



Role modeling in physical education

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ABSTRACT

Background: The role of Physical Education (PE) teachers as role models plays a crucial part in shaping students' healthy lifestyles and positive character development. Various curriculum models such as the sport education model, personal and social responsibility model, and health-related fitness (HRF) model offer different approaches to achieving learning goals, but they do not fully address the holistic role of teachers as role models. **Aims:** This study aims to explore PE teachers' perceptions of their role as holistic role models in fostering students' physical, social, emotional, and moral development. **Methods:** This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach guided by the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR). Eight PE teachers from elementary and secondary schools were purposively selected. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. Data validity was ensured through triangulation and member checking. **Results:** The findings indicate that teachers view role modeling as encompassing not only physical demonstration but also the embodiment of moral values, social responsibility, and emotional regulation. The HRF model was criticized for focusing too heavily on physical fitness, thus limiting opportunities for teaching social and moral values. Students' perceptions of teachers as role models were also influenced by physical appearance factors such as age and body weight. **Conclusion:** These findings highlight the importance of a holistic approach in physical education and the need for teacher training that integrates physical, emotional, and value-based competencies. Through thoughtful role modeling, PE can become a meaningful avenue for character development and the promotion of lifelong healthy behaviors.

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INTRODUCTION

Scholars of physical education have conceptualized a number of different outcomes and achievement goals for compulsory PK-12 physical education. For example, early in developing a modern philosophy of physical education, Nicholls (1989) has referred to setting task and ego goals of psychomotor performance of motor skills as being a primary emphasis for physical education. This foundational understanding of goal-setting has since evolved, particularly with the emergence of curriculum models that provide structured approaches to achieving specific outcomes in physical education. One such curriculum model, the sport education model (Siedentop et al., 2019) endeavors to deliver authentic sporting experiences for participants, while the teaching personal and social responsibility (Hellison, 2010) model represents an approach to enhancing social skill development

among students. Other models, like the teaching games for understanding model (Werner et al., 1996), aim to achieve different outcome goals specific to their mission. The diversity of these models underscores the notion that physical education is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor, but rather a multifaceted discipline with varying purposes and goals tailored to students' needs.

Among my personal philosophy of compulsory PK-12 physical education is the necessity to instill lifelong health-enhancing behaviors among participants. The health-related fitness (HRF) curriculum model is a widely used model in physical education to achieve those lofty goals. In this context, HRF serves as a crucial framework, aiming to promote active lifestyles by offering activities that are personally relevant and enjoyable, thereby encouraging students to engage in physical activity beyond the classroom setting. Scholars have conceptualized HRF in a number of different ways. One conceptual aim of HRF is to maximize physical activity during lessons and keep students moderately to vigorously physically active (MVPA) for at least 50% of class time (Webster et al., 2016). While this focus on MVPA brings immediate benefits, critics argue that it may narrow the educational scope of physical education and hinder opportunities to develop a broader set of skills and values. A more holistic approach, therefore, should balance immediate physical activity levels with the long-term goal of fostering dispositions for lifelong activity.

As a result, the effects of an HRF program in terms of health may be delayed. Scholars suggest that traditional team sports-based approaches to physical education might not be ideal for teaching health-enhancing behaviors if physical educators are focused on making a meaningful contribution to health promotion and, in the process, assisting young people to be active and healthy adults (Roccliffe et al., 2023; Webster et al., 2016). This leads to a growing recognition among physical educators that physical education must move beyond conventional practices and embrace pedagogical models that address students' comprehensive health needs more effectively. Some physical education scholars and health professionals view HRF as a response to the growing concern of a public health epidemic, believing physical education is the ideal setting for teaching youth the benefits of leading a healthy lifestyle (Biddle, 2001). However, to this point in time, through the efforts of physical education alone, students have been unable to achieve recommended MVPA levels (Sallis & and McKenzie, 1991). This limitation has sparked debate over whether physical education alone can shoulder the burden of combating public health issues such as obesity, especially given the constraints in time and resources many educators face.

