

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Sport in High Schools: A Case of Selected Schools in Masvingo District

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Abstract

The ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly impacted all aspects of life across the globe. Emerging threads on the COVID-19 pandemic discourse have mainly focused on unpacking implications on the health system, economy, and sports in general, among others. However, there is an apparent dearth of literature focused on the implications of COVID-19 pandemic on sporting activities in schools in Zimbabwe. Sporting activities are an essential component of the updated curriculum. This present study interrogated the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic on sporting activities in high schools in one selected district in Zimbabwe. The researchers drew from Green's (2005) Model of Sport Development to unpack the impact of Covid-19 on sporting activities in high schools. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, the study utilized a case study research design. The study's data was generated entirely online using semi-structured interviews (WhatsApp video calls) and focus group discussions (WhatsApp group video calls). The participants were conveniently selected from a WhatsApp group of Physical Education teachers and Sports Organisers in the Masvingo district. The findings from the study were analysed using and thematic analysis. The study established that Covid-19 disrupted the high school sporting calendar, affected

athletes' fitness and led to the marginalization of sporting activities and Physical Education. The researchers recommend the use of the *TrainMyAthlete* application to monitor high school athletes' training during Covid-19 disruption.

Keywords: Covid-19, sporting activities, High schools, Zimbabwe

1 Introduction

It is common knowledge that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic goes beyond mortality and morbidity (McKibbin & Fernando 2020). Numerous theories and perspectives have emerged in unpacking the genesis and spread of Covid-19 since its outbreak in Wuhun City in China (Bao, Liu, Zhang, Liu & Jun Liu 2020; Shaw, Kim & Hua 2020). Scientists, medical researchers and researchers across the globe have contributed to the exponential growth in research on Covid-19 mainly focused on vaccine development and trial of various drugs (Lu, Stratton & Tang 2020; Di Gennaro, Pizzol, Marotta, Antunes, Racalbutto, Veronese & Smith 2020; Shaw *et al.* 2020).

Supranational and national agencies have also sought to unpack the economic implications of Covid-19 on the world as well as national economies. The World Bank (2020:01) revealed that 'Covid-19 has triggered the deepest global recession in decades'. The Asian Development Bank projected that the Covid-19 pandemic will cost the world US\$ 8, 8 trillion (BBC 2020) and government borrowing around the world is projected to exceed US\$ 10 trillion. In the United Kingdom, the government efforts to combat the Covid-19 pandemic have risen to £123, 2 billion. The UNDP (2020) in a policy brief on the socio-economic impact Covid-19 on Zimbabwe revealed that the economic growth will be further depressed from the 8 percent recorded in 2019. Hence, it can be noted from the plethora of economic projections and studies that the Covid-19 pandemic has severe economic impacts globally. However, while there is growing literature on Covid-19 in the fields of science, medicine and economics, there is an apparent gap in the discourse on the effects of the pandemic on sporting activities in high schools in Zimbabwe. Therefore, this study sought to unpack the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on sporting activities and Physical Education in high schools in a selected district in Zimbabwe.

2 The World under Lockdown

The UNDP (2020:01) reports that Covid-19 was declared ‘a public health emergency of international concern on January 30, 2020, and thereafter, a pandemic on March 11, 2020’. Shaw *et al.* (2020:01) state ‘On 11th of March 2020, WHO has declared this as a global pandemic, and as of 23rd of March 2020, the virus has affected 172 out of 195 countries’. Efforts to curb the spread of the Covid-19 have necessitated the implementation of full or partial lockdowns around the world. More than three billion people in almost 70 countries were asked to stay at home by their respective governments (Langton 2020). Mohr, Nassis, Brito, Randers, Costagna, Parnell and Krusturup (2020:01) state ‘the COVID-19 crisis is somewhat different and has had real and tangible impacts on the sport and football industry’. The Tokyo 2020 Olympics postponement is the biggest sporting event to be affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, soccer leagues, wrestling matches, rugby tournaments among other numerous sports activities have been postponed in the majority of countries across the globe. However, while Covi-19 casualties and ramifications on the economy and professional sport are being projected and quantified, there is an apparent need to unpack the effects on sporting activities in high schools in Zimbabwe. It is interesting to note that the interrogation of disruptions in learning activities in schools around the world in general and Zimbabwe, in particular, neglects unpacking effects on sporting activities in high schools. This case study contributes to the discourse on the ramifications of the Covid-19 pandemic on sport and society in Zimbabwe.

