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Can Sport for Development Programs Improve Educational Outcomes? A Rapid Evidence Assessment

Authors' contribution:

- A) conception and design of the study
- B) acquisition of data
- C) analysis and interpretation of data
- D) manuscript preparation
- E) obtaining funding

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ABSTRACT

Over the last 20 years, sport for development (SFD) has become an increasingly used tool to tackle education-related challenges around the world and has even become recognized by major international institutions such as the United Nations and the Commonwealth. In spite of this, evidence on the effectiveness of SFD programs on educational outcomes is limited. Through a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA), this paper seeks to begin addressing this gap. Literature is included if it quantitatively examines the relationship between participation in a SFD program and educational outcomes, namely academic performance, school attendance, or attitudes and behaviors related to school. Results are then organized and presented according to these aforementioned areas. The identified literature paints a mixed picture of SFD's impact on educational outcomes related to academic performance and school attendance, though the data related to improved attitude and behavior is more positive. Overall, the lack of research on this topic and the deficiencies in some of the identified studies do not allow for the conclusion that SFD generates positive education-related outcomes. This paper concludes by proposing potential solutions to address this gap in research.

KEYWORDS

sport for development, education, grades, rapid evidence assessment

In many countries, the retention, attendance, and performance of youth in school poses serious challenges. The World Bank notes that nearly half of all youth in Sub-Saharan Africa are out of school (K. Inoue et al., 2015) while, in Latin America, only between 50 and 70% of youth graduate from high school (Sanchez, 2013). There are numerous factors that lead to youth leaving or not finishing school, including early marriage, lack of educational offers, low educational quality, and levels of parental education, while other individual factors such as lack of motivation, lack of information and risk-taking behavior can be contributing factors (K. Inoue et al., 2015).

Over the last 20 years, there have been efforts to use sport as a means to foster social development and help tackle these education-related challenges (Coalter, 2010b; Kidd, 2008). Known as sport for development (SFD), this approach can be broadly defined as the intentional use of sport, physical activity and play to achieve specific development objectives. Education has been a particular focus of these programs, and data suggest that a plurality (36.7%, n=347) of SFD organizations specifically targets education and education-related objectives

(Svensson & Woods, 2017). These individual SFD programs are not likely to be able to tackle deep-rooted social issues, though they can operate at the individual (Coalter, 2010a) or community levels. These programs can use their platforms to address some of the misinformation or misperceptions that exist about education in certain communities and use sport as a hook to lead youth towards programs or structures that support their educational development (Coalter, 2010a; UNICEF, 2016). They can also provide safe spaces for youth, helping shield them from many of the risk-taking behavior associated with negative educational outcomes (Burnett, 2014; UNICEF, 2016).

The potential of sport to contribute to positive educational outcomes has become recognized by international institutions, including the United Nations, the Commonwealth, and the International Olympic Committee (Beutler, 2008; Colucci & McCracken, 2014; Diop; International Olympic Committee., 2018; Kidd, 2008; UNICEF, 2016). Various literature also supports the claim that physical education and school sport can lead to improved cognitive ability, improved attitudes towards school and even improved academic performance (Bailey, 2006; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Singh, Uijtdewilligen, Twisk, van Mechelen, & Chinapaw, 2012; Trudeau & Shephard, 2008). However, these benefits are not automatic and largely depend on the interactions of coaches and teachers (Bailey, 2006). For instance, settings that actively include parents, children, and educators while emphasizing enjoyment, inclusiveness, and diversity are more likely to generate positive educational outcomes through sport (Bailey, 2006).

Despite this encouraging data and claims made by international actors, it is misguided to conflate physical education, school sport, or school-supported extracurricular activities with sport for development. While most of the studies on the benefits of school sport and physical education are centered around schools in the Global North (Singh et al., 2012), those do not reflect the realities of many SFD programs. Similarly, the vast majority of researchers and research locations in SFD are found in the Global North (Schulenkorf, Sherry, & Rowe, 2016). Yet most SFD activities are located in the Global South (Svensson & Woods, 2017) and, globally, these programs often operate outside of formal school structures, and do not necessarily benefit from access to trained physical educators, access to school facilities, or relationships with educators. Numerous prominent programs such as Amandla EduFootball, Fútbol Net, Deportes para la Paz, BoxGirls, and WomenWin operate outside of formal educational settings (Jaitman & Scartascini, 2017; Whitley et al., 2019). Furthermore, as many of these programs operate outside of these school structures, they do not generate the additional benefit of making school more attractive in the way typical in-school physical activity programs might (Bailey, 2006). Thus, the claims made about physical education, school sport, or school-based extracurricular activities are not immediately transferable to the different structural, social, economic, cultural and geographic contexts that define many SFD programs. Indeed, in a systematic review looking more generally at the connection between physical activity and performance at school, Singh et al. (2012) found that most studies focused on participation in school sports or physical education, but that these did not reflect “the complete range of physical activities in which children can participate” (p. 54).

