

Barriers to school sport participation: A survey among secondary school students in Pretoria, South Africa

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Abstract

The primary aim of this study was to determine factors affecting sport participation among 197 (103 females and 94 males) students aged 15–18 years (mean age: 16.5 years; $s = 0.8$ years) who were drawn from three secondary schools in Pretoria, South Africa. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data. Results indicated that participants were affected mainly by sports conflicting with their studies, loss of interest to participate in sport, lack of transport after school practice, poor self-perceived competencies in sport, conflict from other personal interests, and lack of parental support. These results provide information for planning and effective delivery of sports programmes in schools.

Keywords: School sport participation, barriers, students.

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Introduction

In South Africa, many children in secondary schools are actively involved in different sporting events. However, active participation in school sport has declined in the past few years despite the keen interest shown by students to actively engage in sports (Toriola et al., 2011). From a practical standpoint, the absence of Physical Education in South African public schools further limits children's opportunities to participate in sport and physical activity (Amusa & Toriola, 2008; Toriola et al., 2011). In response to the pressing need to promote sport and physical activity in South African schools as a strategic priority, the Minister of Sport and Recreation, Mr. Fikile Mbalula launched the South African school sport programme in 2012. This initiative is aimed at inculcating physically active lifestyles among the youth and promoting sustainable sports development in the country.

Research has shown that children's sport participation promotes healthy physical and social development (Toriola et al., 2011). Ewing and Seefeldt (1989) also suggested that children's participation peaks between the ages of 10 and 13 years, and then consistently declines till the age of 18, when a relatively small percentage of youth remain involved in organised sports. For instance, Gould and Petlichkoff (1988) reported dropout rates for an average of 35 % in any given year for children who participate in sport.

Children participate in youth sport for a variety of reasons and have multiple reasons for involvement (Gould & Petlichkoff, 1988). However, if the motives to stop participating are greater than those for continuing participation, then a child will most likely not begin or will discontinue his or her sport involvement (Wann, 1997). Many young athletes at secondary schools stop participating in sports because of the factors such as failure to gain self-esteem and self-confidence, burnout, not getting an opportunity to play, poor organization and management skill at schools, inadequate sports facilities, conflict between sport and school work, etc. (Gould & Petlichkoff, 1988).

Coaches who are hostile, aggressive, and abusive can also contribute to young athletes' decision to discontinue participation in sport. Black and Weiss (1992) stated that children also drop out of athletics because of poor coaching. Smith, Smoll and Curtis (1978) suggested that young athletes respond quite favorably to positive behaviors such as verbal reinforcement and instructions. Smith, Smoll and Curtis (1979) reported that coaches who gave technical instruction were rated more positively than those who used general communication and encouragement. LeUnes and Nation (1989) noted that many well intended coaches want to offer their players a positive experience but, because of their poor interpersonal or coaching skills, they are ineffective as coaches.

Affiliation motive is a major motive that children have for sport participation. Thus, children enjoy sport because of opportunities it provides to be with friends and make new friends. Peer relations are linked to a child's sense of acceptance, self esteem, and motivation (Weinberg & Gould, 2007). Alderman and Wood (1976) also found that the affiliation motive was the most important reason for youth sport participation. However, if the affiliation needs are not met, children are likely to permanently withdraw from school sport. Youth sport coaches should therefore, give young athletes an opportunity to make friends and socialize in sport. Coaches should place emphasis on developing young athletes' physical, social and psychological wellbeing rather than on winning. This study was carried out therefore, to assess sport participation constraints among a group of secondary school students in Pretoria, South Africa.

Methodology

Design

A descriptive survey design was used for data collection.

Study sample

The participants were 197 students (103 females and 94 males) drawn from three secondary schools in Pretoria, the capital city of South Africa. They were aged 15 to 18 years (16.5 ± 0.8 years).

Questionnaire and procedure

A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data. It consisted of open and closed ended items and was validated by a statistician at Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria, South Africa. A Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.44 was obtained for the questionnaire items ($p < 0.05$). The questionnaire was designed based on extensive review of literature on youth sport (Scanlan, & Lewthwaite, 1986; Seefeldt, Ewing & Walk, 1992; Toriola et al., 2000; Amusa et al., 2008; Davison, 2009; Nthangeni, Haycock & Toriola, 2009; Toriola et al., 2011). It was subsequently administered on same day at each of the participating schools by Life Orientation teachers in their respective classrooms. The teachers were given detailed instructions and guidelines by the researcher on how to properly administer the questionnaires. All participants were informed that participation was voluntary and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality of their responses.

Data analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using the statistica software, Release 11, 2009. Statistical methods such as means, standard deviations, percentages and frequencies were used to analyse the data. For ease of interpretation, the 5-point response scales were combined into two main categories: agree (combination of strongly agree and agree), undecided and disagree (merger of strongly disagree and disagree).

Results and Discussion

Student's t-tests revealed no significant differences between female and male students regarding the barriers to school sport participation. The results are illustrated in Figures 1 to 6.

