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The Current Situation and Reform Strategies of Gender Equality in Physical Education in Rural Schools in Zhaoqing

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Abstract

Despite Guangdong Province's "Hundred-Thousand-Ten Thousand Project" increasing hardware investment in rural schools, gender equality in physical education is still obscured by "facility coverage rate." Using eight rural schools in two counties (cities, districts) of Zhaoqing City as samples, a three-level analytical framework of "admission—process—significance" was constructed using questionnaire surveys, classroom observations, and teacher interviews. The study found that there was no significant gender difference in physical education class attendance, showing "formal equality"; However, there was a "hidden diversion" in extracurricular activities, school team selection, and equipment usage, with girls concentrated in low-adversarial programs; In classroom interactions, teachers guided and corrected boys with significantly higher frequency, and gender segregation in free groups was evident; Student sports self-efficacy and body confidence are significantly differentiated, with the narrative of "boys being active, girls quiet" being widespread; There are gender blind spots in systems and resource allocation. The study believes that teachers' lack of gender awareness and competition-oriented incentives are the core mechanisms for the reproduction of gender inequality, and accordingly proposes a four-level reform path: from "equal opportunity" to "gender-responsiveness."

Keywords

Rural School Physical Education; Gender Equality; Zhaoqing; Gender-responsive teaching; Body discipline.

1. Introduction

Balancing education between urban and rural areas is a core issue in China's basic education policy[1]. Guangdong's "Hundred-Thousand-Ten Thousand Project" education action plan clearly proposes building good rural school sports venues and fully equipped facilities. Various regions in Zhaoqing have successively upgraded sports fields and equipment, significantly improving the "hard conditions" of rural school physical education teaching. However, facility coverage and compliance rates do not necessarily translate into equal participation opportunities for every student. In the field of physical education, the gender dimension has long been obscured by the direct performance of "field condition improvement": more venues and newer equipment, but who truly uses these resources, who dominates school teams and competitions, and who receives more guidance in the classroom often lacks systematic empirical testing. Gender norms in rural society are more traditional, parents are more cautious about allowing girls to participate in competitive and outdoor sports, and girls' after-school time is more easily occupied by housework and caregiving responsibilities; Rural schools have limited teaching staff and governance resources, weak gender awareness among teachers, and almost no institutionalized gender-sensitive mechanisms. These factors combine to make rural schools one of the most typical sites for observing the reproduction of gender inequality in physical education [2]. Domestic research on gender in rural sports is mostly concentrated in underdeveloped central and western regions, with insufficient attention to western Guangdong

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on the outskirts of the Pearl River Delta. Zhaoqing, located in western Guangdong, is not only the rural hinterland radiating from the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area but also a key area of the "Hundreds, Thousands, Tens of Thousands Project." Its gender equality in rural schools is both typical and urgent. This paper uses eight rural schools in Zhaoqing as samples to conduct an empirical investigation to fill this gap.

At the theoretical level, this study introduces the framework of "gender-responsive pedagogy" [3] into the analysis of physical education in Chinese rural schools. Prakash and Chand's research on rural primary schools in Fiji shows that teachers are both mediators and reproducers of gender norms: the effectiveness of mixed-gender physical activities does not depend on whether the activity form itself is "mixed," but on whether the teacher's teaching methods are gender-conscious [4]. Similarly, Brazilian scholars' investigations into rural school PE classes found that gender issues are often "naturalized"—teachers attribute gender differences to "innate nature," thereby weakening reflection on gender inequality in the classroom, and some teaching strategies even inadvertently reinforce stereotypes of female "fragility" [5]. Domestic research mainly focuses on rural areas in central and western China, examining barriers to girls' sports participation from a sociological perspective, including household burdens, safety concerns, traditional beliefs, and venue conditions [6]. These studies outline the overall picture of rural girls' participation in sports, but their analyses mostly use participation rate as an indicator, with insufficient attention to process-related and constructive dimensions such as "teachers' gender awareness," "classroom micro-level interaction," and "students' bodily cognition," making it difficult to explain "why there is still systematic participation differentiation among boys and girls under the same school and venue conditions." While existing studies mostly measure gender equality by quantitative indicators such as "participation rate" and "achievement rate," this paper emphasizes the importance of participation quality and decision-making participation, advocating a shift from "equal opportunity" to examining "process quality" and "meaning construction," overcoming the limitations of simple quantitative indicators and providing an operational analytical framework for gender research on rural sports with Chinese characteristics. At the practical level, by identifying specific bottlenecks in teacher practice, school systems, and resource allocation, it provides an evidentiary basis for formulating intervention measures in Zhaoqing City and similar regions. The proposed layered reform path can be directly translated into teacher training modules, curriculum review checklists, and county-level supervision indicators, demonstrating strong policy application value

