

ENHANCING STUDENT-ATHLETE WELLBEING IN CBSE SCHOOLS: A GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH TO DEVELOPING A SUPPORTIVE FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

Student-athlete well-being is a critical yet often overlooked aspect of school sports programs, particularly in CBSE schools in Qatar. This study explored the mental health challenges faced by student athletes, focusing on stress, burnout, and academic pressures. Using a qualitative Grounded Theory approach, data were collected from 15 student athletes, 8 parents, and 7 coaches through focus groups and interviews. Thematic analysis revealed key insights: students often prioritise physical endurance over mental health; parents emphasise academic success over sports participation; and coaches focus on performance rather than emotional support. The findings highlight the role of motivation, social pressure, and inadequate school policies in shaping student-athlete experiences. A supportive framework is proposed that advocates school-based sports psychologists, mental health awareness programs, and policy reforms to balance academics and athletics. This study underscores the need for integrated mental health services within school sports programs and suggests further research on cultural influences on student-athlete well-being. Addressing these challenges can foster a more holistic and health-focused sports environment in CBSE schools.

Introduction

Student-athletes face unique challenges that impact their mental health, including stress, burnout, and performance pressure. In academic environments such as CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education) schools, where academic excellence is highly emphasized, student-athletes often struggle to balance their academic responsibilities with athletic commitments. According to Rice et al. (2016), student-athletes are at an increased risk of anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion due to the combined pressures of school and sports. These challenges highlight the need for a structured support system that prioritizes the mental well-being of student-athletes while allowing them to thrive both academically and athletically.

The Intersection of Physical Activity, Obesity, and Wellness

Physical activity plays a crucial role in promoting overall health and well-being among students. However, its relationship with mental health and wellness is often overlooked in school settings. Studies indicate that regular physical activity can enhance cognitive function, reduce stress, and improve mood (Biddle et al., 2019). Conversely, childhood obesity is associated with poor self-esteem, anxiety, and social isolation (Janssen & LeBlanc, 2010). In CBSE schools, the emphasis on academics sometimes results in reduced participation in sports and physical activities, which can negatively impact students' mental and physical health. This is particularly concerning in international settings like Qatar, where sedentary lifestyles and dietary habits contribute to increasing

obesity rates among schoolchildren (Ng et al., 2014). Given these factors, it is essential to explore how physical activity can be better integrated into CBSE school programs to enhance student wellness.

Research Gap in Studying CBSE Student-Athletes in Qatar

While several studies have explored the mental health challenges of student-athletes globally, limited research has been conducted on CBSE school students, particularly those in Qatar. Most existing research on student-athlete wellness focuses on Western educational systems (Hughes & Leavey, 2012; Reardon & Factor, 2010), leaving a gap in understanding how students in CBSE-affiliated schools, which follow an Indian curriculum in an international context, experience and manage their mental health. Factors such as cultural expectations, parental pressures, and academic rigor may have a unique influence on student-athlete well-being in these schools. This study aims to address this gap by examining the attitudes and perceptions of students, parents, and coaches regarding mental wellness in CBSE schools in Qatar.

Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are:

1. To understand the attitudes and perceptions of CBSE student-athletes, parents, and coaches toward mental health and wellness.
2. To develop a structured framework that integrates mental health support into CBSE school sports programs.

3. To explore how school policies, social influences, and cultural expectations impact student-athlete mental well-being.

Methodology

This study employs a Grounded Theory approach to explore the mental health and well-being of CBSE school student-athletes in Qatar. Grounded Theory is particularly well-suited for this research as it enables the development of a theoretical framework based on participants' lived experiences and perceptions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Given the limited research on student-athlete mental health in CBSE schools, this approach allows for an in-depth exploration of attitudes, challenges, and potential solutions by analyzing patterns and themes emerging from qualitative data.

Participants and Sampling

The study included CBSE school student-athletes aged 12-18, their parents, and coaches. A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure that participants had relevant experiences related to student-athlete well-being.

