

The Role of the Physical Education Teacher in Improving Self-Esteem Among Secondary-School Students

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Abstract

Adolescence represents a critical developmental period during which self-esteem undergoes substantial fluctuation and consolidation. Physical education classes constitute a unique educational context where bodily experiences, social interactions, and competence development converge to shape how young people perceive themselves. This theoretical review examines the multifaceted role of the physical education teacher in fostering positive self-esteem among secondary-school students. Drawing upon self-determination theory, hierarchical models of self-concept, and empirical research from diverse contexts, the article explores how teacher behaviors, instructional strategies, and interpersonal dynamics influence global self-esteem and its physical dimensions. The review synthesizes evidence concerning classroom climate, autonomy support, feedback practices, and inclusive pedagogy, while addressing the particular vulnerabilities adolescents face regarding body image and physical competence. Findings indicate that teachers who create supportive environments, provide competence-affirming feedback, and foster meaningful relationships can significantly enhance students' self-perceptions. Practical implications for teacher education and instructional practice are discussed, emphasizing the need for intentional pedagogical approaches that recognize the profound psychological impact of physical education experiences during this formative developmental stage.

Keywords: physical education teacher, self-esteem, secondary school, adolescents, teacher-student relationship, physical self-concept, autonomy support

Introduction

Secondary education coincides with one of the most psychologically complex periods of human development. Adolescents navigate dramatic physical transformations, intensified peer relationships, and evolving self-perceptions that collectively shape their emerging identities. Within this developmental landscape, self-esteem functions as both a psychological outcome and a protective resource, influencing academic engagement, social adjustment, and long-term well-being. Physical education occupies a distinctive position among school subjects because it directly engages the body as both instrument and object of evaluation (Yahiaoui, 2013, p. 200). Unlike purely academic disciplines, PE classes expose students to public displays of physical competence, peer comparison, and embodied experiences that can profoundly affect how adolescents view themselves.

Research consistently demonstrates that self-esteem during adolescence is particularly fragile and context-sensitive. The physical domain represents a critical component of overall self-worth during this period (Douar, 2015, p. 58), as bodily changes and appearance concerns become increasingly salient. Physical education teachers therefore occupy a pivotal role in

shaping not only motor skills and fitness but also the psychological constructs that underpin students' sense of personal value. Yet the mechanisms through which teachers influence self-esteem remain complex and warrant systematic examination. This article provides a comprehensive theoretical review of how PE teachers can foster positive self-esteem among secondary-school students, synthesizing conceptual frameworks with empirical evidence from diverse educational contexts.

The article proceeds through several integrated sections. First, theoretical and conceptual foundations are established, clarifying the nature of self-esteem as a global construct while examining its physical dimensions and developmental context. Second, the specific mechanisms through which PE teachers exert influence are analyzed, including classroom climate, autonomy support, and feedback practices. Third, empirical evidence regarding physical activity interventions, motivation, and body image is synthesized to identify consistent patterns and remaining gaps. Finally, practical implications for secondary PE teachers are articulated, providing actionable guidance grounded in theory and evidence.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Self-Esteem as a Global Construct

Self-esteem represents an individual's overall subjective evaluation of personal worth and value. As a global construct, it encompasses affective judgments about the self that transcend specific domains or situational contexts. Individuals with high self-esteem generally view themselves as capable, valuable, and deserving of respect (Barakat et al., 2022, p. 271), whereas those with low self-esteem experience pervasive doubts about personal adequacy. This global self-evaluation develops through accumulated experiences across multiple life domains, including academic achievement, social relationships, and physical competence. Importantly, self-esteem during adolescence functions not merely as a cognitive appraisal but as an affective-motivational orientation that influences goal pursuit, risk-taking, and interpersonal behavior.

The hierarchical organization of self-perceptions has received substantial empirical support. According to multidimensional models, global self-esteem occupies the apex of a hierarchical structure, with domain-specific self-concepts occupying intermediate levels and context-specific evaluations forming the base. This hierarchical arrangement implies that changes in domain-specific self-perceptions can cascade upward to influence global self-esteem, though the strength of these effects varies depending on the personal importance assigned to each domain. For secondary-school students, the physical domain often carries considerable weight in determining overall self-worth (Adjali & Rouag, 2017, p. 150), making physical education experiences particularly consequential for psychological development.

