



# THE LA TROBE ASIA BRIEF

## SCHOOL SPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

Biju Philip, Nikhil Jha and Greg Dingle

How sport can be a tool to develop human capital and community development programs in the schools of rural India, creating a promising environment for social inclusion and community capacity building initiatives.





It is my pleasure to introduce the newest issue of the La Trobe Asia Brief, a collaborative effort in which the authors examine the challenges and benefits sport programs within schools can provide to personal development and community cohesion in India.

India is a diverse country, both culturally and linguistically, and the success of pilot programs reported in this issue demonstrate their effectiveness and possible applications in other countries, including Australia.

I would sincerely like to thank Dr Biju Philip, a respected researcher from La Trobe Business School, for his work in leading this Brief in collaboration with Dr Nikhil Jha from the Department of Economics at St Joseph's University in Bengaluru, India, and Dr Greg Dingle, also from the La Trobe Business School.

La Trobe University has made a firm commitment to sport development, with both the Centre for Sport and Social Impact and a new sports park precinct. The precinct is the national base for Football Australia's national women's programs, including the home of the Matildas, and the State Centres for Football Victoria and Rugby Victoria. This research is an extension of that commitment.

On behalf of the authors, I sincerely hope you enjoy reading these insights into the possibilities sport development can bring to both schools and community.

**Associate Professor Rebecca Strating**  
Director, La Trobe Asia

## Message from the Director

### ABOUT THE SERIES

The La Trobe Asia Brief is a publication from La Trobe Asia, based at La Trobe University. This series provides a platform for commentary, research and analysis of policy issues that are of key importance in the Asian region. The papers in The La Trobe Asia Brief series are written for an informed audience. Authors will be invited by La Trobe Asia to contribute to this series.

### PHOTOS

Tim May, Biju Philip and Ben Philip

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### THE LA TROBE ASIA BRIEF #09

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#### The following papers were cited in this work:

Philip, B., Seal, E. L., & Philip, S. (2023). *Human resource development for community development: lessons from a sport-for-development program in rural India*. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, 61(2), 442-461. DOI: 10.1111/1744-7941.12357

Philip, B., Hoye, R., & Sherry, E. (2022). *Sport-for-development and social inclusion in caste-ridden India: opportunities and challenges*. *Soccer & Society*, 23(8), 970-986. DOI: 10.1080/14660970.2021.1993199

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sport is considered a vehicle for development.

The United Nations General Assembly identified sport as a means to promote education, health, development, and peace and acknowledged that sport has the potential to contribute to the Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals.

Since 2000, sport activities have increasingly been included by governments and non-governmental organisations within their community development programs for individual and community development.

Research also supports the argument that sport-for-development can play an important role in achieving non-sport objectives for the development of individuals and communities, education, health and social connectedness.

India's school education is enormous and challenging. Policy makers and academics agree that school dropout rates and the quality of school education continue to be a challenge for educators in India.

Based on experience and knowledge gained through research and multiple sport-for-development projects implemented in school and community settings, it is argued that school sport is an ideal option to facilitate activity-based learning initiatives in India.

However, the current sport programs in Indian schools, physical education and Khelo India Youth Games, are not designed to facilitate activity-based learning or improve the quality of school education.

We make the following recommendations to improve the quality of school education in India:

- As India is linguistically and culturally diverse, school sport for development projects must include stakeholders such as students, educators, families, and community leaders to conduct evidence-based research to enhance the quality of primary education.
- Make use of the "Khelo" initiative to identify the impacts of the sport programs that improve learning outcomes and reduce attrition.
- Australia and India must work together to initiate a consortium for sport-for-development aimed at improving school children's education, health and social development.
- Improved research nexus between universities in Australia and India to implement scientific research empowering educators to conduct pilot studies and rigorous evaluations in developing activity-based learning initiatives suitable for the student cohort.





