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Participation in sport and the perceptions of quality of life of high school learners in the Theewaterskloof Municipality, South Africa

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Abstract

In South Africa, sport unites the country because it transcends race, gender, politics and language groups. Majority of South African youth are in the developmental phase where critical decisions are being taken on key life transitions, including education, work, lifestyle, participation in society, and other psycho-sociological areas. Learners in high school in the previously disadvantaged communities form a crucial part of South Africa's future. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to determine how high school learners in the Theewaterskloof Municipality in South Africa perceived the influence of sport participation on their quality of life. The perceptions of the learners were specified according to six domains: drugs, alcohol and crime; mental health; social contact, culture and safety; happiness and wellbeing; physical health and diseases; and academic achievement. The research was conducted at three high schools located in the Theewaterskloof Municipality, Western Cape Province. A questionnaire was used to collect information from 484 learners aged 13 to 18 years. A significant relationship was noted for variables of each domain, except drugs, alcohol and crime and academic achievement. Learners perceived that increasing sport participation resulted in a significantly positive response of at least one variable for the domains social contact, culture and safety; physical health and diseases; mental health; and happiness and wellbeing.

Keywords: Sport, quality of life, learners, perception, South Africa.

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Introduction

South Africans are sports-minded people, and sport unites the country by transcending race, gender, politics and language groups (Brand South Africa, 2009). Looking at the social aspect of sport participation, people traditionally use sport for relaxation, competition and stress relief (Andres & Van Kleij, 2010). The authors also noted that sport has an integral approach because it brings people together and unite people's behaviour, education, wellbeing and health.

Considering mental health, Steptoe and Butler (1996) concluded that emotional wellbeing is positively associated with the extent of sport participation and vigorous recreational activity among adolescents. This was further explained by the research of Donaldson and Ronan (2006) who, besides emotional well-being, also reported a positive relationship between sport and enhanced behavioural well-being.

Research on the concepts and perceptions of human well-being has found that people in South Africa (SA) see money, good jobs, adequate housing, food and clothing, a solid family and recreation as important facets to create happiness, pleasure and joy as well as alleviate poverty (Clark, 2002). UNICEF (2009) has reported that poverty is to be found in the informal settlements within the previous disadvantaged communities across the country and, in many instances, sport is not yet made accessible for children in these areas. To address problems of accessibility, corruption, inefficiency, and racial and cultural discrimination in the disadvantaged communities, the social security system in families must be used efficiently and to its full extent (McKinnon, 2010). Higgs (2003) notes that worldwide emphasis is placed on corporate social investment initiatives to address the social inequalities mentioned by McKinnon (2010). In South Africa, there is a specific emphasis on community upliftment and development, poverty alleviation and improving the lives of the disadvantaged (Higgs, 2003). Beutler (2008) states that regular sport participation could benefit public health; universal education; gender equality; poverty reduction; prevention of HIV/AIDS and other diseases; environmental sustainability and even peace-building and conflict resolution. In addition, studies of cognitive functioning have suggested a positive effect of sport on concentration, memory, classroom behaviour and intellectual performance of learners (Strong et al., 2005).

Most people in the previously disadvantaged communities of the Theewaterskloof (TWK) Municipality do not have enough money to let their children join a local sporting club or pay for transport so that they can participate in extramural sport activities. These children come into contact with crime very early in their lives. The crime rates in the TWK Municipality, between April 2006 and March 2009, rose significantly in almost all crime categories (Alderman, 2009). Alderman (2009) indicates that it is evident that more attention needs to be given to social and developmental projects in the TWK Municipality in order to stop crime from rising even higher. Crime is regarded as anti-social behaviour, and Millie (2006) finds that anti-social behaviour is a result of boredom. Boredom amongst young people can lead to experimentation with drugs and alcohol on the streets, also referred to as “substance abuse” (Iso-Ahola & Crowley, 1991; Ziervogel, Ahmed, Flisher & Robertson, 1998; Millie, 2006). Nichols (1997), Coalter (2001) and DCMS/Strategy Unit (2002) believe that the main objective of sport is to create enjoyment and excitement, and thus provide an antidote to boredom for young people. All children deserve the

opportunity to participate in sport near their school or home, as sport can also be used as a tool to prevent children from getting involved with crime, alcohol, drugs, diseases and obesity, and can have positive effects on their lives. Brandt, Terzoli and Hodgkinson-Williams (2005) also noted that the schools in disadvantaged areas often lack basic infrastructure such as classrooms, ablution and sport facilities, putting them in desperate need of assistance from the government and other organisations and institutes.