Physical Self-Concept and Physical Self-Esteem

Physical self-concept refers to the organized cognitive and affective representations individuals hold regarding their physical attributes, capabilities, and appearance. Rather than constituting a unitary construct, physical self-concept comprises multiple subdimensions that reflect distinct aspects of physicality. Physical self-esteem, closely related yet distinct, captures the evaluative and affective components of these physical self-perceptions. Research distinguishes between physical self-worth as a general domain and more specific facets such as sport competence, physical condition, body attractiveness, and physical strength. Evidence from meta-analytic reviews confirms that physical activity participation relates positively to physical self-concept (Babic et al., 2014, p. 1590), though the directionality and mechanisms underlying this association remain subjects of ongoing investigation.

The relationship between physical self-concept and behavior operates bidirectionally. Positive physical self-perceptions can motivate participation in physical activity, while successful physical experiences can enhance physical self-concept. This reciprocal dynamic creates opportunities for virtuous cycles, wherein PE teachers who facilitate competence-building experiences enable students to develop more positive physical self-perceptions, which in turn promote continued engagement. However, the reverse is equally plausible—negative physical experiences can damage physical self-concept and trigger disengagement (Ali Zerrouki & Belghoul, 2019, p. 545). Teachers must therefore attend carefully to how instructional practices shape students' interpretations of their physical capabilities and potential for development.

Recent longitudinal research demonstrates that physical self-esteem serves as a predictor of sustained sports participation among adolescents. Mediation models reveal that exercise motivation and social support function as critical pathways through which physical self-esteem translates into actual participation (Peng et al., 2025, p. 10). These findings underscore the importance of cultivating positive physical self-perceptions during secondary school, as these psychological foundations influence not only immediate classroom experiences but also long-term physical activity trajectories. PE teachers who understand these mechanisms can intentionally design learning environments that support the development of robust, positive physical self-concepts.

Body Image in Adolescence

Body image encompasses the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings individuals hold about their physical appearance and bodily functioning. During adolescence, body image assumes particular salience as rapid pubertal changes alter physical appearance and heighten self-consciousness. The relationship between body image and self-esteem is well-documented, with body dissatisfaction consistently emerging as a predictor of diminished global self-worth. Research with secondary-school students reveals that body image concerns vary by gender, body mass index, and cultural context (Adjali & Rouag, 2017, p. 152), yet they consistently relate to psychological adjustment across diverse populations.

Physical education classes present a unique context for body image formation and potential disruption. Activities that require revealing clothing, public performance, or direct body-to-body comparison can trigger acute appearance concerns, particularly among students who already experience body dissatisfaction. Conversely, PE experiences that emphasize functional competence rather than aesthetic appearance, and that cultivate body appreciation rather than body evaluation, can serve protective functions. Evidence suggests that adolescents practicing physical education demonstrate variable body image outcomes depending on the qualitative nature of their PE experiences (Ali Zerrouki & Belghoul, 2019, p. 546). Teachers who recognize body image vulnerability can modify instructional practices to minimize appearance-based threats while promoting functional body awareness.

The construct of body-esteem, which reflects satisfaction with specific bodily attributes, relates closely to both global self-esteem and physical self-concept. Finnish cross-sectional research demonstrates associations between physical activity levels and body-esteem among 15-year-old adolescents (Ojala et al., 2021, p. 158), suggesting that movement experiences influence how young people feel about their bodies. However, these associations are complex and moderated by factors such as social comparison tendencies, media exposure, and peer acceptance. PE teachers cannot single-handedly counteract broader sociocultural pressures that promote narrow appearance ideals, but they can create classroom microclimates that privilege competence, effort, and individual progress over aesthetic conformity.

Developmental Context of Secondary-School Students

Adolescence encompasses profound transformations across biological, cognitive, and social domains. Secondary-school students typically range from early to late adolescence, a period marked by heightened neuroplasticity, intensified peer influence, and evolving autonomy. From a developmental perspective, this period represents both opportunity and vulnerability. Neurobiological changes enhance sensitivity to social evaluation and reward, making adolescents particularly responsive to peer acceptance and teacher feedback. Simultaneously, identity formation processes render self-perceptions malleable, creating windows for positive intervention but also susceptibility to negative experiences.

