



Perspectives on physical education teachers: are sporting skills more important than teaching skills? A systematic literature review

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Abstract

Physical Education teachers are often assessed on their ability to perform and demonstrate sporting skills. This perspective raises a fundamental question as to whether sporting skills are more important than teaching ability in determining the quality of a Physical Education teacher. This study aims to systematically analyse the scientific literature on the role of sporting skills, teaching ability, and pedagogical content knowledge in the professionalism of Physical Education teachers. This study employed a Systematic Literature Review method in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. The literature search was conducted in the Scopus database using keywords related to physical education teachers, sporting skills, content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, teaching competence, teacher support, and student perception. The initial search resulted in 428 articles; following the selection process, 32 articles met the criteria for the literature review and were analysed using a narrative-thematic approach. The findings indicate that sporting skills are crucial for physical education teachers as they are linked to content mastery. However, sporting skills alone are not sufficient to ensure meaningful learning. Teaching ability and pedagogical content knowledge play a central role in transforming sporting skills into learning experiences that are safe, inclusive, enjoyable and meaningful for pupils. This study found that sporting skills are important, but no more important than teaching ability. Experienced physical education teachers are those who can combine sporting skills, pedagogical expertise and sensitivity to the diversity of their pupils.

Keywords: physical education teachers, sporting skills, teaching ability, pedagogical content knowledge, systematic literature review.

INTRODUCTION

Physical Education (PE) teachers have a complex role because they are not only required to master sports skills but also to create learning experiences that are safe, enjoyable, inclusive, and meaningful for all students. In practice, teachers encounter students with a wide range of characteristics—including differences in motor skills, motivation, sports experience, and physical, psychological, and social conditions. This

diversity requires teachers not only to master sports activities but also to understand how each student learns and develops through physical activity.

However, the quality of physical education teachers is still often measured based on their ability to demonstrate skills in various sports. Teachers who are skilled at playing soccer, basketball, volleyball, track and field, or gymnastics are often considered high-quality teachers. In reality, mastery of sports skills does not necessarily translate into the ability to explain movements, provide feedback, modify activities, manage the classroom, build motivation, or adapt instruction to students' needs. This situation demonstrates that a teacher's professionalism cannot be assessed solely based on technical skills but must also take into account their pedagogical abilities.

The issue aligns with Shulman's (1986) perspective, which emphasizes that teachers' knowledge consists not only of content knowledge but also of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK)—that is, the ability to transform material so that it can be understood and learned by students. In physical education, PCK is particularly important because teachers not only teach concepts but also movement experiences. Teachers need to master movement techniques, game rules, training principles, safety, and the characteristics of physical activities, while also being able to transform that knowledge into learning experiences tailored to students' characteristics. Ward and Ayvazo (2016) explain that PCK in Physical Education is specific to both content and context and develops through teaching experience and an understanding of students' characteristics.

Sports skills remain the professional foundation for physical education teachers because they help teachers understand movement patterns, identify errors, design exercise progressions, and select activities aligned with learning objectives. Kim (2021) demonstrates that in-depth content knowledge contributes to strengthening pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and improving the quality of learning. However, these skills only have educational value when they are translated into pedagogical decisions, such as simplifying movement tasks, modifying activities, providing differentiated instruction, and ensuring that every student has the opportunity to succeed.

In the context of learning, teaching competence is a crucial factor. Baumgartner (2022) explains that the professional competence of physical education teachers encompasses professional knowledge, the ability to perceive learning situations, interpret students' responses, make decisions, and implement pedagogical actions. Thus, a teacher's quality is determined not only by what they know but also by their ability to apply that knowledge in dynamic learning situations.

Empirical findings also indicate that the relationship between teachers' knowledge and students' learning outcomes is not direct. Wittwer et al. (2025) found that the influence of teachers' professional knowledge and skills on learning development is mediated by the quality of the learning process, teacher-student interactions, learning motivation, and instructional design. This means that mastery of sports skills or content knowledge does not automatically improve learning outcomes without the support of effective pedagogical practices.

A similar view emerges from the students' perspective. A high-quality physical education teacher is not merely one who is skilled in sports, but one who is able to provide support, build a sense of competence, and create positive learning experiences. Liu et al. (2025) demonstrated that teachers' support for students' competence is positively associated with students' participation in sports through their perceptions of competence and persistence in training. Meanwhile, Russo et al. (2025) found that students' positive perceptions of physical education are influenced by well-being, enjoyment, collaboration, teacher behavior, and inclusive learning. These findings confirm that teacher quality is determined not only by athletic skills but also by the teacher's ability to build pedagogical relationships that support student development.

