

Understanding Body Ideals through Physical Education in the Indian Context

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Abstract: *Body ideals play a significant role in shaping individuals' self-perception, confidence, and participation in physical activity. In the Indian context, understandings of the body have traditionally emphasized balance, harmony, and holistic well-being, as reflected in practices such as yoga, indigenous games, and physical disciplines rooted in cultural traditions. However, contemporary influences, including mass media, commercialization of fitness, and performance-oriented sports culture, have altered perceptions of the ideal body, often promoting narrow standards of appearance and physical performance. Physical education, as an essential component of the education system, has the potential to critically engage with these changing body ideals and promote healthy, inclusive, and realistic understandings of the body. This paper examines how physical education in India contributes to the formation of body ideals among students by analyzing historical perspectives, curricular objectives, teaching practices, and socio-cultural influences. It also highlights challenges such as gender norms, unequal access, and overemphasis on competition. The study argues for a holistic and learner-centered approach to physical education that values diversity of bodies, encourages positive body image, and supports lifelong engagement in physical activity within the Indian socio-cultural framework.*

Keywords: *Body ideals; Body image; Physical education in India; Holistic development; Gender and physical activity*

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Body image is a multidimensional psychological construct describing how people perceive, think, feel and behave toward their own bodies (including satisfaction/dissatisfaction, cognitive evaluations, affective responses and behavioural strategies). Research reviews and handbooks define body image as both an evaluative and an affective appraisal of appearance that is shaped by personal perception and social feedback (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2004). Disturbances in body image are now recognized as a global mental-health concern because they are linked to poor self-esteem, disordered eating, depression and avoidance of physical activities (Rodgers et al., 2023).

Physical education (PE) occupies a key mediating role between societal body ideals and young people's lived experiences of their bodies. Recent narrative reviews conclude that PE can either mitigate or exacerbate body image concerns depending on curriculum intent, pedagogy and classroom practice: when PE emphasizes mastery, inclusion and bodily experience it tends to promote positive body image; when it privileges performance testing, comparison and narrow athletic ideals it can increase appearance pressure and body dissatisfaction (Barker et al., 2023; Kerner et al., 2017). International health agencies also position school-based physical activity as a primary setting for health promotion because schools reach children across socio-economic strata and can influence lifelong attitudes to activity and body care (WHO, 2020).

2 | HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE BODY IN INDIA

Classical Indian thought treats body and mind as integrated aspects of personhood rather than sharply separated substances. Upanishadic and later Vedantic texts, and the schools that follow them, describe multiple layers of existence (gross body, subtle body, causal body) and present the mind (manas/antahkarana) as functioning within embodied experience; consciousness is not conceived as purely disembodied cognition (primary overviews of the Upanishads; Vedāntic commentaries). This holistic account contrasts with Cartesian dualism and foregrounds embodied cognition long before modern phenomenology (see standard overviews of Upanishadic philosophy).

Ayurveda, the classical Indian medical system, conceptualizes health as equilibrium of body, mind and spirit (swasthya) and treats mental and physical processes as mutually constitutive; therapeutic practice addresses both physiology and mental states via diet, lifestyle, herbs, and mind-body techniques (Behere et al., 2013). Yoga texts—most notably the Yoga Sūtras attributed to Patañjali—present an integrated practice where āsana (posture) and prāṇāyāma (breath control) are tools for regulating body and mind to achieve clarity and balance; the aim is psychophysical integration rather than mere bodily aesthetics (Patañjali, Yoga Sūtras). Indigenous martial traditions (for example, kalarippayattu, malla practices) combined physical conditioning, discipline and ethical formation, thus embedding physical training within broader personal and social aims rather than reducing it to external appearance or competitive display (Behere, 2013; Patañjali sources).

3 | CONCEPT AND OBJECTIVES OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN INDIA

Contemporary Indian policy documents and curriculum frameworks articulate PE as a vehicle for health, life-skills and social development. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF 2005) and the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) explicitly include games, sports, yoga and fitness within the core curriculum to support physical health, psychosocial well-being and values such as teamwork and resilience. NEP 2020 emphasizes experiential, holistic and activity-based learning that integrates sports, health and life skills in school and higher education systems (NCF, 2005; NEP, 2020). International guidance from WHO similarly frames school physical activity as central to preventing non-communicable disease and supporting mental health, reinforcing the health aims of PE in policy and practice.

