

Research Article

Exploring undergraduate experiences in physical education and health: A photovoice study of Indonesian students

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Background: Research on undergraduate students in Physical Education (PE) and Health particularly in Indonesia and the Global South has predominantly relied on quantitative indicators, often neglecting students' lived, embodied, and emotional experiences within demanding academic and physical environments. Objective: This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Indonesian undergraduate students enrolled in PE and Health programs and to examine how these experiences can inform more responsive and inclusive educational practices. Methods: A qualitative participatory design was employed using photovoice. Eight undergraduate students documented their academic and personal experiences through photography over a two-week period, followed by reflective writing and focus group discussions. Data were analyzed thematically through collaborative coding, guided by experiential learning principles. Result: Three central themes emerged. First, Balancing Academic and Physical Demands revealed a dual burden of physical exhaustion and academic discipline. Second, Identity, Belonging, and Community highlighted the vital role of peer, family, and social support in sustaining motivation and resilience. Third, Navigating Uncertainty and Emotional Pressure reflected students' anxieties related to career prospects, professional readiness, and structural constraints within the field of physical education. Conclusion: The findings demonstrate that photovoice effectively captures nuanced student experiences often overlooked by conventional approaches, while simultaneously fostering reflection and empowerment. Engaging students as co-constructors of knowledge offers valuable insights for developing more student-centered, supportive, and inclusive learning environments in Physical Education and Health programs.

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Introduction

Recent discussions in higher education research have increasingly emphasized academic performance, employability, and institutional outcomes, often at the expense of students' lived, emotional, and embodied experiences (Aquino & Reyes, 2022; Fatoni et al., 2025). This tendency is also evident in Indonesia, where academic motivation is frequently foregrounded, while psychological dimensions such as resilience and self-compassion remain marginal within higher education reform agendas (Sugianto et al., 2022). Such a narrow focus risks reducing students' experiences to measurable indicators, obscuring how they interpret, negotiate, and give meaning to their academic lives.

Empirical studies in Indonesia further illustrate the multidimensional pressures faced by university students, particularly in Physical Education (PE) and Health programs. Supriyanto et al. (2024) reported that Indonesian university students' physical fitness and mental health levels remain largely moderate, reflecting the cumulative strain of balancing academic, physical, and personal responsibilities. Similarly, Nopiyanto et al. (2022) found that PE students in Bengkulu experienced moderate stress during thesis completion, highlighting the psychological toll of academic demands. In blended learning contexts,

Yuliawan et al. (2023) demonstrated that reduced physical activity and increased stress were prevalent compared to conventional learning settings. While these studies effectively document outcomes such as stress, fitness, and activity levels, they largely adopt quantitative, researcher-driven approaches that leave students' own interpretations and voices underexplored.

This methodological pattern is not unique to Indonesia. Across Southeast Asia and the Global South, research on PE students has predominantly emphasized curriculum implementation, physical literacy, or performance outcomes, with limited engagement in participatory or student-led inquiry. For example, Veloo & Md-Ali (2016) documented structural and pedagogical challenges in PE implementation in Malaysia, while Burnett (2021) reviewed the marginalization of physical education in South African schools, noting that students are rarely positioned as active contributors to knowledge production. Similarly, Williams et al. (2017), examining postgraduate experiences in physical education across Australasia, observed that student voices are often filtered through institutional narratives rather than foregrounded through participatory methodologies. Collectively, these regional studies suggest a persistent gap in research approaches that center PE students as co-constructors of meaning, particularly within undergraduate contexts.