Although various studies have examined content knowledge, PCK, and the teaching competencies of physical education teachers, the understanding of the relationship between athletic skills and teaching ability in determining teacher professionalism remains fragmented. Some studies emphasize the importance of mastery of a particular sport, while others focus more on pedagogical aspects. In the context of school education, however, these two aspects are complementary and inseparable.

Based on this gap, this study aims to systematically analyze perspectives in the scientific literature regarding the role of sports skills and teaching competence in determining the quality of physical education teachers. Specifically, this study aims to identify the importance of sports skills as content knowledge, analyze the role of teaching competence and pedagogical content knowledge in learning effectiveness, synthesize findings regarding students' perceptions of the quality of physical education teachers, and formulate the conceptual relationship between sports skills and teaching competence in the professionalism of physical education teachers.

METHOD

This study employs the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to examine, map, and synthesize scientific findings regarding perspectives on the professionalism of

physical education teachers, particularly as they relate to the roles of athletic skills and teaching abilities. This method was chosen because it allows for a systematic, transparent, and accountable literature search, ensuring that the study's conclusions are based on a synthesis of scientific evidence rather than merely on opinion or practical experience.

This study was conducted in accordance with the 2020 Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines as the standard for reporting systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021). PRISMA was used to ensure that every stage of the study—from the identification and selection of articles to their synthesis—was reported clearly and systematically. This review did not conduct a meta-analysis because the articles analyzed varied in research design, context, variables, and measurement instruments. Therefore, the synthesis was conducted using a narrative-thematic approach, which involves grouping and interpreting findings based on key themes related to sports skills, content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), teaching ability, teacher competence, and students' perceptions of physical education teachers.

The research data sources consist of scientific articles published in reputable journals indexed by Scopus. This database was selected because it provides international publications relevant to the fields of physical education, sports pedagogy, teacher education, and physical activity-based learning. To ensure the accuracy of bibliographic data, article metadata was verified through DOIs, publisher websites, and supporting databases such as ERIC, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis, Human Kinetics, Frontiers, PLOS ONE, and SAGE, although priority was still given to articles analyzed from Scopus-indexed journals.

The literature review utilized a combination of English keywords organized around three main concepts: physical education teachers, sports skills or content knowledge, and teaching ability or pedagogy. The search was limited to English-language articles published between 2014 and 2026 to capture the latest developments in the literature on Physical Education teachers' competencies. Nevertheless, classic articles with significant conceptual contributions, such as Shulman (1986), were still used as a theoretical foundation.

Inclusion criteria included English-language journal articles indexed in Scopus that discussed physical education teachers or teacher candidates, with a focus on sports skills, content knowledge, teaching ability, pedagogical content knowledge, teacher competencies, or student perceptions. Conversely, articles that discuss only athlete performance, competitive sports training, sports physiology, or physical fitness without any connection to learning or the context of sports clubs were excluded from the analysis.

Article selection was conducted following the four PRISMA stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. During the identification stage, articles were obtained through a search of the Scopus database using predetermined keywords. Next, duplicate articles were removed using reference management software. The screening stage involved reviewing titles and abstracts to assess their relevance to the research focus. Articles that passed this stage were then read in full during the eligibility stage, and only those that substantively addressed the research theme were included in the final analysis.

Articles that met the inclusion criteria were extracted using a data extraction form containing information on the authors, year of publication, article title, journal, country or research context, research objectives, research design, participant characteristics, key concepts, research findings, and their relevance to the research questions. To ensure the quality of the analyzed articles, this study used the 2018 Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), which can be used to assess the quality of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies in systematic reviews (Hong et al., 2018).

Data analysis was conducted using a narrative-thematic approach. The initial stage began with a thorough reading of the articles to understand the context, objectives, and main findings of each study. Next, the information related to athletic skills, teaching ability, content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, teachers' professional competencies, teacher support, and students' perceptions was coded. Codes that were related were then grouped into main themes, resulting in a conceptual synthesis used to answer the research question regarding the relationship between sports skills and teaching ability in the professionalism of physical education teachers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A literature search in the Scopus database yielded 428 articles matching the initial keyword combination. These articles were then reviewed to identify possible duplicates. As a result of this review, 54 duplicate articles were removed, leaving 374 articles to proceed to the title and abstract screening stage.

