THE PRINCIPLES OF FAIR PLAY IN THE EDUCATION OF LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS DURING PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND SPORTS CLASSES

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Cite this article as:
Tomova, D. (2025). The principles of fair play in the education of lower secondary school students during physical education and sports classes. *Proceeding book of the 4th International Scientific Congress "Applied Sports Sciences", 2025, Sofia.* pp. 465 - 470. https://doi.org/10.37393/ICASS2025/73

ABSTRACT
This study explores fifth-grade pupils' understandings of fair and unfair conduct during competition and their views of the teacher's role. A cross-sectional survey was administered in a Bulgarian lower secondary school, examining rule adherence, responses to referees, relations with teammates and opponents, and perceptions of the physical education teacher. Pupils expressed strong support for playing by the rules and respectful behavior. Some responses revealed uncertainty in situations involving confrontation with authority figures and, occasionally, misclassified argumentative actions as compatible with fair play. Girls tended to align fair play more closely with following the coach's instructions and rule-oriented conduct, while boys were more likely to view certain confrontational actions as acceptable. Most pupils associated exemplary athletes with respect for rules and teammates and expected teachers to foster a tolerant and cooperative climate. The findings highlight the importance of explicit classroom work on dispute resolution, respectful communication, and the application of Olympic values in everyday lesson practice.

Keywords: *fair play; sportsmanship; Olympic values; physical education; lower secondary; ethical behaviour; teacher role*

INTRODUCTION

Physical education serves both cognitive and moral formation. It develops technical and tactical skills, motor abilities, and health habits, while also shaping norms of conduct and sportsmanship. The physical education teacher is responsible for promoting both motor development and moral education, cultivating stable values alongside technical and tactical skills. The educational role of physical education is closely linked to cognitive development and has long combined a theoretical component aimed at knowledge acquisition with a practical component focused on motor skill refinement (Dokova, 2017, p.54). Through participation in individual sports, combat disciplines, team games, and competitive events, pupils build persistence, respect, cooperation, and a sense of belonging.

Fair play is a central concept within this moral dimension. Thomas Arnold's educational work helped to articulate standards of sportsmanship that later informed the Olympic philosophy developed by Pierre de Coubertin. In this tradition, fair play refers to respect for opponents and referees, loyalty to the rules, commitment to the spirit of the game, self-restraint, and dignified conduct in the face of unfair play (Solakov & Georgiev, 1985, p. 67; Mitev & Vitanova, 2021, p. 95). The Olympic Charter codifies allied values such as internationalism, comradeship, mutual support, harmonious personal development, and the rejection of discrimination, while promoting education for peace through sport (International Olympic Committee, 2011).

Translating these values to the school context requires attention to teaching practice and to institutional support. In Bulgaria, the National Olympic Academy of the Bulgarian Olympic Committee promotes Olympic education and has fostered initiatives such as the Teachers' Olympic Society and the development of Olympic Educational Centers, including the center at the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski", recognized by the IOC (Bulatova & Platonov, 2019, p.55; Tomova, 2017, p.109). Such frameworks provide a rationale for integrating Olympic values into curricular and extracurricular activities, while maintaining a classroom focus on clear pedagogical aims and age-appropriate methods. In physical and preparatory sports, teachers are expected to cultivate not only motor skills but also core ethical and social values such as work ethic, honesty, fairness, teamwork, mutual support, courage, discipline, and respect for opponents (Rumenov, 2023, p. 14).

Despite extensive scholarship on ethics in sport,

most empirical studies examine athletes rather than school pupils. Research includes instruments for assessing moral decision-making and ethical boundaries in competition, notably the Questionnaire of Sports Ethics and AMDYSQ, which address athletes across age groups and sport types (Lee et al., 2007; Yaffe et al., 2021; Ziółkowski et al., 2012). There is, however, limited evidence on how younger learners in lower secondary education understand fair play and how they judge ethical and unethical behaviors during school-based sport.

The present study addresses this gap by examining knowledge and attitudes toward fair play among fifth-grade pupils in physical education settings. It describes pupils' judgments about fair and unfair conduct in competition, explores gender differences in selected evaluations, and considers perceived aspects of the teacher's role in supporting ethical behavior. This focus seeks to inform classroom practice with evidence from the pupil perspective and to guide targeted moral education within physical education.