Scholarly and policy literature converge on the view that PE should do more than develop athletic skill: it should foster movement literacy, bodily awareness, social competence and intrinsic motivation for lifelong activity. Physical literacy frameworks (and related didactic models) emphasise motivation, confidence, competence and knowledge to sustain participation across the life course; similarly, Indian curriculum documents promote yoga and play alongside competitive sport to cultivate a balanced, inclusive form of bodily learning. When PE instruction foregrounds mastery, autonomy support and adaptive assessment rather than only normative performance metrics, it contributes to positive body image, social inclusion and overall well-being (Kerner et al., 2017; NEP 2020; WHO school guidance).

4 | BODY IDEALS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN SOCIETY

In contemporary Indian society, body ideals are increasingly shaped by mass media, cinema, advertising, and digital platforms. Traditional Indian understandings of the body, which emphasized balance, functionality, and inner well-being, are now intersecting with globalized visual cultures that promote narrowly defined standards of attractiveness and performance. Research in sociology and media studies shows that repeated exposure to idealized bodies in films, television, and advertising plays a significant role in shaping body perception, particularly among adolescents and young adults (Garg & Anand, 2020).

Indian cinema, especially mainstream Bollywood, has historically influenced popular notions of beauty and physical desirability. Film actors are frequently portrayed with lean, muscular, and fair-skinned bodies, reinforcing aesthetic norms that associate success, confidence, and social status with a particular physical appearance. Studies indicate that such portrayals contribute to body dissatisfaction and appearance-based comparisons, especially among youth who identify with cinematic role models (Mishra & Sharma, 2021).

Advertising further amplifies these ideals by linking physical appearance to consumer success and personal worth. Fitness products, cosmetic brands, fairness creams, and dietary supplements are often marketed using highly edited and unrealistic images, creating aspirational but unattainable body standards. Sociological research in the Indian context suggests that such representations encourage the commodification of the body, where appearance becomes a project that must be constantly improved through consumption (Banerjee & Duflo, 2019).

Social media has intensified this phenomenon by creating interactive and continuous exposure to idealized bodies. Platforms such as Instagram and YouTube promote fitness influencers, lifestyle bloggers, and celebrities whose content often emphasizes aesthetics, performance, and body transformation. Empirical studies in India report a positive association between high social media use and increased body surveillance, comparison, and dissatisfaction, particularly among young women (Perloff, 2014; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Unlike traditional media, social media blurs the line between everyday users and celebrities, making idealized bodies appear more attainable and increasing psychological pressure.

Alongside media influence, contemporary Indian society is witnessing a shift in how fitness, beauty, and physical performance are defined. Fitness is increasingly equated with visible muscularity, leanness, and measurable performance outcomes rather than overall health, functionality, or well-being. The rapid growth of gyms, fitness apps, bodybuilding culture, and competitive endurance events reflects this transformation (Srinivasan, 2018).

Beauty standards have similarly narrowed, with emphasis placed on slimness for women and muscularity for men. These ideals often marginalize diverse body types and overlook genetic, cultural, and socio-economic variations. Research in Indian psychology and gender studies indicates that such standards

disproportionately affect women, leading to higher levels of body dissatisfaction, anxiety, and reduced participation in physical activity when appearance-based evaluation dominates (Raval & Madan, 2020).

Performance has also become a dominant marker of bodily value, especially in educational and sporting contexts. Competitive success, physical testing, and visible outcomes are often prioritized over enjoyment, skill development, and personal growth. Scholars argue that this performance-centric approach reflects a broader neoliberal influence, where bodies are evaluated based on productivity, efficiency, and competitiveness (Shilling, 2012).

In contrast, public health and educational research consistently emphasize that narrow body ideals can undermine both mental health and long-term engagement in physical activity. When individuals perceive fitness and beauty as unattainable, they are more likely to disengage from physical education and exercise altogether (WHO, 2020). This highlights the importance of critical engagement with contemporary body ideals, particularly within educational settings such as physical education, where alternative, inclusive understandings of the body can be promoted.

