
Sport Participation Vis-A-Vis Academic Performance: Opportunities and Challenges for Students

Mugari Abisha, Masocha Vincent

*ZOU Lecturer: Dept of Physical Education and Sport: Marondera
Bindura University of Science Education Lecturer*

ABSTRACT

The thrust of this study was to examine the validity and correctness of the theory that participating in sport by learners increases their academic performance, yet most parents believe that doing sport at school is wasting valuable time and it contributes to failure rate. Former 'O' level students from 2010-2013, Heads of schools and class teachers were respondents through interviews and documentary analysis. Study findings were that students active in sport can also do better in academic subjects; sports provide opportunities that enhance learning. It was recommended that parents should encourage their children to do sport as a compulsory subject.

INTRODUCTION

The main aim among most parents for sending their children to school is to see them excelling well in academic subjects that pave way for better employment in the world of industries. Therefore, parents have a common belief that participating in school sport activities by their children is being playful if not wasting the valuable time for studies. This understanding has been fuelled up by having Physical Education and Sport not being an examined subject in Zimbabwe and other developing countries, leading most parents to regard it as irrelevant practical subject meant for the less intelligent learners at school.

Several studies, [3], [4], [12], reported that sport participation increases children's academic performance. Those findings' validity and applicability may remain utopia and unrealistic to present African schools, therefore this research study traced the academic performances of those students who were into sport in government secondary schools from 2010 to 2013 in ten boarding secondary schools in Mashonaland East Province in Zimbabwe.

In the view of most parents in African developing countries, participating in sport activities is done by people who have nothing important to do at that time, since sport includes leisure and play activity. This belief has been invigorated by the failure by most African Education systems to make Physical Education and Sport an examinable school subject, a case of Zimbabwe. Possibly this has made parents to think that Physical Education and Sport in schools is a trivial subject for less intelligent children who cannot compete in academic subjects like mathematics, English, physics, chemistry, geography, history and others. Having passed examinations for these and other academic subjects leads the child to gain employment and social recognition in communities. The showers of comments to those students who had passed their academic subjects are that they were not playful as those who did sport.

However, studies by [3], [4], [12], have revealed a new theory that participating in sport by learners increases their academic performance. This line of thinking has motivated the researcher of this study to focus on finding the correctness and reliability of this philosophy using Zimbabwean government secondary schools Heads, class teachers and former Ordinary Level students.

The theory did not elaborate on opportunities and challenges that arise for the student who is active in sport, but this study had examined these opportunities and challenges extensively. The practical experiences by the respondents counteract misconceptions borne by both the researcher and the school parents in Zimbabwe.

**Address for correspondence*

abishamugari@gmail.com

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The prevailing conception among parents in Zimbabwe is that sport participation by their children at school retards them to perform better in academic subjects, yet the contemporary theory is that participating in sport activities by learners enhances their performance in academic subjects. School authorities are blamed by parents for poor performance at school work by their children attributing this to wasting study time doing sport at school. Children at school are caught in between, to participate in sport or leave sport and concentrate on academic work only. The dilemma among students is that; is it true in Zimbabwean school situations that a good participant in sports can also excel in academic subjects?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does sport enhance achievement in academic subjects?
2. How does sport create opportunities that contribute to school performance by learners?
3. Which challenges do learners in sport face that disturb performance in other subjects?
4. Which are the possible solutions to ameliorate the conflicting situations for better performance at school?

ASSUMPTIONS

The researchers had the following assumptions prior to the study:

1. Learners who are into sport do not pass five Ordinary Level examinations.
2. Girls into sport are the most affected, hence they fail examinations.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study could be used by school administration bodies to convince parents to encourage their children to take sport seriously if there was a positive correlation between sport participation and performance in academic subject. In addition, the study shall be used as a panacea to challenges faced by learners at school who are good in sport as well as in academic subjects. The findings shall be availed in all schools and at Heads of schools workshops in districts.

