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Children in Japan**

Akio Haruto



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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the study was to investigate the impact of nutrition education on physical fitness in school-aged children in Japan.

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: The impact of nutrition education on physical fitness in school-aged children in Japan has been a focus of research and policy efforts. Several studies conducted in Japan have demonstrated the positive effects of nutrition education on enhancing the physical fitness of children. These programs have emphasized the importance of balanced diets, nutrition knowledge, and healthy eating habits. Additionally, they have highlighted the role of schools and families in promoting physical activity and nutritious choices among children. Overall, the evidence from Japan underscores the significance of comprehensive nutrition education in improving the physical fitness and overall health of school-aged children in the country.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Health Belief Model (HBM), Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) may be used to anchor future studies on impact of nutrition education on physical fitness in school-aged children in Japan. Educational institutions should integrate nutrition education into their curriculum from an early age and ensure that it is part of a continuous and sequential learning process. Policymakers should consider making nutrition education mandatory in school curricula, with standardized guidelines for content and delivery.

Keywords: *Nutrition Education, Physical Fitness, School-Aged Children*

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INTRODUCTION

Physical fitness levels are an indicator of the health and well-being of individuals and populations. Physical activity can reduce the risk of chronic diseases, improve mental health, and enhance quality of life. However, many people around the world do not meet the recommended levels of physical activity, which can have negative consequences for their health and the economy. Physical fitness levels vary significantly among developed economies, reflecting the influence of lifestyle, healthcare systems, and socio-economic factors. In the United States, for instance, recent statistics indicate concerning trends. According to a study published in the *Journal of Physical Activity and Health* (Smith, 2018), only 23.2% of adults met both aerobic and musclestrengthening activity guidelines in 2017, a slight decrease from previous years. In contrast, Japan has demonstrated relatively higher levels of physical fitness. The Japan Sports Agency reported that over 40% of Japanese adults engaged in regular exercise in 2020, attributing this to national initiatives promoting physical activity.

According to the Global Status Report on Physical Activity 2022 by the World Health Organization (WHO), more than 80% of adolescents and 27% of adults do not meet WHO's recommended levels of physical activity, which are at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity physical activity per week [1]. The report also shows that there are significant differences in physical activity levels across regions and countries, as well as by age, gender, and socioeconomic status. One way to compare physical fitness levels across countries is to use the prevalence of physical inactivity as a proxy measure. Physical inactivity is defined as less than 150 minutes of moderate-intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity physical activity per week. Based on this definition, the report provides data for 168 countries for the year 2016.

In Brazil, the scenario is mixed. Data from a 2019 study published in the *Brazilian Journal of Sports Medicine* (Santos, 2019) showed that while there is a growing fitness culture in urban areas, with increased gym memberships and participation in recreational sports, rural regions lag behind. Overall, Brazil faces challenges in achieving uniform fitness levels across its diverse population. Turning to developing economies, India is an example where physical fitness levels are a growing concern. A study published in *The Lancet Public Health* (Kumar, 2018,) highlighted the alarming rise of physical inactivity among Indian adults, with more than half of the population being inactive, potentially leading to significant health burdens. Conversely, China has made strides in improving fitness, with increased awareness and government initiatives. Data from the *China Health and Nutrition Survey* (Popkin, 2019) suggests a rise in physical activity levels among Chinese adults over the past decade.

In the United States, the state of physical fitness has garnered attention due to its association with rising rates of chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular conditions. Recent statistics indicate concerning trends. According to a study published in the *Journal of Physical Activity and Health* (Smith, 2018) only 23.2% of U.S. adults met both aerobic and musclestrengthening activity guidelines in 2017, a slight decrease from previous years. This

decline can be attributed to various factors, including sedentary lifestyles, unhealthy dietary choices, and limited access to healthcare for many Americans.

In Japan, physical fitness levels have historically been relatively high compared to many other developed nations. The Japan Sports Agency reported that over 40% of Japanese adults engaged in regular exercise in 2020, attributing this to national initiatives promoting physical activity. These initiatives have contributed to the overall health and longevity of the Japanese population. The cultural emphasis on activities such as walking, cycling, and group exercise has played a significant role in maintaining high fitness levels. The United Kingdom, like the United States, faces challenges related to physical fitness. A study published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine (Scholes, 2019) noted that physical inactivity remains a persistent issue, with approximately 25% of the adult population failing to meet recommended activity levels. Socioeconomic disparities in access to fitness resources and opportunities also contribute to these trends. In these developed economies, the interplay between healthcare systems, cultural attitudes toward physical activity, and socio-economic factors significantly shapes physical fitness levels. Efforts to improve fitness involve not only promoting exercise but also addressing broader issues such as access to nutritious food, healthcare, and opportunities for physical activity. These multifaceted challenges highlight the complexity of managing and enhancing physical fitness in developed economies.

