Cultural education for young athletes: a holistic approach

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Abstract: Currently, most young athletes are aware of the importance of academic education and aspire to enhance their understanding of cultural theory. However, due to their limited cultural foundation, the substantial time and effort required for daily training and competitions, and the insufficient emphasis placed on cultural education within schools, a gap exists in the cultural education of young athletes. This article aims to explore models for cultural education tailored to young athletes within a broader educational context, with the goal of addressing the tension between training and academic learning, and to provide a reference for fostering the development of young athletes into well-rounded individuals with diverse competencies through culturally informed education.

Keywords: broad educational environment, young athletes, cultural education

1. Introduction

Athletes engaged in competitive sports gradually withdraw from the competitive arena as they age, due to factors such as the decline of physical performance, injuries, or the generational transition between older and younger athletes, until their athletic careers come to an end. However, determining their future after retirement is a question that every athlete must consider. Only a small fraction of these athletes are able to pursue careers related to sports—such as coaching, management, or scientific research roles. To secure a livelihood, the remaining athletes must seek their own opportunities and address their employment challenges. Therefore, when nurturing young athletes, it is essential to build a solid foundation; one should not pursue perfect, advanced athletic skills at the expense of cultivating cultural knowledge, moral character, and personal development. Otherwise, these young athletes may become a disadvantaged group in society upon their retirement. Consequently, the issue of cultural education for young athletes has become an urgent matter that requires attention; authorities at all levels and schools of all types should place greater emphasis on fostering the comprehensive competencies of young athletes, enabling them to become versatile professionals with specialized expertise and multiple skills.

2. Research subjects and methods

2.1. Research subjects

A total of 160 young athletes from Guangdong Province were randomly selected as survey participants; questionnaires were distributed to them, comprising 104 male athletes and 56 female athletes.

2.2. Research methods

2.2.1. Literature review method

The relevant literature pertaining to this research project has been reviewed to provide the necessary supporting materials for the implementation of this study.

2.2.2. Interview method

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Through exchanges with relevant leaders, experts, coaches, some academic teachers, and student-athletes from the Sports Management Center of the Guangdong Provincial Sports Bureau and the Guangzhou Municipal Sports Bureau, detailed first-hand information was gathered.

2.2.3. Questionnaire survey method

A questionnaire survey was conducted among a total of 160 young athletes from provincial and municipal training units across Guangdong Province; 160 questionnaires were distributed, and 154 were returned, resulting in a response rate of 96%.

2.2.4. Mathematical statistics method

The collected relevant data were statistically analyzed using SPSS 13.0 and Excel.

3. Research findings and analysis

3.1. Definition of the "broad educational perspective" background

The modern comprehensive education concept is rooted in the vision proposed by the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century: "Education in the 21st century is supported by four major pillars—learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together." This represents a novel educational theory that is grounded in the broader economy, encompasses the broader sciences as its core content, and serves the needs of large-scale production; it is an educational framework oriented toward modernization, the global community, and the future [1]. Its core tenet is that education is a continuous process spanning from birth to death, and its scope of content is extensive—requiring individuals not only to acquire scientific and cultural knowledge but also to develop the skills needed to navigate interpersonal relationships, manage personal affairs, and thrive in society. This concept is characterized by two distinct features: continuity and breadth, which underscore the necessity for individuals to cultivate a lifelong learning mindset throughout their long-term development journey and to engage with a wider range of knowledge domains in order to secure a stable place in society. The "comprehensive education" paradigm embodies a fresh educational philosophy and direction, aiming to ensure that every member of society receives a quality education—and our young athletes are, of course, no exception.

3.2. The current state of cultural education for young athletes

3.2.1. Basic information about young athletes

According to the basic survey statistics, adolescent athletes aged 14–16 accounted for 78.4% of the total number of respondents. Most of these adolescent athletes were enrolled in either the nine-year compulsory education system or the senior secondary education stage.

3.2.2. Youth athletes' learning time allocation

According to national regulations, full-time students in regular schools have a weekly study time of 30–35 hours, calculated as 45 minutes per session [2]. An analysis of the study and training schedules of young athletes in Guangdong Province revealed that their weekly time spent on academic subjects is approximately 15 hours; this indicates that daily training and competitions account for most of their study time. For this group, whose academic foundation is already relatively weak, without a guaranteed "quantity" of study time, it is difficult to achieve a qualitative leap in learning outcomes.

3.2.3. Youth athletes' learning motivation

Among the respondents: 71.5% considered social adaptability to be very important; 67.4% believed that the comprehensive development of individuals was essential; 53.1% felt that their ability to analyze and solve problems needed improvement; and 49.3% regarded enhancing athletic performance as the most important priority. From this, it can be inferred that most respondents strongly agree with the importance of academic education. However, a portion of respondents did not fully understand the relationship between athletic performance and academic education; in reality, the two are not mutually exclusive. Receiving advanced cultural education and developing stronger cognitive abilities better facilitate the learning and mastery of modern training methods and techniques; moreover, such education lays a solid foundation for

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athletes' secondary employment after retirement. Without strong cultural literacy, it would be exceedingly difficult for individuals to meet the demands of society and would likely lead to their failure in the competitive environment of natural selection.

