

Article

An Analysis of Methodological Aspects in the Practice of Nautical Activities in Educational Centers

Daniel Medina-Rebollo ¹, Pedro Saenz-Lopez Buñuel ², Pedro Jorge Paulino da Silva Bento ³,
Jesús Fernández-Gavira ^{4,*} and Eduardo José Fernández-Ozcorta ²

¹ Department of Physical Education and Sport, Centro de Estudios Universitarios Cardenal Spínola CEU, 41930 Seville, Spain; dmedina@ceu.es

² Departamento Didácticas Integradas, Universidad de Huelva, Avda. Tres de Marzo s/n, 21071 Huelva, Spain; psaez@uhu.es (P.S.-L.B.); eduardo.fernandez@dempc.uhu.es (E.J.F.-O.)

³ School of Education, Polytechnic Institute of Beja, 7800-000 Beja, Portugal; pbento@ipbeja.pt

⁴ Physical Education and Sports Department, University of Seville, 41013 Seville, Spain

* Correspondence: jesusfgavira@us.es

Abstract: Currently, physical and sports activities in natural environments are viewed as valuable resources for combatting sedentary lifestyles, with water sports and related activities offering significant educational potential. However, these activities are not fully integrated into physical education programs, largely due to a lack of training in methodological approaches. This qualitative study interviewed ten stakeholders (including instructors, managers, and teachers from three countries) to analyze key methodological aspects necessary for effective implementation. The results revealed three main findings: (1) direct instruction emerged as the primary teaching approach, incorporating demonstrations and level-appropriate activities; (2) optimal learning occurs in small groups of 8–12 students per instructor; and (3) technical skill development should focus on sailing, kayaking, and paddleboarding. This study identified weather conditions as a key challenge, necessitating flexible planning. Based on these findings, this study provides practical guidelines for implementing water sports in educational settings, emphasizing the importance of structured teaching approaches, appropriate group sizing, and environmental considerations.

Keywords: water sports; physical activity; formal education; methodology; children; teenagers



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1. Introduction

In today's society, a significant portion of the population, particularly in developed countries, lacks sufficient physical and sports activity, leading to sedentary lifestyles [1]. This phenomenon is especially important among children and adolescents, who spend a large amount of time on activities such as watching television, using mobile phones, using computers, and playing video games [2].

Sedentary lifestyles contribute to an increase in health problems, leading to diseases such as obesity and cardiovascular conditions [2–5]. This lack of regular activity contributes to childhood diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and asthma [6–8].

In response to this issue, the educational field proposes that physical-sports activities in the natural environment (PSANE) be integrated into the physical education curriculum itself [9]. PSANE offer countless educational opportunities [10]. In fact, more and more teachers are including PSANE content in their lesson plans to motivate students [11].

A study has emphasized the importance of the natural environment in improving the quality of life [12], even highlighting its therapeutic effects in reducing stress, leading to tangible functional improvements such as decreased heart rate, relief of muscle tension, and reduction in blood pressure, among other benefits [13]. It is important to note that these types of activities can help develop knowledge, skills, and abilities, ensuring safe and respectful use of the natural environment where they are practiced [14].

Children and adolescents are disconnected from their natural environment, especially those living in urban areas, making it essential to offer them PSANE linked to their educational curriculum. Among the various forms of participation in these activities are nautical activities and sports (NAS), which, when conducted in natural settings, can be stimulating in compulsory education. This is not only because they are uncommon in school programs; this is also due to the motivation fostered by practicing NAS outside the conventional context of physical education classes [15].

For this reason, the analysis of the practice of nautical activities and sports in schools has become a topic of growing interest in educational centers [16]. Its potential for the holistic development of students has been demonstrated [17], as it offers countless educational opportunities [10]. These environments have intrinsic potential, as they can become motivating and rewarding activities [18].

Even so, there are several reasons why PSANE and NAS have not yet been fully integrated as prominent resources within the physical education curriculum's lesson plans. These include a lack of time, the limited flexibility of the school schedule to manage these activities, the distance to suitable practice spaces, and the need for specific equipment [19]. Additionally, other important factors that hinder the development of these activities are the limited training of teachers, as well as issues related to the methodology and organization of these activities [20].