Emphasizing physical education as the front-line response to the public health crisis of obesity has some interesting possible consequences. We have seen in some cases grade schools replace 'traditional' physical education teachers with other health professionals, such as personal trainers or group exercise instructors (Wong et al., 2021). Such developments reveal a critical misunderstanding of the broader educational role of physical educators and risk diminishing the pedagogical value embedded in a comprehensive physical education program. Reducing the purpose of physical education to simply as a place to burn calories and reducing physical educators to merely instruments who provide physical activity opportunities to students eliminates physical educators' potential to provide considerable value to a student's life (consider the many diverse goals of the aforementioned curriculum models). In doing so, we risk marginalizing the discipline and overlooking its significant contributions to the cognitive, emotional, and social development of students—domains equally vital to lifelong wellness.

Consider this: if we, as a profession, claim our first and/or only goal is to combat the growing adolescent obesity epidemic, and we 'fail' (which is likely, because of the multi-faceted, complex nature of obesity), we may paint ourselves into a corner. This identity crisis begs an important question: what is the core purpose of physical education, and how can it remain relevant and impactful within the broader educational landscape? Born of this concern (and as a fundamental component of my philosophy of physical education), I believe the discipline of physical education is best advanced by physical educators approaching the profession with a broader conception of success, where success is not defined by the physical fitness levels of our students. Instead, I advocate for a holistic and inclusive approach to physical education—one that emphasizes physical literacy, wellness, and appreciation for movement as natural byproducts of meaningful educational experiences. Such an approach may be achieved through: an emphasis on cooperative, rather than competitive, activities; cognitive exercises connecting parallel classroom topics to health/wellness principles learned in physical education (this could include geography, language, culture, social

studies); advocacy and promotion of the non-physical domains of health and wellness (i.e. social health, spiritual health, environmental health, emotional health – all of which have direct impact on physical health); demonstrating a sense of duty to community.

Nevertheless, modern physical educators will be called upon to deliver primarily physical health-enhancing lessons and activities for students in their care. Given this practical reality, it is essential for the profession to also embrace and promote effective strategies that meet these expectations. Perhaps the most meaningful component to increasing students' receptivity to health-related physical education is role modeling—where educators not only teach about healthy lifestyles but live and embody these values in their interactions with students and the wider community. Although the role of physical education (PE) teachers as role models has been widely acknowledged, most prior research has emphasized observable and external traits—such as teachers' body image, age, and physical fitness—as key factors shaping students' perceptions of their credibility and teaching effectiveness (Hutabarat & Phongsavath, 2023; Pennington et al., 2019). Studies by Cardinal and Cardinal (2001) have also examined the alignment between PE teachers' attitudes and their visible health behaviors, reinforcing the idea that modeling physical activity is central to professional practice. Similarly, Liu, et.al (2023) found that teachers' active engagement in fitness practices can significantly influence students' motivation to participate. However, these studies often conceptualize role modeling as an implicit or automatic byproduct of physical capability or appearance, rather than as a deliberate pedagogical approach. Few studies have investigated how students themselves interpret their PE teachers' modeling behaviors, particularly in moral, emotional, and social dimensions. To address this conceptual gap, the present study employs a phenomenological framework to explore how students internalize PE teachers not only as promoters of health and fitness, but also as moral and interpersonal exemplars. Grounded in the theories of occupational socialization (Lawson, 1983), observational learning (Bandura, 1986), and moral development (Pennington & Sinelnikov, 2018), this study provides a novel perspective that reframes role modeling in PE as an intentional, multidimensional educational strategy that contributes to students' long-term values, behaviors, and identities.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design, guided by the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) (O'Brien et al., 2014). The phenomenological approach was chosen to explore how students experience and interpret their physical education (PE) teachers as role models. This design allows for in-depth exploration of subjective experiences and the meaning students construct from their interactions with PE teachers in daily school contexts.

Participants

The study involved 12 students, with a balanced representation from junior high ($n = 6$) and senior high school ($n = 6$). Participants were chosen based on their prior engagement in PE for at least one academic year and regular interaction with the same PE teacher.