5 | SCHOOL PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND BODY PERCEPTION

In Indian school education, physical education is formally recognized as an essential component of holistic development. National curriculum documents emphasize that physical education should promote physical fitness, body awareness, emotional well-being, and social skills rather than only athletic achievement. The *National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005* highlights the role of physical education and games in fostering self-awareness, cooperation, and respect for bodily diversity, arguing that learning through the body is central to meaningful education (NCERT, 2005).

More recently, the *National Education Policy (NEP) 2020* reinforces this perspective by advocating experiential and activity-based learning. The policy explicitly integrates sports, yoga, and physical activities into the core curriculum to support physical health, mental well-being, and life skills. NEP 2020 emphasizes that education should develop “cognitive, emotional, social, and physical capacities in an integrated manner,” thereby positioning body awareness as a legitimate educational outcome rather than a by-product of sports participation (Government of India, 2020).

Within this framework, school physical education is expected to help students understand their bodies, recognize physical abilities and limitations, and develop positive attitudes toward movement. Scholars argue that such curricular objectives have the potential to promote healthy body perception by shifting focus from appearance and comparison to bodily experience, functionality, and self-regulation (Whitehead, 2010).

Despite progressive curricular intentions, research consistently points to a gap between policy and classroom practice in Indian schools. Teaching practices in physical education often remain sport-centric and teacher-directed, with a strong emphasis on drills, standardized activities, and competitive team sports (Singh & Sharma, 2018). These approaches tend to privilege students who already possess athletic competence while marginalizing those with lower skill levels or different bodily capacities.

Assessment practices further influence students’ body perception. Performance-based assessments such as physical fitness tests, skill execution scores, and competitive outcomes are commonly used because they are perceived as objective and easy to administer. However, educational research suggests that such assessment methods encourage social comparison and reinforce the idea that bodily value is tied to measurable performance (Kirk, 2010). In the Indian context, limited teacher training and large class sizes often exacerbate reliance on these narrow assessment tools (NCERT, 2017).

Alternative assessment approaches—such as formative assessment, self-reflection, peer feedback, and participation-based evaluation—are recommended in curriculum documents but are less frequently

implemented. Studies indicate that when assessment focuses on effort, improvement, and engagement, students are more likely to develop positive body awareness and sustained motivation for physical activity (Bailey et al., 2009).

A key tension in school physical education lies between performance orientation and participation-oriented approaches. Performance-oriented PE emphasizes competition, winning, and technical proficiency, often mirroring elite sports models. While this approach may benefit a small proportion of athletically inclined students, it can lead to anxiety, exclusion, and negative body image among others, particularly girls and less-skilled students (Kumar & Bhukar, 2013).

Participation- and enjoyment-based approaches, by contrast, prioritize inclusion, play, personal improvement, and enjoyment of movement. Research in physical education pedagogy shows that students who experience enjoyment and autonomy in PE are more likely to associate physical activity with positive feelings and to continue being active outside school (Bailey et al., 2009). In the Indian setting, yoga, indigenous games, and non-competitive activities offer culturally relevant opportunities to promote such inclusive experiences.

NEP 2020 explicitly supports a shift toward participation and lifelong engagement by encouraging schools to value physical activity for health and well-being rather than solely for competitive success. Scholars argue that adopting this orientation can help redefine body ideals in schools, moving away from narrow performance standards toward acceptance of bodily diversity and functional competence (Whitehead, 2010; Government of India, 2020).

6 | GENDER, BODY IMAGE, AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

In India, body image is deeply shaped by gendered social expectations that influence how boys and girls experience physical education. For boys, dominant cultural narratives often associate the ideal body with strength, muscularity, endurance, and athletic competence. These expectations align closely with competitive sport models commonly emphasized in school physical education, thereby reinforcing the idea that physical prowess is central to masculine identity (Chatterjee, 2018).

In contrast, girls are frequently subject to body ideals that prioritize slimness, grace, and aesthetic appearance rather than strength or physical competence. Psychological and sociological studies conducted in India indicate that girls often experience greater body dissatisfaction, heightened self-consciousness, and fear of negative evaluation during physical activities, particularly in adolescence (Raval & Madan, 2020). These pressures are intensified during puberty, when bodily changes draw attention and increase discomfort in movement-based settings such as PE classes.