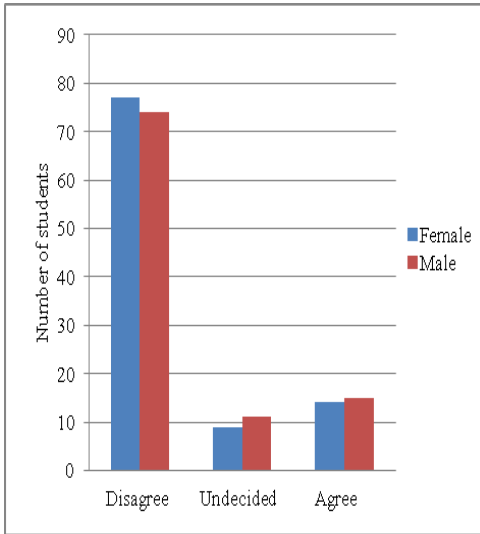


Figure 1: Lack of parental support

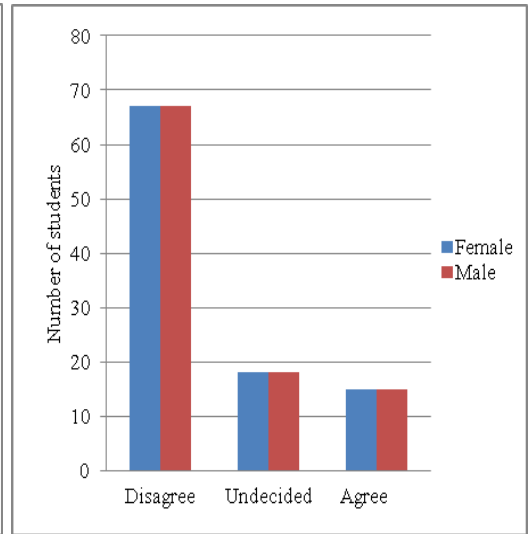


Figure 2: Conflict from other interests

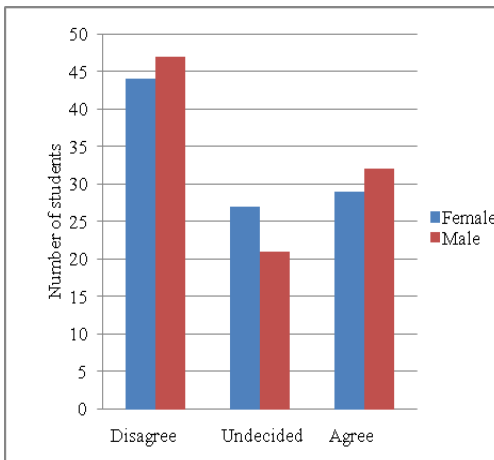


Figure 3: Sport participation disturbs studies

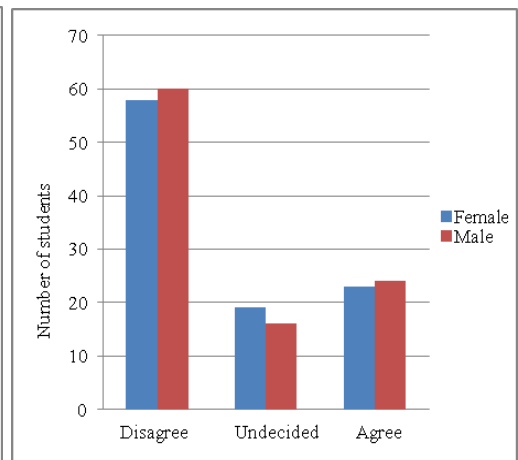


Figure 4: Not competent in sport

Percentages were calculated based on the students' responses. The most important barriers to sport participation reported by females were 'loss of interest' (32%), 'sport disturbs studies' (29%), 'lack of transport after school' (27%), and 'not good enough to participate in sports' (23%). However, most important barriers reported by males were 'sport disturbs studies' (32%), 'lack of transport after school' (28%), 'loss of interest' (24%), and 'Not good enough' (24%). In this study, female adolescents reported lack of parental support as the least important barrier. Parental support is a major barrier to sport participation in children.

According to Scanlan and Lewthwaite (1986) parental support affects children’s participation and performance in sport.

