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Covid-19 pandemic and school sporting activities in Ghana: The perceived impacts on students well-being

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Abstract

The Coronavirus pandemic has extremely affected various activities worldwide including school sports. Despite this, little has been done on the consequences of the cancellation of school sporting activities due to the pandemic on the well-being of students. The present study ascertained how cancellation of school sports due to the Covid-19 pandemic influenced the general well-being of students and suggested appropriate interventions to bring back school sports. The purposive sampling technique was used to collect data from Nineteen (19) Senior High School Student` athletes through semi-structured interviews. The data collection tool was created on seven themes: sports programmes, sedentary activities, impacts of the pandemic on sports, sports opportunities, impacts of sports on students` well-being, consequences, and measures to bring back school sports. Content analysis procedures were the main analytical technique. The findings revealed that students are faced with physical, psychological, emotional, economic, mental, and social health challenges. Consequently, students have gained weight, lost scholarship opportunities and friends, and go through fear and anxiety. Therefore, appropriate measures and directives such as; reduction in the number of spectators at stadiums, fumigation of stadiums, vaccination of students, and testing and quarantine are recommended to be followed to help bring back the school sports.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, impacts, sporting activities, students well-being

Introduction

The Coronavirus pandemic has affected all walks of life including activities in schools. The deadly disease which has killed millions in the world has affected the organisation of sporting programmes in many schools. However, sporting activities have been found to boost the immune systems, contribute to social and emotional excitement, improve socialization with peers, and enhance students` attention span (Lim & Pranata, 2021; Coakley, 2011; Gregory & Kaufeldt, 2015) ^[21, 9, 13]. Despite these, the pandemic has made athletes faced with challenges of participating in recreational activities with friends as well as an inter-personal relationship with and coaches (Samuel *et al.*, 2020) ^[31].

According to Omura *et al.* (2021) ^[25], about 57% of high school students play at least one school or community sports team in the past year. Specifically, high school boys mostly participate in 11-aside football activities whereas girls engage in volleyball, and athletics competitions for fun, enjoyment, and fitness (Sevilla *et al.*, 2020) ^[35]. Although participating in school sporting activities contributes immensely to the holistic development of students, this pandemic has led to inactivity, and a lack of in-person interactions among students and coaches, and this could negatively affect students` life (Shepherd *et al.*, 2021) ^[36].

The closure has resulted in students` boredom in schools and spending time on sedentary activities such as sitting for a long-time watching television and playing video games online in their free time (Latomme, 2021) ^[20]. Additionally, students do not participate in games and athletics in schools which can assist them to have fun and enjoy themselves, however, participate in online games and betting activities, and this has resulted in less physically activeness contributed to weight gains and loss of physical fitness (Maddison *et al.*, 2009) ^[23].

The pandemic has caused emotional stress such as sadness and fear in most people, and has presented a high challenge for physical activity performers (Horesh & Brown, 2020) ^[15], and also made athletes experience cognitive and psychological reactions such as disappointment,

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anxiety, fear, and frustration in schools (Taku & Arai, 2020)^[38]. This has impacted many lives negatively and as a result, sports performers do not benefit from social and emotional excitement from friends (Samuel *et al.*, 2020)^[31]. Research confirmed that the pandemic has affected millions of people psychologically, developmentally, and economically due to the closure of sports (Sanderson & Brown, 2020)^[32]. The researchers added that because the future of the restoration of school sports is uncertain, the closure has resulted in psychological struggles among youth athletes. The pandemic has resulted in a loss of playing season and athletes experienced a loss of financial opportunities as well as the opportunity to see and play with peers and friends (Sanderson & Brown, 2020)^[32].

In an attempt to assess the conditions of anxiety and depression among adolescents, Babiss and Gangwisch (2009)^[2] hypothesized that non-participation in regular sporting activities results in ill-health problems of anxiety and depression. The researchers suggest that appropriate time and equipment should be given to the adolescents for them to be encouraged to participate in sports to protect them from these conditions. Besides, when an individual engages in sports, there are social, mental, and physical health benefits that could be derived from participation (Ho *et al.*, 2017)^[14]. Considering this, the current study meant to top up knowledge to look for the general health effects of students who do not participate in sporting activities. Therefore, the present study addressed the physical, mental, psychological, economic, social as well as emotional impacts on students for failing to participate in sports due to the pandemic.