Why These Participants Were Selected

1. Student-athletes (15 participants) were chosen as the primary focus group because they directly experience the mental and physical demands of balancing academics and sports.
2. Parents (8 participants) were included to explore how family expectations and cultural attitudes influence students' motivation and mental well-being.
3. Coaches & PE teachers (7 participants) were recruited because they mentor student-athletes and shape their training environments, providing insight into the role of schools in supporting mental health.

The total of 30 participants ensured a well-rounded perspective, incorporating students, parents, and coaches—all key stakeholders in student-athlete well-being.

Participants were selected based on their willingness to discuss issues related to mental health and sports. The inclusion criteria required that student-athletes be actively involved in school sports programs for at least one academic year. Parents and coaches were chosen based on their direct involvement in the students' athletic journey. This sampling method ensured a diverse range of perspectives while allowing for in-depth data collection.

Data Collection Methods

The study utilized focus groups and semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data. These methods were chosen to facilitate open discussions and capture multiple viewpoints on mental well-

being, challenges, and support systems within CBSE schools.

Focus Groups

Three separate focus group discussions were conducted for student-athletes, parents, and coaches. Each session lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and was held in a neutral school setting to encourage open dialogue. The discussions focused on:

- Perceptions of mental health and wellness in student-athletes
- The impact of academic pressure, peer expectations, and cultural beliefs
- The role of school policies in supporting or hindering athlete well-being

The student-athlete focus group revealed that many participants felt overwhelmed by balancing academics and sports, with some admitting to experiencing anxiety before competitions. The parental focus group highlighted concerns about the lack of awareness regarding mental health issues, while the coaches' focus group emphasized the need for structured psychological support within school sports programs.

Semi-Structured Interviews

In addition to focus groups, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants to gain deeper insights into individual experiences. A total of 10 interviews (4 students, 3 parents, 3 coaches) were conducted. The interviews allowed participants to share personal challenges, coping strategies, and recommendations in a confidential setting. The flexibility of this method enabled researchers to probe further into key themes emerging from the focus groups (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Given the sensitive nature of mental health discussions, strict ethical guidelines were followed to ensure participant confidentiality and voluntary participation.

1. Informed Consent

- All participants (students, parents, and coaches) were provided with a detailed consent form explaining the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks.
- For student-athletes under 18, parental consent was obtained before participation.

2. Confidentiality

- Participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous, with responses coded to protect privacy.

- Focus group and interview transcripts were stored securely, with access limited to the research team.
- 3. Voluntary Participation
 - Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.
 - They were also encouraged to seek clarification or refuse to answer any questions they found uncomfortable.

By adhering to these ethical standards, the study ensured that participants felt safe and respected, which contributed to more open and honest discussions.

Data Analysis

To analyze the qualitative data collected from focus groups and interviews, a manual thematic analysis approach was used. This method allowed for a systematic way of identifying patterns and key insights from the responses of student-athletes, parents, and coaches. The analysis followed a structured step-by-step process that ensured accuracy and reliability in deriving meaningful conclusions.

Step 1: Transcription of Data

- All focus group discussions and interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent to ensure that no details were missed.
- The recordings were then transcribed word-for-word (verbatim) into written text.
- After transcription, the transcripts were reviewed carefully to ensure accuracy, and any grammatical errors or unclear statements were cleaned for readability without altering the meaning.
- This step ensured that the data was ready for detailed analysis.

Step 2: Reading and Familiarization with Data

- Once the transcripts were prepared, they were read multiple times to gain a deep understanding of the responses.
- Key statements, frequently mentioned words, and important insights were highlighted to identify common patterns.
- Notes were taken on the main ideas and concerns expressed by the participants.

