

LITERATUR REVIEW

Sports as a Middle Way: a Philosophical Analysis of the Concept of Taoism (Wu Wei) in Physical Education

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Abstract:

Physical education in practice is still heavily influenced by a competitive and performance-oriented paradigm, which often neglects the philosophical and humanitarian dimensions of the learning process. This situation has the potential to cause physical and psychological stress for students, thus suboptimally achieving the goal of physical education as a means of developing a holistic human being. Based on these issues, this study aims to analyze the relevance of the Wu Wei principle in Taoist philosophy as an alternative philosophical foundation for physical education in a modern pedagogical context. This study uses a qualitative approach with a library research design, which examines classic Taoist texts, particularly the Tao Te Ching, as well as various academic literature discussing the philosophy of education, physical education, and contemporary sports pedagogy. Data are analyzed through content analysis and a philosophical hermeneutic approach to interpret the meaning of Wu Wei and its implications for physical education learning practices. The results of the study indicate that the dominance of the competitive paradigm in physical education is correlated with the emergence of burnout phenomena, decreased motivation, and neglected mental well-being of students. Conversely, a learning approach that emphasizes movement awareness, balance, and non-competitive activities in line with the Wu Wei principle has the potential to strengthen humanistic values, improve psychological well-being, and create a more meaningful learning experience. This study concludes that the integration of Wu Wei principles can serve as an alternative philosophical framework for developing a more humanistic, balanced physical education that is oriented toward character building and harmony between body, mind, and environment.

Keywords: Humanistic Physical Education; Taoist Philosophy; Wu Wei;

1. Introduction

Physical education is essentially understood as a means of holistic human development, oriented not only toward physical fitness but also encompassing the development of character, moral values, and the mental health of students (Fitrianto Ari Tri, 2023). However, in practice, the implementation of physical education in various educational institutions still tends to emphasize motor skill mastery, competition, and athletic achievement (Marani et al., 2024). This excessive focus on physical performance has the potential to neglect the philosophical and humanitarian dimensions that are the primary foundation of physical education (Azimov, 2025). This often leads to physical and psychological stress in students, thereby losing its educational significance as a means of developing a holistic personality (Ennis, 2017).

As an alternative to this paradigm, Eastern philosophical traditions offer a perspective that emphasizes balance, harmony, and self-awareness in human activity (Gier, 2008). One relevant concept is the principle of Wu Wei in Taoist philosophy, introduced by Lao Tzu in the classic text Tao Te Ching (Thi et al., 2025). Wu Wei is defined as action carried out

without coercion, namely the ability to act in harmony with natural law without being driven by excessive ambition (Kohn, 2006). In the context of sports, this principle can be understood as a process of movement and training that occurs naturally, consciously, and is not solely oriented towards competition.

In the context of modern education, the sports paradigm that emphasizes performance and results is often associated with various negative impacts, such as burnout, repeated injuries, and decreased student motivation (Smith, 1986; Madigan et al., 2022). However, physical education ideally functions as a holistic learning space that integrates physical, mental, social, and moral aspects in a balanced manner (Whitehead, 2010). In line with this, (Yudho, 2022) asserts that sport can be viewed as a middle ground between the extremes of competition and passivity, thus not only teaching movement skills but also providing meaningful life experiences.

However, studies in the field of physical education to date are still dominated by pedagogical, psychological, and physiological approaches (Capel & Blair, 2019). Philosophical studies, particularly those that specifically connect the concept of Wu Wei in Taoism to physical education in a modern pedagogical context, are still very limited. Few studies explicitly examine how Wu Wei principles can serve as a conceptual basis for responding to the dominance of the competitive paradigm and developing a more humanistic and balanced physical education (Jia & He, 2024). This situation indicates a crucial research gap that needs to be filled through a systematic review of the philosophical literature. Such research not only contributes to enriching theoretical perspectives but also has the potential to stimulate a renewal of the sports education paradigm (Etkin, 2024).