The purpose of the following is, by means of a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA), to begin addressing this gap. Specifically, this REA will provide an initial summary of the evidence surrounding the impact of SFD programs on educational outcomes, especially in terms of academic performance, school attendance, as well as behavior and attitudes in relation to school.

Methodology

A Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) was conducted by a single reviewer between June 26th and July 22nd, 2019. A REA, which is appropriate for investigating new or emerging topics, aims to be systematic yet makes concessions concerning the breadth, depth, and complexity of the process by limiting certain aspects typically associated with traditional systematic literature reviews (Grant & Booth, 2009). In this particular instance, the type of literature included, quality appraisal, the number of sources consulted, as well as the number of titles

and descriptions screened per source, were chosen based on predefined inclusion criteria to match the study purpose.

Pre-defined Boolean search strings were used to search for English language literature from a variety of online sources. These sources included the Ebsco Discovery Service, Google Scholar, the Journal of Sport for Development and Sportanddev.org, as well as a general Google search. The pre-defined search strings, outlined in Table 1 along with the overall search and inclusion criteria, were designed to focus on the connection between SFD and various education-related outcomes, as well as to capture more general studies or evaluations that could include education-related measures. To limit the time and breadth of the review, only the first 200 titles and descriptions for each search combination were screened on Google Scholar, Ebsco Discovery Service, and Google. Additionally, as the goal of the Google search was to find program evaluations as opposed to specific literature, only the terms related to impact, evaluation, or monitoring were used there. Given their importance to the field, all search results from SportandDev.org were screened, while all currently available titles and descriptions in the Journal of Sport for Development were similarly screened.

Table 1. Overview of search process and inclusion criteria

Property	Description
Boolean Search Terms	('Sport' AND 'Development') AND ('education' OR 'school' OR 'school retention' OR 'school dropout' OR 'school attendance' OR 'school performance' OR 'grades' OR 'evaluation' OR 'monitoring' OR 'impact')
Search Parameters	Search of titles and descriptions/abstracts, sorted by relevance
Format	Academic articles, theses, dissertations, grey literature, or evaluation reports
Language	English
Geographic Scope	Worldwide
Sources	<p>Google Scholar</p> <p>Ebsco Discovery Service (including Complementary Index; Academic Search Ultimate; ScienceDirect; Science Citation Index; MEDLINE; Academic Search Index; Business Source Complete; Environment Complete; Regional Business News; CINAHL; PsycINFO; Supplemental Index; Knovel; Scopus; Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection; Directory of Open Access Journals; Social Sciences Citation Index; IEEE Xplore Digital Library; SPORTDiscus; SocINDEX; J-STAGE; British Library Document Supply Centre Inside Serials & Conference Proceedings; PsycARTICLES; JSTOR Journals; Emerald Insight)</p> <p>Google</p> <p>Journal of Sport for Development (All titles/descriptions)</p> <p>SportandDev.org</p>
Program Criteria	Sport-for-development program (i.e. intentionally using sport for development goals) aiming to promote the educational attainment of its participants, taking place outside of formal school setting
Method Criteria	Quantitative research (including randomized control trials, non-randomized control trials, and longitudinal studies) focusing on a single program and its impact on education outcomes.
Outcome Variable Criteria	Outcome variables related to academic performance (e.g. grades, pass rates, standardized tests, reports of student achievement), school attendance (e.g. attendance sheets, reports of student attendance), school behavior (e.g. reports of student behavior, stays in detention, referrals to counselling)

Source: own study.

During the initial web search, titles and descriptions or abstracts were screened for their relevance to the subject of SFD and education. Results were included for a full-text screening if the title or description included

references to a sport program and any of the abovementioned educational outcomes, or if it included more general references to the evaluation of a sport program.

