

**SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS: CONTEXTUALIZING ISSUES IN
EXTRACURRICULAR SCHOOL BASED SPORTS**

by

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Dedication or Acknowledgement Page

I would like to thank my family for all of their support, encouragement, and inspiration.

Mommy, Maddie, Sebbie, and Moe; you guys mean everything to me.

Abstract

This capstone project reviewed research literature exploring current trends in youth sports participation. The three issues of ‘specialization’, ‘hyper-competitiveness and exclusionary team forming’, and ‘the influence of leadership’, were identified as being most significantly responsible for impacting the efficacy of extracurricular school based sports as a conduit for fostering feelings of school connectedness in adolescents. School connectedness theory was used to contextualize these issues from an educational perspective, and to provide the framework and consistent direction necessary for addressing these concerns moving forward. As such, specific recommendations for changes in the design of extracurricular school based intramural sports programs were presented for future implementation. Further research should attempt to collect data that begins to empirically measure and validate the effectiveness of a reconfigured intramural sports model in enhancing feelings of school connectedness in adolescents.

Keywords: School connectedness, social and emotional learning, extracurricular school based activities, extracurricular school based sports, school sports, adolescents, sports program design

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School Connectedness: Contextualizing Issues in Extracurricular School Based Sports

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

Recent trends in educational research have continued to stress the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) theory in the analyzation and reconstruction of student learning environments and the education system as a whole. Past studies, as part of the continued evolution and refinement of research exploring SEL, have resulted in, amongst other things, the emergence of the bio-ecological theory of school connectedness. School connectedness has been identified as a significant component toward facilitating successful social emotional learning conditions for students, as well as being linked to the positive development of a variety of adolescent physiological and psycho-social benchmarks. In fact, school connectedness has become its own extensive theoretical framework, complete with a thorough and complex research catalogue.

However, the core concepts necessary for creating environments of school connectedness lack specificity and revolve around abstract philosophical changes in school curriculum, culture, and staff attitudes. The most practicable conceptual pillar of school connectedness is the belief that student participation in extracurricular activities results in increased feelings of individual connectedness (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Mahoney, Harris, & Eccles, 2006). Accordingly, it has been demonstrated that schools “that have higher rates of participation in extracurricular activities during or after school tend to enjoy higher levels of school connectedness” (Preece, 2009, p.23).

Specifically, participation in school sports continues to be the overwhelming means through which adolescents get involved in extracurricular activities (Feldman & Matjasko,

2005), and therefore, extracurricular school-based sports provide one of the most institutionally inherent opportunities for secondary schools to create and sustain school connectedness.

Knowing this, it is reasonable to suggest that, ideally, these sports programs would be optimally structured toward enhancing school connectedness.

Unfortunately, this tends to not be the case in practical applications. Despite decades of research that has focused upon highlighting the numerous positive developmental outcomes related to youth participation in extracurricular school based sports, including moral development (Bredemeier, Weiss, Shields, & Cooper, 1986) , psychological variables of self-concept and depression (Calfas & Taylor, 1994; Ferron, Narring, Cauderay, & Michaud, 1999; Bell, 2001), perceived confidence (Cassidy & Conroy, 2006), and a variety of increasingly isolated academic performance variables (Trudeau & Shephard, 2010), more recently, a growing number of scholarly researchers have explored the negatives aspects of participation in school sports, such as low self-esteem (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004), depression (Wiersma, 2000), negative physical outcomes (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005), and the adoption of undesirable social norms (Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003).

Ultimately, any factor that minimizes the benefits of sports for participating students, or leads to adolescent total non-involvement or withdrawal from sports, impacts the development of school connectedness. Due to the fact that extracurricular school based sports continue to be embedded within the modern school system, it is important to consider how they can be employed most effectively as conduits toward developing school connectedness. The three current issues in school sports that I have identified as being most prominent in inhibiting school connectedness are ‘specialization’, ‘exclusionary team formation/hyper-competitiveness’, and ‘the influence of leadership’. By exploring these issues, it is hoped that practical

recommendations can be conceptualized. Until then, educators are failing to meet the complete social emotional needs of their adolescent students.

Purpose

This research will examine the relationship between school connectedness and adolescent participation in school-based extracurricular sports. The goal will be to identify the specific contextual and structural issues within current sporting models that work to minimize school sports as an environment for facilitating school connectedness. The core concepts of school connectedness will provide the filters through which to navigate the existing body of research pertaining to current issues in adolescent sports.

The research will be guided by the question: In what specific ways do current extracurricular school-based sport models hinder or prevent the development of school connectedness in adolescent students? An associated question, whose exploration will be predicated upon the findings of the first question, is: In what practicable ways can extracurricular school-based youth sports be re-conceptualized in order to create optimal conditions for developing school connectedness in adolescent students?

Relevance/Importance of study

For a variety of convergent reasons, this research is relevant for educators, administrators, counsellors, coaches, sponsors, and athletic directors. Firstly, SEL theories, including school connectedness, have become the predominant compass of the 21st century in educational theory, impacting the way educators conceptualize curriculum, classrooms, and school climate. In fact, at the time of this writing, the British Columbia Ministry of Education is in the process of reprogramming the Prescribed Learning Outcomes for all curricular areas. For example, the new Physical Education curriculum is currently being finalized and will be

implemented within the next two years. On a personal note, the school I work at has been a pilot school for some of the upcoming changes in PE. I have seen, firsthand, how SEL theory has guided specific curricular decisions, such as not formally reporting alphabetical or numerical assessments for PE students in grades 8 and 9. While these changes are significant and encouraging for the future of PE, already antiquated extracurricular school sports models appear to have been overlooked, and so far, appear to be impervious to the philosophical shift toward SEL. It is for this particular reason that my research distinguishes its focus directly upon extracurricular school based sports and not physical education class.

Secondly, extracurricular school sports models are outdated in relation to the current landscape of youth sports. High school sports used to be the primary athletic option for adolescents wanting to participate in organized sport, and perhaps pursue a future in elite athletic endeavours, however, youth sports continue to become increasingly ‘professionalized’ and outsourced. By adolescence, youth are frequently ‘specializing’ their skills toward one sport via non-school based athletic opportunities such as club teams, skill development camps, academies, and preparatory schools. As a result, the competitively driven exclusionary practices of the current high school sports environment seem redundant and inconsistent with both current social emotional movements in educational policy and sporting trends.

Although current extracurricular school based sports models are less than ideal, some opportunity is better than no opportunity. An examination of public schools in British Columbia reveals an increasing number of schools offering a decreasing number of opportunities for adolescent participation. A personal anecdote that illustrates this very problem originates from my own experience coaching a grade 9 boys’ basketball team last year. Of the 9 district wide league schools that could potentially field teams, only 3 did. There are a variety of reasons for

this decline, but I believe that a prolonged period of continually strained labour relations between BC teachers and the BC government have exacerbated these conditions. I believe that, consequently, low teacher morale has led to a significant downturn in the number of teachers willing to act as coaches or sponsors of school athletics or intramural programs. Unfortunately, I am not sure if this trend will ever be reversed, which highlights two relevancies. Firstly, the current educational backdrop is providing fewer opportunities for participation, which in turn results in fewer opportunities for developing feelings of school connectedness. More importantly, this current plight underscores the fact that if there are going to be fewer extracurricular school based sports programs, the ones that do exist need to be made as efficient and purposeful as possible.

This research may produce important outcomes. As very little research exists around the topic, it is hoped that by identifying and compiling a list of the issues and barriers that specifically inhibit school connectedness in school sports, at the very least, educators and those who work with adolescents through extracurricular school based sports will have a resource tool to help consider and guide their practice. Ideally, the findings of the research will critically reconsider the systems in which school sports are delivered to students, leading to identifying practical steps to be implemented toward potentially reconfiguring or developing entirely new forms of extracurricular sports opportunities that efficiently facilitate school connectedness. Finally, it is also hoped this research article acts as a springboard into further studies that look to empirically examine measures of school connectedness in relation to extracurricular school based sports.

Theoretical Framework

There exists a substantial educational research base dedicated to the development and exploration of the concept of school connectedness. In fact, the school connectedness core principles of *'belonging to a community'*, *'positive student relationships with adults/teachers'*, *'school rules are fair'*, and *'consistent punishment for breaking the rules'*, are already used to provide direction in the conscious effort to create positive school climates, and on a larger scale, act as part of the framework through which current educational decisions and policy are shaped (Urbanski, 2007). Although there are slight differences in the way that 'school connectedness' is defined and operationalized by researchers, there are consistent findings that emerge from the literature. Particularly, evidence has demonstrated that "Whether examining academic performance or involvement with a range of health behaviors, young people who feel connected to school, that they belong, and that teachers are supportive and treat them fairly, do better" (Libbey, 2004, p. 282).

For example, adolescents that perceive a strong sense of connectedness to their school are more likely to exhibit improved classroom behaviour, academic motivation, and classroom engagement (Libbey, 2004), resulting in an increased likelihood of academic success and higher GPAs (Klem & Connell, 2004; Ogilvie, 2014). Similarly, positive feelings of school connectedness have been associated with reduced rates of adolescent truancy and school dropout (Blum & Libbey, 2004; Wehlage & Rutter, 1985), as well as with decreased engagement in several risk-taking behaviours such as substance abuse and sexual interactions (McNeely & Falci, 2004; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Preece, 2009).

Additional studies have concluded that there is a relationship between youth who possess positive notions of school connectedness, and their ability to reach adolescent mental health

functioning and psychological developmental outcomes (Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000; Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006). Connectedness has also been positively associated with adolescent neurological growth and an individual's ability to develop traits of resiliency, empathy, and self-regulation (Ogilvie, 2014). Finally, some studies have shown possible links between positive measures of school connectedness and decreased levels of student victimization, violent behaviour, and bullying (Bishop et al., 2004; Wilson, 2004).

Researchers have been able to identify several key constructs that serve as general guidelines in creating real world cultures of connectedness. The most tangible core principle is a belief that adolescent participation and interaction within school-based extracurricular activities provides one of the most significant means of creating connected school cultures and communities (Mahoney, Harris, & Eccles, 2006). Common features of these extracurricular programs include structured organization and adult supervision, and are primarily provided through opportunities such as school sponsored clubs, interest groups, and academic or athletic teams.

Based on the documented relationship between school connectedness and participation in extracurricular activities, perhaps it is not surprising that the stand-alone research surrounding the benefits of adolescent involvement in extracurricular activities reveals similar findings to those of school connectedness. In brief, research findings suggest that an adolescent's involvement with extracurricular activities act as "indicators of positive development" (Mahoney et al., 2006, p. 3) in a variety of social, academic, emotional and psychological outcomes

(Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Gordon-Larsen, McMurray, & Popkin, 2000; Malina & Cumming, 2004).

