



It Takes a Spark to Ignite a Fire:

Developing Efficacy and Connections Through Esports

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Research Problem

Esports was brought into USD 259 during the COVID pandemic at a time when students were experiencing remote learning due to the closing of schools.

Esports team members in WPS were not demonstrating many of the academic and social school-related disengagement issues reported by other districts and states post Covid and were observed to have strengthened, or developed a new, connection to their schools.

WPS district leaders invited the WSU Educational Leadership Doctoral Field Study Team to conduct research in USD 259 to increase understanding of if, and how, esports was perceived to have exerted influence on the social and learning environment for esports players. If it had, to explore in what ways it had exerted influence. If the esports program was not identified as influential, what was creating the difference in esports team members noticed by teachers and leaders?

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of a selected group of esports team members, their coaches, their principals, and the district level leaders responsible for the program, to gain insight into what participation in esports means to them.

Research Questions

The study was guided by these three research questions:

1. How do esports team members perceive their involvement in esports to influence their connection to their school?
2. How do esports team members describe their engagement with their educational experiences at school before and after joining their team?
3. How do adult research participants describe the educational ecosystem before and after the implementation of esports?

Theoretical Framework: Self-Efficacy

This study seeks to provide insight into the experiences of esports participants and the adults working with them. Using the framework of Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1994) our study will examine four main sources influencing self-efficacy and the interacting activating processes that encourage their development.

Self-Efficacy's Four Sources of Influence

1. Belief in one's personal ability; or **efficacy**; built upon successes through overcoming obstacles and perseverance.
2. **Vicarious experiences**. Watching others succeed through social contexts and models provides the opportunity to see seemingly similar individuals reach goals and overcome obstacles.
3. **Verbal persuasion** or feedback from others that compliment and affirm one's ability to succeed
4. **Physiological feedback**, refers to the impact of physical responses related to stress and emotional misinterpretations pertaining to one's physical ability.

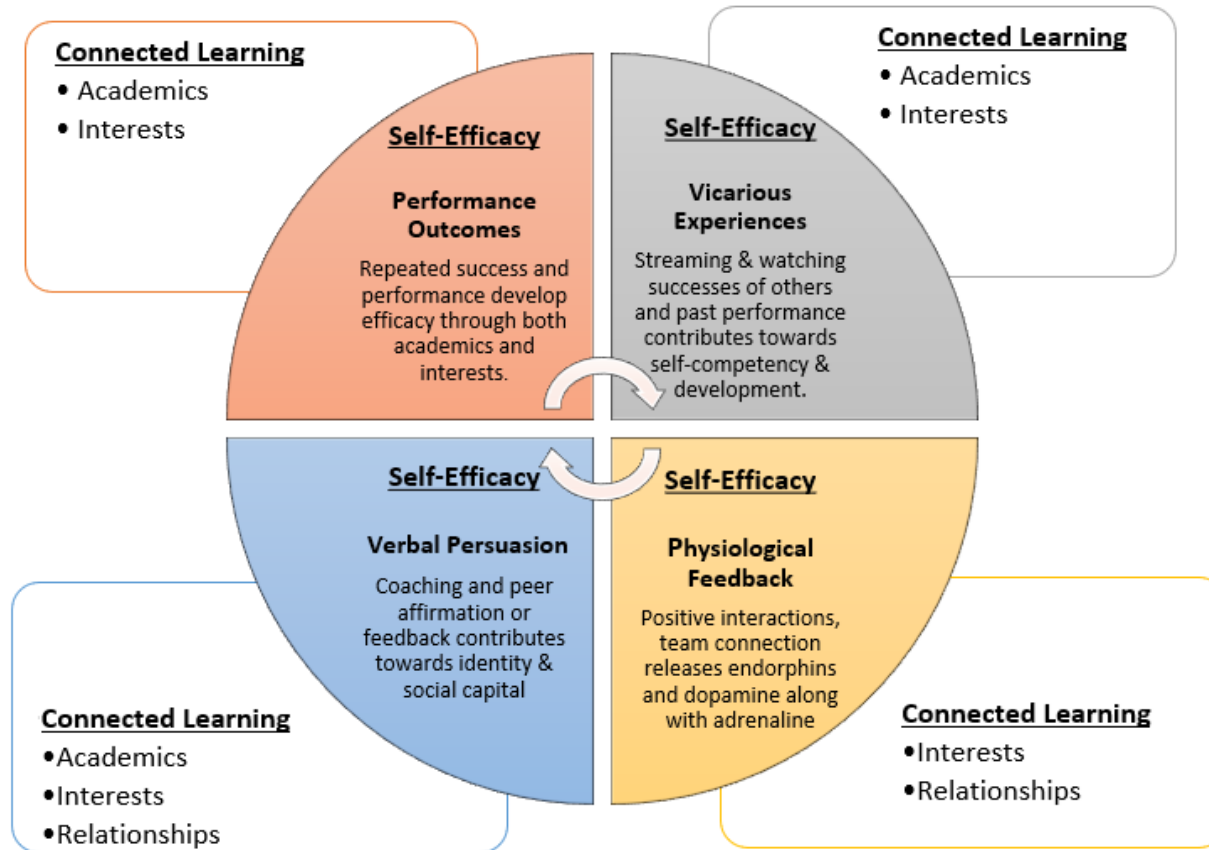
Theoretical Perspective

Theoretical Framework: Connected Learning

- 3 Spheres: A connected learning environment is revealed when the spheres of “personal interests, supportive relationships, and academic, civic, and career opportunity” converge (Ito et al., 2020, p.4).
- 4 Learning elements: Must be experienced by the student. Then the development of self-efficacy may be enhanced.
 - Sponsorship of Youth Interests
 - Shared Practices
 - Shared Purpose
 - Connections Across Settings



