

Academic Engagement among African American Males Who Hold Aspirations for Athletic Careers in Professional Sports¹

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Coleman's seminal work, *The Adolescent Society* (1961), sparked a debate over the relationship between participation by students in extra-curricula activities and academic engagement that continues into the present. Coleman found a negative correlation between involvement in extra-curricula activities and academic success, and concluded that the time and energy devoted to extra-curricula activities directed precious time away from proper academic achievement (Coleman 1961). Since participation in sports has been a major extra-curricula activity in schools for the nearly 50 years following Coleman's seminal work, much of the debate has centered on the relationship between sports participation and academic success in middle and secondary schools. Braddock (2005) notes that 82 percent of middle schools and 98 percent of high schools provide sports participation opportunities in school-based athletics, including opportunities for competition between teams from different schools. Subsequent research produced findings that challenged Coleman's conclusion that school-based athletics detract from student success and the educational mission of schools (see for example: Hanks & Eckland 1976; Braddock 1980; Braddock 1981; Snyder & Spreitzer 1990; Marsh & Kleitman 2003; Braddock 2005; Braddock, Hua & Dawkins 2007). In addition, other evidence indicates that sports participation has other positive benefits for adolescent development, including enhanced physical and mental well-being (Birrell 1983; Crocker et al. 2000), higher self-esteem (Birrell 1983; Bunker 1991; Coop & Rotella 1991; McHale 2001;

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association of Black Sociologists, New Orleans, LA, June 17 2009. Please address all correspondences to Jomills H. Braddock,II (braddock@miami.edu)

Phillips 1998), decreased discipline problems (Marsh 1993), and reduced incidence of depression (Sabo, Miller, Melnick & Heywood 2004; Phillips 1998), suicide (Phillips 1998) and substance abuse (Dawkins, Williams & Guilbault 2006).

Despite the large body of evidence on the benefits of sports, there continues to be growing concern regarding the overemphasis on sports, especially related to the social and educational development of blacks and other minority youth. For example, Edwards (1986) has been a chief spokesman for the argument that sports participation is overemphasized among black boys and men. Edwards and others argue that the mobility aspirations of millions of black males lead them to believe that, by placing greater emphasis on sports, they are securing their destiny, which is the fulfillment of a journey to the life of a highly paid, professional athlete. Therefore, participation in sports diverts attention and efforts away from academic engagement. The question of whether participation in sports contributes to or detracts from the social and educational development of blacks is an extension of the argument raised initially by Coleman, but framed in the context of the social milieu which characterizes the circumstances faced by many blacks who grow up in a climate where excelling in sports competes as an avenue for mobility with the conventional focus on education and academic engagement as the key to future success.

This debate has been characterized by Braddock (1980) in terms of two competing hypotheses: (1) *participation in sport-impedes-mobility* and (2) *participation in sport-enhances-mobility*. The sports-impedes-mobility hypothesis, which has been the dominant perspective injected in past and more recent debates over the overemphasis on sports in America, argues that involvement in athletics decreases interest in academic engagement and reduces aspirations for pursuing success through educational attainment. Thus, for millions of black youth who aspire to becoming a professional athlete as a major goal, education matters only to the extent that maintaining eligibility to participate in sports in elementary and secondary schools through college is necessary in order to fulfill externally imposed requirements. Devoting efforts and energies to be fully engaged in the learning process is secondary to development as an athlete. Since the sport-impedes-mobility perspective views sports and academics as competing, students who choose to be athletes must be fully engaged in athletics, while disengaging from their academic development. Even for the few highly talented athletes, the sports-impedes-mobility perspective

recognizes that an overemphasis on sports may lead to disappointing results if circumstances such as injury cut short one's journey to the top. Despite the tremendous odds against "making it" in professional sports, little emphasis is placed on developing academic talents in preparation for other careers as an alternative.

