

Student - Athletes' quest for balance: Stories from Istanbul

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of students who are actively engaged in sports. The study seeks an answer to the following questions: "To what extent do students who engage with sports maintain a balance between their school life and sports life? The study is based on a qualitative study focusing on the lived experiences of sports athletes. The data collection process consists of interviews and written reflections. During the analysis of the narrative stories, two themes were identified relating to the experience of being a student-athlete: Maintaining a balance between sports life and school life was the main theme that emerged in the study. This was followed by the second theme of support and mentorship of teachers, family, and friends.

Keywords: Student-Athletes, Balance, School

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1. Introduction

The value of sports to the life of an individual has been a high-stakes issue for many centuries. As *the New York Times* (Keener, 2013) argues, lessons learned in sports competitions and tournaments channel into teenagers' learning experiences both in and outside the classroom.

This study discusses how student-athletes maintain a balance between school and sports. The reason I am conducting this project is that I have been unable to pursue my life as an athlete whilst engaging in my academic studies as a scholarship student in one of the most privileged international schools in Istanbul. I have tried many different ways to tackle the problems I struggled with while trying to find the balance in my life. In conclusion, I decided not to do sports professionally but to take part as a hobby that would contribute to my health and general satisfaction.

Moreover, for the last few years, I have had the opportunity to study at different schools and meet people from different social classes. Many of the students I met had been professional athletes for long periods. I was thus able to observe how students maintain this balance.

Therefore, derived from my own experience, this study examines the stories of student-athletes and their school and sports life balance. Their experiences are analyzed through their own perspectives and the ways schools contribute to their success is also investigated. The remainder of the article consists of Literature Review, Methodology, and Themes followed by Conclusion, Discussion, and Recommendations.

1.1. Literature review

"While striving to win, children learn about teamwork, leadership, and sportsmanship, all of which can contribute to their development as solid citizens." (Keener, 2013)

A major issue regarding sports in the 21st-century sports is the lack of exercise and physical activity. Globally, a paradigm shift has occurred in people's views towards how sports should be treated. Unfortunately, a big section of people considers doing sports only as a "physical activity". However, pursuing in an area of sport is much more than simply a physical activity: student-athletes develop significant personal traits such as teamwork, time-management, mental health awareness, work ethic, leadership, and commitment. All of which empower them to become well-rounded people in areas like science, technology, law, literature, business, and arts. Evidence has shown that physical activity is one of the most significant aspects of life that contribute to self-satisfaction and happiness. Hence, the relationship between academic potential and intellectual perseverance goes hand-in-hand.

A student-athlete has to overcome additional barriers and challenges when he or she is compared to their friends. Since that person is pressured by the demands of an academic course making it difficult to balance their academic life with their sporting activities. Students find themselves operating in survival mode in order to meet the additional challenges they encounter on a daily basis (Parham, 1993). A study conducted on Canadian university students' football experiences in their first year found that football commitments occupied so much time during the season that they had difficulty in "finding time for other activities such as studying, working on assignments, eating properly, or getting enough sleep" (Checroune et al., 2012, p. 243). Studies by Miller et al. (2002) and Miller and Kerr (2003) found "loneliness at a cultural and socio-economic level" to be one of the main problems experienced by student-athletes. Pinkerton et al. (2010) identified the following problems among student athletes: fear of success; identity conflict; social isolation; poor athletic performance; academic problems; and career or vocational concerns (p.

218). Some countries appear to develop individually tailored models to support student-athletes. For example, the United States of America has a long history in the development of school-based models that support the development of student-athletes in many ways. The degree and the nature of the support system seem to vary from one country to another depending on the economic, structural conditions, and institutional policies in place (Ryba et al. 2015). Student-athletes seem to learn how to overcome the initial constraints they encounter over time. The study conducted by Parham (1993) highlights the following challenges encountered by first-year university student-athletes:

- Learning how to balance academic and athletic activities
- Adapting to a certain degree of isolation from social and more 'mainstream' activities
- Managing a successful trajectory
- Paying attention to their own physical health in a conscious manner so that they protect themselves from injury
- Establishing good communication channels with their coaches, parents, and friends (Parham, 1993)