The Algerian secondary school context, documented in multiple empirical studies, illustrates how educational structures shape adolescent development. Algerian PE classes operate within particular cultural and institutional constraints (Yahiaoui, 2013, p. 205), including gender-segregated instruction, variable resource availability, and specific curricular emphases. Understanding contextual particularities enables more nuanced interpretation of how teacher behaviors influence student outcomes. Research with Algerian secondary students reveals that participation patterns in PE classes correlate with multiple dimensions of self-esteem (Choual & Hachaichi, 2020, p. 155), suggesting that engagement itself constitutes a psychological outcome worthy of pedagogical attention.

Motivation patterns shift substantially during secondary school. While younger children often display high intrinsic interest in physical activity, many adolescents experience motivational decline, particularly girls and those who perceive themselves as less competent. Self-determination theory provides a framework for understanding these motivational dynamics. According to this perspective, adolescents require supportive environments that satisfy basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ntoumanis & Standage, 2009, p. 195). PE teachers who recognize developmental shifts in motivation can adapt their instructional approaches to align with adolescents' emerging needs for self-direction, meaningful challenge, and authentic social connection.

The PE Teacher's Influence: Mechanisms and Pathways Classroom Climate and Teacher-Student Relationships

The quality of interpersonal relationships between teachers and students represents a foundational mechanism through which PE teachers influence self-esteem. Classroom climate encompasses the prevailing social-emotional atmosphere, including patterns of interaction, implicit norms, and affective tone. Supportive climates characterized by warmth, mutual respect, and psychological safety enable students to take risks, tolerate failure, and engage authentically. Research with Algerian adolescents demonstrates that socio-affective dimensions of student behavior in PE classes relate significantly to motivational and psychological outcomes (Yahiaoui, 2014, p. 40). Teachers who establish positive rapport create conditions wherein students feel valued as individuals, not merely evaluated as performers.

Teacher-student relationships exert influence through multiple psychological pathways. First, positive relationships provide emotional security that buffers against the anxiety inherent in public physical performance. Students who trust their teachers feel safer attempting new skills and exposing vulnerability. Second, caring teacher relationships satisfy the basic psychological need for relatedness (Standage et al., 2005, p. 420), which in turn supports autonomous motivation and psychological well-being. Third, teachers serve as significant adults whose perceptions carry weight in adolescents' self-evaluations. When teachers

communicate genuine belief in students' potential, this affirmation can counteract negative self-perceptions and cultivate growth-oriented mindsets.

The affective dimension of teacher behavior proves particularly consequential. Teachers who express enthusiasm, demonstrate patience, and show personal interest in students' lives beyond athletic performance create humanizing educational experiences. These relational qualities matter especially for students who lack confidence or have experienced prior negative PE experiences. Research examining mental imagery and physical self-attributes among Algerian male secondary students reveals connections between psychological processes and physical self-perceptions (Bouhental et al., 2025, p. 8), suggesting that internal cognitive-affective states mediate the impact of external environmental factors. Teachers who attend to students' subjective experiences, not merely objective performance metrics, can more effectively support positive self-concept development.

Autonomy Support and Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory articulates three fundamental psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—that when satisfied promote optimal motivation, performance, and well-being. Autonomy support refers to instructional behaviors that acknowledge students' perspectives, provide meaningful choices, minimize controlling language, and offer rationales for activities. Empirical research consistently demonstrates that perceived autonomy support from PE teachers predicts need satisfaction, autonomous motivation, and positive affective outcomes. A recent study reveals that PE teachers' autonomy support positively influences self-esteem in secondary students, with emotional intelligence mediating this relationship (Granero-Gallegos et al., 2023, p. 5). These findings underscore that teacher behaviors shape not only immediate situational motivation but also enduring self-evaluations. Autonomy-supportive teaching involves specific, observable practices. Teachers can solicit student input regarding activity selection, provide options for demonstrating competence, explain the personal relevance of learning objectives, and acknowledge that different students may approach tasks differently. Such practices communicate respect for students as agents capable of self-direction rather than passive recipients of instruction. When adolescents experience volition and self-endorsement in their PE participation, they develop more internalized motivation (Ntoumanis & Standage, 2009, p. 196), which relates positively to self-esteem and psychological adjustment. Conversely, controlling teaching styles that rely on external pressures, conditional regard, or authoritarian directives can undermine autonomous motivation and damage self-perceptions.