Such gendered body expectations can shape students' engagement with physical education. While boys may feel social pressure to perform and excel athletically, girls may experience pressure to avoid activities that expose their bodies or challenge conventional norms of femininity. Research suggests that these contrasting expectations contribute to unequal participation patterns and reinforce gender disparities in physical activity levels within schools (UNESCO, 2015).

Social norms and structural barriers significantly affect participation in physical education, particularly for girls and marginalized groups. In many Indian communities, cultural beliefs surrounding modesty, gender roles, and domestic responsibilities restrict girls' opportunities for physical activity. Parents and caregivers may perceive sports and physical exertion as inappropriate or unnecessary for girls, especially beyond primary education (Nanda et al., 2016).

School-level factors further compound these challenges. Lack of gender-sensitive infrastructure such as separate changing rooms, appropriate sports attire, and female PE teachers has been identified as a

major barrier to participation. Empirical studies report that adolescent girls often avoid PE classes due to embarrassment, fear of body exposure, or discomfort in male-dominated activity spaces (Kaur & Kaur, 2019).

Marginalized groups, including students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, rural areas, and certain caste or tribal communities, face additional constraints. Limited access to facilities, economic pressures, and reduced institutional support restrict consistent engagement in physical education. These barriers intersect with gender, creating compounded disadvantages for girls from marginalized communities (UNICEF India, 2019).

Inclusive physical education is increasingly recognized as essential for promoting equity, positive body image, and lifelong engagement in physical activity. National policy frameworks in India, particularly the *National Education Policy 2020*, emphasize gender equity, inclusion, and equal access to sports and physical education for all students, regardless of background (Government of India, 2020).

Research indicates that inclusive PE practices—such as offering diverse activities, emphasizing participation over competition, and adopting flexible assessment methods—can significantly improve girls' confidence and body perception. The integration of yoga, traditional games, and non-competitive movement activities has been shown to create culturally relevant and psychologically safe spaces that encourage broader participation (NCERT, 2005).

Teacher attitudes and pedagogical approaches play a crucial role in fostering inclusion. Studies suggest that when PE teachers actively challenge gender stereotypes, encourage cooperative learning, and recognize diverse forms of physical competence, students are more likely to feel valued and included (Bailey et al., 2009). For marginalized groups, school-based physical education can serve as a powerful platform for social inclusion, empowerment, and the normalization of bodily diversity.

In summary, addressing gendered body expectations, dismantling participation barriers, and adopting inclusive pedagogies are critical for ensuring that physical education contributes positively to body image and well-being among all students in the Indian context.

7 | PHYSICAL EDUCATION, HEALTH, AND SELF-ESTEEM

A substantial body of research confirms a strong and consistent relationship between regular physical activity and mental well-being across age groups. Physical activity has been shown to reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress while enhancing mood, emotional regulation, and psychological resilience (Biddle et al., 2019). Neurobiological explanations suggest that physical activity stimulates the release of endorphins, serotonin, and dopamine, which contribute to improved emotional states and cognitive functioning (Lubans et al., 2016).

In the Indian context, growing concerns around adolescent mental health, academic pressure, and sedentary lifestyles have increased attention on the role of school-based physical education. The World Health Organization identifies schools as critical settings for mental health promotion, emphasizing that structured physical activity can support emotional well-being and social connectedness among children and adolescents (WHO, 2020). Indian studies similarly indicate that students who participate regularly in physical education and sports demonstrate lower stress levels and better emotional adjustment compared to inactive peers (Kumar & Yadav, 2018).

Physical education plays a unique role in shaping self-esteem and body-related confidence because it involves direct engagement with the body in social settings. Research suggests that when PE programs emphasize mastery, personal improvement, and enjoyment rather than comparison and competition, they contribute positively to students' self-concept and body image (Bailey et al., 2009). Experiences of

skill acquisition, movement competence, and successful participation foster a sense of achievement and self-efficacy, which are key components of self-esteem.

In Indian schools, PE has the potential to counter negative body perceptions reinforced by academic competition and media-driven appearance ideals. Educational frameworks such as the *National Education Policy 2020* explicitly link physical education with mental health, life skills, and self-confidence, highlighting the role of sports, yoga, and physical activity in nurturing emotional strength and positive self-identity (Government of India, 2020).