Based on these criteria, documents were selected for full-text screening. Documents were included in the final analysis if they quantitatively examined the relationship between participation in a SFD program and educational outcomes, namely in relation to variables of academic performance, school attendance, or attitudes and behaviors in relation to school. Only explicit SFD programs were included (i.e. programs that intentionally use sport as a tool for development) and all selected studies reflect programs that take place outside of a formal school setting. The choice to exclude school-based programs was made in line with the points made in the introduction, as well as to avoid conflating SFD “with school-based interventions” (Whitley et al., 2019). Academic articles, grey literature, evaluation reports, dissertations or theses were included, whereas as other materials such as conference papers, presentations, annual reports were not. In order to include as much literature as possible, no quality threshold is imposed on the reviewed literature. Nonetheless, the quality of each included study is evaluated using the checklist for assessing the quality of quantitative studies put forth by Kmet, Lee and Cook (2004). This checklist provides a basis for evaluating the design, sampling, data collection, analysis, and reporting of a given study. Results from this quality evaluation are included in the results section and later serve to complement this paper’s discussion.

Ultimately, documents that met the criteria above were selected for full-text analysis. Once selected, the relevant information from the documents was extracted, including the research methodology, the sample characteristics (e.g. gender, age, role), the program details, the location, and the results. Results were further organized according to the aforementioned categories of academic performance, school attendance, and attitudes and behaviors in relation to school. Results related to academic performance included grades, pass rates, test scores, performance reports, or other aptitude assessments. Results related to school attendance included official attendance sheets, teacher reports of attendance or student reports of attendance. Finally, results related to attitude and behavior included measurements of perceptions about school, measurements of prosocial values or behaviors, teacher reports of student behavior, or data related to disciplinary actions. The extracted results are then briefly presented and summarized.

Results

Search Results

Based on the search criteria outlined in the methodology, 5123 potentially relevant titles and descriptions were identified and screened. Based on the title and descriptions in these results, 93 articles or evaluations were then selected for full-text screening. Articles were selected for full-text screening if the title or description included references to a sport program and any of the abovementioned educational outcomes, or if it included more general references to the evaluation of a sport program. Thus, articles excluding at this stage were mostly discarded due to their lack of adherence to these criteria.

Following full-text screening, a total of 9 documents were included in the review, forming the basis of this paper. Documents were included in the final review if they quantitatively examined the relationship between participation in a SFD program and educational outcomes. Only explicit SFD programs were included and all selected studies reflect programs that take place outside of a formal school setting. Figure 1 depicts the overall process and results associated with this REA.

The excluded studies are discussed in more detail below, followed by a presentation of the results extracted from the selected documents, which is divided according to academic performance, school attendance as well as attitudes and behaviors in relation to school. Finally, the results of the quality assessment of the selected papers will be presented. A summary of the programs described in the included studies can be found below in

Table 2, while a summary of the studies, including their methodologies, results, and quality scores, can be found in Table 4.

