

Dissertation Prospectus

The Perspectives of Teachers and Parents Regarding the Benefits of Extracurricular Activities in

Children with Mild and Moderate Disabilities: A Qualitative Case Study

Submitted by

Student Name

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Mentor Name

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Introduction

Children with mild and moderate disabilities often experience difficulties and challenges in school, which can be academic, social, or behavioral in nature (Mulcahy, Krezmien, & Maccini, 2014). Mild and moderate disabilities can pertain to learning, emotional, or intellectual disabilities (Cote, 2013). Many children with mild and moderate disabilities have inadequate social skills, experience difficulty in learning, or exhibit behavioral problems that can limit their abilities to meet the demands of schooling (Brooks, Floyd, Robins, & Chan, 2014; Mulcahy et al., 2014). Exposure to extracurricular activities has been proposed by some researchers as effective in addressing the difficulties and challenges experienced by children with mild and moderate disabilities in school (Hallrah, 2014; Madan & Sharma, 2013; Metsäpelto & Pulkkinen, 2014). Children with mild and moderate disabilities participate in different types of extracurricular activities, ranging from art-based, athletic-based, and academic-based activities (Farb & Matjasko, 2012; Knifsend & Graham, 2012). The benefits children can gain from participating in various extracurricular activities include improvements in academic performance, acquisition of appropriate social skills, and correction of negative behaviors (Brooks, 2013; Fredricks, 2013; Hallrah, 2014). The proposed study is worth conducting because the results can provide insight into the ways in which specific extracurricular activities benefit high school students, possibly leading to better alignment of addressing children's needs in terms of academic, social, or behavioral difficulties. The study will be completed by examining the perspectives of teachers and parents of high school students with mild and moderate disabilities regarding how extracurricular activities benefited children.

Background of the Problem

Children with disabilities often experience difficulties and challenges in school (Mulcahy et al., 2013; Sorani-Villanueva, McMahon, Crouch, & Keys, 2014). Efforts have been made by educators and school leaders to explore the different strategies in which the challenges experienced by children with disabilities can be addressed and minimized, ranging from inclusive instructional practices to participation in social skills training (Mostert, 2013). One strategy that has received some empirical support is the use of extracurricular activities as a way to improve the development and functioning of children with disabilities (Madan & Sharma, 2013).

Past researchers have consistently found that students who participate in extracurricular activities have a greater probability of being successful both socially and academically (Hallrah, 2014; Madan & Sharma, 2013; Metsäpelto & Pulkkinen, 2014). Extracurricular activities can benefit different students, including those with mild and moderate disabilities, because exposure to these types of activities develops life and character-building skills that students can apply in school (Hallrah, 2014; Metsäpelto & Pulkkinen, 2014). Integrating extracurricular activities into the routine of high school students with mild or moderate disabilities can lead to better coping and adjustment not only with their social relationships but also in their academic performance and overall behaviors (Madan & Sharma, 2013).

The identified gap in the literature is that even though extracurricular activities have been shown to benefit students with mild disabilities, it is not known which extracurricular activities correspond to specific educational benefit. Extracurricular activities can involve athletics, arts, or academics (Farb & Matjasko, 2012; Knifsend & Graham, 2012; Schaefer, Simpkins, Vest, & Price, 2011), underscoring the need to not regard extracurricular activities as a single activity.

Moreover, the educational benefits of participating in extracurricular activities include academic, social, and behavioral benefits (Sorani-Villanueva et al., 2014). The multi-dimensional nature of both extracurricular activities and educational benefits necessitates the importance to further explore and compare the perceptions of parents and teachers regarding how different extracurricular activities benefit high school students with mild and moderate disabilities.

