teachers and school coaches in autonomy-supportive, mastery-oriented climates and in explicit life-skills teaching that links sport experiences to social and academic situations; (c) give socially anxious students graded roles (e.g., team assistant, referee, then player) that provide progressive exposure; (d) pay particular attention to girls and to students with body image concerns; and (e) involve families in building a positive sport culture. For research: (a) use longitudinal, cross-lagged and cluster-randomised designs in high schools; (b) measure school sport participation in detail (type, level, dose, years) together with sport culture; (c) test mediators and moderators simultaneously; and (d) validate instruments for social self-efficacy and sport culture in Turkish adolescents.

Limitations and strengths

This review is narrative rather than systematic, so the selection of studies may be subject to bias, and no formal risk-of-bias appraisal or meta-analysis was performed. The included literature is heterogeneous in samples, measures and designs. Strengths include an integrated theoretical framework combining self-efficacy, cognitive-behavioural, self-determination and positive youth development perspectives, the inclusion of evidence up to March 2026, and the use of verified sources with DOIs only.

Ethical statement

This study is a narrative review of previously published literature and did not involve human participants, animals or personal data. Therefore, ethics committee approval was not required.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Ufuk Dilekçi: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing, Project administration.

Data availability

No new data were created or analysed in this study. All sources reviewed are publicly available and are listed in the reference list.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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