



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### WHEN STRENGTH FEELS GENDERED: PROCEDURAL JUSTICE AND TRUST IN UNIVERSITY PHYSICAL EDUCATION

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#### ABSTRACT

Gender stereotypes remain a key source of inequality in higher education physical education, particularly in strength-based courses, where they may undermine students' sense of fit, competence, and participation. Classroom procedural justice may help buffer these effects by promoting fair participation and trust in teachers. However, these links remain underexplored in non-major university PE. This study explored how procedural justice was enacted and experienced in two women-only strength-based PE courses at a Chinese university, and how it was associated with students' trust in the teacher, participation, and perceived fit with strength-based activities. A qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design was used, combining classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and brief pre- and post-course questionnaires over a 16-week semester. Participants comprised 46 female non-PE majors, including 24 in martial arts and 22 in rugby. Results indicated that procedural justice was enhanced by clarified assessment criteria, concrete classroom expectations, and meaningful student voice opportunities. Over time, in the rugby class, hesitation toward contact activities fell from 63.6% to 27.3%, indicating greater willingness to engage in demanding tasks. Differences also emerged across course contexts, with martial arts students reporting a stronger sense of fit than rugby students (79.2% vs. 40.9%). These findings indicate that classroom processes can reduce the impact of gender stereotypes in university physical education. Procedural justice and student trust in teachers help promote inclusive participation in strength-based activities.

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## INTRODUCTION

University physical education (PE) extends beyond the improvement of physical fitness, encompassing wider educational and developmental aims (Žnidarec Čučković *et al.*, 2026). In practice, however, these aims are not always easily achieved. Students' engagement in PE is shaped not only by physical ability but also by the social meanings attached to various activities and the classroom environments in which participation takes place (Knowlton & Newland, 2024). One important source of inequality in PE is the persistence of gender stereotypes (Preece & Bullingham, 2020). Certain physical activities continue to be associated with socially constructed ideas about masculinity and femininity, influencing how students judge the suitability of particular activities and their own competence in them (Stride *et al.*, 2020). Colley *et al.* (2005) found that Strength-based activities are often coded as masculine, whereas activities emphasizing flexibility or aesthetic expression are more often associated with femininity. These expectations may discourage participation, reinforce unequal self-evaluations, and limit students' sense of belonging in PE contexts (Voelker *et al.*, 2015).

How far these expectations shape participation may depend in part on how classroom processes are enacted. Procedural justice may matter because transparent rules, intelligible assessment standards, and opportunities for student voice can make classroom expectations more understandable and more negotiable (Jacknick, 2021). In such conditions, students' trust in the teacher may become especially important. It can shape whether they feel supported enough to take part in activities that challenge gendered expectations (Johnston *et al.*, 2022). Viewed in this way, procedural justice and students' trust in the teacher form part of the classroom process through which inclusive participation may be supported in university PE. The literature relevant to this topic has developed along two related but largely separate lines. For instance, Liu *et al.* (2023) have examined how gendered expectations shape students' participation and views of physical competence. A separate line of work, mainly in educational psychology, Han and Ha (2025) has explored procedural justice and teacher trust in learning contexts. This work suggests that students' sense of fairness and their trust in teachers are closely related to important outcomes, including engagement and satisfaction. However, much of this research has focused on relationships

between variables rather than on how these processes are experienced in everyday classroom settings. Such questions have also rarely been examined in university PE for non-sport majors. This issue is particularly important in Chinese universities, where the government as early as 2020 emphasized the need for PE curricula to become increasingly diverse, including broader programs for strength-based courses for all students. Against this background, the present study examines a strength-based PE course taken by female non-sport majors at a Chinese university. Using a qualitative-dominant mixed-method design, it combines classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and supplementary survey data. More broadly, the study considers how university PE, as a non-competitive educational setting, may support inclusive participation, gender equality, and student development. It addresses three questions: (1) How were procedural justice practices enacted in the course, and how were they experienced by students? (2) How did these practices contribute to the development of students' trust in the teacher and their willingness to participate? and (3) How did this process relate to students' participation, sense of fit, and perceptions of physical competence across different course contexts?