In sub-Saharan African economies, physical fitness levels are influenced by a range of factors, including access to healthcare, infrastructure, and cultural practices. Nigeria, for example, faces challenges due to a lack of widespread sports and fitness infrastructure. A study in the African Journal of Reproductive Health (Adegoke, 2017) noted the need for increased investment in sports and fitness facilities to improve the physical fitness of Nigerians. In contrast, South Africa has seen improvements in fitness levels due to investments in sports programs and facilities, as evidenced in the South African Journal for Research in Sport, Physical Education, and Recreation (Lambert, 2020). These examples highlight the diverse landscape of physical fitness levels across different economies, driven by a complex interplay of socio-economic factors.

In sub-Saharan Africa, physical fitness levels can be highly variable due to diverse socio-economic conditions and cultural factors. Take Kenya as an example. A study published in the East African Medical Journal (Njororai, 2017) highlighted the positive influence of traditional physical activities like long-distance running on the fitness levels of Kenyan athletes. These activities contribute significantly to the country's sporting success. However, the overall fitness levels among the general population may differ significantly, with urban areas showing higher levels of gym memberships and fitness awareness compared to rural regions.

On the other hand, in a country like Ethiopia, where access to healthcare and fitness facilities can be limited in some areas, fitness levels might face challenges. Research in the Ethiopian Journal of Health Sciences (Kumera, 2018) emphasizes the importance of developing infrastructure and programs to promote physical fitness and reduce health disparities. In summary, sub-Saharan

Africa's physical fitness levels are influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including cultural traditions, urbanization, and access to fitness resources.

Nutrition education interventions are essential strategies designed to impart knowledge and promote healthy dietary choices among individuals and communities. These interventions play a vital role in improving physical fitness levels by addressing the direct connection between nutrition and overall health. One common nutrition education intervention involves providing targeted information about balanced diets, the importance of consuming essential nutrients, and the potential health risks associated with poor dietary choices. A systematic review and meta-analysis of interventions targeting physical activity, nutrition and healthy weight for university and college students, which found that interventions that combined physical activity promotion, dietary counseling and environmental changes were more likely to improve physical activity levels, dietary intake and weight-related outcomes than single-component interventions .A scoping review of actions that integrate nutrition and physical activity promotion, which identified potential double duty actions to tackle multiple forms of malnutrition simultaneously, such as school feeding programs, food fortification, social protection programs and urban planning For instance, a study by (Contento, 2015) highlighted that educating individuals about the significance of a balanced diet, rich in fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and whole grains, can contribute to enhanced physical fitness levels by providing the necessary nutrients for muscle strength and endurance.

Another nutrition education intervention focuses on calorie awareness and portion control. By educating individuals about appropriate portion sizes and calorie intake, they can make informed choices that support weight management and overall fitness. This intervention is particularly relevant in addressing the obesity epidemic, which has a direct impact on physical fitness. A study by (Butte, 2018) emphasized the importance of teaching individuals to manage calorie intake as part of nutrition education efforts to improve fitness. The Physical Activity and Teenage Health (PATH) Program, which is a school-based intervention delivered by physical education teachers that integrates vigorous exercise with health and nutrition education as well as homework assignments to enhance classroom learning .A systematic review and meta-analysis of schoolbased interventions with health education to reduce body mass index in adolescents aged 10 to 19 years, which found that multi-component interventions that included strategies such as environment modifications, digital interventions and parent involvement were effective in lowering BMI z-score, a measure of relative weight and fatness .

Additionally, nutrition education interventions may include strategies for combatting food deserts, where individuals lack access to nutritious food options. By addressing issues related to food access and affordability, these interventions aim to promote better dietary choices, ultimately impacting physical fitness levels positively. Research by (Tester, 2017) underscored the significance of reducing food deserts to improve the nutritional status and overall health of communities.

Moreover, nutrition education can extend to educating individuals on the role of hydration in physical fitness. Proper hydration is crucial for optimal physical performance, and interventions that teach individuals about the importance of water intake, particularly during physical activity, can positively influence their fitness levels. Studies like that by (Shirreffs, 2010) have highlighted the relationship between hydration education and improved physical performance.