Competence support represents another critical teacher behavior within the self-determination framework. Competence experiences arise when students successfully meet optimal challenges that stretch but do not exceed current capabilities. Teachers facilitate competence satisfaction by appropriately scaffolding tasks, providing clear instructional cues, offering constructive feedback, and structuring success opportunities. Research testing self-determination theory in school PE contexts confirms that competence satisfaction mediates relationships between teacher support and adaptive outcomes (Standage et al., 2005, p. 425). For self-esteem specifically, repeated competence experiences accumulate into generalized beliefs about personal capability, which form core components of positive self-regard.

The integration of autonomy and competence support creates synergistic effects. When students experience both volition and effectiveness, they develop autonomous competence—a sense that they are freely choosing to engage in activities at which they can succeed. This psychological configuration represents an optimal state for self-esteem development. Algerian research examining the relationship between self-esteem and achievement motivation in PE

classes reveals positive associations (Barakat et al., 2022, p. 275), suggesting that motivational processes and self-evaluative processes operate in tandem. Teachers who understand these interconnections can design learning environments that simultaneously foster multiple psychological needs.

Feedback, Competence Experiences, and Inclusion Practices

The quality, timing, and content of teacher feedback constitute powerful determinants of how students interpret their physical experiences and construct self-perceptions. Feedback serves multiple functions including providing information about performance, regulating behavior, and communicating interpersonal messages about student worth. Process-focused feedback that highlights effort, strategy use, and incremental improvement tends to support self-esteem more effectively than outcome-focused feedback emphasizing ability or relative standing. When teachers frame errors as learning opportunities rather than indicators of inadequacy, students develop resilient self-concepts capable of withstanding inevitable setbacks.

Public versus private feedback delivery also matters considerably. Public praise may enhance social status and self-esteem for high-achieving students, but it can intensify anxiety and self-consciousness for struggling students who receive corrective feedback before peers. Differentiated feedback approaches that consider individual students' psychological needs represent best practice. Additionally, the ratio of corrective to affirmative feedback influences students' overall experiences. Teachers who predominantly highlight deficits risk cultivating performance anxiety and undermining self-worth, whereas those who balance constructive guidance with genuine encouragement foster psychological safety.

Inclusion practices that accommodate diverse abilities, interests, and body types prove essential for protecting self-esteem across the full student population. Physical education classes traditionally privileged athletically gifted students, inadvertently marginalizing those with lesser sport competence. Contemporary inclusive pedagogies emphasize universal design, modified activities, and multiple forms of participation that allow all students to contribute meaningfully. Research examining physical self-esteem and bodily-kinesthetic intelligence during PE classes demonstrates relationships between these constructs (Rabiai & Alwan, 2023, p. 500), indicating that embodied learning experiences influence cognitive-affective self-perceptions. Teachers who intentionally create inclusive participation structures enable broader ranges of students to develop positive physical self-concepts.

Synthesis of Empirical Evidence

Physical Activity Interventions and Self-Esteem/Self-Concept

Meta-analytic evidence provides robust support for the proposition that physical activity interventions improve self-esteem and self-concept among children and adolescents. Liu and colleagues' systematic review synthesized multiple experimental studies and concluded that physical activity interventions yield small-to-moderate positive effects on both constructs (Liu et al., 2015, p. 7). Effect sizes varied depending on intervention characteristics, participant demographics, and outcome measurement specificity. Notably, interventions incorporating explicit self-esteem promotion components alongside physical activity produced stronger effects than activity-only interventions, suggesting that psychological mechanisms require explicit pedagogical attention.

The specificity of self-concept changes represents an important consideration. Domain-specific effects often emerge more reliably than global self-esteem effects, as physical activity directly influences physical self-concept which may or may not generalize to overall self-worth. Babic and colleagues' meta-analysis focusing specifically on physical activity and

physical self-concept found moderate positive relationships (Babic et al., 2014, p. 1595), with effects consistent across age groups and study designs. These findings suggest that PE teachers can confidently anticipate that quality physical activity experiences will enhance students' physical self-perceptions, which may subsequently influence global self-esteem depending on the personal importance students assign to physical attributes.

Recent systematic reviews examining physical activity's effects on mental health outcomes among children and adolescents report beneficial impacts on self-esteem alongside other psychological constructs (Fu et al., 2025, p. 8). The comprehensiveness of these effects indicates that physical activity operates through multiple mechanisms, including neurobiological pathways, social interaction, mastery experiences, and body image improvements. For PE teachers, these findings validate the psychological significance of their work while highlighting responsibility for ensuring that PE experiences are genuinely positive rather than merely providing activity exposure. Quality matters as much as quantity when considering psychological outcomes.

