The Effects of CCA Participation during Examination Stand-down Period on Examination Results – A School Cross-country Team Experience

備考與考試期間仍舊繼續參與課外活動對考試成績的影響 — 以一支中學校際越野賽跑隊的經歷為例

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Abstract

It is a common practice in schools in Singapore to implement CCA stand-down period of about four weeks prior to the examination to allow students to focus on their revision. This study attempted to investigate the effects of a school sports team's participation in CCA training during the stand-down period on their exams results. A school cross country team where the author taught was selected for the study. It was found that students who continued to train three times a week for four weeks prior to the examinations did not perform any worse in their examination results. Instead students in the team who opted to stand-down, like the rest of the school population, actually performed worse. The athletes who were training were very focused as they felt that time was a premium. They also started work in advance and adopted a more consistent approach to their work. Having training also made these students rest better and gave them a break to recharge and freshen up. Overall, having a goal helps them stay energised and focused. With the necessary guidance and facilitation, juggling CCA and examination can be a valuable learning opportunity for students, making them the holistic students that the CCA programme aims to achieve.

Introduction

It is a common practice in Singapore schools to have a Co-Curricular Activity (CCA) stand-down period, when all CCA cease for about four weeks, before the mid-year and final-year examinations. The rationale for this practice is to allow students to focus on their preparation for the two examinations. The concern is that continuing CCA practice close to the examination period may affect the students' preparation for the examination.

According to the Ministry of Education (MOE), "CCAs are an integral part of our students' holistic education. Through CCA, students discover their interests and talents while developing values and competencies that will prepare them for a rapidly changing world." (MOE, 2016)

While such goals are admirable, the CCA stand-down period contradicts these goals. Having a CCA break prior to the examination sends a message questioning students' ability or necessity to manage CCA while they study.

Juggling CCA and examination is not an unnecessary risk, but a valuable opportunity in the education system. Consistency, confidence and resilience are some very important values and competencies that will prepare our

youth for the dynamic world. Instead of leveraging on this opportunity, the introduction of the revision break has now unintentionally encouraged students to do last minute revisions instead of cultivating good work habits and useful time management skills. Psychologically, an opportunity to develop confident individuals who can cope with the demands of school examinations while continuing with an activity of interest and talent is taken away. Moreover, these breaks prevent progressive physical development that students in sports CCAs require to excel in their sporting endeavors. Frequent disruptions to regular physical activity could even increase the risk of injury.

The main concern of school leaders and administrators is that CCA activity during the examination may be too demanding on the student. It may adversely affect the examination performance of the students. It may even put too much stress on the students who may not be able to manage the demands of CCA practice with revision for the examination. Introducing an examination break of about four weeks seems to be a straightforward solution.

But is it worth giving up the potential educational values of training and studying during the examination so as to help students cope with the examination? Is the examination study break really a solution? Does stopping CCA before the examination lead to better examination results?

Review of Literature

School sports and physical education have long been a part of school systems all over the world. And they have provided students valuable learning opportunities, including exposure to organised physical activity.

Physical activity is widely accepted as an important element in maintaining healthy function and wellbeing that include physical, emotional, individual, social, intellectual and financial wellbeing (Bailey et al., 2015). Several studies have suggested that physical activities improves a student's learning and memory (Taras, 2005) and in fact, it was a significant predictor for better academic performance (Fredricks and Eccles, 2006). Bailey and his colleagues (2015) also show that physical activity can support intellectual development in children but it is often ignored by parents and school policy makers when dealing with academic performance.

Melnick et al. (1992), found out that involvement in extracurricular activities has no bearings on one's grades and standardized test scores but it did lower school dropout rates for some minority youth. Fisher et al. (1996) also reported that sports involvement was not statistically associated with academic performance or scores.

Scott et al. (2008) studied the academic performance of college student-athletes in various sports during in-season and out-of-season. They found out that student-athletes did better out-of-season than in-season due to higher in-season time demands. Another study by Maloney and McCormick (1993) concluded that a student-athlete had poorer academic results compared to a non-athlete due to the sports season. These student-athletes tend to do better than non-athletes during out-of-season.