The study provides a three-layered operational definition of gender equality: Admission equality means male and female students have equal opportunities in course selection, school team selection, extracurricular activities, and equipment usage; Process equality means receiving balanced teacher feedback, practice opportunities, and physical safety during participation, with no systematic neglect or discipline due to gender; Equality of meaning means students can gain equal physical confidence and skill development through sports, without being limited by the stereotype of "sports suitable for boys/girls." Rural schools refer to compulsory education schools located in non-urban streets within counties (cities, districts) under Zhaoqing City, including town-centered primary schools, general rural complete primary schools, and teaching sites reserved for small-scale schools, covering different levels and scales to facilitate the assessment of differences in school conditions on gender equality.

2. Research Design and Methods

2.1. Research Questions

In rural school physical education in Zhaoqing, what is the participation status of male and female students in three aspects: admission, process, and significance, and is there a systemic

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difference? How do teachers (especially PE teachers and homeroom teachers) have gender awareness and daily practices shape this gender equality situation? Are there gender blind spots in school systems and resource allocation, and what are their mechanisms?

2.2. Research Samples

Purposeful sampling was used, taking into account county type and school level. At the district/county level, Deqing County (representing mountainous counties) and Gaoyao District (representing suburban villages) were selected; At the school level, each county selected 4 rural schools, including 1 township central primary school, 2 general rural complete primary schools, and 1 retained teaching site, totaling 8 schools. The student subjects were grades 4 to 8, sampled by gender quota, with a total of 400 valid questionnaires collected (204 boys, 196 girls); The teacher sample included 1–2 PE teachers from each school, 1 homeroom teacher, and 1 vice principal or director of teaching in charge of PE, with a total of 28 interviews; Additionally, each school was structured to observe 4–6 PE classes, totaling 38 sessions. The composition of the research samples is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Sample composition

Types of schools	Quantity (locations)	Valid questionnaires (persons)	Interview with Teachers (persons)	Observation Period (Lessons)
Town Central Primary School	2	118	6	10
Generally, rural areas are complete and primary	4	198	14	20
Teaching points are retained	2	84	8	8
Total	8	400	28	38

2.3. Data Collection Methods and Analysis

Data were collected using four methods: questionnaire surveys, classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups, forming cross-validation of quantitative and qualitative data. The specific design is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Data Collection Methods and Objects

Method	Target	Key points
Questionnaire survey	Students in grades 4 to 8	Frequency of participation in PE classes, participation in extracurricular sports activities, exercise self-efficacy, attitude toward "suitable exercise for men and women," and teacher feedback perceptions
Classroom observation	Each school has 4–6 PE classes	Teacher names and demonstrates/corrects the gender distribution of subjects, grouping methods (by gender/mix), equipment allocation, and gender suggestion in language

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Semi-structured interviews	Physical education teachers, homeroom teachers, and administrators	Understanding gender equality, attributing barriers to female participation, gender considerations in curriculum design, and personal training experience
Focus Groups	Students (separated by gender)	Reasons for liking and avoiding PE classes, peer evaluations, and feelings about physical exposure and competitive sports

Quantitative data were analyzed using a combination of descriptive statistics and variance testing: chi-square tests were used for categorical variables (such as participation rate, item distribution), independent sample t-tests for continuous variables (such as self-efficacy, classroom interaction frequency), and stratified comparisons at the school level were conducted to identify the impact of educational conditions. Qualitative data were encoded using thematic analysis methods, centered around the "entry—process—meaning" framework, focusing on two types of themes in teacher narratives: "naturalized" discourse and "intentional adjustment" strategies.

2.4. Research ethics

The research follows educational ethics: minors must obtain written informed consent from their guardians for participation; Classroom observations are not recorded on video and only recorded in a structured manner; Interview questions involving physical experiences are allowed for students to decline; All school and teacher information is anonymized, and original data is limited to project team members.

