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Systematic Review

Body Image of Schoolchildren and Physical Education Teachers: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify and analyze, through a systematic review, empirical studies on the body image (BI) of schoolchildren and Physical Education (PE) teachers, considering its relationships with physical fitness, body composition, participation in PE classes, and teaching practice. The search was conducted in the CAPES Periodicals Portal in March 2026, covering 2016 to 2026 and combining Portuguese-language descriptors with the Boolean operator AND, following the PRISMA 2020 statement. Peer-reviewed empirical studies investigating the BI of basic education students or PE teachers in the school context were included; theoretical essays, reviews, and studies outside the period were excluded. Of the 106 records identified, four studies composed the final sample, all quantitative and cross-sectional, organized into two categories: BI of schoolchildren and its relationships with physical fitness, body composition, and PE classes; and BI of PE teachers. The studies reported high prevalences of body dissatisfaction and distortion. Among the studies retrieved, scientific production on the topic was scarce and concentrated on describing prevalence, revealing gaps regarding pedagogical intervention studies aimed at building a positive body image in everyday school life.

Keywords: Body Image. Physical Education and Training. Faculty. Systematic Review.

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Introduction

The body is one of the first references through which individuals relate to the world and attribute meaning to their experiences (Tavares, 2003). However, in a society marked by the intense circulation of images, the influence of digital media, and the dissemination of idealized body standards, the body also becomes an object of judgment, comparison, and social control (Frois et al., 2011; Lira et al., 2017). From this perspective, the way individuals perceive, feel about, and evaluate their own bodies constitutes a complex phenomenon called body image (BI), a multidimensional construct involving perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and attitudes toward one's own body, influenced by biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors (Tavares, 2003).

During adolescence, a period marked by intense physical, emotional, and social changes, the construction of BI becomes even more relevant, making adolescents particularly susceptible to the influence of aesthetic standards disseminated by the media, social networks, and different peer groups (Kachani & Jacobsohn, 2025). Using data from the 2019 National School Health Survey (PeNSE), covering 159,245 Brazilian students aged 13 to 17 years, Linhares et al. (2024) estimated that 30.2% of adolescents were dissatisfied with their BI, showing the considerable magnitude of this phenomenon in the country's school population. Although adolescence is a period of particular vulnerability for the construction of BI, this review covers studies conducted with different school populations, including children, high school students, and teachers, so the phenomenon is examined here more broadly across the school context.

Schools, in turn, are important spaces for socialization and for the production of meanings about the body, where students have experiences that may contribute both to valuing body diversity and to reproducing stereotypes and prejudices related to physical appearance (Russo, 2020). Among the curricular components, Physical Education (PE) plays a unique role, as it deals directly with bodily practices, placing the body in evidence through movement experiences, social interaction, and cultural production (Barros et al., 2023). According to the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC), this curricular component should enable students to critically understand bodily practices as cultural manifestations, fostering reflection on health, diversity, identity, respect for differences, and beauty standards (Ministério da Educação, 2018). Although BI is not explicitly mentioned in the document, it contains competencies and skills that allow the topic to be addressed pedagogically in articulation with the school curriculum (Almeida et al., 2025; Ministério da Educação, 2018).

In this context, it is necessary to understand how scientific production has addressed BI in school PE, in order to identify both the volume of and the gaps in the literature and to inform reflection on pedagogical practices aimed at building positive body perceptions among students. Although PE classes expose students' bodies and may trigger feelings of shame (Barros et al., 2023), and although the BNCC addresses BI indirectly and in a limited way (Almeida et al., 2025), some aspects remain little explored, such as: a) the relationship between schoolchildren's BI and variables present in classes, such as physical fitness, body composition, and participation in activities; b) the BI of PE teachers themselves and its associated factors; and c) pedagogical strategies capable of fostering a positive BI within the curricular component. Accordingly, this study aimed to identify and analyze, through a systematic literature review, the studies published in the last ten years that investigated the BI of schoolchildren and PE teachers, considering its relationships with physical fitness, body composition, participation in PE classes, and teaching practice.