In the local context, Quek (1994) and Quek and Low (2001) attempted to investigate the relationships between sports participation and academic performance in Singapore schools by conducting several case studies. They found that with proper support and guidance by significant adults, student-athletes can perform well in school while pursuing sports excellence.

Trudeau and Shephard (2008) concluded in their review that the available literature suggests that sports is more likely to benefit academic achievement if offered in schools rather than in other sports contexts, given the proximity of educational resources and environment. There are also researches suggesting that sports participation has a negative effect on academic performance, while acknowledging that there are other benefits like increasing self-esteem and attachment to school.

While some students and parents blame physical activity and CCAs for their poor academic achievement, Sharif and Sargent (2006) concluded that a more likely cause is the time students spend on video games. Parents should implement content limit on screen time and video game instead of physical activity and CCAs which statistically showed that it had a positive effect on physical health, as well as academic performance. In fact, formal Singapore Education Minister, Mr. Heng Swee Keat highlighted the finding from a Student's Health Survey by Health Promotion Board that indeed students are spending more time on television, computers and video games (Lee, 2013).

Adults, student participants and student observers believe that inter-school sports is generally good. It appears that there are mixed findings on the effects of sports participation. What are the reasons for such findings?

The differences in the findings may be explained by the fact that the above studies have been undertaken in different contexts involving different types of sports and age groups. The specific situation and parameters of each study need to be examined carefully in order to make judgements as to the validity of any findings. Moreover, the majority of the above studies were completed in the US context which is clearly very different from that in Singapore. Nevertheless, the above references provide us with some indication of the complexity of the debate. Although there are studies showing positive effect of sports participation on academic performance, none of the studies are into the effect of sports participation during examination period on academic performance.

The aim of this study was to investigate if continuous participation in sports CCA during the four-week stand-down period before examination affects academic performance. The perception the students and their parents have of this experience and the reasons for the outcome of their participation were also investigated.

The Study

A cross country team from a local secondary school where the author taught was introduced the idea of training through the examination stand-down period. Instead of the break that the rest of the student population have about four weeks before the examination, the team continued to train right to the examination day.

Students were informed before the new academic year in January to be prepared to train through the examination coming up that year. To facilitate the process, they were reminded of basic study skills including making use of holiday before the term began to read up, to pay attention in class, to read up after each chapter and to complete all homework promptly, and to prepare for class tests and examination well in advance (Quek, 2014). Students were also advised to pay attention to time management issues like not wasting time and making use of waiting time. They were also advised to minimise screen time. To further facilitate the process and to send a clear message, CCA practices were organised efficiently.

Despite the early preparation, the CCA stand-down option was still offered to members of the team prior to the stand-down period. This was to ensure that students who were not prepared for the task of training through the examination could opt out and prepare for the examination like the rest of the cohort.

After the examination results were released, the students were asked to complete an online questionnaire, wherein they provided their examination results and their experience. Specifically, the students were given options to reflect on their perception of their performance in the examinations. They were given the following options:

a. Significant decline in exams results,
b. Slight decline in exams results,
c. Results remained the same,
d. Slight improvement in exams results,
e. Significant improvement in exams results

They were also asked about their initial thoughts on their participation in training through this examination stand-down period, the level of parental support they received and the reasons they thought contributed to the results they got. Follow-up interviews were conducted with the participants to obtain more information on their experience training through the examination.

Findings

Nineteen students participated in the study initially. Two did not complete the questionnaire and were excluded from the study. Two students opted to stop training. One student chose not to participate in the training to “focus on the examination” while the other cited “parental objection” as a reason to withdraw from participation. Fifteen students opted to continue training three times a week while the rest of the school stopped all CCA practice to prepare for the examination.