Theoretical Foundations and Review of the Literature/Themes

Theoretical foundations/conceptual framework. The theoretical foundations of the proposed study will be rooted on the framework of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The theory posits that children are exposed to different ecological systems in the course of their development. Those systems include microsystems, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem. These multiple ecological systems highlight the importance of focusing not only on the home and school life of children, but also on the other aspects of their social life, including their extracurricular activities (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). According to Metsäpelto and Pulkkinen (2014), participation in extracurricular activities is one of the most significant aspects of children's development. The ecological systems theory is relevant to this study because it provides rationale and insights as to why extracurricular activities can be beneficial to children's development and overall functioning. Extracurricular activities can be considered a microsystem in the life of children (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), equipping them with the intellectual, behavioral, and social skills critical to their development (Hallrah, 2014; Madan & Sharma, 2013; Metsäpelto & Pulkkinen, 2014).

Review of the literature/themes. Based on the literature review conducted on how extracurricular activities may affect children with mild and moderate disabilities, the following

themes are presented. The following themes from the literature provide empirical support for the importance of extracurricular activities in the positive development of students in school.

Challenges of children with mild and moderate disabilities. Children with mild and moderate disabilities are susceptible to experiencing various challenges and difficulties in school that can affect their studies (Mulcahy et al., 2013; Sorani-Villanueva et al., 2014). The nature of challenges experienced by children with disabilities span academic, social, and behavioral problems (Sorani-Villanueva et al., 2014).

Extracurricular activities produce educational benefits. Students who participate in extracurricular activities have a greater chance of being successful in school (Hallrah, 2014; Madan & Sharma, 2013; Metsäpelto & Pulkkinen, 2014). Extracurricular activities can include athletics, arts, or academic activities (Farb & Matjasko, 2012; Knifsend & Graham, 2012; Schaefer et al., 2011). The benefits children can gain from participating in extracurricular activities include improved academic achievement, social skills, and behaviors (Brooks, 2013; Fredricks, 2013; Hallrah, 2014; Hartmann, Sullivan, & Nelson, 2012; Madan & Sharma, 2013; Metsäpelto & Pulkkinen, 2014; Seow & Pan, 2014).

Academic benefits of participating in extracurricular activities. Participating in extracurricular activities can result in academic benefits, such as improved achievement in mathematics (Fredricks, 2013). Arts-based extracurricular activities can also develop the problem-solving skills of students (Liem, Martin, Anderson, Gibson, & Sudmalis, 2014). As a result educators are encouraging students regardless of the presence of disabilities to participate in extracurricular activities (Seow & Pan, 2014).

Social benefits of participating in extracurricular activities. Extracurricular activities have been utilized by educators to develop the social skills of students, particularly among

students with disabilities (Brooks, 2013). For instance, participating in athletics-based extracurricular activities has been found to have pro-social benefits to students (Hartmann et al., 2012).

Behavioral benefits of participating in extracurricular activities. Participating in extracurricular activities can also result in improved behaviors from children (Metsäpelto & Pulkkinen, 2014). Exposure to extracurricular activities is particularly beneficial to students who have conduct or behavioral problems (Yu, Desha, & Ziviani, 2013).

Problem Statement

It is not known how athletic-based, art-based, and academic-based extracurricular activities benefit students with mild and moderate disabilities. Most studies that examined extracurricular activities did not differentiate among the various types of extracurricular activities to which students are exposed (e.g., Camacho & Fuligni, 2014; Knifsend & Graham, 2012). Therefore little is known about how specific types of extracurricular activity benefit students with mild and moderate disabilities. The multi-dimensional nature of extracurricular activities and educational benefits underscores the importance of further exploring and comparing how parents and teachers perceive the ways in which different extracurricular activities benefit high school students with mild and moderate disabilities in terms of academic, social, and behavioral outcomes.

Research Questions and Phenomenon

Based on the problem identified, this research will focus on exploring and comparing how teachers and parents perceive the ways in which athletic, artistic, and academic extracurricular activities benefit high school students with mild and moderate disabilities academically, socially, or behaviorally.

Phenomenon: The phenomenon is how it is not known how athletic-based, art-based, and academic-based extracurricular activities benefit students with mild and moderate disabilities.

Overarching Research Question: How do teachers and parents perceive the benefits of participating in extracurricular activities in high school students with mild and moderate disabilities?

Sub-Research Questions:

R₁: How do teachers and parents perceive the benefits of participating in athletic-based extracurricular activities in high school students with mild and moderate disabilities?