## METHODS

**Research design:** This study adopted a mixed-methods design in which qualitative data provided the main basis for interpretation, and questionnaire data were used in a supplementary role. The study examined how classroom processes unfolded over one semester (Weeks 1–16) in two university strength-based physical education courses for female non-sport majors. Data were collected from three sources: non-participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and a brief pre–post questionnaire. The qualitative strand was central to the study, given that the research focused on how procedural justice practices were enacted in class, how students interpreted such practices, and how these experiences were related to their trust in the teacher and willingness to participate. Questionnaire data were incorporated to offer a descriptive account of changes in key constructs across the semester and to help validate and elaborate on the interpretations derived from the qualitative findings. Classroom observations were conducted biweekly across the semester, with eight sessions in each course and sixteen sessions in total. Each observation lasted 45 minutes. Interviews were conducted in two rounds, in Week 8 and Week 16, to capture changes in students' perceptions and experiences over time. The questionnaire was administered twice, in Week 2 and Week 14, to provide descriptive evidence on change in key constructs and to support triangulation. Before the main study, the questionnaire was pilot tested to refine item wording and to assess its internal consistency prior to formal administration.

**Participants and settings:** The study was conducted at a university in Beijing, China, in two female-only strength-based PE courses: a women's martial arts class and a women's rugby class. Both courses formed part of the regular university PE curriculum and ran for one semester (16 weeks). These courses were selected because they involved forms of physical activity that are often associated with strength, challenge, and gendered expectations, while also varying in classroom context and activity format. Such characteristics made them suitable

settings for examining how procedural justice practices, trust in the teacher, and student participation developed across the semester. The two courses enrolled 48 students at the start of the semester. Over the course of the study, one student took a leave of absence and one withdrew after being exempted from PE requirements. The final sample, therefore, comprised 46 female students (martial arts:  $n = 24$ ; rugby:  $n = 22$ ). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. To ensure confidentiality, all personal identifiers were removed, and the data were anonymized during processing and reporting.

### Data Collection

**Non-participant observation:** Non-participant classroom observation was used to record classroom interaction and teaching practices across the semester. Observations were conducted once every two weeks in each of the two classes, producing 8 sessions per class and 16 sessions in total. During each session, the observer produced field notes and completed a structured observation record based on a framework prepared in advance (Table 1). This framework centred on three key domains: procedural justice practices, students' trust in the teacher as reflected in classroom interaction, and gender-related patterns in participation and competence talk. Particular attention was placed on the communication of rules, how teachers responded to students' questions and needs, and how students engaged with challenging tasks over time.

**Semi-structured interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students' experiences and perceptions in more depth (Adams, 2015). Interviews took place at two points in the semester, in Week 8 and Week 16. Six identical students were interviewed at both time points to track changes in their experiences. These participants were chosen to reflect diverse levels of classroom participation across the two courses, with four from martial arts and two from rugby. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. The interview guide focused on four areas: perceptions of procedural justice, trust in the teacher, gendered views of suitability and competence in strength-based PE, and experiences of classroom participation. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interview guide was applied flexibly, with follow-up questions used to clarify responses and explore emergent themes.

**Questionnaire:** A brief pre–post questionnaire was used as a supplementary quantitative source to support triangulation with the qualitative data. The questionnaire covered three constructs: gender stereotypes in sport, procedural justice, and students' trust in the teacher. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), and the instrument was kept short (13 items) to reduce response burden. The questionnaire was administered twice during the semester (Week 2 and Week 14). Quantitative results were used descriptively, including means, standard deviations, and pre–post change scores, to support the interpretation of the qualitative findings. No inferential modelling was undertaken.

**Pilot testing:** The questionnaire was piloted with 12 female students from the same university who were not included in the formal sample. The pilot was used to refine item wording and to assess the internal consistency of the subscales. Reliability analysis indicated acceptable internal consistency for each subscale (Cronbach's  $\alpha \geq .80$ ). The finalized questionnaire structure and pilot reliability estimates are reported in Table 2.

Table 1

Domain	Focus of observation	Illustrative indicators
Procedural justice practices	Communication of rules and assessment; opportunities for student input	Clarity of assessment criteria; use of demonstrations; student suggestions and teacher responses
Students' trust in the teacher in classroom interaction	Feedback style; differentiated support; safety assurance	Task-focused feedback; non-stigmatising language; task adaptation; visible safety guidance
Gender-related participation and competence talk	Willingness to attempt challenging tasks; expressions of suitability and competence	Voluntary participation; questioning; peer support; statements about capability or appropriateness

Table 2. Questionnaire structure and internal consistency from the pilot study

Construct	Sub-dimension	Items (n)	Cronbach's $\alpha$ (pilot, n = 12)
Gender stereotypes in sport	Gender-activity fit (GS fit)	3	.83
Gender stereotypes in sport	Gender-ability bias (GS bias)	3	.80
Procedural justice	-	3	.81
Students' trust in the teacher	-	4	.82

Note. *GS\_fit* = gender-activity fit; *GS\_bias* = gender-ability bias. Questionnaire data were collected at Weeks 2 and 14 and are presented descriptively (*M*, *SD*, and change scores).