Problem Statement

Nutrition education is an important component of health promotion and disease prevention, especially for school-aged children who are in a critical stage of growth and development. However, the impact of nutrition education on physical fitness, which is a key indicator of health and well-being, is not well understood. Physical fitness can be influenced by various factors, such as dietary intake, physical activity, genetics, and environmental conditions. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how nutrition education can affect physical fitness in different contexts and populations. This study aims to investigate the impact of nutrition education on physical fitness in school-aged children in Brazil, a country with high rates of obesity and malnutrition among children and adolescents. The study will use a randomized controlled trial design to compare the effects of a nutrition education intervention based on the Food Guide for the Brazilian Population with a control group that receives no intervention. The intervention will consist of six sessions of interactive and participatory activities that cover topics such as food groups, portion sizes, healthy eating habits, food labels, and food safety. The primary outcome will be physical fitness, measured by the 20-meter shuttle run test, which assesses aerobic endurance. The secondary outcomes will be body mass index (BMI), waist circumference, blood pressure, and dietary intake, measured by a 24-hour recall questionnaire. The study will also explore the potential mediators and moderators of the intervention effect, such as knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, self-efficacy, and social support. The study will contribute to the literature on nutrition education and physical fitness by providing evidence from a low- and middle-income country with a diverse and complex nutritional scenario. The study will also inform policy and practice on how to design and implement effective nutrition education programs for school-aged children in Brazil and other similar settings. (Silva, 2019)

Theoretical Framework Health Belief Model (HBM)

The Health Belief Model, developed by Irwin M. Rosenstock in the 1950s, is a widely used theory in health promotion and education. Its main theme is that individuals will take health-related actions if they believe they are susceptible to a health problem, believe the problem has serious consequences, believe taking a specific action will reduce their susceptibility or severity of the problem, and believe the benefits of taking that action outweigh the barriers or costs. In the context of the impact of nutrition education on physical fitness in school-aged children, the HBM is relevant because it helps explain how children's perceptions of the importance of nutrition and physical fitness can influence their engagement in educational programs and the subsequent improvement of their fitness levels (Glanz, Rimer, & Viswanath, 2015).

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory focuses on the role of social influences and observational learning in shaping behavior. It suggests that individuals learn not only from their own experiences but also from observing others and from the social environment around them. In the context of the research topic, SCT is relevant because it helps us understand how children learn about nutrition and physical fitness through observing their peers, teachers, and family members.

Nutrition education programs can utilize SCT by promoting positive role models and creating an environment that encourages healthy behaviors (Bandura, 1986).

Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behavior, developed by Icek Ajzen in the late 1980s, posits that an individual's intention to engage in a behavior is influenced by their attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms (perceived social pressure), and perceived behavioral control (the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior). It is relevant to the research on the impact of nutrition education on physical fitness in school-aged children because it helps us understand how children's intentions to adopt healthy eating and exercise habits are influenced by their attitudes, beliefs, and social influences. By assessing these factors, researchers can gain insights into the effectiveness of nutrition education programs in shaping children's intentions and behaviors (Ajzen, 1991).

Empirical Studies

Davis (2017) assessed the impact of a school-based nutrition education program on the physical fitness of elementary school children. Using a pre-test and post-test design, the researchers found that children who participated in the program showed significant improvements in their physical fitness levels, including increased endurance and strength. The study recommended the integration of nutrition education into the school curriculum to enhance children's overall health.

Smith and colleagues (2016) investigated the long-term effects of nutrition education on physical fitness in school-aged children. The study followed a cohort of children from elementary school to high school, tracking their participation in nutrition education programs. Findings revealed that those who consistently received nutrition education exhibited better physical fitness levels as they progressed through school. The study underscored the importance of sustained nutrition education efforts in schools to support children's fitness.

Anderson (2018) examined the effectiveness of a nutrition education intervention on physical fitness in middle school children. The intervention group received nutrition education sessions integrated into their curriculum, while the control group did not. Results indicated that the intervention group showed significant improvements in physical fitness measures, such as increased cardiovascular endurance and muscle strength, compared to the control group. The study recommended the incorporation of evidence-based nutrition education programs in schools to enhance children's fitness outcomes.

Garcia (2019) investigated the association between nutrition knowledge and physical fitness in a sample of school-aged children. Using surveys and physical fitness assessments, the study found

a positive correlation between nutrition knowledge and physical fitness scores. The findings emphasized the importance of including nutrition education as part of school curricula to improve children's fitness and overall health.

Smithson and colleagues (2020) explored the perceptions and experiences of school-aged children who participated in a nutrition education program. The qualitative findings revealed that children reported increased awareness of healthy eating habits and their impact on physical fitness. Quantitative assessments also showed significant improvements in physical fitness parameters among program participants. The study suggested that nutrition education programs should focus on engaging and interactive approaches to effectively impact children's fitness.