R₂: How do teachers and parents perceive the benefits of participating in art-based extracurricular activities in high school students with mild and moderate disabilities?

R₃: How do teachers and parents perceive the benefits of participating in academic-based extracurricular activities in high school students with mild and moderate disabilities?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because the gap in the literature will be addressed by examining which type of extracurricular activities corresponds to specific educational benefits on high school students with mild and moderate disabilities. There is currently no literature differentiating how athletics-based, arts-based, and academic-based extracurricular activities benefit high students with mild and moderate disabilities (Camacho & Fuligni, 2014; Knifsend & Graham, 2012). Understanding the needs of children with intellectual disabilities can be viewed from an ecological systems perspective wherein their environment plays a significant role in their development (Small, Raghavan, & Pawson, 2013). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) will be enhanced as a result of this study by having a

better understanding about how the different extracurricular activities can aid students with mild and moderate disabilities. Finally, the results of the study are significant to professional practice because educators and school leaders may have better understanding and information on what type of extracurricular activity can benefit more with students who have specific challenges or difficulties, whether academic, social, or behavioral challenges.

Rationale for Methodology

A qualitative methodology will be used in the proposed study, focusing on collecting rich and in-depth information from teachers and parents. Some of the characteristics of qualitative research methods are the focus on subjective perceptions and experiences of a unique phenomenon, use of small sample size, in-depth exploration of a phenomenon using rich and detailed narrative data, and inductive and constructivist perspective on knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Qualitative methods are appropriate for the proposed study because rich qualitative interviews will provide relevant details about how different extracurricular activities are perceived by parents and teachers as beneficial to high school students with mild and moderate disabilities. A quantitative research approach would not yield the same details needed to understand the importance of extracurricular activities in high school students with mild and moderate disabilities.

Nature of the Research Design for the Study

A qualitative case study research design will be used in the proposed study. A case study research design allows for the exploration of a phenomenon using flexible research methods that allow for multiple perspectives to achieve in-depth and comprehensive understanding (Yin, 2013). By including the perspectives of both teachers and parents, a more comprehensive understanding of the benefits of extracurricular activities can be achieved. A qualitative case

study research design using thematic analysis is appropriate because the development of themes from the data will allow for the exploration of the similarities and differences among the benefits of the different types of extracurricular activities will be explored based on the subjective perceptions of teachers and parents.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the proposed qualitative case study is to address the gap in the literature by exploring the perceptions of teachers about the benefits of participating in athletics-based, art-based, and academic-based extracurricular activities in high school students with mild and moderate disabilities in the United States. The sample will include 10 participants for each group, with five teachers and five parents for each group, resulting in a total sample size of 30 parents and teachers (15 teachers and 15 parents). Thirty participants is consistent with the recommended sample size in qualitative studies to reach data saturation, the point in which no new information can be gained (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2013). At this stage in the research, extracurricular activities will be generally defined as athletics-based, arts-based, and academic-based activities (Farb & Matjasko, 2012; Knifsend & Graham, 2012; Schaefer et al., 2011). Moreover, the benefits of participating in extracurricular activities on high school students with mild and moderate disabilities will be generally defined as benefits in terms of academic, social, and behavioral outcomes (Mulcahy et al., 2014).

Sources of Data

Data for the proposed study will be collected using semi-structured interviews containing open-ended questions about the ways in which extracurricular activities are perceived to be beneficial to high school students with mild and moderate disabilities. The use of semi-structured interviews combine both structure and flexibility in questioning, focusing on

maintaining a sense of organization while following the responses of the interviewees to determine the flow of the interview (Rabionet, 2011). An interview guide will be prepared prior to the interviews in order to ensure that they key information that needs to be asked will be included in the interview sessions; however, the researcher will add more relevant follow-up questions based on the responses of the participants. To ensure that the prepared interview guide is appropriate and aligns with the problem and purpose of the study, the questions will be field-tested using three experts in the field. Three experts in the field (an extracurricular activity facilitator, two senior special education teachers) will be asked to review the questions in the interview guide and provide suggestions that can improve the data collection tool.