Table 3.

	Pre M	Pre SD	Post M	Post SD	$\Delta$
PJ	3.434783	0.863154	4.297101	0.648753	0.862319
TT	3.353261	0.850778	4.467391	0.556798	1.11413
GS fit	3.398551	0.933914	4.275362	0.682423	0.876812
GS bias	2.869565	0.653493	4	0.235702	1.130435

**Data Analysis:** The analysis relied mainly on the qualitative data, with the questionnaire findings used in a supporting role. Observation records and interview transcripts formed the main basis for interpretation, while questionnaire findings provided a descriptive picture of change over the semester. Observation and interview data were analysed iteratively through repeated reading, coding, and comparison: initial coding focused on the core issues of the research questions, including how procedural justice practices were enacted in class, how students interpreted these practices, how trust in the teacher was developed or challenged, and how these processes were linked to students' willingness to participate, sense of fit, and perceptions of physical competence. Subsequently, related codes were grouped into broader analytic categories, from which an initial set of themes was derived. These themes were refined through repeated comparison across the two qualitative data sources, different stages of the semester, and the two course contexts.

Observation data were primarily used to identify how procedural justice practices were enacted in specific classroom situations, while interview data served to examine how students interpreted and experienced these practices. Particular attention was paid to how students' accounts of trust, participation, and perceived competence shifted over time and across activity contexts, with representative classroom episodes and interview excerpts selected as supporting evidence for each theme. To strengthen the credibility of the interpretation, patterns identified in one data source were cross-checked against evidence from the others, including the descriptive questionnaire results. Additionally, attention was devoted to cases that did not align with the emerging interpretation; these cases were utilized to refine the themes and clarify the conditions under which particular classroom processes appeared to support or constrain student participation. The questionnaire data were analysed descriptively, with means (*M*), standard deviations (*SD*), and pre-post change scores ( $\Delta$ ) calculated for each variable. These results were not treated as an independent explanatory basis but rather as a tool to contextualize and support the qualitative interpretation, ensuring the findings were grounded in both contextual insight and descriptive data.

## RESULTS

**Enacting procedural justice: from rule transparency to student voice:** In the early part of the semester (Weeks 1–2), assessment criteria were communicated orally. Interview accounts suggested that oral explanation alone was insufficient for many students to retain or apply the criteria in practice. Overall, 66.7% reported that the detailed criteria were difficult to understand or remember. In the rugby class, 23% reported avoiding contact-related actions because they were uncertain about the level of physical contact involved. From Week 3 onwards, the criteria were provided in brief handouts and explained alongside movement demonstrations. The teacher also compared examples of correct and incorrect technique and provided targeted feedback during practice. Observation records indicated that these adjustments were accompanied by more frequent student reference to the criteria across both courses. In 83% of observed sessions, students were recorded checking or calibrating their performance against the stated criteria. This behaviour was recorded in 91.7% of observed sessions in martial arts and 72.7% in rugby. In addition, students' questions initially focused on clarifying the criteria. As the semester progressed, their attention shifted towards how these criteria could be met, suggesting a more practical understanding of what was required. Procedural justice practices were further strengthened through opportunities for student input. In Week 4, only two students voluntarily raised training-related questions. From Week 6, small-group discussion and whole-class feedback routines were introduced to facilitate student participation in class adjustment. Following this change, the number of suggestions increased from around two per session to around eight per session, and approximately 75% of suggestions were adopted. For example, after adjusting warm-up time in rugby, absenteeism decreased from 3.2 to 0.5 instances per week. Interview responses indicated that many students viewed their input as having a real impact on class arrangements.