In Ghana, School sports is one of the most exciting programmes in the school curriculum. Students partake in activities such as; athletics, football, volleyball and just to mention a few to acquire opportunities to play for clubs as well as gain scholarships into other tertiary institutions. Despite this, former Ghana Black stars; Asamoah Gyan and Sulley Ali Muntari and a former Ghanaian sprinter, Janet Amponsah, passed through school sporting activities and developed their skills learned in schools into a career. In spite of the numerous benefits of sports participation, this cancellation has affected many students to be disappointed and depressed because they cannot engage in their annual inter-school and college sporting activities. Considering this, the present study intends to address the effects that closure of school sports has had on the well-being of students and the appropriate measures to bring back school sports.

Literature Review

The impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on sports has affected many activities. Since the emergence of this pandemic, numerous activities such as sporting and economic events have been postponed while others are cancelled. The pandemic led to the postponement of the Olympic Games 2020 as well as the UEFA Euro 2020 (BBC, 2020)^[4]. According to Kaur *et al.* (2020)^[17], the pandemic has resulted in the closure of fitness and activities centers such as gyms, playgrounds, and stadiums and therefore, many individuals could not get access to these facilities to train and work on their muscles to achieve fitness goals. Meanwhile, the closure of sports playgrounds was instituted to stop the spread of the pandemic. Consequently, even though research indicates that sports enhance physical and psychological skills which include stress management and physical activeness (Reardon *et al.*, 2019)^[29], training and competition interruptions could result to fear of disruption of career opportunities, loss of friends as well as sponsorships,

and other financial assistance (Sanderson & Brown, 2020)^[32]. Despite this, students' participation in sports seems to be less affected by disturbing psychological systems since they have the benefit of speaking and interacting with their peers and sharing responsibilities (Reardon, *et al.*, 2019)^[29].

Healthy individuals generally reach the developmental milestones at their appropriate ages as they grow especially, in the school-going ages (Sawyer *et al.*, 2018)^[33], and therefore for a person to be healthy, that person goes through day-to-day healthy lifestyles such as sports participation. This is because, sports participation leads to better circulation and supply of oxygen to the brain, increases cognitive thinking capacity, creativity, memory power, reasoning, and language ability, increase motor skills, bone muscle density, develop self-confidence and self-esteem (Brubanec, 2011)^[7]. Despite the benefits, the cancellation which was meant to stop the spread of the disease has had a greater psychological struggle in students which includes sharing previous competitions' experiences as they are no longer participating in sporting activities (Sanderson & Brown, 2020)^[32].

Similarly, it has contributed to many individuals not being able to actively engaged in sports and physical activities and as a result, leading sedentary lifestyles such as sitting and reading in schools and at homes, watching televisions, playing games, and gambling online, leading to weakening of the immune system which causes ill-health problems such as hypertension (Akindutire & Olanipekun, 2017)^[1]. Since physical activity plays a vital role in the development of students, Bailey (2006)^[3] added that participating in it influences the health and well-being of students. The researcher affirmed that students who engage in sporting activities perform well in their exams and also have decreased levels of anxiety and depression.

Notwithstanding this, Kniffin *et al.* (2015)^[18] posit that participating in school sports enhances the life-long physical activity and improved health. This assumption, therefore, is in support of the recommendation that; an individual must go through 150 minutes of moderate-intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity physical activity throughout a week to achieve fitness (Piercy *et al.*, 2018)^[28]. Physical activities are essential in human life especially in times of anxiety and fear. Conversely, there are potential stress sports participants encounter which includes decreased sleep, loneliness, fear, anxiety, and many different conditions such as post-traumatic disorders (PTSD) among athletes (Schinke *et al.*, 2020)^[34]. The closure of sports has resulted in the loss of sports-specific physical fitness and stamina and this has led to ill-health conditions like obesity and a decrease in general health (Maddison *et al.*, 2009; Babiss & Gangwisch, 2009)^[23, 2].

