



TECHNIUM
SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL

Vol. 20, 2021

**A new decade
for social changes**

www.techniumscience.com

ISSN 2668-7798



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In Pursuit of Excellence: Student-Athlete Achievers' Motivations, Opportunities, and Struggles

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Abstract: Twenty-first-century education recognizes the role of sports as one framework for life-long skills, values, health, and well-being. The purpose of the study was to explore the on and off-field experiences of the six Junior High School student-athletes, the driving forces associated with their participation, and its influences and contribution to their excellent performance both in academics and in sports. This study utilized the qualitative research design using the phenomenological approach to gather insights into the lived experiences of the participants. The recursive textual data analysis revealed five core themes and the essence of the phenomenon: Motivated to Excel, Strong Support System, Rewarding Opportunities, Surpassed the Hurdles, and Exercised Self-Regulation. The themes revealed that the participants highly valued the positive impact of their sports involvement and the support of significant persons in their life. The findings implied that a comprehensive understanding of the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of the student-athletes, their self-regulation skill, and support system facilitated a more effective approach in providing a nurturing learning environment that enhances academic performance, sports skills, and holistic health.

Keywords. Sports, student-athletes, phenomenology, academic performance, Philippines

1. Introduction

Education in the 21st century recognizes the role of sports in the acquisition of life-long skills and values, and in the promotion of good health and well-being. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [1], the dynamic form of education through sports has the power to provide a universal framework for learning values, to support active learning, to complement cognitive skills, to increase amounts of responsibility among students, and to enhance their level of concentration and participation in school activities. Associated with these cognitive benefits, [2] stressed that sports improve classroom behaviour contributing to the enhanced academic performance of pupils either directly or through the achievement of wider social outcomes. [3] also cited that the potential psychological and social benefits of sport may indirectly improve academic performance, enhance mental health, improve feelings of connectedness with school, and develop positive social behaviours. [4] conferred that student-athletes engaged in sports for reasons that satisfied their need for

competence and relatedness. They have experienced varied factors that can be both sources of opportunities and success [5], and they have emphasized the importance of sports participation in their identity, purpose, and achievement in life [6]

It was emphasized during the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Sports the need to appreciate and explore the values of sports in today's world for it helps everyone listen to each other, prevent conflicts, and improve human health and well-being [7]. Article XIV Section 19 of the 1987 Philippine Constitution strongly mandates that "The State shall promote physical education and encourage sports programs, league competitions, and amateur sports, including training for international competitions, to foster self-discipline, teamwork, and excellence for the development of a healthy and alert citizenry" [8]. Henceforth, for several generations, the integration of education and sports has been identified with each other and has become embedded within academic offerings on many levels. Quality education cannot be delivered effectively to students in the absence of co-curricular activities that supplement classroom curriculum, and critical supports that address their unique needs and interest. Having sports program in school have a life-changing effect among student-athletes for it has come to play a major role in their lives across the country today.

However, issues concerning students' involvement in sports and their academic achievement have been a subject of arguments in educational institutions. According to [9], some members of the academe considered sports participation a hindrance to students' ability to excel in academics because most of their time is spent in training and in competitions rather than in studying and in complying with school requirements. [10] presented in their review the problematic aspects derived from the combination of the high level of sports participation and academic study. [11] also stressed that student-athlete achievers faced an intensification of potential stressors as they qualify in a higher phase of the competition and academic demands. Thus, for student-athletes to achieve excellence in sports as well as in academics is relatively impossible. Nonetheless, the study of former researchers highlighted that sports participation improved student-athlete perceptions on academic excellence and mental processes, and on becoming more logical and patient.

While there is a number of extensive researches investigating the impact of sports participation on academic performance, the relationship between the support system and academic achievements, academic and athletic motivation, and stress coping behaviours of athletes, there is a dearth of substantial information on the lived experiences of student-athletes excellently performing both in academic and sport settings.

Hence, the study was conceived in view of the researcher's desire to explore the on-and-off field experiences of Junior High School student-athlete achievers.

2. Method

This study utilized the qualitative research design using the phenomenological approach to gather insights into the lived experiences of Junior High School student-athlete achievers and describe how they experience a certain phenomenon. This research design is used extensively in studying human opinions, themes, and motivations [12]. The participants shared their opinions and experiences orally for according to [13], qualitative research tends to use language data in the form of oral and writing. The meaning of the experiences is primarily about what the participants think and not what the researcher thinks about the participants' experiences [14]. Similarly, empowering individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study encourages the conduct of research [15].

