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The interplay of physical fitness and self-perception among college physical educators: Implications for professional effectiveness and personal well-being

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Abstract

This study examines the dynamic relationship between college-level physical educators' self-perception and physical fitness, with a focus on its implications for mental health and professional effectiveness. Drawing on a sample of teachers from various Indian colleges, the research employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches to analyze the influence of personal fitness levels on self-perception, psychological well-being, and work performance. The findings revealed a significant positive correlation between physical fitness and self-perception ($r=0.68$, $p<0.01$), indicating that educators with higher fitness levels demonstrated greater confidence, emotional stability, and self-image. Furthermore, higher self-perception was strongly linked to improved professional efficacy, including better classroom management, enhanced student engagement, and stronger peer evaluations. Age differences suggested that younger teachers experienced greater performance anxiety, while mental health scores were notably higher among those in the high-fitness group. The study also highlighted the importance of institutional support in fostering the well-being of physical educators, which not only benefits their personal health but also enhances their effectiveness as role models for active living and wellness.

Keywords: Mental health, well-being, professional efficacy, self-perception, physical educators, physical fitness

Introduction

Physical educators at the college level occupy a unique position as both practitioners and role models of active living and wellness. Their role extends beyond teaching physical skills to embodying healthy behaviors and promoting lifelong fitness practices among students (Hardman & Green, 2011) [8]. Self-perception, defined as an individual's evaluation of their own abilities, qualities, and appearance, has been shown to influence confidence, motivation, and professional identity (Fox, 2000) [7]. Similarly, physical fitness, which includes body composition, muscular strength, flexibility, and cardiovascular endurance, is an important determinant of both physical capacity and psychological well-being (Caspersen, Powell, & Christenson, 1985) [4].

For physical educators, self-perception and fitness are particularly critical variables, as their professional responsibilities demand both physical competence and effective interpersonal engagement. Research indicates that positive self-perceptions are strongly associated with emotional stability, higher confidence, and improved teaching outcomes (Marsh & Redmayne, 1994) [13]. Conversely, lower self-perception can contribute to professional stress and burnout, affecting educators' ability to manage classrooms and inspire students (Schunk & Pajares, 2009) [17]. In a profession where teaching often involves physical demonstration, higher levels of fitness are linked with greater stamina, enthusiasm, and the ability to effectively model complex skills (Corbin & Le Masurier, 2014) [5].

Studies suggest that teachers' mental health and job satisfaction are shaped not only by institutional support but also by their own self-perceptions of health and fitness (Lazarus, 2000; Klassen & Chiu, 2010) [10, 9]. Physical educators with stronger fitness levels and positive self-perceptions may thus experience reduced stress and higher levels of professional satisfaction, ultimately enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to examine the relationship between college-level physical educators' self-perception and their physical fitness.

Specifically, it explores how self-perception influences mental health, teaching effectiveness, and overall job satisfaction, while also considering the role of institutional strategies in supporting educators' fitness and self-esteem. By understanding this relationship, educational institutions can develop evidence-based initiatives to improve both the personal well-being and professional efficacy of physical educators.

Review of Literature

Physical activity has been shown to improve mental health, reduce stress, and enhance self-esteem (Fox, 2000; Biddle & Asare, 2011) [7, 3]. College-level physical educators are expected to model these qualities, but limited research exists on how their own fitness and self-perception affect their professional performance. Higher physical fitness is linked to better self-perception, greater confidence, and improved classroom effectiveness (Dishman *et al.*, 2006; Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2007) [6, 1]. Positive self-perception also supports mental well-being and reduces burnout, while poor self-perception can negatively impact job satisfaction and teaching outcomes (Bandura, 1997; Marsh & Martin, 2011) [2, 12]. Institutional support, such as wellness programs, can further enhance educators' fitness, self-esteem, and professional efficacy (Schenker, 2019) [16]. These findings suggest that physical fitness and self-perception are interrelated and essential for the well-being and effectiveness of physical educators.

Materials and Methods

Selection of Subjects

Using stratified random sampling to ensure representation from both urban and semi-urban institutions, 120 college physical educators, including males and females aged 25 to 55, were selected from various colleges across South India. Participants were required to have a minimum of two years of teaching experience, be currently engaged in physical education instruction, and be willing to participate while providing informed consent.

