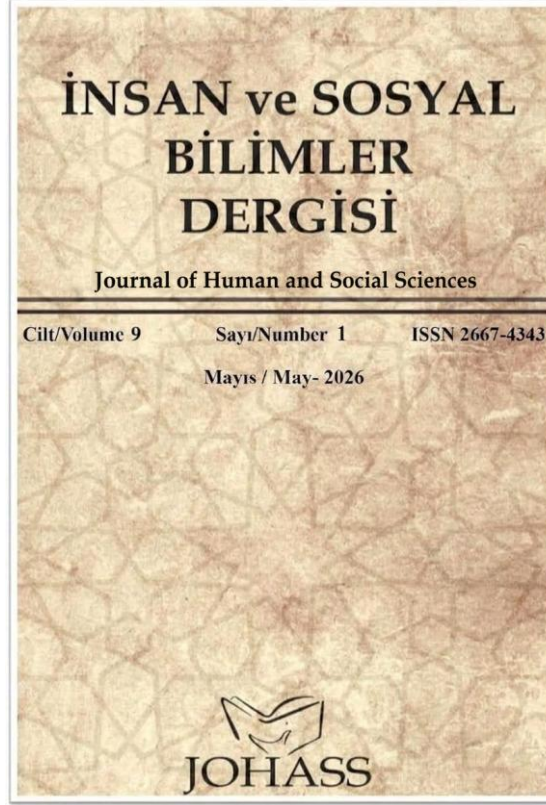


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Arts-Based Physical Education: A Conceptual and Applied Review on Participation, Inclusion, and Psychosocial Empowerment*

* This manuscript was conceptually informed by practical experiences and educational modules developed within the Erasmus+ "JOY in Sport" project, funded by the European Union.

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Abstract

Traditional physical education practices tend to prioritize competition and performance. In contrast, arts-based approaches have emerged as powerful alternatives that promote inclusion and holistic development, particularly among children and youth. This conceptual review synthesizes literature on arts-based pedagogical practices in physical education, with particular attention to forum theatre, creative drama, rhythm-based activities, and music-supported group work. The literature was reviewed through databases including Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC, and Google Scholar, focusing on studies published between 2015 and 2025. The reviewed literature consistently highlights four major themes: enhanced participation, inclusive group belonging, psychosocial empowerment, and empathy development. In addition, the “JOY in Sport” project funded by the Erasmus+ Programme is presented as a practical implementation model. The integration of art into sports education not only contributes to individual growth but also creates opportunities for solidarity, equality, and intercultural dialogue.

Keywords: Arts-based education, sports education, inclusion, empathy, joy in sport project

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Introduction

Sport is a multidimensional field of activity that enables individuals to improve their physical capacities while also supporting the acquisition of cognitive, emotional, and social skills (Tomporowski & Pesce, 2019, Kriellaars et al., 2019; Styles & Martin, 2017). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), sport is defined as a set of rule-based physical activities performed for purposes such as competition, entertainment, physical fitness, or social interaction (Bennett & Culpan, 2014). Sport fosters the development of endurance, team spirit, strategic thinking, and self-confidence, while also serving as a significant sociocultural tool that strengthens an individual's connection with society (Albayrak, 2020; Barnett et al., 2020). However, in recent years, the overemphasis on physical performance has led to the educational and inclusive dimensions of sport being overlooked (Flamand et al., 2022; Forsyewicz, 2020).

Art, on the other hand, is a creative domain through which individuals express emotions, thoughts, and imagination in aesthetic forms (Payne & Costas, 2021; Norris & Hobbs, 2024). Art education enhances a person's capacity for empathy while also increasing aesthetic sensitivity, critical thinking, and expressive skills (Kohan, 2018; Hayes et al., 2025). The transformative power of art, which bridges the individual's inner world with the external environment, holds strong potential for fostering social interaction and embracing diversity in educational settings (Karamani, 2024). Like sport, art also brings individuals together as part of a collective structure through group work, performances, or visual production (Norris & Hobbs, 2024; Korošec, 2023).

Arts-based approaches to sports education constitute an innovative model that seeks to merge the pedagogical strengths of both fields (Anderson & O'Connor, 2022; Beckman et al., 2023). Recent studies have increasingly emphasized the role of arts-based pedagogies in promoting social-emotional learning, inclusive participation, and embodied awareness in physical education contexts. In particular, arts-integrated movement practices have been associated with improved peer collaboration, emotional safety, and sustained engagement among children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Alfrey et al., 2025). This approach centers on promoting freedom of expression, participation, empathy, and the strengthening of social bonds in sport settings (Sofia, 2013). Practices such as forum theatre, creative drama, rhythm-based exercises, and other artistic applications are integrated into sports education with the aim of supporting both the physical and psychosocial development of children (Payne & Costas, 2021; Kohan, 2018; Demarin et al., 2016). In this way, art transforms sport from a performance-

oriented space into an interactive platform that contributes to social healing (Beckman et al., 2023; Kriellaars et al., 2019).