3. Results and Analysis

3.1. The Current Three-Layer Picture of Gender Equality in Physical Education in Zhaoqing Rural Schools

3.1.1. Access Level: Coexistence of "Formal Equality" and "Implicit Diversion."

For physical education attendance, both male and female students had participation rates above 95% (96.8% for boys, 95.4% for girls), with differences not reaching statistically significant levels, indicating "formal equality." This result is not surprising—physical education is a compulsory course in compulsory education, and attendance itself is subject to rigid institutional constraints. However, when examining extracurricular participation with stronger autonomy, the gender differentiation becomes clear: boys participate in extracurricular sports activities at 78.5% and girls at 51.3%, and school team participation is 22.4% for boys and only 8.6% for girls. Both differences are highly significant ($p<0.001$), as shown in Figure 1.

"Hidden diversion" is reflected not only in the number of participants but also in the structure of the events. Analysis of participation proportions in different sports shows that highly competitive and highly visible sports like basketball and soccer are dominated by boys (males account for 85% and 88% respectively), while low-competition events like jump rope and shuttlecock kicking are clearly favored by girls (65% and 75% female), as shown in Figure 2. At the same time, observations show that boys have priority access to equipment in school teams and extracurricular activities. The smaller the school (especially those that retain teaching sites), the fewer opportunities girls have to join the school team—because school teams are

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guided by the goal of "bringing glory to the town sports meet," teachers are more likely to select boys considered "more competitive."

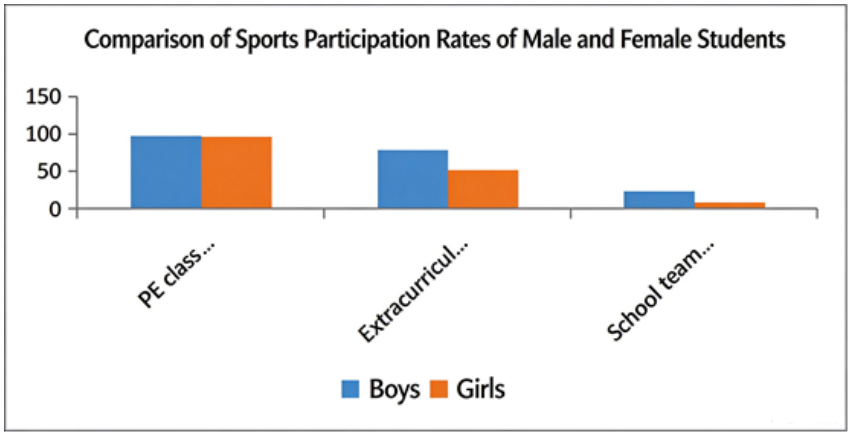


Figure 1: Comparison of sports participation rates among male and female students

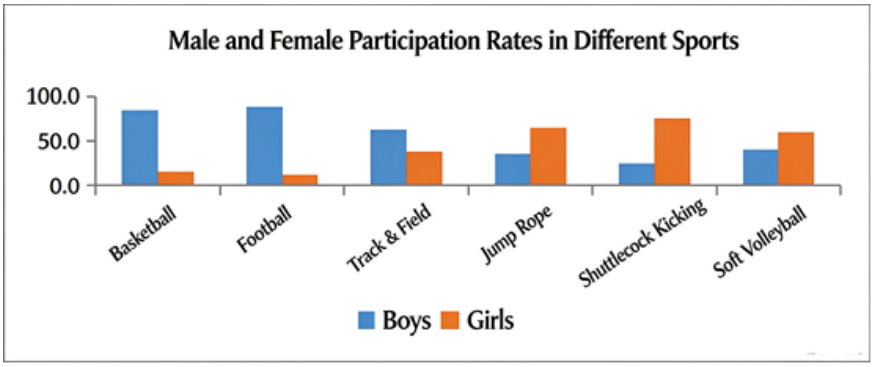


Figure 2: Gender participation ratio in different sports

3.1.2. Process Level: Unintentional bias and intentional adjustment coexist in teachers' practice

Classroom observation data show a clear gender bias in teachers' classroom interactions. In each lesson, boys receive an average of 6.8 technical guidance and 4.2 motion corrections, while girls receive only 2.9 and 1.3 corrections, respectively; At the same time, boys are significantly less ignored than girls (0.8 times vs. 3.1 times), as shown in Figure 3. This dual contrast between "instruction—error correction" and "neglect" shows that teachers, in limited classroom attention allocation, objectively lean toward boys, making girls' silence and withdrawal more easily overlooked, and their motor problems less often corrected.