Step 3: Manual Coding and Categorization

- A manual coding technique was used to organize the data.
- The transcripts were printed out and color-coded to mark different topics and repeated ideas.
- For example:
 - Yellow highlight → Mental health challenges

- Blue highlight → Social and academic pressures
- Green highlight → Need for school-based support

- Each section of the transcript was labeled with relevant keywords to create small categories of information.

Step 4: Identifying Key Themes

- After coding the transcripts, similar ideas were grouped together to form broader themes.
- The key themes that emerged from the analysis included:

1. Common Attitudes Toward Mental Health

- Many student-athletes viewed mental health as secondary to physical fitness.
- Some students felt that discussing mental health issues would be seen as a sign of weakness.
- One student shared:

"I feel nervous before competitions, but I don't talk about it because I think it will make me look weak."

2. Influence of Social and Academic Pressures

- Parents and coaches had different levels of awareness regarding student-athlete mental health challenges.
 - Many parents focused more on academic success than sports, leading to stress among student-athletes.
 - A coach mentioned:
- "We are expected to focus only on performance and winning, but we also see students struggling emotionally."*

3. Need for School-Based Mental Health Support

- Participants emphasized the need for mental health education and resources within CBSE schools.
- Students, parents, and coaches agreed that having trained professionals like school counselors or sports psychologists could help improve athlete well-being.
- A parent stated:

"We never had any workshops or sessions on mental health. If schools create awareness, it will help both students and parents."

Step 5: Organizing Themes into a Framework

- The themes were compiled into a structured framework to show how different factors influence student-athlete well-being.
- This framework highlighted:
 - The importance of raising awareness about mental health.
 - The role of schools, parents, and coaches in creating a supportive environment.
 - The need for mental health services in CBSE school sports programs.

This manual method was chosen as it allows researchers to engage deeply with the data,

ensuring that the voices of student-athletes, parents, and coaches were accurately represented.

Results and Findings

This section presents the key findings of the study, derived through thematic analysis of qualitative data collected from focus groups and interviews with CBSE school student-athletes (ages 12-18), parents, and coaches in Qatar. The themes that emerged from the data highlight the common attitudes and misconceptions about wellness, the role of motivation and social influences, and the need for structured mental health services in school sports programs. The findings provide valuable insights into how student-athlete well-being can be improved through a supportive framework within CBSE schools.

Common Attitudes & Misconceptions About Wellness

A dominant theme that emerged from the study was the widespread misconceptions about wellness among student-athletes, parents, and coaches. Three key areas were identified:

1. Student-Athletes' Perception of Success: Physical Endurance Over Mental Health

Many student-athletes equated success solely with physical endurance, often neglecting mental well-being. They viewed mental struggles as a weakness, making it difficult to seek help.

A 16-year-old basketball player shared:

"I always push myself to train harder, even when I feel exhausted. If I admit that I am mentally drained, people might think I am not strong enough."

Similarly, a football player noted:

"Coaches don't really talk about mental health. It's all about practice and performance. If we feel stressed, we just have to deal with it."

2. Parental Prioritization of Academics Over Sports

Parents emphasized academic success over sports, causing stress and feelings of guilt among student-athletes trying to balance both.

A student explained:

"My parents say that sports are fine, but studies come first. Even if I have an important match, I am expected to finish all my homework before practice."

A parent echoed this sentiment:

"Sports is good, but in the end, what matters is academic performance. Schools don't guarantee scholarships for sports, but academics ensure a secure future."

3. Coaches' Focus on Performance Over Emotional Support

Coaches prioritized performance over emotional well-being, often lacking the training to support athletes' mental health.

One coach admitted:

"Our job is to make sure students perform well. We are not trained to handle mental health issues. If a student is struggling, we usually refer them to the school counselor, but not many go."

External Influences on Student-Athlete Well-Being

1. Extrinsic vs. Intrinsic Motivation

Many students participated in sports due to parental pressure rather than personal interest, leading to stress and anxiety.

A student shared:

"I don't really love playing cricket, but my dad was a player in college, so he wants me to follow in his footsteps."

