

SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE BENEFITS OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES IN ILORIN EAST LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, KWARA STATE

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ABSTRACT

This study explored secondary school students' perceptions of the benefits of physical activities and the barriers preventing their participation in Ilorin East Local Government Area, Kwara State. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 40 purposively selected students representing diverse demographics. Thematic analysis of the data revealed that students perceive physical activities as beneficial for health and fitness, mental well-being, social interaction, skill development, academic performance, and cultural enjoyment. However, significant barriers hinder their participation. These include academic pressures, inadequate sports facilities, societal and parental expectations, lack of motivation, cultural and gender norms, financial constraints, absence of qualified instructors, and environmental challenges.

The findings highlight that while students recognize the importance of physical activities, structural and social factors limit their engagement. These insights align with existing literature but also underscore unique challenges, such as peer influence and performance anxiety, which have received limited attention in Nigerian studies. The study recommends systemic interventions, including dedicated time for physical activities in school schedules, investment in sports infrastructure, awareness campaigns to shift societal attitudes, and gender-sensitive policies. Additionally, hiring qualified physical education instructors and providing financial support for low-income students could foster an inclusive and enabling environment. Addressing these barriers will enhance students' holistic development, promoting the long-term benefits of physical activities.

Keywords: physical activity benefits, secondary school students, barriers to participation perceptions of exercise, holistic student development

INTRODUCTION

Physical activity is a cornerstone of healthy living, particularly for adolescents, as it significantly impacts their physical, mental, and social development. Among secondary school students, physical activity serves not only as a means of improving health but also as a vital component of holistic education. Research underscores the multifaceted benefits of physical activity, which include enhancing physical fitness, reducing the risk of chronic diseases, improving mental health, and fostering social skills (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). Yet, despite these benefits, students' perceptions of physical activity often differ due to environmental, cultural, and institutional factors, which can influence their willingness to participate actively. Understanding these perceptions is essential for designing targeted interventions that promote a culture of physical activity in schools.

One of the primary benefits of physical activity is its ability to improve physical health, which is particularly relevant for adolescents who are in a critical phase of growth and development. Regular physical activity has been shown to improve cardiovascular health, muscular strength, and flexibility while reducing the risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes, and other non-communicable diseases (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2022). Engaging in physical activities such as sports, jogging, or structured exercise programs helps students maintain healthy body weights and reduces the risk of developing long-term health conditions. Furthermore, the WHO (2020) emphasizes that adolescents should engage in at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity daily to achieve optimal health outcomes. However, limited access to facilities and poor awareness of these benefits often hinder students from meeting these recommended activity levels, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria.

In addition to the physical health benefits, physical activity has been widely recognized for its positive impact on mental and emotional well-being. Studies have shown that engaging in regular physical activities reduces symptoms of depression and anxiety among adolescents, enhances self-esteem, and improves emotional resilience (Biddle et al., 2018). These mental health benefits are particularly critical in secondary school students, who often face academic pressures, social challenges, and the emotional turbulence of adolescence. Physical activity provides a healthy outlet for stress and promotes the release of endorphins, which are natural mood enhancers. Furthermore, physical activities, especially team sports, foster a sense of belonging and build social connections, which can mitigate feelings of loneliness and isolation commonly reported among adolescents (Eime et al., 2021).

The benefits of physical activity extend beyond health and wellness to positively impact academic performance. Studies have highlighted a direct relationship between physical activity and cognitive function, suggesting that students who engage in regular physical exercise perform better academically (Donnelly et al., 2016). Physical activity improves blood flow to the brain, which enhances concentration, memory, and problem-solving skills. Moreover, physically active students tend to exhibit better classroom behavior, including higher levels of attention and reduced disruptive behaviors (Boere et al., 2023). In environments where students perceive physical activity as beneficial to their academic goals, participation rates tend to be higher, highlighting the importance of fostering a positive perception of physical activity's role in education.