High schools and colleges that recognize the significant change in the perception of sports have been focusing on trying to provide student-athletes with the critical amount of support so they can seek a life where they can achieve both academic and sports success. Nevertheless, the academic success of student-athletes is a critical and highly complex undertaking. As the popularity and significance of social status have risen, institutions have faced problems regarding how aspiring student-athletes can maintain academic productivity (Bowen & Lewis, 2003). Likewise, Gomez et al. (2018) assert that being a top athlete "requires time, commitment and carefully planned training". In addition, adaptation to training "requires the careful balancing of stress and recovery". In such a competitive context, "the student-athlete has to balance all these demands with the additional requirements of an academic program" (p. 329).

Educational institutions have begun to invest a serious amount of resources into creating strategies that open paths for a sports life along with academic studies. A study conducted in China analyzes the effectiveness of a positive youth development-based (PYD) sports mentorship program that showed that a mentorship program enables Chinese adolescents to improve their mental well-being, psychological assets, physical fitness as well as increase their physical activity levels (Ho, et al., 2017). The NCAA in the United States (National Collegiate Athletic Association) has begun to implement metrics that aim to monitor and evaluate the academic performance of students (Chrabszcz, et al., 2018).

However, not all institutions conduct these strategies well enough so that students can benefit from them. While some administrations only focus on students' academic potential, their athletic potential is not taken into consideration, or teachers do not revise their study program to account for the student who is absent due to competitions because they believe academic study to be more important than athletics. Likewise, the sports federations do not take account of school exam schedules because they believe athletics to be more important than academic study. This research paper aims to determine the strategies and approaches used by administrations and teachers toward student-athletes. High school students share their experiences of how their school supported or did not support them to evaluate the strategies they employed while trying to create a balance between athletic and academic performance (Grandy, et al. 2016).

1.2. Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of students who are actively engaged in sports. The study seeks an answer to the following questions:

- To what extent do students who engage with sports maintain a balance between their school life and sports life?
- To what extent do students who engage with sports receive support from their teachers, parents, and friends?
- To what extent is the support given by the federation satisfactory for student-athletes?
- What kinds of recommendations would student-athletes give their peers who wish to be actively engaged in sports?

2. Methodology

The study is based on a qualitative study focusing on the lived experiences of sports athletes. The data collection process consists of interviews and written reflections. The study is based on the phenomenological design in which student athletes' experiences of balance is described by the meaning attributed to their lived experiences of the phenomenon of school and sports life balance (Creswell, 2017).

2.1. Participants

The participants in this research are eight students who are actively engaged in sports and attend the sports competitions of a licensed sports club. The study was conducted at two international schools. In line with the purpose of the study the researcher specifically focused on collecting the stories of student-athletes who study at international schools. The participants were selected using "snowball sampling," which is expected to help identify the case questions of interested people and collect the unique information from the population sampling" (Creswell, 2017). The snowball sampling began with the first student-athlete with whom the researcher had contact. Then, students started recommending their acquaintances who were involved in sports, thus, creating snowball sampling.

Table 1. Demographic Information about the Participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Sport
TT	17	Male	Table Tennis
B	16	Male	Basketball
F	16	Male	Fencing
W	16	Male	Waterpolo
C	16	Male	Chess
T	15	Male	Tennis
V	16	Female	Volleyball
S	16	Female	Swimming

The researcher conducted ongoing formal and informal conversations with the student-athletes over the last three years. In addition to conversations, participants were also asked to reveal their reflections on a written form.

2.2. Data collection

The researcher began the interview process by sending an email to student-athletes and asking for their voluntary participation with their certified informed consent. The data for this project was collected by conducting face to face interviews with teenagers (study group) who were selected via the snowball sampling method. In order to achieve a wider range of understanding of the concepts, the interview questions were sent to eight students active in different areas of sport and who were academically promising. As a follow-up, participants were asked to record their experiences on a written reflection form, which constitutes the data set for this study. The reflection forms were sent by email and responses were asked to be sent via email. The questions asked both in the interviews and the reflections were open-ended to encourage participants can talk about their experiences without restrictions. They were also reminded that they could skip any question they felt uncomfortable with. Participants were also asked to add comments and anecdotes that may bring unique insights to the study.