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the relevance of Wu Wei principles in Taoist philosophy as a philosophical foundation for physical education. The study focuses on interpreting the concept of Wu Wei in sports learning and its potential application to support a more humanistic, balanced, and meaningful physical education model (Ames, 2016). Through a literature review approach, this research is expected to open new discourse on the importance of integrating Eastern philosophy into physical education, while emphasizing the role of sport as a means to harmony, health, and wisdom in life (Song & Maratovch, 2023).

Despite the growing body of literature examining philosophical, psychological, and pedagogical dimensions of physical education, existing studies largely approach these issues through Western theoretical frameworks, such as humanism, constructivism, and critical pedagogy. Research that explicitly integrates Eastern philosophical traditions, particularly the Taoist principle of Wu Wei, into contemporary physical education discourse remains limited and fragmented. Most available studies discuss Taoism in general educational contexts without systematically positioning Wu Wei as a conceptual and philosophical framework for addressing the dominance of competitive and performance-oriented paradigms in physical education. Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in its systematic philosophical analysis of Wu Wei as an alternative foundation for physical education, offering a humanistic and balance-oriented perspective that bridges Eastern philosophy with modern sport pedagogy. By doing so, this study not only fills an important theoretical gap but also provides a

reflective framework for rethinking the aims and practices of physical education in contemporary educational settings.

2. Materials and Methods

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative systematic literature review with a conceptual philosophical approach. The review aimed to analyze and synthesize philosophical and empirical literature related to the concept of Wu Wei in Taoist philosophy and its relevance to contemporary physical education. The systematic review process followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure transparency and rigor in the literature selection process. (Creswell, 2009). Each selected study was examined to identify recurring themes related to Wu Wei principles, humanistic education, and physical education paradigms.

Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted using several academic databases, including Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis, SpringerLink, and indexed national and international journals (Scopus- and SINTA-indexed). The search covered publications from 2002 to 2025 to capture both classical philosophical interpretations and contemporary discussions in physical education. The search strategy applied Boolean operators using combinations of the following keywords: (“Wu Wei” OR “Taoist philosophy” OR “Daoism”) AND (“physical education” OR “sport pedagogy” OR “physical activity”) AND (“humanistic education” OR “mindfulness” OR “holistic learning”).

The initial database search identified 124 records. After removing 29 duplicate records, 95 articles remained for title and abstract screening. During the screening process, 58 articles were excluded due to limited relevance to physical education or philosophical analysis. The remaining 37 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. After full-text evaluation, 20 articles were excluded due to insufficient conceptual relevance or methodological clarity. Finally, 17 studies were included in the qualitative synthesis, as summarized in Table 1.

Eligibility Criteria (PICO Framework)

To structure the literature selection process, this study adopted a modified PICO framework suitable for philosophical and educational research: Population (P): Physical education learners, athletes, and educational contexts discussed in the literature Intervention (I): Taoist philosophy, Wu Wei principles, mindfulness-based movement, and non-competitive physical activity approaches. Comparison (C): Competitive, performance-oriented, and outcome-driven physical education paradigms. Outcome (O): Humanistic values, psychological well-being, motivation, balance between body and mind, and meaningful learning experiences

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria in this study comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and conference proceedings that addressed Taoism, the concept of Wu Wei, philosophy of education, or physical education pedagogy. Only publications written in English and studies demonstrating clear theoretical, philosophical, or empirical relevance to physical education were considered eligible for inclusion. Conversely, the exclusion criteria encompassed non-academic or non-peer-reviewed sources, articles that lacked explicit relevance to physical education or sport pedagogy, as well as duplicate publications identified across multiple databases.

Subjects

This research does not directly involve human subjects. The unit of analysis in this study consists of written sources, including classical philosophical works, academic books, and scientific articles relevant to the research theme. Therefore, the "subject" of the research is understood as the ideas, concepts, and frameworks of thought contained in the selected literature.

Research Instruments

The main instrument in this research is the researcher himself who plays a key role in the process of searching, selecting, and interpreting data. To maintain consistency and sharpness of analysis, the researcher uses a thematic categorization guide that includes: (1) the concepts of Taoism and Wu Wei, (2) the philosophy of education, and (3) the theory and practice of physical education. This guide serves as an analytical framework in reading and interpreting literature systematically.