RELATED LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter looked at what other authorities have found out about children's academic performances against the wide belief among parents that sport is for those who are less intelligent. The chapter also explored ways to ameliorate the conflicting situations for students to perform better in academic subjects whilst they remain excellent in sport endeavours.

Sport Enhances Academic Performance

Hetherington (1910) in [10] confirms that sport can contribute to academic achievement. The argument by most parents might be of substantial truth regarding the deteriorating pass rates among secondary students, especially in Zimbabwe. However, it is imperative in this study to highlight some case studies by other researchers pertaining the relationship between sport and academic performance in schools.

A study conducted in the Trois-Rivieres region (Quebec) between 1970 and 1977 involving 546 primary school students noted that students involved in an experimental 5 hours of physical education per week had a higher academic performance than their control counterparts who were enrolled in the normal school program for 40 minutes per week, [11].

[8] analysed results from the US National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health; they observed that adolescents who were active in school were more likely to have high grades. [2]'s cross-sectional survey of 9000 Australian school children demonstrated a significant association between academic achievement and physical activity. Further to that, this study had a simple survey code named "True Behaviour", conducted among Zimbabwean secondary students sport non-participants, revealed that their negative perception towards participation in sport is associated with fearing to fail in academic subjects. These and other cases, substantiate the fact that sport participation enhances academic achievement in schools, it might be not true with African schools since there had no any research

conducted among African schools on this issue up to date, leaving this study the first one to break the ice.

The Opportunities and Challenges Learners Face

[11] found out that factors like positive classroom behaviour, self-esteem, self-image, school satisfaction and school connectedness have been postulated as determinants of academic achievement. The advantages that sport active students enjoy seem to be that they become too close to their teachers who happen to be their coaches in sport disciplines. More so, a sports student is always present at school. This makes the students attend most lessons as they fear to lose training sessions. [7] argue that self-identification as a school athlete is associated with a lower rate of reported misconduct at school. A student who refrains from misconduct enjoys respect and extra favours from teachers; this gives the learner much closer relationship with the instructors who can afford to use some calculations in physics, e.g. velocity of the projectile, Newton's laws, lever systems, and biological terms about body systems during aerobic and anaerobic performances. A sport student finds these terms not unfamiliar as they meet these in their academic subjects in the classroom, which is an added advantage unlike those who do not participate in sport. Sport builds self-esteem and actualization as the highest order of motivation and development, [9]. This behaviour is transferred to academic performance by the student.

CHALLENGES SPORT PARTICIPANTS FACE AT SCHOOL LEVEL.

It is assumed that balancing the demands of school work, like home- work, and group work versus training loads can become tiresome for the student in sport, leaving either the school demands unattended to. The general parents' belief and expectation from their children is to see them excelling in academic work so that the graduate is employable, and doing best in Physical Education and Sport (In the African perspective) is venturing into unknown waters. Another drawback is exacerbated by the fact that P.E.S (Physical Education and Sport) is not an examinable subject in most African examination bodies. Therefore, there is much attention to academic performance than to P.E.S learning. [1] posit that players with disabilities are prone to discrimination at school level sports activities. The girl child in African states is not accorded the same sport opportunities as the boy child does due to some unequal cultural considerations.

Girls who are active in sport are more prone to various disturbing circumstances that arise from hegemonic masculinity to sport equipment, [5]. For instance, most African cultures expect a girl child to be at home before sunset to assist parents with house chores and are feared to be abused by boys if they go home late. Whoever does not observe this is suspected to be unruly and disobedient, unlike boys who can stay at school at sport practice sessions until any time. Most schools have no conducive sport attire for girls who fear to expose their body parts like thighs, buttocks and breasts during sport exercises. Such scenario prejudices the girl child who has the sport talents.

