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Abstract: Using qualitative research methods involving observations and interviews with four students, their families and friends, this paper examines six ways that student involvement in sports promoted student success: structuring schedules, creating incentives, building confidence, developing positive adult and peer role models, and its role in getting students to develop future aspirations. It then turns to consider how students use their involvement with sports to negotiate the challenges they faced in adopting a successful student identity. Participation in school sports became a powerful justification for successful school performance for the participating students in this study. Finally, this paper ends with several policy implications for considering sports programming in urban schools.

Key Words: Urban Schools, Sports as a Strategy for Improving Academic Performance, Minority Education in Urban Communities

PLAYING THE GAME: SPORTS AS A FORCE FOR PROMOTING IMPROVED ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE FOR URBAN YOUTH

This project grew out of a larger ethnographic research study that examined how high-achieving urban youth negotiate the barriers to academic success. In this article, I explore the ways in which sports played an important role in creating opportunities for high academic achievement in urban schools. At the outset, it was not obvious that sports would be so prevalent a support structure. However, as will be shown in this article, sports emerged as a critical force promoting success as well as an effective strategy for negotiating obstacles commonly experienced by high school students in urban schools. Here, I briefly review the separate bodies of research that explore the achievement of urban youth and the connections between sports and school performance. The findings from this study serve to link these two bodies of literature to illuminate the multiple ways that student involvement in sports promoted academic success. I then consider how students used their involvement with sports to negotiate the challenges they faced in adopting a successful academic identity. Finally, I conclude with the implications for considering sports programming in urban schools.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This article provides a critique of research that conceptualizes culture and racial identity as static and empirically linked rather than dynamic and socially constructed. Much of the research that posits a causal relationship among racial, cultural and academic identity builds on the work of John Ogbu (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Ogbu, 1993, 1994). Ogbu contends that one’s academic identity results from the socio-politically determined status of one’s racial group. He categorizes students as voluntary/immigrant or involuntary/castelike minorities. Immigrant families, who voluntarily chose to immigrate to the United States, view linguistic hardships or discrimination faced in the U.S. as expected obstacles to achieve success. They accept mainstream American cultural and linguistic patterns as useful to getting ahead rather than in conflict with their own cultural practices. Ogbu argues that they are able to hold onto their own cultural beliefs even as they willingly embrace White, middle-class American cultural values because they view those values as congruent with their goals of upward mobility. Thus, Ogbu concludes, “[W]ith this kind of attitude, voluntary minorities are able to cross cultural boundaries and do relatively well in school” (1994, p. 385).

In contrast, involuntary or “castelike” minorities arrived to the U.S. as a result of conquest or colonization. Involuntary minorities understand that inequities and injustices such as institutional racism translate into limited social and economic opportunities. Their history and experience of oppression lead them to
develop an oppositional identity and cultural frame of reference. They often reject any attempts, including efforts by the institution of schools, to assimilate them into the dominant culture.

Critics have pointed out that not all students of color fit into this strict dichotomy of involuntary and voluntary minorities (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 1991). Even Ogbu acknowledged exceptions, such as Black students who, despite being involuntary minorities, excelled in school (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Fordham later (1988) built on this work, finding that Black students who are successful in school do so by dis-identifying with the culture and attitudes of Black peers who did poorly in school. In other words, to succeed, higher achieving Black students lose their oppositional frame of reference to schooling but in so doing, come to view themselves as raceless.

Recent work has built on and expanded Ogbu's and Fordham's work. Davis (1996) documented a third category of students who affirm their racial identity and also do well in school. Foley (1991) added a class analytic lens to Ogbu's and Fordham's socio-political and racial classification. Flores-Gonzalez (1999) examined the social context of the school, thus implicating the institution within which youth are embedded. These later studies offer a complex, nuanced and dynamic analysis of student cultural and academic identities; however, they never fully abandon Ogbu's static constructions. While they better approximate a more dynamic and contextualized notion of identity, they fail to put “culture in motion” as does the work of Rosaldo (1993).

Culture, in Rosaldo's analysis, is ever-changing in response to the different social contexts in which individuals find themselves. He argues for the need to move away from static constructions of culture and identity. While it is important to recognize the role of culture in shaping behavior, we must also see how individuals shape and transform their own culture. "Social analysis," in the words of Rosaldo, "must attend to improvisation, muddling through, and contingent events" (p.103).