# INTRODUCTION

There has long been an associated benefit between sport and learning. Sport develops team skills and communication, and there are social and psychological benefits. Other studies have identified that children value sport, and that it is a preferred subject in schools. Many education systems acknowledge sport's contributions in developing children and have been applying sport as an active part of their curriculum. Based on the knowledge and experience acquired through scientific research and sport projects conducted in India, this Brief argues that sport is the perfect option for schools to facilitate activity-based learning initiatives and improve the quality of education.

Sport helps governments, educators and civil society organisations achieve development aims. Practitioners and academics have argued that sport is a powerful tool for development. Contemporary sporting practice has always incorporated developmental objectives.

The developmental objectives associated with sport can be broadly classified as the development of sport, and development through sport.

The sporting activities associated with the development of sport focus on enhancing athletic performance and preparing athletes for competition. As the primary objective of the development of sport is competition, athletes who have the potential for elite level performance are prioritised. Therefore, development of sport has limited scope for including all participants.

In contrast, development through sport (sport-for-development) provides opportunities for participation; and is focused on developing non-sport objectives such as social, educational, and cultural development of individuals, groups, communities and society as a whole along with sport skills development. It uses the popularity of sport to attract participants, and then leverage that interest for communicating and achieving non-sport development goals.

As such, sport-for-development has the potential to cater to varied needs of the participants, creating a more inclusive and equitable environments for participation and achieving developmental objectives. Therefore educators, governments and civil society organisations are using sport as a tool to achieve developmental outcomes.

India, the second most populous country in the world, is multi-linguistic and culturally diverse. This linguistic diversity is reflected in 22 regional languages belonging to language families (e.g., Austroasiatic, Dravidian, Indo-Aryan) that are included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Adding complexity to this linguistic and cultural diversity is the caste system that divides Indian society into the high-caste and the low-caste social groups, and creates cultural, systemic and structural barriers for social interaction. This linguistic and cultural context are major challenges for policymakers to achieve quality primary education in India.

Since attaining independence in 1947, India has made significant advances in many areas including health, literacy, and agriculture. Despite being the fifth largest economy in the world, millions of Indians still live in poverty. To alleviate such poverty, it has been argued that improving the quality of education will build foundations for activities that support economic growth. The National Education Policy of 2020 in India acknowledges that activity-based learning initiatives offer a way for improving the quality of primary education.

India is a sport loving nation and sport has important roles in Indian society. Sport's place in modern Indian culture, such as the Indian Premier League and Premier Badminton League, was in part shaped centuries ago where Anglo-Indian education institutions incorporated sport into the curriculum to teach moral lessons. Consistent with this logic, sport can increase social participation, livelihoods, individual development and community connections in India.

Specifically, it has been argued that sport in schools, including that experienced through physical education, contributes to the development of children across five domains – physical, lifestyle, social, affective and cognitive. Other research on the interactive nature of soccer-peer coaching conducted in school contexts in India concluded that improved levels of communication and interpersonal interaction resulted between peers, teachers and community leaders; and thus, school sport facilitated a positive learning environment. As such, sport in schools can be a conduit for achieving positive learning outcomes across multiple domains. However, the current school physical education programs in India are insufficient for children's development.

Given India's cultural and linguistic diversity, top-down school education policies need to be complemented by bottom-up, evidence-based initiatives in schools. This can enable the implementation of a student-centred, activity-based teaching modality for enhancing the quality of primary education.

In this policy brief, we argue that facilitating activity-based learning initiatives and improving the quality of education in India can be leveraged through school sport by including different stakeholders such as parents and community leaders.

# PROJECT BACKGROUND

Sport is a dynamic and evolving concept that is interpreted in a variety of ways. The term can refer to different types such as individual, group, contact, and non-contact. Sport can be played for the purpose of competition and winning, or purely for fun and enjoyment. Thus, the definition of sport may vary according to the context and objectives.