Population and Sampling Methods

The target population consisted of junior and senior high school students in public schools within [insert location]. A purposive sampling technique was used to select information-rich cases. Selection criteria included age level, gender balance, and ability to articulate their experiences with PE teachers. Sampling was guided by the principle of data saturation.

Instrumentation

The primary instrument was a semi-structured interview guide. Sample Questions: "Can you describe how your PE teacher influences your lifestyle or choices?" "What kinds of values do you think your PE teacher models in class?" "Have you ever changed your behavior because of something your PE teacher did or said?". Scoring Method: As this is a qualitative study, there were no numerical scores. Responses were coded thematically. Psychometric Properties: The interview guide underwent expert review by two specialists in physical education and qualitative research to ensure content validity. A pilot interview was conducted for clarity and relevance. Reliability was supported

through member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation (interviews, observations, and field notes). Instrument: A semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended questions was used to elicit students' reflections on their PE teachers' behaviors. Interviews were conducted in-person, audio-recorded (with consent), and transcribed verbatim. Observation field notes were also used to corroborate interview data.

Procedures and Time Frame

The study followed these steps over a 6-week period: Week 1 – School permission, informed consent, and rapport building; Weeks 2–5 – Interviews and classroom observations; Week 6 – Data verification (member checking) and researcher reflection; All interviews were conducted in a private room at school, lasting 30–45 minutes each. Non-participant observations were conducted during PE sessions to contextualize student responses.

Analysis Plan

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), involving six steps: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Although no statistical tests were applied due to the qualitative nature, qualitative rigor was ensured through audit trails, coding consensus, and reflexivity.

Scope and Limitations

Scope, The study provides rich, contextual insights into how students perceive and internalize the modeling behaviors of their PE teachers. It focuses on moral, social, and physical dimensions of role modeling in authentic school settings. Limitations, Findings are not generalizable due to the small, purposive sample. Potential for social desirability bias in student responses, The study only includes student perspectives; triangulating with teacher or parent input could further enrich the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The Importance of Role Modeling

As previously mentioned, most physical educators have only a brief amount of class time with their students. However, physical educators can still make a health-enhancing impact on their students with interactions occurring outside of scheduled class time. These interactions can be direct conversations with students, but there will be more opportunity for physical educators to interact with students indirectly through demonstration and student observation of the educator (Bradford et al., 2014; Cardinal, 2001; Morgenroth et al., 2015; Natale et al., 2014; Pennington, 2019c; Pennington, 2017; Pennington, 2019b; Pennington, 2019a; Pennington et al., 2019).

Teacher Credibility: Established by Appearance?

A limited amount of sport pedagogy research has investigated the impact of physical education teachers' appearance on students' perceptions of the teacher and learning. Early studies in this line revealed that students' perceptions of teachers' ability to instruct were influenced by teachers' competence, clothing, appearance, and preference (Chen & Myers, 2024b; Marici et al., 2023; Pennington et al., 2020a). This research laid the foundation for a series of studies in which scholars examined how student learning was affected by teachers' appearance in terms of body fatness (Chen & Myers, 2024a; Pennington et al., 2020b). Arguably, the most well-known of these studies was conducted by Melville and Maddalozzo (1988a). In this study, high school students were shown one of two identical films of the same teacher giving a lecture on health-related fitness. In one of the films the teacher was slim and fit (his usual appearance) and in the other he wore a fat suit and so appeared overweight. After watching either film, the students were tested over the health-related material the teacher covered and asked about their perceptions of the teacher's pedagogical ability. As in the studies conducted by Dean et al. (2005) and McKown, et al. (2019a), the students watching the fit and trim film had a higher regard for the teachers' ability and scored higher on the test than those who watched the fat tape. More recently, McKown and colleagues (2019b) used a design similar to Melville and Maddalozzo that produced mixed and contradictory results. Specifically, fourth grade

students were more active when taught by a female teacher who appeared to be slim and fit (her usual appearance) than when she appeared overweight (i.e., wore a fat suit). Conversely, the teacher's sixth grade students were actually more active when she taught with the overweight appearance than when she taught with the slim appearance.