Internationally, participatory visual methods—especially photovoice—have gained recognition for their capacity to address this gap. Photovoice has been shown to function not only as a research method but also as a pedagogical and assessment tool that fosters critical consciousness, reflexivity, and student agency (Wang, 2020). Bvumbwe & Mtshali (2018) further demonstrated that photovoice can transform participants' self-perceptions and relational dynamics by redistributing epistemic authority and emphasizing collaborative knowledge-making. In health sciences education, photovoice has been found to promote advanced cognitive processes, including reflective and critical thinking, by enabling students to connect theoretical concepts with their lived realities through self-produced imagery (Haffejee, 2021). Despite this growing body of international evidence, the application of photovoice within undergraduate Physical Education and Health programs—particularly in Indonesia—remains notably scarce.

This study addresses this empirical and methodological gap by exploring the lived experiences of Indonesian undergraduate students enrolled in Physical Education and Health programs through a photovoice approach. Specifically, this study is guided by two research questions: (1) What are the lived experiences of undergraduate students studying physical education and health in Indonesia? and (2) How can these experiences inform improvements in teaching, learning, and student support? To our knowledge, this is among the first studies in the Indonesian context to employ participant-led visual data, collaborative thematic coding, and reflective group dialogue to examine undergraduate experiences in PE and Health programs.

By centering students as active knowledge producers rather than passive research subjects, this study contributes to international scholarship on participatory research in higher education and physical education pedagogy. The findings offer contextually grounded insights for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers seeking to develop more responsive, inclusive, and student-centered learning environments in Indonesia and comparable educational contexts.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design using a convergent triangulation model, in which qualitative and quantitative data were collected in parallel, analyzed separately, and then integrated during interpretation to enhance the credibility and depth of findings. The qualitative component used photovoice as the primary methodological approach, while a cross-sectional survey was employed to contextualize and triangulate students' reported experiences at a broader population level.

Photovoice was selected to foreground students' lived, embodied, and emotional experiences through participant-led visual narratives (Wang & Burris, 1997), whereas the survey provided descriptive patterns related to motivation, stress, professional identity, and engagement. Integration occurred at the results and discussion stages through convergence and complementarity of findings.

This study is grounded in participatory research principles, which position participants as co-creators of knowledge rather than passive research subjects (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). Such an approach is particularly appropriate in educational contexts where student voices are frequently marginalized by top-down institutional perspectives.

Photovoice, developed by Wang & Burris (1997), is a participatory visual methodology that enables participants to document, reflect upon, and critically discuss their lived experiences through photography. The method serves three key purposes: (1) documenting everyday realities, (2) fostering critical dialogue and collective reflection, and (3) communicating participant-generated insights to inform educational improvement.

Previous studies have demonstrated photovoice's effectiveness in capturing embodied, emotional, and contextual dimensions of student life that are often inaccessible through conventional interviews or surveys (Lorusso et al., 2020; Harley et al., 2023). In line with this literature, photovoice in the present study functioned both as a research method and as a reflective pedagogical process.

Participants

Eight undergraduate students enrolled in the Physical Education and Health program at University X (Indonesia) participated in the photovoice component. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure variation in gender and academic year. All participants voluntarily consented to take part in the study.

Ethical approval was obtained from the university's ethics review board. Participants were informed of their rights to withdraw at any time without consequence. No identifiable individuals were included in the photographs without their explicit consent. All data were stored securely and used strictly for academic purposes.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred over six weeks and consisted of three phases:

Phase 1: Photographic Documentation

Over a two-week period, participants independently captured photographs representing their experiences as Physical Education and Health students, including academic activities, physical training, emotional challenges, social interactions, and future aspirations. All photographs were generated solely by participants using personal mobile devices.

Phase 2: Photo Selection and Reflection

Participants selected three to five photographs they perceived as most meaningful. Each image was accompanied by a written reflection guided by the SHOWeD framework (Strack et al., 2004), encouraging critical reflection and contextual interpretation.

Phase 3: Focus Group Discussions and Member Checking

Two focus group discussions were conducted to facilitate collective dialogue and meaning-making. Sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and conducted in Bahasa Indonesia. During these sessions, participants confirmed, clarified, and refined preliminary interpretations, serving as an initial member-checking process.