This policy brief is based on the findings of multiple sport-for-development initiatives, comprising of soccer peer-coaching project conducted among children and youths, mainly from low socio-economic backgrounds in four Indian states: Tamil-Nadu, Karnataka, Odisha, and Kerala.

The program equipped more than 2,000 participants in targeted communities to increase opportunities for sport/community event participation; and thus, contributing to individual and community development. However, the most rewarding outcome of the project was establishing two competitive teams for both Adivasi [Indigenous- Schedule Tribe] girls and boys in a remote rural context in the Nilgiris Mountains of South India.

La Trobe University's Centre for Sport and Social Impact and Sport4All Foundation Inc. in Australia partnered with three Non-Government Organisations in India to implement the soccer peer-coaching projects and conduct study.

The first soccer peer-coaching project was a three-day residential camp conducted in Chennai in 2011, attended by children from two cosmopolitan cities in India, Bengaluru and Chennai. Later, the project was extended to multiple rural settings in India.

Project Lead and author, Dr Biju Philip, visited these locations and worked with Non-Government Organisations and community members at each location to co-create knowledge and devise strategies to initiate these soccer peer-coaching projects. Feedback was collected from different stakeholders (e.g., participants, community leaders, coaches) to conduct program evaluation and continuous improvement.

Participants stated that the soccer peer-coaching project was a unique opportunity that hadn't been accessible for the community:

***'The program is our luck, we never get this opportunity anywhere else. This is a God-sent project. This type of training is available in cities and it is for rich people.'***

The community leaders were able to build new and improved social connections with the schools:

***'The soccer programme is the reason for our relationship with the local schools.'***

Teachers found the soccer peer-coaching project to be a friendly social environment which not only equipped the participants to coach, but facilitated opportunities for communication and interpersonal interaction to have a positive social influence:

***'equipping the children to teach others is a major thing'***

***'a friendly environment and their relationship is getting better'***

***'we have children who do not have a good interpersonal relationship . . . coaching helped them to improve the personal relationship.'***

In their day-to-day life, children from Adivasi do not get an opportunity to interact with children outside their community. The combined coaching programme gave them the opportunity to meet with children from diverse cultural backgrounds.

In addition to research experience, Dr Philip is a licenced junior soccer and athletics coach in Australia and had experience working in coaching and club administration in community clubs in Melbourne, Australia. Dr Philip and Dr Jha are also of Indian origin, completed schooling in India and both communicate in multiple Indian languages. Therefore, the discussions included in this policy brief are based on scientific research and decades of lived experiences. Although the projects were conducted in community and school settings in India, the primary focus of this paper was to highlight the importance of school sports for children's development.





# PRIMARY SCHOOL EDUCATION IN INDIA

Education of children in India is a vast enterprise. Indeed, to western observers, the scale of child education could be difficult to comprehend – more than 1.5 million schools, 8.5 million teachers and 265 million children from varied socio-economic backgrounds make the Indian school education system one of the largest in the world.

To give a sense of just how vast the institution of child education in India is, the total number of teachers in India is almost double Australia's total child population. At this population scale, the education of primary school-aged children in India is not only an important responsibility for the Indian nation state, it is an important contribution to humanity.

India is aware of this responsibility, and primary education has been a state priority in India for decades. The National Policy of Education (NPE) 1986/92 in India initiated a wide range of programs for achieving the goals of Universal Elementary Education. In 2009, such programs were given a legal framework by the Parliament of India with the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009. These top-down policy initiatives in India resulted in improved access to schooling and enrolment rates in primary education. However, two issues remain that limit the advantages of increased access to education: school dropout rates, and the quality of school education.

## School dropout rates

Notwithstanding the increase in access to schools in India, attrition in schools remains a major issue for Indian education policymakers. According to the latest available data (academic year 2020–21), the dropout rates in India for grades 1–5 are 0.76 – not substantially large, and similar across gender. But this number masks a disparity when examined further as a state level, particularly in the north-east, where the dropout rate for primary education is as high as 14 percent. Similarly in the secondary level, which comprise grades 9–10, the average dropout rate in India is substantially larger, over 14 percent. This means out of a student population of 265 million there are potentially more than 37 million students that are not completing a secondary school education.