Aim and objectives

Aim. To examine fifth-grade pupils' knowledge and attitudes regarding fair play and ethical conduct in school sport contexts.

Objectives.

To describe pupils' judgments of fair and unfair conduct during competition.

To examine gender differences in selected fair play evaluations.

To identify pupils' views of the physical education teacher's role in supporting ethical conduct.

METHODOLOGY

Study design

A cross-sectional survey was administered once during regular physical education classes.

Participants

Eighty-eight fifth-grade pupils from four classes in a state school in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria, took part (girls: $N = 45$, 51%; boys: $N = 43$, 49%). All pupils were aged 11. Parental informed consent was obtained prior to data collection.

Table 1. *Participants' socio-demographic characteristics*

Socio-demographic characteristics	Bulgarian students – primary school, fifth grade
Gender	$N = 45$, 51% girls $N = 43$, 49% boys
Age	100% aged 11

Instruments

A survey was developed specifically for this study to capture pupils' judgments of fair and unfair conduct in competition, their views on the teacher's role, and their evaluations of teammates' and referees' actions. This survey was conceptually based on the ethical codes framework and domains discussed in Ziółkowski et al. (2012), but it did not adapt their 52-item, 7-point scale. The instrument comprised ten closed questions and one open question. Several closed questions permitted multiple responses; this was stated on the form and reiterated verbally.

Content validity was established through expert review by two university lecturers in physical education and one school methodologist, which led to minor wording revisions for age appropriateness. A small pilot with a fifth-grade class confirmed clarity and average completion time. As questions were analyzed at the level of single categorical judgments rather than as a latent scale, internal consistency coefficients were not computed.

Data analysis

Data were entered and checked for accuracy prior to analysis in SPSS v.23 (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2017). For the multiple-selection questions, each option was coded dichotomously and analyzed as a separate categorical variable. Descriptive statistics summarised response distributions. Group differences by gender were tested with Pearson's chi-square; Fisher's exact test was used where expected cell counts were below 5. Where both tests were applicable, conclusions converged; we report chi-square statistics with degrees of freedom, p-values, and effect sizes (Phi or Cramér's V) for consistency. Two-tailed tests were used with $\alpha = .05$. Missing responses, where present, were treated as system-missing.

RESULTS

Recognition of ethical and unethical conduct in competition

Rule compliance was almost universal, with 99 per cent endorsing adherence to the game rules as the appropriate course of action, indicating

strong declarative awareness of fair play. Judgments about unethical conduct involving authority figures showed variability. A gender difference emerged for the view that assisting the referee in resolving a conflict constitutes unethical behavior, with boys more likely to select this option ($\Phi = 0.31$, $\chi^2(1) = 7.94$, $p = .005$; medium effect, according to Stoyanova, 2007; see Table 2). Additional contrasts indicated that girls more often identified failure to follow the coach's instructions as unethical, a pattern consistent with stronger endorsement of authority-aligned behaviors reported elsewhere in the study.

Table 2. *Frequency distribution by gender for judging "assisting the referee in resolving a conflict" as unethical behavior*

Gender	Frequencies	We define as unethical behavior of the competing student, assisting the referee in resolving a conflict situation	
		Unselected answer	Selected answer
Boys	Count	11	29
	Expected Count	17.3	22.7
	% within boys	27.5%	72.5%
Girls	Count	24	17
	Expected Count	17.7	23.3
	% within girls	58.5%	41.5%

Evaluation of authority-aligned behaviors

Girls were more likely than boys to judge failure to follow the coach's or physical education teacher's instructions as unethical, $\chi^2(1) = 6.32$, $p = .012$, $\Phi = .28$ (small effect; see Table 3).