In view of this, scholarly research works conclude that if the situation continues and there are inadequate physical activities and sports participation among students, there will be emotional disorders such as anxiety, isolation from others, and displacement of moodiness among students (Moutinho *et al.*, 2017; Papa *et al.*, 2020)^[24, 26]. Regardless, it is very necessary to identify efficient measures and directives to address the situation of the ban on sports participation. Therefore, the Government and other stakeholders must help to restore the school sporting activities.

The objective of the study is to assess how cancellation of school sports due to the Covid-19 pandemic influences the general well-being of students and suggest appropriate interventions to bring back school sports. The main research question for the study is "What are the effects of the abrogation of school sporting activities and the appropriate measures and directives taken to restore school sports?". The sub-research

questions are:

1. What are some of the enjoyable sports programmes that you engaged in before the pandemic?
2. How have you spent your time during the pandemic that would otherwise be spent on those activities?
3. How has Covid-19 impacted school sporting activities these seasons?
4. What do you think will be the opportunities/ benefits (if any) that students might have gained from participation in sports if not this pandemic?
5. How has the cancellation of school sports due to the Covid-19 pandemic influenced your well-being?
6. What do you perceive to be the consequences on students for not participating in sporting activities?
7. What measures do you want the Ghana Education Service and the Government to do to bring back school sporting activities?

Methodology

Research Design

The study used a case study research method which involves the investigation of occurrences over some time. Creswell (2007) ^[11] explained this technique as a qualitative research method in which researchers make in-depth investigations about an event, activity, or situation and describe the situation as it exists. Again, Ellinger *et al.* (2005) ^[12] posited that it is used when investigators have the intention to seek an in-depth understanding of a social phenomenon and be interested in “how what and why” questions. Therefore, employing this technique allowed students to share their views freely and openly on how the cancellation of school sports has affected their general well-being.

Participants

The study involved nineteen (19) Senior High School Form Three Student` Athletes. The student-athletes were considered appropriate because of their level of experience in senior high school sports.

In this regard, participants were deliberately selected based on their knowledge of the impacts of sports participation and their willingness to communicate their experiences and opinions articulately (Creswell *et al.*, 2011; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Bernard, 2002) ^[10, 30, 51]. Since the form three student-athletes have a high level of experience in sporting activities, no first and second-year students were included in the study. This decision was chosen because of their ‘limited’ experiences in Senior High School Sports competitions. Pseudonyms were used for the participants. The participants were coded as “S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6.... S19”

Data Collection Procedure

Semi structured-interview with open-ended questions was applied in the data collection process. Students were asked a series of questions using semi-structured interviews about the impact of this pandemic on school sports which has been cancelled to discover their thoughts and feelings about its effects on their general well-being. The interview sessions were conducted after classes and on weekends. Sessions were done in line with the observation of COVID-19 protocols. With regards to this, the distance between the interviewer and the interviewees during the interview was about two meters with masks on. Each interview lasted 50 to 60 minutes to enable participants to share enough thoughts and experiences about the topic with the researcher. The interviewees were given the chance to revise and edit the questions (Büyüköztürk *et al.*, 2017) ^[8]. Prior to the interview, the ethics together with the purpose of the study were explained to the participants. Parents of the participants were contacted via phone to explain the ethical issues in detail on the phone to them before the interviews were conducted for students. Consent forms were signed by each participant. Participants were informed that they can withdraw at any time if they think they have exhausted their views on the topic. Again, the participants were made aware that there will be no monetary gain while they participate in the study, and also their responses will be recorded for transcription. Afterwards, a copy of the transcript was given to the participants to review. The participants were allowed to check if the data transcribed attests to what he or she said during the interview. This supported the idea that credit should be used in qualitative research to test internal validity in qualitative studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) ^[22].

Pilot Study

Before the study, a pilot interview was conducted with a student-athlete who has competed for his school for the past two years and is now in form three. The interview was conducted based on the purpose of the study. The pilot interview helped the researcher to improve the questions by making some amendments. In addition, it aided the researcher to set standardized questions needed to stimulate an appropriate depth of conversation (Kvale, 1996) ^[19].