2.1 Zimbabwe under Lockdown

The government of Zimbabwe declared Covid-19 a ‘national disaster’ on the 27th of March and subsequently imposed a nationwide lockdown on the 30th of March, 2020. Zimbabwe started the 21-day lockdown at a time the country had only seven confirmed cases of Covid-19 and one death. On the 19th of April 2020, Zimbabwe extended its lockdown by 14 days as a way of escalating measures of reducing the spread of COVID-19. The country’s extension can be viewed as the government’s commitment to contain the country’s virus effectively. On the 16th of May the nationwide lockdown was extended indefinitely. The mandatory lockdown in Zimbabwe meant that schools that were scheduled to close on the 2nd of April 2020, were

prematurely shut down on the 24th of March. Consequently, a week of learning was lost in the first term (semester) of the 2020 school calendar in Zimbabwe. On the 15th of July 2020, the Zimbabwean government indefinitely deferred the reopening of schools due to the increase in the number of confirmed Covid-19 cases. Essentially, the deferment effectively means that the second term of the 2020 school calendar in Zimbabwe has been lost due to Covid-19.

2.1.1 High School Sports Coordination in Zimbabwe

This section contextualizes the high school sports coordination and calendar in Zimbabwe. The coordination of the sporting activities in high schools in Zimbabwe is done through the National Association of Secondary School Heads (NASH) (Nhamo & Muswazi 2014). NASH has structures cascading from the national level down to the school level that ensure the smooth running and standardization of competition rules throughout the country. Each school has a sports organizer responsible for coordinating sporting activities at the school level. The school sports organizer is also a committee member of the zonal sports organizing committee. Essentially these NASH structures ensure that there are clear channels of communication and grievance procedures that run parallel to the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education formal structure. Additionally, NASH promotes the coordination of sports activities by teachers and school heads. Sporting activities in Zimbabwean schools are spread evenly across the first two terms of the three-term school calendar. Each school term has an average of three months. Schools in Zimbabwe participate in athletics during the first term of each year while ball games are engaged in during the second term of the school calendar. The third and final term on the Zimbabwean school calendar is reserved for the end of year examinations. There are a few sporting activities, cultural and art activities in the third term, to allow learners and teachers to concentrate on their final exam preparations.

Sports competitions are held at intra-school level, inter-school level (zonal), Inter-zonal level (district), Inter-district level (provincial) and finally at inter-provincial level (National). In between the competitions, the winning teams and athletes/learners go into camp for training. After the national competitions, selected athletes from the country's ten provinces are selected into the national team representing the country at regional competitions.

3 Theoretical Framework

Sporting activities and Physical Education in high schools in Zimbabwe are viewed as part of Sport Development (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education 2015). Therefore, the researchers drew their theoretical lens from Green's (2005) Model of Sport Development to interrogate the effects of Covid-19 on sporting activities in high schools in a selected district in Zimbabwe. Green (2005) identified three critical stages in sports development: recruitment, retention and transition. At the level of recruitment, the central notion is 'mass participation which seeks to develop opportunities for everyone to participate in sport'. (Ghafouri cited in Javadipour, Ali & Hakimzadeh 2014:57). The researchers utilized the three stages of the Model of Sport Development to understand the implications of the Covid-19 on sporting activities in high schools in a selected district in Zimbabwe. Additionally, Green's model strives to explain the factors which are critical to the development of sport and the combination of factors that impact participation rates and the commitment to the sport of individuals. Hence, in this study, the researchers focused on the effects of the Covid-19 on the factors which have a bearing on sporting activities in high schools in Zimbabwe. The role of financial resources and sports programmes/coaching falls under the retention stage whereby support systems are central. The views of the Physical Education and Sports coordinators in this study on their experiences with Covid-19 and sporting activities were therefore informed by the Model of Sport Development.

4 Research Methodology

The researchers adopted an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative approach for this study. The interpretivist paradigm was chosen because the focus was on 'understanding and explanations' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2018:66). There was a 'fitness of purpose' in this study and the selection of the interpretivist paradigm (Cohen *et al.* 2018:01). Qualitative approaches 'value depth of meaning and people's subjective experiences and their meaning-making processes'. (Leavy 2018:124). Thus, the qualitative approach resonated with the researchers' need to understand the teachers' experiences of Covid-19 on sporting activities in high schools in a selected district in Zimbabwe. Additionally, according to Maxwell (2013:30) qualitative research helps 'understand how events, actions, and meaning are shaped by the unique