While previous studies have examined nautical activities in educational settings, they have largely focused on single-country perspectives or isolated stakeholder views. This limited scope has resulted in fragmented understanding of how to effectively implement nautical activities in educational contexts. To address this gap, our study presents a novel cross-cultural analysis incorporating perspectives from three different European countries (Spain, Portugal, and England), each with distinct maritime traditions and educational approaches.

Furthermore, this study is unique in its comprehensive stakeholder approach, synthesizing insights from

- Educational professionals (primary- and secondary-school teachers);
- Technical experts (nautical sports instructors);
- Administrative stakeholders (program managers and entrepreneurs).

Methodology refers to the approach used to achieve specific objectives, which in the case of the present study are not singular and depend on various factors. The two main teaching techniques are direct instruction, based on teaching the model, and inquiry, based on problem-solving or teaching through exploration. When teaching sports where technical aspects are somewhat relevant, such as in nautical activities, it is recommended to use traditional teaching styles like direct instruction [21]. In this approach, students engage in activities explained by the teacher, sometimes accompanied by demonstrations, where control and organization are prioritized [22], thus avoiding uncontrolled actions that may pose risks [23].

Play, experimentation, and practical activity should be the main vehicles for teaching all content, as they provide students with the stimulation and physical activity their brains need to develop and learn in the long term [24]. Play is a valuable learning tool [25–27]. It is essential to allocate the necessary time for these learnings to be meaningful, through activities that present challenges and are adapted to students' levels [28], using small groups to facilitate cooperative learning [29].

It is worth noting that sailing sports are the most practiced in the nautical sector, followed by rowing sports [30]. Mastering the correct technique in the execution of sports activities is fundamental, as it facilitates proper learning [31]. For the teaching of sports, there should be a global presentation, perceptual familiarization, the teaching of technical models and their integration, and the formation of basic decision-making schemas [32].

A fundamental objective of physical education is for individuals to acquire knowledge, values, behaviors, and practical skills to participate responsibly in the care of the

environment and the prevention of environmental harm [33]. Similarly, physical education also emphasizes the importance of taking care of and respecting materials [34].

Formative evaluation must be an integral part of the teaching–learning process of physical education [35], with systematic observation being a fundamental tool [36].

The presence of at least two instructors is essential, with one in the water and another on a boat for emergencies, as it is considered an important safety measure [37]. It is also necessary to assess the environmental conditions and consider the possibility of suspending a session in case of danger [38].

This article analyzes various educational approaches and strategies used in several European countries that incorporate nautical activities in the school environment. The goal is to address challenges that require attention for the improvement of these curricular practices. To achieve this, it is essential to examine which teaching techniques are the most appropriate, the use of games and how these playful activities are presented, what content to work on, what difficulties might arise, and how to evaluate them.

Therefore, the objective of this study was to analyze the methodological aspects, such as teaching styles, organization, and evaluation, that should be considered to effectively implement these types of activities. Consequently, this study hypothesizes that implementing specific pedagogical methodologies for teaching nautical activities in educational centers will significantly enhance the quality of instruction.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, focused on collecting and analyzing interviews with individuals from various professional fields who interact with students in aquatic environments through physical activity. Consequently, the sample consisted of ten interviews, evenly distributed between five women and five men, ensuring gender balance. These interviews were conducted with different stakeholders related to the field of study, including nautical activity managers, nautical activity instructors, and educators from educational centers across three nationalities: Spanish, Portuguese, and English (please see Figure 1).