Data collection procedure was created on seven (7) themes which included; sports programs, activities students spend time on, the impact of the pandemic on school sports, sports participation opportunities, the impact of sports participation on students` well-being, consequences for not participating in sports and the measures to be taken to bring back school sports. The data collection procedure was presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Semi-structured interviews Questions and themes

| | Questions | Themes |
|----|--|--|
| 1. | What are some of the enjoyable sports programmes that you engaged in before the pandemic? | Sports Programmes |
| 2. | So how have you spent your time during the pandemic that would otherwise be spent on those activities? To what extent are you coping with the situation at the moment? | Activities students spend time on |
| 3. | Alright, generally, how has Covid-19 impacted school sporting activities these seasons? | Impact of the pandemic on sports |
| 4. | What do you think will be the opportunities/ benefits (if any) that students might have gained from participation in sports if not this pandemic? | Sports participation opportunities |
| 5. | How has the cancellation of school sports due to the Covid-19 pandemic influenced your well-being? | Impact of sports participation on students` well-being |
| 6. | What do you perceive to be the consequences on students for not participating in sporting activities because of the pandemic? | |
| 7. | What measures do you want the Ghana Education Service and the Government to do to bring back school sporting activities? | Measures to be taken to bring back school sports |

Analysis

Responses from the semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim. Content analysis was used to analyse the data. This type of analysis involves subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005)^[16]. In the analysis, the content of the document was examined and the data were categorized into classifications (Sönmez & Alacapınar, 2016)^[37]. Data obtained from the interviews were used to create themes and codes.

Codes were created first and then the similar codes were brought together to form themes. To get accurate and reliable findings, the coding and categorization processes were done many times with the help of an expert.

Findings

The first research question was; what are some of the enjoyable sports programmes that you engaged in before the Covid-19 pandemic? The findings are presented in table 2 below:

Table 2: Sports Programmes/Events

| Themes | Codes | Participants | Frequency |
|-------------------|-------------------|--|-----------|
| Sports Programmes | Volleyball | S1, S3, S4, S5, S7, S11, S13, S15 | 8 |
| | Football (Soccer) | S1, S3, S4, S10, S5, S17, S18, S9, S2, S19 | 10 |
| | Handball | S16, S18, S7, S16, S4, S12 | 6 |
| | Netball | S2, S1, S5, S16, S19 | 5 |
| | Hockey | S4, S15, S9 | 3 |
| | Basketball | S3, S2 | 2 |
| | Athletics | S7, S1, S3, S2, S4, S6, S12, S15, S11, S13, S4, S7 | 12 |
| | Table Tennis | S3, S12, S18 | 3 |
| | Badminton | S5 | 1 |

In table 2, when students were asked to mention some of the enjoyable sports programmes they engaged in before the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic, the sports programmes presented nine (9) different codes. The codes were; football, handball, netball, hockey, basketball, volleyball, athletics, table tennis, and badminton. Among the sports programmes, it was observed that athletics was the students' most enjoyable sports programme before the Covid-19 pandemic, which had a

frequency of 12 followed by football and volleyball with frequencies of 10 and 8 respectively. The other sports programmes were; handball (6), netball (5), hockey (3), table tennis (3), basketball (2), and badminton (1).

The responses from students on the activities they spend their time on since there are no sporting activities were presented in table 3 below.

Table 3: Activities students spend time on

| Theme | Codes | Participants | Frequency |
|---------------------------|---|--|-----------|
| Sedentary Life Activities | Betting online | S3, S14, S1, S17, S11, S2, S4, S16, S18, S12, S5, S13, S9, S19, S7, S14, S10 | 17 |
| | Sitting down for long hours to read books | S12, S2, S6, S10, S8, S14, S4 | 7 |
| | Phone Usage | S2, S4, S12, S6, S18, S12, S17, S5, S13, S7, S19 | 11 |
| | Watching Television | S2, S14, S8 | 3 |
| | Playing online games on computers | S12, S14, S3, S5, S11, S2 | 6 |