The term participant was used for it acknowledges the phenomenological perspective that the emergent meaning is co-constituted by the description of the experiences and the interpretative experiences of the one seeking the pre-reflective structure of the experience [16]. The six student-athletes recommended by the gatekeepers, who were the Coordinator of Sports and Cultural Activities, and the Coordinator of Student Activities, met the essential qualifications set in the inclusion criteria: student-athlete medallist; elementary school alumni; academic honors; active student council/organization or club member; and lives with the nuclear family. They were determined using the purposive sampling technique. According to [17], purposeful sampling is a sampling technique used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest. Furthermore, the purposive sampling technique is suitable for qualitative studies where the researcher is interested in the informants who have the best knowledge concerning the research topic [18]. The general aim of sampling in qualitative research is to acquire the needed information and data for a better understanding of the phenomena. There is no limit on how many informants should make up a purposive sample, as long as the needed information is saturated and fully obtained [19].

A letter of approval was sent to the Integrated School Principal of a Catholic Private Institution and the two gatekeepers. This was done to formally ask the approval from the school authorities to conduct the study. Upon approval, the researcher communicated with all the participants to personally inform them of their participation in the said research undertaking and to seek the approval of their parents. Each participant was given a copy of the informed assent and the informed consent for their parents to secure willingly their approval.

The data were collected from the participants using an in-depth semi-structured interview. Interviewing is the most common form of data collection in qualitative research [20], and the best gathering procedure to generate the mass of words from the participants, in which observational data are described and summarized [21]. Moreover, an interview is a technique that involves oral questioning of the participants, collects data as it answers the questions posed, recorded by either written or audio, or by a combination of both [22]. Guided by the interview protocol, the researcher explained the purpose of the study, the duration of the interview, the content, the confidentiality, the informed assent and consent, the digital recording method, and the use of the data gathered. A virtual interview with each participant was conducted privately and digitally recorded.

The interview transcript was returned to participants to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences. After the participant validation, the recursive textual data analysis guided by the three C's of Lichtman [23] - Coding, Categorizing, and Conceptualizing - was used to cull out the experiences of student-athlete achievers. The transcribed interview of the six participants was thoroughly read and reread to acquire a sense of the experiences of each participant. Significant statements were identified and coded which relatively pertained to the conceived phenomenon, and arranged into categories, which allowed themes to emerge and then integrated into an exhaustive description.

The materials that contained the raw information were appropriately stored and protected so that no one can access them except the researcher. All handwritten and printed materials derived from their answers were destroyed by manual shredding, and the digital recording was deleted after the data processing was finished.

3. Results

The data analysis revealed five core themes and the essence of the phenomenon. The themes that emerged describing the lived experiences of Junior High school student-athlete

achievers were Motivated to Excel, Strong Support System, Rewarding Opportunities, Surpassed the Hurdles, and Exercised Self-Regulation.

Motivated to Excel. The determinants that drive student-athletes to excel in both sports and in academics encompasses the internal and external forces that encourage and inspire them to be actively engaged and get involved in school activities.

Intrinsic Motivation. All participants emphasized the value of their athletic experience to one's happiness, and for self-fulfilment and satisfaction.

"I feel happy about my achievement. I just do my best in everything."

"I am happy every time I play for the school, and I told myself to give my all."

"I continue to train to improve myself and excel."

"Sports give me good vibes; it lifts me up and I feel comfortable. Sports is for me comfort zone."

"*Na meet ang interest ko sang sports* (Sports meet my interest) because I became more confident, and determined to achieve more."

"Joining in sports is my passion and a way to improve my skill. Yes, it really is a big help in boosting my confidence."

Extrinsic Motivation. The external factors that increase their drive to excel in a chosen field of sports and in academics were identified by the six participants. The garnering of praise, admiration, and recognition after a win or a work well done enhanced their motivation to excel for it gives them positive feelings.

"After joining in the competition and winning, there are times when I pass along the hallway, *may ga greet na sa akon* (there are those who greeted me). It's a good feeling because I am not familiar with them. It boosts confidence in myself."

"*Kong magkadto ako biskan diin* (If I go anywhere) I felt happy because when they describe me, they like, '*Nakita mo si* (Have you seen) her, the student-athlete?'"

"When I won from a tournament representing the school, I and my teammates will go up on stage to be recognized. It feels good to be given recognition."

"I am very happy every time I received an award."

"It's very satisfying to hear teachers congratulating us. Then I realized that our hard work is worth it even if our experience was too difficult."