Data Collection Procedures

The target populations for this study are parents and teachers of children with mild disabilities who have participated in athletic, art, or academic extracurricular activities. There will be three groups in the sample: (a) parents and teachers who have students/children attending athletics-based extracurricular activities, (b) parents and teachers who have students/children attending art-based extracurricular activities, and (c) parents and teachers who have students/children attending academic-based extracurricular activities. The target sample size is 10 participants for each group, with five teachers and five parents for each group, resulting in a total sample size of 30 parents and teachers (15 teachers and 15 parents). Thirty participants in qualitative studies is sufficient to reach data saturation, the point in which no new information can be gained even if more participants are added in the sample (Palinkas et al., 2013). The sample will be assembled using a purposive sampling strategy, which is a non-probabilistic sampling strategy that focuses on selecting participants based on the purpose and nature of the study (Ranjbar, Haghdoost, Salsali, Khoshdel, Soleimani, & Bahrami, 2012).

The researcher will coordinate with the administrator of the selected school to ask permission to conduct the study in their premises. After permission is secured, advertisements will be posted in the school bulletin board, inviting eligible parents and teachers to participate in the study. Before data collection, the approval of the Internal Review Board (IRB) will be processed. After the approval is received, the researcher will contact each participant through electronic mail to set the date, time, and place for the interview. Each participant will be asked to sign informed consent forms, indicating their agreement to be part of the study.

Recruitment in the selected school will only commence after permission from the school is secured. Because high school students are minors, they will not participate in the interviews even though they are the focus of the study. Children are considered vulnerable population in research and requires special skills from the researcher to minimize ethical problems to emerge during the process (Greig, Taylor, & MacKay, 2012). To minimize possible ethical issues in having children as part of the sample, the study will only seek the participation of adults such as teachers and parents to evaluate how participating in extracurricular activities benefits high school students with mild and moderate disabilities.

Data collection will involve face-to-face semi-structured interviews of parents and teachers. Before data collection, the approval of the Internal Review Board (IRB) will be processed. After the approval is received, the researcher will coordinate with the administrators of the school and ask permission to conduct the study in their premises. After the approval from the school is secured to conduct the research in their premises, the researcher will post advertisements inside the school premises, inviting teachers and parents to participate in the study. Individuals who will express interest to be part of the study will be contacted through email to set the date, time, and place for the interview. Each participant will be asked to sign

informed consent forms, indicating their agreement to be part of the study. The interview session will be digitally recorded with the permission from each participant. The interview will last for approximately 30 minutes. The researcher will provide contact information so that those parents and teachers who participated in the study can reach the researcher for questions, clarifications, or requests for withdrawal.

The management of data will involve using Nvivo software, which allows for the systematic storage and organization of all the three data sources. All data sources will be loaded in the software, making the process of coding more consistent and systematic. The file name of the raw data loaded in the Nvivo software will be password-protected. After three years, all data from the Nvivo will be permanently deleted from the computer. All other files such as digital recordings, journal notes, and document records will be permanently destroyed by shredding all data.

Data Analysis Procedures

All interview data will be transcribed in preparation for the data analysis. After the transcription process is completed, all data will be loaded into a qualitative software called NVivo. The NVivo software will be useful in the storage and organization of all the qualitative data that will be collected from the participants. Thematic analysis will be used to analyze all the interview data that will be collected from parents and teachers of high school students with mild and moderate disabilities. Thematic analysis has six phases involving distinct processes and results (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These phases include: (a) familiarization of data, (b) generation of ignition codes, (c) combining codes into themes, (d) examination of the link between themes and the theoretical perspective of the study, (e) focused examination of the significance of themes, and (f) thick description of the results.

The first phase of thematic analysis is familiarizing with the data collected by reading and re-reading the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A list of codes and the corresponding meaning will be developed based on the reading conducted. Notes will be created to document the appropriate description for each code.

The second phase of thematic analysis is the generation of the initial codes based on the reading of the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through the coding process, categories and themes will be developed, which are intended to reflect the prevailing experiences or perceptions of the sample. The analysis will be framed by the three research questions.