**Building students' trust in the teacher: feedback, safety assurance, and supported participation:** Questionnaire trends were broadly consistent with the classroom process

evidence (Table 3). Scores for students' trust in the teacher increased from  $3.35 \pm 0.85$  at pre-test to  $4.47 \pm 0.56$  at post-test. Procedural justice scores also increased, from  $3.43 \pm 0.86$  to  $4.30 \pm 0.65$ . In addition, both dimensions of gender stereotypes shifted in a more gender-inclusive direction, with gender–activity fit increasing from  $3.40 \pm 0.93$  to  $4.28 \pm 0.68$  and gender–ability bias increasing from  $2.87 \pm 0.65$  to  $4.00 \pm 0.24$ . Higher scores reflect more positive perceptions, and on the gender-stereotype scales they indicate lower endorsement of gender stereotypes. These descriptive patterns are reported here as supplementary evidence alongside the classroom-based findings. The process evidence highlights the importance of changes in feedback, safety assurance, and support for participation in the development of students' trust in the teacher. In the early phase of the course, some feedback emphasised limited ability or low suitability for demanding tasks. In the rugby class, 72.7% of students reported that avoidance of confrontation was closely related to injury concerns and worries about social evaluation. Over time, feedback focused less on students' general suitability for the task and more on how particular movements could be improved. It concentrated increasingly on movement adjustment and skill development rather than on general ability. By Week 6, the number of students who voluntarily asked for technical details had increased from two to seven. This shift indicates that students were becoming more willing to seek guidance from the teacher and to take a more active role in demanding tasks.

At the same time, students' trust in the teacher was strengthened by more visible safety measures and by changes in how classroom activities were organised. After protective techniques were taught and protective equipment was made available, observed use of protective equipment increased from 6.8% to 68.2%. By Week 8, the proportion of students who were hesitant to engage in contact-based activities had fallen from 63.6% to 27.3%. By Week 12, girls' participation in contact-based activities had increased from 1.2 to 3.5 instances per lesson. Taken together, these changes indicate that students' trust in the teacher was shaped through verbal guidance as well as practical adjustments that reduced perceived risk and made participation feel more manageable.

#### **Course-context differences in participation and sense of fit:**

Participation and sense of fit developed differently across the two course settings. In the martial arts course, 79.2% of students reported a strong sense of course fit. Observation data likewise showed frequent individual practice and self-adjustment, and participation patterns remained relatively stable over the semester. In the rugby course, by contrast, only 40.9% of students reported a high sense of fit, and changes appeared more gradual. Rugby depended more heavily on team coordination and interaction, whereas martial arts more often allowed students to work through tasks individually. This difference in task structure shaped how students engaged with challenging activities over time, especially those involving contact and cooperation. Descriptive post-course scores also pointed to a small contextual difference, with the martial arts class reporting a slightly lower post-course stereotype score ( $2.28 \pm 0.45$ ) than the rugby class ( $2.41 \pm 0.52$ ). Overall, the findings suggest that the relationship between classroom processes, participation, and competence-related self-evaluation was shaped in part by the practical demands of the activity itself.

## DISCUSSION

### **Procedural Justice, Trust in the Teacher, and Classroom**

**Dynamics:** The results highlight the close connection between procedural justice practices, trust in the teacher, and changes in students' participation and perceptions of physical competence. Across the classroom observations, interview data, and questionnaire findings, these were not separate developments but linked aspects of a broader classroom process. Students' perception of the classroom as fairer and their reported greater trust in the teacher did not solely reflect this process; it was also evident in the increasing clarity and accessibility of classroom rules and assessment criteria, as well as in the expanded opportunities for students to contribute to class adjustment. These changes are considered to make classroom requirements easier to understand and more readily responded to. In this context, procedural justice was not primarily an abstract perceptual outcome but a set of classroom practices enacted through everyday teaching. These practices seemed to strengthen students' trust in their teachers by reducing uncertainty and making support more evident. Early in the course, many students were hesitant to participate because they were unsure about assessment criteria, uncomfortable with physical contact, or doubtful about their competence. As the teacher provided more specific technical guidance and reduced the sense of risk surrounding participation, students became increasingly willing to ask for support and to engage in tasks they had previously avoided. In this respect, trust developed through classroom interaction and became part of the process by which students moved from caution to participation.

This finding also helps refine how procedural justice is understood in educational settings. Recent research has often approached fairness and justice in classroom settings through students' perceptions, as reflected in the dominance of perception-based instruments and conceptualizations in this area (Rasooli, Zandi, & DeLuca, 2022; Rasooli, DeLuca, Cheng, & Mousavi, 2023). More broadly, the organizational justice literature typically understands procedural justice in terms of individuals' judgments about the fairness of procedures (Colquitt, 2001). The present study suggests that, in university PE, especially in physically demanding courses, procedural justice may be more usefully understood as a set of concrete classroom practices, including the communication of assessment criteria, the provision of feedback, and opportunities for student input. This interpretation is consistent with more recent work calling for fairness in classroom processes to be understood in relation to enacted practices rather than perception alone (Rasooli & DeLuca, 2024). Recent work in higher education has connected procedural fairness to trust in educational authorities and to students' broader engagement (Główczewski & Burdziej, 2022). In this study, trust took shape within a setting marked by physical challenge, uncertainty, and more visible gender boundaries and seemed to condition whether participation was experienced as feasible. It was less a matter of individual disposition than of how procedural justice was enacted, with trust developing alongside shifts in students' willingness to participate and in their sense of physical competence.