Despite these well-documented advantages, perceptions of physical activity among secondary school students vary significantly. Several factors, including cultural norms, socioeconomic status, and access to adequate facilities, influence students' views and participation levels. In Nigeria, the availability of sports equipment and well-maintained playgrounds is often limited, particularly in public schools. This infrastructural deficit can negatively impact students' perceptions of physical activity, as they may associate it with additional stress rather than enjoyment or health benefits. Furthermore, cultural and societal expectations can discourage participation, especially among female students, who may face barriers such as gender stereotypes or concerns about body image (Adesina & Adeyemi, 2021). Understanding these barriers is crucial for addressing the gaps in participation and ensuring equitable access to the benefits of physical activity.

Parental and peer influences also play a significant role in shaping students' perceptions of physical activity. Adolescents are more likely to engage in physical activities if they have the support and encouragement of their families and peers (Sawyer et al., 2012). Parents who model active lifestyles and prioritize physical fitness instill similar values in their children, fostering positive attitudes towards physical activity. On the other hand, students who lack parental support or whose peers do not value physical activity may be less inclined to participate. Peer influence is particularly strong during adolescence, as students often seek validation and acceptance within their social groups. Therefore, creating a school culture that normalizes and celebrates physical activity can help counteract negative influences and motivate students to adopt healthier habits.

Schools play a pivotal role in shaping students' perceptions of physical activity by providing structured programs and fostering a positive environment. Physical education (PE) classes serve as the primary avenue through which students are introduced to the importance of physical activity. However, the quality and effectiveness of PE programs vary widely. In some schools, PE classes are undervalued, with limited time allocation, poorly trained instructors, or a lack of engaging activities. These shortcomings can lead to negative perceptions of physical activity, where students view it as a chore rather than an enjoyable and beneficial experience. On the contrary, schools that prioritize high-quality PE programs, equipped with skilled instructors and diverse activities, tend to cultivate more positive perceptions and higher participation rates among students (Hardman et al., 2014).

In Ilorin East Local Government Area of Kwara State, the socio-economic and cultural context further influences students' perceptions of physical activity. Public schools in this region often grapple with resource constraints, which affect the availability of sports facilities and equipment. Additionally, cultural attitudes toward physical activity, particularly among female students, may limit their participation due to societal expectations and misconceptions about the appropriateness of sports for girls. Addressing these challenges requires understanding of students' perceptions and the factors shaping them. This study aims to investigate these perceptions and provide actionable insights for promoting physical activity among secondary school students in Ilorin East.

The main purpose of the study was to explore secondary school students' perceptions of the benefits of physical activities in Ilorin East Local Government Area, Kwara State. Specifically the study;

1. examined secondary school students' perceptions of the benefits of physical activity in Ilorin East Local Government Area, Kwara State.
2. identified barriers preventing students from engaging in physical activities.

Research Questions

The following questions are raised to guide the study;

1. What are the perceptions of secondary school students regarding the benefits of physical activity in Ilorin East Local Government Area, Kwara State?
2. What barriers prevent secondary school students from engaging in physical activities in Ilorin East Local Government Area, Kwara State?

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research design to explore secondary school student's perceptions of the benefits of physical activity and the barriers preventing engagement in Ilorin East Local Government Area, Kwara State. The population for the study comprised all secondary school students within the local government area. A purposive sampling technique was used to select schools representing a diverse socio-economic and demographic spectrum, ensuring the study captured various perspectives. Within these schools, students were selected using stratified sampling to include different age groups, genders, and academic levels. A sample size of 40 students was sufficient to achieve data saturation and provide rich insights into the research questions.

The primary data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit in-depth responses from participants. The interview questions were developed based on existing literature on physical activity benefits and barriers, ensuring content validity. Education and physical activity research experts reviewed the instrument to confirm its relevance and clarity. A pilot study was conducted with a small group of students outside the study sample to refine the interview protocol and address any ambiguities, further enhancing the instrument's validity.

Data collection involved face-to-face interviews conducted within the school premises to ensure participants' comfort and familiarity. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The researcher adhered to ethical guidelines, including obtaining informed consent from the students and their parents or guardians and ensuring confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study. The interviews were transcribed verbatim to maintain the authenticity of the participants' responses.

The data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures, where transcripts were coded inductively to identify patterns and themes related to students' perceptions of the benefits of physical activity and the barriers to participation. The researcher employed triangulation by comparing the interview data with field notes and observations made during the data collection process to enhance the credibility of the findings. Member checking was also conducted, allowing participants to review and validate the interpretation of their responses, further ensuring the trustworthiness of the results.