Motivation, Participation, and Engagement in PE Classes

Motivational dynamics in PE classes exhibit complex relationships with self-esteem. Research examining dimensions of self-esteem and their relationships with student participation in PE classes among Algerian baccalaureate students found that multiple self-esteem facets predicted engagement patterns (Choual & Hachaichi, 2020, p. 158). Students with higher self-esteem demonstrated greater willingness to participate actively, take on challenging activities, and persist through difficulties. Conversely, students with lower self-esteem exhibited avoidance behaviors, minimal effort, and self-protective strategies that limited their learning opportunities. These bidirectional relationships create either virtuous or vicious cycles depending on initial conditions and teacher responsiveness.

Comparative research examining self-esteem levels among students enrolled versus not enrolled in school sports programs provides additional insight. Algerian research revealed that students participating in school sports demonstrated higher self-esteem compared to non-participants (Ababsa, 2023, p. 70), though determining causality remains challenging. Selection effects may account for some observed differences, as students with higher self-esteem may more readily choose sports participation. Nonetheless, the consistency of these associations across multiple studies suggests that sustained physical activity involvement, particularly in socially supportive contexts, contributes to self-esteem development. PE teachers can facilitate this process by creating pathways that connect classroom experiences to broader school sports opportunities.

Tunisian research examining relationships between global self-esteem and work engagement among PE teachers versus academic subject teachers reveals interesting patterns. Hamrouni and colleagues found that PE teachers' self-esteem related significantly to their professional engagement (Hamrouni et al., 2012, p. 6), suggesting that teachers' own psychological states influence instructional quality. This finding carries implications for teacher education and professional development. Teachers with robust self-esteem and intrinsic motivation likely model these qualities for students while creating more psychologically supportive learning environments. Conversely, teachers experiencing professional burnout or self-doubt may inadvertently communicate negativity that affects student outcomes.

Body Image, Corpulence, and Self-Perception in Adolescents

The relationship between actual body composition, perceived body image, and self-esteem represents a particularly sensitive issue in PE contexts. Algerian research investigating self-

esteem, body image, and actual corpulence among secondary students in Constantine found significant associations between these variables (Adjali & Rouag, 2017, p. 158). Students' subjective perceptions of their bodies often diverged from objective measurements, and these perceptual discrepancies related to self-esteem levels. Body image dissatisfaction emerged as a more consistent predictor of low self-esteem than actual body mass index, indicating that psychological constructs mediate relationships between physical attributes and self-evaluations.

Gender differences in body image concerns and their relationships with self-esteem appear consistently across research contexts. Female adolescents generally report greater body dissatisfaction and stronger associations between body image and self-esteem compared to male peers. However, male adolescents increasingly experience body image concerns, particularly regarding muscularity and athletic physique. PE teachers must recognize these gendered patterns while avoiding stereotypical assumptions about individual students. Creating instructional environments that minimize appearance-based evaluation and emphasize functional body appreciation can benefit all students regardless of gender.

The physical self-esteem of adolescents studied through French-language research reveals multidimensional structures encompassing sport competence, physical condition, body attractiveness, and physical strength (Douar, 2015, p. 60). These subdomains demonstrate differential relationships with global self-esteem and exhibit distinct developmental trajectories during adolescence. For PE instruction, these findings suggest value in targeting specific physical self-concept dimensions rather than treating physical self-esteem as monolithic. Activities that build perceived sport competence may benefit athletically inclined students, while those emphasizing physical condition improvements may resonate more strongly with students focused on health and fitness.

Contextual Insights from Algerian Secondary Schools

The Algerian secondary school context provides valuable insights regarding how educational structures, cultural norms, and resource constraints shape PE's influence on student self-esteem. Historical and institutional analyses reveal that PE in Algeria has evolved considerably, with contemporary emphases on both motor skill development and character formation (Yahiaoui, 2013, p. 210). However, implementation challenges including inadequate facilities, large class sizes, and variable teacher preparation affect instructional quality. These contextual factors moderate the extent to which PE teachers can implement ideal pedagogical practices, underscoring the importance of systemic support for teacher effectiveness.