circumstances in which these occur'. A case study of the Masvingo district in Zimbabwe was utilized to unpack the phenomenon. Cohen *et al.* (2018:376) argue 'a case study provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by presenting them with abstract theories or principles'. The researchers conveniently sampled participants for the study from a WhatsApp group for Physical Education teachers and Sports coordinators. A study by Tarisayi and Manhibi (2017) demonstrated the widespread use of WhatsApp by teachers in Zimbabwe. Therefore, due to the restrictions imposed by the government because of Covid-19, the researchers utilized WhatsApp for both sampling and data generation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten Physical Education teachers and Sports coordinators using individual WhatsApp video calls. While focus group discussions were carried out using WhatsApp group video calls with 15 Physical Education teachers. The generated data were analysed utilizing emerging themes from both semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The researchers ensured that there was confidentiality, voluntary participation and ethics clearance was obtained by two of the researchers affiliated to a university in Zimbabwe.

5 Significant Findings

This section presents significant findings that emerged from this study on the implications of Covid-19 on sporting activities in high schools in a selected district in Zimbabwe. The emerging themes were: disruption of the sporting calendar, individual athlete's fitness, financial implications, and the new normal and practical activities.

5.1 Disruption of the Sporting Calendar

The Physical Education teachers and Sports coordinators who participated in this study indicated that the school sports calendar was the main casualty of the Covid-19 pandemic. It emerged from the focus group discussions that the school sports calendar was affected by the lockdown. One sports coordinator explained *'The school sports calendar for high schools in Zimbabwe evenly spreads activities throughout the year. The first term is focused on athletics, second term for ball games while third is reserved for external examination.'*

Any disruption of say a week is difficult to address, what more the lockdown of more than three months?’ Another participant in the same focus group discussion concurred *‘The lockdown was necessary but it virtually meant cancelling athletics competitions for 2020. There is no way that athletics can resume after the schools reopen in July’*. The participants revealed that Covid-19 disrupted the athletics calendar. It was unlikely to reschedule the competitions when the schools reopen due to other competitions already scheduled for the second term of 2020. Hence, it can be argued that the disruption of international sports calendars and events such as the Olympics was mirrored in the high school sports calendar in Zimbabwe. On the international arena sporting events were cancelled, postponed due to Covid-19 and the high school authorities were also forced to make the same decision to suspend any sporting activities in schools.

5.2 Athletes’ Fitness

The Physical Education teachers bemoaned that the Covid-19 induced disruptions on the sporting calendar also affected the fitness of their athletes and sports teams. One participant noted *‘The disparities between high school sporting activities and professional sports have been magnified by Covid-19. Professional athletes have continued to train individually. Our athletes do not have access to training facilities at their homes to keep themselves fit’*. Another participant concurred, *‘High school sports are not well-developed and there are no professional training ethics among our youngsters. The majority of our learners only train under our supervision at school. The three months break from school means no training. If professional footballers in Europe are succumbing due to lack of match fitness, one can only imagine our poor athletes’*.

It was noted from the participants that the Covid-19 induced break on the school’s sports calendar has impacted negatively on the fitness of the athletes and sports teams in high schools in the selected district in Zimbabwe. The participants noted that the gap between professional and high school sports fitness was exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, the athletes’ fitness was further affected by the apparent lack of sports facilities and gyms at the individual learner’s homes as well as poor training ethics. Hence, it can be reasoned that high school athletes were deprived of access to sports facilities due to the Covid-19 lockdown.

5.3 Financial Implications for Sports

The disruptions in the sporting calendar also had financial ramifications on the high schools that participated in this study. The lockdown was imposed when high schools in Zimbabwe were scheduled to participate in athletics competitions at the zonal level. The athletics teams were already in camp training preparing for the zonal competitions and had to break up camp in adherence with the lockdown rules. One participant revealed *'The imposition of a lockdown had financial implications for schools. Athletics teams that were in the camp had to break camp. This means that the resources invested in training the athletics were wasted'*. The participants stated that resources committed to preparing athletes by high schools in the selected district were wasted since there was no participation in the competitions due to the lockdown. Another participant explained *'Most schools had already bought supplies for their sporting teams for the first term. Some of the supplies were perishables and were meant to be consumed in training camps by the athletes. Covid-19 thus caused schools to incur losses as they could not return the purchases to the suppliers'*. It emerged from the participants' contributions that Covid-19 led high schools to incur numerous losses since the lockdown was announced during the high school sporting calendar. The expenses incurred in preparation to either participate or host athletics competitions can be viewed as financial implications of Covid-19 on the sporting activities in Masvingo district.