All digital photographs and transcripts were anonymized and stored on a password-protected institutional cloud server accessible only to the research team. Identifiable individuals were excluded unless explicit written consent for identity disclosure was obtained. No images revealing identifiable third parties are presented in this manuscript.

Quantitative Component: Survey Method

A cross-sectional survey design was employed. The target population consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in the Physical Education and Health program at University X. Using convenience sampling, a total of $n = 350$ students completed the survey during the academic semester.

Research Instruments

The survey included Likert-scale items (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) measuring:

1. academic and physical workload,
2. perceived stress and fatigue,
3. professional identity formation,
4. motivation and engagement.

Items were adapted from previous higher education and physical education studies and reviewed for face validity by two experts in physical education pedagogy.

Reliability and Analysis

Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha > .70$ across scales). Data were analyzed using SPSS (version XX), employing descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means).

Data Analysis and Integration

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), combining inductive coding with theoretically informed interpretation guided by Dewey's theory of experience (Dewey, 1938). Quantitative findings were analyzed descriptively and integrated with qualitative themes using a convergent triangulation approach, allowing areas of convergence and divergence to be identified.

Results and Discussion

Results

Thematic analysis of the photographs, written reflections, and focus group discussions revealed three central themes that capture the lived experiences of Indonesian undergraduate students studying physical education and health:

1. Balancing Academic and Physical Demands,
2. Identity, Belonging, and Community, and Community
3. Navigating Uncertainty and Emotional Pressure

Each theme is supported by photographs taken by participants, accompanied by reflective narratives and collaborative discussions.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Photovoice Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Semester
Participant A	Male	21	6
Participant B	Female	20	4
Participant C	Male	22	8
Participant D	Male	21	6
Participant E	Male	19	2
Participant F	Female	22	8
Participant G	Male	20	4
Participant H	Male	21	6

Participant Demographics This study involved eight undergraduate students enrolled in the Physical Education and Health program. The participants were purposively selected to represent a range of academic years (semesters) and gender perspectives. To maintain confidentiality and focus on their lived experiences, pseudonyms (Participant A–H) are used throughout the findings. [Table 1](#) presents the demographic characteristics of the photovoice participants.

1. Balancing Academic and Physical Demands

Many participants highlighted the challenge of managing both the intellectual and physical expectations of their program. Photographs depicted packed class schedules, early morning physical training, and late-night study sessions ([Figure 1](#)). Students spoke of exhaustion but also expressed pride in their ability to persist.



Figure 1. Academic Engagement in the Classroom

“This represents the 'Academic' half of our struggle. While our passion is in movement, we know that becoming a professional educator requires sitting in these chairs and learning the theory. It’s a quiet endurance compared to the noise of the stadium.”(Participant A)

2. Identity, Belonging, and Community

Several photos emphasized a sense of connection and shared identity among students ([Figure 2](#)). Images of team sports, group discussions, and informal gatherings illustrated how peer relationships help students cope with pressure and build a sense of belonging in the program.



Figure 2. Running as a Shared Coping Mechanism

“Running side by side like this is how we deal with the pressure. When the assignments pile up and the stress gets high, we come to the track. Hearing the rhythm of our steps together reminds me that I’m not struggling alone.” (Participant E)

This theme shows how the social environment within the department creates a strong support system, which helps students develop both professional and personal identities rooted in collaboration, discipline, and mutual respect.

3. Navigating Uncertain and Emotional Pressure

performance pressure, and emotional well-being. Some photographs captured empty classrooms, rainy fields, or personal study corners—symbolizing isolation, self-doubt, or pressure to meet expectations as seen in [Figure 3](#).



Figure 3. Leading a Swimming Class

“Standing here leading these kids looks like success, but inside, I am terrified. The pressure to be a perfect role model and ensure their safety is heavy. I constantly ask myself: ‘Am I actually ready for this?’ The gap between what I learn in class and the reality of teaching feels huge.” (Participant H)

This theme reflects students’ internal struggles with motivation, mental health, and the ambiguity surrounding life after graduation (Table 2). Despite their dedication, many expressed anxiety about the competitiveness of the job market and a lack of clear direction from the program regarding professional development.