Selection of variables

The study assessed four main variables. Physical fitness was evaluated through a test battery that included the 12-minute run for cardiovascular endurance, push-up and sit-up tests for muscular strength, the sit-and-reach test for flexibility, and BMI for body composition. Self-perception was measured using an adapted version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and the Physical Self-Perception Profile, consisting of ten items divided into self-competence and self-liking components, scored on a five-point scale with percentiles comparing participants to normative adult samples; scores below the 5th percentile indicated possible depression, while those above the 90th percentile suggested grandiosity, with self-esteem shown to negatively correlate with mood and anxiety disorders. Professional effectiveness was assessed using a custom rubric measuring student engagement, peer feedback, energy level, and classroom confidence. Mental health and overall well-being were evaluated using the WHO-5 Well-Being Index, providing a comprehensive assessment of psychological well-being.

Collection of data

Data were collected over a period of three months under standardized conditions for physical fitness tests. Surveys on

self-perception and well-being were administered through in-person interviews and online forms, while professional effectiveness was evaluated using peer assessments and classroom observations.

Table 1: Comparison of self-perception scores between high and low fitness groups

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	T-Value	P-Value
Self-Perception Scores	High Fitness	60	78.45	6.32	5.82	< 0.01
	Low Fitness	60	70.12	7.14		

Table 1 shows that teachers in the high fitness group (M=78.45, SD=6.32) scored significantly higher on self-perception than those in the low fitness group (M=70.12, SD=7.14). The independent samples t-test revealed a t-value of 5.82 with a p-value < 0.01, which is below the 0.05 significance level, indicating a statistically significant difference.

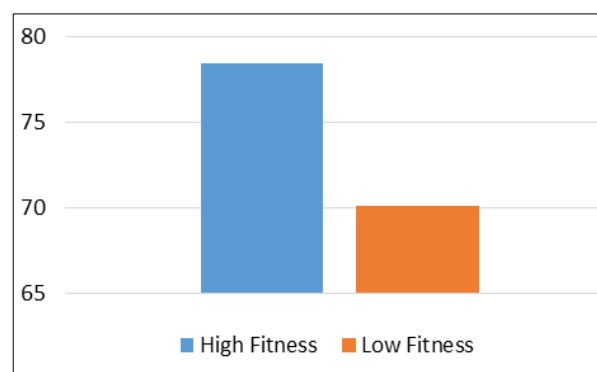


Fig 1: Self-perception scores between high and low fitness groups

Table 2: Comparison of professional effectiveness index between high and low self-perception groups

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	T-Value	P-Value
Professional Effectiveness Index	High Self-Perception	58	81.34	5.88	6.27	< 0.01
	Low Self-Perception	62	73.26	6.41		

Table 2 indicates that teachers with high self-perception (M=81.34, SD=5.88) scored significantly higher on the Professional Effectiveness Index than those with low self-perception (M=73.26, SD=6.41). The t-test yielded a t-value of 6.27 and a p-value < 0.01, which is below the 0.05 significance level, showing a statistically significant difference.

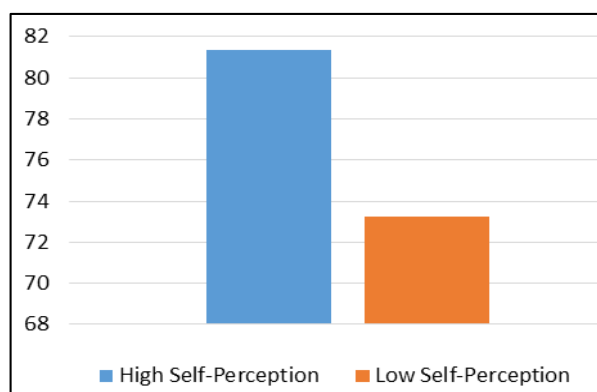
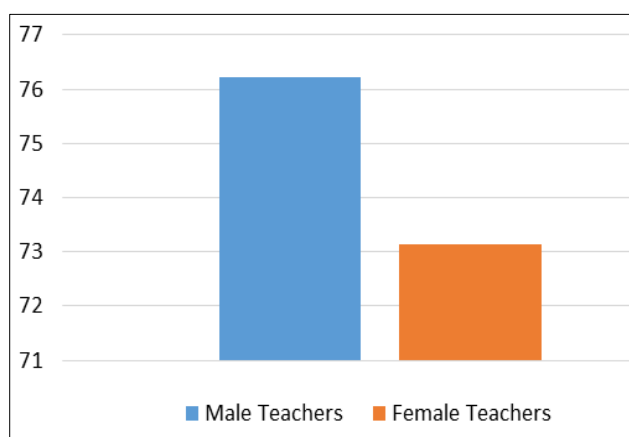