Table 3. *Judging "failing to follow the coach's instructions" as unethical, by gender*

Gender	Frequencies	We define as unethical behavior of the competing student, failing to follow the instructions of the coach (physical education teacher)	
		Unselected answer	Selected answer
Boys	Count	32	8
	Expected Count	26.7	13.3
	% within boys	80.0%	20.0%
Girls	Count	22	19
	Expected Count	27.3	13.7
	% within girls	53.7%	46.3%

Examples of fair play

Recognition of fair play is centered on prosocial and rule-aligned actions. The most common pattern was endorsing both helping an opponent and showing respect while following the coach's instructions (n = 24, 29.6%). A very small minority misclassified confrontational behavior as fair play, with single instances pairing "arguing with supporters" alongside a prosocial option, indicating a need for clearer guidance on appropriate conduct.

No gender difference emerged for identifying help to an opponent as fair play, $\chi^2(1) = 0.61$, $p = .436$. Likewise, there was no gender difference for misclassifying "arguing with supporters" as fair play, $\chi^2(1) = 0.37$, $p = .542$ (Likelihood Ratio = 0.38, $p = .538$). Girls were more likely than boys to endorse "showing respect and following the coach's instructions" as an example of fair play, $\chi^2(1) = 3.87$, $p = .049$, $\Phi = .22$ (small effect; see Table 4).

Table 4. *Endorsing "showing respect and following the coach's instructions" as fair play, by gender*

Gender	Frequencies	You consider an example of fair play - showing respect and following the instructions of the coach (physical education teacher)	
		Unselected answer	Selected answer
Boys	Count	12	28
	Expected Count	8.4	31.6
	% within boys	30.0%	70.0%
Girls	Count	5	36
	Expected Count	8.6	32.4
	% within girls	12.2%	87.8%

Definitions of fair play

Pupils most often associate fair play with positive conduct. The modal pattern combined decent behavior on the field and being a role model for others (n = 26, 32.1%). Isolated misclassifications paired a prosocial option with a confrontational one.

No gender differences emerged for identifying decent behavior on the field as fair play, $\chi^2(1) = 0.11$, $p = .741$, or for identifying being a role model, $\chi^2(1) = 0.31$, $p = .575$. There was also no gender difference for misclassifying disrespect towards supporters as fair play, $\chi^2(1) = 2.00$, $p = .157$. Boys were more likely than girls to misclassify arguing with the referee as fair play, $\chi^2(1) = 4.31$, $p = .038$, $\Phi = .23$ (small effect). Fisher's exact test led to the same conclusion.

Table 5. *Judging "arguing with the referee" as fair play, by gender*

Gender	Frequencies	How do we define fair play? - arguing with the referee	
		Unselected answer	Selected answer
Boys	Count	36	4
	Expected Count	38.0	2.0
	% within boys	90.0%	10.0%
Girls	Count	41	0
	Expected Count	39.0	2.0
	% within girls	100.0%	0.0%

Role-model athlete behavior

Pupils most often linked exemplary conduct with rule adherence and prosocial relations. The modal pattern combined "respects the rules of the competition" and "shows respect towards teammates" (n = 40, 49.4%). Smaller groups paired rule adherence with disrespect to opponents (n = 4, 4.9%) or with not respecting the team captain (n = 7, 8.6%). Additional combinations included respect for teammates together with disrespect to opponents (n = 4, 4.9%) or lack of respect for the captain (n = 7, 8.6%), while one pupil endorsed a fully inconsistent pair (disrespect to opponents and not respecting the captain; n = 1, 1.2%). These patterns indicate varied conceptions of what constitutes a role model.

Girls were more likely than boys to endorse "respects the rules of the competition" as a defining feature of a role-model athlete, $\chi^2(1) = 5.24$, $p = .022$, $\Phi = .25$ (small effect; interpretation following Stoyanova, 2007). See Table 6.

Table 6. *Endorsing "respects the rules of the competition" as a role-model attribute, by gender*

Gender	Frequencies	A famous athlete sets an example for others when? - respects the rules of the competition	
		Unselected answer	Selected answer
Boys	Count	12	28
	Expected Count	7.9	32.1
	% within boys	30.0%	70.0%
Girls	Count	4	37
	Expected Count	8.1	32.9
	% within girls	9.8%	90.2%

Familiarity with Olympic values

Most pupils reported familiarity with Olympic values. Eighty-three per cent answered "yes", while 13 per cent reported they were not familiar; the remaining responses were non-affirmative or missing. There was no gender difference in familiarity, $\chi^2(1) = 1.684$, p = .194. In this context, the physical education teacher is responsible for fostering Olympic education and acting as a personal model, with the sports educator expected "to realize their role as a model and ideal, forming ideals and values in the eyes of their student" (Vitanova et al., 2023, p.29).