Research examining physical self-esteem and bodily-kinesthetic intelligence among middle-school students during PE classes in Algeria demonstrates relationships between movement competence and psychological self-perceptions (Rabiai & Alwan, 2023, p. 505). These findings align with broader theoretical perspectives suggesting that embodied learning experiences shape cognitive and affective development. Teachers working within resource-constrained contexts can still foster positive psychological outcomes by prioritizing relationship quality, instructional clarity, and inclusive participation structures over expensive equipment or elaborate facilities.

Recent research published in 2025 examining dimensions of self-esteem and their relationships with baccalaureate students' participation in PE classes confirms enduring relevance of these issues in Algerian secondary education (Choual & Hachaichi, 2025, p. 158). The replication of earlier findings across multiple samples and time periods strengthens confidence in identified patterns. Consistently, evidence points toward the critical importance

of teacher behaviors that support autonomy, build competence, and foster belonging. These fundamental psychological principles appear to transcend particular cultural contexts, suggesting universal applicability despite contextual variations in implementation details.

Practical Implications for Secondary PE Teachers Creating Psychologically Safe Learning Environments

PE teachers can take concrete steps to establish classroom climates that protect and enhance student self-esteem. First, establishing clear behavioral norms against mockery, bullying, and appearance-based teasing proves essential. Adolescents acutely fear peer ridicule, and teachers must proactively prevent negative peer interactions that can devastate vulnerable students. Explicitly teaching respectful communication, modeling supportive language, and swiftly addressing violations creates safer spaces. Second, normalizing diverse ability levels and celebrating individual progress rather than absolute achievement helps students understand that growth occurs along different trajectories. When teachers publicly value effort and improvement, students internalize messages that worth derives from engagement rather than innate talent.

Third, providing options for modified participation accommodates students experiencing temporary or permanent constraints. Allowing alternative assessment formats, different levels of challenge, and varied roles within activities communicates that all students belong regardless of current capability. Fourth, attending to physical environment factors such as changing room privacy, uniform policies, and activity selection can reduce body image anxiety. Teachers who recognize that the physical setting influences psychological experience can make thoughtful modifications that minimize unnecessary discomfort. Fifth, building individual relationships through personal conversations, interest in students' lives, and remembering personal details humanizes the teacher-student dynamic and creates emotional foundations for learning.

Implementing Autonomy-Supportive Teaching Strategies

Translating autonomy support principles into daily practice requires intentional behavioral change. Teachers can begin by auditing their language for controlling versus autonomy-supportive phrasing. Replacing commands with invitations, providing rationales for learning objectives, and acknowledging students' perspectives shifts the authority dynamic. Offering genuine choices regarding activity selection, grouping arrangements, or skill progressions allows students to experience volition. Even constrained choices between predetermined options enhance perceived autonomy compared to no choice conditions.

Soliciting and incorporating student feedback regarding lesson design demonstrates respect for student agency. Teachers might periodically survey students about preferred activities, perceived challenge levels, or social dynamics. Acting on this feedback communicates that student voices matter. Additionally, supporting student-initiated goals and self-monitoring practices develops autonomous regulation. When students set personal fitness objectives, track their own progress, or design skill practice routines, they exercise self-direction that supports internalized motivation and self-esteem. Teachers transition from directors to facilitators, scaffolding student autonomy rather than replacing it.

Providing Developmentally Appropriate Feedback and Challenges

Effective feedback balances affirmation with guidance, highlights process over product, and maintains appropriate privacy. Teachers should strive for high rates of specific, information-rich feedback rather than generic praise. Statements like "Your weight transfer improved

significantly on that throw" provide more value than "Good job." Process-focused feedback emphasizing strategies, effort, and learning trajectories supports growth mindsets and resilient self-concepts. When students understand that capabilities develop through practice, temporary failures lose their threatening implications for self-worth.

Appropriately calibrating challenge levels requires ongoing assessment of individual student capabilities and psychological readiness. Activities that are too easy bore students and provide limited competence satisfaction, while those that are excessively difficult induce anxiety and reinforce perceived inadequacy. Teachers must differentiate instruction to provide optimal challenge for diverse ability levels simultaneously. Using tiered task structures, flexible grouping, and individualized goal-setting enables personalized challenge within group instruction. Importantly, teachers should frame challenges as opportunities for growth rather than tests of adequacy. When students approach difficult tasks with learning orientations rather than performance anxiety, challenges become vehicles for self-esteem enhancement rather than threats.