The sport-enhances-mobility hypothesis provides an alternative perspective to assess the relationship between sports participation and academic engagement and future attainment of educational and occupational goals. This perspective argues that participation in sports can increase academic engagement and success. For example, Braddock (2005) argues that participation in sports operates through the mediating factors of social and cultural capital, school engagement and personal resilience to influence students' academic success. Sports participation also enhances mobility indirectly by operating as a protective factor against deviant behaviors and promoting such valued assets as maintaining exercise and fitness, and developing the ability to handle adversity and contribute to teamwork and sportsmanship (Rasmussen 2000).

Sports Participation and Academic Engagement: A Typology

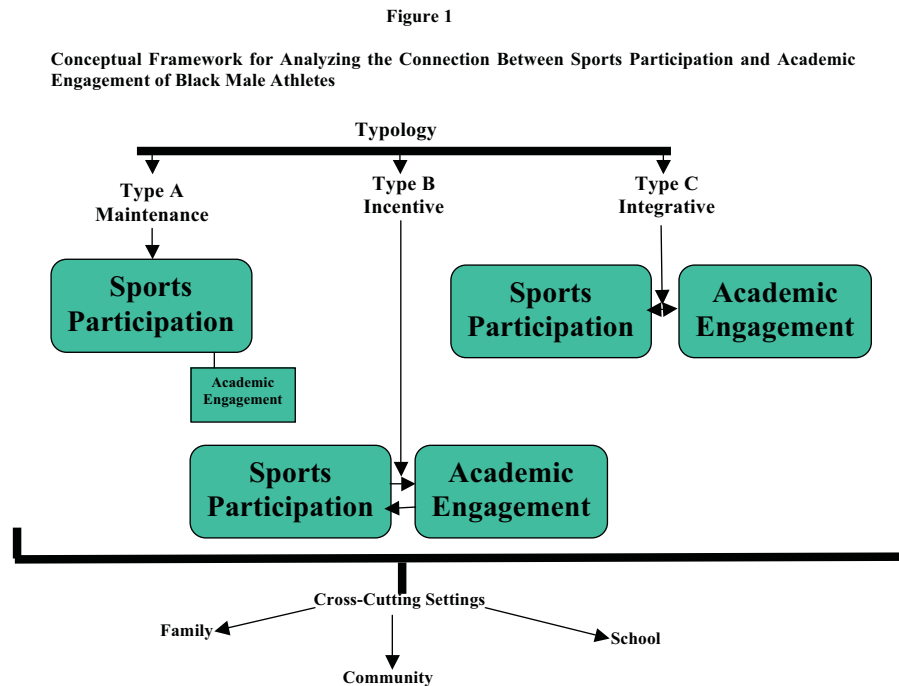
Students who are academically engaged are actively involved in the learning process, devote full attention to their studies and have a commitment to their academic success, while students who are not academically engaged lack interest, display apathy, and participate only superficially in their academic pursuits (Newman et al. 1992; Finn 1993). The debate over whether sports participation "impedes" or "enhances" mobility may not be a debate at all, since the connection between sports participation and academic engagement of students may result in either or both outcomes, along with other possibilities. The typology in Figure 1 provides a conceptual framework for analyzing these possible connections.

Among student-athletes with aspirations for major sports, emphasis on sports may begin early in childhood and the extent to which they become academically engaged may also begin early on with complicity from parents, schools and coaches in the settings of family, community and school. While the connection between sports participation and academic engagement needs closer examination to understand whether sports impedes or enhances mobility, generally, this issue is especially important in addressing mobility aspirations of African American student-athletes and their parents who have their sights on big-time athletics with the ultimate

goal of reaching the ranks of professional sports. As shown in Figure 1, the typology includes three “ideal types” or models that characterize the connection between sports participation and academic engagement: Type A: “Maintenance,” Type B: “Incentive,” and Type C: “Integrative.”