According to [Makiwane and Kwizera \(2008\)](#) the quality of life (QOL) among the majority of adolescents in SA remains low, mainly because of the widespread diseases in SA. The relationship between sport and QOL can be seen as a righteous circle, where aspects influence one another in terms of input and outcomes. Furthermore, there is a relationship between the different aspects of sport, such as physical functioning, general health perceptions and vitality ([Laforge et al., 1999](#)), and QOL, meaning that a slight change can make a difference to all single aspects within the circle. Ndlovu (2009) is of the opinion that the promotion and accessibility of sport is very important and that the degrading of physical education in schools prevents sport from being integrated into the lifestyles of high school learners, which could influence their QOL.

The present study considers the relationship between sport and six domains of QOL chosen from various items in literature which note significant positive outcomes of a relationship between sport and QOL. However, none of these studies examine the relationship of sport and all the domains of QOL and, more specifically, as it pertains to learners in previously disadvantaged schools in SA. Taylor, Sallis and Needle (1985), Steptoe and Buttler, (1996) and Spaaij (2009) all limited their research to the relationship of sport to only one of the domains of QOL, such as emotional well-being, social impact and mental health. The present study, however, aims to provide a more complete picture. Therefore, the QOL domains identified for this study include: 1) social contact, culture and safety ([Burnett, 2008](#); [Spaaij, 2009](#)); 2) drugs, alcohol and crime ([Tucker & Scott, 1992](#); [Nichols, 1997](#); [Coalter, 2001](#); Department for Culture Media & Sport (DCMS)/Strategy Unit, 2002); 3) physical health and diseases ([Laforge et al., 1999](#); [Strong et al., 2005](#); [Makiwane & Kwizera, 2008](#)); 4) mental health ([Steptoe & Buttler, 1996](#); [Fredericks & Eccles, 2006](#)); 5) happiness and well-being ([Kavussanu & McAuley, 1995](#); [Ndlovu, 2009](#)) and 6) academic achievement ([Kremer & Scully, 1994](#); [Donaldson & Ronan, 2006](#)).

The purpose of this study is therefore to determine the perception of high school learners' on the influence that sport participation had on all six dimensions of QOL within the previously disadvantaged schools of the TWK Municipality in the Western Cape Province, South Africa.

Methodology

Research design

This study employed a cross-sectional research design to collect data on learners' perceptions of the influence of sport on their quality of life. The survey technique is most suitable when informative and explorative research is undertaken. Leady and Omrod (2005) noted that a cross-sectional design is used to sample and compare individuals or groups from different phases of development at a specific period of time. This design allows for large numbers of subjects to be sampled and assessed in that specific period of time.

Sampling

There are five previously disadvantaged secondary schools in the TWK Municipality populated by 4079 learners. Three of the schools agreed to participate in this study. Confidentiality of the three schools was ensured and schools were referred to as A, B and C. At the time data were collected in September 2010, the total numbers of learners per school were A = 1460, B=661 and C=705 learners, thus the total population for this study was N=2826. A representative sample size of N=352 was calculated to reach a confidence level of 98%. Information sheets and consent forms were sent to all learners and their parents. The researchers had to rely on the availability of the learners on the day that the study was conducted at the respective schools, and permission was granted by their parents to participate in the study. Learners between 13 and 18 years were therefor conveniently selected to participate in the study. A total of 484 learners from all three schools, Grades 8-11, participated. The sample size of 484 was deemed sufficient to represent the total population.