3.2.4. Adolescent athletes' acceptance of academic subjects

Among the 154 young athletes surveyed, 99 (64.3%) considered academic studies very important; 20 (12.9%) considered them important; 14 (9%) regarded them as somewhat important; and 54 (18.8%) considered them unimportant. It is evident that a significant number of these young athlete's value academic learning and wish to enhance their academic literacy; however, they often feel overwhelmed and unsure of how to approach it. Furthermore, lacking appropriate guidance from their academic teachers, they gradually deviate from their academic studies over time, ultimately focusing solely on their training and showing little interest in academic coursework.

3.2.5. Young athletes' cognitive and emotional investment in academic learning

As a special group, young athletes must devote significant time and effort to training and competing, while simultaneously pursuing their academic coursework. The practical challenge facing youth athlete educators is whether they can fully unlock their potential; in this context, improving learning efficiency within the limited time available is of utmost importance. However, a crucial factor in ensuring high learning efficiency is whether the students possess sufficient energy. According to survey results, 59.4% of young athletes in Guangdong Province believe they have ample energy to engage in their academic studies—this belief lays a solid foundation for enhancing their learning outcomes and provides a strong guarantee for improving efficiency in their classroom learning.

3.2.6. Adolescent athletes' satisfaction with the offered courses

"The best motivation for learning, according to American psychologist Bruner, is interest in the subject matter itself." [3] A survey on the level of interest among young athletes in Guangdong Province in their studied courses revealed that 10.4% strongly liked the courses, 46.8% liked them somewhat, 29.2% did not particularly like them, and 13.6% were indifferent to them; this indicates that the majority of young athletes possess a strong desire for knowledge and a keen interest in learning. However, a significant portion of them remain dissatisfied with their current coursework. Through further in-depth inquiry, it was found that some young athletes believe that, in addition to acquiring fundamental knowledge, they should also be exposed to subjects with greater practical relevance and a direct connection to competitive sports.

An analysis of the current state of academic learning among young athletes reveals that while they possess clear learning motivations and abundant energy, they exhibit low satisfaction with the courses offered and lack guaranteed study time. To more effectively address the challenges faced by young athletes in their academic pursuits, we must leverage the broader educational environment—expecting not only that they master and apply scientific and cultural knowledge, draw inferences from a single example, and integrate knowledge comprehensively, but also that they develop the skills to navigate interpersonal relationships, handle various situations, and master the art of living. These pressing issues present a significant educational challenge for frontline educators; they must be approached with fresh educational perspectives to identify appropriate teaching methods tailored to these young learners.

3.3. Cultural education for young athletes: a macro-educational approach

3.3.1. Establish a driving model that integrates both "internal factors" and "external factors"

The purpose of implementing this model is to help young athletes better acquire cultural knowledge within a broader educational environment, preventing them from simply conforming to external influences. First, teachers should be willing to experiment with innovative teaching methods and tailor their instructional content to the unique characteristics of the student group; through their role as guides, teachers can identify and engage students' areas of interest. Second, teachers should select personalized teaching approaches that suit the specific needs of student-athletes, employing a diverse range of instructional strategies—including communication, interaction, expression of opinions, and the use of case studies—to make classroom teaching more engaging, enabling students to focus fully on their learning and develop healthy study habits. Furthermore, through a collaborative, four-pronged educational approach involving

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the school, family, teachers, and coaches, athletes can become aware of the importance of cultural education; this enables young athletes to draw upon both internal and external motivators to fuel their learning motivation, thereby achieving breakthrough progress in their cultural education [4].

3.3.2. Emphasize knowledge transfer

Knowledge transfer refers to the ability to apply acquired knowledge both vertically and horizontally, thereby optimizing learning outcomes. It is essential to embrace the philosophy of "teaching a person how to fish" rather than simply "giving a person a fish"; otherwise, the approach will be counterproductive—requiring twice the effort for half the result—and will steer learners further away from the correct path of learning, ultimately diminishing their interest in learning. In the teaching process, educators should not merely explain the concept, principles, or related example problems of a specific knowledge point; nor should they encourage students to develop a reliance on merely replicating existing content mechanically. Instead, emphasis should be placed on the internal connections within the knowledge being taught—particularly on comprehensive integration that combines widely disparate, scattered, or independent knowledge points, which requires students to possess strong knowledge transfer skills. Similarly, problems encountered during training can be adapted to learning scenarios (for example, issues such as rotation angles or rotation axes in advanced training exercises can be integrated with geometric concepts from mathematics; the spirit, energy, strength, and beauty demonstrated in performance events can be linked to the appreciation of elegant literary texts in language arts). This approach enables young athletes not only to effectively resolve their own training-related doubts but also to gain strong motivation for their academic studies, highlighting the importance of knowledge transfer.