An awareness of the dynamic nature of culture leads to a conceptualization of identities as fluid. Stuart Hall (1992) writes, “[T]he] fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy” (p. 277). Instead, Hall argues, “[T]he human subject] assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent ‘self’” (p. 277). Hall's analysis represents a powerful de-centering of the human subject replaced by an understanding of identity as fluid, fragmented, contradictory and unfinished. His analysis reflects the increased importance of the multiple, ever-changing and often contradictory ways that people construct their identities in response to shifting contexts, social structures and diverse human interactions.

Nevertheless, the recognition that identities remain fluid and shifting does not imply that the dominant narratives of race or class or any other essentialist category become irrelevant. These prevalent discourses shape the social worlds in which individuals exist. Thus, rather than taking these categories of race or class as determinants of identity, attention must be paid to how individuals negotiate and respond to these dominant and essentialist discourses in the on-going process of identity construction. In so doing, such analyses interrogate the interaction of social structures and human agency. They pay attention to culture as a process, “as something which is continually produced, even as it may be reproduced” (Levinson & Holland, 1996, p. 13).

In addition to negotiating and responding to dominant discourses of, for example, race and class, individuals also must navigate and negotiate various communities of practice (Wenger, 1998): “As we encounter our effects on the world and develop our relations with others, these layers build upon each other to produce our identity as a very complex interweaving of participative experience and reificative projections.” (p. 151). Individuals inhabit multiple communities that each shape identity formation differently. As Wenger goes on to explain, “Identity is thus more than just a single trajectory; instead, it should be viewed as a nexus of multimembership” (p. 159). Much of the fluidity of identity occurs because people occupy and engage in multiple sites of participation. As people cross contexts, they bring with them their participation styles from prior contexts. How they reconcile (or not) these multiple selves affects their agency in shaping the culture of each community of practice.

Unfortunately, Wenger's analysis fails to examine in detail how people reconcile multiple selves resulting from membership in communities in conflict with each other – particularly when those conflicting communities exist within the same social context. Such realities are frequently the case for urban students as they attempt to achieve a successful academic identity while maintaining a strong social identity with peers who do not esteem academic competence (Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1983; MacLeod, 1995; Willis, 1981). Such realities also make behavior less consistent and predictable and thereby reveal the fluidity of identity.

As well, Wenger's conception of identity as "a nexus of multimembership" (ibid) frames identity as fluid but reactive. Others (Skinner and Holland, 1996), though, build on his work and reconceive of identity as proactive arguing that new identities are formed from different repertoires upon which an individual, inhabiting multiple worlds, can draw. Skinner and Holland refer to these multiple worlds as heteroglossic sites, and their analysis of Nepalese students posits a powerful agency resulting from a proactive conception of identity:

There was not a single homogeneous message students could draw on for (re)creating themselves as moral persons and social selves. Within this heteroglossic site, students had to orchestrate different voices for their understandings of themselves and the world (p. 291).

In forging new identities proactively, students become cultural producers, altering the very contexts in which they are engaged. This reconfigured context affects students' further negotiations creating a mutually transformative process with both context and student identity constantly in flux. As urban youth negotiate conflicting spaces in schools, they simultaneously shape and are affected by the contexts through the on-going creation of new performances which, in turn, shape the different and often conflicting contexts they inhabit.

School sports is unique among the many conflicting contexts urban youth navigate in that family members,
I worked with the students for more than two years. In addition to observations in the schools and homes, I conducted multiple interviews with each student. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. While each student was interviewed alone at least two times, I also interviewed students with their peers and, occasionally, with their families in both formal (recorded and transcribed) and informal interviews (recorded afterward in field notes). I also conducted interviews with family members, teachers, coaches, tutors, friends and other people significant in the lives of the eight participating youth. This article focuses on the four students who identified as student-athletes, three males (two Black and one Filipino) and one Black female.