Procedure

The research procedure began with a search for literature sources through libraries and scientific databases, such as Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis, and Springer, as well as national and international journals indexed by SINTA and Scopus. The collected literature was then selected based on topic relevance, academic credibility, and publication recency, with a period spanning 2002–2025, according to the study's needs (Gall et al., 2007). Next, the selected sources were classified into main themes to facilitate the analysis process and maintain the coherence of the discussion (Bowen, 2009).

Statistical analysis

Data analysis was conducted qualitatively without the use of statistical procedures. The analytical techniques used included content analysis to identify and understand the meaning of the text, as well as a philosophical hermeneutic approach to interpret the concept of Wu Wei in the context of physical education. The analysis process was carried out in stages and reflectively through in-depth reading, comparing views between sources, and synthesizing ideas into a coherent conceptual framework.

Ethics

This research did not involve human participants or sensitive data, and therefore did not require formal ethics approval. All sources used are cited transparently and responsibly, in accordance with academic principles, to maintain scientific integrity and avoid research ethics violations.

3. Results

The results of this study are derived from a systematic synthesis of 17 selected studies that met the inclusion criteria through the PRISMA-based literature screening process. The analyzed literature consists of philosophical analyses, theoretical reviews, qualitative studies, experimental research, and systematic reviews, reflecting diverse methodological approaches within the field of physical education. The synthesis of findings reveals three dominant thematic patterns that are consistently discussed across the reviewed studies, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Literature Review Results

No	Authors / Year	Journal Indexing	Method	Sample Characteristics	N	Variables / Focus	Key Findings
1	(Brunsdo n, 2024)	Scopus (Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy)	Theoretical / conceptual analysis	Philosophical paper (no empirical sample)	N/A	Physical education, virtue, character	Interprets physical education through a neo-Aristotelian lens, emphasizing character and virtue development beyond physical performance.
2	(Demirel & Yildiran, 2013)	ERIC / DOAJ	Historical–philosophical review	Non-empirical literature	N/A	Philosophy of physical education and sport	Traces philosophical developments of physical education and highlights the neglect of ethical and humanistic dimensions in modern competitive sport.
3	(Culp, 2021)	Scopus (Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance)	Conceptual analysis of practice	School-based PE contexts	N/A	Dehumanization, inclusivity, student experience	Critiques dehumanizing practices in PE and proposes an inclusive, student-centered approach.
4	(Gould & Whitley, 2009)	Scopus (Journal of Intercollegiate Sport)	Quantitative correlational survey	Collegiate athletes	N/A	Burnout sources and consequences	Demonstrates that performance pressure and high expectations are associated with emotional exhaustion and

						reduced motivation.	
5	(Glandorf et al., 2025)	Scopus (International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology)	Systematic review and meta-analysis	Multi-sport athlete studies	N/A	Burnout, mental and physical health	Shows strong associations between athlete burnout and depression, anxiety, and physical fatigue.
6	(Ruaro et al., 2019)	Scopus (Journal of Physical Education and Sport)	Experimental study	Elderly women	40 participants	Quality of life, fitness, muscle strength	Finds that non-competitive strength training improves quality of life and physical fitness.
7	(Khanbeiki, 2024)	Indexed journal	Quasi-experimental intervention	High school students	N/A	Mindfulness, physical activity intention, mental health	Reports positive effects of mindfulness-based PE on mental health and academic performance.
8	(Theroux et al., 2025)	Scopus (BMC Psychology)	Single-arm pilot intervention	Primary school students	N/A	Mindful movement, emotional regulation	Indicates feasibility and positive trends in emotional regulation and psychological well-being.
9	(Ravn, 2022)	Scopus (Frontiers in Sports and Active Living)	Theoretical and qualitative analysis	Physical activity learning contexts	N/A	Embodied learning, bodily awareness	Emphasizes bodily awareness and interaction over outcome-oriented performance.
10	(Ken Hardman & Green, 2011)	Scopus (Book)	Theoretical review	International PE systems	N/A	Policy, curriculum, PE objectives	Highlights the need for inclusive and lifelong-oriented physical education.
11	(Road et al., 2019)	International conference proceedings	Theoretical analysis	Educational philosophy texts	N/A	Taoism, humanistic education	Explains Taoism as a foundation for modern humanistic education emphasizing balance and harmony.
12	(Tan, 2021)	Scopus (Research in Comparative and International Education)	Philosophical-comparative study	Education systems	N/A	High-performing education, Daoist critique	Critiques performance obsession and proposes a Daoist-informed educational

