

Sports And Academic Achievement

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Abstract

The link between athleticism and academic performance has always been an area where educators are keen to investigate. Knowing whether students benefit from the impact of sports involvement is a huge advantage in engaging learners from a variety of backgrounds. In doing a recent literature review I have found that students who are involved in sports benefit in a variety of ways, not only academically through increased grade point averages (GPA) but through greater school involvement, better self-esteem and social skills.

Literature Review

Through a recent review of findings linking athletic involvement with academic achievement, two resulting purposes for educators will be proposed: to show whether extra-curricular athletic programs do benefit the school age population in terms of academics and well-being, and to give districts information on whether to invest more strategically at the local levels in extra-curricular sports resources. An effort is made to focus on studies pertaining to students from different socio-economic backgrounds and demographics within the school aged population in order to review a comprehensive findings associated with the variables studied.

In 2008, Dr. Douglas Hartmann of the University of Minnesota presented a comprehensive review of past studies done on the link between sports and academics. He found that the overwhelming majority of studies demonstrated a high degree of correlation exists between the two and that the correlation should not be questioned. In fact, isolating the causal factors connecting the two is the goal of more recent studies. Hartmann (2008) states that,

In terms of causal factors, for example, there is an ongoing debate about the extent to which the relationship is the result of being involved in high school athletes (thus suggesting that sports participation directly facilitates or enhances academic) as opposed to being the product of other, related social factors such as parental income or education (factors that are well known to determine much educational attainment and correlate highly with sports participation). In terms of variations, researchers have been examining how this

relationship may be impacted by different types or levels of sport participation as well as how it may operate differently for diverse social groups or under different institutional conditions and configurations. (p.6)

For example, Fisher, Juszczak and Friedman (1996) in a Cornell University study of inner city youth, where close to 90% of students reported some sports involvement for enjoyment, recreation and competition, found that their efforts did not correlate with higher academic achievement. In fact, the study concluded that many had “unrealistic expectations for their futures regarding a sports scholarship and some even utilized unhealthy behaviours in an effort to enhance their performance.”

It is important to note that not all of the studies prove a correlation between sports involvement and academic achievement, only a majority of them do this. Miller, Melnick, Barnes, Farrell and Sabo (2006) found that in another study which examined demographic features in addition to “jock identity” and athlete status in relation to grades over a two year period, black female athletes reported lower grades but female athletes as a whole reported higher grades than non-athletes. In addition, athletes reported significantly more misconduct including skipping school and being sent to the principal's office). Moreover, the findings supported the conclusion that although a preponderance of existing research has linked high school sports with positive academic effects, the strength and direction of the examined relation appears to be contingent upon gender and race in adolescence. In fact, the study offers evidence that the reason for weak or inconsistent findings among researchers on the topic may be that the relationship between athletic participation and positive school outcomes are selective rather than causal; that is, those adolescents who do well in high school are also those who choose to participate in school sports.

In contrast, Melnick, Sabo and Vanfossen (1992) of the State University of New York found that athletic participation was significantly related to lower dropout rates for minority youth. Moreover, the researchers state that although athletic involvement does not correlate with greater academic gains in this group, it is helpful in keeping high risk youth engaged in the educational system.

On the other hand, many studies continue to support the idea that sports involvement has positive effects in relation to academic achievement. For example, as recently as 2008, an extra hour of involvement in physical activity does not affect performance and may have small gains in GPA. Taking time away from physical activity and adding it to academic subject learning does not help the GPA.

In another study at the University of Miami School of Medicine, Field, Diego and Sanders (2001) found that “students with a high level of exercise had better relationships with their parents

(including greater disclosures and more frequent touching), were less depressed, spent more time involved in sports, used drugs less frequently, and had higher grade point averages than did students with a low level of exercise.”

Similarly, in support of the academic and sport involvement association, a study by Debbie Mitchell and Leslee Scheuer (2003) at the University of Central Florida including a million students in grades 5, 7 and 9 found a distinct linear correlation between students' academic achievement and standardized fitness measurement in these grades. A higher level of fitness was positively related to better grades.

These findings are also corroborated by Headley (2011) in the journal *Australian Youth*, who found that high levels of exercise were associated with better relationships with parents, less depression, more involvement in sport, less frequent drug use, and higher grade point averages. Better relationships with parents have been noted as important for adolescents' happiness.

In another cornerstone study done by J.S. Coleman (1961), the famous sociologist who wrote a famous report on equality of education, found that boys were too preoccupied with star athletes. Hauser and Lueptow (1978) replicated and extended the Coleman's study later to show that although athletes have higher GPAs by the end of their high school careers, they do not gain enough broad experiences in these years, and consequently their academic performance thereafter suffer a decline.

This finding questioned Coleman's results that athletics diverted resources away from academics as boys were more interested in sports, dates, and cars, and girls were more focused on relationships. His support of athletics as improving competition among groups in contrast to academics that positions individuals against each other and creates inherent conflicts is implicit in his consideration of the social aspects of sports in education.

In fact, the search for the true causal factors, as these two studied variables can be mediated and affected by a plethora of other factors, lead recent researchers to emphasize the pro-social benefits of sports involvement that encourages young people such as, “increased interest in school, the need to maintain good grades to stay eligible, increased attention from adults like teachers and coaches, membership and interaction with educationally oriented peers, college aspirations for sports participation.” (Hartmann, p.12)

In summary, the preponderance of the evidence from the studies reviewed shows how an involvement in exercise and sports in school-age students, especially adolescents, can provide numerous social benefits, which inevitably leads to better academic performance. As more evidence is

amassed on the causal factors, it appears that athletic involvement has a greater than expected impact on school experience. The creation of sports centred schools, for example, or school districts' investments in resources that support students in a variety of athletics then is a crucial component to well-being of the student body.

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