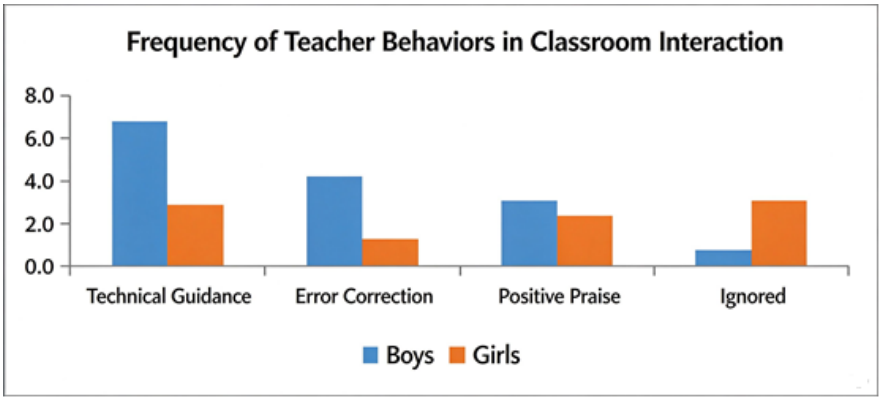


Figure 3: Frequency of teacher behavior in classroom interaction (times/lesson)

Grouping habits further amplify this bias. During free grouping, students generally automatically isolate by gender, with males and females forming separate groups, and the

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intensity of participation and touching opportunities for girls in adversarial practice significantly decreases; When teachers force mixed grouping, girls' opportunities to touch the ball in adversarial practice are further reduced. It is worth noting that a few teachers demonstrate gender-responsive conscious practices: such as adjusting rules to implement "different scoring for men and women on the same stage," providing girls with non-confrontational alternative tasks, and deliberately balancing practice opportunities between the sexes in mixed grouping. However, these practices mostly rely on teachers' personal experience and awareness, have not yet become institutional requirements, nor have they received systematic support from peers. A summary of core process-level indicators is shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Core Process-Level Indicators (Average per Lesson)

Indicators	Boys	Girls
Technical guidance frequency (times/class)	6.8	2.9
Frequency of Correction (per class)	4.2	1.3
Frequency of positive praise (times/class)	3.1	2.4
Number of Missed Videos (times/lesson)	0.8	3.1
Competitive practice touches (times/person)	12.5	6.2

3.1.3. Meaning: Gender Differentiation and "Naturalization" Narratives of Body Confidence

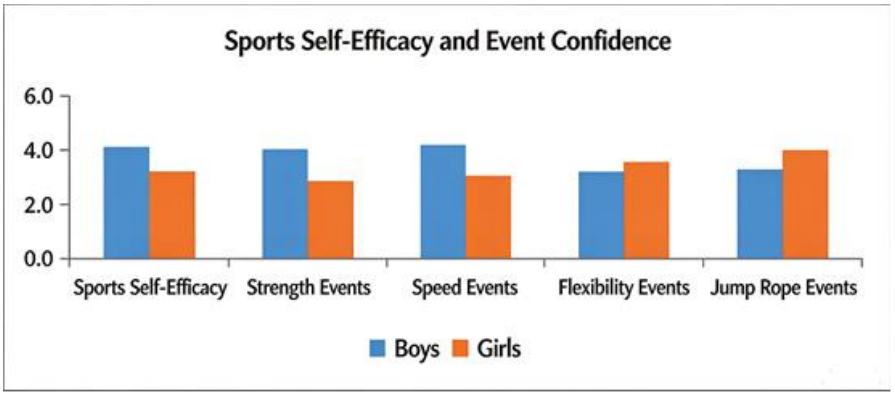


Figure 4 Sports Self-Efficacy and Project Confidence among Male and Female Students (5-point average score)

Students' perception of their own athletic abilities showed clear gender differentiation. On the exercise self-efficacy (5-point scale), boys scored an average of 4.12, while girls scored 3.21, a significant difference; By event, girls' confidence in strength and speed events was significantly lower than boys', but in flexibility and jump rope events, they were not lower or even higher than boys, as shown in Figure 4. This "event differentiation" indicates that girls do not generally "dislike sports," but rather that their confidence is limited to categories compatible with "femininity."