Factors influencing school dropout rates for Indian schools are complex and range from poverty-driven economic need for children to earn an income, low educational attainment of parents, family structures, to daytime access to food and lack of student engagement. Overall, dropout rates are a disturbing problem of secondary school education in India requiring immediate attention.

## Quality of school education

Policy makers and researchers argue that the quality of school education in India is a significant issue, with the National Education Policy 2020 highlighting current primary school curriculum and pedagogy as unsuitable for children's development.

This is not a new revelation. For instance, the Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2007 showed that in most parts of rural India, 57.5 percent of students in Grade Three are not able to read contents based on Grade One syllabus. As 67 percent of the Indian population lives in rural India (approximately 871 million people), this is a significant problem. Indeed, it is argued that education policies in India have other priorities and are not student-centred.

It is important to note that India's schooling system is multi-tiered. Schools affiliated to state, national or international boards of examinations are intended to cater to students from varied social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The national boards, such as the Central Board of Secondary Education, the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations, and the International Baccalaureate school programs in India, are generally available for English medium schools. These national and international programs provide quality education experiences for students in contrast to the schools affiliated to the state.

As a result, children from affluent families attend schools affiliated to national and international boards of examinations. The children from middle class families attend the English medium government aided schools affiliated to the states. In contrast, the children from economically and culturally disadvantaged families in India largely attend the non-English medium schools managed by states, panchayat and municipality. The multi-tier schooling system aligned to support social, cultural and linguistic classes seems practical; however, research identified that differential streams of primary

schooling limit intergroup social inclusion opportunities, leading to an uneven quality of education, and limiting social interaction between class, caste and gender.

Although quality education is an issue for both English and non-English medium schools in India, non-English medium schools in rural India face greater levels of cultural and linguistic challenges for delivering quality school education, and it has been argued that poor quality of school education is the major reason for school dropouts in rural India.

The current schooling system in rural India struggles to engage children from Adivasi and Dalit (Schedule Caste) communities in particular, most of whom are first generation school attendees. Although there are various reasons identified for this disengagement, research identified that schools are using conventional approaches to teach Adivasi and Dalit children comprising of classroom teaching and rote learning.

There is an absence of practical activity in the learning process, with little opportunity for exploration, problem-solving, participation and interaction in this learning process. As such, there is a strong argument for improving the quality of school education in order to attract and retain students in schools. Key stakeholders such as government, school authorities and parents, can benefit from a unified approach for devising strategies for engaging children and reducing school dropouts in rural India.





# SCHOOL SPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT

Using school sports for development is not a new concept. In the 19th century, British public schools used sports to improve the health and social skills of their students. Evidence of the benefit to schools of using sport for children's development is also emerging.

Scholars have argued that sport is one of the areas valued by school children, and a preferred subject in school. Sport participation and physical activity benefits the health at a young age. School sport is also a way to increase awareness of the importance of being healthy and fit. Group activities associated with school sports have the potential to develop children's skills in problem-solving, social interaction, interpersonal communication, and decision making. Therefore, school sport has the potential to contribute to the education and development of children.

Regular physical activity at a young age improves physical and psychological health, reduces the risk of a variety of diseases and reduce the risk of chronic disease in adulthood. For example, coronary heart disease and diabetes are linked to childhood obesity. Similarly, there is evidence that regular physical activity positively effects the mental health of children. Sport participation and physical activity has been demonstrated to reduce stress, anxiety and depression. Therefore, it is clear that sport and regular physical activity improves the physical and mental health of children.

Researchers also claim that school sport could be a developmental tool for children. Participation in school sport may contribute to children's physical, lifestyle, and social development, if the program is positive, supportive and safe. Similarly, it has been argued that school sport could be a tool to develop cognitive, motor and affective areas of children's development.