Participants in the focus group discussions also noted that plans to reopen schools and the eventual resumption of school sports have a financial burden on the high schools and sporting activities in the selected district. One participant stated *'Schools are already overburdened by numerous adjustments in preparation for teaching and learning in the era of Covid-19. Extending these preparations to the school sports facilities, gyms will further burden the struggling schools'*. Another sports coordinator reflected that *'We have observed in the past that when school authorities encounter financial challenges they always sacrifice sporting activities. Covid-19 related expenses will ultimately force the school sports budget to be sacrificed'*. While the effects of Covid-19 are being felt across the board, it emerged from this study that the school sports budget will be cut to channel the funds towards other expenses. Another participant revealed *'Preparatory meetings for the reopening of schools are focusing on the provision of Personal Protective Equipment for use during classes. PPE for sporting activities and Physical*

Education is not be prioritized'. Essentially it can be noted from the above statements that there were fears of the marginalization sporting activities and Physical Education as a subject in high schools in the selected district.

5.4 The 'New Normal' and Sporting Aactivities

On the way forward, participants in both semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were unanimous that the 'new normal' introduced to curb the spread of Covid-19 was largely at loggerheads with the teaching approaches encouraged in Physical Education. One Physical Education teacher explained *'The introduction of the new curriculum in Physical Education and Sport in high schools in Zimbabwe emphasizes practical activities and demonstrations. Essentially learners are supposed to be assessed doing practical tasks. Now the 'new normal' talks about masks, social distancing among others. The 'new normal' complicates the teaching of Physical Education completely'*. It emerged from the study that options being considered to overcome the challenges brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic were reversing the gains made over the years in the teaching of Physical Education. Additionally, the participants highlighted that the Physical Education syllabus was explicit that practical activities were supposed to be prioritized and assessed continuously contributing to the learners' final mark. Another participant even cited sections from the Physical Education syllabus which stated *'The Secondary School Physical Education, Sport and Mass Displays Syllabus will cover theory and practical activities by learners in Form 1 to 4'*. Another Physical Education teacher added in the focus group discussions that *'The Physical Education syllabus can be viewed as standing on two pillars: theory and practical activities. There has to be a balance between the two pillars'*. Therefore, it can be noted from the participants' views that the Covid-19 pandemic and the new normal adversely affected the practical activities in Physical Education. It has been widely recommended that social distancing is crucial in curbing the spread of Covid-19. Thus, the participants noted that social distancing complicates practical activities in sporting and Physical Education.

5.5 Ways of Mitigating the Effects of Covid-19 on Sporting in High Schools

The researchers asked the participants in the study to suggest possible solutions

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to ameliorate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on sporting activities in high schools. One participant elaborated *'We read in the newspapers that governments around the world have devised financial packages to help various sectors of the economy to cope with the effects of Covid-19. Why don't our government provide a similar package for sporting activities in high schools?'* The views were supported by another participant who highlighted that *'Sports governing bodies internationally have also come up with supporting mechanisms for professional sports. There is a need for similar support at the grassroots level like high school sporting activities in Zimbabwe'*. The major suggestion that came from the participants in this study was the provision of a funding package to enable high school sporting activities to resume in the era of Covid-19. Another participant in the focus group discussions observed *'Several strategies are being implemented to ensure that learners continue learning during the lockdown. However, nothing much is being said about sporting in high schools. Why are schools not using technology just like Zoom is being used for meetings and lessons?'*

The above statement reflects the marginalisation of sporting in conversations on mitigating the effects of Covid-19 on high schools in general. Additionally, it can be noted from the statement that one possible way of mitigating the effects of Covid-19 on sporting in high schools was the incorporation of technology such as internet-based platforms to monitor athletes' training at home. Furthermore, another participant suggested, *'Sports coordinators should provide training routines and manuals to athletes to guide individual training at home'*. In cases where it is not feasible to use technology, schools can provide a paper-based training manual to guide high school athletes training individually at home.