However, within the breadth of possibilities that fall under the larger definitional umbrella of school-based extracurricular activities, school sports are, by far, the most participated in specific extracurricular activity, accounting for 43% of all adolescent participation (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). Extracurricular school based sports generally consist of competitive inter-school athletics, clubs, and intramurals. As previously discussed, school-based extracurricular activities, and especially sports, can help foster traits of school connectedness such as community, self-worth, and belonging (Cassidy & Conroy, 2006; McMillan & Reed, 1993). In fact, there are decades of previous research findings that have already explored the variety of benefits gained by adolescents through participation in youth sports. For example, participation in sports and physical activity act not only as a preventative means of dealing with stress and anxiety (Ferron et al., 1999), but as a key indicator and feature of building emotional resiliency (Bell, 2001) . A clear relationship has also been established between school sports participation and brain health and academic performance (Trudeau & Shephard, 2008, 2010). Similarly, such participation has been linked to positively impacting youth development of perceived competence and self-esteem (Cassidy & Conroy, 2006) , including “fewer adjustment problems” (Bohnert & Garber, 2007, p. 1021) in regard to adolescent psychopathology and moral development (Stuart & Ebbeck, 1995).

Despite the extensive catalogue of research touting the benefits of participation in school based sports, recent studies have changed direction and demonstrated that there are unique interpersonal effects and inherent structural flaws that inhibit, prevent, or dissuade adolescents from engaging in extracurricular school sports. Emotionally and psychologically, youth sport

participation may create excessive pressure for success and winning, leading to negative self-concept, low confidence and self-esteem (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Hedstrom & Gould, 2004). With increasing specialization, additional major psychological concerns include youth burnout, extreme parental pressures, and depression (Wiersma, 2000). Sport involvement has also been associated with negative physical outcomes such as major injuries, eating disorders, obsession with body image, and risk taking physical behaviours (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). In addition to findings of impaired moral development (Bredemeier, 1994) and increased aggression (Bredemeier et al., 1986), other negative social outcomes for sports participants include the adoption of undesirable social norms via negative group dynamics, poor sportsmanship and negative relationships with adult leaders (Hansen et al., 2003).

However, these interpersonal outcomes through sports are often a product of the very structures and climates in which they occur, and ultimately, program design is the key factor in whether youth experience positive or negative outcomes (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). In thinking of an ideal developmental model for extracurricular school based sports, it is perhaps obvious to state that certain conditions “need to be in place to facilitate the production of such a climate” (MacPhail, Kirk, & Eley, 2003, p.69), yet “many sport programs designed to foster positive youth development are in fact doing the opposite” (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005, p. 193). Issues such as time requirements, excessive competitiveness, exclusionary team forming and coaching influence, are just a few examples of previously identified systemic issues related to school sports (Coakley, 2011; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Hedstrom & Gould, 2004).

In summary, an established relationship exists between school connectedness and participation in extracurricular school based sports, however, the positive benefits associated with this relationship are only possible in the proper contexts and environments. Despite this

knowledge base, extracurricular school based youth sport programs have changed very little, and in fact, very few tangible, practical solutions or alternatives have been offered. Feldman and Matjasko (2005) have suggested that any future research into youth sports should “model the impact of extracurricular activities within a conceptual framework that can guide analyses” (p. 193), and as such, it is my proposition that school connectedness be the theoretical framework used to redefine issues in extracurricular school sports; ultimately resulting in structural models that re-conceptualize the way that high schools deliver sports to adolescents.

Predicted Limitations of Study

There are several limitations to this research study. The primary issue, which is related to the inherent nature of the capstone format, is that the findings presented within this study will be based upon the usage of secondary data via journal articles. Similarly, because empirical research will not be conducted and the information presented will be based on the research findings of others, there will be no demonstration of causality toward the subject matter. Another limitation is that the instruments typically used to measure feelings of school connectedness are almost entirely reliant on scaled measures that invoke self-reporting.

It should also be noted that there are limitations in regard to the generalization of research findings. The voluntary nature of school sports ensures that the outcomes of this research will be irrelevant for the segment of the school population that simply has no interest in sports. There is also no accounting for, or differentiation of, key demographic variables such as gender, race, or socio-economic status.

Summary

The goal of this study is to identify the specific contextual and systemic issues that act as barriers for adolescents in experiencing feelings of school connectedness while participating in

extracurricular school based sports. By highlighting these issues, it is hoped that tangible, practical recommendations can be provided to educators, coaches, and administrators in order to create an optimized developmental model of sport participation based primarily on the goal of facilitating school connectedness. Despite limitations regarding causality and generalizability, this research is important and relevant when contextualized within the current educational and political climates of British Columbia.

In the following chapter, a literature review will be conducted that defines and discusses the pertinent conceptual frameworks related to this study. The chapter 2 literature review will also present relevant findings as framed by the research question. Chapter 3 will discuss the implications of the research findings from chapter 2, as well as offering practical suggestions for implementation in future school based extracurricular sports settings. The final sections of chapter 3 will offer suggestions for setting a course toward future research, as well as closing commentary.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Introduction

The remainder of this review of literature will concentrate on the four conceptual areas most prominent in the current study. First, an operational definition of school connectedness will be offered before tracing the path of school connectedness as a theoretical modality integral to social emotional learning programs with school-aged individuals. Secondly, the relationship between youth participation in school based extracurricular activities and school connectedness will be explored. As a part of a closer conceptual scrutinization and definitional refinement, the research body surrounding extracurricular school sports will be briefly reviewed in the third section. By examining the research surrounding current issues in youth sports, the final section will be used to identify the specific aspects of extracurricular school based sport models that negate feelings of school connectedness.

School Connectedness

Overview

School connectedness, which has also been studied under the terms of school bonding, school engagement, or school climate (Urbanski, 2007), is a concept now used in a variety of developmental, psychological, behavioural, health/sports science and sociological fields. Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, and Hawkins (2004) assert that school connectedness and bonding are based in the three central developmental models of “attachment theory, control theory, and the social development model” (p. 252). Despite this, school connectedness is primarily embraced as a freestanding educational theoretical model closely related to and derived from social emotional learning theory (Blum & Libbey, 2004) .

Definitions

Several definitions exist for school connectedness. In one of the earliest instances, Goodenow (1993) defined school connectedness as “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (p. 80). In 2003, in an attempt to synthesize a decade of rapidly evolving research into a clear conceptual framework, leading educational experts on school connectedness gathered for a conference on the subject. One result was the production of the Wingspread Declaration on School Connections, a document still generally viewed as the most comprehensive overview of the key concepts of school connectedness theory. As such, the Wingspread (2004) definition of school connectedness, as referring to “the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals” (p. 233), will be the definition from which I operate.

Literature Review

The origins of school connectedness are firmly rooted in developmental theory. In 1979, Bronfenbrenner retooled his bioecological model by stating that human development is not only impacted by an individual’s environment, but also the processes of that environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). In fact, the influence of bioecological theory is evident in Wehlage and Rutter's (1985) ground breaking examination of school dropouts; an article in which the first traces of school connectedness concepts appear. Instead of focusing on the characteristics of the students themselves, the researchers reviewed longitudinal studies and previously collected data samples with the goal of “understanding the institutional character of schools and how this character affects the potential dropout” (p. 5). Specific to the study, poor relationships with teachers and unfair discipline were identified as the most important variables impacting

dropouts. However, the implication most significant to my study is the early recognition that student actions within schools need to be contextualized and understood within the structures and processes of that school.

Lamborn, Newmann, and Wehlage (1992) continued the progression toward the initial conceptualization of school connectedness in their examination of the relationship between adolescent academic engagement and a series of non-instructional influences, particularly the four student variables of family structure, peer groups, extracurricular participation, and employment. Self-reporting surveys were used to measure the degree to which these non-instructional influences affected school achievement, as measured by GPA. Despite several limitations such as self-reported data, the lack of accounting for the effects of other interpersonal factors (ex. socioeconomic), and voluntary response participant population, important research findings did emerge from this study. Firstly, the data showed a clear relationship between students reporting high engagement with these non-instructional influences and elevated measures of academic achievement. Secondly, the findings of this study acted as a springboard for the conceptual evolution toward identifying and constructing the frameworks of school connectedness.

Goodenow's research (1993) achieved a lot of firsts for school connectedness. On top of providing the initial definition for school connectedness, Goodenow developed the first valid instrument with which to measure "perceived belonging or psychological membership in the school environment" (p.79). In order to maximize scale reliability and construct validity, early versions of the tool were given to adolescents (N=755) and reconfigured accordingly, ultimately resulting in the 18 question Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) survey. Subsequent findings, as gathered through the usage of this scale, suggested that feelings of

school connectedness were “substantially correlated with self-reported school motivation, and to a lesser degree with grades and with teacher-rated effort in the cross-sectional scale development studies and in a subsequent longitudinal project” (p.79). Goodenow’s study provided the early blueprint to an entirely new theoretical ideology and research area.

A significant expansion of research into school connectedness followed Goodenow’s seminal work, however, the infancy of the research area meant that it was not until the early 2000s that publishable literature was able to conclusively and consistently identify both the impacts of school connectedness and the core theoretical constructs. Currently, an extensive research catalogue highlights a variety of positive academic, psychological, sociological and behavioural outcomes that have been linked to adolescents who possess feelings of school connectedness.

For example, through the usage of self-reporting measures and statistical regression analyses, Roeser, Midgley, and Urdan (1996) first identified and explored several specific contextual factors that influence student achievement, including school connectedness. Since then, research has clearly established that adolescents that perceive a strong sense of connectedness to their school more often exhibit improved classroom behaviour, academic motivation, and classroom engagement, and are “more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, and have lower drop-out rates” (Klem & Connell, 2004, p. 263). Recently, Benard and Slade (2009) have explored school connectedness as a contributing factor in the adolescent development of resilience, empathy, and the ability to self-regulate.

Additionally, school connectedness has been associated with reduced rates of adolescent truancy and decreased engagement in several risk-taking behaviours. McNeely and Falci (2004) were some of the earliest researchers to collect primary empirical data and avoid using pre-

existing longitudinal data as a means of exploring school connectedness. Likert scaled questionnaires were distributed to American adolescents (N=20,745), and the returned data (78.9% yield) was subject to multinomial logistic and conditional regression analyses. Findings suggested that school connectedness had positive effects on the six health-risk behaviors of “cigarette smoking, drinking to the point of getting drunk, marijuana use, suicidal ideation or attempt, first sexual intercourse, and weapon-related violence” (p. 290). However, one unique finding was that school connection had no relevance as a protective predictor toward future engagement in these at-risk behaviours.