Methods

The reporting of this systematic review followed the recommendations of PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses; Page, Moher, et al., 2021; Page, McKenzie, et al., 2022). Adopting these guidelines provides transparency, methodological rigor, and reproducibility to the review process, ensuring the quality of the evidence synthesis and the reliability of the analyses. According to Rabelo and Antunez (2025), this methodological strategy favors the systematic identification of the most recent publications on a given topic, broadening the analysis of the evidence available in the literature and contributing to strengthening pedagogical practices grounded in scientific knowledge.

The search was conducted on March 22, 2026, through the Periodicals Portal of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), which integrates different national scientific databases, using a ten-year time frame covering the period from 2016 to 2026 in order to include the most recent and relevant scientific production on the topic. The ten-year time frame, from January 2016 to the date of the search in March 2026, was defined according to the purpose of the review: to map the recent state of the art on BI in the school context in order to support the development of PE pedagogical interventions aligned with the current curriculum. This interval covers the period of development and implementation of the BNCC, which establishes, among the specific PE competencies for elementary school, identifying the multiplicity of beauty and body aesthetic standards and critically analyzing the models disseminated by the media (Ministério da Educação, 2018). It is acknowledged, however, that the small final sample suggests that broader time frames could be adopted in future studies. The search was conducted exclusively through the CAPES Periodicals Portal, without complementary searches directly in specific bibliographic databases, which may have reduced the sensitivity of study retrieval. According to Sampaio and Mancini (2007), searching electronic databases is a fundamental step in conducting systematic reviews, since well-defined search strategies increase the likelihood of identifying relevant studies more efficiently and in less time, contributing to the quality and reliability of the evidence synthesis. Accordingly, combinations of Portuguese keywords were used with the Boolean operator AND: "*Educação Física AND Imagem Corporal" (Physical Education AND Body Image); "Base Nacional Comum Curricular AND Imagem Corporal" (National Common Curricular Base AND Body Image); "Educação Física AND Percepção da Imagem Corporal" (Physical Education AND Body Image Perception); and "Adolescência AND Imagem Corporal" (Adolescence AND Body Image).*

The inclusion criteria were: a) empirical studies, with a quantitative or qualitative approach, that investigated the BI of basic education students or PE teachers in the school context, analyzing its relationship with variables linked to school PE: physical fitness, motor performance, body composition, participation in PE classes, or teaching practice; b) peer-reviewed; and c) published in the last ten years. The exclusion criteria were: a) theoretical essays, literature reviews, and other publications without empirical data collection; b) studies that did not address BI in the school context; and c) studies outside the specified time frame.

The decision to include only empirical studies is justified by the aim of the review, which is to synthesize evidence produced from data collected from schoolchildren and teachers. Although theoretical essays and reviews are relevant for reflection on the topic, they do not present primary data that can be compared with the other studies and were therefore excluded. Likewise, including studies that investigated BI in association with physical fitness, motor performance, and body composition in the school environment, even without explicit mention of the curricular component, made it possible to delimit the sample based on the variables actually analyzed by the studies.

After the 106 records were identified, 12 duplicates were removed, leaving 94 records for screening. Screening was carried out by reading titles and abstracts to assess the adequacy of the publications to the established inclusion criteria; at this stage, 89 records were excluded for not meeting the eligibility criteria, leaving five articles for full-text reading. After full-text analysis, one study was excluded because it was a theoretical essay without empirical data collection (Fiel & Fusaro, 2021), so four articles composed the final sample of the review. Title and abstract screening and full-text reading were performed independently by two researchers, and disagreements were resolved by consensus. The reasons for exclusion at the full-text reading stage were recorded.

Data extraction was performed by one researcher and checked by a second researcher using a standardized form containing the following variables: author(s) and year of publication, objective, participants (number, age range, educational level, and location), methodology (design, approach, and data collection instruments), and main BI-related results. No additional information was sought from the study authors.

Due to the heterogeneity of designs, participants, and instruments, no meta-analysis was performed. The findings were analyzed through narrative synthesis: the included studies were organized in a descriptive table (Table 2) and grouped into thematic categories defined according to the focus of each study, considering the population investigated (schoolchildren or teachers) and the variables analyzed in association with BI (physical fitness, body composition, participation in PE classes, or teachers' working conditions), which resulted in two categories: BI of schoolchildren and BI of PE teachers.