Initial Thoughts

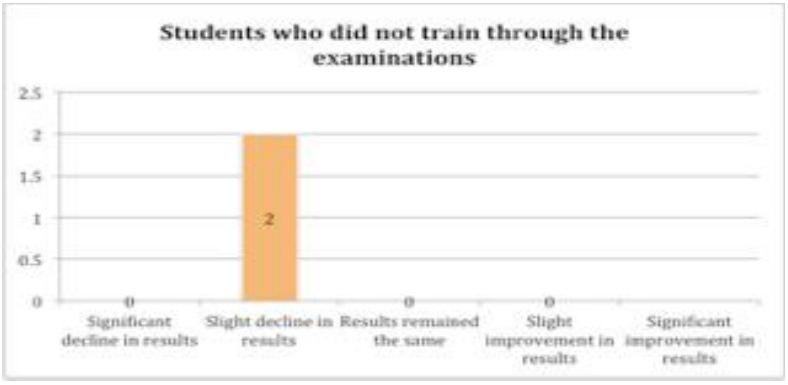
All fifteen expressed a certain degree of doubt on whether they could manage to train during the examination stand-down period. Some questioned "if it was possible", some thought that "it was going to be tough", while some thought that "it was impossible!" Other words like "scared", "worried", "wary" and "doubtful" were used to describe their initial thoughts. Two students, however, were "looking forward to it".

Examination Results

a. Both the students (100%) who opted to stop training prior to the examination experienced a "slight decline in their academic results."
b. Among the 15 who continued to train during the examination preparation period, 2 (13.33%) indicated "no difference in their performance in the examination."
c. 9 of the 15 (60%) who continued to train during the examination period experienced a "slight improvement in the examination results".
d. 4 of the 15 (26.67%) "experienced a significant improvement in the examination results" after training through the examination period.

Figure 1 showing the results of students who opted to train through the examination stand-down period.

Figure 2 showing the results of students who opted not to train through the examination stand-down period.



All students who stopped training to focus on the examination performed worse (albeit slightly) in the examination. None of the students who trained through the examination performed worse. 26.67% performed significantly better and 60% performed slightly better, with 13.33% no significant difference in the results.

Reasons

When asked what they thought were the reasons for getting the results they got, below were the reasons given:

Students did better generally because they knew they were going to have less time to revise during the examination period, they started preparing for the examination earlier. And because they perceived that they have less time, they valued their time, and were more focused during revision. (Refer to Appendix for all the 15 responses.)

For the two students who experienced a decline in their performance, one girl explained that *"I did not study hard enough as I was not very focused" (Subject 17)* while the other did not provide any reason, but instead explained that "I do not think training would have made my results better" (Subject 12)

Parental Support on Participation

Of the 17 respondents, one parent "strongly opposed" the student's participation and two "discouraged". Seven were "neutral", four "somewhat supportive" and three "very supportive".

After the experience and the results, all fifteen participants who trained through examination said that it was beneficial, and would do it again. They also believed that their parents would continue supporting their future participation. On the other hand, the two non-participants who stood down for the examination said that they would stand-down again for the next examination, and believed that their parents would not support them training through the examination.

Discussion

Contrary to the expectation of administrators who stopped CCA practice to facilitate revision, both students who stopped attending practice performed worse. Instead, none of the fifteen students who continued to attend practice performed worse.

1. Focused

Among the reasons given for the findings, "focused" was the most cited word in the reasons provided by the students. (9 out of the 15 students used the word "focus".)

Due to their perception that they would have less time for their revision; less time compared to their peers and less time compared to what they were used to in the past, they tried to be more focused on their revision. They tried to make the most out of the time they had to optimize their revision. (Parkinson's Law). That could also imply a reduction on screen time, avoiding the problem that could potentially come from them. The students might have learned to be more productive and on task, instead of wasting time.

2. Early Preparation

Interviewees mentioned that they *"studied more beforehand" as they "have less time than others so I started preparing earlier."*

Starting preparation earlier also meant that the students were more consistent with their schoolwork. Early preparation and consistent work are valuable work habits that the students should cultivate, instead of the bad habit of doing "last-minute revision".