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework for Analyzing the Connection Between Sports Participation and Academic Engagement of Black Male Athletes



Maintenance - The key goal in the maintenance model (Type A) is for students to maintain eligibility for participation in sports. In this model, excelling in sports is the dominant activity for both students and their families. At the high school level, the star athlete is especially popular and highly sought out as a prospect by colleges and universities, who are in contact with the student-athlete as well as parents and coaches of the student-athlete. Academics are central to realizing the mobility aspirations of the student-athlete insofar as the need to (a) maintain eligibility to play, (b) graduate from high school and (c) meet college entrance requirements, including required scores on standardized tests for admission to college. Therefore, under the maintenance model, participation in academics is important only to the extent that compliance with rules established by schools and interscholastic athletic associations at state and local levels can be maintained. However, since the connection between

sports participation and academic engagement begins much earlier, the process of viewing academics only in terms of maintaining eligibility for participation in sports also begins earlier. For example, even community-based, youth sports programs normally require that children be in good academic standing to participate in these programs. There may be some exceptions, as Robert Powell demonstrated in his critical examination of the world of high stakes, youth football in Miami in his book, *We Own This Game* (2003). Under the maintenance model, the connection between sports and academic engagement is imbalanced. The primary commitment of the student is clearly to excel as an athlete with the goal of becoming a star performer in high school and college and ultimately reaching the professional ranks. On the other hand, education is viewed as necessary, but imposed, serving as an obstacle to overcome if the goal of reaching athletic stardom is to be realized. Academic engagement is “forced” and the aspirations for success in education are limited to achieving the goal of maintaining eligibility to participate in sports.

Incentive – Similar to the maintenance model (Type A), the incentive model (Type B) is an ideal type, which includes a strong interest and commitment to participation sports. However, unlike the maintenance model, under the incentive model there is also a strong commitment to academics. Participation in sports may serve as an incentive to pursue academics seriously, and doing well academically ensures that aspirations to achieve goals that extend beyond sports can be realized. Therefore, participation in sports is viewed as both an incentive to engage academically and an avenue that can lead to realizing mobility aspirations for attainment of educational and long-term occupational goals. The process of connecting success in sports with academic achievement usually begins in childhood, rooted in socialization experiences where both athletic and academic success are encouraged and rewarded by parents, teachers and others. Thus, academic engagement is elevated to the same level as sports participation, with success in the latter serving as an incentive to doing well in the former and vice versa.

While the goal under the incentive model is to do well, both as an athlete and in academic pursuits, the demands placed on student-athletes, especially in the highly visible, revenue-generating sports, in terms of time and energy that must be devoted to developing as an athlete, often place sports and academics at odds or as competing forces. Therefore, the connection between sports participation and academic engagement can be

strained and non-reinforcing. In highly competitive interscholastic sports environments at the high school and college levels, many black student-athletes and others find that the incentive of sports as a means of doing well academically may be overshadowed by the overwhelming demand to devote disproportionately greater attention to athletics at the expense of academics. Yet, recent evidence indicates that black parents whose children are involved in interscholastic sports at the high school level are highly engaged with them around educational matters, suggesting that strong parental involvement may provide a key to continued academic engagement (O'Bryan, Braddock & Dawkins 2006). Ideally, a strong commitment to academics and the incentive to be as successful in the educational as the sports realm, when rooted in values acquired through socialization, will enable blacks and other student-athletes to excel, even, sometimes at a higher level than their non-athletic counterparts as exemplified by awards such as the Rhodes Scholarship and "All-Academic" honors.

Integrative – The integrative model (Type C), as an "ideal type," places sports and academic engagement on an equal plane, whereby both are highly valued and mutually reinforcing. Unlike the maintenance model (Type A), which views academic engagement and sports as "conflicting" forces, or the incentive model (Type B), which views academic engagement and sports as "competing" forces, the integrative model (Type C) views sports and academic engagement as "compatible" forces. The integrative model views the high interest level in sports among young people as an opportunity and relatively untapped resource for connecting student engagement in school and the classroom with sports. As Sokol-Katz, Basinger-Fleischman and Braddock (2004) note, "Sport captures varying degrees of interests from children of all backgrounds, regardless of whether or not they are participants in athletics. The weaving of sports concepts and contexts into teaching of core mathematics, reading, and composition lessons, then, would seem a logical instructional strategy for raising levels of student engagement, particularly with at-risk youth" (Sokol-Katz, Basinger-Fleischman & Braddock 2004: 1). From the perspective of the integrative model, sports and academics are integrated into the learning process with the goal of increasing academic engagement achieved as the high appeal of sports becomes transferred to the classroom and the lessons from the classroom played out both as demonstrations of physical activity on the playing field and decisions regarding career options beside sports. While a number of projects have successfully increased academic