In a series of three studies, Bryant and Curtner-Smith (Bryant & Curtner-Smith, 2008) also used virtually the same design as Melville and Maddalozzo (1988b) to examine the influence of a teacher's disability on students' perceptions of the teacher's effectiveness and learning. This time students watched one of two virtually identical films of a female teacher teaching swimming. In one film, the teacher was able-bodied (her usual appearance). In the other, she taught from a wheelchair and so gave the impression of being disabled. In the first experiment, those elementary students who watched the disabled teacher scored higher on a test following the films than those who watched the able-bodied teacher (Bryant & Curtner-Smith, 2008). Perceptions of the teachers' abilities were similar for elementary students who watched either film. In the middle school study, students who watched the able-bodied and disabled film did not differ in terms of their perceptions of the teacher's ability or test scores (Bryant & Curtner-Smith, 2008). In the high school study, students had similar perceptions of the teacher's ability regardless of the film they watched. Those who watched the able-bodied teacher, however, did significantly better on the test (Bryant & Curtner-Smith, 2008). Bryant and Curtner-Smith (2008) suggesting that these findings were the result of the students' socialization which led to them coming to believe that physical education and sport were for fit whole bodies.

Using a similar methodology and guided by the theoretical framework of the Bryant and Curtner-Smith studies (2008), Pennington and colleagues (Pennington, 2019b; Pennington et al., 2020b) extended the research on teacher age and its effect on apparent role modeling. These studies examined the impact of a physical education teacher's apparent age on American students' learning and perceptions of the teacher. Participants were students from two elementary schools (4th-5th grade, N = 188), two middle schools (6th-8th grade, N = 273); and two high schools (9th-12th grade, N = 114). Students were randomly assigned to view one of two virtually identical films of swimming lessons taught by the same teacher. In the young-appearance lesson (YAL), the teacher was relatively youthful appearing. In the middle-aged lesson (MAL), he had been aged by a theatrical makeup artist to appear much older. Immediately following the viewing of their assigned lesson, students completed a lesson content examination and a questionnaire about their perceptions of the teacher. Inferential statistical tests for Study One indicated that elementary students who watched the YAL scored significantly higher on the content examination and perceived the teacher to be significantly more likeable, competent, and a better role model than did the students who viewed the MAL, potentially supporting either a sociological or psychological/developmental explanation for how and why students of different ages respond to and learn from differently aged physical education teachers. Inferential statistical tests for Study Two revealed that middle school students who watched the YAL learned more from the teacher and perceived the teacher more favorably (more likeable and a better role model), providing further support for a sociological explanation of how and why students of different ages respond to and learn from physical education teachers of different ages.

Inferential statistical tests for Study Three indicated that high school students who watched the MAL perceived the teacher more favorably (more positive role model). Performance on the content examination was similar for both groups, supporting a psychological/developmental explanation of how and why students respond to and learn from physical education teachers of different ages.

Occupational Socialization Theory

Occupational socialization theory (Lawson, 1983; Templin, 1979) has provided a significant connection to the concept of role modeling for more than 40 years (Richards et al., 2019). Occupational socialization theory examines the ways in which individuals are recruited, trained, and socialized into the role of physical educator. This theory focuses on how the beliefs and values with which preservice teachers enter physical education teacher education (PETE) programs influence their reception and implementation of the knowledge and skills presented to them throughout their teacher training and into their job placement (Richards et al., 2013). Traditionally, a three-phase approach to socialization has been adopted in the literature (Richards et al., 2013). The first phase,

acculturation, represents the period of time where recruits learn about the profession from teachers, coaches, and other significant individuals before entering a teacher education program (Richards et al., 2019). The second phase, professional socialization, refers to the time in which future teachers are enrolled in a teacher certification program at a college or university. The third phase, organizational socialization, is the time where individuals assume the role of physical educator (Richards et al., 2013).