In keeping with the social shift toward an increased awareness of mental health issues, recent studies have demonstrated a relationship between youth who possess positive notions of school connectedness and their ability to reach adolescent mental health functioning and psychological developmental outcomes. In 2006, Shochet, Dadds, Ham, and Montague specifically explored the connection between school connectedness and future depressive and anxiety symptoms, as well as general mental health functioning. The Children’s Depression Inventory (CDI), Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM), and the Spence Children’s Anxiety Scale (SCAS) were used as the data collection tools, and hierarchical linear modeling results supported the notion that school connectedness “correlate[s] strongly and negatively with concurrent and future self-report symptoms of depression and anxiety and with deficits in overall functioning” (p.176). Problems with this research included a substantial attrition rate and typical issues related to self-reporting.

Also, recent research has started to focus upon examining the negative repercussions of highly connected schools on adolescents who do not experience feelings of school connectedness. For example, Anderman (2002) explored school belonging as related to mental

health and psychological outcomes based upon school level differences such as school size, grade configuration, and urbanicity. Using data already available as part of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, the researcher used multi-level regressions to interpret the data. Of specific note, was the finding that schools possessing high levels of school connectedness were actually positively related to more intensive negative incidents of “social rejection, school problems, and GPA” (p. 806). This illuminates the importance for educators utilizing school connectedness principles to be cognizant of identifying and servicing the disconnected students in a school. It is important to realize that increasing feelings of student connectedness within a school means that another segment of the student population may be further marginalized and disconnected.

Additionally, several studies have explored the possible links between environments with positive measures of school connectedness and student victimization and bullying. Urbanski (2007) examined data taken from the National Crime Victimization Survey School Crime Supplement to examine the relationship between bullying and school connectedness, and to see if school connectedness was a protective factor in preventing bullying. However, factor and regression analyses revealed little variance between the incidence of bullying and school connectedness variables. Interestingly, one significant conclusion was that, in terms of the occurrence of bullying, “The strongest predictors were factors related to school discipline” (p.135).

Similarly, following the Columbine High School shooting, Wilson (2004) was inspired to explore the relationship between aggressive victimization and a variety of school connectedness moderators. Using data obtained through the distribution of Safe communities-Safe Schools Imitative survey to students (N=2,327), Wilson was able to conclude that “Despite variations in

climate, the amount of connectedness experienced by the average student appears to consistently contribute to predicting his likelihood of aggression and victimization” (p. 299). Criticisms of Wilson’s study include the usage of self-reporting data and a frequent usage of the pronoun ‘he’ when discussing aggressive students.

The body of research surrounding school connectedness also includes researchers’ attempts to identify the unique theoretical components and conceptual constructs critical to the development of school connectedness. While there are small variations amongst the exact terms and specific terminology, there are consistent and reoccurring concepts that suggest ways through which school connectedness can be established and measured. For example, Preece (2009) suggests the four core components of school connectedness are a student’s “sense of belonging to a community, trust in the school administration, a sense of safety at school, and confidence in the school’s commitment to them” (p. 23), while Libbey (2004) asserts that connectedness is formed based upon the four aspects of “commitment, power, belonging, and belief in rules” (p.274). On the other hand, the Wingspread Declaration on School Connections (2004) lists high academic expectations coupled with support for learning, positive adult-student relationships, and both physical and emotional safety as the four key constructs.

However, for the purpose of my paper, and as presented in *Table 1*, Urbanski’s (2007) statement of the four main constructs of school connectedness as being: belonging to a community, teachers treating students with respect, school rules being fair, and consistent punishment for breaking the rules, will be the theoretical definitions that guide my research.

Despite the clear demarcation of the key variables necessary for creating feelings of school connectedness, suggestions for optimizing these variables through practical means remain limited and abstract in nature. For example, the “most effective strategies” (p. 233) for

developing school connectedness offered by the Wingspread Declaration (2004) are broad generalizations that propose one should optimize classroom management strategies, teaching techniques, supporting teachers and providing academic support to all students. Yet, there are very few concrete proposals for actually achieving these goals in practical ways.

Similarly, Libbey (2004) offers “nine salient constructs that relate to school connectedness” (p.278), which include academic engagement, belonging, discipline/fairness, extracurricular involvement, likes school, student voice, peer relations, safety, and teacher support. And although the researcher is even able to independently define and identify specific measurements for each construct, there is once again a lack of discussion regarding practical implementations for facilitating positive outcomes toward these constructs. Despite years of research demonstrating the positive outcomes for creating environments that foster feelings of school connectedness in students, educators lack the practical means for doing so. This void is one of the primary research gaps in which I will operate.

Table 1.

The Main Constructs of School Connectedness.

<u>Core Concepts</u>
Belonging to a Community
Positive Student Relationships with Adults/Teachers
School Rules are Fair
Consistent Punishment for Breaking the Rules

Extracurricular School Based Activities

Overview

Of the main constructs related to fostering school connectedness, the most practically oriented is the notion that adolescents “who participate in extracurricular activities...feel more attached to the school” (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002, p. 146). Consistently, the existing research reveals an established relationship between feelings of school connectedness and youth involvement in extracurricular activities. For example, Preece (2009) explicitly concludes that “Schools that have higher rates of participation in extracurricular activities during or after school tend to enjoy higher levels of school connectedness” (p. 23). McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum (2002) identify their four school connectedness constructs as “classroom management climate, school size, severity of discipline policies, and rates of participation in extracurricular activities” (p.146). Libbey (2004) states that extracurricular participation is “an element of measuring students’ connection to the school” (p. 280). Similarly, Ogilvie's (2014) thorough examination of school connectedness touts the value of extracurricular activities as a venue for creating “Time spent by children in face-to-face interactions building relationships” (p.23). Clearly, adolescent participation in extracurricular school based activities is an important pathway for creating feelings of school connectedness.

Definitions

The impact of youth participation in extracurricular activities has been explored under similar but distinguishable operational modalities such as organized activities or structured voluntary activities. At a basic level, Larson (2000) suggests that extracurricular activities are defined by several key characteristics. Firstly, participation is voluntary, and secondly, the

activities are structured, meaning that “participation occurs within a system involving constraints, rules, and goals” (p. 174). Adolescent participation in extracurricular activities occurs in one of three settings, generally categorized as school activities, community activities, or personal hobbies. Consequently, because my research focuses solely on the school setting and educational outcomes, the term ‘extracurricular school based activities’ will be used moving forward to denote this specific emphasis .

Extracurricular school based activities can be defined as: voluntary activities for students that are supported and organized by schools, occur outside of the school curriculum and timetable, and generally taking place on school grounds. Such activities are manifested in opportunities such as school sponsored clubs, interest groups, and academic or athletic teams.

Literature Review

The developmental effects of generalized extracurricular participation have been contextualized through a variety of psychological, behavioural, educational and sociological lenses. Overall, “the bulk of research on organized activities has shown positive consequences of participation for academic, educational, social, civic, and physical development” (Mahoney, Harris, & Eccles, 2006, p. 3). These outcomes are possible because extracurricular opportunities provide environments in which one can “act out the developmental tasks of adolescence” and “get to know other peers and adults through personal bonding and mutual trust and commitment (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005, p.161). Furthermore, Valentine, Cooper, Bettencourt, and DuBois (2002) conclude that extracurricular opportunities are important because they allow adolescents to observe and interpret their own behaviours, leading to an increased understanding of themselves.

Sociologists first studied the role of adolescent extracurricular participation in relation to developmental outcomes in the 1960s. Like school connectedness, modern examinations of extracurricular activities were revolutionized as a result of the theoretical advances of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological developmental model. Holland & Andre's (1987) activity review was the first attempt to consolidate the previous decade's worth of research that primarily focused on the positive associations between adolescent functioning and extracurricular participation. The researchers divided activities into interscholastic athletics and non-athletic activities, and sought to identify the effects of several affective measures such as gender, school size, and sense of control/power. Overall, the researchers concluded that participation in extracurricular activities "enhances the overall educational experience of students" (p. 88).

Recent research regarding this topic has moved in a variety of directions. For example, in examining psychological concepts of adolescent initiative via a comprehensive literature review, Larson (2000) concluded that during extracurricular activities, "adolescents experience a unique combination of intrinsic motivation and concentration rarely present during their daily experiences in schoolwork and unstructured leisure" (p.178), while also confirming positive outcomes such as "diminished delinquency, greater achievement, and increased self-control and self-efficacy" (p.178).

In 2003, Hansen, Larson, and Dworkin used the newly developed Youth Experiences Survey (YES) in order to specifically "inventory the types of developmental experiences that adolescents report across organized youth activities" (p.26) into categories of 'personal development' and 'interpersonal development'. Although this article further supported the notion that extracurricular participation is connected to positive emotional and interpersonal development (p. 49), this study is equally significant for being one of the first to highlight the

adverse effects of extracurricular participation in terms of “negative peer interaction” and having a low capacity for “learning prosocial norms” (p.50). Limitations of this study include self-report data and small sample size (N=450). Additionally, Bohnert and Garber (2007) conducted a longitudinal study of 198 adolescents that found participation in extracurricular activities may contribute to positive mental health outcomes, and “lower levels of externalizing psychopathology during high school even when controlling for prior psychopathology” (p. 1021).

One of the most important and exhaustive studies regarding adolescent participation in extracurricular school based activities is Feldman and Matjasko's (2005) comprehensive examination of past research. In hoping to identify future directions for research in regard to the impact of extracurricular activities on youth, the researchers conducted an extensive literature review that led to findings that both supported the positive influences of such participation, while simultaneously advancing the discussion surrounding negative outcomes. By using moderators such as race, gender, and peer group association, the authors began the process of potentially identifying the specific contextual factors that hinder the effectiveness of extracurricular school programs in being able to promote positive social-emotional outcomes. In fact, Farb & Matjasko (2012) created an updated version of this research that will be discussed in further detail in upcoming sections of this chapter.

Extracurricular School Based Sports

Overview

In terms of the sheer numbers of student participation, extracurricular school based sports is the principal subcategory of extracurricular school based activities. As a subset of the larger conceptual framework of extracurricular school based activities, extracurricular school based

sports are inherently derived from similar bioecological and developmental theoretical roots. And therefore, by extension, the core belief within school connectedness theory - that adolescent participation in extracurricular school activities fosters feelings of school connectedness, also applies specifically to school sports. In fact, even after decades of studies, researchers continue to explore the impact of youth participation in organized sports on adolescent developmental outcomes, and increasingly in terms of critically rethinking the very systems in which the extracurricular school based sports are delivered.

Definitions

Accounting for 43% of all adolescent extracurricular involvement, school sports are simply the most participated in activity that exists under the broader concept of extracurricular school based activities (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). School sports are offered within two main contexts: extramurals and intramurals. The former is the traditional athletic model of initial interpersonal competition in seeking placement on a team, followed by competition against similar teams from other schools. Teams are formed and guided via the instruction of coaches. On the other hand, intramurals are organized sports that take place outside the school timetable, usually at lunch or afterschool, and feature competition within the population of a single school. These teams are formed and guided by students themselves. Therefore, central to the purpose of this study, the term 'extracurricular school based sports' will be the final delineation of the operational term, and will be defined specifically as: school based extracurricular athletic activities that are voluntary in nature; structured, organized and delivered to adolescents by adults, and are delivered through provincially sanctioned inter-school competition or intramural programs.