Procedures and validation

A questionnaire was used as survey method for this research. The questionnaire was developed using the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire (Balding, 2001) that was supported by UNICEF in a SA study, TNO AZL Child Quality of Life questionnaire (Vogels et al., 2004), South African Social Attitudes Survey for young people (Makiwane & Kwizera, 2007), McGill QOL questionnaire (Cohen, 1997) and the Self-reported QOL Questionnaire of Bigelow, Gareau and Young (1991). These questionnaires were combined into one questionnaire in order to address all six domains of QOL. To make it measurable and related to the age of the learners, each question was rated using the Likert scale ranging from one to five, one being *strongly disagree* and five being *strongly agree*. On request of the schools, the questionnaire was translated into Afrikaans, as the learners in these schools were predominantly Afrikaans-speaking. The questionnaire was piloted at a non-participating previously disadvantaged school

in the TWK Municipality, to ensure that the questions were understood correctly, and to ensure reliability and validity. The questionnaire tested reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of $r=0.745$. The questionnaire was then self-administered by visiting each of the schools accompanied by an interpreter who was fluent in Afrikaans to assist should any questions arise.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using the Statistical Analyses System (SAS) Version 9. Nonparametric procedures were used for the statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were conducted in terms of frequencies, means and standard deviations, while an ANOVA was used to analyse these data inferentially. To find possible significant differences, ANOVA was used to compare the amount of time that learners spent participating in sport per week, with the different outcomes on all question groups for every domain of QOL. The Cochran-Mantel-Haenszel test was used to determine significant results between the three schools. Spearman Rank Correlation and the Pearson's Chi-Square test were used to examine associations among the variables. The alpha level was set at 0.01.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the University of the Western Cape, and permission was granted by the Western Cape Education Department to conduct the study in schools. Schools were also asked for permission to conduct the study. Participating schools were ensured of their anonymity by referring to them as Schools A, B and C. Parents and learners were informed of the study and that participation was voluntary. Written consent of the parent/s or guardians and assent of the learners were required before learners were permitted to participate in the study. Learners were not requested to reveal their identity in order to keep their data confidential.

Results

Four hundred and eighty-four high school learners aged 13-18 from the three participating schools participated in the study. Table 1 presents the number of male and female students from each school. Eight participants did not indicate their gender. Learners were asked to indicate how many times per week they participated in sport. Two hundred and fourteen (48%) of the participants indicated that they occasionally participated in sport, with very few learners participating more than once a week or not at all (Table 2). The main reasons for not participating in sport were that there were no clubs in the area ($n=143$), clubs were located too far from their homes ($n=163$), they did not have the money for transport to travel to clubs ($n=156$), and in general they did not have the money to participate in sport ($n=149$). Learners who were playing sport could tick

multiple reasons for being active in sport, and these are shown in Table 2. The main reason for playing sport, according to 73% (n=352) of the respondents, was because it is healthy, and secondly 67% (n=326), that it kept them away from drugs, alcohol and/or crime-related activities.

Table 1: Gender per school

Type of school	Male	Female	Total learners
	n(%)	n(%)	n(%)
A	71(15)	80(17)	151(32)
B	59(12)	81(17)	140(29)
C	83(18)	102(21)	185(39)
Total	213(45)	263(55)	476(100)

Table 2: Sport participation frequency of high school learners

Participation	Frequency	%
>2 a week	79	16.70
1-2 a week	91	19.24
Occasionally	214	44.85
None	89	18.82

Table 3: Main reasons for playing sport

Reason	Frequency	%
To have fun	128	26.45
To make friends	278	57.44
To be healthy	352	72.73
Nothing else to do	101	20.87
Keep away drugs alcohol/crime	326	67.36
To feel happy	253	52.27
To feel strong	238	49.89
To keep mentally fit	256	52.89
To perform, better at school	189	39.05

Results and outcomes of all significant variables for sport participation were outlined for each of the six domains of QOL.

In the first domain, significant correlations were noted between sport participation and the variables *willing to play at a club* ($p \leq 0.0001$) and *making friends* ($p \leq 0.0001$). This indicated that the relationship between playing and being willing to play at a sporting club was consistent with sport participation. The most interesting result of this domain showed that learners who participated in sport more often seemed to make friends more easily than the other learners

who were less physically active. There was no significant relationship between the learners who had social problems and their participation in sport, nor for *insecurity, safety, ethnicity* and the *reasons* for not playing at a club.