As this is a systematic review based exclusively on publicly available scientific publications, without data collection directly from human participants, submission to a Research Ethics Committee was not required, in accordance with Resolution No. 510 of April 7, 2016, of the National Health Council (CNS), which establishes the norms applicable to research in the Human and Social Sciences (Conselho Nacional de Saúde, 2016).

Results

A total of 106 articles were identified through the search strategies applied to the selected database. The different combinations of descriptors and Boolean operators yielded different numbers of results. One of the strategies returned no records, which may indicate gaps in the scientific production on the articulation of the investigated phenomenon within school PE. The results obtained with each search strategy are presented in Table 1.

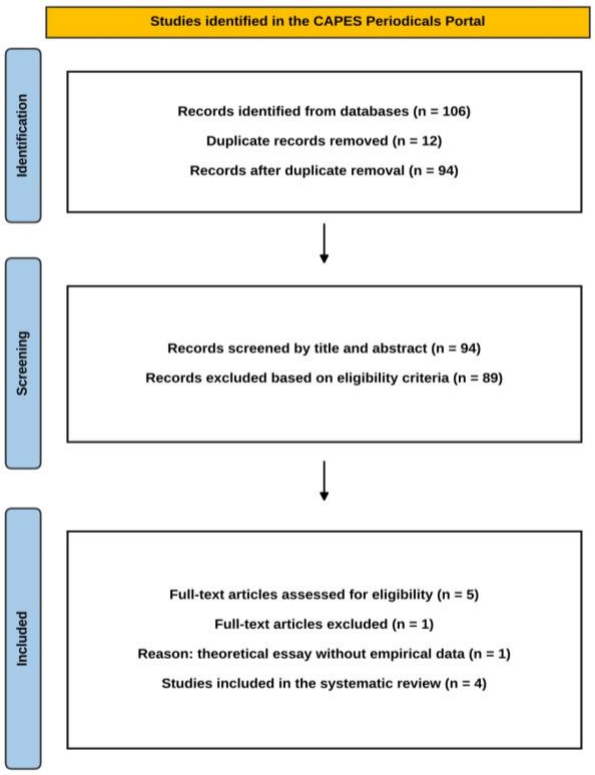
Table 1 - *Database, search strategy, and results*

Database	Search strategy	Results
CAPES	Educação Física AND Imagem Corporal (Physical Education AND Body Image)	n = 63
CAPES	Base Nacional Comum Curricular AND Imagem Corporal (National Common Curricular Base AND Body Image)	n = 0
CAPES	Educação Física AND Percepção da Imagem Corporal (Physical Education AND Body Image Perception)	n = 14
CAPES	Adolescência AND Imagem Corporal (Adolescence AND Body Image)	n = 29

Note. Prepared by the authors.

After the screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages, according to the previously established criteria, four studies composed the final sample of the systematic review, since the theoretical essay by Fiel and Fusaro (2021) was excluded at the eligibility stage. The stages of identification, removal of duplicates, title and abstract reading, full-text analysis, and final study selection are summarized in the flow diagram presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 - *PRISMA flow diagram of study identification, screening, and inclusion*



Note. Prepared by the authors based on the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page, Moher, et al., 2021).

Based on the included studies, the findings were organized into two thematic categories: a) body image of schoolchildren: relationships with physical fitness, body composition, and PE classes; and b) body image of PE teachers. The main characteristics of the included studies are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Characteristics of the studies included in the systematic review

Author(s)/Year	Objective	Participants	Methodology	Results
Chumlhak et al. (2020)	To assess the level of physical fitness, body image, and school performance in students in the early grades of elementary school.	285 schoolchildren aged 8 to 11 years from five municipal schools in Guarapuava, Paraná, Brazil.	Descriptive, cross-sectional, quantitative study. Instruments: PROESP-Br test battery (anthropometric measures and physical fitness); silhouette scale by Kakeshita et al. (2009); school performance based on the mean grades of the first two-month term in five subjects.	Most schoolchildren had low levels of physical fitness, regardless of age and sex. No direct associations were found among physical fitness, body image, and school performance.
Condessa (2019)	To analyze the relationships among body image perception, physical characteristics, physical capacities, and motor performance in children in the first cycle of basic education, investigating possible gender differences.	35 children in the 3rd and 4th grades of elementary school, aged 8 to 11 years (Portugal), followed between 2017 and 2018.	Quantitative, exploratory study. Instruments: silhouette figure test; anthropometric measures (body mass, height, waist circumference, and BMI); flexibility, abdominal strength, and agility tests; qualitative assessment of motor skills.	Children's body image is constructed through the interaction of motor, physical, and sociocultural factors, with gender being an important mediator of bodily experiences, practice opportunities, and the valuing of certain skills.