Table 2. Summary of Themes

Theme	Description
Balancing Academic and Physical Demands	Students juggle physical training with academic responsibilities, often leading to exhaustion but also personal growth.
Identity, Belonging, and Community	Peer support and shared experiences foster a sense of belonging and professional identity.
Navigating Uncertainty and Emotional Pressure	Students face psychological stress related to future careers, mental health, and academic expectations.

4. The challenge of juggling multiple roles and responsibilities

A recurring theme across participants’ photographs and reflections was the challenge of managing multiple roles and overlapping responsibilities as undergraduate students. Beyond their academic and physical training commitments, many students also carried responsibilities as part-time workers, student organization members, family contributors, and community volunteers.

Photographs depicted laptops next to gym bags, class notes scattered on motorbikes, and students rushing between classes and coaching sessions (Figure 4). These images served as visual metaphors for the blurred boundaries between roles—and the exhaustion, but also resilience, that emerged from constantly switching between them.



Figure 4. Strength Training

“Even when exhaustion sets in, I keep pushing through—balancing studies, training, and life’s responsibilities, knowing it all builds my strength and discipline for the future.”
(Participant D)



Figure 5. Basketball Training

“At times, it feels like I'm just going through the motions—teaching, coaching, and juggling responsibilities. But when I step back, I see how much I've learned and grown through every challenge.” (Participant G)

For many students, these competing demands required constant negotiation and prioritization. Several mentioned feelings of guilt or inadequacy—worrying that giving attention to one area meant neglecting another. At the same time, some participants viewed this pressure as a formative experience that helped them develop discipline, time management, and emotional endurance. This theme reflects the complex reality of being a student in physical education and health—not just as a learner and athlete, but also as a worker, leader, family member, and aspiring professional. While these overlapping roles often produced stress, they also contributed to personal growth, adaptability, and a deeper understanding of self.

5. Support Systems

Amid the academic pressures, physical demands, and emotional strain, participants frequently emphasized the importance of support systems in sustaining their motivation and well-being. These support systems—ranging from family, peers, lecturers, and mentors to religious or spiritual practices—emerged as critical anchors throughout their academic journey. Photographs included images of group study sessions, motivational messages from family chats, places of worship, and even food shared with friends. These images served as symbolic reminders of the people and spaces that offered encouragement, grounding, and perspective during difficult moments.



Figure 6. Training with Coach in Trackfield

“Grateful for the guidance and support from my coach and lecturer. Their dedication and encouragement are what keep me going, pushing me to become better both as a student and an athlete.”(Participant C)



Figure 7. preparation for a Sprint on the Running Track with My Friend – Participant B

“This is our training field, but more than that, it’s where we laugh, fall, and get back up together. My friends here are more than teammates—they’re my support system.” (Participant F)

Peers were particularly highlighted as a source of emotional resilience and shared understanding. Many participants described a deep sense of camaraderie with classmates who experienced the same pressures. Small acts of solidarity—like checking in before exams, sharing resources, or practicing together—became essential forms of emotional care.

Meanwhile, lecturers and academic advisors were mentioned as supportive when they showed empathy, offered flexibility, or acknowledged student struggles. However, this support was often described as inconsistent or dependent on individual personalities. Some participants also cited spirituality or religious practice as a source of strength, helping them remain grounded and focused in the midst of uncertainty.

This theme underscores the idea that student success is never individual—it is often sustained by networks of support that are informal, relational, and emotional. For physical education and health students in particular, who navigate physically intense and academically rigorous environments, the presence of reliable support systems can make the difference between burnout and growth.

In addition, several participants pointed to spirituality and religious practices as sources of inner strength, helping them remain grounded and focused amidst uncertainty. Images of places of worship or prayer practices symbolized these forms of transcendental support, which provided both comfort and direction.