6 Discussion and Conclusions

The researchers established from the findings from this study that the effects of Covid-19 on sports and Physical Education in high schools in a selected district in Zimbabwe were microcosmic of effects of Covid-19 on the international sports arena. The International Olympic Committee resolved to postpone the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics Games due to the Covid-19 pandemic on the international arena (Brasor 2020). The same decision was mirrored in the high school sports arena in Zimbabwe. Hence, the researchers argue that the ramifications of Covid-19 on high school sports in Zimbabwe

was microcosmic of effects on international sports. Projections reveal that top professional leagues lost millions of dollars in revenue. Examples of losses incurred due to Covid-19 include the Tokyo Olympic Games (US\$6 billion), US major Leagues (US\$5.5 billion), English Premier League (US\$1.35 billion) according to the Aljazeera report on the 25th of June 2020. However, while it is difficult to project the financial losses incurred by high schools due to Covid-19, reveals that the losses mirrored those of major leagues to a certain extent. Additionally, the study confirmed the view that ‘the global sporting community is facing serious challenges due to measures [due to Covid-19] imposed in countless countries around the world’ (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020). However, despite mirroring the international arena, the effects of Covid-19 on high schools in the selected district were compounded by a lack of funding. Financial constraints posed on sporting activities in high schools in the selected district by Covid-19 can be classified under the retention stage of Green’s (2005) model. Financial challenges negatively impact participation in sporting activities at the high school level and thereby affecting sports development.

The study findings also revealed the marginalisation of sporting activities and Physical Education due to Covid-19. Participants noted that due to budgetary constraints, sporting activities and Physical Education were being sacrificed as high schools in the selected district prioritized prepared to reopen. Sporting activities and Physical Education are sometimes erroneously viewed as play and mainly for dull learners (Nhamo & Muswazi 2014; Wanyama 2011). These views contribute to the marginalization in times of crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic presents a crisis that has increased expenses for schools and therefore funds are being directed to priority areas. Worryingly from the study, sporting activities were not being prioritized in the selected high schools. The marginalization of sporting activities and Physical Education was evident in the allocation of funds in the school budgets suggested by the participants. Chifamba (2019) established that a lack of funding already stifled sports development in Zimbabwe even before the Covid-19 outbreak. Therefore, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic compounded the already dire funding of sporting activities situation in Zimbabwean high schools. Additionally, the marginalisation of sporting in high schools was further evident in the conversations on ways of mitigating the effects of Covid-19 in high schools. Conversations are currently focused only on recovering lost learning time while neglecting sporting in high schools.

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Essentially the marginalisation of sporting in conversations can be viewed as restrictions according to Green's model of Sports Development.

The study also established that there was a realization among the participants in this study that the Covid-19 pandemic was here to stay. This realization that the Covid-19 pandemic was long-enduring mean that there has to be a way of continuing with sporting activities while taking precaution. Precautions such as social distancing and Personal Protective Equipment were viewed as the new normal in sporting activities in high schools in the selected district. The study further revealed the need for financial support to enable the participation of learners in high school sporting activities under the new normal era. Thus, it can be concluded from the preceding that the resumption of high school sporting activities requires a substantial financial injection to adhere to the new normal way of life. Thus, the researchers recommend the provision of funding to help high schools prepare for the resumption of sporting activities in the Covid-19 era. Additionally, the maintenance of fitness among individual high school athletes in Zimbabwe during the Covid-19 disruptions can be enhanced through the use of social media and the internet. Efforts to promote online learning that is being implemented should also be replicated in the arena of sporting in high schools. Mohr *et al.* (2020:07) argue 'Football clubs should be aware of that these are special circumstances [Covid-19] and be prepared for a future unlike anything experienced before'. Drawing from Mohr *et al.* (2020) we also argue that school authorities, sports coordinators and all other stakeholders in sporting in high schools should appreciate that Covid-19 provides extra-ordinary circumstances for sporting in high schools which warrant extra-ordinary mitigating solutions. Trainers and coaches can interact with their sports teams and individual athletes using phone applications. Internationally, professional soccer players during the Covid-19 lockdown used the FIFA-backed *TrainMyAthlete* app designed by physiotherapist Liam Hayes (White 2020). Fundamentally, there is a need for reimagining sporting in Covid-19 times and post the Covid-19 pandemic. Other spaces are being reimagined in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, which buttresses the need to be innovative to promote sport in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Hence, we recommend the incorporation of internet-based platforms that can be accessed using phone platforms to ensure constant interaction and monitoring of high school athletes in Zimbabwe. Furthermore, high schools in Zimbabwe can also provide individual athletes with individual training manuals and routines to guide them individually in their respective homes. We

also recommend that stakeholders should include sport in conversations on ways of overcoming Covid-19 challenges in high schools. Internationally, tournaments have been rescheduled while other tournaments and sport codes are amending their rules due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Stakeholders must engage in conversations to amend and adjust sport codes in line with the WHO guidelines for sports.

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