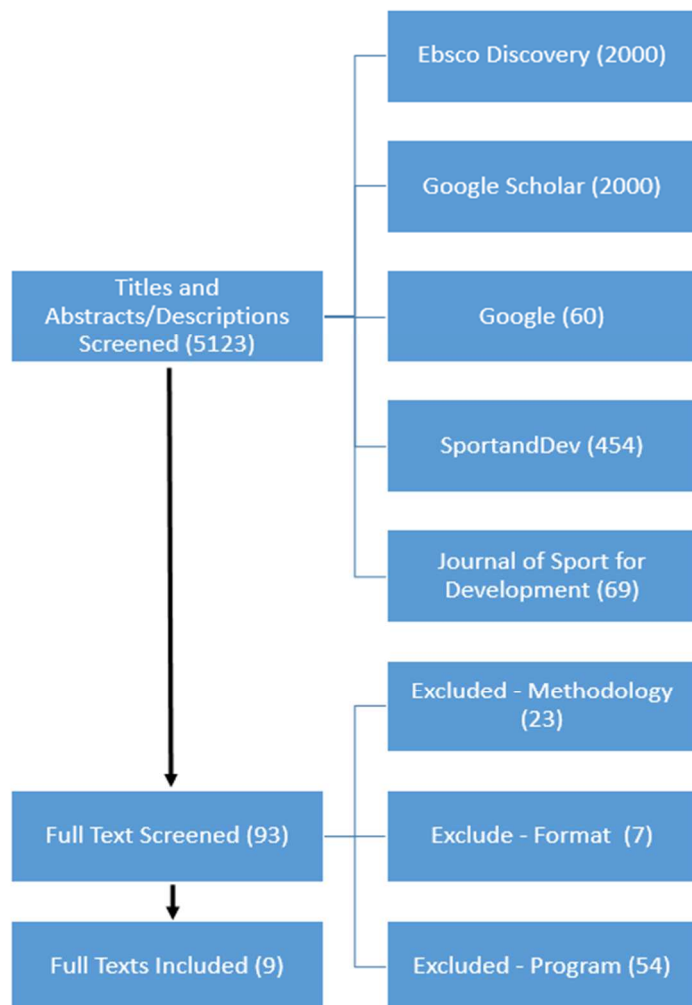


Figure 1. Rapid Evidence Analysis Process Flow
Source: own study.

Excluded Studies

A total of 84 full-text documents were screened and ultimately excluded from the results of this assessment. Nearly 65% of the exclusions were because the documents did not refer to any of the aforementioned education-related variables or did not deal with a sport for development program as defined for the purposes of this study. Over a quarter of the excluded documents were because their methodologies were primarily qualitative. The rest of the exclusions were due to the document being in an excluded format, such as an annual report or conference presentation.

Table2. Summary of programs in selected studies

Program	Location	Country Classification	Program	Target
Amandla EduFootball	Khayelitsha, South Africa	Upper middle income	Football is used as a “hook” to draw in participants. A fair play points system rewards teams for regular attendance and for good conduct on the field during matches. A leadership development program provides an additional framework for highly motivated participants to serve as coaches / life skills facilitators and to complete an accredited 2-year learnership.	At-risk youth from Cape Town townships
Capoeira4Refugees	Palestinian Territories	Lower middle income	Capoeira4Refugees uses Capoeira as a psychosocial tool to promote well-being among youth affected by conflict. Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian craft that combines live music, sport, dance, play, culture, and history.	Palestinian (and refugee) youth affected by conflict
Football United	Western Sydney, Australia	High income	Football United is a football intervention targeted at young people in culturally diverse areas such as the western Sydney region with high levels of refugee settlement. The program offers after school football, as well as access to additional program components including training as football coaches, life skills, and leadership development workshops.	Young people from the Western Sydney region
Sporting Chance Programme	Various Locations, Australia	High income	Academies use sport and recreational activities as a vehicle to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secondary students in school. The exact nature of the program varies according to location.	Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders
HSBC Outward Bound / Sky Living for Sport	United Kingdom	High income	The HSBC/OB project is a five-year program that HSBC funds residential outdoor/ adventurous activity experiences for pupils from five schools in the Docklands area of London.	Disaffected pupils
YWCA Girls on the Run	Tampa, United States	High income	The program uses running as a vehicle to deliver a curriculum that provides opportunities for addressing many aspects of girl-specific determinants via skill-building activities delivered in a supportive, empowering context that emphasizes fun and making friends.	3rd to 5th grade girls
Doc Wayne Athletic League	Boston, United States	High income	To provide children in residential school settings with an opportunity to play sports.	Residential school children
Students Run Philly Style (SRPS)	Philadelphia, United States	High income	Students Run Philly Style was founded in 2004 to combat youth violence by using distance running as the key program activity. Serving urban youth ages 12 to 18 who are mainly from low socioeconomic families, the program culminates each year in participation in the Philadelphia Marathon and Half Marathon.	12 to 18-year-olds from low socio-economic backgrounds
Ishraq	Egypt	Lower middle income	A program for out-of-school 13–15-year-old girls in rural Upper Egypt that offered them a comprehensive package of learning, skills development, and sports while providing safe spaces to do so.	Out-of-school 13 to 15-year-old girls in rural Upper Egypt

Source: Selected studies.

Academic Performance

Results related to academic performance included grades, pass rates, test scores, performance reports, or other aptitude assessments. Here, some results are promising, but on the whole inconclusive. The Ishraq program in Upper Egypt, which aims to offer a comprehensive package of learning, skills development, and sports to young girls from socially conservative areas, was able to determine that there was a statistically significant relationship between increased time spent in the program and overall reading and writing ability (Brady, 2007). Furthermore, 92% of program participants who chose to take a standardized national literacy test managed to pass (Brady, 2007). Elsewhere, a study of the Girls on the Run program in the United States demonstrated, via the administration of pre-post questionnaires, an increase in cognitive competence, though this change was not statistically significant (DeBate & Bleck, 2016).