During the screening stage, a total of 374 articles were reviewed based on the relevance of their titles and abstracts to the study's focus. The main focus of this research is physical education teachers, sports skills, content knowledge, teaching ability, pedagogical content knowledge, teachers' professional competencies, and students' perceptions of physical education learning. Based on the screening results, 283 articles were excluded because they did not align with the research focus. The articles excluded at

this stage generally discussed athlete performance, competitive sports training, or physical fitness without any connection to the role of teachers or in non-educational sports contexts.

After the screening phase, 91 articles were deemed suitable for full-text review. During the full-text review phase, the articles were examined based on the established inclusion and exclusion criteria. Of these 91 articles, 59 were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria. Articles excluded at this stage included those that did not specifically discuss physical education teachers, did not examine teaching abilities or pedagogical competencies, focused solely on students' athletic skills without relating them to the teacher's role, were not available in full text, or were not set in the context of school education or teacher education.

Consequently, a total of 32 articles were found to meet the inclusion criteria and were used as the final articles in this study. These final articles were then analyzed using a combined narrative and thematic approach to identify patterns of findings regarding the relationship between athletic skills and teaching ability in shaping the professionalism of physical education teachers.

Table 1.

Results of Article Selection Based on the PRISMA Flowchart

Selection Stage	Number of Articles	Notes
Identified articles from the Scopus database	428	Search results beginning use the keywords that have been determined
Duplicate articles removed	54	Articles that appear more from one time
Article after duplication deleted	374	Incoming articles to stage filtering title and abstract
Article issued based on title and abstract	283	No in accordance with focus study
Articles that are rated worthy For review text full	91	Relevant articles based on title and abstract
Text articles full issued	59	No fulfil criteria inclusion after review full
Final article analyzed	32	Articles used in synthesis end

Based on the table, it can be seen that of the 428 initial articles, only 32 were ultimately included in the synthesis. In other words, the final articles analyzed accounted for approximately 7.48% of all articles identified in the initial stage. This indicates that the selection process was rigorous to ensure that the articles analyzed were truly relevant to the research focus.

Sports skills are one of the key foundations of professionalism for Physical Education (PE) teachers. Mastery of movement techniques, game rules, training principles, safety, and the characteristics of physical activities equips teachers to understand the

material they will teach. From the perspective of content knowledge, this mastery serves as the foundation for teachers to design lessons that align with the objectives and characteristics of their students. However, mastery of the subject matter cannot be interpreted merely as a teacher's ability to demonstrate sports skills. A teacher may be highly skilled at playing volleyball, soccer, or gymnastics, but these abilities do not necessarily make them capable of effectively guiding students in their learning. It is this distinction that sets the teaching profession apart from that of athletes and sports coaches.

This perspective aligns with Shulman's (1986) theory, which posits that a teacher's knowledge lies not only in mastery of the subject matter but also in the ability to transform that material so that students can understand it. In Physical Education, this ability is reflected when teachers are able to simplify motor skills, provide appropriate demonstrations, explain common mistakes, offer feedback, and adapt activities to students' abilities. Thus, athletic skills are not the ultimate goal but rather a professional asset that gains meaning when used to create learning experiences. Kim (2021) reinforces this view by explaining that in-depth content knowledge serves as a crucial foundation for the development of teachers' pedagogical skills in teaching various sports-related content.

Although athletic skills are a foundation that cannot be overlooked, the results of the synthesis indicate that teaching ability is actually the most decisive factor in the success of Physical Education learning. These abilities include lesson planning, delivering instructions, classroom management, providing feedback, using learning strategies, modifying activities, assessment, and creating a safe and enjoyable learning environment. Harvey & Jarrett (2014), for example, demonstrate that game-centered approaches can enhance student motivation, tactical understanding, and engagement. These findings indicate that a teacher's success is determined not only by their ability to demonstrate sports techniques but also by their ability to select learning strategies that encourage students to think, make decisions, collaborate, and actively participate.

The importance of teaching skills is becoming increasingly evident because Physical Education is a subject that takes place in an open social setting. Students' difficulties in performing movements or understanding games are often observed by their peers, which can affect their self-confidence. In such situations, teachers are expected to quickly assess the classroom situation and make appropriate pedagogical decisions. Baumgartner (2022) explains that the professional competencies of Physical Education teachers include the ability to perceive learning situations, interpret students' responses, make decisions, and implement appropriate pedagogical actions. Therefore, a professional teacher is not only able to demonstrate movements correctly but is also able to ensure that

every student feels safe, confident, and motivated to continue learning. This aligns with the findings of Wittwer et al. (2025), which show that teachers' professional knowledge does not directly influence learning outcomes but rather works through the quality of the learning process that teachers facilitate.