Literature Review

In terms of the research history, the earliest studies examining youth involvement with sports strictly as a developmental moderator began in the mid-1980s. Bredemeier, Weiss, Shields, and Cooper (1986) distributed the Sport Involvement Questionnaire to camp participants (N=106) in order to measure moral development and aggression tendencies. Interestingly, in an early recognition of the possible negative outcomes related to youth involvement in sports, the researchers noted that some sports may in fact “impede moral growth” (p. 316). This initial research led to a subsequent article by Bredemeier (1994) that is essential for several reasons. To begin with, this was one of the first articles to ideologically distinguish extracurricular school based sports as a unique context for examination. Secondly, this research led to the creation of the Scale of Children’s Action Tendencies in Sport (SCATS) as a data collection tool. Regression analyses led to results that suggested “gender and school-level differences” in relation to action tendencies in certain moral dilemmas (p. 1) Overall, the researcher found that moral reasoning scores do in fact “predict assertive and aggressive action tendencies in both sport and daily life contexts” (p. 10).

Through the framework of ‘social approval’, Stuart and Ebbeck (1995) further investigated moral development in school sports. The Perceived Social Approval Scale was used to gather data from 249 male and female school basketball players between the ages of 9 and 15. Correlation analyses allowed researchers to assert that social approval via school sports can “play a role in the cognitive and behavioural components of moral development” (p. 278). Aside from secondary data analysis, an obvious limitation to this study is the inability to generalize results to other sports beyond basketball.

Calfas and Taylor's (1994) cross-sectional observational literature review examined the relationship between youth participation in sports and psychological variables in adolescents. By

using research gathered from social science data bases, the researchers employed meta-analysis to measure effect sizes of physical activity upon psychological variables of self-esteem, self-concept, and depression. Ultimately, the study concluded that “physical activity is psychologically beneficial for adolescents” (p. 421). Similarly, Ferron, Narring, Cauderay, and Michaud (1999) asserted that participation in sports and physical activity act as a preventative means of dealing with stress and anxiety, while Bell (2001) found such participation a key indicator and feature of building emotional resiliency.

Cassidy and Conroy (2006) explored the relationship between youth extracurricular school based sports participation and measures of self-esteem and perceived competence. Multiple regression and correlation analyses were used to interpret data ascertained through usage of the Self-Esteem Questionnaire (SEQ) and the Self-Perception Profile for Children. While the authors found several positive associations between mental health outcomes and youth sports, the most significant takeaway was the notion that within school sports, “non-parenting influences such as coaches, teachers and peers” (p. 17) have a greater influence on the development of self-esteem and perceived competence.

More recently, in an attempt to understand the relationship between academic performance and participation in extracurricular school based sports, Trudeau and Shephard (2008) conducted a thorough review of over 90 scholarly articles. This research is relevant for many reasons, the first being that it is of Canadian origin and incorporates many Canadian articles and supporting data. It is also noteworthy because the authors uniquely explore the implications of the research question for students with special needs, as well as within the context of the ever- burgeoning field of neuroscience. In their conclusions, the authors take the position that participation in “such activities are likely to increase attachment to the school and

self-esteem which are indirect but important factors in academic achievement” (p.9). Perhaps more radically, it is suggested that these opportunities be made increasingly available and that they should “be added to the school curriculum by taking time from other subjects without risk of hindering of hindering student achievement” (p.1). An updated literature review by Trudeau & Shephard (2010) provided an enhanced focus on experimental studies involving advances in neuroscience, including concepts of cerebral circulation, arousal, and neurotrophins (p.4).

However, an increasing number of studies have redirected their focus upon some of the negative interpersonal effects of adolescent participation in extracurricular school sports. I would like to highlight the fact that, because many of these issues will be addressed in much more depth in the following section, for now this review will only superficially draw attention to a small sampling of related research. Emotionally and psychologically, youth sport participation may create excessive pressure for success and winning, leading to negative self-concept, low confidence and self-esteem (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Hedstrom & Gould, 2004). Also, with the predominance of specialization in one sport, and at increasingly younger ages, additional major psychological concerns include youth burnout, extreme parental pressures, and depression (Wiersma, 2000). Sport involvement has also been associated with negative physical outcomes such as major injuries, eating disorders, obsession with body image, and risk taking physical behaviours (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). In addition to findings of impaired moral development (Bredemeier, 1994) and increased aggression (Bredemeier et al., 1986), other negative social outcomes for sports participants include the adoption of undesirable social norms via negative group dynamics, poor sportsmanship and negative relationships with adult leaders (Hansen et al., 2003).

Issues in Extracurricular School Based Sports

Overview

The practice of secondary schools providing opportunities for students to participate in sports programs is firmly entrenched as an integral part of the culture of North American high school educational settings. Historically, the rationale for this emphasis has been based upon a belief that extracurricular school sports create a “fertile context for adolescents to develop and teach themselves a wide range of positive competencies” (Larson, 2000, p. 175). This concept has been explored extensively, resulting in a substantial base of scholarly research that has highlighted both the benefits and detriments of such participation. However, recent literature has increasingly focused on the notion “that positive youth development through sport is not automatic, but to the contrary, is dependent upon a multitude of factors that must be considered when planning and designing youth sport programs (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005, p.35).

In other words, the efficacy of adolescent participation in extracurricular school based sports, as a means to facilitate positive interpersonal developmental outcomes, is directly related to the very design of the programs through which these sports are delivered. Researchers, using a variety of different sport and psychological related modalities and moderators, have uniformly identified that, within current school sport models, there are inherent structural and systemic flaws that not only inhibit the ability of participants to optimally meet developmental competencies, but may even act to entirely dissuade adolescents from engaging in any participation at all.

For example, as early as 1994, Calfas and Taylor's exploration of adolescent psychological moderators as related to physical activity, initially suggested that “future research should consider the role of the social context in which the activity occurs” (p.421). More recently, in looking for ways to make youth sports more inclusive, MacPhail, Kirk, and Eley

(2003) noted that in order to do so, the most important factor is that certain design “structures need to be in place to facilitate the production of such a climate” (p.69). Mahoney et al's. (2006) examination of youth participation in organized activities, including school sports, also concluded that positive youth development is “certain to depend on the features of the activity considered” (p.21). Finally, even Coakley's (2011) scathing discussion exploring the fallacies that exist within popularized beliefs that associate youth sport participation and positive developmental outcomes, is based upon the premise and condition that any “outcomes associated with sport participation are contingent upon contextual factors” (p.13).

However, despite this common acknowledgment for the need to acutely consider the very structures and characteristics of the programs through which school sports are delivered, to date, most empirical research has focused on assessing a variety of interpersonal measures as impacted by a general sporting context, as opposed to examining the actual structural designs of school sports programs as moderators themselves. As reflected by the fact that high school extracurricular school sports delivery methods have remained virtually unchanged, there continues to exist a lack of research that comprehensively identifies the issues pertaining to the structures of school based sports in a way that actually leads to tangible suggestions for improved alternate sports models. To illustrate, though the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2002) can specifically outline 8 features of sports settings that foster positive assets in adolescents, and Fraser-Thomas et al. (2005) have created “An applied sport-programming model of positive youth development” for future policy makers, both articles are in fact devoid of any suggestions as to what this means in terms of concrete, practical implementation. Notably, in Feldman and Matjasko's (2005) literature review exploring the effects of school-based extracurricular activities upon adolescent development, which is perhaps

the most comprehensive discussion of the research topic to date, the authors proclaim that the direction for future research “must consider the mechanisms through which activities exert their influence on development” (p. 159). However, almost a decade later, their more recently published review of the subsequent literature base concedes that in regard to school sports program design and “Across developmental areas, there has been little exploration into new outcome variables” (Farb & Matjasko, 2012, p. 42).

Within the context of school connectedness theory, the ultimate goal of my research is to identify the specific negative systemic features of school sports programs. Toward this end, several articles provide the conceptual foundation and direction for this approach. At a basic level, my research methodology is rooted upon Stuart and Ebbeck's (1995) suggestion that any examinations into youth sport should synthesize information from sources that “include theoretical principles, research findings, and the experience of practitioners” (p. 278). My personal insight gained from over 15 years of coaching high school sports will provide real life understanding when exploring the relevant literature. Anderman's (2002) assertion that “school level variables are, for the most part, contextual in nature and... may be altered through reform efforts” (p. 807), reinforces the idea that identifying key extracurricular sports programs variables is an initial pathway toward the larger goal of meaningful change. Perhaps most importantly, Feldman and Matjasko (2005) have suggested that when aiming to optimally reconstruct the way that extracurricular school based sports are delivered to students, one should “model the impact of extracurricular activities within a conceptual framework that can guide analyses” (p.193). Further to this point, Trudeau and Shephard's (2010) contend that any reimagining of extracurricular school based sports be based upon its “educational potential rather than its competitive side” (p.10).

In summary, any changes to the structural design of school sports should be considered within the frameworks of, and in accordance to current educational objectives. For reasons already previously established within this research, school connectedness will be the theoretical compass used to navigate the existing literature base surrounding issues in youth sports. The basic logical premise is that, if youth participation in extracurricular school sports is the most significant means of developing school connectedness, then any factor that negatively impacts such participation has adverse effects on creating school connectedness and the social emotional climate of a school. Three current issues in school sports have been identified for discussion: specialization, exclusionary team formation/hyper-competitiveness, and the influence of leadership. Each of these problems will be identified, discussed, and then re-contextualized within the conceptual frameworks of school connectedness.

Analysis

Specialization

In the context of athletics, specialization refers to an athlete's decision to limit "participation to one sport that is practiced, trained for, and competed in on a year-round basis" (Hill & Hansen, 1988, p.76). Also referred to as the 'professionalization' of amateur sport, this trend became popularized during the mid-1990s, and resulted from, in part, then emergent notions of mastery (10,000 hours) and the explosive proliferation of sports media coverage and million dollar contracts for professional athletes. In practical terms, this led to youths starting serious sport participation at earlier ages, increased competitiveness, as well as the emergence of private sports camps, clinics, and out of season programs. Currently, this phenomenon has only become much more expansive and financially elitist. For example, despite the fact that some 'prestigious' Canadian basketball preparatory schools and hockey academies charge up to \$50,000

per year for a daily regimen that focuses primarily on athletic development and may only sometimes meet basic educational learning outcomes, the number of registrants for such opportunities continues to escalate (Traikos, 2015).