The following questions were asked during the interviews and their reflections:

- Could you give some background information about when and how you started doing a sport? What was your influence?
- Can you say that doing a sport advanced you in your academic life? Why?
- At what period did you start to think that you will start having difficulties being able to continue academic and sports life together?
- How did your family support you during this sacrificial period?
- Can you elaborate on how you maintained the balance while doing a sport and focusing on academic life? Did you have any specific methods?
- How does your school try to support you? What kind of contribution/help the school administration provides you?
- Does (your sport's) Federation take into account whether you have exams or not? Do you have a memory where you were in a difficult dilemma?
- I heard that even though the school's administration department supports students to do sports, some teachers are not very keen to tolerate a student not being in the class, exam or etc. because they do not want to explain a whole subject from scratch to only one student. Has anything like this happened to you, what was your solution?
- What is your suggestion for administrators/teachers to create a life where students who are doing sports do not fall back academically compared to other students?

2.3. Data analysis

The researcher transcribed all of the interviews and reflections. I began with the raw field texts in which all the stories were analyzed word by word then moved to interpreted texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I divided the data analysis process into four sections using Marshall and Rossman (1999) as a reference: organizing data; identifying themes, patterns, and categories; searching for alternative explanations of the data; and writing the report (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Throughout the analytical process, I used student-athletes' words to describe their experiences.

Based on the answers of the interviewees, keywords, specific events, and themes were identified. The analysis was established according to the data received.

3. Results

During the analysis of the narrative stories, two themes were identified relating to the experience of being a student-athlete: Maintaining balance between athletics and school life & Support and mentorship of schools and federations.