**PARTICIPANTS**

Matthew

In middle school, Matthew struggled behaviorally in class, but not academically. Of his own compartment, Matthew notes, “Kindergarten to like fifth grade, I was kind of like bad—trying to be with the crowd…. I did my work, but then, it was like, after I did it I just go loud. I couldn’t control myself.” His middle school counselor agrees—Matthew was strong academically, but received numerous referrals and suspensions.

Despite his improvements in sixth and seventh grades, toward the end of his eighth grade year, he was involved in a major fight. Because of his previous conflicts with other students and teachers that year, Matthew was suspended and threatened with expulsion. However, he was never expelled; a counselor noticed his academic record and, instead, assisted Matthew in getting into a high school across town.

Throughout high school, Matthew played football and basketball year around. He was in a local neighborhood gym league when he was not playing for his school teams. While he was successful on both the school and neighborhood sports teams, he felt he was too small to be able to play football in college; therefore, his greatest ambition was to be a point guard on the basketball team at Duke University.

Jalisha

Jalisha attended the same middle school as Matthew. With the exception of living in a working class suburb during her third and fourth grades, Jalisha was raised in a low-income, predominantly Black neighborhood. Jalisha was raised by an active mother and stepfather who regularly attended parent nights and volunteered with programs that served Black students at the school.

Though her experience was less turbulent than Matthew’s, Jalisha had several disciplinary problems in school even while she maintained honor roll every year since second grade. According to her mother, since kindergarten, Jalisha would finish her work early and become disruptive to other students. In the seventh grade, her mother noticed Jalisha getting into trouble because of “her attitude.” And in high school, Jalisha maintained friendships with girls her mother considered negative influences. Despite this, and throughout her academic career, Jalisha was able to push the disciplinary boundaries while avoiding suspension. As well, academically, Jalisha has always done well, maintaining As and Bs.
SPORTS AS A FORCE PROMOTING A SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

In this research examining students' transformation in their school performance, involvement in sports emerged as a critical force in promoting student improvement. In this section, I explore six different ways that sports served to promote student success: structuring schedules, creating incentives, building confidence, developing positive adult and peer role models, and getting students to develop future aspirations. Further, I examine how students used their participation in sports to negotiate academic identity across varied social contexts.

Structure

Involvement in after-school athletics helps structure students' time after school. It pushes students to be more organized with their daily schedule. Prior research recognizes a connection between involvement in extra-curricular programs and greater academic success in school (Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Eckert, 1989). Involvement in sports is also associated with lower rates of delinquent behavior (Segrave, 1980, 1982; Segrave & Hasted, 1984). One way it promotes such positive effects is that it simply keeps student-athletes busy. James, for example, felt that staying busy in the structured activity of high school sports kept him from getting in trouble. He explained, "After having basketball, baseball and track practice, I was like almost too tired to go out. So I just stayed in the house. I think that kind of helped me. Since I was too tired to go out that made the risk of me doing something bad, like lessened."

Yet, staying busy, was not without its problems. Matthew's grandmother reflected on concerns that arose for her:

He likes to play ball. And he want to play too much. He play for everybody. Basketball, football. And I tell him, uh, I tell him he's going to burn himself out. You know. I said you might fall out. You know just playing, playing, playing all the time. But maybe that would keep him busy from running around. You know in the streets trying to be with the, you know, the crowd.

What began as a lament about Matthew's preoccupation with sports became, upon her own reconsideration, a reflection of the benefits of sports involvement. Students involved with after-school athletics find themselves in structured and adult supervised activities exactly during the time period that research reveals is associated with higher rates of adolescent delinquency (Flannery, Williams, & Vazsonyi, 1999). Literature in the sociology of sports also finds that "athletes exhibit significantly less delinquent behavior than nonathletes" (Segrave & Hasted, 1984).

Nevertheless, when Matthew's grades later declined, his grandmother blamed it on his overindulgence in sports stating, "I think he's playing around. He loves basketball more than he loves anything." So while involvement in structured sports activities may inhibit delinquency, it may also compete with time needed for academic work.

As well, we cannot assume that involvement in sports prevents delinquency by building character and conformist attitudes (Miracle & Rees, 1994). It clearly did not for Jamal who was involved in three sports all year around and still got in trouble with the law and in school. While research into student involvement in sports may not reveal an impact on students' tendency for conformist behavior, it does funnel students into adult-supervised activities preventing student-athlete's from engaging in behaviors that undermine successful
school performance. Further, as will be explored below, sports involvement does affect students’ grades and college aspirations.