However, scholars caution that this potential is realized only when PE environments are inclusive and supportive. Performance-oriented teaching and rigid assessment can undermine self-esteem, especially among less-skilled students and girls (Kirk, 2010). Conversely, student-centered pedagogy, encouragement, and recognition of diverse abilities contribute to positive self-image and sustained engagement in physical activity.

8 | TRADITIONAL AND INDIGENOUS PHYSICAL PRACTICES

India possesses a rich heritage of traditional and indigenous physical practices that integrate physical, mental, and social dimensions of health. **Yoga**, one of the most globally recognized Indian practices, is rooted in ancient philosophical traditions and emphasizes balance between body, mind, and breath. Empirical research demonstrates that regular yoga practice improves flexibility, strength, emotional regulation, and psychological well-being, making it particularly relevant for school-based physical education (Telles et al., 2013).

Traditional games such as *kabaddi*, *kho-kho*, *gilli-danda*, and *mallakhamb* have historically functioned as accessible forms of physical activity requiring minimal equipment. These games promote agility, teamwork, strategic thinking, and endurance while being adaptable to different age groups and skill levels. Scholars argue that traditional games foster inclusive participation and reduce performance anxiety because they are embedded in local culture rather than elite sport norms (Singh & Mehta, 2017).

Indigenous sports and martial traditions, including *kalarippayattu* and wrestling (*akhara* culture), emphasize discipline, bodily awareness, respect, and moral development. These practices highlight functionality and resilience rather than appearance, offering alternative frameworks for understanding physical competence (Alter, 1992).

Traditional and indigenous physical practices contribute significantly to body acceptance by valuing bodily diversity and lived experience over standardized ideals. Unlike modern fitness cultures that often prioritize aesthetic outcomes, these practices emphasize effort, balance, and inner awareness. Research suggests that culturally relevant physical activities enhance students' sense of belonging and reduce feelings of inadequacy related to body image (UNESCO, 2015).

Incorporating indigenous practices into school physical education aligns with Indian educational policies that promote cultural rootedness alongside modern knowledge. NEP 2020 encourages the inclusion of local games, yoga, and traditional sports as part of holistic education, recognizing their role in promoting physical health, mental well-being, and cultural continuity (Government of India, 2020).

By reconnecting students with indigenous movement traditions, physical education can challenge narrow body ideals and promote more inclusive, respectful, and sustainable relationships with the body. Such integration supports not only physical fitness but also cultural identity and positive self-perception.

9 | INFLUENCE OF EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AND REFORMS

Educational policy plays a decisive role in shaping how physical education addresses body ideals in schools. The **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** marks a significant shift in India's educational philosophy by explicitly endorsing holistic development, where physical, cognitive, emotional, and ethical dimensions of learners are treated as interconnected (Government of India, 2020). Unlike earlier frameworks that often treated physical education as co-curricular or supplementary, NEP 2020 integrates sports, yoga, and physical activity into the core curriculum across all stages of schooling.

The policy emphasizes reducing the excessive focus on rote learning and academic pressure, which indirectly supports healthier body perceptions by valuing movement, play, and experiential learning. By recognizing sports and physical education as tools for mental health, teamwork, discipline, and resilience, NEP 2020 repositions the body as an essential medium of learning rather than merely an object of performance or appearance (NCERT, 2021). This policy orientation creates space for redefining body ideals in schools away from narrow athletic or aesthetic norms toward functional, diverse, and health-oriented understandings.

NEP 2020 also aligns with the global concept of **physical literacy**, which emphasizes motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding for lifelong engagement in physical activity (Whitehead, 2010). Although the term "physical literacy" is not always explicitly used, the policy's emphasis on life skills, well-being, and experiential learning reflects its core principles.

Life skills such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, cooperation, and decision-making are closely linked to bodily experiences in physical education. Research suggests that when PE integrates life skills education, students are more likely to develop positive self-concepts and realistic body perceptions because success is defined through participation, effort, and learning rather than comparison or external appearance (Bailey et al., 2009). In this sense, policy reform provides an important structural foundation for addressing body ideals through education.

10 | CHALLENGES IN ADDRESSING BODY IDEALS THROUGH PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Despite progressive policies, a major challenge in addressing body ideals through physical education is the continued dominance of competition-oriented and elite performance models. In many Indian schools, PE is still largely equated with competitive sports, fitness tests, and talent identification for inter-school competitions. Scholars argue that such practices reinforce narrow definitions of bodily success and privilege students who already possess athletic ability, while marginalizing others (Kirk, 2010).