Perceived role of the teacher in fair play education

When asked whether the physical education teacher should explain the rules of fair play, responses indicated clear expectations for value-oriented guidance. The majority, 73 per cent, stated that the teacher should cultivate a tolerant attitude towards both opponents and teammates. A further 13 per cent indicated that resolving disputed situations during lessons or competitions helps to develop ethical behavior. Another 13 per cent responded that this is not a task for the teacher. No gender differences were observed in these evaluations ($p > .05$). Overall, pupils positioned the teacher not

only as an instructor but also as an agent of moral formation within physical education.

DISCUSSION

The findings show strong declarative support for rule adherence and respectful conduct among fifth-grade pupils, alongside high self-reported familiarity with Olympic values. This accords with frameworks that define fair play as loyalty to rules and respect for opponents and officials (International Olympic Committee, 2011; Mitev & Vitanova, 2021). At the same time, a minority misclassified confrontational actions such as arguing with referees or supporters as compatible with fair play, which signals incomplete procedural understanding of sportsmanship and points to the value of explicit instruction about conduct in disputes. Our data support the findings of Burgueño and Medina-Casaubón (2020) among high school students that physical education teachers should promote moral and ethical education by developing sportsmanship orientations in the context of school physical education.

These judgments map onto domains treated in athlete-focused instruments that address ethical boundaries and moral decision-making in competition (Lee et al., 2007; Ziółkowski et al., 2012), yet our school-based sample differs from those populations. The translation of abstract values into concrete behavior appears uneven at this age, especially in scenarios involving authority figures. Gender-based differences were small but consistent: girls more often endorsed authority-aligned behaviors. They linked role-model status with rule adherence, whereas boys were more likely to judge assisting the referee as unethical and to misclassify arguing with the referee as fair play. These results among secondary school students are aligned with the findings by Lyons and Turner (2015) that female college students reason morally at a higher level than male college students. Such patterns are compatible with accounts that relate moral judgments to socialization contexts and perceived justice during competition (Yaffe et al., 2021).

Educational implications follow directly. Lesson routines in physical education should make fair play principles explicit, including structured practice for respectful communication, handling disagreement, and de-escalation in game situations. Short scenario discussions and targeted feedback during preparatory games can support consistent application. This is aligned with expectations that teachers cultivate ethical and social values alongside motor skills (Rumenov, 2023, p.14) and act as visible models of Olympic education in the classroom (Vitanova et al., 2023).

The study has constraints that should temper interpretation. It is a single-site, cross-sectional study based on self-reported categorical responses. The questionnaire was developed for this study and, though conceptually informed by existing frameworks, was not designed as a psychometric scale; behavioral observations were not collected, and causal inference is not warranted. Multiple-response questions were coded dichotomously, which captures breadth but not latent structure. These limitations indicate several priorities for subsequent work. Future studies should validate an age-appropriate instrument for school settings, combine surveys with behavioral observation during lessons and competitions, and follow pupils over time. Teacher-led interventions on dispute resolution and respectful communication should be tested with control groups, and comparisons across sport types and participation intensities may clarify contextual influences on pupils' moral judgments (Yaffe et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

Pupils endorsed core elements of fair play, particularly rule adherence and respectful relations, and positioned the physical education teacher as central to cultivating a tolerant classroom climate. Misclassifications involving confrontation indicate that some pupils need clearer guidance on how ethical principles apply in disputes. These results support integrating Olympic values into everyday lesson practice through explicit teaching, modeling, and feedback, and argue for a concise curriculum module on Olympic principles to ensure consistency across classes and schools (International Olympic Committee, 2011; Mitev & Vitanova, 2021; Mitev & Goranov, 2018, p.74).

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Design: Slavka Asenova, Svetla Kostova
Publisher: Scientific Publishing House NSA Press
ISBN (Online): 978-954-718-803-7