"I am happy every time the lower grade students call my name and also being recognized as a winner during morning students' assembly at the quadrangle."

Strong Support System. The voice of the participants gave life to and identified individuals who have provided a holistic approach in supporting each dimension of their student-athletes life.

Parental Support. The participants described the physical, emotional and financial support of the parents as factors contributing to their holistic sports and academic experiences.

"I felt the support of my parent through their presence during the competition."

"My mother is always there for me, while my father is working hard to sustain my sports expenses."

"The presence of my parents makes me less nervous and inspires me to train harder to become better. It cheers me up that they're there to support me."

“My parents brought me to see a physician for a medical check-up regularly, to make my body healthier so that I can do all and give my best during the training and competition.”

“My parents supported me all the way, like financially. They were around during the competition.”

“My mother helps me with my school works. *Gina dul-ong ako ni Mama sa* (My mother brings me to the) venue for practice and competition.”

Mentors’ Support. The participants highlighted the support of their teachers through their presence and cheers during the competition, and the understanding and consideration extended to them in academics. Furthermore, the coaches also provided support for learning and improving skills.

“Teachers’ encouragement and presence inspire me more to do my best. Seeing them cheering for me and the team was such a nice experience.”

“My coaches and my teachers understand my situation, that’s why I am so grateful to them. They were so understanding, they gave me second chance.”

“I appreciate teachers that come to my tournament to support me and my team. The support of my coaches also matters to me because they teach me important skills.”

“The first support that I’ve truly received from my school is the support of my teachers.”

“I feel the support of the teacher, for they congratulated me and the team for our win.”

“The support of my teachers and class adviser. I am allowed by my teachers to take the special exam. And the support of our coach, because he really teaches us to improve our skills.”

Peer Support. Five of the participants emphasized that the presence, cheers, and the help of classmates, friends, and schoolmates off-and-on athletic environment are manifestations of their full support and concern to them.

“My classmates cheer for me. They inspire me to be confident.”

“*Kong indi ko maka report sa school* (If I cannot report to school) because of tiredness, my classmates will tell me to answer the written activity.”

“My classmates were supporting me like my best friends. They cheer me up to lift my spirits high in the tournament.”

“I feel very touched because my best friend has been supporting me from elementary until high school.”

“I also see and feel the support of our classmates, schoolmates, and friends every time we are in the competition because they are cheering for us all the way.”

Rewarding Opportunities. Participation in sports and other school-related activities provides an avenue for the participants to discover and explore new places, gain friends and acquaintances, and learn and acquire skills and values necessary for life and relationship.

Exposure and Travel. Four participants shared their exposure and travel experiences due to their participation in different levels of athletic events.

“At the age of 10, I already have competed in the National game. I get to experience traveling to different places, and also achieving.”

“Mostly exciting and happy because my family and I could travel together. I would go to regional meet and compete outside Bacolod.”

“We were able to travel a lot to neighbouring places.”

“I have competed here in Bacolod and in other places. When we travel to compete, I really pray.”

New Acquaintance. The involvement and participation in sports and other school activities have provided a venue for the six student-athletes to meet new friends and individuals having the same interest as them in and outside the sports community.

“I was able to meet a lot of influential people, and helped me grow and that changed my mindset about things.”

“I have met a lot of new students and the upper class.”

“I am able to meet a lot of people; I get to socialized.”

“The training, though difficult, makes me happy because I am able to meet a lot of new friends in and outside of our school.”

“I am able to meet new friends from another school during the competition.”

“I am able to meet players from other teams.”

Lessons Learned. The experiences of the participants brought a significant contribution to the acquisition of skills and values essential to life and in their holistic growth.

“I didn’t expect that I will be part of the team. It’s such a nice experience and *damo ko may na learn* (I have learned a lot).”

“I became competent in my studies, work, and in sports.”

“In taekwondo, I have learned self-discipline, also the correct techniques of movements.”

“I was able to develop my leadership skills.”

“I have learned self-defense in Taekwondo, while in Basketball, it’s an exercise for me.”

Three of the participants also shared their realizations.

“When I started in karate, I was like eat all you can. Now that I realized the amount of carbs that I am taking, it changed me into a healthy person.”

“I am amazed by my capacity and drive to excel in both.”

“To always use wits. Because achieving things doesn’t always need guts but I also need to be smart on what I am doing.”

Surpassed the Hurdles. These are the challenges encountered by the participants as they strive to be better and excel in academics and in sports. The hurdles they faced were perceived as the uncertain and temporal psychological state of mind and heart.