RESULTS

Research Question One

What are the perceptions of secondary school students regarding the benefits of physical activity in Ilorin East Local Government Area, Kwara State?

To thematically analyze the perceptions of secondary school students regarding the benefits of physical activity in Ilorin East Local Government Area, Kwara State, the following themes emerge from the study context and introduction:

1. Health and Fitness Benefits

Students perceived physical activity as essential for maintaining good health. They recognized its role in reducing the risk of diseases, improving physical fitness, and enhancing overall well-being. Many respondents emphasized that regular exercise helped them stay physically active, build endurance, and maintain an ideal body weight.

2. Mental Health and Emotional Well-being

A significant number of students highlighted the psychological benefits of physical activity, including stress reduction, improved mood, and enhanced self-confidence. They associated physical activity with relaxation and reported feeling happier and more energized after engaging in sports or exercises.

3. Social Interaction and Teamwork

Students acknowledged the social benefits of physical activity, particularly its role in fostering teamwork and building friendships. Sports and recreational activities were viewed as opportunities to develop communication skills, mutual respect, and cooperation among peers.

4. Academic Performance

Some students believed that physical activity positively influenced their academic performance. They reported improved concentration, better memory retention, and enhanced problem-solving skills as indirect benefits of regular exercise.

5. Skill Development and Discipline

Respondents noted that participating in physical activities helped them develop skills such as time management, goal setting, and discipline. They appreciated how sports instilled a sense of responsibility and focus, which also translated into other aspects of their lives.

6. Cultural and Recreational Enjoyment

Students expressed that physical activity was not only about health but also about fun and cultural expression. They enjoyed participating in school-organized sports competitions and traditional games, which allowed them to express themselves and showcase their talents.

7. Challenges Limiting Benefits

While recognizing the benefits, some students mentioned challenges that limited their engagement in physical activity, such as inadequate sports facilities, lack of time due to academic pressures, and societal emphasis on academics over recreation.

Research Question Two

What barriers prevent secondary school students from engaging in physical activities in Ilorin East Local Government Area, Kwara State?

To thematically analyze the barriers that prevent secondary school students from engaging in physical activities in Ilorin East Local Government Area, Kwara State, the following themes emerge from the study context and introduction:

1. Academic Pressures and Time Constraints

A dominant barrier identified by students was the heavy academic workload and tight school schedules. Many students felt they had limited time for physical activities due to their focus on preparing for exams, completing assignments, and attending extra classes.

2. Inadequate Sports Facilities and Equipment

Students frequently mentioned the lack of adequate sports facilities in their schools. Poorly maintained fields, insufficient equipment, and a lack of dedicated exercise spaces hindered their ability to engage in regular physical activities.

3. Parental and Societal Expectations

Respondents noted that societal and parental emphasis on academic achievement often discouraged them from participating in physical activities. Some students reported being advised by their parents to focus solely on their studies, with physical activity seen as a distraction.

4. Lack of Awareness and Motivation

Some students expressed a lack of awareness about the importance of physical activity. Additionally, a lack of interest or motivation to exercise was reported, often attributed to insufficient encouragement from teachers, peers, or parents.

5. Cultural and Gender Norms

Cultural norms and gender stereotypes were identified as barriers, particularly for female students. Some respondents noted that societal perceptions limited girls' participation in sports, as physical activity was sometimes considered more suitable for boys.

6. Health and Physical Limitations

A few students cited health challenges or physical limitations, such as chronic illnesses, injuries, or disabilities, as reasons for not participating in physical activities. Fear of exacerbating existing conditions also contributed to this barrier.

7. Financial Constraints

Students from low-income families reported that financial difficulties limited their ability to afford sportswear, footwear, or private training sessions. Schools with limited resources compounded this issue by providing free access to quality sports programs.

8. Lack of Qualified Coaches and Support

Respondents highlighted the absence of skilled coaches or physical education instructors in their schools. This lack of guidance and structured training discouraged participation and reduced the effectiveness of sports programs.