Most other studies, however, were not able to provide conclusive evidence of impact on academic performance. Students Run Philly Style, a positive youth development program using distance running to engage youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds, found no meaningful impact between program participation and self-reported academic performance (Y. Inoue, Wegner, Jordan, & Funk, 2015). The evaluation of another US-based program, the Doc Wayne Athletic League, concluded that there were no changes in grades for any of the study subjects regardless of their participation status in the league (D'Andrea & Spinazzola, 2009). Similarly, research on the Sporting Chance program in Australia determined that there was insufficient evidence to show “a clear link between (...) participation and improved academic outcomes” (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2011, p. 4).

School Attendance

Results related to school attendance included official attendance sheets, teacher reports of attendance or student reports of attendance. Of the three studies addressing this topic, all of them demonstrated improvements in student attendance.

The Ishraq program again showed promising results, and found that participants had a higher school enrolment than the comparison or non-participant groups, and that the enrolment level increased with longer participation in the program, culminating in a 68% school enrolment rate for participants who completed the full program (Brady, 2007).

The evaluation of Capoeira4Refugees programming in the Palestinian Territories found a decrease in self-reported school absences compared to the initial baseline, going from 2 to 1.33 absences per month for boys, and from 1.29 to 0.71 for girls (Prytherch & Kraft, 2015). Finally, research on the Sporting Chance program in Australia demonstrated an increase in school attendance, with between 11 and 15% of the 1092 students reporting increased attendance since joining the program (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2011).

Attitudes and Behaviors

Results related to attitude and behavior included measures of perceptions about school, measures of prosocial values or behaviors, teacher reports of student behavior, or data related to disciplinary actions. This topic is the most widely explored in the literature, with five of the included studies addressing the subject. Overall, four studies identified positive changes, while one found an increase in negative attitudes towards school.

Data on the HSBC Outward Bound program show that “project group pupils also appear to outperform a comparison group of pupils who did not participate in project activities” (Sandford, Duncombe, & Armour, 2008, p. 426). In fact, 58% of project students in Year 2 and 49.8% of project students in Year 3 are perceived by their teachers as having shown positive improvements in behavior, compared to 37.6% and 32.3% on non-

project students, respectively (Sandford et al., 2008). Nonetheless, these results were not uniform, as between 8 and 17% of project students were perceived as having negatively developed (Sandford et al., 2008).

Looking at Football United's programs in Australia in a study using treatment portioning, researchers found a lower score on peer problems, a lower score on hyperactivity and higher scores on prosocial behavior when comparing participants against non-participants. Of these, only the difference on pro-social behavior was suggestively significant¹ (Nathan et al., 2013). However, when isolating only the male participants, both the differences on peer problems and prosocial behavior became statistically significant (Nathan et al., 2013).

The two American-based programs included echo the above findings. The Girls on the Run program in Tampa was found to generate a small, statistically insignificant increase in pro-social behavior (DeBate & Bleck, 2016), while the Doc Wayne Athletic League participants demonstrated a suggestively significant reduction in behavioral incidents at their respective schools (D'Andrea & Spinazzola, 2009).

Conversely, in a study measuring the impact of Amandla EduFootball's impact on violence reduction, data on attitudes related to school were collected and a "comparison [showed] a significant increase in Negative School Attitudes" (Edelstein, 2016, p. 127). In regards to this change, the researcher speculated that this might be an indicator of increased disclosure from the respondents (Edelstein, 2016).

Quality of Results

Six of the selected studies received a score of 65% or higher when applying the checklist developed by Kmet et al. (2004). Although the average quality of the selected studies was 75.3%, certain issues concerning sample description or data reporting were present. Three studies failed to adequately describe the demographic background of their subjects, sometimes omitting to mention basic information such as age or gender. A further five studies omitted reporting any data related to variance, while all of the studies either only partially discussed the issue of confounding or omitted it completely. The quality scores for each study can be found in Table 3.