The link between sport participation and the *sport influences drugs, alcohol and crime* variable (domain two) was not statistically significant ($p=0.0154$). However, this could be deemed significant because there was a large group of respondents (88%) who agreed that sport could help to keep people away from bad influences such as drugs, alcohol and crime.

Both the *physical health* ($p\leq 0.0001$) and the *sport health* ($p\leq 0.0001$) variables were significant for sport participation in domain three. Outcomes indicated that the majority of the respondents perceived themselves to be healthier when they participated in sport more often and the *sport health* variable showed that a positive connection was made between sport, sport importance and the perceived relationship with physical health.

Sport participation was also significantly related to *mental health* ($p=0.0013$) (domain four). Hence, it can be said that learners who participated in sport perceived themselves to be more mentally fit and strong more often than other learners who participated less in sport or not at all. For the variables in the academic achievement domain (domain five), no significant relationship or link was noted on sport participation. Lastly, for domain six, there was a significant correlation noted between sport participation and the *happiness* ($p\leq 0.0001$) variable, which explained the significant positive impact that sport participation had on the perceived happiness of the learners in the study sample.

Discussion

Nichols (1997), Coalter (2001) and DCMS/Strategy Unit (2002) believe that the main objective of sport is to create enjoyment and excitement, but 67% ($n=326$) of the learners in this study perceived that the main reason for their participating in sport was to keep them away from bad influences such as drugs, alcohol and crime. Only 26% ($n=128$) of the respondents have fun as the main reason to play sport. The perception of the learners in this study seemed to be very responsible and mature compared to the general idea that people in the above-mentioned studies had regarding their motivation to play sport.

It is known that boredom among youth can lead to experimentation with drugs and alcohol on the streets, also referred to as “substance abuse” ([Iso-Ahola & Crowley, 1991](#); [Ziervogel et al., 1998](#)). Sport could be an antidote to boredom for young people (Nichols 1997; Coalter, 2001; DCMS/Strategy Unit, 2002). However, in this study, the relationship between sport participation and drugs, alcohol and crime was not statistically significant. Yet the results could be

considered to be practically significant because an increase in sport participation led to a higher belief that sport could be a positive influence on drugs, alcohol and crime. This concurred with the theory of Cameron and MacDougall (2000), which stated that accessibility to appropriate activities in a social context sport could, in combination with other interventions, help to reduce crime in specific groups and communities.

UNICEF uses sport to teach children skills and create knowledge of a healthy lifestyle (UNICEF, 2009). However, when learners participated in sport more often, there was no significant connection to their knowledge of HIV/AIDS and the way sport can be used as a preventative instrument according to the study sample. For the domain of mental health, Steptoe and Buttlar (1996) concluded that emotional well-being is positively associated with the extent of participation in sport and vigorous recreational activity among adolescents. This was in line with the outcomes of the mental health variable, because, if learners increased their amount of sport participation, they perceived themselves to be more mentally fit and stronger than those learners who participated less or not at all.

Although studies of cognitive functioning suggest a positive effect of sport on concentration, memory, classroom behaviour and intellectual performance of learners ([Strong et al., 2005](#)), the amount of sport participation on the variables of academic achievement did not seem to be significant. On the other hand, learners who indicated they participated in sport more often experienced increasing happiness and well-being. Sport can therefore be seen as a combination of positive and negative emotions, and gives participants opportunities for self-expression, personal achievement, competitive strivings, fun and joy (Jackson, 2000).

Conclusion

In all domains of QOL significant results were described for sport participation, except for drugs, alcohol and crime and academic achievement. The general hypothesis was therefore supported in that learners of high schools in the previously disadvantaged communities in the TWK Municipality, who participated in sport, perceived that they had a better QOL than learners of the same age group who did not play sport at all. The findings of this study will hopefully create awareness about the crucial role that sport can play in improving the QOL of everybody involved.

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