Table 2. Themes Emerged

Theme 1: Maintaining balance between athletics and school life

Theme 2: Support and mentorship of schools and federations

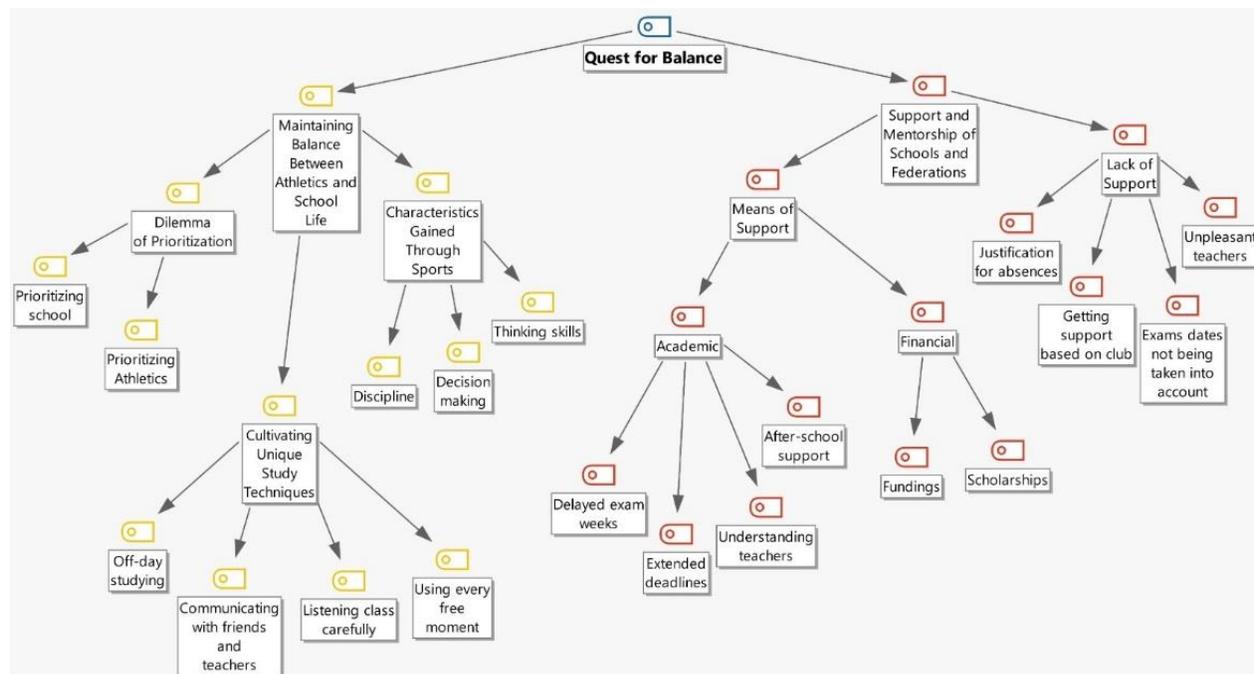


Figure 1: Themes and Sub-Themes Emerged

As it can be seen from the figure above, maintaining balance between sports life and school life was the first theme that emerged in the study. This was followed by the second theme of support and mentorship of schools and federations. Both of the themes also involve sub-themes.

Theme 1: Maintaining balance between athletics and school life

One of the main themes that emerged from the voices of the student-athletes was “maintaining a balance between sports life and school life”. The data for this theme was provided through the following interview question: “To what extent do you maintain a balance between your school life and sports life?” The following discusses the student-athletes’ reflections.

Time constraints serve as one of the biggest challenges in the lives of student-athletes. Student “S” asserts

that it takes some time to adjust to the role of being a student and an athlete. Her experience showed her that time helped her to manage the two important factors in her life. In the first couple of months, she learned by trial and error. This was echoed in the voices of more than half of the participants. The following excerpts reveal the dilemma experienced by student-athletes' in their initial period:

- "I was able to focus on my school work at home and my volleyball during practice. I learned the importance of **not letting those two aspects of my life affect each other.**"
- "Right now, I am a 10th-grade student and also a 16-year-old. People that try to balance out school and sports life-changing decisions are made in this period of our lives. Ultimately, while choosing to which side you are going to lean puts you in a dilemma where you can **lose motivation for both.**"
- "When I was in 5th grade, my training finished at 8.30 pm. **I didn't have enough time for my assignments,** but somehow I didn't stop playing tennis."
- "When I got into high school, the amount of time I spent on training decreased tremendously because **I prioritized my classes.**"
- "There were many times when I wished I had just **a little bit more time to study** for an exam to *get the grade I wanted*. Everyone said that it would be very hard to continue swimming while doing the IB Curriculum, and to be honest, it is quite hard. **I've spent so many nights without the chance to sleep.**"

The first six months appear to be the transition period. Student-athletes noted that they develop certain strategies that establish the link between their sports life and academic life. They are aware of the fact that their lives are more complicated compared to their peers. They believe that these challenges have enabled them to develop resilience with certain personal qualities. The term resilience was used to depict the following expressions: "Becoming stronger, powerful, disciplined, organized and efficient". Although most of the student-athletes at first perceived their situation to be a disadvantage, they later recognized that the personal traits they gained from doing sports had a positive impact on their careers. Two of the participants are still hesitant about the benefits gained from doing a sport and trying to survive in two challenging life contexts.

- "Sport has gained me a lot of **discipline** that helps me maintain my sport and academics."
- "Yes, I think it did. Chess had a major effect on my classes. I didn't even need to study until the high school entrance because I think chess improved my **thinking abilities.**"
- "Not only the opportunities for **scholarships** but important skills like **time management, quick decision** making always helped me through with my academic life."
- "I can't say that sports helped me in my academic life but I think it is too soon to say because we're in high school. Nevertheless, if I have to say something positive about sports in relation to my academic career, I would have to point out the **discipline** it brought me."
- "I cannot say whether there was a direct influence on my academic skills. However, it definitely taught me **discipline.**"

Despite all of the roadblocks these athletes encountered, the resilience obtained by doing sports contributed to how they survived during this period. In addition, the skills adapted during this process led them to gain a wider understanding of how they can maintain a balance between school and sports life. Every student has tried many different ways to create an environment for themselves where they are able to pursue both of their careers at the same time. Some of the strategies used by the students were communicating with teachers and friends, listening to the lesson carefully, studying everywhere, studying

on off days, sacrificing free time outside of school, and giving some free time for themselves to stay mentally stable.