Although it is difficult to map the relationship between sport and educational outcomes, it has been argued that physical education in schools may have the potential to contribute to the education and development of children. However, some evidence suggests that sport has a positive impact on educational achievement. For instance, research in a German school context has identified a robust effect for not only on health and behavioural outcomes but also on school performance.

If policies and programs are shaped to provide resources for development, children will typically develop competence, character, connection, confidence and a caring attitude. For example, school sport can contribute to positive educational outcomes by developing soccer-based tactical playing knowledge and decision-making of participants. Positive relationships can also be drawn between cognitive performance and regular physical activity. Similarly, socially inclusive school sporting programs can create intergroup contact opportunities and thus facilitate social inclusion in

rural Indian context. Therefore, if sport can link with social development activities, children can develop social skills through sport participation.

Important conclusions may be drawn from the above discussion:

First, most students prefer to participate in school sport, and sport participation not only provides health benefits, but may also be a tool to create a socially cohesive environment to improve education outcomes. Although there is clear evidence that school sport can produce direct health benefits, participation in any physical activity may not necessarily produce social and educational benefits for children. Necessary conditions and social contexts in which the physical activity takes place are important to produce perceived social benefits.

Second, some evidence suggests that the impact of physical activity on cognition is different for boys and girls. Therefore, program design and delivery of school sports must incorporate necessary conditions to create a socially cohesive context to achieve educational outcomes. Such school sport programs can create a school environment to deliver quality school education and engage students to achieve enhanced health and educational outcomes.



## SCHOOL SPORT IN INDIA

In the recent past, there has been some recognition of the limited policy focus on sports particularly in schools in India. The government introduced Khelo India School Games in 2018, now known as Khelo India Youth Games, where the objective is to encourage and revive sports culture at the grassroots level. An important function of the program is to identify sport talent among the youth (anyone below the age of 17 can compete) and help them compete in national and international sporting events.

However, the objectives of "Khelo" initiative is competition and elite development of sport talent, not providing opportunities for participation for all abilities, and therefore limits the creation of inclusive and equitable participation for all youths. There is also little indication of employing sports as a means of experimenting with activity-based learning or affecting educational outcomes. Therefore, current "Khelo" initiatives may not have the capacity to improve the quality of school education in India.

The National Education Policy of 2020 recommended the improvement of the quality of school education in India and acknowledged that activity-based learning initiatives could be a way to achieve this. It can be argued that school sports and physical education is a form of development activity. Researchers argue that physical education is a process of learning, mainly through physical activity to improve children's physical competence; physical education at school focuses on developing specific knowledge, skills and understanding in students through different sporting activities. Physical education at school also highlights the importance

of health and fitness to students, and develops skills in problem-solving, interacting, communicating, and decision making. Therefore, physical education could be an enabler to facilitate activity-based learning initiatives in schools in India.

Although the national curriculum in India includes Health and Physical Education, physical education has yet to be considered an important area for school children's development, and based on the author's lived experiences it is not given equal importance as other subjects in Indian schools. A study conducted among private and government school students in Delhi also identified that the lack of institutional support is the key barrier for school children to participate in physical education in India.

Similarly, India's 2016 Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth highlighted there is limited evidence of physical education programs in schools. Physical education in schools in India consist of an hour per week educating students on the theoretical aspects of physical education, and an annual sports day. As a result, it does not necessarily provide opportunities for regular physical activity for children. Thus, the current physical education policies and programs in India are not sufficient to provide health, social or educational benefits to children.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

We concluded that the inclusion of sport in the school curriculum and a physically active teaching modality could have positive impacts on students' educational outcomes. Moreover, we argue that sport can be a development tool for children and adults in India. For example, researchers identified that the interactive nature of school sport created social inclusion opportunities for children in culturally diversified rural school settings in India. Similarly, research recognises that sport can be a tool to develop human capital and community development programs in rural India. As such, there is clear evidence demonstrating how sport can create a promising environment for social inclusion and community capacity building initiatives in rural India.