Limitations

A REA can help identify knowledge and gaps, but this is, by design, not a comprehensive methodology and there is always a risk that relevant results have been excluded. Limiting the time and resources associated with the review may lead to biases whereas "limiting appraisal or quality assessment may place a disproportionate emphasis on poorer quality research" (Grant & Booth, 2009, p. 101). A review methodology such as this can be especially challenging when applied to development, as studies and evaluation reports are not written in a uniform fashion, making direct comparisons difficult (Mallett, Hagen-Zanker, Slater, & Duvendack, 2012). Furthermore, this paper excludes qualitative research. This is not meant as an indictment of qualitative methods, but rather done to facilitate ease of analysis, as quantitative results are generally less ambiguous than qualitative ones. Nonetheless, given the importance of social, cultural, and environmental contexts in development, it is important to continue using qualitative methods to explore these unique features (Mallett et al., 2012). However, in light of these different contexts and the difficulty of comparing studies, this paper cannot make generalizations about the specific sports, games, methodologies, or programs that are effective or not.

¹ Results are suggestively statistically significant at $p \leq .10$

Table 3. Summary of selected studies and findings

Authors	Year	Program	Methods	Type	Quality (%)	Sample	Academic Performance	Attendance	Attitudes and Behaviour
Edelstein, I.	2016	Amanda EduFootball	Longitudinal quasi-experimental panel study	Dissertation/Thesis	95.83	318	Not measured	Not measured	Increased Negative School Attitude
Prytherch, H.; Kraft, K.	2015	Capoeira4Refugees	Longitudinal analysis of questionnaires, supported by interviews and focus groups	Evaluation Report	36.36	Unknown	Not measured	Decrease in self-reported school absence	Not measured
Nathan, S. et al.	2013	Football United	Mixed methods design was employed using treatment partitioning, including surveys and interviews	Academic Article	90.91	142 survey respondents	Not measured	Not measured	Participants reported higher pro-social behavior and less hyperactivity than comparison group, but the difference was not statistically significant
Australian Council for Educational Research	2011	Sporting Chance Programme	Analysis of longitudinal academic data as well as both longitudinal and cross-sectional questionnaires	Evaluation Report	59.09	1012 program participants, 78 principals, and 194 school staff	No significant effect on grades	Increase in self-reported attendance	Increase in reported engagement by school staff
Sandford, R. A., Duncombe, R.; Armour, K. A.	2008	HSBC Outward Bound	Longitudinal analysis of attendance data and pre-post questionnaires	Academic Article	59.09	142	Not measured	Not measured	Higher perceived behavioral improvements from teachers
DeBate, R.; Bleck, J.;	2016	YWCA Girls on the Run	Pre-post intervention data collected via a 64 item questionnaire	Academic Article	95.45	384 girls in the 3rd, 4th and 5th grades	Small, statistically significant improvement in cognitive competence	Not measured	Small, statistically insignificant increase in pro-social behavior

D'Andrea, W.; Spinazolla, J.	2009	Doc Wayne Athletic League	Pre-during-post intervention data collected via academic records, questionnaires and observations for both participants and non-participants	Evaluation Report	68.18	33 participants, 26 non-participants between the ages of 12 and 21 years old	No change in grades	Not measured	Suggestively significant reduction in behavioral incidents
Inoue, Y.; Wegner, C.E.; Jordan, J.S.; Funk, D.C.	2015	Students Run Philly Style	Cross-Sectional data collected via questionnaires analyzed via Multiple Linear Regressions	Academic Article	95.45	330 participants, 120 of which provided usable data	No measured influence in self-reported academic performance	Not measured	Not measured
Brady, M. et al	2007	Ishraq	Pre-post test with data collected via surveys and interviewed, measured against a comparison group of non-participating girls from both program and non-program locations	Evaluation Report	77.27	277 participants, 176 non-participants, 134 non-program location girls	Statistically significant relation between program participation length and reading/writing ability; 92 of program participants who took literacy test passed	Higher school enrollment than comparison group; 68 school enrollment rate for participants who completed the full program	Not measured

Note: Grey – not measured, very light blue – no change, light blue – negative change, dark blue – positive change
Source: Selected studies.