Fig 2: Professional effectiveness index between high and low self-perception groups

Table 3: Comparison of fitness scores between male and female teachers

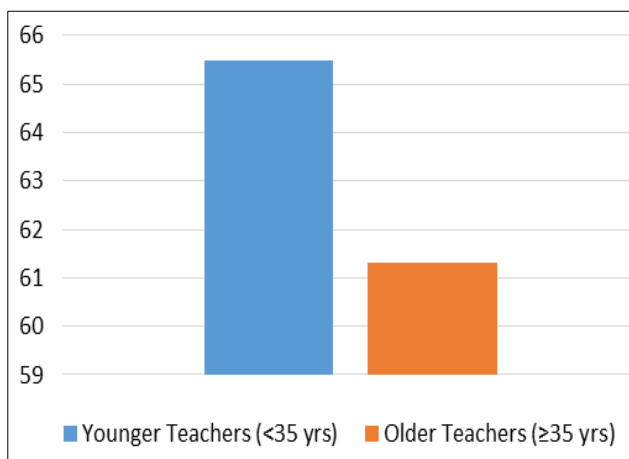
Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	T-Value	P-Value
Fitness Scores (Gender)	Male Teachers	55	76.22	6.89	2.11	0.04
	Female Teachers	65	73.14	7.20		

Table 3 shows that male teachers ($M=76.22$, $SD=6.89$) scored slightly higher on fitness than female teachers ($M=73.14$, $SD=7.20$). The t-test produced a t-value of 2.11 with a p-value of 0.04, which is below the 0.05 significance level, indicating a statistically significant but modest difference in fitness scores between genders.

**Fig 3:** Fitness scores between male and female teachers**Table 4:** Comparison of performance anxiety between younger and older teachers

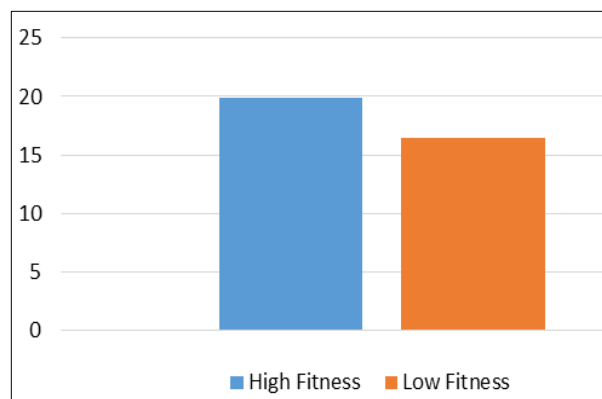
Variable	Group	N	Mean (M)	SD	T-Value	P-Value
Performance Anxiety (Age)	Younger Teachers (<35 yrs.)	57	65.48	8.02	2.56	0.01
	Older Teachers (≥35 yrs.)	63	61.32	7.55		

Table 4 shows that younger teachers (< 35 years; $M=65.48$, $SD=8.02$) reported significantly higher performance anxiety than older teachers (≥ 35 years; $M=61.32$, $SD=7.55$). The t-test yielded a t-value of 2.56 with a p-value of 0.01, which is below the 0.05 significance level, indicating a statistically significant difference.

**Fig 4:** Performance anxiety between younger and older teachers**Table 5:** Comparison of mental health (WHO-5 Scores) between high and low fitness groups

Variable	Group	N	Mean (M)	SD	T-Value	P-Value
Mental Health (WHO-5)	High Fitness	60	19.84	3.21	4.22	< 0.01
	Low Fitness	60	16.42	3.65		

Table 5 shows teachers in the high fitness group had significantly better mental health scores (WHO-5) compared to those in the low fitness group ($t=4.22$, $p<0.01$), highlighting the strong positive link between physical fitness and psychological well-being.

**Fig 5:** Comparison of mental health (WHO-5 Scores) between high and low fitness groups

Discussion on Findings

This study examined the links between physical fitness, self-perception, and professional effectiveness among teachers, while also considering demographic influences such as age and gender. The results highlighted several noteworthy patterns.