						balance.
13	(R. Zhu, Scopus 2002) (Asian Philosophy)	Classical text analysis	Laozi and Zhuangzi texts	N/A	Wu Wei, aesthetic judgment	Interprets Wu Wei as effortless action aligned with natural harmony.
14	(Slingerland, 2016) Academic book	Comparative philosophical analysis	Classical Chinese philosophy	N/A	Wu Wei, ethical practice	Examines Wu Wei as a spiritual and ethical ideal of non-coercive action.
15	(Peter M. Wayne & Fuerst, 2013) Academic book	Research synthesis and practice guide	Tai Chi practitioners	Multiple studies (varied sample sizes)	Balance, physical and mental health	Demonstrates health benefits of mindful movement consistent with Wu Wei principles.
16	(Y. Zhu, 2023) Studies in Sports Science and Physical Education	Theoretical review	Contemporary sport pedagogy	N/A	Reflective and collaborative pedagogy	Advocates learner-centered and reflective approaches in sport education.
17	(Jia He, 2024) Trans/Form/Acao	Philosophical analysis	Chinese sports philosophy	N/A	Eastern values, sports ethics	Shows how Eastern philosophies enrich ethical understanding of modern sport.

A summary of the results of the analyzed literature is presented systematically in Table 1. The table demonstrates the diversity of methodological approaches, ranging from philosophical studies and qualitative studies to experimental research and meta-analyses. Although originating from different backgrounds and focuses, most studies demonstrate a common trend: the need for a paradigm shift in physical education from a performance-oriented approach to a more balanced, reflective, and learner-centered approach.

Overall, the results of the literature synthesis confirm that the principles of Wu Wei can be positioned as a relevant philosophical foundation for addressing various issues in contemporary physical education. This approach supports physical activity without coercion, fosters self-awareness, strengthens social relationships, and contributes to the mental well-being of students. However, the results also indicate that the application of Taoist values in physical education requires contextual adaptation, given that the modern education system is still strongly influenced by the logic of competition and achievement. Therefore, these findings serve not only as a theoretical basis but also as a reflective foundation for educators and practitioners in developing a more humane and meaningful physical education.

4. Discussion

This discussion critically examines the findings of the systematic literature review by situating the concept of *Wu Wei* within contemporary debates on physical education

pedagogy. Rather than merely reiterating the results, this section interprets the findings through a philosophical lens to highlight their theoretical significance and pedagogical implications.

The findings indicate that a performance- and competition-oriented paradigm continues to dominate physical education practices, often resulting in psychological stress, burnout, and diminished motivation among students (Gould & Whitley, 2009; Glandorf et al., 2025). From a philosophical perspective, this paradigm reflects a teleological and instrumental view of the body, where movement is valued primarily for its outcomes rather than its experiential or educational meaning. Such an orientation risks reducing physical education to a mechanism of performance production, thereby neglecting its broader humanistic and educational purposes (Brunsdon, 2024; Culp, 2021).

Within this context, the Taoist principle of Wu Wei offers a contrasting philosophical foundation. Wu Wei emphasizes non-coercive action, natural alignment, and harmony between the individual and their environment (Slingerland, 2016; R. Zhu, 2002). Unlike competitive paradigms that prioritize control, discipline, and maximization of performance, Wu Wei promotes a mode of engagement in physical activity that values process, awareness, and balance. This philosophical distinction is significant, as it reframes physical education not as a site of constant comparison and competition, but as a learning space that supports embodied understanding and self-regulation.