3. Refreshed

A student felt that *"training made me fresher to study after", while another said that training allowed her to "take a break".*

While preparing for examination, some students go on for hours cramming, believing that the long hours they spend would make them perform better, without realising that after a while they are no longer productive. Having to attend training three sessions a week does provide a break from their long hours of sedentary revision.

There is abundant evidence showing the value of physical activity. This includes enhancing the circulation of blood and oxygen to the brain, and the positive effects they have on intellectual activity (Hillman et. al. 2011). This regular physical training might have enhanced their revision, instead of distracting them.

Moreover, the examination period is stressful. While training appears to add psychological and physical stress on students, these students looked forward to trainings as it was a break from school work, and they felt refreshed after training. Possibly, because the students were still training during this period of time, they might have tried to maintain the rest they needed to perform serious physical activity. This rest has the added benefit of keeping them refreshed, something they needed for their revision (Eliasson et al. 2002). Some students mentioned that because they had sufficient rest to cope with training, they were also more refreshed in class daily.

4. Motivation and Skills

There is one very important underlying factor in the above discussion - the students who trained through the examination period valued their sports training and academic performance. It is only because both areas are of importance and interest to them that they were motivated to put in the effort to "be focused", "study in advance" and "get sufficient rest". For students who are not interested in either of the tasks, this whole process would not be possible. Also, constant guidance has to be provided to these youths who may not have the skills to juggle both tasks simultaneously.

Besides, teachers or coaches might have to pay attention to the demands of sports training for the students. If the CCA practice was too demanding – training for four hours per session, or six sessions a week etc., the outcome may not be the same. Proper guidance and facilitation may be necessary to attain the results above.

Conclusion

Schools implement CCA stand-down period of about four weeks prior to the examination to allow students to focus on their revision. This study attempted to investigate the effects of a school sports team's participation in CCA training during the stand-down period. This study found that students who continued to train three times a week for four weeks prior to the examinations did not perform any worse in their examination results. Instead students in the team who opted to stand-down, like the rest of the school population, actually performed worse.

The athletes who were training during the examination stand-down period were very focused as they felt that time was a premium. They wanted to be productive and get the most done in the time they had instead of wasting it on unproductive tasks. They also started work in advance and adopted a more consistent approach to their work instead of procrastinating and resorting to last-minute work. Having training also gave these students a break to recharge and freshen them up. They were probably resting better as they needed the rest for their sports training, which in turn made them fresh and alert in class.

As management and education researches often show, having a goal helps one to energise and focus (Martin, 2013). In this case, having a goal to continue with training during examinations helped the students stay focused on their training and their studies. With the necessary guidance and facilitation, juggling CCA and examination can be a valuable learning opportunity for students, making them the holistic students that the CCA programme aims to achieve.

APPENDIX I

"I was more focused on studies" (Subject 1)

"I studied more beforehand so I didn't rush my revision" (Subject 2)

"I realized the importance of time and studied whenever I had the chance to" (Subject 3)

"Training made me fresher to study after" (Subject 4)

"Training through exams means I have less time than others so I started preparing earlier. It made me appreciate my time more and made revision more productive"(Subject 5)

"Training made me more focused and task oriented since I could not waste time" (Subject 6)

"I was more focused in completing tasks and I spent less time procrastinating and made full use of my limited time"(Subject 7)

"I kept my focus on training and studies only, so no room for other distraction"(Subject 8)

"I was more focused and put away all distractions as I knew I had to be on task"(Subject 9)

"Training made me more focused on how I managed my time. Training also allowed me to take a break from studying before continuing to study."(Subject 10)

"I was more focused and inclined to study after spending time training in school. It gave me a sense of urgency to study harder…'(Subject 11)

"I had lesser time and so I had to focus on my studies even more" (Subject 13)

"I managed my time better so I could concentrate on both studying and training" (Subject 14)

"I made precious use of the minimum time I had before and after training, and made the most out of it"(Subject 15)

"I was more focused during exams period and did more revision"(Subject 16)

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