Discussion and Conclusion

The studies above demonstrate encouraging but limited signs with respect to the link between SFD programs and educational outcomes. We can be optimistic about the results for attitudes and behaviors in relation to school. Four of the selected studies demonstrated improved outcomes relating to perceived or reported attitudes and behaviors, and all of these studies were evaluated to be of good quality as they included sufficient sample sizes, comparison groups, and clear analytical procedures. These results are also in-line with research in the field that shows that SFD programs can have positive impacts on a variety of life skills (Hermens, Super, Verkooijen, & Koelen, 2017). In contrast, the areas related to academic performance and attendance must be treated with more caution. In terms of academic performance, some studies show promising results, but they are generally upfront about their limitations or inability to clearly connect their respective programs to changes in academic performance. It is reasonable to conclude that sport programs on their own are not sufficient to foster improved academic performance and that a supportive structure, including offers such as counseling services, tutoring, or learning resources, must be in place to do so. Inoue et al. (2015) point out that the potential for improved academic performance “would likely be leveraged when the programs clearly incorporate academic-related activities into their program design rather than solely relying on the development of self-determined motivation toward sport activities” (p. 380). Similarly, three studies measure school attendance, two of which do so via self-reports. Self-reports can provide valuable insights, but they are vulnerable to social desirability bias. Therefore, without supplementary data from other sources, such as teacher reports or attendance sheets, those results must be taken with a grain of salt.

In addition, the quality issues present in some of the studies demonstrating positive outcomes prevent making more definite conclusions. Though the overall quality of the included studies is good, some studies are undermined by potential biases and other flaws. One source of potential bias takes the form of reporting bias, whereby many positive results are described without a full presentation of the statistics. This is especially true in the evaluation reports from the Doc Wayne Athletic League, Capoeira4Refugees, and the Sporting Chance program. In all three of these documents, there are issues related to the clarity of the selection process for subjects, the description of those subjects, the presentation of the analytical methods used, and the overall presentation of results. Without a proper understanding of the overall research and analytical procedure, it is difficult to gain a full picture of the strengths, flaws or potential biases associated with any one study. Given that only certain, selected results are presented in these studies, it is possible that other mitigating or negative results are excluded. It is interesting to note that three of the four lowest quality studies were in fact evaluation reports, as such reports are often produced using less rigorous methodologies, and tend to face various time, financial, and political pressures (Bamberger, 2009).

Taken as a whole, this study points to a key issue: there is limited research to support the espoused claims about the benefits of SFD on educational outcomes, especially in the Global South. It is likely that many have relied on data from physical education and school sport to underpin their programs and the credibility of such programs has been bolstered by the perceived endorsements of major international institutions such as the IOC or the Commonwealth. As is made clear here, the results from the physical education and school sport contexts are not immediately applicable to the different realities of SFD programs. A new, robust, diverse body of literature must be built in order to investigate what kind of impact SFD programs can have on the educational outcomes of its beneficiaries, as well as to generate a better understanding of the opportunities, challenges, and good practices in the field.

The recent report from UNICEF on child-focused sport for development is a welcome step and presents many of the opportunities and challenges faced by education-focused SFD programs (UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, 2019). Though this report similarly underlines the need for more evidence, of the 33 items referenced in the bibliography of the its chapter on education, three authors are present in nearly 40% of the references (UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, 2019). An increased diversity of voices and perspectives is clearly

needed to better understand the connection between SFD and educational outcomes. As Schulenkorf et al. argue (2016), this would allow for new debates and contributions “in the areas of methodology and theory building” (p. 36)

Moving forward, it is imperative for funders, practitioners, and researchers to use more rigorous methodologies that allow for the measurement of educational outcomes, as well as to continue developing knowledge about good practices and challenges in the field. Namely, this can mean implementing studies that allow for a proper comparison between participants and non-participants or supplementing the results of either qualitative or quantitative studies with official school data such as grades, attendance sheets, referrals to counseling or stays in detention. Longer-term studies are also needed, as results can be “individualized, context specific and (...) short-lived” (Sandford et al., 2008, p. 427). Methods, sources, and perspectives from the program communities should be included, especially since these may not be known to external researchers and funders (Nicholls, Giles, & Sethna, 2011), and there are certainly other rigorous, locally-relevant tools or sources that can help measure the effectiveness of SDP programs on educational outcomes. And, when conducting evaluations, programs and funders should seek out expertise from various fields and locations so as to ensure greater diversity in the people and perspectives used in SFD research.

In the meantime, as these important steps are being taken, we must continue exercising caution in espousing claims or setting objectives that are too ambitious. As this paper demonstrates, there is simply not enough evidence to either support or refute the notion that, as a whole, SFD has a positive impact on educational outcomes.

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