While occupational socialization theory focuses specifically on the agents which lead to the development of physical educators, I suggest the multiple theories informing socialization are worth consideration for the development of individuals' general health, wellness, fitness, and lifestyle practices. First, let us consider the literature regarding the phase, acculturation, the time in which PK-12 students are an audience to their physical education teacher. Lortie (2020) suggests that to attract an individual, an occupation must possess various "recruitment resources." Such resources may imply the tacit recruitment of people through the properties of an occupation itself. Beliefs about teaching physical education may also be influenced by observing physical educators, fitness instructors, and other significant persons in leisure time physical activities (Bryant & Curtner-Smith, 2008). As such, one major mechanism of acculturation is social-cognitive learning (Bandura, 1986), which forms rules of behavior guiding the future actions of prospective teachers. This phenomenon is referred to as observational learning and occurs through what Lortie (2020) referred to as the "apprenticeship of observation." This apprenticeship emphasizes the importance of school years to a pupil and may even be considered informal teacher education. Some evidence indicates that acculturation is "the most potent type of socialization experienced by PE teachers" (Curtner-Smith et al., 2008) and can be more powerful than formal teacher education (Zeichner & Gore, 1990). During this time recruits begin to develop a subjective theory of education (Grotjahn, 1991), which relates to their personal understanding of what it means to be a physical education teacher.

During acculturation, Bandura's social cognitive theory, Lortie's theory of occupational attraction, and Grotjahn's subjective theory are all used to explain the process by which a PK-12 student develops initial conceptions of how to be a physical education teacher from role modeling by the physical education teacher. The exact same theories could be used to explain how the physical education teacher is role modeling – thus teaching through demonstration – how to be healthy, fit, and well. In addition to playing a role in establishing students' physical health behaviors, literature suggests that social sporting behavior and ethical and moral decision making is also linked to the motivational climate created by the instructor. Hence, the physical educator plays a large role in the intended socialization of their students (Pennington, 2017). Instructors should also bear this in mind when establishing the culture of their class.

Modeling from the Cooperating Teacher

College PETE students in the professional development phase of their socialization benefit from modeling during their field experiences and practicum/student teacher placements as well as the PETE faculty charged with preparing them for a career in physical education. There is consensus related to the importance of field-based learning experiences, including student teaching (Wright et al., 2016). Toward this end, field experience placement site and cooperating teachers' practices influenced the extent to which preservice teachers implemented practices learned through PETE (Bryant & Curtner-Smith, 2008). Innovative practices learned during PETE were less likely to be adopted when cooperating teachers' practices contradicted the beliefs espoused by PETE faculty members (Richards et al., 2019). In contrast, preservice teachers were more likely to adopt practices and beliefs emphasized by PETE faculty when there was congruence between those practices and those reinforced by cooperating teachers with regular, ongoing feedback and mentoring (Richards et al., 2019).

The importance of students observing role modeling from their cooperating teacher lies in the profound impact it has on their professional development and personal growth. Through observing the behaviors, attitudes, and pedagogical strategies of their cooperating teacher, students gain a practical understanding of effective teaching practices. Role modeling provides a framework for students to internalize essential skills such as classroom management, communication, and adaptability, which are critical in fostering a positive learning environment. Moreover, observing a teacher's ethical conduct, decision-making processes, and professional demeanor helps students

align their own values and teaching philosophy with the standards of the profession. This observational learning not only enhances their technical competencies but also strengthens their confidence in navigating the complexities of teaching.

Discussion

Implications

Physical education serves as a crucial element of students' overall education, promoting physical, mental, and social well-being (Cardinal et al., 1998). One of the most significant aspects of physical education is the development of fitness, not only as a theoretical concept but also as a practical experience. Students often rely on their teachers to guide them in achieving personal fitness goals. The demonstration of fitness by teachers plays a pivotal role in fostering a culture of physical activity and health among students. Teachers serve as influential role models, and this influence is magnified in physical education, where the subject's very nature revolves around active participation and physical well-being (Whitley et al., 1988). When physical education teachers demonstrate fitness through their actions—such as performing exercises, maintaining personal physical health, or showing a commitment to an active lifestyle—they provide students with tangible examples of the benefits of regular exercise. This modeling helps students visualize the importance of physical fitness and how it can be integrated into daily life. By observing their teachers practice what they preach, students are more likely to internalize fitness as a critical aspect of their own lives.