The impact of sport specialization on adolescents has been widely researched. Côté (2004) posits that when specialization occurs at a developmentally inappropriate age, the benefits are outweighed by the disadvantages. This includes psychological, social, and physical issues such as “overtraining, injury, failure to develop transferable skills, decreased enjoyment, burnout, depression, decreased self-esteem, increased sensitivity to stress, fear of competition, sense of failure, [and] missed social opportunities” (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005, p.28). Another much-publicized issue is related to the “over-involvement and expectations of parents and adults in youth sport programs” (Wiersma, 2000, p.17).

However, the most researched impact of sport specialization on youth has to do with mental health aspects, particularly the psychological concepts of burnout and withdrawal. Withdrawal refers to a specialized athlete reaching a point where he or she considers non-sport endeavours to be more favourable than continuing within the sport, and this usually results in a prolonged break from the activity that may or may not culminate in a return to that activity (Petlichkoff, 2010). On the other hand, burnout is “perhaps the most salient consequence of high-level sport commitment” (Wiersma, 2000, p. 17) and is “the long-term end result of emotional and/or physical exhaustion” (Henschen, 1998, p. 399). In these instances, youth not only withdraw from a sport but also face serious health issues.

The issue of specialization has a definitive impact on the development of school connectedness though extracurricular school sports, particularly the core school connectedness concepts of ‘belonging to a community’ and ‘positive relationships with adults/teachers’ are

affected. In terms of community, there are several obvious issues. Through a sociological lens, specialization “is thought to isolate the young athlete from peers and interfere with normal identity development” (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004, p.40). There is only a finite amount of time that a person can dedicate to personal pursuits, and if youth are dedicating the majority of their time to a singular athletic purpose, they will naturally have less time for social opportunities with their peers and for the development of an attachment to the school community. In practical terms, this usually means that a student only participates on the school team as related to their specialty, or more frequently not at all. These situations are reflected in Seefeldt, Ewing, and Walk's (1992) findings that when youth do quit school sports, ‘wanting to participate in other activities’ was one of the four main common justifications for doing so. Furthermore, the increasingly common practice of students moving away from their home schools and communities to join academies exacerbates issues related to being separated from lifelong friends and support systems. The rising costs of specialization programs further creates a system and conditions that may further divide the peer community. Finally, counter to the very traits of community, the core emphasis of specialization is on individual improvement and success, which may devalue teamwork and lead to seeing peers simply as competitors.

Specialization can also result in negative relationships with adults, teachers, and coaches, thus negatively influencing the main school connectedness construct of ‘positive relationships with adults/teachers’. From an academic standpoint, a substantial amount of time allocated toward athletic endeavours may mean less focus on academics, and these conflicting expectations may strain the relationship between youth and their subject teachers. Negative interactions with adults for specialist athletes may occur in a variety of situations. Often against their wishes, specialist athletes are regularly banned or discouraged from playing for their school

teams by their community coaches. Meanwhile, a school based coach may be upset that his or her star player will not participate, meaning that the student is in a no win situation of meeting the competing expectations of adults. When a youth does play for his or her school team, competitive coaches may place excessive pressure and unfair performance expectations on the specialized athlete. At the very least, scheduling conflicts may mean that a youth prioritizes community sporting obligations over school practices or games. These situations create the additional side effect of impacting the concept of ‘belonging to community’, as potential teammates may feel abandoned in their own pursuits of success or teammates see the specialized athlete as receiving special or preferential treatment. The latter issue will be discussed further in the following sections, but also relates to the school connectedness core concept of ‘school rules are fair’. In conclusion, specialization limits the opportunities to create school connectedness through extracurricular school based sports and may negatively impact a student’s relationships with teachers, coaches and peers.

Hyper-Competitiveness and Exclusionary Team Forming

Issues of over-competitiveness and exclusionary team forming are inter-related; competitive ideologies often lead to inequalities within the practical dynamics of ‘team’ concepts and structures. The main issue with competition is not the idea itself, but rather the instances where a focus on winning undermines and precludes notions of using sports as a means to foster positive interpersonal developmental outcomes. As previously discussed, there are many benefits to be gained from participation in settings of directed peer competition through sports. Generally, youth like some level of competition because it provides an important context for social comparison and feelings of competency (Roberts & Treasure, 1992), as well as providing opportunities for character challenging and character building (Hansen et al., 2003). However, a

substantial base of research exists that has demonstrated that excessively competitive sporting environments can also have a multitude of negative impacts on youth. For instance, Hansen et al., (2003) have suggested that such contexts may lead to higher rates of negative peer interaction, rivalry with peers, limited ability to take the perspective of others, and impaired moral development that leads to unsportsmanlike behaviour.

The dual nature of competitive school sports is reflected within the findings of the frequently referenced research of Seefeldt, Ewing, and Walk (1992), who surveyed 8000 youth in the hopes of being able to categorize and classify the reasons that youth participate in sports. The top five reported motives were 'to have fun', 'to do something I am good at', 'to stay in shape', 'to learn new or improve my skills', and 'to play as part of a team'. Interestingly, 'to win' was found to be the 8th most important reason for participation. Therefore, while competition in sports is important and has clear benefits, it is also necessary to acknowledge that youths who participate in school based sports have "multiple motives for involvement" beyond winning (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004, p.21), and that the purposeful design of school sports activities should reflect these findings more accurately.

Hyper-competitiveness impacts the development of school connectedness, particularly through the construct of 'belonging to a community'. As related to adolescent participation in school sports, a central focus on competition and winning inherently leads to a variety of systemic issues that are manifested in the application of exclusionary team formation procedures. In extramural form, this refers to the process of having students 'try out' or audition for a place on a team, and then 'cutting' or eliminating students when choosing a final roster. This practice is employed for both team (i.e. basketball, volleyball, etc.) and individual (i.e. swimming, badminton, etc.) sports. In fact, MacPhail et al. (2003) "reported that 'Being left out because you

are not good enough' was the aspect of sport participation which children minded most about" (p.65). By the very definition of the process, 'cutting' youth is exclusionary and may separate students from their natural, pre-established peer communities, and, most obviously, will prevent the possibility of forming new or stronger connections with peers and the school community . Furthermore, an individual's competence and ability are clearly demarcated for everyone to see, which can impact self-esteem and feelings of self-worth. And, while it is also true that the exclusionary nature of a finite number of roster spots translates to elevated feelings of school connectedness for those that do make the team, conversely, it is of great importance to realize that within these situations, "those who are not connected will experience [even] greater rejection" (Shochet et al., 2006, p. 172) from their peers and school community.

Personally, I have seen many adolescents who, being cut even once at an early age, will never play that sport or any sport ever again, forever eliminating the possibility of sports as a tool for developing school connectedness. Similarly, a coaches' relationship with a 'cut' student can be drastically altered. For teacher-coaches, such decisions may negatively impact all other future personal interactions with that student, including the therapeutic relationships with clients for counselors who coach. In terms of the relevant core concepts of school connectedness, the process of 'cutting' directly impacts the principles of 'belonging to a community' and 'positive relationships with adults/teachers'.

However, the solution to these problems is not as simple as prohibiting coaches from 'cutting' players, as the positive effects of sports are experienced only when adolescents are given meaningful opportunities to express competence, or in other words 'playing time'. The distribution of playing time is another way that current sports models embody exclusionary practices. Generally, coaches who prioritize winning will allocate playing time unequally,

through a system where the best players receive a majority of playing time and the worst receive none. In fact, Hedstrom and Gould (2004) repeatedly found that even for students who were good enough to make a team, one of the main reasons that these students eventually quit sports was because they “were frustrated with not getting to play and not having a chance to learn the appropriate skills to gain experience” (p.23). In relation to school connectedness concepts, the competition for playing time may result in rivalry amongst peers , or even a total cessation of sports participation (Brustad, Babkes, & Smith, 2001), both of which negatively affect the construct of ‘belonging to a community’. Furthermore, the fact that most respondents “blamed the coach” for being responsible for the lack of playing opportunity (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004, p. 23), clearly signifies a breach in the development of ‘positive relationships with adults/teachers’. It should be noted that part of this discussion, which will be elaborated upon in the next section, is that coaches often have inconsistent expectations, rules and policies when it comes to deciding how much an individual gets to participate. Such inequities can hinder the development of school connectedness, particularly via the constructs of ‘school rules are fair’ and ‘consistent punishment for breaking the rules’.

On the other hand, school based sports delivered via intramurals are generally more inclusive and less competitive than extramural program designs. Opportunities to create feelings of ‘belonging to a community’ are enhanced, as all students are allowed to participate without fear of being ‘cut’, and teams may be formed across grades, gender, and ability. Often, efforts are made to group similar age groups or skill levels to create parity amongst competition levels. Since there are no coaches, any concerns about the possibility of negative ‘relationships with coaches’ are alleviated.

However, it should be noted that this is not a perfect model and is still exclusionary, particularly because of the unique issues that arise due to intramural teams being formed through self-composition. For example, although technically any student may participate, teams are generally formed amongst pre-existing peer groups, resulting in a system that creates a situation where those without the requisite number of peer connections may not find a team and will be excluded regardless. In these situations, the opportunity to establish new relationships with peers is minimized. Additionally, the team formation structure of this model can actually reinforce an over-emphasis on winning and competitive disparity, as the best players simply create their own teams to dominate the other teams without hindrance. In summary, many school based intramural athletic programs foster an ‘us versus them’ interschool mentality that works counter to creating sporting contexts that allow for developing feelings of ‘belonging to a community’.

Currently, extracurricular school based sports place an inordinate amount of focus on competition and are often exclusionary in terms of opportunity. Ultimately, youth would “prefer to participate in modifications of adult forms of sports that allow them to participate at their own levels of competence, rather than struggle to conform to a standard many may never achieve” (MacPhail et al., 2003, p. 68). While there is no simple solution for creating a perfect balance between competition and adolescent social-emotional considerations, it is clear that, moving forward, any considerations for redesigning school sports programs should be based upon inclusion, and attempting to create a competitive environment that equally balances student ability, competency, and opportunity.

The Influence of Leadership

As Fraser-Thomas et al. (2005) concisely state, “the personal characteristics of group leaders are critical to the success of all youth development programs” (p.29). In other words,

perhaps no other factor has as much influence in “positively or negatively influencing youths’ sport experience” (p.29) than the role of the coach. High school extracurricular athletics coaches are usually community volunteers or teachers, but are generally adults who, inherent to the position, automatically become role models to adolescents. The decisions, attitudes, and behaviours of a coach can have substantial implications on the ability of youth to develop feelings of school connectedness.

There is an established research base that has examined the impact of coaches on youth participation in sport, and repeatedly, across a variety of transgressions, a significant portion of the negative interactions that youth experience in sport can be attributed to their coaches’ lack of adequate training and knowledge about working with adolescents. For example, Smoll, Smith, Barnett, & Everett (1993) posited that youth coaches who underwent training to learn techniques for effective encouragement and skill instruction provided a more positive experience for their players. Similarly, Hedstrom & Gould (2004) found that youth playing under the tutelage of trained coaches “showed a greater increase in self-esteem...and a number of positive psychosocial consequences” (p.11). In reference to the previous discussion on the overemphasis on competition, it is noteworthy that trained coaches also created an environment where “the win-loss records of the team seemed not to impact athletes’ perceptions of satisfaction” (p.11). Perhaps most importantly, Barnett, Smoll, & Smith (1992) found that the attrition rate for adolescent participation in extracurricular school sports with untrained coaches was 26%, while that same number with trained coaches was only 5%.