engagement of students by using this approach, including the integration of football into middle school math lessons (Strickland 1996) and the use of baseball to demonstrate laws of physics (Adair 1990), the integrative model has not been extensively examined as a potential learning context for improving academic engagement of black student-athletes.

Academic Engagement and the Black Male Athlete: A Case Study

While the typology introduced in the previous section presents three “ideal types” (maintenance, incentive and integrative) as models which characterize the connection between sports participation and academic engagement, the actual experiences of individual black student-athletes may contain elements of one, two or all three models across the stages of one’s life experiences in sports and education from childhood to early adulthood. The following case study is presented to illustrate the manner in which each of the models in the typology may operate in the experiences of a single individual across family, community and school settings from the earliest stages of childhood through adolescence and early adulthood.

The Case of Eddie B

Eddie B (not his real name) is an African American male who grew up in the western suburbs of a large, Midwestern city. He lived with both of his parents in a fairly stable, middle-class community. His father worked for a large, Midwestern corporation in the railroad industry in a lower level, non-professional position, while his mother was a Ph.D. trained, licensed professional in her field. The family’s earnings enabled them to assume a fairly comfortable, but modest, lifestyle. While Eddie B’s father excelled as a high school football player, he migrated to the Midwest from a state in the deep South shortly after completing high school; his mother also grew up in a sport-minded family in the South, but was only mildly active in athletic pursuits (she was a champion intra-mural bowler at a small college), and came to the Midwest after completing graduate degrees. Eddie B displayed an early interest in sports and unusual signs of athleticism even as a toddler. Before Eddie B reached the age of 10, he was bigger and stronger than his peers were and able to compete effectively in youth sports in higher weight categories where most of the other children were much older. He gained increasing notice by coaches from community-based teams and eventually at school, especially after entering middle school and participating in interscholastic sports. While Eddie B was a well-adjusted, above average student, his efforts and interest in academics began to decrease as sports became a more central focus in his

life. As a latch-key youth entering early adolescence, Eddie B spent much of his time engaged in organized, after school sports programs at the “Y,” on community playground teams, or as a member of school-based teams. Since he excelled in multiple sports (including baseball, basketball and football), he was popular as an athlete both in his community and at school. He even earned the nickname “Sport,” which was used affectionately by friends, coaches and some teachers. While his parents were proud and supportive of his accomplishments in sports, they also felt that sports were being over-emphasized in his social development. For example, one little league baseball coach would make exclusive trips to his home to give Eddie B a ride to each game to ensure that he would attend every game, even when Eddie B’s parents assured the coach that they would be taking their son to games. As Eddie B prepared to enter high school, his parents received personal visits from coaches from many of the high schools in the metropolitan area, some of which were well-known as schools attended by individuals who went on to become highly successful professional athletes. In fact, the recruiting of middle-school student-athletes by rival high schools was not a new phenomenon and usually embraced by parents who saw it as a sign that their child was being identified as a future pro prospect. However, for Eddie B’s parents this greatly concerned them, since it was clearly motivated by their son’s attractiveness as an athlete rather than interest in his academic development. Eddie B was not only happy about the attention that he was receiving, but began to chart his path to the professional ranks following in the footsteps of the former high school players who had attended these high schools to later become star players at the professional level. Eddie B’s parents decided on a small, private, parochial high school for him to attend, in large part, because the school stressed academics and was less likely to place Eddie B in the limelight of the sports media-frenzy that characterized this metropolitan sports market. Although the high school that Eddie B attended participated in an athletic conference consisting of similar small schools, this school had been largely unsuccessful for many years as a competitive force in the conference. As an instant success in football, Eddie B became the starter at quarterback in his freshman year and, over the next four seasons, the school he attended reached unprecedented heights that were uncharacteristic in winning conference championships and gaining recognition for itself and Eddie B throughout the metropolitan area. In the meanwhile, Eddie B’s academic engagement was clearly based on an interest only in meeting the minimal requirements for maintaining eligibility and gaining admission to college. Eddie B was identified as one of the top 15 recruits in the metropolitan