Incentives

Typically, the literature from the sociology of sports indicates that students involved in high school sports earn better grades than their non-athletic peers (Eitle & Eitle, 2002; McPherson, Curtis, & Loy, 1989; Miracle & Rees, 1994; Okihiro, 1984). Many of these authors contend that linking eligibility requirements to grade point averages (GPA) is key. When students value participating in sports, they work hard academically to maintain a “playable” GPA. When James began playing sports in high school, it didn’t take him long to learn that if “I can’t do my work, I can’t play sports.” Jamal had missed the baseball season in sixth grade and learned this lesson the hard way. After becoming ineligible again in ninth grade because of low grades, he never became ineligible again. He explains how his anger at being ineligible for basketball pushed him to raise his grades:

And, as I will discuss later, sports offered a powerful justification for studying when other forces encouraged students not to study. Even students whose GPAs stayed well above the eligibility requirements voiced this concern. The students in high school, it didn’t take him long to learn that if “I can’t do my work, I can’t play sports.” Jamal had missed the baseball season in sixth grade and learned this lesson the hard way. After becoming ineligible again in ninth grade because of low grades, he never became ineligible again. He explains how his anger at being ineligible for basketball pushed him to raise his grades:

Jamal’s former coach and mentor, Lloyd, also spoke of the role of sports as an incentive for Jamal to improve his grades:

And I think that um with the sports he knew that he had to achieve certain grades if he was going to be able to play. And... in high school... he was playing basketball, baseball, and football. So he was there every night. And it was very rough, you know. If you couldn’t get good grades you didn’t play.

This connection between sports eligibility was voiced over and over again by several of the students. Even students whose GPAs stayed well above the eligibility requirements voiced this concern. The students involved in this study, in part, were motivated to study because of their desire to participate in school sports. And, as I will discuss later, sports offered a powerful justification for studying when other forces encouraged students not to study.

Building Confidence

Assertions about the academic pay-off of self-confidence achieved on the field or in the gym are difficult to substantiate. Nevertheless, participants in this study made these connections. As Jamal’s tutor indicated, “At least he [Jamal] had something to fall back on that he was good at” even as he struggled with reading. She felt that students who can identify with something that gives them pride are more open to engaging in activities that they may find challenging. At a basic level, she felt that confidence in some aspect of your identity is critical stating, “if you’re not comfortable in terms of not being confident, you’re not open. You can’t learn.”

While such connections may be difficult to substantiate, it was clear that sports offered a non-academic school-based arena in which students could develop confidence and a connection to at least one aspect of school. Feeling intimidated by high school as a freshman, James found confidence in track:

Like that ninth grade year I was the only freshman on the on the JV A team. There were like three other sophomores. Which there, when they were seniors they were fastest in the school. So I was like, hey, I ran with them. You know, I was the only freshman on that team. And so, I was just like, maybe I can do something with these guys.

Similarly, Matthew and his grandmother expressed pride in playing on sports teams that took him to play in conferences in Hawaii and Florida. Perhaps more importantly, success in sports creates not only pride in one’s self, but also pride from the surrounding community.

Positive Peer Role Models

Research indicates that involvement in sports in high school increases a student’s sense of their own popularity (Melnick et al., 1992; Okihiro, 1984). It has similarly been shown that involvement in local high school sports affects the development of friendships (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Foley, 1990; Mahoney et al., 2003). Participation in school sports greatly affected the participants in this study. Jamal attributes much of the behavior that got him into trouble at school to the friends he hung out with. These friends from the neighborhood were mostly older than Jamal and, of those who were still enrolled in school, few attended. Later, after he made significant changes in his life, he found that most of his friends were from the football team.

While he did not make the causal connection, his mother and mentor did. Jamal’s mother stated, “His group of friends, I saw them changing.” In high school he became tighter with a group of friends that “played football together. They were outside of school together.” More and more, Jamal and this group of friends “start[ed] to get more focused in on the academics.” Lloyd, Jamal’s mentor similarly felt that developing a new group of friends was critical to Jamal’s turnaround:

As he reached the sophomore year, he really got things turned around. Um and I think it was a combination of having friendships with other people that were doing things that he began to recognize were important because of getting good grades. And he started to recognize that if he wanted to play sports, if he wanted to go on to college this was what everyone expected of him. And uh he I think started to associate with a better group of kids.