Methodological Approach

This study was designed as a conceptual review based on contemporary literature related to arts-based pedagogy, physical education, inclusion, and psychosocial empowerment. Relevant publications were identified through searches in Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC, and Google Scholar databases using combinations of keywords such as *arts-based physical education*, *creative drama in sport*, *forum theatre*, *inclusion*, and *psychosocial empowerment*. Priority was given to peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2025, alongside key theoretical and project-based sources relevant to the Erasmus+ JOY in Sport framework.

Arts and Sports: Shared Pedagogical Values

Arts and sports may seem like separate disciplines at first glance, yet both serve similar functions in terms of self-expression, social interaction, and confidence building (Payne & Costas, 2021; Karamani, 2024; Kohan, 2018). A comprehensive report by Arts Council England highlights that young people involved in artistic activities tend to have stronger social relationships, improved communication skills, and enhanced self-perception (Karamani, 2024; Korošec, 2023). In particular, regular participation in theatre, music, and visual arts increases students' school engagement, teamwork orientation, and willingness to express themselves (Payne & Costas, 2021; Norris & Hobbs, 2024).

One of the key findings emphasized in the report is the potential of art to include and empower individuals (Kohan, 2018; Hayes et al., 2025). Through participatory arts practices, young people from diverse social, economic, or cultural backgrounds can collaborate in shared creative spaces, which in turn helps reduce social polarization and enhance cohesion (Anderson & O'Connor, 2022; Barnett et al., 2020; Korošec, 2023). In this respect, art can be considered a powerful tool for addressing issues such as exclusion, bullying, and inequality—challenges that have long persisted within the domain of sports (Forysiewicz, 2020; Sofia, 2013).

When combined with the physical dimension of sport, the freedom of expression, empathy, and creative thinking offered by art create a multidimensional learning environment (Tomporowski & Pesce, 2019; Payne & Costas, 2021; Hayes et al., 2025). Like sports, the arts also direct individuals toward collective goals while allowing them to express their identities without suppression (Norris & Hobbs, 2024; Beckman et al., 2023). Accordingly, arts-based

sports education unites pedagogical values such as co-creation, belonging, and emotional regulation, which are shared by both disciplines, within a common ground (Demarin et al., 2016; Karamani, 2024).

Art-Based Sports Education Models

Art-based sports education represents a holistic approach that aims not only to enhance individuals' physical development but also to nurture their emotional, social, and cognitive dimensions (Tomporowski & Pesce, 2019; Kriellaars et al., 2019; Styles & Martin, 2017). This methodology enriches sports training with aesthetic expression, creative thinking, interpersonal communication, and empathy skills (Payne & Costas, 2021; Kohan, 2018). Artistic practices such as theater, drama, rhythm, and music are integrated into traditional sports routines to encourage self-expression and social bonding among participants (Tomporowski & Pesce, 2019; Norris & Hobbs, 2024; Hayes et al., 2025).

A noteworthy example of this approach is the JOY in Sport project, supported by the European Union. The art-based sports education modules developed within this initiative aimed particularly to boost participation among children who are marginalized, have low self-esteem, or come from diverse social backgrounds (Albayrak, 2020; Barnett et al., 2020). One of the key methods used in the project was forum theatre, which enabled children to re-enact problems they encounter and collaboratively explore solutions (Forysiewicz, 2020; Norris & Hobbs, 2024). This method proved to be a powerful tool for fostering critical thinking, expressive courage, and group solidarity (Payne & Costas, 2021; Kohan, 2018).

Additionally, creative drama and music-based activities effectively enhanced group coordination and social bonds (Payne & Costas, 2021; Hayes et al., 2025). For instance, rhythm-based exercises for children encouraged individual participation while simultaneously reinforcing group collaboration through synchronized movements (Tomporowski & Pesce, 2019; Kriellaars et al., 2019). The VIP Membership Model, developed under the JOY project, introduced an innovative method to promote positive leadership, support systems, and solidarity among children (Albayrak, 2020; Barnett et al., 2020). In this model, each child alternately took on a supportive role within the group, fostering a strong sense of community to combat social exclusion (Anderson & O'Connor, 2022; Barnett et al., 2020).

These models are significant not only for personal development but also for cultivating sustainable social inclusion practices in sports clubs (Styles & Martin, 2017; Flamand et al., 2022; Beckman et al., 2023). The transformative power of art enables sports participation to

become more inclusive, diverse, and empathy-driven (Payne & Costas, 2021; Kohan, 2018; Kriellaars et al., 2019).

Art-Based and Inclusive Sports Education

While sports environments offer valuable opportunities for healthy development, some children and adolescents face the risk of exclusion, labeling, or becoming invisible in these settings. Differences such as gender, ethnicity, disability, or socioeconomic disadvantage can undermine equal participation and a sense of belonging in sports (Albayrak, 2020; Barnett et al., 2020; Forsyewicz, 2020). Therefore, it is essential for physical education to shift from a purely performance-oriented model to one that promotes inclusion and addresses psychosocial needs (Flamand et al., 2022; Karamani, 2024; Payne & Costas, 2021).