**Course context as a boundary condition:** The contrast between martial arts and rugby shows that course context serves as a boundary condition. In the martial arts course,

many tasks could be approached through individual practice and repeated adjustment. This made it easier for students to develop a sense of fit and to build familiarity with movement at a relatively manageable pace. In the rugby course, by contrast, participation depended more heavily on teamwork, interaction, and physical contact. These disparities not only affect student engagement but also shape their sense of fit and influence their judgement of their own capabilities within each course. The difference between the two courses may therefore point to different thresholds for participation across activities. In courses where physical contact and confrontation are more salient, perceptions of risk and existing gender norms may be activated more strongly. This may help explain why changes in participation appeared slower and more cautious in rugby. The findings suggest that the effects of procedural justice and trust in the teacher were shaped by the demands of the activity. In this respect, activity structure was part of how these classroom processes unfolded.

**Practical implications, limitations, and future directions:** In light of the course contexts and activity structures examined here, these findings offer practical guidance for the design and delivery of more inclusive university PE, while also highlighting important directions for future research. As discussed above, inclusive participation in university PE courses characterised by physical challenge and gendered boundaries is shaped not only by students' attitudes and abilities, but also by how procedural justice is enacted and how trust in the teacher develops through classroom interaction.

#### These findings have several practical implications

**Procedural justice should not be reduced to the mere public display of rules:** More importantly, classroom standards need to be presented in ways that students can understand, use, and respond to. Linking assessment criteria to movement demonstrations, practice-based feedback, and concrete examples may help students translate rules into workable guides for action.

**Opportunities for student voice should be treated as a core part of PE teaching rather than as an optional addition:** In PE settings, feedback routines, small-group discussion, and adjustments to tasks or lesson arrangements may help students understand how the class works and feel more able to engage in it. Such practices may also help students see themselves as active contributors to the PE lesson rather than as passive recipients of instruction.

**In strength-based courses, safety provision should be treated as a basic condition for engagement:** Clear protective requirements, technical guidance, and adjustments to tasks may help reduce students' sense of risk. This may leave students less hesitant and more ready to engage in activities that are often seen as less suitable for women. The interpretation of the findings is necessarily tied to the context of the study. Because the research was conducted in a single university and focused on female-only courses, the conclusions are best understood in relation to similar educational settings. The questionnaire data were used mainly to complement the qualitative evidence and to support the reading of classroom processes, rather than to establish causal relationships. In addition, while classroom observation and thematic coding enabled the analysis to trace processes over time, the qualitative account inevitably remained influenced to some

extent by the researcher's own interpretive judgement. Extending the analysis to different universities, activity types, and student groups would help to determine whether similar patterns emerge across a broader range of contexts. The inclusion of multiple researchers, comparisons across a wider variety of courses, and longer-term research designs may also strengthen analytical consistency and enhance explanatory depth. Since the present findings suggest that activity structure influences how classroom processes unfold, further research should continue to examine the relationships among procedural justice, trust in the teacher, and participation across different forms of university PE.

## CONCLUSION

Inclusive participation in strength-based university physical education classes cannot be understood merely through the perspectives of student attitudes or abilities. In the present case, it took shape through classroom conditions that made expectations clearer, support more credible, and demanding tasks more manageable for non-sport major female students. The critical factor, therefore, was not simply whether students were willing to engage, but whether the course itself was taught in ways that reduced uncertainty, made participation feel safer, and allowed students to enter activities that might otherwise have remained marked by hesitation and gendered self-doubt. Concurrently, research indicates that these developments cannot be divorced from the very structure of the activity itself. The comparison between martial arts and rugby highlights that classroom practices do not carry the same force across all settings; rather, their effects are shaped in part by the practical, interactional, and risk-related demands of the activity. In this respect, the study offers less a universal mechanism than a context-specific account of how inclusive participation may be fostered in physically demanding and gendered PE environments. More broadly, it points to the need to understand inclusion in university PE not as an abstract principle, but as something accomplished through the ordinary practices of teaching, feedback, safety assurance, and classroom adjustment.

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