- "I always tried to stay happy and protect my mental health because **nothing is more important than your health**. On the other hand, I tried to use my time as efficiently as I could and **never skipped doing things I enjoyed at least an hour every day** in order to again protect myself from mental health issues like depression."
- "I generally **study hard on the days that I don't have training** and study 1 or 2 hours other days."
- "I tried to keep track of the classwork and homework by **talking to my friends and teachers**."
- "I struggle to keep a balance between sports and academics for most of the time. However, **I get good grades by listening to the work that is done in class** carefully and with all my attention when I need to do so I do not need to spend my own time studying."
- "I tried to use **every moment** before and after practice either to do homework or study for exams." "...I would say **sacrificing my own free time outside of school was what I usually did**."

In conclusion to the theme of "Maintaining a balance between school and sports life", every student has a different way of maintaining a balance based on their field of sport and their personal characteristics. While some put their academic career first, others put their sports life first or spent equal time on both. Nevertheless, since all of them still have both strong academic and sports careers, it can be inferred that no matter what roadblock these students encountered, they certainly found ways to overcome it.

However, students should not have to do this. All sorts of different opportunities should be provided so they are not put in the dilemma of choosing what to do with their sports life. Even though, as this research shows, some students find ways to adapt to this environment, this is not always the case. In Turkey, many students end up not pursuing their career in sports because it is really risky only having a career solely based on a sport. After all, an injury could result in the sport's career-ending. On the other hand, some people just focus on being an athlete and leave their academic life behind. Therefore, a system where the student can pursue both should be created: a system where you know that you are following your sports career without any doubts about it affecting your academic career negatively. This brings us to Theme 2: "Support and mentorship of schools and federations".

Theme 2: Support and mentorship of schools and federations

Regardless of how strong and resilient the student-athletes are, sooner or later they experience a situation where they have to choose between going to a tournament and writing a paper for school or entering an exam. Hence, a spotlight must be put on the support from the school administration.

Therefore, the following questions interview questions were asked:

- To what extent do students who engage with sports receive support from their teachers and the school administration?
- To what extent is the support given by the federation satisfactory for student-athletes?
- What do student-athletes expect from their school administrations to enable them to pursue their careers?

Many of the students receive help and understanding from most of their teachers: extended deadlines, post-school revisions, and even in some cases financial support.

- "The teachers are quite **understanding** when I explain the situation to them."
- "My school really supports chess. For example, they **took** the chess team to an international tournament in Russia."
- "I knew they **weren't pleased** with the occasion but they always tried to **support** me for my lost class time."

It can be seen that some teachers treat their students equally and these students did not suffer from a loss of educational rights. However, some schools don't support students as much as they support other students.

- "School hasn't really supported us in the past, but now I think the **PE teachers can relate to us**, that's why they can show some understanding."
- "My school **doesn't support me** in any kind of way, the only thing they do for athletes is counting "sports competition" as a **justification for our absences** related to sports."

In both of these students' situations, the school administrator and teacher are not as supportive as they should be. While in one case the only people showing understanding are the PE teachers, in another case the student is not supported by his school at all.

In addition, some administrations tend to support more athletes that train under the school's name. Meanwhile, they do not show the same interest and care to students who do not carry the school's flag. One of the students shared their experience regarding this issue.

- "To be honest, **I don't think the school is supportive enough to the students who play sports outside of the school**. I play volleyball and I too have a very busy schedule. However, **I don't think I get recognized** by the school or the teachers because I don't swim or play tennis there. Our school is more supportive towards its own players."
- "Especially for me, I have an *academic scholarship* which means that I have to have an 85 average while still going to practice 6 or 7 days a week. If the school supported athletes who have busy schedules but play outside of the school, then I think it would make our lives a lot easier. But no, **I don't think the school supports us in any way.**"

In this scenario, this student has been suffering because of the schools' preferential support for those who carry their school flag.

This study shows that school life and sports life serve as counterparts that feed one another. Voices of the participants show that students need the support of their school and the sports clubs as well as their families. They are aware of the fact that no matter how motivated they may be, they are constantly in search of a mentoring and supportive system in both spheres of their lives. In this case, the role of the sports federation is of utmost importance because the main goal of these athletes is to achieve success in their area of expertise and those who determine the schedule are the federation. Hence, the federations must take care to pick dates for competitions based on the exams. Because they do not do this, competition dates often interfere with exam dates.