Art-based approaches provide a strong alternative in this context. Through methods such as participatory drama, music, and creative expression, children engage not only physically but also emotionally and socially (Payne & Costas, 2021; Norris & Hobbs, 2024; Kohan, 2018). Skills such as empathy, self-expression, emotional regulation, and social presence are more effectively developed in a sports education framework integrated with the arts (Hayes et al., 2025; Karamani, 2024). As highlighted in the Arts Council England report, artistic activities strengthen young people's sense of belonging and enhance their capacity to build social relationships (Karamani, 2024; Korošec, 2023).

The modules developed within the JOY in Sport project provide concrete examples of this theoretical approach. In the forum theatre sessions conducted during the project, children actively participated in problem-solving processes by dramatizing real-life experiences of social exclusion (Forsyewicz, 2020; Payne & Costas, 2021). Furthermore, under the VIP Member Model, participants were encouraged to take on supportive roles within the group on a rotating basis. As a result, solidarity, mutual responsibility, and a shared sense of purpose were fostered, leading to noticeable increases in children's self-confidence (Payne & Costas, 2021; Kohan, 2018).

Psychosocial empowerment is achievable not only at the individual level but also through structural transformation. Art-based practices challenge the authoritarian, coach-centered structures often found in sports clubs and promote a more participatory and horizontal educational model (Anderson & O'Connor, 2022; Flamand et al., 2022). In this regard, art-integrated sports education is not merely a method but a crucial tool in building a more equitable, inclusive, and responsive sports culture (Forsyewicz, 2020; Beckman et al., 2023).

Results and Discussion

This review study has revealed, both theoretically and practically, that art-based sports education enhances participation, supports individual awareness, and reduces social exclusion (Tompsonowski & Pesce, 2019; Styles & Martin, 2017; Albayrak, 2020). It is evident that moving beyond the competition- and performance-oriented nature of traditional sports education toward a more inclusive, sensitive, and creative educational approach is necessary. The potential of art to foster freedom of expression, empathy, and group cohesion can be effectively utilized within sports environments as well (Payne & Costas, 2021; Karamani, 2024; Kohan, 2018).

The JOY in Sport project demonstrates that integrating art into sports is not merely a methodological preference but also a pedagogical necessity (Anderson & O'Connor, 2022; Forsiewicz, 2020; Payne & Costas, 2021). Practices developed within the Project such as forum theatre, the VIP model, and rhythm-based activities have made significant contributions to children's social and emotional development (Payne & Costas, 2021; Kohan, 2018; Hayes et al., 2025). Furthermore, it has been observed that coaches, through these methods, have been able to establish stronger and more empathetic relationships with children (Anderson & O'Connor, 2022; Flamand et al., 2022). Across the reviewed literature, arts-based physical education practices were most frequently implemented among children and adolescents, particularly in school and community sport settings. A notable trend across recent studies is the increasing use of arts-based strategies to address social exclusion, particularly in multicultural and disability-inclusive sport settings (Nemček, 2024). These approaches appear to be especially effective when implemented through peer-led, participatory, and reflective learning structures. These age groups appear to benefit substantially from methods that combine movement with emotional expression and peer interaction. Among the artistic approaches, forum theatre and creative drama were the most commonly reported methods, primarily due to their effectiveness in addressing social exclusion, empathy development, and collaborative problem-solving. Rhythm- and music-based activities were also frequently used, especially with younger children to enhance coordination, enjoyment, and group cohesion (Anderson & O'Connor, 2022; Forsiewicz, 2020).

In this context, several policy and practice recommendations can be proposed to ensure the sustainability and wider implementation of art-based sports education. First, the inclusion of art-based methods should be encouraged in sports education curricula (Albayrak, 2020;

Barnett et al., 2020; Flamand et al., 2022). This would help create inclusive learning environments in both school-based programs and club-level activities. Coaches and physical education teachers should be supported through in-service training on participatory methods such as creative drama and forum theatre to ensure that these approaches are applied effectively and pedagogically in the field (Payne & Costas, 2021; Kohan, 2018).

Particularly in developing inclusive sports policies aimed at increasing access for disadvantaged groups, the transformative and instrumental power of art should be taken into account (Albayrak, 2020; Barnett et al., 2020; Korošec, 2023). At the international level, innovative educational models that intersect art and sport supported through collaborations such as Erasmus+ should be promoted, thereby fostering the exchange of best practices across different countries and enriching learning processes based on cultural diversity (Beckman et al., 2023; Kriellaars et al., 2019).

Result

Arts-based physical education offers a transformative pedagogical framework that extends beyond traditional performance-oriented sport models by emphasizing participation, inclusion, empathy, and psychosocial empowerment. The reviewed literature and the JOY in Sport project collectively demonstrate that integrating artistic practices such as forum theatre, creative drama, and rhythm-based group activities can strengthen children's social belonging, self-expression, and emotional resilience. Future research should focus on age-specific implementation models, longitudinal outcomes, and comparative evaluations of different arts-based methods across diverse educational and cultural contexts. Future studies may also examine the effectiveness of arts-based physical education models in disability sport, refugee youth programs, and gender-sensitive sport participation contexts. These findings suggest that arts-based physical education may serve as a sustainable pedagogical pathway for fostering equitable, joyful, and socially responsive sport participation.

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