From table 3, 6 of the participants observed that since there are no sporting activities, school life is boring and therefore it left alone for you to read your books always. On the other hand, 11 participants opined that they usually spend time on their phones any time they are free and chat online with friends and families. Because campus life is unbearable for some students, 3 and 6 respondents confirmed that they watch television for long hours and play online games respectively. Moreover, majority of the participants constituting 17 students revealed that they engage in soccer betting activities to make money for themselves since there are no sporting and physical activities to keep them busy in school. Some of the expressions by

students are presented below:

“According to a student, in this era of the pandemic, he cannot train at all since there are no competitions ahead of him. In this regard, He always spends time on online betting activities to make money and sometimes watches online videos to entertain himself” [S3].

“On the other hand, another student echoed that, before the Covid-19 pandemic, he participated in athletics and hockey activities for enjoyment and fan making. But now there are no sporting activities, he spends time on my books and online chatting” [S12].

Table 4: Impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on school sports

| Theme | Codes | Participants | Frequency |
|------------------------------|--|---|-----------|
| Impact of Covid-19 on Sports | Cancellation of School Sports | S10, S2, S5, S9, S18, S6, S12, S1, S8, S11, S13 | 11 |
| | Closure of Play Grounds (Parks and Stadiums) | S9, S10, S2, S1, S7, S3, S12, S13 | 8 |
| | Loss of Sports Seasons in Schools | S14, S6, S5, S13, S17, S9 | 6 |

Three different codes are derived from the theme “impacts of Covid-19 on sports” in schools in table 4. From table 4, 11 participants confirmed that cancellation of sports and physical

education programmes in schools is a major impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on school sports. Notwithstanding that alone, closure of playgrounds such as the stadiums (8) as

well as loss of sports seasons (6) were also recognized as students concerns. Because of this, a student opined that: “What pains her most is the closure of the annual inter-co and super-zonal athletics competitions staged in the stadium which

has always been a good and ideal time to see a lot of Junior High School (JHS) friends from different schools to have fun and enjoyment with them”. [S9]

Table 5: Sports Participation Opportunities

| Theme | Codes | Participants | Frequency |
|-------------------------------|---|---|-----------|
| Sports Participation Benefits | Scholarships | S1, S2, S5, S9, S18, S6, S8, S11, S9, S4, S3, S15, S14, S7, S13 | 15 |
| | Travelling Opportunities | S11, S10, S2, S1, S7, S3, S12, S15 | 8 |
| | Cash prizes from old students and school administrators | S9, S5, S13, S17 | 4 |
| | Cash prizes from competitions sponsors | S3, S8, S11 | 3 |

To inquire from the students the opportunities/ benefits that they might have gained from participating in sports if not this pandemic, 15 students concluded that, participating in school sports competitions aid students to acquire scholarships and other financial assistance to study in other institutions. Students argue that they would have gotten some financial assistance if not for this pandemic. Moreover, 8 of the participants also submitted that they would have travelled to places for sports competitions. They added that, when they have such journeys, they go to certain tourist centres and also learn different cultures from where they go. Nonetheless, 4 participants did engage in sporting activities and received cash prizes from old students and school administrators while 3 of the participants

received cash prize rewards from competition sponsors. Considering the above, respondents confirmed that: “Participating in school sporting activities could help athletes to travel from their region to other regions. Specifically travelling from Ashanti Region to Cape Coast in the Central region of Ghana for competitions to have a look at the sea and read meanings to nature since such a resource cannot be found in Ashanti region and also visit historic places like the Cape Coast Castle for learning purposes”. [S15]. “Again, a student posited that sports is like a hobby therefore, I participate in sports to achieve fitness goals to perform daily activities and also win some cash prizes for myself”. [S3].