Fear of the Unknown. One of the challenges experienced by the participant was their tendency to feel scared or nervous about something and situation that they have no control or knowledge of, and their anxieties in meeting the expectation of others to them.

“I felt anxious during the competition when I saw the opponents. I also feel nervous because I might get a low grade if I will not study well.”

“I feel terrified and nervous. I realized that when you are in a certain event you will really feel the darkest time.”

“I was very nervous and afraid that people would expect more from me.”

“The first obstacle that I have encountered was fear. It was always fear that hinders me to give my very best and competing well.”

“There were times that I feel discouraged.”

“Nervous if our team will win or not in the game.”

Pressure. The second hurdle faced by the participants was their perception of threat or feeling of difficulties and hardships experienced in sporting situations and in their studies.

“During the schedule of exam and at the same time training, it’s a pressure and hard work.”

“I feel the pressure because there are a lot of people believing in me and I don’t want to fail them. I could say that Karate is hard because it is not only physically hard but also emotionally and mentally hard.”

“I felt kind of pressure because I feel that I have to really win for my school.”

“It was kind of hard for me to balance everything, like passing projects and assignments, and going to the venue for practice in swimming. Training in the pool was really hard work.”

“As we all know that studying is not really easy. I need time and focus to learn everything especially during exams.”

“I need to train hard and study hard. Having high grades on the report card is pressure because I need to push myself to study hard in order to get high scores in the examination.”

Exercised Self-Regulation. The voice of the participants revealed their inner strength and toughness, sense of responsibility, self-discipline, and reliance to withstand and surpass the hurdles associated with their academic and sports experiences.

Time Management. Results of the interview revealed that the participants have already practiced planning and organizing their time and activities between school works and sports training.

“For us student-athletes, we took time to study, we took a break and helped each other for our exam.”

“I need to watch out every week to manage my schedule. Week days *dapat naka school mood na ako* (I should be in school mood). After dismissal, I need to go to the gym for practice and training. Then go home to work on my assignments. Saturday is still a whole day of karate training. But Sunday is my rest day because I need to rest.”

“When it’s time to do training, I give my all and focus on Taekwondo alone. And when it’s time to do my studies I only focus on that. When I do assignments at home I do it at night if I still have energy, but if I’m already tired at night I try to do it early in the morning before going to school.”

“Planning ahead of time like when our coach said that I won’t be able to attend in my Monday class because I have to practice.”

“I usually study the lesson ahead of time so that I will be aware of what they’re going to study, and what we’re going to discuss on that day when I was absent.”

“I managed my time like *ga answer ko muna* (I will answer first) school works before I practice or play basketball. Then when I am home, I will answer again my assignment.”

Stress Management. The participants demonstrated a positive way of dealing with and responding to the demands of their responsibility as students and as athletes. They were able to manage stress effectively and adapt to it in a healthy way.

“It is an up and down experience, but I was able to cope because I studied well.”

“I need to positively deal with losing weight gains because this is a challenge that I faced every time I am on training and competition.”

“There are many obstacles but I overcome them with the help of God through prayers.”

“I always look at the brighter picture of things even if there are negative experiences.”

“I worked hard to balance my study and sports training. I pray to God for guidance and strength.”

Seeking Help. All participants acknowledged their need for guidance, assistance, and understanding to deal with and cope with their academic requirements, and to better manage their school life.

“I asked help from my classmate if I missed school works, and also help from subject teachers if there is a new lesson.”

“I asked consideration from my class adviser to reschedule my exam because I need to study first the lessons.”

“When I have a hard time doing my school works, I asked help from my friends, from my senior teammates, and even to my subject teachers.”

“I seek emotional support from my close friend by talking to her.”

“I asked help from my classmate on lessons taught by our teacher.”

The voices of the participants presented the overall role of sports in their lives, emphasized the importance of their experiences, and the value and benefits associated with their active participation. Hence, their lived experiences emerged as significant driving forces that provide the inspiration, assistance, strength, learnings, and satisfaction as they race in the quest for excellence both in academics and in sports. These determining factors that remarkably contributed to their holistic growth and development pushed them to strive for the best and outstandingly accomplish their desired goals and aspirations in and outside the school and sports communities.