This “better group of kids” came from Jamal’s involvement with these kids in sports. And while researchers have argued both ways on whether student-athletes represent a positive or negative influence (Barber et al., 2001; Broh, 2002; Eitle & Eitle, 2002), in Jamal’s case, it clearly seemed to be positive.

Friendships developed through sports were similarly a positive influence on Jamal. He explained that in the
past he was with the wrong group of kids who, “you know, if they know you are doing something wrong and they don’t tell you about it.” He described how his new group of “good” friends that were involved in sports with him became a positive influence on him:

“They were on the good friends side. They weren’t too much of I’d say thugs. They were just like, I’m gonna do my business the way I want to do it. Like you know, play sports, do my homework, whatever. Cause, like four of them. They also played football, so they kept their grades up all year round to play sports. So it kind of, you know, taught me. They play sports for a little motivation to do good in school. You know, we all like playing sports, all five of us. The four and me. We all played sports and stuff. They’d concentrate on schoolwork because if they didn’t and they started failing their classes, they wouldn’t play sports. So they kinda balanced it out saying that I’m gonna play sports and still do my work....”

Over time, James became tighter with this new group of student-athletes. He pulled his grades up to the high 2.0s and low 3.0s. He associated his increased academic performance with his relationships to the student-athletes with whom he became friends.

Positive Adult Role Models

One advantage to participating in sports is the opportunity to develop relationships with caring adults as coaches (Mahiri, 1998). Research consistently credits the role of coaches in the higher achievement of student-athletes (McPherson et al., 1989; Rehberg, 1969; Schafer & Armer, 1972).

Participants in this study similarly articulated the role of coaches in supporting improvement in school performance. Yolanda, Jamal’s mother, felt that coaches played an important role in Jamal’s improvement:

“The coaches saw a lot of potential in my son. Of course, some of the coaches were parents that had children and they were police officers and so, (laughing) by them being police officers they were playing a big role. They were very supportive. They would call if they had any problems. They would call me or they would call Lloyd. They would call and give us a report. Or if, you know, there was a problem with Jamal outside of school or outside of the home that I wanted to talk to them about, you know, I could call them and let them know and they would chat with him and say, “Hey, if you don’t get it together you gonna be going down that road and you know where that’s gonna lead you. It’s gonna lead you to a jail cell.” So they were always good and they were always being supportive. And they would be showing Jamal basically how to turn, continue to turn his life around from a negative to a positive. And how important it was to have the academics as well as the sports and to move forward to move onto college.

Other parents/guardians echoed this sentiment too. Matthew’s grandmother felt that the coaches were a positive influence on her grandson. Research indicates that coaches may play an important role in developing college aspirations. As McPherson et al. (1989) indicate, “Athletes may also receive considerable encouragement from adult significant others (e.g., coaches) at their high schools or colleges. Athletes often report that their high school coach was instrumental in their decision to attend college” (p. 73).

College Aspirations

Not only do coaches inspire college aspirations in students, do peer relationships developed through participation in sports. Jamal’s mentor felt that Jamal’s involvement with a community center basketball team helped Jamal begin to aspire to college. He stated, “[P]robably the athletic team that Jamal was involved with probably... all the kids you know had some aspirations of going to college.” These aspirations, he felt, rubbed off on Jamal. For others, sports provided the incentive to do well in academically. Matthew, his sister and his grandmother made it clear that Matthew was preoccupied with sports over everything else. In inquiring about this further, I asked Matthew why he did so well in school if his main focus was sports. He noted, “I can’t go to Duke if I ain’t got the grades.”