2. Social Pressure and Body Image Concerns

Peer judgment and body image concerns deterred some students, particularly girls, from participating in sports.

A female participant noted:

"Some girls don't play because they think sports will make them look bulky. Others worry about sweating and looking bad."

3. Lack of Structured Mental Health Programs in Schools

Schools lacked formal mental health support for student-athletes, with no dedicated sports psychologists or structured wellness programs.

A concerned parent remarked:

"Schools should take mental health seriously, just like they do with academics. Right now, there's no structured support system for student-athletes."

Discussion

This study's findings highlight that mental health remains an overlooked aspect of student-athlete development in CBSE schools. Social pressures, school policies, and academic expectations significantly contribute to student-athlete stress and burnout. Prior research has shown that competitive pressure often results in anxiety and exhaustion (Reardon & Factor, 2010), and this study reinforces that perspective. Student-athletes primarily associate success with physical endurance, often neglecting mental well-being. Similar to Gustafsson et al. (2017), this study found that students fear being perceived as weak if they express mental distress. Additionally, many student-athletes hesitate to seek psychological support from coaches or school counselors, reflecting findings by Stambulova et al. (2020).

Parental and social pressures also play a crucial role in shaping student-athlete mental health. Academic expectations from parents often take precedence over sports, leading to stress and emotional exhaustion, aligning with Harwood and Knight's (2015) research. Additionally, parental pressure to balance academics and sports negatively impacts intrinsic motivation and well-being (O'Rourke et al., 2013). Social pressure regarding body image and peer judgment further discourages sports participation, consistent with Slater and Tiggemann's (2010) findings that body dissatisfaction is a major barrier to adolescent sports engagement.

A significant gap exists in institutional mental health support within CBSE schools. Research suggests that school sports programs often lack structured psychological resources (Henriksen et al., 2020), a concern echoed in this study. Schools in Qatar lack trained sports psychologists and formal mental health policies, leaving student-athletes without necessary psychological support. Similar to Rice et al. (2016), this study emphasizes the urgent need for embedded mental health professionals in school sports programs to foster a more supportive environment for student-athletes. Addressing these gaps through policy reforms, parental education, and institutional support is essential for enhancing student-athlete well-being.

Recommendations

To address these challenges and develop a more supportive framework for student-athletes in CBSE schools, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Implementing School-Based Mental Health Support

- Schools should hire trained sports psychologists who can offer counseling, stress management strategies, and performance psychology training to student-athletes.
- Schools should incorporate mental health education into physical education and sports training programs to ensure that students, parents, and coaches understand the psychological demands of sports.
- Establishing regular mental health check-ins for student-athletes can help identify early signs of stress, anxiety, or burnout.

2. Educating Parents and Coaches on Student-Athlete Well-Being

- Awareness workshops should be introduced to educate parents on the impact of excessive academic pressure on student-athletes' mental health.
- Schools should provide training sessions for coaches on how to recognize signs of stress,

anxiety, and emotional distress in student-athletes.

- Encouraging a balanced approach where student-athletes receive support for both their academic and athletic commitments can help alleviate unnecessary pressure.

3. Creating Flexible Academic Policies for Student-Athletes

CBSE schools should develop policies that allow student-athletes to balance academics and sports effectively. This can include:

- Flexible examination schedules for students participating in major competitions.
- Academic counseling programs tailored for student-athletes to help them manage both responsibilities.
- Collaboration between teachers and coaches to ensure that student-athletes receive academic accommodations when necessary.

4. Encouraging Further Research on Cultural Factors and Mental Health in Student-Athletes

- Future research should examine how cultural expectations shape sports participation and mental health among CBSE school students in Qatar.
- Investigating the long-term effects of academic and social pressure on student-athletes' mental well-being can further refine school policies.
- Comparative studies between CBSE schools in different countries can offer insights into best practices for integrating mental health into school sports programs.

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