Taken together, both the survey data and the qualitative narratives consistently demonstrate that student success is not an individual achievement alone but is strongly sustained by relational and emotional networks of support. For physical education and health students in particular—who must navigate both physically demanding and academically rigorous environments—the presence of reliable support systems often determines whether their experiences result in burnout or growth.



Figure 8. Sport Center

6. Engaging with Children and Youths

Another significant theme that emerged from the participants' reflections was the meaningfulness of their interactions with children and youths during teaching practice, coaching sessions, or community outreach. These engagements were seen not merely as academic requirements but as powerful experiences that shaped students' sense of identity, motivation, and future direction.

Many participants included photographs of sports activities, classroom environments, and playful moments with school-aged children. These images were often described with pride and emotional connection, revealing the role of youth engagement in reinforcing participants' sense of purpose and reminding them of the broader impact of their field.



Figure 9. Leading Warm-Up with My Students

"This is a photo of me leading warm-up with my students. Their energy reminds me why I chose this path. It's not about perfection—it's about inspiring them to move." (Participant B)



Figure 10. Tech Kids In Middle School

"Sometimes, when I feel lost in assignments and deadlines, teaching kids brings me back. It's a reality check—that what we do really matters." (Participant H)

These interactions also helped participants envision their professional futures—as educators, coaches, mentors, or community leaders. They gained practical experience in communication, empathy, patience, and adaptability—skills that are often underemphasized in formal academic settings but critical in the field of physical education and health.

Additionally, working with children often created space for reflection on social responsibility and inclusion. Several participants expressed concern about unequal access to quality physical education, especially in rural or underserved areas. These reflections deepened their understanding of the field's potential not only to promote health and fitness but also to foster equity, confidence, and community connection.

This theme shows how direct engagement with children and youths can be a transformative component of learning, offering students both motivation and moral grounding in their academic journey. It reinforces the importance of field-based, relational learning experiences in the development of competent, compassionate professionals in physical education and health.

The survey results reinforce the theme that emerged from participants' reflections, highlighting the significance of interactions with children and youths in shaping their professional identity and motivation. The data shows that the majority of participants feel highly motivated when teaching or mentoring children. Specifically, 45.7% of participants strongly agree, and 40% agree that these activities invigorate them, illustrating that direct engagement with children and youths not only provides a sense of accomplishment but also strengthens their motivation to continue their education in this field. This aligns with the experiences shared by several participants, who mentioned that such activities help them rediscover their purpose, especially when feeling overwhelmed by academic assignments and deadlines.

Moreover, the survey results indicate that over 60% of participants feel that interacting with children helps them shape their professional identity as educators or coaches. This illustrates how these field experiences have a profound impact on their perspectives about their future roles—not just as instructors or trainers but also as character builders and inspirations for the younger generation. Participants also expressed that their involvement with children has made them more aware of the importance of their role in developing a healthy, confident, and inclusive younger generation.

Furthermore, more than 80% of participants reported that these experiences made them more conscious of their social responsibility, particularly in ensuring equitable access to physical education

and health. This awareness led to broader reflections on the access disparities, especially in underserved areas, reinforcing their understanding of the field's potential to not only promote physical health but also foster a sense of community and support. Therefore, these direct interactions with children and youths are crucial components of their academic journey, providing motivation and a moral foundation as they prepare for a better professional future.

7. Challenges to Physical Education (PE): Navigating Structural and Contextual Barriers

Participants identified several challenges within the field of Physical Education (PE) that impacted their academic experiences and professional outlook. These challenges span from institutional limitations to societal perceptions and career uncertainties. Photographs depicting outdated sports facilities, empty gyms, or study materials alongside news articles about limited job prospects illustrated the contextual difficulties students face.