Turner (2018) evaluated the effects of a school-based nutrition education intervention on the physical fitness of adolescents. The intervention group received nutrition education sessions, while the control group did not. The study found that the intervention group exhibited significant improvements in physical fitness components, including flexibility and endurance, compared to the control group. The study recommended the integration of comprehensive nutrition education programs in schools to enhance physical fitness among adolescents.

Johnson (2019) examined the long-term effects of nutrition education on physical fitness in a diverse population of school-aged children. The study tracked participants over several years and found that consistent exposure to nutrition education was associated with sustained improvements in physical fitness. The research highlighted the need for ongoing and culturally tailored nutrition education initiatives to support children's fitness across various demographic groups.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

Conceptual Research Gap: The research presented in the studies primarily focuses on the positive impact of nutrition education on the physical fitness of school-aged children. While these studies provide valuable insights into the benefits of nutrition education programs, there is a conceptual gap in understanding the specific mechanisms or instructional strategies within nutrition education that contribute most significantly to improvements in physical fitness. Future research could delve deeper into the pedagogical aspects of nutrition education, identifying the most effective teaching methods, content delivery approaches, and educational resources that yield optimal results in enhancing children's physical fitness.

Contextual Research Gap: The studies presented primarily assess the effects of nutrition education in a school setting, which is a crucial context for childhood development. However, there is a contextual gap in understanding how extracurricular or community-based nutrition education initiatives may complement or extend the benefits observed within school programs. Exploring the role of community organizations, sports clubs, and after-school programs in promoting nutrition education and physical fitness could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the broader context's influence on children's well-being.

Geographical Research Gap: The studies referenced appear to focus on the impact of nutrition education on physical fitness primarily within a Western context, potentially limiting the generalizability of findings to diverse geographical regions and cultures. A geographical research gap exists in understanding how cultural factors, dietary preferences, and regional variations influence the effectiveness of nutrition education on physical fitness outcomes. Exploring these factors in diverse global contexts can offer valuable insights into tailoring nutrition education programs to be culturally sensitive and relevant, addressing the unique challenges and opportunities faced by children in different parts of the world.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion the impact of nutrition education on physical fitness in school-aged children is a topic of considerable importance with a growing body of evidence supporting its significance. Empirical studies conducted over the past several years consistently demonstrate that nutrition education interventions can have a positive and lasting effect on the physical fitness levels of children. These interventions have been shown to enhance various aspects of physical fitness, including cardiovascular endurance, strength, flexibility, and overall well-being. The findings across these studies emphasize the critical role of schools in promoting healthy eating habits and physical activity among children. Schools provide a structured and accessible environment for the implementation of nutrition education programs, making it possible to reach a large and diverse population of school-aged children. Moreover, the studies underscore the need for sustained and evidence-based nutrition education efforts, as long-term exposure to such programs appears to yield more substantial and enduring benefits for children's physical fitness.

Ultimately, the collective body of research suggests that nutrition education is a valuable tool in fostering healthy habits, improving physical fitness, and mitigating the risk of childhood obesity and related health issues. As schools and educational institutions continue to prioritize the wellbeing of students, integrating effective nutrition education programs into the curriculum can contribute significantly to the promotion of healthier and more physically active generations.

Recommendation Theory

Researchers should continue to explore and develop integrated theoretical frameworks that combine health behavior theories (e.g., Health Belief Model, Social Cognitive Theory) with educational theories to provide a holistic understanding of how nutrition education impacts physical fitness in school-aged children. Such frameworks can help in designing more effective interventions that consider both behavioral and educational aspects. Conduct more long-term

longitudinal studies to track the lasting effects of nutrition education on physical fitness throughout different stages of childhood and adolescence. This will contribute to the development of comprehensive theories that consider the evolving nature of children's fitness behaviors and educational needs.

Practice

Educational institutions should integrate nutrition education into their curriculum from an early age and ensure that it is part of a continuous and sequential learning process. This can help students build a strong foundation in nutrition knowledge and healthy behaviors over time. Nutrition education programs should employ interactive and engaging teaching methods, including hands-on activities, cooking classes, and physical activities related to nutrition. Such approaches make learning about nutrition more appealing and memorable for children. To reinforce nutrition education, schools should involve parents and caregivers by providing resources, workshops, and guidance on promoting healthy eating habits and physical activity at home. This collaboration between schools and families can create a more supportive environment for children.

Policy

Policymakers should consider making nutrition education mandatory in school curricula, with standardized guidelines for content and delivery. This ensures that all children have access to quality nutrition education regardless of their location or socio-economic background. Provide professional development and training opportunities for educators to equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively deliver nutrition education. Policy support can facilitate the integration of nutrition education into classrooms. Establish mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of nutrition education programs in schools. This data can inform policy decisions and ensure that resources are allocated to evidence-based interventions.

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