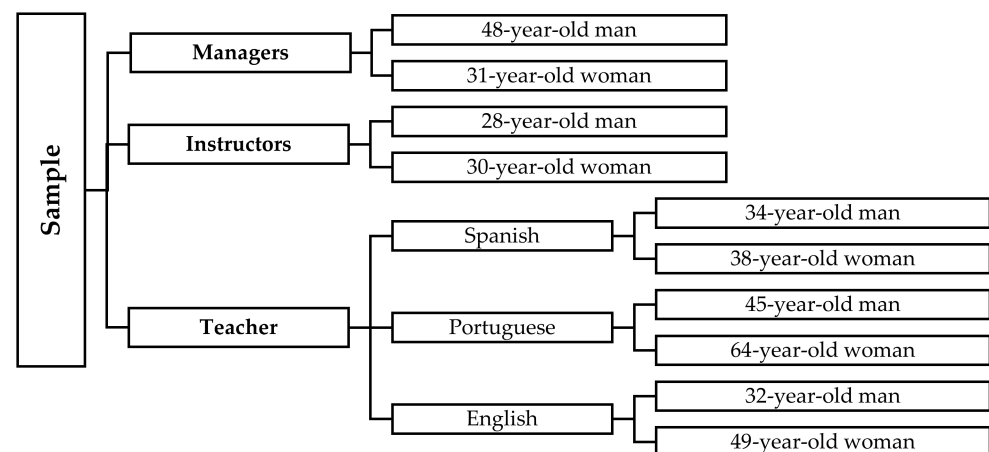


Figure 1. Research sample.

Prior to the interviews, participants were thoroughly informed about the research objectives and the intended use of their data, which was solely for research purposes related to the study topic. All the participants were adults, gave their consent, and signed an electronically registered informed consent form.

To capture the true essence and complexity of this phenomenon and understand the multiple aspects surrounding this practice, the interview method was chosen due to its versatility and effectiveness. Specifically, this approach enhances the understanding of how nautical activities can be implemented in the educational context from the perspective of educational actors.

The chosen instrument was an interview [39], which aimed to understand the development of nautical activities in educational centers. This interview was an effective tool for gaining insights into how nautical activities should be conducted in educational settings. It was designed and validated using the Delphi method by nine experts from various fields (academic, business, and educational centers) who had expertise in the organization and implementation of nautical activities in education. It consists of 29 valid and reliable questions covering aspects related to the organization of activities, potential methodologies to use, and safety considerations.

Subsequently, the research procedure encompassed several stages, including the conducting and recording of interviews, transcription, and the analysis and coding of data using the qualitative data analysis software MaxQDA 2022. This program is specifically designed for analyzing qualitative data, such as textual material, interviews, and transcripts. It allowed us to identify relevant dimensions and categories within the transcripts and assign appropriate labels. Additionally, it facilitated the identification of patterns, themes, and emerging trends in the participants' responses.

The individuals selected for interviews included two entrepreneurs (E), two nautical-sports instructors (I), and six primary- and secondary-school teachers (T). This sample was chosen using convenience sampling from participants in the previously mentioned "Atlantic Youth" project who expressed interest in being interviewed. The selection process always considered representativeness, and the opinions of the experts were sought before finalizing the selections (Please see Figure 2).

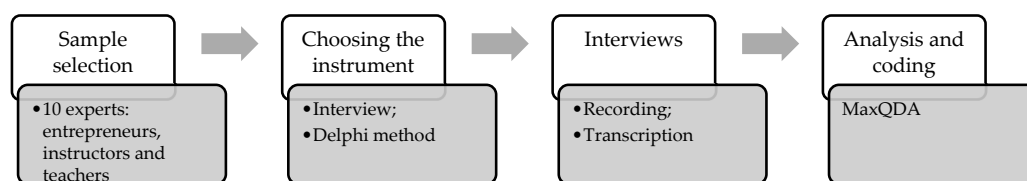


Figure 2. Methodological procedure of this study.

As a result, we identified five substantial dimensions—methodology, curriculum, organization, difficulties, and evaluation—which will be discussed in the following sections.

3. Results

The results collected have been divided into five subsections, which are intended to give a clearer view of the conclusions to be presented. The first one is "method", and it includes aspects related to the way of teaching nautical activities. In the second sub-section "curriculum", it is mainly mentioned which objectives and contents should be addressed. "Organization" is the third subsection and deals with the organizational guidelines to be taken into account when carrying out an activity in the aquatic environment. The fourth subsection is "evaluation", which develops aspects related to what, how, and when to evaluate. The last subsection is 'difficulties', which analyses possible setbacks that we may encounter when carrying out nautical activities. Table 1 presents the quantitative conclusions resulting from the analysis of the interviews, aimed at examining the most significant facets. It outlines contributions from various participants, including entrepreneurs, instructors, and teachers. All were selected based on their experience, with a minimum of five years in their field of work. A total of 102 contributions were made, with the dimension "method" appearing most frequently (31), followed by "curriculum" (22), "organization" (19), "evaluation" (18), and "difficulties" (12). This classification underscores the importance of these topics for the interviewees and will serve as the basis for presenting the qualitative analysis of their opinions.