Table 6: Impact of sports participation on students` well-being

| Theme | Codes | Participants | Frequency |
|---|---------------------------|--|-----------|
| Developmental Impacts of Sports Participation on Students` Well-being | Physical Development | S12, S2, S5, S9, S18, S15, S3, S4, S17, S16 | 10 |
| | Social Development | S14, S6, S5, S3, S1, S7 | 6 |
| | Mental Development | S10, S4, S3, S6, S11, S19 | 6 |
| | Psychological Development | S9, S1, S19, S2, S3, S15, S14, S3, S13, S5, S8 | 11 |
| | Economic Value | S8, S13, S2, S17, S11, S8, S12, S7 | 8 |
| | Emotional Development | S3, S2, S15, S6 | 4 |

In table 6, six sub-themes were developed from the main them “impact of sports participation on students` well-being”. However, they were psychological, physical, social, mental, economic, and emotional well-being development impacts. In the psychological development impact, students were of the view that, because there are no sporting activities in schools, they feel disappointed, stressed, and have even lost interest in participating in future sports programmes. Moreover, some of the respondents added that they undergo anxiety as well as fear and panic at all times.

“Since there are no sporting activities in schools, I go through psychological struggles whenever we share previous competitions` experiences with friends. I am just thinking of stopping schooling because sports is one of the main reasons why I came to school”. [S6]

In the physical development impact, students were worried that they have experienced weight gain, are less physically active, and have lost stamina due to the absence of sporting activities in schools.

“Because sports promote physical fitness and help manage overweight students, not participating in active sports will affect an individual by increasing the weight which could lead to certain ill-health conditions such as obesity”. [S18] “I have been lazy of late and less active because my life has been without sports for the past two seasons”. [S17] “

Moreover, I only eat, learn and sleep (E.L.S) without taking part in any sporting and physical activities due to this pandemic. This has made me gain weight compared to the last two seasons where I engaged in sporting activities.

Consequently, I am afraid this may lead to other health conditions such as for overweight (obesity)”. [S16].

The social development impact which involves a person`s relationship with others was also maintained by the participants. According to them, students are unable to socialize with friends and also cannot reach out to friends because of this pandemic which has brought school sporting activities to a halt. In this regard, students articulate that;

“I cannot partake in games with friends. Through school sports, students from different cultures come together and learn to accept each other. [S1]. “Students make friends and social support particularly in times of difficulty”. [S13]. “Because there are no sporting activities for students for the past two seasons, I cannot approach my friends in different schools as we used to do every year”. [S14].

From the economic development impact, it was perceived that students have lost scholarship opportunities. However, students participate in these school sporting activities to win scholarship opportunities into other tertiary institutions such as Universities and Colleges of Education. In spite of this, some students were of the view that, had it not been this pandemic, they would have won cash prizes from competition sponsors as well old students, and school administrators. Nonetheless, participating in school sports could also help students to learn certain sports skills and used them as a career. Regardless, one participant maintained that:

“Through school sporting activities, Asamoah Gyan, former Ghana Black Stars skipper learn sports skills and used them in his professional football career. He is now enjoying the skills

learned in school sports which are earning him income”. [S11]. “Apart from that, engaging in sports and physical activities could ensure the nation Ghana with healthy and able citizens and this could lead to high productivity” [S2].

In the emotional development impact, although emotional health involves a person’s ability to express appropriate feelings when faced with situations, participants feel sad and not happy at all because they do not participate in school sports in their era for the past two seasons. One participant stated that; “No enjoyment and fan making in schools ever since sports were cancelled and this has brought sadness in schools. Therefore, making life in schools uneasy because sports used to be a source of happiness in school”. [S6]

In the mental development impact, it was revealed that some students were unable to think critically in class whenever a question is asked.

Students find it very difficult to reason and recall concepts learned because they do not participate in any physical activities to refresh their minds. Consequently, there is dullness in students whenever they are learning in class. Despite this, some students emphasized that;

“Because I do not engage in sports and physical activities anymore, my ability to make decisions and good judgment in class has been affected negatively as compared to the time I was doing sports.[S1] “The more I engage in physical activities and sports, the more active my brain and cognitive functions”. [S19] “Therefore, there should be an organization of school sports to have sufficient and effective intellectual power to think critically and recall concepts learned in class” [S3].

The next question is about the appropriate measures to be followed to bring back school sports. In this sense, the participants’ views are in Table 7 as follows.