Deeper still, the widespread existence of "naturalized" narratives. In interviews, a significant proportion of male and female students interpreted "boys are active, girls are quiet" as "naturally so," and boys reflected less on this attribution. This naturalized narrative reinforces teachers' classroom behavior: when teachers have fewer expectations for girls' athletic performance, students tend to take gender differences for granted. The study also found that in

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schools with female PE teachers, girls are more willing to participate on school teams, and girls more frequently express in interviews that "she makes me think girls can play well too." However, the proportion of female PE teachers in the sample is very low, and this positive effect is difficult to see in most schools.

3.1.4. Gender blind spots at institutional and resource levels

At the institutional and resource level, the gender dimension is almost absent. First, venues and equipment allocation is called "standardization," lacking gender needs assessment. Although Gaoyao District has upgraded sports facilities, there is no institutional arrangement for whether the equipment list considers female preferences (such as adding jump rope, soft volleyball, etc.), and new equipment mainly serves mainstream competitive sports like basketball and soccer. Second, the choice of physical education course content is concentrated in the hands of individual teachers, and curriculum and activity design lack a gender equality review mechanism; whether the needs of male and female students are balanced depends entirely on teachers' own initiative. Third, gender issues are almost absent from the rural teacher training system. Whether it is the Guangdong Rural Teacher Training System or projects like the "Silver Age Lecture Program," there are no modules related to gender equality in sports, and teachers lack professional tools to identify and address gender inequality in the classroom.

3.2. Analysis of the mechanisms behind why gender inequality persists in rural sports

3.2.1. The "Absence" and "Substitution" of Teachers' Gender Awareness

Interviews show that most teachers equate gender equality with "both men and women attending classes and running," lacking awareness of differences in process quality. When asked about insufficient female participation, teachers attribute it to individualized and natural expressions such as "girls themselves are reluctant to move," "parents are afraid of getting hurt," and "rural conditions are just like this," translating structural issues into personal choices and environmental limitations. Even when a few teachers recognize gender bias in the classroom, their coping strategies remain at the personal level—such as adjusting groups based on experience or giving girls extra attention—lacking peer support and institutional recognition, making it difficult to sustain. This "absence" and "replacement" mechanism places the responsibility for gender equality suspended at the level of individual morality rather than implemented at the level of systems and professional competence.

3.2.2. Penetration of Gender Norms into Schools in Rural Society

Gender norms in rural society permeate schools through two pathways: parents and peers [7]. Parents have clear conditions regarding female students' participation in sports: they permit "mild" activities like jump rope and running, while they are reserved about "injury-friendly" and "tanning" activities like basketball and soccer. Girls' after-school time is occupied by housework and caregiving responsibilities, and questionnaires show their completion rate of extracurricular exercise is lower than boys'. The localized definition of "good girl"—quiet and obedient—creates tension between the confrontation, shouting, and sweating required in PE classes, causing some girls to choose "dignified retreat" in PE classes. These norms do not appear in a coercive form but permeate classrooms through everyday phrases like "girls shouldn't be like that," working together with teacher practice to influence girls' willingness to participate

This infiltration process is not one-way indoctrination. In interviews, homeroom teachers mentioned that school sports meets and PE classes are rare occasions where girls can be "seen," and some girls gain recognition from peers and teachers through outstanding performances in activities like jumping rope and shuttlecock kicking. This shows that rural gender norms are not monolithic; sports provide potential space to break gender stereotypes—the key is whether

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teachers can recognize and amplify these positive moments, rather than tacitly allowing them to fade naturally.

3.2.3. The Squeeze of Competitive Orientation on Equal Participation

The assessment indicators for rural school physical education work centers on competition results and physical fitness test pass rates, which together form institutional pressure on gender equality. Competition results-oriented motivates teachers to concentrate limited resources on "gifted individuals," most of whom are males; Physical fitness test pass rates are based on the baseline of universal compliance, ignoring gender gaps, and thus cannot serve as a driving force for promoting gender equality. Moreover, the event setting and registration rules for county-level sports meets, in the absence of clear male-to-female ratio regulations for group events, objectively restrict girls' participation opportunities. This mechanism reveals an important finding: in the Chinese rural context, "competition-oriented" is a source of gender exclusion independent of cultural norms and stems from institutional levels, which is an important supplement to existing international research.

3.3. Reform strategies from "equal opportunity" to "gender-responsiveness."

3.3.1. Embedding gender awareness into rural physical education teacher training

It is recommended to add a "gender-responsive physical education teaching" module to Guangdong Province's "New Strong Teacher Project" rural teacher training and Zhaoqing City's "Silver Age Lecture Program" and "Qinglan Project," with at least 4 class hours, covering classroom interactive observation tools, grouping strategies, feedback language review, and body protection awareness. At the same time, develop a local case database in Zhaoqing, selecting "intentional adjustment" segments from female physical education teachers' practice and classroom observation to form micro-cases for discussion, turning training from abstract concepts into actionable classroom strategies.