The relevance of Wu Wei becomes more evident when examined alongside contemporary research on mindfulness-based and awareness-oriented physical education approaches. Studies included in this review demonstrate that mindful movement practices contribute positively to students' psychological well-being, emotional regulation, and engagement in physical activity (Khanbeiki, 2024; Theroux et al., 2025). Conceptually, these approaches align closely with Wu Wei, as both emphasize attentiveness to bodily sensations, reduction of excessive striving, and respect for individual capacities. This convergence suggests that Wu Wei can serve as a philosophical underpinning for emerging pedagogical models that seek to humanize physical education.

Furthermore, the integration of Wu Wei principles contributes to the broader discourse on humanistic physical education. Humanistic pedagogies prioritize subjective experience, dignity, and holistic development over standardized performance outcomes (Demirel & Yildiran, 2013; Ravn, 2022). By introducing Taoist philosophy into this discourse, the present study extends existing humanistic frameworks beyond their predominantly Western roots. In this sense, Wu Wei functions not merely as a cultural or spiritual concept, but as an epistemological alternative that enriches the theoretical foundations of physical education.

From a pedagogical standpoint, adopting a Wu Wei-informed approach does not imply the elimination of effort, discipline, or skill development in physical education. Rather, it calls for a reorientation of educational intent, where physical activities are designed to foster awareness, cooperation, and intrinsic motivation (Tan, 2021; Jia & He, 2024). Practices such as non-competitive games, mindful movement, and reflective learning experiences exemplify how Wu Wei principles can be operationalized in educational settings (Peter M. Wayne &

Fuerst, 2013). This approach positions physical education as a meaningful learning process that supports long-term well-being rather than short-term performance outcomes.

Research Limitations

This study has several limitations that require careful consideration. First, the study is entirely literature-based, thus not involving empirical data from direct physical education learning practices. Consequently, interpretations regarding the application of Wu Wei remain conceptual and normative. Second, much of the Taoist literature analyzed originates from ancient Chinese philosophical and cultural contexts, so its relevance to modern physical education systems requires careful conceptual adaptation. Furthermore, the limited literature specifically linking Wu Wei to modern sports pedagogy also limits the scope for direct empirical comparison.

Directions for Future Research

Based on these limitations, further research is recommended to develop empirical studies that directly test the application of Wu Wei principles in the context of physical education. Classroom action research, qualitative studies based on teacher and student experiences, and pedagogical experiments can be used to evaluate the impact of a Wu Wei-based approach on student learning motivation, mental health, and the quality of social interactions. Furthermore, comparative studies linking Taoist values with local wisdom in physical education also have the potential to enrich philosophical and contextual understanding. Thus, the integration of Eastern philosophy in physical education is not only theoretical but also has a strong practical foundation and is relevant to the needs of modern education.

5. Conclusions

This study confirms that physical education not only serves as a vehicle for developing physical skills, but also has a philosophical foundation that plays a crucial role in shaping students' perspectives on the body, movement, and life. The Wu Wei principle in Taoist philosophy offers an alternative perspective that emphasizes balance, self-awareness, and harmony in physical activity. Through the principle of acting without coercion, physical education can be directed toward movement experiences that are more natural, reflective, and aligned with the capacities and needs of students.

The integration of Wu Wei values also serves as a critical correction to educational paradigms that overemphasize competition and performance. An approach that emphasizes collaborative activities, traditional games, and mindfulness-based movement practices enables physical education to become a space that supports mental health, positive social relationships, and holistic character development. Thus, physical education focuses not only on outcomes but also on a meaningful and sustainable learning process.

Scientifically, this article contributes an alternative philosophical framework that can serve as a conceptual basis for developing a curriculum and educational practices that are more humanistic, balanced, and oriented toward the formation of the whole person. The

integration of Eastern philosophy, particularly the principle of Wu Wei, enriches the academic discourse on physical education and opens up opportunities for the development of a more contextual and sustainable learning paradigm.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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