It is encouraging to note that sport has the potential to bring people together from culturally and linguistically diverse groups and provide a socially cohesive space for development in a rural Indian context. It is important to highlight how sport can be an enabler to bring participants from different social and cultural groups together and achieve enhanced capacity. As such, school sport could encourage a socially cohesive environment to engage children and provide opportunities for exploration, problem-solving, participation and interaction; and thus, improve the quality of education.

As India is culturally and linguistically diverse, it is not practical to develop a single education policy for application in every school in India. Moreover, the rural school (mostly non-English medium) students in India includes members of economically and educationally deprived and low-caste social groups. As a result, parents may be limited in providing additional support at home for their children to succeed in school. Some children from disadvantaged backgrounds also may find it difficult to comply to the rules and regulations in schools, and thus, experience difficulty succeeding in schools. As the non-English medium schools are managed by state, panchayat and municipality has children from disadvantaged families, these schools must be actively seeking to engage students in helping them to succeed in school. Although parents of non-English medium schools may have limitations in providing additional support at home, schools can include parents in student engagement initiatives and thus, encourage parents to create a learning culture at home and school. Moreover, involving parents of traditional communities enable schools to tap into traditional methods used in learning and knowledge transfer initiatives, and also to understand the cultural and contextual relevance of knowledge and learning.

Some linkages between sport and child development remain unexplored. Understanding the impact of school-based sport activity on dropout rates has not received any attention. Moreover, sport likely has synergistic effects on various aspects of educational attainment that are different in a developing country like India. For instance, sports can seamlessly segue to activity-based learning. Similarly, school sport programs could be used to engage parents and the wider community to localise knowledge and learning in traditional communities to improve the quality of school education. Research exploring these themes can be driven by engaging not only students and educators but also enablers such as families and communities.

Policies for incorporating sport in child development require careful planning which needs to be grounded in research in the developing country context such as India. Pilot studies can be a starting point, but rigorous evaluation of programs by policymakers will be required to understand how sport programs that reduce attrition and improve learning outcomes can be scaled up. Although the "Khelo" initiatives may not currently have the capacity to improve quality of school education in India, it could be extended to primary grades and leveraged to answer these questions. The literature seems to strongly suggest that sport has a multi-faceted positive effect on child-development and therefore the benefits of using sports to influence development are too high to be ignored by Indian education policymakers. However, there are not many scientific research studies conducted in India on school sport-for-development.

As Australia is a sporting nation and there are a number of peer-reviewed publications focusing on Australia based sport-for-development studies, researchers from Australia and India have the opportunity to work together to establish a consortium for knowledge transfer, developing contextually relevant sport-for-development initiatives in improving school children's education, health and social development.

Australia and India must initiate research funding to support research capacity in universities in Australia and India, providing mutual benefits for both countries. The co-created knowledge through scientific research may provide more insights into cultural understanding of traditional knowledge and learning; and this could be applicable for schools working with children of Indian origin and traditional communities in Australia.

# Authors



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Biju Philip is a qualitative researcher and has expertise in initiating sport-for-development projects in India, Australia and Thailand in school and community settings.

His research interests are in sport-based human resource and community development. He has publications in international peer-reviewed journals.

His PhD research was a longitude qualitative action research project that examined the impacts of a sport-for-development program on social inclusion and leadership of primary school aged children in a complex community setting in rural India.

Biju is also the founding Chair of Sport4all Foundation Inc; and has served in the CPA Australia's Public and Not-for-Profit Sector Committee.



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Greg has published refereed articles in European Sport Management Quarterly, Managing Sport and Leisure, Science of the Total Environment, the International Journal of Sport Marketing & Sponsorship, and the International Journal of Environmental Sustainability.

He co-edited the Routledge book, Sport and environmental sustainability: Research and strategic management, and contributed to the Routledge handbook of sport and the environment.

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