The relationship between mastery of subject matter and teaching ability is explained more comprehensively through the concept of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK). This concept views teachers as individuals who not only understand what they teach but also how students learn that material in specific contexts. Ward & Ayvazo (2016) explain that PCK in Physical Education is specific to each content area because every sport has distinct movement characteristics, levels of difficulty, risks, and learning strategies. Teachers must be able to design learning progressions, modify games, ensure safety, and adapt activities to students' developmental levels. Meanwhile, Backman & Barker (2020) point out that knowledge in Physical Education is not only acquired through the teacher's explanations but also through the experience of moving, trying, making mistakes, correcting movements, collaborating, and reflecting on those experiences. Thus, PCK serves as a bridge that unites mastery of sports with effective teaching practices.

The importance of pedagogical skills is also evident in the application of various learning models. The Sport Education model provides students with opportunities to learn through authentic experiences, teamwork, role-sharing, and shared responsibility (Hastie et al., 2011). Similarly, cooperative learning has been shown to improve learning outcomes in the physical, cognitive, social, and affective domains (Casey & Goodyear, 2015). Both approaches demonstrate that the quality of Physical Education instruction is determined more by how teachers design learning experiences than by simply demonstrating athletic skills.

The students' perspective also paints a similar picture. A teacher considered high-quality is not merely one who is skilled in sports, but rather one who is able to provide support, appreciate every effort, and create a safe learning environment. Liu et al. (2025) found that teachers' support for students' competence is positively associated with students' participation in sports through increased perceptions of competence and persistence in training. These results are reinforced by Russo et al. (2025), who showed that positive perceptions of physical education are influenced by well-being, enjoyment, collaboration, teacher behavior, and an inclusive learning environment. These findings demonstrate that pedagogical relationships are just as important as subject mastery in building student motivation.

The difference in orientation between Physical Education and competitive sports further highlights the importance of teaching skills. While competitive sports focus on performance and winning, Physical Education aims to develop students holistically through physical activity. Dudley et al. (2022) demonstrate that high-quality Physical Education has an impact on psychomotor, cognitive, affective, and social development. Therefore, the success of learning cannot be measured solely by mastery of sports techniques but must also be assessed by the development of motivation, cooperation, physical literacy, and the habit of leading an active lifestyle.

The implication of these findings is the need for stronger integration between mastery of a sport and pedagogical skills in the education of prospective teachers. Sports skills instruction should not be limited to technical skills but must also include training in lesson planning, assessment, activity modification, and classroom management through microteaching, field practice, observation, reflection, and case-based learning. In this way, prospective teachers will not only become physically skilled individuals but will also be able to facilitate their students' learning processes.

Based on a synthesis of theory and research findings, this study confirms that athletic skills and teaching ability are not two competing competencies, but rather complementary ones. Athletic skills address the question of what is taught, while teaching ability addresses how students can learn it in a meaningful way. In school teaching practices, teaching ability supported by PCK plays a more decisive role because it transforms mastery of sports into a learning experience with educational value. This view is in line with Ennis (2017), who asserts that the ultimate goal of Physical Education is to build students' motivation and engagement in physical activity throughout their lives.

Overall, a synthesis of 32 articles shows that athletic skills serve as the foundation for content mastery, teaching skills guide the learning process, and PCK acts as the link between the two. These three elements must be integrated for learning to be effective, inclusive, and meaningful. Thus, the professionalism of physical education teachers is measured not only by their athletic proficiency but, above all, by their ability to design learning experiences that foster students' self-confidence, cooperation, physical literacy, motivation, and lifelong active lifestyles.

CONCLUSION

In line with the research objectives, this study concludes that athletic skills are important, but not more important than teaching ability. In the context of Physical Education in schools, teaching ability plays a central role because it determines whether a

teacher's mastery of sports actually impacts students' development. Therefore, the professionalism of Physical Education teachers should be understood as an integration of sports skill mastery, pedagogical competence, subject-specific content knowledge (PCK), and sensitivity to student diversity.

The implication of this study is that the education of prospective physical education teachers needs to balance the development of athletic skills with the development of teaching competencies. Teacher education programs should not only assess prospective teachers based on their ability to perform sports, but also on their ability to design, implement, reflect on, and evaluate learning. In this way, Physical Education teachers can serve not merely as athletes, but as educators who help students grow physically, socially, emotionally, and as human beings.

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