area and was highly sought by major universities, nationally. Eddie B had expressed a desire to attend a big-time school where he could gain national visibility and exposure to professional football teams. Privately, he revealed his desire to leave college after two years and turn professional. His reasoning was that two years would sufficient time to display his talents and attract the attention of professional football teams. Eddie B signed a letter of intent to attend a large university located in the Midwest and a member of the Big Ten Conference. Therefore, upon entering a large university that was well-known both for its sports-mindedness, as a member of one of the most competitive conferences in the country, and its national reputation as a prestigious academic institution, Eddie B had little interest in education and engaging academically beyond what was necessary to maintain eligibility for the two years that he planned to remain as a student-athlete. As a freshman athlete, Eddie B was projected to be among a small number of first year players to start at his position (cornerback) in the Big Ten. However, very early on in his college career, he encountered difficulty adjusting academically, largely because of his failure to comply with the rules established by the team to ensure that players were meeting expectations (e.g., class attendance and performance, study hall attendance, etc.). In addition, Eddie B sustained an injury that prevented him from assuming the role of a starter, and encountered conflict with coaches over the time needed for recovery and return to the playing field (Eddie B felt he needed more time to recover fully). By the middle of the first semester, the differences between Eddie B and the coaching staff heightened and he became even further disengaged academically. Therefore, after only one semester, Eddie B left the university and the limelight of major college football.

Since Eddie B continued to hold aspirations for playing football at the professional level, he enrolled in a Midwestern junior college known for being a haven for students like Eddie B who had failed to maintain academic eligibility. Eddie B was successful in restoring his academic eligibility status, earning a 3.2 GPA after a summer and one semester at the junior college and made plans to return to a Division I institution and to resume his quest toward the goal of reaching the pros. As Eddie B prepared to enroll at his second Division I, Midwestern university, which was a medium-sized institution in a less competitive conference than the Big Ten, he encountered a life changing experience which affected his outlook on both returning to sports and engaging academically in his new surroundings. Upon returning to his hometown after completing the stint

at the junior college and to prepare for the trip to his new university, he received news that one of his childhood friends was killed tragically in a gang-style violent attack that also severely injured several of his children and other family members. Like Eddie B, his friend had excelled as an athlete during childhood and adolescence, but was disengaged from school and never able to capitalize on his talents as an athlete in terms of moving toward the fulfillment of aspirations to become a professional athlete. Despite his friend's path, which led to early fatherhood and low-level drug dealing, Eddie B remained in constant contact with his friend, who often encouraged him to take advantage of the opportunities he had to become successful as an athlete. This life-changing experience, which occurred shortly before Eddie B returned to school, influenced his outlook on both the desire to be successful in sports and the role of education in the process of realizing goals beyond sports. Sports, which became an incentive to do well academically beyond the need to maintain eligibility and academic engagement, was, therefore, elevated to a level of importance where it would serve as an avenue for realizing goals beyond sports.