Despite the benefits of formal coaching training and the increasing number of quality opportunities to engage in such training, high school coaches continue to fall short of meeting these standards. Some coaches may be teachers with a limited background in sports, or

conversely, community members with a background in sports but limited knowledge about working with youth and meeting their social-emotional needs. This is due in large part to the fact that coaching is voluntary in nature and demand is usually higher than supply; coaching is altruistic in spirit, but also requires a significant investment of time with little tangible reward. Contextualized within the current ‘specialization’ climate of youth sports, coaches that do have certification are in a position of either spending 20+ hours a week volunteering at the high school for free, or taking those same 20+ hours and diverting them to paid positions through private clinics or club teams. The population from which to draw qualified and trained volunteers into the fabric of the school community has been greatly reduced.

For those community members and teachers who do elect to coach, the voluntary nature of the work probably precludes other personal obligations such as schooling or careers. Many simply “do not have time to give to coaching education” (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004, p.12). Even then, once trained, many coaches “are left to coach an entire team without other individuals to help or do not have a network for mentoring” (Houseworth, Davis, & Dobbs, 1990, p.10). Ultimately, time constraints and the lack of ability to seek guidance from more experienced peers may limit opportunities for meaningful reflection upon personal practice, which can hinder the skill development, growth, and longevity of a coach.

Regardless of being trained or untrained, negative interactions between adolescent participants in youth sports and coaches are most frequent when coaches are perceived to be overly competitive and solely focused on winning. In a concise restatement of the previous section exploring hyper-competitiveness, research shows that “coaches who place primary emphasis on winning often exploit their athletes rather than considering their athletes’ developmental stages and advancing their athletes’ psychological and social best interests”

(Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005, p. 29). In the most basic, practical sense, some coaches may exhibit poor behaviour modeling; the intense focus on winning can influence the decision making processes of these coaches, “which can lead them to be coercive or punitive, to encourage unsportsmanlike behaviour, and fail to support youth’s social and personal development” (Hansen et al., 2003, p. 50). In the context of school connectedness, an overly competitive coach can negatively affect the theoretical premise of ‘positive student relationships with adults/teachers’.

Another significant reason cited by youth for quitting extracurricular school based sports was a belief that the coach was unfair and played favourites with certain players (Seefeldt et al., 1992). This notion is supported by school connectedness theory, as core concepts state that adolescents feel most connected to their schools when they believe that ‘school rules are fair’ and that there is ‘consistent punishment for breaking the rules’. Sports are philosophically based on fairness and following a uniform set of rules that creates a level playing field, therefore, it can be suggested that these School Connectedness concepts have additional significance within sport settings. In extracurricular school based sports, the responsibility of creating and enforcing rules falls squarely onto the coach. Yet, perhaps unfairly, the daily existence of a coach is a minefield that provides innumerable opportunities for a coach to undermine his or her stated principles in regard to having fair rules and consistent punishment, as almost every non-verbal cue, statement, or decision is being scrutinized by a group of adolescents developmentally fixated on identifying fairness and hypocrisy in the world. Finally, in regard to any conversation related to rules and discipline in sports, it is important to remember the previously discussed idea that the most significant currency in school sports is the allocation of playing time, and that, almost always the consequences for breaking the rules results in taking it away from a player.

The perception of a coaches' fairness is predominantly based upon the standard of discipline that a coach instills upon the most skilled players on the team. However, there are a variety of ways that coaches, both consciously and unconsciously, employ different sets of rules and consequences for their best players. One of the most basic expectations that coaches have is that in order to play in games, players must be in attendance and punctual for all team practices. However, the enforcement and subsequent discipline of this rule often appears to be based upon some combination of the individual's overall talent, importance to the team, and significance of the upcoming game. As discussed in a previous section, the current trend of specialized athletes only exacerbates these problems; because specialized athletes are often the best players on their school teams, exceptions are often made to accommodate their scheduling conflicts.

Within a variety of contexts, adolescent student athletes clearly recognize when their coaches and other adults make hypocritical and inconsistent disciplinary decisions. For example, in actual game situations, the more skilled and important players may get additional leeway with mistakes that a less skilled player would not receive. Similarly, a lesser player may invoke harsher admonishment from a coach for an error that a better player may not be scolded for. Referees can also reinforce this double standard with preferential calls and leniency toward star players. Within the school setting, there might be increased flexibility for important athletes in terms of dealing with issues related to poor attendance, failing grades, or undesirable school citizenship.

It is possible to suggest that, when thinking about extracurricular school based sports as an opportunity for creating feelings of school connectedness, no single variable is as influential as the coach. In fact, the traits and behaviours of a coach can have a substantial impact on all four school connectedness concepts. Coaches who are poorly trained and focus too much on

competition can negatively impact the development of ‘positive student relationships with adults/teachers’. The most prominent way that coaches undermine their relationships with student athletes is by creating environments where adolescents do not feel that ‘school rules are fair’ and that there is ‘consistent punishment for breaking the rules’. In turn, this unfair treatment is divisive, potentially leading to distrust amongst teammates, peer rivalry and negative peer relationships, all of which work against developing feelings of ‘belonging to a community’.

If extracurricular school based sports programs are to be reconsidered within the context of their educational potential, then coaches need to be educators first. This means that coaches, regardless of being a teacher or community volunteer, should be adequately trained in both the social emotional needs of adolescents and the skills of their respective sports.

Summary

In this chapter, a literature review was conducted in order to address the research goal of being able to identify the specific ways that current extracurricular school-based sport models hinder or prevent the development of school connectedness in adolescent students. An exploration of current issues related to adolescent participation in youth sports revealed the topics of ‘specialization’, hyper-competitiveness and exclusionary team forming’, and the ‘influence of leadership’, as having the most direct and significant impact upon the traits of the programs through which school sports are delivered. A closer examination of the research base led to identifying how these three main issues manifest themselves within the actual practical dynamics of extracurricular school based sports programs. This information was then contextualized and evaluated through the lens of school connectedness theory and its’ four key theoretical concepts, as presented in Table 2. A more detailed summary of these findings will be presented in the following chapter, which will provide the knowledge base for the Chapter 3

discussion focused on conceptualizing practical suggestions for reimagining how extracurricular school based sports can be delivered to adolescents.

Table 2

Summary of Issues in School Based Sports and Related Effects on School Connectedness

General Extracurricular School Sports Issue	Specific Extracurricular School Sports Issues	Affected School Connectedness Principles
Specialization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Burnout/Withdrawal - Displacement from Natural Peer Relations/Community - Increased Competitive Expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Belonging to a Community - Positive Relationships with Teachers/Adults - School Rules are Fair
Hyper-Competitiveness and Exclusionary Team Forming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Overemphasis on Winning - Exclusionary Team Formation - Unequal Playing Time - Negative Peer Relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Belonging to a Community - Positive Relationships with Teachers/Adults - School Rules are Fair - Consistent Punishment for Breaking the Rules
The Influence of Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of Trained Coaches - Overemphasis on Winning - Inconsistent Application of Rules/Consequences - Student Leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Belonging to a Community - Positive Relationships with Teachers/Adults - School Rules are Fair - Consistent Punishment for Breaking the Rules

Chapter 3: Discussion

Summary

School connectedness can be defined as the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment. Educational settings that foster school connectedness have been proven to have numerous positive effects on adolescent educational outcomes and interpersonal physiological and psychosocial developmental benchmarks.

Of the many suggested conditions thought necessary to create environments conducive to school connectedness, the most tangible and practical method is through student engagement in extracurricular school based activities. Of these activities, and in terms of sheer volume, extracurricular school based sports continue to be the predominant form of such participation. However, despite being funded by educational budgets and delivered directly through schools, often these activities have little grounding in educational policy and are not primarily conceptualized or optimized as an educational tool. Extracurricular school sports need to be purposefully considered as an extension of educational policy and used to reinforce educational goals; my suggestion is that the ideal theoretical framework for doing so is school connectedness.

The research was guided by the question: In what specific ways do current extracurricular school-based sport models hinder or prevent the development of school connectedness in adolescent students? The basic premise is that for adolescents, terminating participation in school sports also entails a substantial loss of opportunity for developing school connectedness. Therefore, the first step toward my research goal was an initial review of scholarly literature pertaining to the current trends in youth sports participation. Three topics were identified as being most influential in impacting an adolescents' decision to no longer participate in school based sports: '*specialization*', '*hyper-competitiveness and exclusionary team forming*', and '*the influence of leadership*'. In the case of each of these overarching problems, a closer examination of the data revealed several inter-related subsets of issues for each topic. These issues were then considered in terms of their impact on each of the four constructs of school connectedness theory, which are '*belonging to a community*', '*positive relationships with adults/teachers*', '*school rules are fair*', and '*consistent punishment for breaking the rules*'.

Specialization

Specialization refers to the increasingly common process in which an adolescent devotes their entire sporting existence to practicing, training, and competing in a single sport on a year-round basis. Overall, research has shown that when specialization occurs at a developmentally inappropriate age, the athletic benefits are far outweighed by the interpersonal disadvantages. Three unique concerns identified as being specifically related to specialization are '*displacement and withdrawal from natural peer relations and community*', '*burnout and withdrawal*', and '*increased competitive expectations*'. As a whole, issues with specialization impact all four

school connectedness concepts of ‘belonging to a community’, ‘positive relationships with adults/teachers’, ‘school rules are fair’ and ‘consistent punishment for breaking the rules’.

Youth that dedicate the majority of their time to a singular athletic endeavour will naturally have less time to pursue other social opportunities and personal interests, leading to some degree of ‘displacement and withdrawal from natural peer relations and community’. Within the school sports setting, this can mean that a student only participates on the school team for their specialty sport, on a limited basis, or more frequently, not at all. Specialization isolates young athletes from peers and can effect normal identity development and attachment to the school community. Furthermore, specialization philosophically places an emphasis on individual goal setting and successes, which often runs counter to the sporting ideal of shared success through teamwork and personal sacrifice. Displacement from natural peer groups and community directly impacts, and semantically echoes, the school connectedness concept of ‘belonging to a community’.