4. Discussion

The data collected in this study have provided valuable insights into the experiences of six Junior High School student-athletes, both in academics and in sports. In general, the result of the study describes that the participants are typically and extremely motivated to excel both in sports and in academics. It is stimulating to note that they highly valued the positive impact of their sports involvement for self-fulfilment, life’s lessons and learnings, discoveries and opportunities, and the contribution of other external factors that also lead them to academic success. These motivations according to [4], represented a complex interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation rather than a singular motive. [24] also reported that the academic achievement of students is influenced by important factors which are directly or indirectly, related to self-concept, intrinsic motivation, and self-determination, and the role of significant others such as parents’ support, teachers’ attitude, and peer understanding contribute to the success of their performance. Moreover, [25, 6] presented in their studies that athletes who have positive perceptions of school experience are satisfied with the support received and strong influence from coaches, faculty, parents, family, and teammates.

The support of parents, mentors, and peers as presented in the study, is a key component in the athletes’ success both in sports and in academics. Student-athletes described the stable and dynamic forms of support shown to them both by their mother and father, and how the assistance was significant to and valued by them. The result in the study of [26] indicated that parents play an important role in athletic development throughout childhood and adolescence. Parental help according to [27], like bringing their child to a training session, supporting the competition, motivating them when discouraged, and sharing the child’s success are perceived by young athletes as overwhelming. Other than parents, teachers, and coaches are

also perceived by participants as the most important individuals in their athletic and even in their academic undertakings. They reported that the support of their mentors was paramount. It was presented in the study [6] that athletes embraced the support of teachers in the athletic experience and became more comfortable approaching their teachers in terms of the academic setting. Athletes perceived that the faculty who had shown interest in their academic success provides beneficial effects with them like attending games and even practices. Moreover, [28] reported that coaches have the opportunity to play a pivotal role in facilitating successful integration of sport and education, and according to [29] coaches perceived the enhancement of student athletes' personal development to be an important part of their role. It was also noted that peers, like their classmates and friends, were widely regarded by the participants as valuable sources of support and information especially on understanding and answering their classwork. The support of the classmates and friends led to a positive influence on their academic achievement. Furthermore, their peers displayed a more pro-active way of showing support not only in their academic requirements but also in their sports life with their presence during the competition.

On the contrary, it is interesting to note that the participants experienced a number of hurdles as they strive to excel both in academics and in their field of sports. Results from the interview revealed that they have experienced the fear of the unknown and pressure. According to [29, 30], a traditional assumption in sports psychology research reported that academic study and high-level sports may involve challenges that could make athletes vulnerable to increased levels of stress. Similarly, [5] highlighted that student-athletes aiming to achieve a high level of success both in sports and academic settings are susceptible to increase stress as a result of combined performance demands. However, [31] emphasized that stress may facilitate better sports performance if athletes were able to understand its origin and regulate its intensity, like, fear arising from the anticipation of a challenging course could enhance athlete's concentration. The participants face an intensification of these potential stressors due to academic demands and sports performance.

Despite the negative emotions faced in balancing both the sports and academic commitments, it appears that the experiences of the participants are overwhelmingly positive for they were able to overcome and surpass these challenges due to their self-regulation skills like proper organizing of their time and activities between school works and sports training, managing stress through a healthy mental perspective and with the help of God. Participants revealed that they are seeking support and guidance from parents, coaches, teachers, teammates, classmates, and friends not only in their sports undertakings but also in academic and personal situations. They identified positive relationships with teachers who accommodated their request to reschedule a missed quiz or exam or allowed a make-up assignment. They also stressed that their relationship with friends and teammates was noted to be influential in coping with their academic and emotional concerns. They narrated the importance and strength of the assistance of this supportive system: the parents, coaches, and teammates have been identified by [32] as being sources of social support for young athletes when dealing with competition and stress. This social support reported by [11, 33] was perceived by student-athletes as influential to stress adaptation. For according to [34, 35, 36] promoting positive adaptation to stress and resilience can be developed at a very young age of student-athletes. Their extensive research in sports stressed that athletes displaying high levels of sporting success and general well-being are those that can adapt when confronted with adversaries and stressors.

5. Conclusion

Creating a culture of excellence among student-athletes who have the necessary skills and values to contribute to nation-building is the goal of every educational institution. As the members of the academe taking conscious efforts in creating integral curricular and co-curricular offerings specifically in sports, provide opportunities to usher academic excellence more so hone consistently student-athletes to maximize their full potentials.

The experiences of student-athlete achievers promote a holistic approach to sports involvement. The values of the school and sports climate, and support system were notable in this study. Therefore, school-initiated programs that reinforce student performance and the support of the significant persons before and during competitions had greatly contributed to the success of these student-athletes may it be in academics or in sports, and likewise enhance their holistic health and well-being.

Future exploration into the experiences of student-athletes who are academically deficient could also be useful to discover their tribulations and triumphs.

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