In their review of the literature of the educational impact of high school sports, Miracle and Rees’ (ibid) found that “one of the most consistent findings in the research on the relationship between high school sport and education is that athletics increases participants’ educational aspirations” (p. 138). While they are quick to remind us that college aspirations do not necessarily lead to college success or completion, they argue that high-school athletes are more likely to consider and actually attend college then their non-athlete peers (Mahoney et al., 2003; Spreitzer & Snyder, 1990). Such aspirations are important first steps to successful performance in high school. Athletes, regardless of the sport, are quite aware that some of the best athletic training occurs in college. In striving for the college field or court, students recognize that there is an academic component to it. They are forced to think about SATs and GPAs as a means to obtain their college athletic aspirations. This was no less true for the student-athletes who participated in this study.

Sports involvement promoted even stronger college aspirations for highly successful athletes who were actively recruited by college teams. James, who was the star quarterback for his school’s football team and the fastest person on his high school’s track team, was recruited by several universities and went on to play football at one of the California State Universities with an athletic scholarship. He felt that sports really got him interested in college and got colleges interested in him. He is going to be the first and only member of his large extended family to attend college. It also, in his case, provided the funding that made college feasible.

In several ways, participation in sports promotes successful school performances by offering greater structure, creating incentives, building confidence, developing positive peer and adult role models, and fostering college aspirations. Each of these factors can be found in schools independently; but only rarely are they found together, offered in one program. Sports offers a vehicle to greater academic success. The findings presented thus far affirm and provide greater depth to the quantitative literature reviewed earlier. In the next section, I venture into less often examined territory to
explore how involvement in sports was used by participants as a tool to negotiate obstacles.

THE BLAME GAME: JUSTIFYING SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

All of the students in this study were concerned about their reputations among their peers. Consistent with research on urban schooling (Fordham, 1988; Ogbu, 1993; Omi & Winant, 1994), youth in this study understood well that engagement in school could undermine their social reputation among peers. Maintaining their status among peers while simultaneously acting the part of a successful student required, at times, that students blame their academic efforts on forces beyond their control. Students could justify their high grades and efforts to study on eligibility requirements for involvement in sports. In addition, success in sports promoted their popularity overall; they then used this reputation as an athlete to overshadow any negative labels they might otherwise acquire from their successful academic performance.

The students participating in this study and their families repeatedly articulated the importance of sports in the lives of youth. In many ways, as noted in the previous section, sports helped to promote students’ successful academic performances. Yet perhaps more important than the structures, incentives, confidence, role models and future aspirations that sports extended, involvement offered an effective strategy for negotiating the conflicting contexts these students inhabited.

For the students in this study, their classmates, neighborhood peers, teachers and families all embraced their involvement in sports (with the exception of Matthew’s grandmother who was not against sports involvement per se, but Matthew’s obsession with sports). Sports is a high status activity that accrues benefits to its athletes. For example, Jalisha indicated that, even though she earned similar grades as another Black student who she considered a “nerd” and who “acted white,” Jalisha claimed she successfully avoided such labels, in part, because she gained popularity as a star on the basketball team, “because everybody know me, because I play basketball.”

Similarly, Matthew felt that his identity as an athlete freed him from such labels. Although he had engaged in competitions with his sister to see who could earn the best grades, he clearly distinguished himself from his sister, whom he considered a geek, by asserting his identity as an athlete:

Matthew: I don’t want to be no geek. I want to have a [pause] Cause, most geeks don’t play sports. And I like to play sports.

Eric: Okay, couldn’t you be in the books and play sports?

Matthew: Geeks don’t have time for sports.

Eric: Okay, so your sister doesn’t play sports.

Matthew: No. Here, Matthew differentiated himself from his sister by playing sports. Even though he studied hard and earned grades as high as his sister’s grades, he claimed to avoid being a geek by playing sports. His reputation and identity as an athlete, superseded any reputation he might have earned from high grades.

In reflecting on the challenges Jamal faced in trying to improve his school performance, Jamal’s mentor stated, “I think that’s one of the real challenges as to how you elevate the kids self-confidence and interest in getting good grades without causing them to leave behind their circle of friends.” He found that Jamal’s sports involvement greatly assisted Jamal’s ability to confront this challenge stating that “Jamal worked a lot to do that [catch up on his academic skills] because kids admired him for his sports abilities and therefore he could also spend more time from an academic standpoint and not lose the friendships.” The popularity Jamal gained from being an athlete, meant that he did not have to devote as much attention to his peer circles. He could neglect his friends and focus on his studies without having to worry that such efforts would risk his friendships or popularity.