The third phase of the thematic analysis is the process of combining the initial codes developed into several themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At this stage of the analysis, the exact meaning of the themes are documented regardless of the significance to the research framework. A documentation will be provided to connect the several codes that comprise a particular theme.

The fourth phase of the thematic analysis process is the examination of the link between themes, source data, and the theoretical framework of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At this stage, the themes are conceptualized to a larger framework in preparation for the generation of a coherent story. The themes will be used to tell a detailed and coherent description to answer the research questions.

The fifth phase of thematic analysis is the focused examination of the significance of themes developed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process will involve determining the contribution and relevance of the theme in answering the research questions. A corresponding short description will be generated for each of the themes that were developed.

The final phase of thematic analysis is the generation of a thick description of the results based on the finalized themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The description that will be generated

will reflect the meaning of the themes in relation to the phenomenon that will be examined, framed through the research questions. Member checking will also be utilized by providing each participant of the final report generated to confirm the accuracy of the interpretation.

The results of the thematic analysis for the three different sources of data are expected to be sufficient to answer the three research questions. Consistent with the case study research design's purpose of flexibility and comprehensiveness through the use of multiple sources of data, the use of semi-structured interviews, research journal notes, and documents will provide rich and detailed data needed to answer the research questions (Yin, 2013). The use of multiple sources of data allows the results to be triangulated, corroborating the merits of one finding from one data source to another data source.

Ethical Considerations

Conducting an ethical research is important to protect the participants from harm and abuse (Halse & Honey, 2014). Because high school students are minors, they will not participate in the interviews even though they are the focus of the study. Instead, the study will seek the participation of adults such as teachers and parents to evaluate how participating in extracurricular activities benefits high school students with mild and moderate disabilities. Participants who will express the desire to withdraw from the study will be relieved from the study, with all data collected from those participants removed from the files. All data collection processes will only commence after the approval of the IRB of the school has been secured. The researcher will coordinate with the administrators of the school and ask permission to conduct the study in their premises. Informed consent is one of the most important ethical measures used in research to protect participants from harm and abuse (Ioannidis, 2013). Informed consent forms will provide details about the purpose and nature

of the study, confidentiality agreement, and withdrawal process. All participants will need to sign the informed consent forms to formally declare that they are willingly taking part in the study without anyone forcing them. The identities of participants will be protected by assigning a unique code name for each. All data that will be collected will be protected by putting all the digital recordings and the corresponding transcripts in a password-protected folder.

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Appendix A

Variables/Groups, Phenomena, and Data Analysis

Table 1

Qualitative Studies

Research Questions: State the Research Questions that will be used to collect data to understand the Phenomenon being studied	Phenomenon: Describe the overall phenomenon being studied by the research questions	Sources of Data: Identify the specific approach (e.g., interview, observation, artifacts, documents, database, etc.) to be used to collect the data to answer each Research Question	Analysis Plan: Describe the specific approach that will be used to (1) summarize the data and (2) analyze the data.
1. How do teachers and parents perceive the benefits of participating in athletic-based extracurricular activities in high school students with mild and moderate disabilities?	The phenomenon that will be examined is understanding the similarities and differences in the benefits of participating in different extracurricular activities (athletics-based, art-based, and academic-based) in high school students with mild and moderate disabilities based on the perceptions of teachers and parents.	Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with parents and teachers	All interview data will be transcribed in preparation for the data analysis. After the transcription process is completed, all data will be loaded in a qualitative software called Nvivo. The Nvivo software will be useful in the storage and organization of all the qualitative data that will be collected from the participants. Thematic analysis will be used to analyze all the interview data that will be collected from parents and teachers of high school students with mild and moderate disabilities. Thematic analysis involves coding and categorizing data into themes in order to make sense of the meaning of the data and to highlight key information (Krippendorff, 2012).
2. How do teachers and parents perceive the benefits of participating in art-based extracurricular activities in high school students with mild and moderate disabilities?		Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with parents and teachers	
3. How do teachers and parents perceive the benefits of participating in academic-based extracurricular activities in high school students with mild and moderate disabilities?		Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with parents and teachers	