Specialized athletes often deal with ‘increased competitive expectations’, and in fact, this intense focus has a significant bearing on all four school connectedness concepts. For instance, competitive expectations from parents and coaches may place excessive pressure and unfair performance expectations on the specialized athlete, leading to strained relationships that exist in direct opposition to the school connectedness principle of ‘positive relationships with adults/teachers’. In the context of school sports, because specialized athletes are often the most skilled players and deemed necessary for winning, special accommodations are often made to ensure their participation. However, this special treatment directly subverts the core connectedness ideals of ‘school rules are fair’ and ‘consistent punishment for breaking the rules’. Exasperated by the inconsistent treatment, teammates may resent and despise the specialized

athlete, leading to divisiveness within the team that negatively impacts the notion of ‘belonging to community’.

The final issue arising from youth sport specialization is ‘burnout and withdrawal’. A sustained and intense focus on a singular purpose has been documented as having potentially serious side effects. Withdrawal refers to scenarios where a specialized athlete may need to take a prolonged break from their sport, whereas burnout is a more serious mental health condition characterized by emotional and physical exhaustion leading to total absolution of the sport. Part of this problem is surely a consequence of the previously discussed idea of being removed from natural support systems. Beyond simple non-participation in school sports, burnout and withdrawal can negatively impact peer relationships, school routines, and social activities, all of which are practical elements of ‘belonging to a community’. Additionally, instances of adolescent withdrawal or burnout are almost always accompanied by the presence of over-bearing parents or coaches, whose harmful personal agendas can negate the development of ‘positive relationships with adults/teachers’.

Hyper-Competitiveness

Another issue identified as being significant in impacting adolescent participation in school sports is ‘hyper-competitiveness’. In the context of this research, a hyper-competitive sports environment is defined as one where a focus on winning undermines and precludes notions of using sports as a means to foster positive interpersonal developmental outcomes. In practice, this is embodied in the procedures of ‘exclusionary team forming’, and ‘allocation of playing time’.

A substantial research base exists that has already demonstrated that excessively competitive sporting environments can have negative repercussions on youth, including higher

rates of negative peer interaction, rivalry with peers, limited ability to take the perspective of others, and impaired moral development that leads to unsportsmanlike behaviour. Most obviously, these characteristics have an influence on the notion of ‘belonging to a community’. Furthermore, because these overly competitive attitudes are often fostered and reinforced by coaches and parents, the school connectedness trait of ‘positive relationships with adults/teachers’ is also negatively impacted.

The primary practical manifestation of hyper-competiveness is ‘exclusionary team forming’. Prevalent in extramural sports, exclusionary team formation refers to the process of ‘cutting’ or eliminating students from a team based predominantly on evaluations of skill. Such processes can negatively impact self-esteem and feelings of self-worth, as an individual’s competence and ability are clearly demarcated for everyone to see. At the most basic level, ‘cutting’ youth is exclusionary and works against the principle of ‘belonging to a community’. For example, preventing students from participating on school based sports teams not only separates youth from their natural pre-established peer networks, but also minimizes the possibility of forming new or stronger connections with peers and the school community. Additionally, students almost invariably take the decision to be cut very personally, which can have the effect of forever altering the dynamic of the relationship between the coach and adolescent moving forward. In terms of connectedness, cutting students is a process that also works against the purported goal of fostering ‘positive relationships with adults/teachers’.

It should also be noted that, although intramurals sports program designs are more inclusive in the sense that students cannot be ‘cut’ from a team, they still can be exclusive because teams are self-composed, requiring students to have a pre-established network of peers.

It can be argued that being marginalized due to a lack of peers is more damaging than being excluded for a lack of skill.

All adolescent student athletes want meaningful opportunities to express their competency, however, the ‘allocation of playing time’ is the second way that current sports models engage in exclusionary practices. Generally, coaches that prioritize winning will assign playing time unequally, employing a system where the best players receive a majority of playing time and the worst receive none. In relation to school connectedness, the construct of ‘belonging to a community’ is impacted in several ways. Firstly, a competition for playing time may result in rivalry amongst peers, while those who do not receive meaningful playing time may end up quitting. If playing time is distributed and awarded to players whose actions are in contravention to stated team rules and expectations, the concepts of ‘school rules are fair’ and ‘consistent punishment for breaking the rules’ are undermined and will lead to further erosion in the building of community. Finally, the fact that youth most often blamed their coaches as being responsible for their lack of playing opportunity, clearly signifies a breach in the development of ‘positive relationships with adults/teachers’.

The Influence of Leadership

Negative interactions with coaches was the most frequently reported reason that youths provided when explaining why they had chosen to end their participation in school sports. This overwhelming trend underscores the significance of ‘the influence of leadership’ as an integral aspect of developing school connectedness. As a theoretical testament to this relevance, each of the four school connectedness concepts are directly affected by the decisions and actions of a school based sports coach. Problematic relationships between coaches and students can often be

attributed to the coach having a '*lack of training*', being '*overly-competitive*', and being '*inconsistent in enforcement of the rules*'.

Unfortunately, many high school coaches have a 'lack of adequate training', particularly when it comes to being aware of how to meet the social and emotional needs of adolescents. Research found that trained coaches created sporting contexts that encouraged positive psychosocial aspects such as self-esteem, increased personal satisfaction, and reduced sporting attrition rates to that of untrained coaches. Furthermore, trained coaches placed less emphasis on winning and competition.

Several factors may influence whether or not a coach has training. Most significantly, coaching a high school athletic team is unpaid and requires a significant investment of time, leading to a situation where the demand for coaches is usually higher than the supply. The climate of specialization in youth sports has also affected the availability of qualified coaches, as certified coaches are diverting their time to paid positions through private clinics or club teams. Finally, coaches may not have the time or money to give to training, or once trained, lack access to a mentor or support network that can help facilitate their development and growth. In practical terms, a coaches' lack of training most often leads to interpersonal issues and conflicts with the players, which ultimately impairs the fostering of 'belonging to a community' and developing 'positive relationships with adults/teachers'.

Although the possible repercussions of being part of an 'overly competitive' sporting environment have already been previously discussed, it is important to further clarify that coaches who are primarily focused on winning often exploit their athletes rather than considering their athletes' developmental stages and advancing their athletes' psychological and social best interests. At the most basic level, coaches may exhibit poor behaviour modeling that becomes

coercive or punitive, encourages unsportsmanlike behaviour, and fails to support the social and personal developmental needs of youths. In the context of school connectedness, an overly competitive coach can partake in behaviours that negatively impact the premise of ‘positive student relationships with adults/teachers’, while making decisions that clearly place an emphasis on winning over reinforcing concepts of ‘school rules are fair’ and ‘consistent punishment for breaking the rules’.

Sports are philosophically based on fairness and following a uniform set of rules with clear consequences for infringing upon these rules, however, coaches are often ‘inconsistent in enforcement of the rules’. In school sports, the responsibility of upholding and enforcing the rules falls squarely onto the coach, and notably, the perception of a coaches’ fairness is predominantly based upon the standard of discipline that the coach instills upon the most skilled players on the team. There are a variety of situations in which coaches are forced to practice what they preach, including everyday expectations regarding punctuality and attendance for practices, in-game scenarios where a coach must react on the fly to player performance or attitude, and within the greater school setting, where exceptional athletes may receive additional leeway for dealing with issues related to poor attendance, failing grades, or undesirable school citizenship. If adolescents perceive that their coaches are biased and subjective in their applications of rules and standards, then it becomes increasingly implausible that youths will develop a ‘positive relationship with adults/teachers’.

Recommendations

The associated research question for this study was: In what practical ways can extracurricular school-based youth sports be reimagined in order to create optimal conditions for developing school connectedness in adolescent students? School connectedness constructs were

used as the theoretical filters through which to conceptualize solutions to the specific issues identified as being most relevant to adolescent withdrawal from participation in school based sports.

It is important to note that my recommendations are best suited for application in team sports, and are to be implemented within intramural program designs only. Primarily, this is due to the overwhelming logistics of even considering overhauling the long-entrenched, competitive sporting philosophies employed by provincial extramural school sports sanctioning bodies. Also, because intramural program designs are independently created by individual schools at their own discretion, these settings offer a malleability ideal for the early stages of research reliant on trial and error. Recommendations are organized according to the school connectedness concept most closely associated with that proposal. A sample framework for an intramural spring basketball league that has incorporated these suggestions is included as Appendix B.

Belonging to a Community

The school sports issues identified as most significantly impacting feelings of belonging to a community are specialization and exclusionary team forming practices. The key to any community is inclusiveness, and the basic underlying premise is that school sports programs should focus on creating conditions that lead to, and allow for, the participation of as many students as possible.

Examining the problems related to specialized athletes provides some insight and direction into initial recommendations for changes to school sports program designs. Specialized athletes face separation from their peers and school community primarily due to constraints on their time. Similarly, many other adolescents ‘specialize’ in other interests, such as academics, part-time employment, and family commitments. Many adolescents quit sports as other

priorities become more important; they still want to play competitively in a sport they enjoy, but do not have the time required to invest fully in traditional extramural sporting models. Therefore, as a philosophical starting point, redesigned intramural sports programs need to minimize time commitments and remove consequences for missed games.

There are several practical proposals for addressing concerns regarding time commitments. Firstly, there needs to be a reduction in the overall time required for participation, and fortunately, some of the already established basic characteristics of intramural sports designs are conducive to this purpose. For example, most intramural programs consist entirely of games and are devoid of practice sessions. Furthermore, because all games take place in-school, time requirements are minimized due to geographical convenience and through the removal of the extramural sports expectation of traveling to other schools for competition. I believe that the inherent benefits of intramural programs can be enhanced by ensuring that scheduling and timing of the games are prescribed and consistent. Toward this objective, there are a number of measures that can help maximize the time frame for potentially resolving the scheduling conflicts that might normally act as deterrents for participation. For example, completed schedules for all games should be distributed to participants before the program commences, while games should be scheduled on the same days each week, with no team playing more than two games per week. The duration of games should be restricted to being no longer than one hour in length and are to begin no later than two hours after the conclusion of the school day, ensuring that students are able to keep their evenings free to pursue other endeavours.

As mentioned earlier, students want meaningful opportunities for participation in sports, and the first step toward ensuring this access is to eliminate exclusionary team formation practices. Future intramural leagues should look to include players from across all grades,

genders, and skill levels. So as to create competitive and social parity, teams should be organized so that there is a general mix of these traits, and there are two main options for accomplishing this. Firstly, teams can be composed using a draft format, where certain students are chosen as team captains and are involved in selecting the rest of their teammates. It is recommended that team captains be chosen for leadership qualities and not for skill based reasons. On the positive side, the draft format ensures that all participants are eventually absorbed onto a team and that there is some control in being able to play with friends, however, the process still stratifies student ability based on the position that they are selected. The other option is to have the adult/teacher organizer of the sports program create teams that attempt to balance the various player demographic traits evenly amongst teams. Regardless of the method and degree of randomness, mixing up the teams has the important effect of creating relationships between students in the same school community that might not occur otherwise.