Involvement in sports enabled these students to maintain their reputations with their peers while still allowing them room to perform well in school. Perhaps even more importantly, the grade requirements for sports could be offered to peers as a justification for their successful school performance rather than any desire to earn good grades. Even if these students valued good grades, they could still appear as if they do not really care about their grades, but rather, earn good grades only to continue playing ball. This is evidenced by the fact that in response to my inquiry about why she earned good grades, Jalisha replied that she needed to earn them for sports, even though her GPA was consistently well above the eligibility requirement for sports participation. Also, James’s statement, “I can’t do my work, I can’t play sports” could reflect his justification for academic efforts as much as it might reflect his motivation.

Thus, sports involvement offers a successful strategy for maintaining a positive reputation with peers by promoting a student’s popularity and offering a justification for academic efforts. A student can assert the identity of an athlete among family, peers, classmates, and teachers without fear that such an identity will conflict with the cultures of any of these contexts. Moreover, the eligibility structure in high school sports offers a convenient justification for successful school performance. Additionally, through involvement with sports students are able to develop relationships with other students who similarly engage in this careful balance between their multiple and conflicted contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

Although Ogbu’s and Fordham’s social analysis of the reality confronting urban students such as Jalisha, Jamal, James, and Matthew is too deterministic and limiting, it does capture the challenge that such urban students encounter. Though their identities are fluid and divergent social contexts are carefully negotiated, this is no easy task. There are clear forces at work within and beyond the school contexts that promote failure and dis-identification with academic success. If this were not so, then we would not find such pervasive failure in urban contexts. In fact, the students in this study
reflect an exception to the prevalent norm; they excelled despite the pervasive failure of so many of their peers. Their success in underfunded, poorly supported and typically ineffective urban schools is remarkable.

Sports represents only one vehicle for promoting urban students' successful academic performance. While the connections can be made through larger quantitative studies, it requires a qualitative and processual analysis to uncover exactly how and in what ways participation in sports shapes students' school performances and identities. This study begins to corroborate the findings of earlier studies and our understandings about the relationship between school performance and participation in sports.

More significantly, this study highlights the critically important role sports play in assisting urban youth in negotiating the conflicted contexts they inhabit on a daily basis. Sports, by being positively embraced by classmates, neighborhood peers, families and school staff, make it perhaps a unique identification for the urban student-athlete to better negotiate her/his conflicted contexts. Moreover, it offers the perfect socially acceptable justification for embracing academic effort. More research is needed to examine other contexts that assist students in the negotiations of their conflicting identifications (i.e. hip hop art forms).

There are many implications for schools and practitioners. First, schools and school districts should make certain that they maintain athletic eligibility requirements for students. Not only does this provide a motivation for struggling student-athletes, it offers a justification for academic effort. However, more research is needed to uncover the impact of the eligibility requirements for students who are unable to attain requisite grades. For Jamal, his commitment to sports was so strong that becoming ineligible frustrated him and motivated him to improve his grades; for others, it might lead to giving up and dropping out.

In addition, this research indicates that involvement in sports is generally positive in urban schools. This would suggest that urban schools should work to increase opportunities for students in sports. However, this recommendation comes at a time when funding has been redirected toward the "back-to-the-basics" movement of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). This has led to a funding squeeze in sports. This ought to be reconsidered as success in the basics will remain elusive if students are not motivated toward academic success.

Another policy movement in schooling is the expansion and growth of "small schools." This could be beneficial in terms of sports if more students are eligible and encouraged to play sports due to the smaller number of students in each school. However, there is a question as to whether the new small schools provide less or more opportunities for sports participation than their older, larger and more traditional high school counterparts. Research into the expansion of small schools and the possible decrease of involvement in sports is similarly needed.

Ideally, this and other similar research will continue to elucidate the powerful ways that participation in sports in urban schools can promote improvement in the academic performance and identities of student-athletes. This research also helps educators become more aware of the complicated negotiations urban students undertake to succeed in urban classrooms. Greater sensitivity to these negotiations helps all urban students, whether involved in sports or not, to better navigate their conflicting worlds to improve their academic performance without undermining their identities in other contexts.

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