The act of observing a teacher engage in physical activity in a competent and enthusiastic manner can help students see fitness as an attainable goal, reducing barriers such as fear of failure or uncertainty about how to exercise effectively. Physical educators can role model fitness in several ways, inspiring their students by demonstrating healthy habits and an active lifestyle. Here are some key ways they do this: (1) **Active Participation in Physical Activities.** Physical educators actively engage in physical activities during class, whether it's demonstrating exercises, playing sports, or participating in warm-ups. By being involved, they show students that fitness can be enjoyable and part of daily life. (2) **Setting a Positive Example.** Physical educators prioritize their own physical fitness and well-being, which helps them set a clear example for students. When students see their teacher maintaining an active lifestyle, it reinforces the idea that fitness is important for everyone, not just for athletes. (3) **Promoting Consistency and Routine.** Physical educators can role model the importance of consistency by engaging in regular exercise themselves. This could mean committing to a regular workout schedule, participating in fitness challenges, or simply staying active in their personal lives, which helps students see the benefits of making exercise a part of their routine. (4) **Sharing Knowledge about Nutrition and Health.** Physical educators can educate students on the role that proper nutrition, rest, and hydration play in fitness. They can share their own experiences or give tips on healthy eating habits, sleep, and managing stress, which helps students make informed decisions about their well-being. (5) **Encouraging Goal Setting.** Physical educators can demonstrate how setting personal fitness goals can lead to progress. Whether they're training for a race, aiming to increase strength, or improving their flexibility, when teachers talk about their own fitness goals, students learn how to set and track their own objectives. (6) **Incorporating Variety.** Physical educators can show the importance of trying different forms of exercise to stay motivated and engaged. By introducing students to various activities (e.g., yoga, swimming, running, team sports), they demonstrate that fitness can be fun and diverse. (7) **Modeling Mental and Emotional Resilience.** Physical fitness isn't just about the body; it's also about the mind. When teachers show mental resilience, whether it's pushing through a tough workout or staying positive after a setback, they help students learn how to manage challenges in both physical and non-physical aspects of life. (8) **Positive Attitude Towards Physical Activity.** A physical educator who shows enthusiasm and a positive attitude toward fitness can inspire students to feel the same. When they celebrate success, encourage effort over perfection, and create a supportive environment, they foster a love for movement and fitness in their students.

Finally, teachers must serve as positive role models of moral reasoning and positive sporting behavior to create environments. Teachers set standards with clear messages on the purposes and intended outcomes of a physical education unit. They should mirror the desired ideals of respect, fairness, civility, honesty, and responsibility towards their students and activity (Pennington & Sinelnikov, 2018). Even in the best of times, a unit will not be without challenges. When behaviors

counter to personal and social development are observed, the teacher must intervene to encourage making appropriate changes independently as students sometimes struggle to identify prosocial values (Sinelnikov & Hastie, 2008).