Table 1. Total count of studied dimensions according to entrepreneurs, instructors, and teachers.

Categories	E	E	I	I	ST	ST	PT	PT	ET	ET	Total
Method	2	3	4	3	4	3	3	4	2	3	31
Curriculum	3	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	22
Organization	2	2	1	3	2	1	2	2	2	2	19
Evaluation	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	18
Difficulties	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	2	12
Total	9	10	10	13	11	9	10	11	8	11	102

Notes: E = entrepreneur; I = instructor; ST = Spanish teacher; PT = Portuguese teacher; ET = English teacher.

In each dimension, the quotes provided by the participants who are part of the project are analyzed. The ideas extracted are organized starting with those that are most shared, for which the participants provided the most information, and ending with those that are less frequently mentioned.

3.1. Method

This category examines aspects related to diagnosing students' levels, delivering theoretical content, choosing teaching styles, whether individualized instruction is necessary, and the appropriate student-to-instructor ratio to ensure quality teaching.

Six participants indicated that for teaching nautical activities or sports, they would use methods related to direct instruction, including explaining and providing examples of how to perform various activities. Additionally, these activities should be conducted in a playful manner (5), allow sufficient time for meaningful learning (4), and should present a challenge for the participants (2).

“Traditional styles such as direct command or model learning should be used as they facilitate rapid learning for students” (English teacher).

“Activities should always be conducted in a playful manner, through game-based activities that present a challenge to these students” (Entrepreneur).

Five participants believed that the initial part of the first session is the ideal time to impart the most theoretical knowledge, which will then be further developed during practical sessions (6), where they would take advantage of any opportunity to provide explanations. In relation to this content, they highlight the knowledge of the environment where the activity will take place (7), the importance and awareness of environmental conservation (6), and understanding how to use and care for the equipment (4).

“In the initial session, we need to emphasize the environment where we will be conducting the activity . . . the characteristics of the dock, the ground where we will carry out the activity, whether it is muddy or has rocks . . . Regarding environmental conservation, we should establish basic rules in that same session about what should not be done, and these rules must be respected by all participants” (English teacher).

Nine participants emphasized the importance of adapting activities to students' levels, as well as to their characteristics or specific needs (such as motor disorders, hyperactivity, or medical conditions related to certain illnesses). Four of them indicated that the approach to working with these students will vary significantly depending on whether the students have prior experience or not or whether they are adults or children.

“Working with inexperienced and experienced students will be different. Firstly, due to the subjective perception of risk, and secondly, because of the level of motivation of students who already have some knowledge of these activities” (Spanish teacher).

3.2. Curriculum

Next, the aspects related to the objectives and contents that should be developed in a program of water activities are developed.

All the participants took part in developing this category, answering that the objectives to be developed are 'to know the technical aspects necessary to carry out a water sport independently' (10); followed by 'to enjoy water activities and the environment where they are carried out' (7); to respect and care for the environment (6); to promote educational values through sport, such as cooperation, safety, teamwork, respect for the rules, etc. (6); and to know what equipment is necessary, its characteristics, and how to use it correctly (4).

"The fundamental objective that these types of aquatic programs should have is to acquire basic knowledge that allows mastery of the vessel, enabling us to operate independently" (English teacher).

"The objectives that should be worked on include understanding the necessary equipment and its characteristics based on physical qualities, acquiring the knowledge needed to perform activities autonomously, caring for the environment, and enjoying these activities" (Instructor).

Regarding the content, the participants considered it important to develop the execution of technical aspects necessary for performing activities independently (9); the use of nautical activities as a leisure occupation (4); respect and care for the environment (6); the acquisition of educational values inherent to the sport, such as cooperation, teamwork, respect for rules, and overcoming challenges (5); care of equipment (4); application of safety rules in nautical activities (4); and a critical attitude towards physical activity and its impact on health (4).

"The content to be addressed in nautical sports includes operating autonomously in the aquatic environment, balance, and movement. Additionally, it involves respect and care for the environment" (Portuguese teacher).

Regarding technical content, the participants provided two distinct approaches. Six individuals addressed general technical content, indicating that it should include the correct execution of boarding and disembarking from vessels, knowledge, handling, and maintenance of equipment, precision in balancing on vessels, effective movement, and understanding and use of winds, currents, and tides.