Figure 11. Football Field

"As Seen [Figure 11](#) This is a photo of the football field on our campus. It's not just about the lack of proper facilities; it reflects how Physical Education is often overlooked, even in something as basic as having a standard playing field." (Participant F)



Figure 12. Teach Experience in Middle School

"Sometimes I worry about my future career because many people think PE is just about sports, not a serious profession. It's frustrating." (Participant C)

In summary, the participants' narratives and photographs highlight the structural and cultural barriers that PE students face, including inadequate facilities and societal misconceptions regarding

their profession. Despite these challenges, the participants remain committed to their studies, motivated by their passion for the field and the potential to create a positive impact within the community.

8. Treading Water: Struggling to Keep Up Amidst Pressures

A poignant theme among participants was the sensation of “treading water”—feeling like they were constantly exerting effort just to stay afloat in their academic and personal lives, without clear signs of progress or relief as captured in [Figure 13](#) and [Figure 14](#).

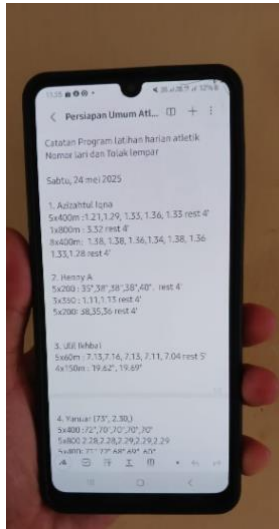


Figure 13. Training Note

"Balancing training, assignments, and daily responsibilities feels like treading water sometimes. With every set and every sprint, I push myself harder, even when the pressure feels overwhelming. But I know it's all part of the journey to become stronger, both physically and mentally." (Participant G)



Figure 14. Lifting in the Gym

"At times, it feels like I'm lifting more than just weights—balancing assignments, training, and personal goals. The pressure is overwhelming, but as a student in physical education, I know that every rep, every set, is part of my growth. I can't stop, even when it feels exhausting." (Participant B)

Students described moments when academic pressures, physical exhaustion, and emotional stress converged, making it difficult to find motivation or hope. This feeling was often accompanied by anxiety, self-doubt, and fear of failure. Yet, even within this struggle, many participants acknowledged small acts of resilience—pushing through difficult days, seeking support from peers, or finding brief moments of calm and accomplishment. This theme underscores the emotional and psychological toll of juggling demanding roles and high expectations. It also reveals a need for institutional support systems that recognize student stress and provide resources for mental health and well-being.

The survey results highlight the emotional and psychological challenges that participants face, reinforcing the theme of "treading water"—where students feel as though they are constantly struggling to stay afloat amidst academic, personal, and emotional pressures. The data from the survey reflects the intensity of these struggles.

This study explored the lived experiences of Indonesian undergraduate students studying physical education and health through a participatory photovoice methodology. The findings reveal complex and interrelated themes that shed light on the challenges, supports, and motivations shaping students' academic journeys.

Discussion

Balancing Multiple Demands and the Emotional Toll

Participants' struggles to juggle academic, physical, social, and personal responsibilities reflect the broader challenges identified in higher education literature (Larran Jorge & Andrades Pena, 2017; Pearson et al., 2016). The theme of treading water captures the emotional toll of persistent pressures, where students strive to maintain equilibrium despite exhaustion and uncertainty. This aligns with Dewey's (1938) theory of experience, emphasizing that growth arises through continuous interaction with challenging environments, though such processes can be emotionally taxing. Our findings suggest that without adequate institutional and social support, students risk burnout and diminished well-being. Specifically, survey results show that 31.4% of students frequently experience fatigue due to balancing multiple roles, while 42.9% express that these pressures contribute to increased resilience and discipline, highlighting the dual nature of their struggles and growth. The constant juggling of academics, physical training, and personal responsibilities can be overwhelming but ultimately fosters perseverance and strength.