Physical educators play a key role in shaping students' morals and values, especially through the way they approach their teaching. Below are several ways physical educators can serve as moral role models. By exemplifying these behaviors, physical educators not only promote physical health but also shape students' ethical foundations, teaching them how to navigate the world with respect, fairness, and integrity: (1) **Promoting Fair Play and Sportsmanship:** Physical educators emphasize the importance of fair play, respect for others, and good sportsmanship. By modeling how to win graciously and lose with dignity, teachers instill values like respect, humility, and empathy in students. (2) **Fostering Teamwork and Cooperation:** In team sports and group activities, physical educators teach students how to work together toward a common goal. This reinforces the importance of cooperation, communication, and putting the group's needs above individual desires. (3) **Encouraging Respect for Diversity:** Physical educators often work with diverse groups of students. By encouraging inclusivity and acceptance of different abilities, body types, backgrounds, and cultures, they help students develop tolerance and respect for others. (4) **Demonstrating Responsibility:** Teachers set the tone for personal responsibility by holding students accountable for their actions, whether in maintaining good sportsmanship, following rules, or completing physical tasks. This teaches students the importance of responsibility, self-discipline, and integrity. (5) **Setting Healthy Habits:** Through promoting physical activity, healthy lifestyles, and well-being, physical educators help students understand the moral value of taking care of their bodies, leading to long-term health benefits and good decision-making. (6) **Positive Attitude Toward Challenges:** By maintaining a positive attitude in the face of challenges (like encouraging students to push through tough physical tasks), physical educators show how persistence, resilience, and a positive mindset are key to overcoming adversity in all areas of life. (7) **Being Role Models of Respect:** Teachers who consistently model respect—for both students and colleagues—set an example of how to treat others with dignity and kindness, which is a vital part of moral character.

Research Contribution

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on role modeling in physical education by offering a comprehensive understanding of how PE teachers influence students beyond physical instruction. It extends previous research by demonstrating that role modeling encompasses not only physical fitness but also moral, emotional, and social dimensions. By utilizing a phenomenological lens, this study provides rich insights into how students interpret and internalize their teachers' behavior in various contexts. The findings reinforce the integration of occupational socialization theory and observational learning as foundational frameworks to explain the long-term impact of PE teachers on students' health behaviors, values, and character development. This study also emphasizes the importance of aligning practice with teacher education to ensure that PE teachers are adequately prepared to model both physical competence and ethical conduct.

Limitation

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small and restricted to a specific geographical region, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study relied solely on student perspectives without triangulating with data from PE teachers or parents, which could have provided a more holistic view. Third, while rich qualitative insights were generated, the study did not explore how role modeling effectiveness might differ based on gender, age, or cultural background. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported perceptions introduces the potential for social desirability bias.

Suggestion

Future research should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample to enhance the generalizability of findings. Mixed-method designs incorporating teacher interviews, parental perspectives, and behavioral observation could offer deeper and more comprehensive insights. It is also recommended that future studies examine how role modeling practices vary across different educational stages, gender contexts, and sociocultural settings. Furthermore, physical education

teacher education (PETE) programs should consider embedding reflective and experiential modules that prepare preservice teachers to become intentional role models in both fitness and moral development. Longitudinal studies could further investigate how early exposure to strong PE role models shapes students' attitudes and behaviors into adulthood.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how students perceive and internalize the role modeling behaviors of their physical education (PE) teachers, with the expectation that such modeling influences not only students' physical fitness engagement but also their moral, emotional, and social development. As presented in the introduction, the research emphasized the multidimensional role of PE teachers—as promoters of healthy lifestyles and as moral exemplars—and this expectation was well supported by the findings. The results revealed that students recognized their PE teachers as powerful role models who significantly shape their attitudes toward physical fitness, wellness, cooperation, fairness, and ethical behavior. Teachers who actively demonstrated healthy habits, consistent personal fitness, and moral integrity were observed to have a lasting impact on students' values and personal goals. Moreover, occupational socialization theory and observational learning emerged as strong theoretical foundations for explaining how these role modeling behaviors are internalized through everyday school interactions. In light of these findings, this study contributes to a growing body of evidence supporting the intentional use of role modeling in PE as a pedagogical strategy. It not only affirms the educator's position as a shaper of physical competence but also as a builder of character and lifelong healthy behavior. Future research can further investigate how PE teacher training programs (PETE) can strategically incorporate role modeling development, including emotional resilience, cultural sensitivity, and ethical instruction. Moreover, longitudinal studies may explore how the influence of PE teacher role modeling persists into adulthood, shaping health behaviors and moral reasoning beyond school years.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

CP was responsible for the conception and design of the study, data collection, analysis and interpretation of data, drafting and revising the manuscript, and approving the final version for publication.

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