Addressing Body Image Concerns Sensitively

Given the salience of body image during adolescence, PE teachers must navigate appearance-related issues with particular sensitivity. Minimizing unnecessary focus on body size, shape, or appearance represents a foundational principle. Emphasizing what bodies can do rather than how they look redirects attention toward functional appreciation. Incorporating diverse body types in visual materials, avoiding weight-based activities, and never using body size as a motivational tool protects vulnerable students from harm. Teachers should also monitor peer interactions for appearance-based comments and intervene educationally when necessary.

For students demonstrating significant body image distress, private conversations acknowledging their concerns while emphasizing their valued qualities beyond appearance can provide crucial support. Referrals to school counselors for students exhibiting disordered eating or severe body dysmorphia ensures appropriate professional intervention. More broadly, integrating brief educational components about media literacy, body diversity, and health-focused versus appearance-focused physical activity orientations equips students with conceptual tools for critically evaluating sociocultural messages. While PE teachers cannot single-handedly resolve societal appearance pressures, they can create countercultural spaces that privilege health, competence, and body respect.

Fostering Inclusive Participation and Differentiated Instruction

Inclusion requires more than merely allowing diverse students to be present; it demands creating genuine belonging and meaningful participation for all. Teachers can employ multiple instructional strategies to achieve inclusion. Universal design principles that build accessibility into initial activity design rather than retrofitting modifications prove more effective and less stigmatizing. Cooperative learning structures that assign interdependent roles allow students with varying abilities to contribute authentically to group success. Emphasizing tactical understanding and decision-making alongside physical execution creates participation pathways for students with different strengths.

Teachers should regularly examine their attention patterns to ensure equitable interaction with all students rather than predominantly engaging high-achievers. Intentionally seeking opportunities to provide positive feedback to typically marginalized students helps disrupt patterns wherein struggling students receive disproportionate negative attention. Creating leadership opportunities for diverse students, including those not identified as athletic stars, validates multiple forms of competence and contribution. When students experience

themselves as valuable community members whose presence and participation matter to others, their self-esteem benefits regardless of absolute skill level.

Conclusion

The role of the physical education teacher in shaping adolescent self-esteem extends far beyond motor skill instruction or fitness development. As this review demonstrates, PE teachers occupy a unique position at the intersection of embodied experience, social interaction, and identity formation during a developmentally critical period. Through intentional pedagogical choices regarding classroom climate, autonomy support, feedback practices, and inclusive instruction, teachers can create learning environments that foster positive self-esteem alongside physical competencies. The synthesis of theoretical frameworks with empirical evidence reveals consistent patterns: students thrive psychologically when they experience supportive relationships, satisfy basic psychological needs for autonomy and competence, and encounter learning environments that minimize unnecessary threat while providing optimal challenge.

Importantly, teacher influence operates through multiple pathways simultaneously. Supportive teacher-student relationships provide emotional security and satisfy relatedness needs. Autonomy-supportive practices enhance intrinsic motivation and self-endorsement. Competence-building experiences accumulate into generalized beliefs about capability. Body-positive pedagogies protect against appearance-based self-devaluation. These mechanisms function synergistically rather than independently, creating comprehensive psychological support systems when implemented thoughtfully. Conversely, their absence or violation can damage self-esteem and trigger disengagement from physical activity with long-term health implications.

Future research should continue examining contextual and cultural variations in how teacher behaviors influence student outcomes, as most existing evidence derives from Western or specific regional contexts. Longitudinal designs that track students across multiple years would illuminate developmental trajectories more clearly than cross-sectional snapshots. Intervention studies testing specific teacher training programs could identify most effective professional development approaches for enhancing teacher capacity to support student self-esteem. Additionally, research incorporating student voice through qualitative methods would enrich understanding of subjective experiences and meaning-making processes that quantitative measures may overlook.

For practicing teachers, the evidence base provides both validation and guidance. The psychological dimensions of PE instruction matter profoundly and deserve as much pedagogical attention as technical skill development. Teachers who cultivate awareness of their interpersonal impact, commit to continuous learning about adolescent development, and intentionally design learning experiences with psychological outcomes in mind can transform PE from a potentially threatening context into a developmentally enriching one. Ultimately, secondary-school PE teachers serve not merely as instructors of movement but as architects of experiences that shape how young people come to understand and value themselves during one of life's most formative periods.

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