Table 7: Measures to be followed to bring back school sports

| Theme | Codes | Participants | Frequency |
|----------|---|---|-----------|
| Measures | Vaccination | S8, S3, S14, S6, S2, S15, S1, S18 | 8 |
| | Testing and Quarantine | S1, S3, S10, S7, S13, S11 | 6 |
| | Reducing the number of spectators at stadiums | S6, S1, S2, S10, S7, S13, S9, S3, S17, S7, S9 | 11 |
| | Fumigating the stadiums | S16, S2, S6 | 3 |

Regarding the measures to bring back school sports, four (4) codes were developed from the main theme. The codes were; vaccination, testing, and quarantine fumigating the stadiums or the playgrounds and reducing the number of participants at the stadiums. Among the codes, the majority constituting eleven (11) of the respondents stated that there should be an organization of school sports with a reduced number of students participating in the activities. Eight (8) students believed that every student should be vaccinated to protect students against the virus. Six (6) also expressed that, testing and quarantining those who will test positive could help contain the virus for school sports to be in progress while three (3) students addressed that, since one could contract the virus from coming into contact with infected surfaces, there should be fumigation in all the sports venues (stadiums) to kill the viruses before the start of the sporting activities. With the vaccination, some students advised that;

“Vaccination which involves an introduction of vaccines into the bodies to keep a person healthy is as important as diet and exercise. Therefore, the vaccination will be one of the most convenient and safest preventive care measures available to students to allow them to participate in school sports without danger” [S3] “With the issue of reducing the number of participants at game venues, particular sports can be played behind closed doors without allowing spectators to go to the stadium to watch the activities” [6]. Moreover, only 20% of spectators should be allowed at the stadium to watch sports events instead of the usual full capacity of the stadium, and all should mask up as well. With this, we can contain the virus” [S17].

Discussion of Findings

From the study, it was submitted that before the pandemic, students participated in physical activities in schools to have fun, enjoy themselves, and for physical fitness. The majority of the students liked participating in athletics followed by football (soccer). On the other hand, some students engaged in hockey, table tennis, basketball, and badminton. Although engaging in these physical activities could help students achieve many benefits, most students use online soccer betting activities as their source of fun and money-making. Additionally,

participants engaged in phone usage to play games, watch telenovelas, and read their books to release tension, stress, and anxiety whenever they get bored. Contrariwise, these sedentary life activities have contributed to the loss of stamina, gaining of weight, and others being inactive in their everyday activities. This somewhat is consistent with the statement made by Latomme (2021) ^[20] which indicates that the closure of sporting activities due to the Coronavirus pandemic has caused boredom in students and therefore engaging in sedentary life activities such as sitting down for long hours to read books and playing online games. This behaviour of students, however, has resulted in weight gain and loss of physical fitness in students (Maddisson *et al.*, 2009) ^[23].

Nevertheless, students believed that they would have gotten more opportunities from sports if not the pandemic. From the study, it was identified that traveling opportunities, as well as cash prizes from school authorities and competition sponsors, would have been acquired. The majority of the students concluded that they would have used sports to acquire a scholarship to gain admission into tertiary institutions. Unfortunately, the pandemic has made all the sports opportunities such as scholarships into tertiary institutions go wayward. This opinion is in line with the assertion made by Sanderson and Brown (2020) ^[32] who posited that the pandemic has led to the loss of sports participation benefits such as scholarships to gain admissions into other institutions and other financial assistance to fund students in their education.

Students suffered health-wise as far as physical activities and sports participation are concerned. However, on the impacts of sports on students’ well-being, students were psychologically impaired. Participants maintained that since there are no sports, students feel disappointed, lost interest in participating in sports in the future, and also go through psychological struggles whenever they share previous experiences with friends and tutors. This statement was addressed by Sanderson and Brown (2020) ^[32] who indicated that the cancellation of sports due to the pandemic has influenced the psychological well-being of athletes which has made them feel disappointed and go through stress and anxieties. Regardless, very quick interventions are needed to bring back school sports to eradicate these struggles.