Author(s)/Year	Objective	Participants	Methodology	Results
Santana et al. (2025)	To analyze the degree of body image distortion among adolescents and its correlation with participation in Physical Education classes in full-time state schools.	74 students in the 3rd year of high school; non-probabilistic convenience sample (Caruaru, Pernambuco, Brazil).	Descriptive, cross-sectional, quantitative study. Instruments: Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ); 20-item questionnaire on PE and class participation.	Body image distortion predominated (52.7%). No significant associations were found with class participation, sex, or age; a significant association was found with appearance-related bullying experiences.
Claumann et al. (2019)	To analyze body image dissatisfaction among Physical Education teachers working in early childhood education.	38 Physical Education teachers (30 women) working in early childhood education in municipal daycare centers in Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brazil.	Quantitative, cross-sectional study. Instruments: demographic and occupational questionnaire; Stunkard silhouette scale; self-reported body mass and height (BMI).	Body image dissatisfaction in 68.4% of teachers, associated with longer professional experience (≥ 10 years), higher weekly workload (40 h vs. 30 h), and weight status, being more frequent among overweight teachers (13 of 14) than among those with normal weight (13 of 24); no association with sex or age.

Note. Prepared by the authors.

a) Body image of schoolchildren: relationships with physical fitness, body composition, and PE classes. Chumlhak et al. (2020) investigated the correlation between physical fitness levels, BI, and school performance, using the Projeto Esporte Brasil (PROESP-Br) test battery for physical fitness and the silhouette scale by Kakeshita et al. (2009) for BI perception. Most schoolchildren, regardless of age and sex, were dissatisfied with their BI and had low levels of physical fitness, with no direct relationships among physical fitness, BI, and school performance. Condessa (2019), comparing physical characteristics, BI perception, physical capacities, and motor performance in Portuguese children in the 3rd and 4th grades, found significant differences between sexes only in the 3rd grade, with a tendency for body satisfaction to decrease as age and body mass index

(BMI) increased, in addition to a negative correlation between BMI and weight satisfaction in both sexes. Santana et al. (2025), in turn, found that 52.7% of students had some degree of body image distortion (20.3% mild, 13.5% moderate, and 18.9% severe); although no significant associations were observed between BI distortion and sex, age, participation in classes, or physical activity, a significant association was found with experiences of appearance-related bullying during PE classes.

b) Body image of PE teachers. Claumann et al. (2019) analyzed the BI of PE teachers, relating negative body perception to professional trajectory. The authors found BI dissatisfaction in 68.4% of the teachers and a significant relationship between dissatisfaction and length of professional experience, weekly workload, and weight status: teachers with ten or more years of experience and those with a 40-hour weekly workload, compared with those working 30 hours, had a higher proportion of dissatisfaction. Regarding weight status, dissatisfaction was more frequent among overweight teachers (13 of 14) than among those with normal weight (13 of 24), although it was present in both groups. There were no statistically significant associations with sex, age group, marital status, skin color, or educational level.

Discussion

The findings of this systematic review show that, within the set of retrieved studies, the scientific production on BI in school PE between 2016 and March 2026 was limited and concentrated on descriptive cross-sectional quantitative designs, mainly aimed at identifying the prevalence of body dissatisfaction and distortion among students and teachers (Chumlhak et al., 2020; Claumann et al., 2019; Condessa, 2019; Santana et al., 2025).