- "No, our federation **does not take into account that we have exams** because our important championships seem to always be on the same weeks as our exams."
- "Important tournaments were after my exam week which horribly affected my performance due

to lessened training and doing more school work.

- "The Turkish Volleyball Federation prepares their yearly program according to the common exams that the students take such as LGS or the University Entrance Exam so that students don't have trouble while attending the Turkish Championships. However, the federation obviously doesn't keep track of every school's individual exams."

In conclusion to the theme of "Support and mentorship of schools and federations", it can be seen that the school administrations and teachers try to provide some support toward their students while some schools do not provide support because they do not believe sports to be important or that the students don't specifically support the school. Even though administrations support athletes that participate in their club, the fact of every student being equal should not be ignored. If and only if student-athletes are treated fairly will schools be successful. Despite the attitude of school administrations, most teachers are aware of the situation that these students are in and how sacrificing it can be. Therefore, it is paramount that administrations and sports federations listen to these aspiring athletes' experiences.

4. Conclusion, Discussion and Recommendations

First, as clearly shown in the theme of "Maintaining a balance between athletics and school", every student had found a way to maintain balance in their lives. The characteristics gained from being an athlete and a responsible student build exceptional qualities such as discipline, time management, responsibility, awareness, and quick thinking. Nevertheless, external factors have been roadblocks for students during these periods: transportation, energy recovery, time management, and etc. Hence, each of these teenagers created certain systems and tactics for themselves. While some prioritize their school work, others prioritize their training, or distribute time between them equally or reward themselves. Thus, every type of student has their own methods for pursuing their careers despite all the roadblocks encountered. In this study, some of the student-athletes complained about the constraints they experience due to the long and intense training hours. This finding seems to be in parallel with the studies in the literature of sports life of students. A study by Checroune et al. (2012) revealed ways in which time spent participating in football-related activities influenced the amount of time that could be allocated for being involved in academic activities. Recommendations derived from participants' stories could be the use of mentoring through sports psychology and other support systems to enable them to optimise their time management skills. This was previously found to be important in the scholarship of student athletes by Mckenna and Dunstan-Lewis (2004) and Gomez et al. (2018). In a study conducted on Irish university students by Gomez et al. (2018), lack of communication between the coach and the athlete was found to be one of the main barriers student-athletes face in their careers. The study proposed a holistic support model based on counseling as a means for maintaining balance in their challenging lives.

Second, the results of the theme of "Support and Mentorship of Schools and Federations" show that school administrations have created a program for extending homework and essay deadlines. However, this does not necessarily mean that the program is suitable for every student. It is not logical to expect an athlete who trains at their school and another athlete who trains at a more distant facility to have the same amount of time and energy. Therefore, administrations should be flexible and provide different types of opportunities based on the students' characteristics and their area of sport. That is why schools should firstly focus on different strategies in which every type of student can benefit without the fear of falling behind in coursework. If schools create these types of systems and collaborate with sports federations, none of the students will be left out in the cold trying to survive by themselves. With the combination of the qualities of being an athlete and the necessary opportunities provided by schools, brilliant minds will be found in the world. Miller and Kerr's study (2003) noted that social contact can be

developed only in class and athletic clubs due to heavy training programs. That is why their social interactions appear to be limited to teammates and other athletes.

The current study does not reveal any findings in this regard. Instead, high school students who are actively involved in sports seem to be very social, especially with their team mates and their coaches. Because of the limited amount of time left after the heavy load of sports, it is easier for them to interact and socialize with their friends from the same team.

In future studies based on the topic of student-athletes, the researchers could study the types of approaches that can be used by conducting interviews with student-athletes, teachers, and school administrations.

Mutz et al. (2020) analysed life satisfaction within the frame of leisure time sports activities through a survey conducted on the German young population. The study revealed that sports have a beneficial effect on "well-being". When our findings are interpreted in line with the literature, the positive effect of being actively involved in sports serves as a means for the well-being of the youth. Schools and sports clubs are expected to develop strategies and tools to enable students-athletes and their families to maintain balance between their sports life and school life. It should be noted that the strategies should also be tailored in a way to open social and interaction times for student athletes apart from the sports-oriented socialization. Stories shared in this study are expected to provide insights and recommendations for student-athletes as well as their schools and families.

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