Since National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) rules required that Eddie B "sit out" for one year before resuming his athletic career, the year at his new school was spent heavily engaged in physical conditioning and academics. Unlike his earlier experience as a freshman at the school in the Big Ten, Eddie B was equally connected to sports and academics. In fact, his experiences in the classroom began to influence his attitudes, outlook and decisions about the role of sports in his life. For example, during a course in African American studies, Eddie B became aware of the history of exploitation of black athletes, especially the accumulation of wealth by whites from the labors of black athletes, which sports journalist Bill Rhoden (2006) would later term "forty million dollar slaves" in his book by the same title. After completing a report in this course on an illustrious black leader and founder of a historically black college (HBC) and, fortuitously, finding out that one of his friends with whom he became reacquainted was currently attending that college on an athletic scholarship, Eddie B became interested in transferring to this college. As Eddie B became more academically engaged through the integration of knowledge of history and sports, his once, single-minded aspirations for pursuing a career in professional sports began to broaden to a desire to prepare for alternative careers outside of sports. Because of this renewed outlook, Eddie B decided to transfer to this small, historically black college and participate in football at the lower, Division II level, instead

of remaining at a Division I institution. Eddie B played football as a non-scholarship athlete (i.e., a “walk-on”) during his first year at the HBC and as a scholarship athlete in his second and final year. A capstone of Eddie B’s college career was being named a Black College, Academic All-American in his senior year, a recognition that represented the movement of the connection between sports participation and academic engagement across the three levels of the typology from the maintenance, the incentive, to the integrative model. Despite retaining aspirations for a professional career in football and attracting some interest from professional teams, a major injury sustained in his senior year removed any chance that Eddie B would have for realizing a professional career as an athlete. However, Eddie B went on to earn an M.B.A. degree as is well on his way toward realizing mobility goals outside of becoming a professional athlete...

Conclusion

As the typology for analyzing the connection between sports participation and academic engagement indicates, and the case study of Eddie B illustrates, the question of whether sports impedes or enhances aspirations and chances for attaining mobility goals among blacks is more complex than often portrayed. For example, the notion that the tremendous odds against realizing the goal of becoming a professional athlete should deter black youth from aspiring to reach this achievement must be viewed in the context of (1) the high visibility of successful black professional athletes who have beat these odds, (2) the perception that the odds against realizing the goal of becoming a professional in such underrepresented fields as medicine, law and engineering are equally great, (3) the challenges of academic engagement faced by many black youth based on their early experiences of failure in fractured schools, especially in inner-city urban communities, and (4) the view among many parents that nothing is wrong with cultivating and supporting the talents of their children, whether in sports, academics or other areas. However, black youth who exhibit extraordinary athletic talents at an early age may be at-risk of academic disengagement unless there is a strong commitment by parents, teachers and coaches to recognize the dangers of not introducing educational values that foster academic success very earlier on in the socialization experiences of these youth in the contexts of family, community and school. Too often, concern over academic engagement of blacks does not come until the high school level when attention is focused on maintaining eligibility and meeting college admission requirements. However, this may be too late, since early disengagement from school while overemphasizing sports

can lead to young people never developing the foundational skills that are needed in such areas as reading, composition and math to be even minimally successful at the high school level.

Additionally, attempts by regulatory bodies at the college and professional levels (e.g., The NCAA, NBA, NFL, etc.), to enact what are felt to be stringent policies for high school student-athletes seeking admission to college or going directly to the professional level may actually contribute to the perpetuation of a disconnect between sports participation and academic engagement. For example, the current policy of requiring a high school athlete to attend college for one year before being allowed to “jump to the pros” (the so-called “one and done” rule) may encourage the practice of maintaining minimal academic engagement of student-athletes through high school and one year of college, at best, or fostering the violation of rules by using “ringers” to replace unprepared students to take college admission tests such as the SAT or ACT, at worst.

To conclude, sports participation and school engagement among black high school students should not be viewed as necessarily antithetical forces. Indeed, as we have suggested through the introduction of the conceptual framework or typology for analyzing the connection between sports participation and academic engagement, the elements of sports and academics may be conflicting, competing, or compatible in the experiences of students who aspire to realize their goals for future success. Among black student-athletes, the development of a strong connection between sports and academics, following tenets of the integrative model, is especially needed prior to reaching high school to avoid “forced academics” and its negative consequences for realizing the attainment of career mobility aspirations in sports and beyond.

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