3.3.2. Establish a gender-sensitive review mechanism for physical education courses and activities

Add a "Gender Equality Self-Checklist" to existing physical education teaching and research activities, conducting regular self-checks on whether equipment allocation is rotated, whether grouping is rigid, and whether teacher feedback is balanced. Extracurricular activity design should adopt "parallel options" rather than "forced mixing": while retaining mixed events, provide non-competitive options preferred by girls, such as jump rope clubs and soft volleyball, and ensure these options have the same venues, equipment, and teacher allocations as mainstream sports. School team selection rules should be transparent, recording the gender distribution of registrations and selections, and organizing teaching reflections on classes or programs with significant gender gaps.

3.3.3. Incorporate gender equality indicators into rural sports supervision

It is recommended to add a "gender gap in sports participation" process indicators to the compulsory education quality and balanced monitoring in Deqing County, Gaoyao District, and other places, such as gender gap in extracurricular activity participation rates and gender ratio in school team selection rates, serving as reference items rather than accountability criteria, to avoid creating new exam pressure. County-level teaching and research departments publish a "Rural School Sports Gender Equality Bulletin" every academic year, using data feedback to drive micro-improvements at the school level and forming a closed loop of "monitoring—feedback—improvement."

3.3.4. Gender-responsive facility configuration and course supply

For rural school sports facility upgrade projects, schools should be required to submit a "Gender Analysis of Equipment Usage" as an attachment to procurement applications, ensuring that new equipment matches girls' exercise preferences and avoiding funding continuing to be

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directed one-way toward mainstream competitive projects. At the same time, relying on the National Smart Education Platform for Primary and Secondary Schools and the Guangdong Province Comprehensive Application Pilot, "Gender-Responsive PE Classroom" micro-lesson resources will be collected and shared, reducing the marginal cost for rural teachers to obtain professional support and amplifying the demonstration effect of high-quality practices at a lower institutional cost.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

4.1. Conclusion

Through a mixed study of eight rural schools in Zhaoqing, a three-layer picture of gender equality in rural school sports is depicted. Overall, the gender equality status in this region is at a stage where "formal access is basically achieved, process quality is significantly differentiated, and institutional guarantees are almost nonexistent." Formal equality in physical education attendance has been basically achieved, but there is significant differentiation in extracurricular participation, project structure, classroom interaction, and students' physical confidence, while the institutional and resource levels hardly consider gender dimensions. The systemic lack of teacher gender awareness and competition-oriented institutional incentives are the two core mechanisms of gender inequality reproduction; their interaction continuously consolidates gender differences beneath the "natural" surface. The key lever of reform is not hardware, but the restructuring of teacher training content and the establishment of school-level review mechanisms.

4.2. Theoretical Contributions

The study tested the applicability of the "gender-responsive teaching" framework in Chinese rural schools, revealing the specific operation of "naturalized" discourse in teacher narratives and providing local evidence for understanding the construction process of gender inequality in rural sports. At the same time, the study responds to and expands on the findings of Fiji's research: in the Chinese rural context, "competition-oriented" as an independent source of institutional exclusion, together with cultural norms, acts alongside cultural norms in the reproduction of gender inequality, a mechanism that has not been sufficiently discussed before. The three-level framework of "access—process—significance" in this paper also provides an actionable comparative benchmark for subsequent similar research.

4.3. Research Limitations and Future Directions

There are several limitations in the study. First, the sample is limited to eight rural schools in two counties (cities, districts) of Zhaoqing City, so generalizing conclusions to broader regions requires caution; Second, the study uses a cross-sectional design, making it impossible to infer causal relationships between variables; Third, the measurement of students' body confidence and self-efficacy relies on self-reporting, which may lead to social expectation bias. Future research can carry out intervention studies—such as teachers' gender-responsive workshops combined with real-time classroom feedback—to test the actual effects of gender-responsive training on teacher practice and student participation, and further examine the long-term impact of female physical education teacher placement on female students' sports identity. At the tool level, classroom observation indicators can be refined into quantifiable coding systems, and contextual measurement tools suitable for rural schools can be developed to improve data comparability between different schools.

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