In contrast, four individuals divided the content to be addressed into two types of sports: sailing sports (sailing, kitesurfing, etc.) and rowing sports (kayaking, paddleboarding, etc.), specifying the technical content for each. For sailing sports, the focus should be on preparation for navigation (choosing equipment based on weather, selecting the navigation area, etc.), handling the vessel (stopping, maneuvering, and turning), and adjusting sails according to the wind. For rowing sports, the content should include selecting equipment suitable for the participants' age and height (safety and navigation), maintaining balance in the vessel, using paddles to advance, turn, and stop, planning and using currents for navigation, and boarding techniques for getting into the vessel from the water (in case of a fall).

"The technical content to be addressed in nautical sports includes knowledge of handling different equipment and its maintenance, boarding and disembarking from vessels, balance, movement, turning, and the use of tides, currents, wind direction, etc." (Spanish teacher).

3.3. Organization

This section covers two aspects of organization: the number of students per group and how to form these groups.

All the participants indicated that the groupings should have the same percentage of participants in relation to gender, being a resource favoring the formation of stronger interpersonal relationships and promoting a higher level of friendship and social cohesion within the group. In addition, another factor to be taken into account is the knowledge possessed by the learners. Therefore, six participants emphasized that students should be grouped by their level of knowledge to work more efficiently, and only three participants

suggested creating mixed-level groups so that students with more experience can assist their peers. Only one participant mentioned that the formation of groups according to the knowledge of the learners should take into account the objectives to be achieved (e.g., technical improvement and socialization).

“It is beneficial for groups to be classified based on the students’ skills so that work can be done more effectively” (Instructor).

“I would create diverse groups, meaning that within a single group, there should be both more capable and less capable students, so that, in the water, students can help each other or give instructions when the instructor is not present” (Portuguese teacher).

Eight participants highlighted that the fewer students per group, the easier and more effective teaching will be. They indicated that the optimal number for a quality session with primary- or secondary-school pupils should be between 8 and 12 students per instructor.

“The smaller the group, the more effective the transmission of information will be” (Portuguese teacher).

“The teacher/student ratio should be small enough to allow for the effective delivery and control of instructions on aquatic sports. A trust-based and respectful environment should be created. I would suggest 10 participants per instructor in individual sports” (Portuguese teacher).

3.4. Evaluation

In this category, aspects related to what, how, and when to evaluate are analyzed. All the participants (10) indicated that one key aspect for evaluation is students’ ability to move autonomously in the aquatic environment. Other important aspects for assessment are respect and care for the environment (8) and, finally, educational values such as teamwork and respect for instructors and peers.

“A fundamental aspect to evaluate is whether the child can maintain balance and move independently in the water” (Spanish teacher).

Eight participants believed that observation is the primary tool for evaluating students and analyzing their performance in various activities, such as their ability to move or their respect for the environment. Six participants suggested that evaluation should also include questions or group reflections during practice. Only two participants would use questionnaires, noting that this tool allows for a more thorough assessment and the acquisition of more information.

“Through observation, we can gather a lot of information, such as whether students can move without assistance, if they do not litter during sessions, or if they help their peers” (Businessman).

Finally, nine subjects emphasized the need for an initial evaluation to understand the starting point of students. Additionally, six of them would conduct continuous evaluations, taking into account different relevant aspects during the activities. Two of them would perform this evaluation at the end of each session, while the other two would do so only at the end of the project.

“During the various activities, we can evaluate our students and check if the objectives set at the beginning are being achieved” (Portuguese teacher).

3.5. Difficulties

We will consider aspects related to the difficulties encountered when conducting aquatic activities.

Eight subjects highlighted that one of the most significant challenges in teaching nautical activities is the conditions of the environment, which can be affected by tides, wind, cold weather, and rain. All of them indicated that if any risk is present, they would

suspend the scheduled activity and replace it with an alternative activity such as hiking, watching a related film, or collecting samples from the shore.

“If there is bad weather and the conditions are not suitable for conducting a safe activity, I would cancel the activity and conduct an alternative activity” (Spanish teacher).

Five participants pointed out that entry into water is one of the aspects where students face the most difficulties, often resulting in falls that require the instructor to assist while the rest of the participants are navigating.