With the physical development, students revealed that their abilities and capabilities to use their muscles and body parts for their day-to-day activities have been affected drastically compared to the past two seasons where they had sporting activities. Despite this, students are worried about their weight gain experience and the loss of stamina. These experiences by the students, therefore, support the Babiss and Gangwisch (2009) [2] assertion which opined that failure to partake in physical activities could result in loss of physical fitness and excessive increase in weight leading to ill-health conditions such as obesity and decrease in overall health. Having considered the students' physical development, students' knowledge about social development which involves improving well-being in the society so that they can reach their full potential was also examined. Students observed that their inability to see and socialize with peers and friends from different schools was a challenge. Students admitted that the pandemic bars them from reaching out to their friends. Students maintained that they cannot interact with friends to share memories and past stories back in Junior High School. This observation was asserted by Samuel *et al.* (2020) [31] who posited that due to the ban on sporting activities, athletes are faced with challenges of seeing and making friends as well as an interpersonal relationship with peers and coaches. As a result, students getting the opportunity to do sports could contribute to the eradication of this challenge of lack of interpersonal relationships among students and coaches (Shepherd *et al.*, 2021) [36]. So that students' ability to approach and interact with friends during intramural and extramural sports competitions would be enhanced.

From the study students' mental developmental impact was discussed. Students addressed that, they feel dull in class and cannot reason and recall concepts quickly because they spend all their time reading books without practical physical education classes and sporting activities in the school. Cognitively, participants' ability to pay attention in class, manage and respond to experiences and information they experience on daily basis was also a challenge. Despite this, it was revealed that during studies and examinations, students cannot think critically when dealing with questions properly as compared to when they had practical physical education lessons and sporting activities in schools. This challenge is in support of the conclusion which states that engaging in sports and physical activities develops human minds which help influence academic achievement such as high aspiration for learning and improved high grades whenever examination is conducted (Bradley *et al.*, 2013; Bailey, 2006) [6, 3].

Emotionally, students' ability to express and manage their feelings in this time of pandemic was also questionable. In the findings, participants' emotions and feelings were largely affected because of the cancellation of sports and other co-curricular activities such as entertainment programmes in schools. Considering this, there are no enjoyable and fun-making activities in schools. Owing to the effects, students feel disappointed for not taking part in sports in their era of staying in school for the past two years, and as a result, staying in school to learn is now difficult.

Economically, although students take part in sports to acquire scholarships and cash prizes, some also learn some skills and use them as a career to earn salaries. On the other hand, it is believed that students participate in sports to increase productivity in society. Studies find that individuals who partake in sports and other physical activities at least three times per week are more productive and miss fewer workdays than their less active counterparts. This therefore could lead to

potential monetary gains. In other words, engaging in sports encourages lower transportation costs as well as smaller health care bills. To elucidate further, students believe that, participating in sporting activities helps strengthen the muscles and the physiological system which contribute to the effective functioning of the system leading to improved health. Consequently, students can work effectively and also prevent certain illnesses to cause a reduction in the nation's expenditure on health.

The findings from the study revealed certain measures that students must follow to bring back school sporting activities. However, this is general information and recommendations and must not be treated as medical advice to participating in sports. Nevertheless, the students suggested that the number of spectators at the stadium must be reduced, vaccination, testing, and quarantine of the positively tested students should also be enforced and fumigation should be done at all sports venues to help kill the virus. While the rates of vaccination protect everyone from contracting the disease, others are still in compliance with the wearing of a mask, washing of hands under running water, and distancing themselves as far as possible can help contain the virus.

In conclusion, although the Covid-19 pandemic has caused the closure of sporting activities in schools, the nature of the Covid-19 disease calls every individual to strengthen the immune system. It is widely recognized that engaging in sports and other physical activities can help improve the immune system, teamwork, leadership skills, how to control tempers, and just to mention a few. In line with the benefits, school sports should be returned and all guidelines, rules, regulations, and recommendations concerning how to contain the virus should be made known to the students. Hence, the National Sports Authority (NSA) Directors, Ghana Education Service (GES) Directors, Heads of institutions, all facilities, and tournament directors, as well as coaches, should help monitor the recommendations and directives that would be set forth by the Government to organize school sports safely and effectively. Despite the findings of the study, the researcher recommends that similar research should be done using the mixed method to make findings more robust.

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