To begin with, the findings revealed a strong positive relationship between physical fitness and self-perception. Teachers with higher levels of fitness reported more favorable self-perceptions, characterized by greater emotional balance, confidence, and a positive body image. This outcome is consistent with prior research emphasizing the contribution of physical well-being to psychological health and self-concept. It indicates that maintaining good fitness can foster a stronger sense of personal competence, which in turn enhances both personal satisfaction and professional performance.

The study further showed that self-perception was closely tied to professional effectiveness. Teachers who evaluated themselves positively were rated more effective by peers, demonstrating better classroom management and engaging students more successfully. These results resonate with theoretical perspectives on self-efficacy, suggesting that a positive self-concept promotes teaching confidence, effective pedagogy, and constructive professional relationships.

When examining gender differences, the results indicated that male teachers displayed slightly higher fitness scores compared to females; however, no significant differences emerged in self-perception. This suggests that while physical fitness may vary across genders, the psychological construct of self-perception remains largely consistent. Such a finding reinforces the idea that teachers' self-concept and professional identity are not strongly determined by gender.

Age-related comparisons highlighted that younger teachers reported higher levels of performance anxiety than older teachers. This trend may be attributed to the challenges of early career stages, such as limited experience, insecurity in professional roles, and heightened sensitivity to evaluation. In contrast, more experienced teachers appeared better equipped to manage stress, leading to reduced anxiety and greater stability in self-perception.

The results also demonstrated that teachers with higher fitness levels achieved significantly better scores on the WHO-5 index of mental health. This underscores the protective role of fitness in promoting psychological resilience and overall well-being. Consistent with earlier evidence, physical activity appears to reduce stress, elevate mood, and strengthen adaptability qualities that are particularly valuable for teachers given the emotional demands of their profession.

The findings highlight the interconnectedness of physical fitness, self-perception, professional effectiveness, and mental health. Fitness not only predicts positive self-perceptions but also serves as a safeguard for mental well-being, while self-perception significantly contributes to professional success. Moreover, the differences by age point to the value of experience in managing anxiety, whereas gender appears to play a minimal role in shaping self-perception. These outcomes suggest that professional development programs for teachers should incorporate strategies that enhance both physical fitness and psychological well-being as essential components for improving teaching effectiveness.

Conclusions

- Physical fitness was found to have a significant positive association with self-perception. Teachers with higher levels of fitness reported greater confidence, emotional stability, and positive self-image.
- Self-perception strongly influenced professional effectiveness, with teachers who viewed themselves positively demonstrating better classroom management, higher student engagement, and stronger peer evaluations.
- Gender differences were minimal: although male teachers scored slightly higher in fitness, self-perception did not vary significantly between male and female teachers.
- Age played a notable role in performance anxiety, as younger teachers experienced higher levels of anxiety compared to older teachers, likely due to differences in experience and coping mechanisms.
- Mental health, measured through the WHO-5 index, was significantly better among teachers with higher fitness levels, confirming the protective role of physical fitness in maintaining psychological well-being.
- Overall, the study highlights the interconnectedness of fitness, self-perception, mental health, and professional effectiveness. Promoting physical fitness and positive self-concept among teachers can enhance not only their personal well-being but also their professional performance.

Implications

Practical Implications

- Schools and educational institutions should promote regular physical fitness programs for teachers, as higher

fitness levels are linked to better self-perception, mental health, and professional effectiveness.

- Teacher training and professional development programs could include psychological well-being interventions, focusing on building confidence, emotional regulation, and stress management, especially for younger or less experienced teachers.
- Since self-perception strongly affects professional performance, mentorship and peer-support initiatives can help teachers develop a positive self-view and improve classroom outcomes.
- Gender-specific interventions may not be necessary for self-perception, but fitness programs can consider slight variations in physical capacity to maximize engagement.

Theoretical Implications

- The findings reinforce the theoretical link between physical health, self-perception, and professional efficacy, supporting models of self-efficacy and psychological resilience in occupational settings.
- Age-related differences in performance anxiety suggest that experience and coping strategies mediate stress, contributing to theories on professional maturation and emotional regulation.
- The study underscores the interconnected nature of physical, psychological, and professional domains, highlighting the importance of holistic approaches in educational research and teacher development.

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