SOLUTIONS

In light of the above challenges faced by students active in sport, this study has sought solutions from other authorities.[13] urges schools to establish Youth Sport Trust, supported by sponsoring partners to develop resources and programmes which are proven in demonstrating positive impact on young people and changing lives. [6] suggest schools to use gender responsive pedagogy approaches to accommodate the needs of both boys and girls during teaching and learning sessions. Parents and teachers should be conscientized to support sport talented students so as to balance their studies. Schools should give priority to sport budgets so that they purchase proper sport attire and equipment and train more coaches who are also teachers of academic subjects.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter had an insight on the paradigm used, the research design, the population, the sample and sampling techniques used and the research instruments deemed necessary.

RESEARCH PARADIGM

This study adopted qualitative methods during data collection process and data analysis.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The descriptive survey was deemed appropriate since it allowed the researchers to study a larger population that was sport involved.

POPULATION

The study population consisted of out of school "0" Level graduates, class teachers, Heads of secondary schools, and School Sports Directors from ten secondary schools. These respondents were purposively selected for their direct conduct with those graduates and were information saturated.

SAMPLE AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUES

The sampling technique used was the purposive one and the sample was made of fifteen former "0" Level students, forty class teachers, ten heads of schools, and ten Sports Directors to make a sample size of seventy respondents. This sample size was regarded as a true representation of the whole population and deemed adequate to provide the much needed data to answer research questions.

DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

It emerged that in 2011 =91%, 2012 =90%, 2013 =92% of the students who were active in sport had passed five subjects at '0' level as indicated in interviews and school documents. These findings demystified the general notion that sport active students are not intelligent. However, it was confirmed by the students research participants that it is true that balancing school work and sport expectations is difficult at times, possibly that has made the 10% of former '0' level students active in sport failed to do it in their examinations.

It was further discovered that sport active students were friendlier to teachers who happen to be their coaches. That rapport as revealed in the literature by [11] had also been observed as a strong contributing factor in Zimbabwean schools for sport active students to pass their academic subjects.

100% of class teachers confirmed that sport active students were more cooperative in class and always were the first to handover school assignments than those not into sport. This study assumed that that speedy assignment handover was due to the student's urgency and carefulness to balance school work and sports demands, whilst those not into sport have complacency as they have all the time at their exposure.

Out of the 10% who failed to acquire 5 '0' levels, 7% were girls. This scenario confirms abundant reasons cited by [1] which are common set-backs against the girl child to participate in sport.

100% of the participants were against the belief that sport is for the less intelligent students, citing numerous academic graduates who were sport active students. This finding concurs with Hetherington (1910)'s argument in [10] that physical education can contribute to academic achievement.

This study has a collection of common strategies that were employed by schools aimed at assisting students active in sport to do better in academic subjects:

Table1. Strategies

STRATEGY	No.of schools	%
1. Implementing Child-Friendly Schools Model	67.5	90%
2. Relating Sports Techniques to academic subject concepts	75	100%
3. Providing sports career guidance to students	75	100%
4. Establishing Youth Sport Partnerships with cooperate world	60	80%
5. Free education for sport talented students	37.5	50%

The data in table 1 substantiate the fact that students active in sport deserve a special form of assistance so as to make the learning much more friendly and responsive in one way or another to the needs of the students. If all schools were to develop their standards to those identified above, the generality of parents would not complain about poor academic performance of their children ending up accusing sport as a factor for poor academic performance in schools.

CONCLUSIONS

From the above findings, it can be concluded that:

- Students active in sport activities can also do better in academic subjects.
- Sport is not for the less intelligent students.
- Participating in sport provides some opportunities that enhance learning.
- By not being an examinable subject, Physical Education and Sport has been trivialised in most African education curricular.

Recommendations

Basing on the above conclusions, the study recommends that:

- Parents should encourage their children to take up Physical Education and Sport as a subject as it enhances their learning of academic subjects.
- Ministry of Education to draw up transitional plans in partnership with Ministry of Sports, Arts and Culture for students active in sport so that those student graduates are employable by the corporate world.
- Schools should practise the Child-Friendly Model in order to be pedagogically responsive.
- Parents should encourage their children to participate in sport activities since by doing this students enjoy more learning benefits.
- Physical Education and Sport as a subject should be examinable in most education curricular in Africa so as to gain recognition by parents and students.

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