3.3.3. Timely adjustment of the curriculum structure

In alignment with the ongoing reforms in quality-oriented education for primary and secondary schools, and in response to the developmental direction and distinctive characteristics of competitive sports schools, a comprehensive, multi-tiered quality-oriented education system should be implemented for young athletes. This requires adjustments to the curriculum design; we must abandon the mindset that mastering subjects like mathematics, physics, and chemistry will shield one from facing any challenges in life, nor should we adhere to an approach that focuses solely on traditional academic subjects (e.g., Chinese, mathematics, and foreign languages). As part of the new generation, these young athletes represent key areas worthy of our attention—whether it be their receptivity to new ideas, their channels for acquiring information, their ways of viewing issues, their interpersonal skills, their ability to navigate social interactions, or their capacity to adapt to societal developments. Particularly for those in adolescence, who harbor diverse dreams for society, the reality can be harsh: for those who devote themselves solely to training, aside from achieving proficiency in their athletic skills, can they find any other means of securing a sustainable future? [5] Therefore, it is recommended to design appropriate curricula that address the psychological well-being, behavioral habits, personal qualities, and moral character of young athletes, thereby fostering their holistic development.

3.3.4. Create a conducive learning environment

A conducive learning environment is influenced by a multitude of factors—such as school facilities, faculty, instructional resources, teaching methods, school culture, and academic atmosphere; family harmony; as well as proper learning objectives, outlook on life, worldview, and values—any minor change in these factors can impact students' academic performance, a truth that holds particularly true for the special group of young athletes. It is essential not only to inspire their determination through the exemplary demeanor of champions but also to appropriately select role models of academic and moral success to guide them in approaching their studies correctly. By fostering an overall environment that balances both "training" and "learning," we can promote the harmonious physical and mental development of these young athletes.

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4. Conclusion and recommendations

4.1. Conclusion

Under the broad concept of education, student-athletes are expected not only to master scientific and cultural knowledge, but also to develop skills in interpersonal relations, conduct, and survival. For young athletes with a relatively weak academic foundation, it is difficult to achieve a qualitative leap in learning outcomes without a guaranteed "quantity" of study time. They have clear learning motivation, abundant energy, and a high level of recognition of cultural learning; however, their satisfaction with the currently offered courses is relatively low.

4.2. Recommendations

Establish a driving model that integrates both "internal and external factors," leveraging a four-pronged collaborative education approach involving schools, families, teachers, and coaches to unlock the learning potential of young athletes. Emphasize knowledge transfer by applying the problem-solving skills acquired during training to academic learning scenarios; this organic integration not only effectively addresses challenges encountered in training but also provides a strong foundation of interest and motivation for academic studies. Building upon alignment with the reform of quality-oriented education in primary and secondary schools and in line with the developmental direction and distinctive characteristics of competitive sports schools, the current curriculum structure should be appropriately adjusted to meet the specific needs of young athletes—such as their psychological state, behavioral habits, personal qualities, and emotional well-being—thereby fostering their holistic development. Create a conducive learning environment and establish a supportive ecosystem that simultaneously prioritizes both "training" and "learning," thereby promoting their balanced physical and mental growth.

5. Conclusion

The cultural education of young athletes represents a systematic endeavor that combines both urgency and complexity; its success or failure directly impacts athletes ' lifelong development and their ability to adapt within society. Drawing upon the perspective of a "holistic education approach," this study employs an empirical investigation to uncover the current practical challenges faced by young athletes—namely, "strong motivation, limited time availability, and outdated curricula." The findings indicate that merely extending instructional hours or relying on unilateral didactic methods is insufficient to resolve the "conflict between academic learning and athletic training"; only by integrating cultural education into a broader framework—encompassing "learning to acquire knowledge, learning to perform tasks, learning to conduct oneself, and learning to coexist" —can a qualitative breakthrough be achieved. By establishing a synergistic mechanism driven by both "internal and external factors," leveraging "knowledge transfer" to bridge the gap between athletic training and academic studies, and complementing these efforts with the optimization of curriculum structures and the reconfiguration of learning environments, athletes' learning potential can be effectively unleashed. Moving forward, it is essential to further deepen the integration of sports and education, treating the enhancement of cultural literacy as the cornerstone for the sustainable development of competitive sports. This approach will enable the cultivation of "versatile sports talents" who possess not only exceptional athletic skills but also a profound cultural foundation, thereby laying a solid foundation for their social integration and career development after retirement.

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