This overemphasis on performance often leads to negative body comparisons, anxiety, and disengagement, particularly among girls and less-skilled students. Research in educational psychology indicates that when PE environments prioritize winning and ranking, students are more likely to associate physical activity with failure and embarrassment rather than enjoyment and self-care (Bailey et al., 2009).

Another significant barrier is inadequate teacher preparation and infrastructural support. Many physical education teachers receive limited training in inclusive pedagogy, body image sensitivity, and mental health awareness. As a result, teaching practices may unintentionally reinforce stereotypical body ideals or rely heavily on traditional, performance-based methods (Singh & Sharma, 2018).

Infrastructure constraints further restrict implementation of holistic PE. Insufficient playgrounds, lack of equipment, large class sizes, and absence of gender-sensitive facilities limit opportunities for inclusive and varied physical activities. Policy documents acknowledge these gaps, noting that disparities in resources directly affect students' access to quality physical education (Government of India, 2020).

Regional and socio-economic inequalities present additional challenges. Access to trained teachers, facilities, and diverse physical activities varies widely across states, rural-urban contexts, and school types. Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds often have fewer opportunities for structured physical education, which can reinforce social inequalities in health, confidence, and body perception (UNESCO, 2015).

These disparities intersect with gender, caste, and disability, making it difficult to ensure that physical education contributes equally to positive body image for all students. Addressing body ideals through PE therefore requires not only pedagogical change but also systemic equity in resource allocation.

11 | INCLUSIVE AND HOLISTIC APPROACHES IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Inclusive and holistic approaches to physical education emphasize the learner's lived experience of movement rather than standardized performance outcomes. Learner-centered pedagogy encourages student choice, self-reflection, and adaptation of activities to individual abilities and interests. Research shows that such approaches support intrinsic motivation and foster positive relationships with the body because students feel seen, respected, and capable (Kirk, 2010).

Experience-based teaching, which includes play, exploration, and reflective discussion, helps students understand their bodies as sources of agency and expression rather than objects of evaluation. This approach aligns with both Indian educational philosophy and international best practices in physical education (Bailey et al., 2009).

Shifting the focus of PE from competition to participation and enjoyment is central to promoting healthy body ideals. Studies consistently demonstrate that enjoyment is a key predictor of sustained physical activity and positive self-image (WHO, 2020). When students experience movement as pleasurable and socially supportive, they are more likely to value physical activity for well-being rather than appearance.

Valuing diversity in body types, abilities, and movement styles further supports inclusive physical education. Incorporating yoga, traditional games, non-competitive activities, and cooperative learning tasks allows multiple forms of physical competence to be recognized. Such diversity challenges narrow body ideals and helps normalize different bodies and abilities within the school environment (UNESCO, 2015).

In sum, inclusive and holistic physical education practices offer a powerful means of addressing body ideals by redefining success, promoting equity, and fostering lifelong positive relationships with the body.

12 | CONCLUSION

This study has examined the concept of body ideals in the Indian context by situating physical education within historical traditions, contemporary socio-cultural influences, and evolving educational policies. The analysis demonstrates that understandings of the body in India have traditionally been holistic, emphasizing balance, functionality, and harmony between body and mind. Practices rooted in yoga, Ayurveda, indigenous games, and martial traditions reflect an inclusive view of physical competence that values lived experience over appearance or elite performance.

In contrast, contemporary Indian society is increasingly shaped by media-driven and performance-oriented body ideals that prioritize narrow standards of fitness, beauty, and athletic success. These ideals often influence school physical education practices, where competition, testing, and comparison may unintentionally reinforce body dissatisfaction and exclusion, particularly among girls and students from marginalized backgrounds. Despite progressive curricular intentions, gaps remain between policy goals and classroom realities due to limitations in teacher preparation, infrastructure, and equitable access.

Educational reforms, particularly the National Education Policy 2020, offer a significant opportunity to reframe physical education as a holistic, learner-centered domain that integrates physical literacy, life skills, and mental well-being. When physical education emphasizes participation, enjoyment, diversity, and personal growth, it can play a transformative role in shaping positive body perception, self-esteem, and lifelong engagement in physical activity.

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