The Centrality of Support Systems

The critical role of peers, family, mentors, and community in sustaining student motivation echoes existing research emphasizing the power of social support in graduate and undergraduate success (Boyce et al., 2019; Stylianou et al., 2017). Support systems function as both emotional anchors and practical resources, buffering the stresses associated with juggling multiple roles. This reflects Dewey's notion of continuity in experience, where supportive relationships enable students to connect past, present, and future academic experiences in meaningful ways. Survey data revealed that 74.3% of students rely heavily on family support, and 40% of students feel their peers provide crucial emotional support. These findings reinforce how essential these networks are for student well-being, helping them navigate challenges and maintain motivation through difficult times.

Engaging with Children and Youth: Meaning and Professional Identity

Interactions with children and youths emerged as a profound source of purpose and professional identity development. This engagement provides students with relational and experiential learning opportunities that go beyond formal coursework. The findings align with experiential learning theories that emphasize reflection on concrete experiences as foundational to meaningful education (Kolb,

1984). Through these engagements, students internalize their roles as future educators and community leaders, enhancing both motivation and resilience. More than 60% of survey participants expressed that working with children has significantly shaped their professional identity, demonstrating how hands-on experiences solidify their commitment to the field of physical education.

Challenges to the Field of Physical Education

Participants' accounts of infrastructural limitations, societal misconceptions, and career uncertainties highlight systemic challenges facing physical education in Indonesia. These obstacles complicate student experiences and career outlooks, suggesting a need for policy and institutional reforms. The findings resonate with critiques of neoliberal influences on higher education that often marginalize disciplines perceived as less economically productive (Stylianou et al., 2017). Survey results indicated that 40% of students feel the facilities do not meet the standards for optimal training, while 26.7% perceive physical education as undervalued by society. These barriers, including societal perceptions of PE as less academic or serious, hinder students' development and future opportunities. Addressing these challenges requires collective action to raise awareness about the value of physical education and to improve support for students and graduates.

Implications for Practice and Policy

This study underscores the value of participatory methodologies like photovoice in centering student voices, empowering participants to reflect critically and collaboratively on their experiences. Institutions could foster similar peer communities and reflective spaces to enhance student well-being and academic success. Providing support networks that extend beyond academic settings—incorporating mentorship, career guidance, and peer support—could significantly improve student resilience and overall success. Furthermore, addressing structural challenges in physical education demands coordinated efforts involving curriculum reform, resource allocation, and career guidance. Expanding physical training facilities, creating awareness about the importance of physical education, and enhancing job placement support can help students feel more supported throughout their academic journeys.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers rich insights, its sample size and focus on a single national context limit generalizability. Future research could expand to include diverse institutions and comparative studies across countries. Additionally, longitudinal designs might capture how student experiences evolve over time.

Conclusions

This study draws three main conclusions regarding the lived experiences of Indonesian undergraduate students in Physical Education and Health. First, students navigate a unique "dual burden" of rigorous academic requirements and intense physical training, often resulting in physical exhaustion and a sense of "treading water," though this struggle concurrently fosters discipline. Second, success and persistence in the program are not solitary achievements but are heavily dependent on informal support systems—particularly peers and family—which serve as essential emotional anchors. Third, direct engagement with children and youth during training acts as a critical mechanism for reinforcing professional identity and motivation, helping students counter societal undervaluation of their field and anxieties about future career prospects.

Based on these findings, this study offers two practical recommendations for institutions:

1. Integrate Well-being into the Curriculum: Institutions should recognize the physical and mental toll of the program by integrating recovery strategies and mental health support directly into the academic schedule to prevent burnout.

2. Strengthen Career and Mentorship Support: Departments should establish structured mentorship programs connecting students with alumni or practitioners early in their studies to provide clearer professional direction and alleviate anxiety regarding career uncertainty.

Authors' contributions

SB and P are contributed to data collection, data analysis, study design, manuscript drafting, and revision. SB and AA contributed to the conceptualization of the study and performed critical revisions for important intellectual content. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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