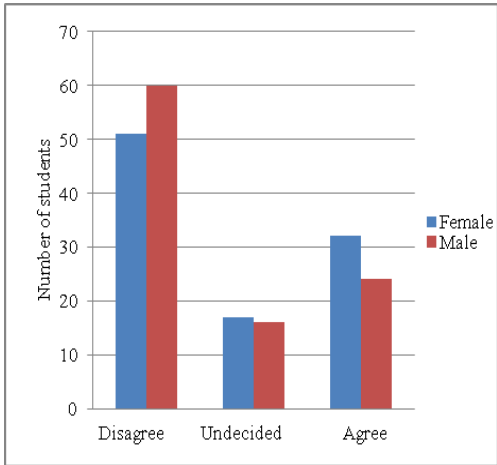


Figure 5: Loss of interest

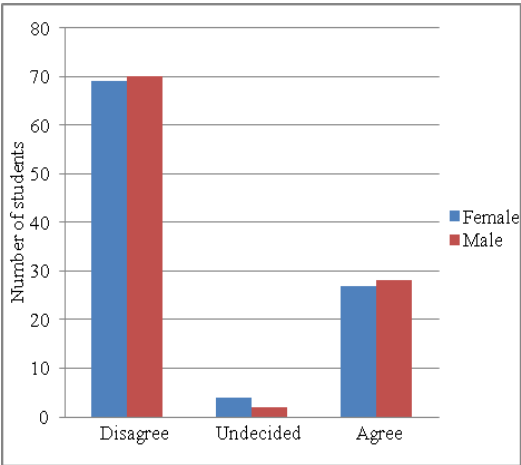


Figure 6: Lack of transport

‘Sport disturbs studies’ and ‘lack of interest’ in sports, were perceived as major barriers in this study. As students in grades 10 to 12 prepare for university education, parents usually insist that their children pay more attention to their studies than participating in sports. Lack of interest in school sports can be caused by factors such as lack of fun, parental pressure, aggressive coaches, etc. Adolescents who have sports equipment at their respective homes participate less in physical activities and sports in preference of being more involved in social activities such as partying, shopping, spending time with their friends and dating. They are also involved in sedentary lifestyle and unhealthy behaviours such as binge eating, playing computer games, internet browsing, watching movies, smoking and alcohol abuse.

Lack of transport after school hours was also perceived as major barrier by the students. Transport seems to be a major problem faced by students who participate in school sports. Parents, who work long hours, find it difficult to leave work to pick up their children after school sports. As there is limited supply of buses and taxis in South Africa, students have to rely on public transport. Therefore, they are unable to participate in sports as public transport is often scheduled such that they are picked up just after school hours before school sport starts. This is a deterrent to the students’ school sports engagement. However, students who live around their schools are at a considerable advantage to participate in sports than those who live far away from school.

Among the school children in this study, the main reason for not participating in sports was ‘sport disturbs school studies’. This finding is contradicts to those reported in other studies.

According to Melnick, Sabo and Vanfossen (1992) participation in sport improves students' grades, keeps them in school, and raises their educational aspirations. Crain (1981) and Trent and Braddock (1992) have also suggested that participation in sports increased students' overall interest and commitment to schooling as well as their engagement in more student-teacher contact, more positive attitudes about schooling, and more parent-school contact.

Other studies, such as that by Crain (1981) suggested that participation in sport activities could provide extrinsic rewards to students and help them form social bonds and relationships at school. Wolff (1993) argues that athletic participation can build self-esteem, increase self-confidence and teach good sportsmanship. However, the other reasons (loss of interest, lack of transport, not good enough to participate in sport, conflict from other interests and lack of parental support) are consistent with the findings of other studies (Davison, 2009; Seefeldt, Ewing & Walk, 1992; LeUnes & Nation, 1989; Robinson & Carron, 1982).

A previous study by Molinero et al. (2006) found that other reasons for children not participating or dropping out of sports were: "Had other things to do", "No team work", "Not able to be with my friends", "Did not get enough recognition", "Did not win enough", "Did not feel important enough", "Did not like the coach" and "Did not like the pressure". It should also be noted that most of the motives for discontinuing sport participation involve at least a moderate degree of negative stress and anxiety. Hostile parents' and coaches', perceptions of a lack of abilities, and similar discontinuation factors all lead to a highly stressful environment for the young athlete. As a result, the individual may become burnt out and consequently quit participation (Wann, 1997).

Schmidt and Stein (1991) also noted that many young athletes end or curtail their involvement because they have other commitments or develop other interests. For example, they reported that children who did not participate in sport were involved in other leisure activities such as "dancing", "music", "chess", "public speaking", "drama" and "singing. Wann (1997) stated that if children do not succeed in athletics and thus not receiving self-esteem benefits from participation, they will quite likely seek out another activity to occupy their leisure time. If youngsters find success in the new activity they will probably spend more time participating in that activity and less time in sport.

Conclusion and recommendations

The results of the study indicate the following as the factors that influence sport participation among students in selected secondary schools in Pretoria: Sports conflicting with studies, loss of interest, lack of transport, poor skills needed to participate in sport, conflict from other interests, and lack of parental support.

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations can be made. Schools should encourage and motivate students to participate in sports irrespective of gender, race, culture, religion and disability. The schools should also provide children with basic equipment hire qualified coaches and sport coordinators, facilitate access to sport facilities and ensure that playgrounds are safe and properly maintained.

In order to meet the needs of young athletes and sustain their participation in sports, this study agrees with the following strategies suggested by Weinberg and Gould (2007): *Strategies to meet the need for fun* (form realistic expectations to avoid negative coaching results and frustration; keep practice active-avoid lines and standing around and joke and kid around with children); *Strategies to meet the need for success*: (allow children to compete and help children define winning not only as beating others but as achieving one's own goals and standards); *Strategies to meet the need for affiliation*: (provide time for children to make friends, schedule social events outside practice and incorporate periods of free time before and during practice); *Strategies to meet the need for skill development*: (implement effective instructional practices (e.g. effective demonstrations, contingent feedback, foster a positive approach to instruction, emphasizing what the child does correctly and know the technical and strategic aspects of the sport).

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