School PE may be a particularly sensitive space for issues related to body image, since, unlike other curricular components, it exposes the body more directly to peers' gaze during classes (Barros et al., 2023). Elements such as body comparison among classmates, physical fitness assessment, motor performance in light of socially valued aesthetic standards, and experiences of inclusion or exclusion in games and activities may intensify both positive bodily experiences and situations of embarrassment (Barros et al., 2023; Russo, 2020). In this scenario, the way teachers conduct bodily practices (their methodological choices, their mediation of conflicts, and the way they address, or avoid addressing, the topic) may be decisive in whether these experiences translate into valuing body diversity or into reinforcing exclusionary standards (Almeida et al., 2025).

Notably, none of the included studies analyzed systematic pedagogical intervention strategies aimed at building a positive BI in everyday PE, revealing an important gap in the scientific production on the topic. This gap is concerning given the increasing sociocultural pressures related to appearance, especially among adolescents (Kachani & Jacobsohn, 2025; Linhares et al., 2024), and reinforces the need for research that examines not only the prevalence of the phenomenon but also how teachers plan, conduct, and evaluate pedagogical actions focused on corporeality.

The association identified by Santana et al. (2025) between BI distortion and appearance-related bullying experiences reinforces the role of school PE as a potentially ambivalent space: while it can foster positive bodily experiences, it can also expose students to situations of comparison, embarrassment, and exclusion. In this sense, although the BNCC does not explicitly use the term BI, the competencies related to the critical understanding of bodily practices, the valuing of diversity, and respect for differences provide a curricular basis for addressing the topic intentionally and systematically in classes (Ministério da Educação, 2018).

The results of Claumann et al. (2019) add a little-explored dimension to the literature: the BI of PE teachers themselves. The study identified a high prevalence of body dissatisfaction among teachers (68.4%), associated with career length, workload, and weight status. However, the relationship between teachers' BI and their pedagogical practice was not investigated. This raises the hypothesis, to be examined in future studies, that teachers' own body perceptions and experiences may influence the way they mediate discussions about the body and body image in classes, which, if confirmed, would reinforce the relevance of investing in initial and continuing teacher education on the topic.

This review has limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. The search was restricted to the CAPES Periodicals Portal and to Portuguese-language descriptors, without complementary searches directly in specific bibliographic databases, which may have reduced the sensitivity of the search strategy and excluded studies published in other languages or indexed in other databases. In addition, no formal assessments of the risk of bias of the included studies, publication bias, or certainty of evidence were performed, which calls for caution when interpreting the findings. Furthermore, the small final sample (n = 4) limits broader generalizations, which may reflect both the scarcity of scientific production specifically focused on the relationship between BI and school PE and the limitations of the search strategy. Future studies are recommended to expand the databases consulted, include descriptors in other languages, and, especially, conduct interventional and qualitative research capable of investigating how didactic decisions and pedagogical interventions can be mobilized to promote critical reflection on the body in everyday school life.

Conclusion

This study found that, within the set of studies retrieved by the adopted search strategy, the scientific production on BI in school PE between 2016 and March 2026 was scarce and concentrated on describing the prevalence of body dissatisfaction and distortion among students and teachers, exclusively with cross-sectional quantitative designs. A relevant gap was identified regarding studies analyzing intentional pedagogical strategies aimed at building a positive BI in everyday classes, as well as regarding the understanding of the teacher's role as a critical mediator of issues related to corporeality.

The findings point to the relevance of broadening the discussion on BI in school PE, especially through approaches that problematize aesthetic standards and value health, body diversity, functionality, and well-being. Future research is recommended to explore, through qualitative and interventional approaches, the interrelationships between BI and meaningful bodily practices in order to support the formulation of pedagogical strategies and teaching materials that can contribute to safer, more participatory school environments that welcome body differences.

Declarations

Ethical approval: not applicable. This is a systematic literature review without data collection directly from human participants; therefore, submission to a Research Ethics Committee was not required, in accordance with CNS Resolution No. 510/2016 (Conselho Nacional de Saúde, 2016).

Conflict of interest: the authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Author contributions: A.A.S.C. contributed to the study conception, the search, selection, and analysis of studies, and the writing of the manuscript; B.F.A. contributed to the study conception, methodological guidance, study selection and assessment, with monitoring and validation of decisions, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version.

Registration and protocol: this review was not registered on PROSPERO and has no published protocol.

Data availability: the data extracted from the included studies are presented in Table 2; the search and selection spreadsheets are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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