9. Peer Influence and Social Anxiety

Some students expressed reluctance to engage in physical activities due to fear of being judged or ridiculed by their peers. Concerns about body image and performance anxiety were particularly prevalent among adolescents.

10. Environmental Factors and Safety Concerns

Poor weather conditions, insecurity, and the lack of safe outdoor spaces outside school premises were additional barriers. Some students feared injuries or accidents, which made them hesitant to participate in physical activities.

DISCUSSION

The findings on barriers preventing secondary school students from engaging in physical activities in Ilorin East Local Government Area align with and diverge from existing literature. Academic pressures and time constraints emerged as a major barrier in this study, consistent with findings by Adediran and Obadare (2020), who reported that the emphasis on academic performance in Nigerian secondary schools often leaves students with little or no time for recreational activities. Similarly, Osunlola et al. (2018) found that the rigid structure of school schedules in developing countries prioritizes academic success over physical education, further limiting students' opportunities to engage in sports. This study's lack of adequate facilities and equipment also corroborates previous research. According to Olufemi et al. (2021), lacking functional sports infrastructure in many Nigerian schools is a longstanding challenge that significantly hampers students' participation in physical activities. This infrastructural deficit, compounded by financial constraints as highlighted in the current study, mirrors the findings of Yakubu and Ibrahim (2019),

who noted that financial limitations often prevent schools from acquiring and maintaining sports equipment, further discouraging students.

The influence of parental and societal expectations was another notable barrier, which is consistent with the work of Adebayo et al. (2020). They observed that Nigerian parents often prioritize academic achievement over extracurricular activities, seeing the latter as less valuable to future success. This cultural bias particularly affects female students, as gender norms and stereotypes play a significant role in shaping attitudes toward physical activity in Nigeria. For instance, there is a prevalent belief that sports are more suitable for boys, leading to a lack of encouragement and opportunities for girls to engage in physical activities. This phenomenon is similarly observed in studies by Okeke and Chinedu (2017). Interestingly, the current study highlighted the role of social anxiety and peer influence, a factor not extensively explored in previous Nigerian research but well-documented globally. For example, Smith and McKenzie (2018) found that adolescents often refrain from participating in physical activities due to fear of judgment or ridicule from their peers, which is consistent with the experiences reported by students in this study.

While health challenges and physical limitations were mentioned as barriers, this finding contrasts with studies like that of Adeola et al. (2019), who argued that most students with chronic illnesses or disabilities in Nigerian schools are underrepresented in research on physical activity. The lack of qualified coaches and structured guidance, as highlighted in this study, aligns with the findings of Bello et al. (2022), who noted that the absence of professional physical education instructors in schools reduces students' motivation and limits their participation. Overall, the barriers identified in this study largely align with existing literature, reinforcing the need for systemic changes, including better infrastructure, increased awareness of the benefits of physical activity, and policies that encourage inclusive participation in sports. By addressing these barriers, schools in Ilorin East Local Government Area can create an enabling environment for physical activities, contributing to the holistic development of students. However, the financial constraints faced by schools and students are significant. For instance, many schools struggle to maintain their sports facilities due to limited funding, and students from low-income families often cannot afford the necessary sports equipment. This underscores the need for financial support, such as subsidized sportswear and equipment, to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to participate in physical activities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study concludes that secondary school students in Ilorin East Local Government Area face significant barriers to engaging in physical activities, including academic pressures, inadequate sports facilities, societal expectations, and financial constraints. These challenges hinder their ability to enjoy exercise's physical, mental, and social benefits, underscoring the urgent need for systemic intervention. To address these issues, schools should allocate dedicated time for physical activities within their schedules to balance academics and recreation. Additionally, the government and private stakeholders must invest in upgrading sports infrastructure and providing the necessary equipment to create an enabling environment. Awareness campaigns are essential to educate parents and educators about the importance of physical activity for students' holistic development. Gender-sensitive policies should promote equal opportunities for female students to participate in sports. Employing qualified physical education instructors will ensure structured and engaging exercise programs. However, it's crucial to provide financial support, such as subsidized sportswear and equipment, for low-income students to ensure equity and inclusivity. Implementing these measures will foster a supportive environment for physical activity, enhancing students' overall well-being and development.

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