“Organizational problems can be most noticeable at the water entry stage, as there are always falls” (Instructor).

Three participants mentioned that one of the greatest difficulties in conducting these sessions is providing support to the entire group at any given moment. They express that it is sometimes impossible due to varying skill levels, falls, and other factors that cause the group to disperse, making it challenging to attend to everyone.

“The most problematic aspect is providing adequate support to all the students in the water. If you are on one side, you cannot attend to those who are farther away, and this happens frequently because practitioners are generally dispersed in the water” (Portuguese teacher).

Two subjects noted that a challenge is maintaining an appropriate pace for a group with different levels of ability. They highlight that sometimes a student is significantly lagging behind or distanced from the group.

“A student with a very low level or many problems keeping up with the group’s pace. This would require the second instructor to stay with that student, which means that in any situation, only one instructor would be left with a large group” (Instructor).

4. Discussion

The use of nautical activities and sports is gaining increasing importance in our society, with the educational system being one of the primary areas where this significance is evident. This prominence is justified by several reasons, including their value as a tool for the holistic development of students [17,40] and the numerous educational possibilities they offer [10]. These characteristics have led many educators to incorporate them into the physical education curriculum [41].

Educators tend to favor direct instruction as a teaching style, using explanations and examples. This is consistent with the view that these teaching styles are most suitable for learning technical gestures [21]. Moreover, these methods facilitate faster learning and greater control [22]. This teaching style is recommended in the presence of risks [23].

One of the aspects highlighted by the participants is presenting activities in a playful manner while still posing a challenge and allowing sufficient time for completion [29]. They believe that activities should be adapted to students’ levels [15].

Additionally, there is a need to conduct a more theoretical first session, covering content related to the natural environment and its use and care [32].

The primary goal of these sessions should be to acquire the technical skills necessary to perform nautical sports independently [31].

Regarding the most practiced nautical sports, Ref. [30] identifies sailing as a sport within sailing and kayaking and paddle surfing within rowing sports.

In terms of organization, the participants noted that a smaller number of students makes teaching easier and more effective, allowing for cooperative learning [29], and that an optimal range would be 8 to 12 students per instructor. For grouping, some participants suggested organizing students by skill levels to accelerate learning, while others believed that mixed levels could encourage peer assistance.

An initial assessment is recommended to understand the starting point of students, which can be repeated at the end of the sessions or at the project's conclusion [33]. There is an emphasis on evaluating students' ability to move autonomously in the aquatic environment, using systematic observation [36], which is considered a fundamental tool.

Regarding difficulties, environmental conditions are highlighted as a significant challenge, with activities potentially being suspended in case of risks [38]. Additionally, there is often difficulty in providing adequate support to the entire group, which may arise from varying skill levels or falls, making the presence of two instructors crucial for handling emergencies [37].

5. Conclusions

This work emphasizes providing guidelines and recommendations on how to effectively implement nautical activities and sports in educational settings. Several practical conclusions have been drawn:

First, educators prefer using direct instruction, providing explanations and examples of how to perform various activities. Activities can be presented in a playful manner, while making them challenging for the participants. It also is crucial to allocate sufficient time for learning. Additionally, these activities should be adapted to students' levels, which is a key factor, especially if they have prior experience with such activities.

It is recommended that more theoretical content is covered in the first session and then developed further during practical sessions. Key content areas include understanding the local environment, respecting the environment, and knowledge of the use and care of equipment.

The primary goal of these activities is for students to acquire the technical skills necessary to perform nautical sports independently. This involves learning correct boarding and disembarking techniques, equipment knowledge and handling, and effective movement. The most practiced water sports are sailing, kayaking, and paddle surfing.

It is noted that a smaller number of participants makes teaching easier and more effective, with the recommended number being between 8 and 12 students per instructor. Groupings can be made by skill levels to enhance learning or mixed levels to encourage peer support.

An initial assessment is recommended for determining students' starting points, with follow-up evaluations possible at the end of sessions or the project. Emphasis is placed on evaluating students' ability to move autonomously in the aquatic environment.

Regarding difficulties, environmental conditions are highlighted as a major challenge, with activities potentially being suspended in the presence of risks. Additionally, there is sometimes a challenge in providing adequate coverage to the entire group, which can be due to varying skill levels or falls.

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Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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