Similarly, recommendations for future school based intramurals programs need to find ways to ensure that playing time is allocated equally to all participants. In fact, this can be done quite easily. The first step is to ensure that all participating teams have at least 1.5 times the requisite number of players necessary for on-field competition. For example, in basketball there are 5 players per team on the court during normal gameplay, meaning that teams would need to have a minimum of 8 players. The next step is to break down each sport's timing or scoring system into chunked units that can be evenly divided and clearly demarcated. For example, it could be every 5 minutes in a basketball game or every 5 points in netball, but when these timing targets are reached, each team has to make substitutions. By following the substitution rules that no one player can sit two shifts in a row and no one player can play more than two

shifts in a row, all participants should receive relatively equal opportunities for meaningful participation.

There are some additional ways that intramural programs can be designed to encourage belonging to a community. First of all, the successful running of the program should be the shared responsibility of the participants, and as such, students are expected to be in charge of duties such as gym preparation, score keeping, and refereeing. In terms of organizing this, information can be included on the schedule that makes a particular team responsible for these jobs on specific days. In the case of refereeing, students can gain perspective and first-hand experience in understanding the difficulties associated with attempting to fairly and consistently apply and enforce rules. My final recommendation is that league specific team t-shirts be provided to all participants. Identical shirts in varying team colours act as uniforms during game situations, and are an easy way to increase connectedness through a highly visible shared community identity.

Positive Relationships with Adults/Teachers

Typical sporting models inherently place coaches and adults in positions of power over their athletes, and these inequitable power dynamics are frequently the underlying root cause of conflict in relationships between coaches and adolescents. In terms of specific issues, research revealed that reports of negative student interactions with coaches most often resulted from a coaches' lack of training and excessive emphasis on winning, while being predominantly manifested in the practices of exclusionary team forming and unequal allocation of playing time.

The easiest way to address the problems associated with the influence of leadership is to simply remove the coach. Similar to the discussion in the previous section, this suggestion is made more plausible by the fact that most forms of school intramural sports programs already do

not require the need for coaching or coaches. Coupled with the recommendations for a revised sporting model that eliminates cutting and inequitable distribution of playing time, the need for a coach is only further diminished. Abolishing the role of coach also mitigates the issues of a lack of training and being overly competitive.

However, the elimination of coaches only minimizes the potential for negative interactions with adults by avoiding them completely, and wholly undermines the connectedness goal of developing positive relationships with adults or teachers. Therefore, I recommended that a significant aspect of any conceptualization of future school sports models should focus on putting students in positions to work alongside adults as opposed to under their command. In practice, this can take two mutually inclusive forms. The first is to develop peer relationships and mentorship opportunities through shared responsibilities. For example, have students score keep or referee with teachers. The other option is to create a teacher team that participates in the intramural program. Students are able to interact with their adult teachers in a competitive environment that subjects teachers to the same rules and standards of enforcement. This has the dual effect of providing guidelines for the adults to model appropriate behaviours, while creating settings that, absent of the usual imbalanced power dynamics, allow for the development of positive relationships between youth and school staff.

School Rules are Fair and Consistent Punishment for Breaking the Rules

The primary practitioners and enforcers of rules in current school sports models are the coaches. Therefore, the recommendation to eliminate the role of coaches also alleviates concerns related to the impact of coaches with unfair rules and inconsistent consequences; any coaching decision that might normally be open to subjective interpretation and assessments of fairness and hypocrisy would be rendered inconsequential.

Similarly, recommendations for improving these two school connectedness concepts are encapsulated as part of previous suggestions. For example, the perception that rules are fair will be supported by the initiatives that advocate for equal access to sport participation, inclusive team formation, distribution of playing time, and in the expectation of sharing responsibilities. With the participation of a teacher team, students are able to see adults being held to the exact same rules, standards and consequences that they are. The duty of refereeing provides students with invaluable experience that will allow them to truly understand and impose notions of fairness, as well as comprehend the difficulties associated with enforcing rules within a simple black and white binary.

Future Research

Limitations of this study begin with the fact that this is a capstone project and that there is no empirical data to reinforce, substantiate, or statistically verify my assertions. Future research should look to implement the recommendations presented within this article, and then investigate the efficacy of these resolutions in relation to the stated goal of improving adolescent measures of school connectedness via participation in school based sports. Initial studies would employ a single-subject group design, with positive results determining the necessity for subsequent controlled group studies.

Future researchers should employ measurement tools with the intention of collecting empirical data for the purpose of conducting relevant statistical analysis in hopes of demonstrating causality. As an example, The Hemingway Measure of Adolescent Connectedness is a useful and theoretically relevant measurement instrument. A copy of this document has been included as Appendix A.

Conclusion

The ability of school sports to bring about positive interpersonal growth in adolescents is clear; my own participation in high school sports saved me from a path of self-destructive behaviours. Sports teach lessons about coming together, teamwork, and bonding, yet the designs of the programs in which sports are delivered are exclusionary, suggesting that there exists a fundamental and basic need for expanding the reach of sporting opportunity. My recommendations for reshaping intramural sports program designs are based on the theoretical frameworks of school connectedness, and purposely emphasize values of inclusiveness, equality, and community. Furthermore, these suggestions are meant to be easily implemented and transferable across a variety of team sports and school settings. It is my hope that the proposals outlined in this paper will allow adolescents to have increasingly unhindered access to meaningful participation in extracurricular school based sports.

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Appendices

Appendix A- The Hemingway Measure of Adolescent Connectedness (Short Form)



Adolescent Version A

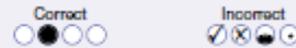
The Hemingway Measure of Adolescent Connectedness[®]

(MAC 5 Adolescent, grades 6-12)

M. J. Karcher, Ed.D., Ph.D., University of Texas at San Antonio

MARKING INSTRUCTIONS

- Use number 2 pencil only.
- Make dark marks that fill the circle completely.
- Erase cleanly any mark you wish to change.
- Make no stray marks.



Name: Number: Date:

Sex: Male Female Grade: 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 Age:

Race/Ethnicity: White Black Hispanic Asian BI-racial Other:

Who do you live with? Mother Father Both Other:

Please use this survey to tell us about yourself. Read each statement. MARK the number that best describes how true that statement is for you or how much you agree with it. If a statement is unclear to you, ask for an explanation. If it is still unclear, mark the "?".

"How TRUE about you is each sentence?"

	Not at all true	Not really true	Sort of true	True	Very true	? Unclear
(1) I like hanging out around where I live (like in my neighborhood).	1	2	3	4	5	?
(2) Spending time with friends is not so important to me.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(3) I can name 5 things that others like about me.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(4) My family has fun together.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(5) I have a lot of fun with my brother(s) or sister(s). (leave blank if you have none)	1	2	3	4	5	?
(6) I work hard at school.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(7) My classmates often bother me.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(8) I care what my teachers think of me.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(9) I will have a good future.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(10) I enjoy spending time by myself reading.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(11) I spend a lot of time with kids around where I live.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(12) I have friends I'm really close to and trust completely.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(13) There is not much that is unique or special about me.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(14) It is important that my parents trust me.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(15) I feel close to my brother(s) or sister(s). (leave blank if you have none)	1	2	3	4	5	?

(16) I enjoy being at school.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(17) I like pretty much all of the other kids in my grade.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(18) I do not get along with some of my teachers.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(19) Doing well in school will help me in the future.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(20) I like to read.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(21) I get along with the kids in my neighborhood.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(22) Spending time with my friends is a big part of my life.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(23) I can name 3 things that other kids like about me.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(24) I enjoy spending time with my parents.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(25) I enjoy spending time with my brothers/sisters. (leave blank if you have none)	1	2	3	4	5	?
(26) I get bored in school a lot.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(27) I like working with my classmates.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(28) I want to be respected by my teachers.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(29) I do things outside of school to prepare for my future.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(30) I never read books in my free time.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(31) I often spend time playing or doing things in my neighborhood.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(32) My friends and I talk openly with each other about personal things.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(33) I really like who I am.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(34) My parents and I disagree about many things.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(35) I try to spend time with my brothers/sisters when I can. (leave blank if you have none)	1	2	3	4	5	?
(36) I do well in school.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(37) I get along well with the other students in my classes.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(38) I try to get along with my teachers.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(39) I do lots of things to prepare for my future.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(40) I often read when I have free time.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(41) I hang out a lot with kids in my neighborhood.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(42) I spend as much time as I can with my friends.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(43) I have special hobbies, skills, or talents.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(44) My parents and I get along well.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(45) I try to avoid being around my brother/sister(s). (leave blank if you have none)	1	2	3	4	5	?
(46) I feel good about myself when I am at school.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(47) I am liked by my classmates.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(48) I always try hard to earn my teachers' trust.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(49) I think about my future often.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(50) I usually like my teachers.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(51) My neighborhood is boring.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(52) My friends and I spend a lot of time talking about things.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(53) I have unique interests or skills that make me interesting.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(54) I care about my parents very much.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(55) What I do now will not affect my future.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(56) Doing well in school is important to me.	1	2	3	4	5	?
(57) I rarely fight or argue with the other kids at school.	1	2	3	4	5	?

Appendix B – Sample Model for School Connectedness Focused Basketball League**Format**

- ❖ The number of teams will be based on the number of students who participate, there will be 8 to 10 players per team
- ❖ There will be a teacher team that participates in the regular season
- ❖ Captains will be chosen by Mr. Berkbigler, then the original captains will pick a co-captain, and a team colour
- ❖ Co-captains will then engage in a draft to pick the remaining players of their team, the draft will be ‘reverse snake’ style
- ❖ There will be at least ten regular season games, followed by a double elimination playoff tournament, with the finals being played at lunch
- ❖ Most teams will have 2 games a week with a set schedule for play days; the entire schedule for the regular season will be provided to you before the league starts
- ❖ We are looking at game times of 3:30pm, 4:30pm. The game times will be evenly dispersed amongst all teams
- ❖ Specific teams will be designated certain days that they are responsible for handling setup, scorekeeping and refereeing duties
- ❖ Students will not referee the playoff games

Rules

- ❖ All players must have their team shirt to play
- ❖ Games are played in two halves of 25 minutes running time, except for the last two minutes of the second half.
- ❖ There will be player substitutions every 5 minutes of the game when a game stoppage occurs.
- ❖ Players may double shift, but not triple shift, and no player can sit two shifts in a row
- ❖ If a team is short players, the opposing team may allow the short team to play short and triple shift if necessary
- ❖ Nobody can foul out, fouls will be accumulated and totalled per half, with the team with fewer fouls shooting the difference at the end of each half...
- ❖ If a game is tied at the end of regulation there will be a 5 minute overtime, no ties
- ❖ Technical fouls will count as 3 team fouls and that player will not be able to play for the rest of the half in which the foul was committed
- ❖ All regular basketball rules apply

Cost

- ❖ 25 dollars per player includes: a team shirt, minimum 10 league games, minimum 2 playoff games, and awards for the champions