Theoretical Perspective



Literature Review

- Reviewing the existing literature from the field of esports **provides context** for developing an **understanding of the topic** from a variety of perspectives, and a way of placing the **current study** into the **completed body of research** informing the subject.
- Topics included in this section were selected as they **pertained** to the specific USD 259 study, filled our **knowledge gaps**, and helped us situate the study in the broader context of esports as a national and international **phenomenon**.
 - Origins of esports
 - Stereotypes
 - Resistance of esports as Sports
 - Esports and Well-Being
 - Gaming Addiction and Internet Gaming Disorders (IGD)
 - Esports, Physical and Mental Health
 - Esports and Career Readiness
 - Esports and STEM
 - Esports and Career Opportunities

Methodology

Research Design: Qualitative case study

Research Sites: Four selected high school sites in USD 259 where esports is offered

Research Participants: 44 Administrators, esports team captains, players, and coaches

Data Collection: Interviews, focus groups, documents, observations

Data Analysis: Constant comparative method

Research Quality: Triangulation

All Participants Identified Social Benefits from Involvement in Esports.

Research revealed differing perspectives on recognition and awareness of esports.

All Participant Groups Found Academic Benefit From Involvement in Esports

*Supported Making and Keeping Passing Grades and Attendance Required
to Compete*

Esports and Pursuit of Higher Education

Team Members Reported Downsides to Esports

Mental Exhaustion

Physical Fatigue

Challenges for Females

There were Post-Implementation Changes in the Ecosystem

Differences Perceived in Student Belonging After Esports - All the adult participants indicated the sense of belonging or concept of community is a difference noted within the ecosystem sparked by the establishment of esports.

Learning Environment Differences After Esports - The data reflects student involvement in USD 259 esports was perceived by adult participants as a catalyst for behavior and academic improvement.

Physical Environment Differences After Esports - Regarding the technology required to start up multiple esports teams for the district, participants shared background information about the formation process.

Participants Voiced Perceptions of Potential Threats to Esports

Physical challenges: Obsolescence and overuse of equipment; space for Gaming Concepts and esports growth; infrastructure (HVAC, internet, aging buildings)

Budget challenges: Concern about future funding when COVID funds go away

Personnel challenges: Potential for coach burn-out and need for additional coaching staff and Gaming Concepts teachers

Support for Growth Existed in All Participant Groups

*One area of **program sustainability** that evolved significantly over the course of implementation was the **strong participation** and **growing interest** in esports.*

*Participants are **building a community** that they are **proud** of, **engaged** in, and, through social media, is becoming more **visible** to a larger audience.*

Because of this, there is growing student interest in esports.

Discussion: Connected Learning

Esports Deepened Team Member Connections with School

Esports team members confirmed that experiencing interest-based learning, access to opportunities, and building relationships while engaged in school-sponsored esports connected them to their school.

- Connected learning: Sphere of Interest
- Connected Learning: Sphere of Opportunity
- Connected Learning: Sphere of Relationships

Discussion: Connected Learning

Elements of Connected Learning Environments are Present Within the Esports Ecosystem

- Sponsorship of Youth Interests
- Shared Practices
- Shared Purpose
- Connections Across Settings

Relationships with teammates and coaches were most important and participating in esports resulted in connections to peers and adults within and beyond their school and team settings

Discussion: Self Efficacy

Team Members Enhanced Self Efficacy Through Esports

Cited specific instances relating to each of the four sources of efficacy that support esports influence on confidence and social development:

- Presence of opportunities to build **personal mastery** of skills
- Presence of **verbal persuasion** in coaching and teammate interactions
- Presence of **vicarious experiences** to increase knowledge
- **Physiological feedback**

Discussion: Challenges

Challenges in the Ecosystem to Long-term Program Sustainability

Data from interviews, focus groups, and observations supported the perception that real challenges exist for the growth of esports in WPS. The growth of esports appears largely dependent on the expansion of curriculum and course offerings. The challenges are surmountable because:

- Student interest remains strong in Gaming Concepts courses

- Vision of district leadership for esports

- Significant ownership and investment by stakeholders and is highly valued and appreciated by all participating in, and responsible for esports teams

Analysis of findings from the data collection sources used to inform this study of Wichita Public Schools esports programs yielded implications for practice, policy, and future research.

- Implications for Practice
- Implications For Policy
- Implications for Future Research

Implications for Practice

- Creating an ecosystem of connected learning supportive of esports could include increasing visibility, the fan base, and recognition for the esports team members.
- Including current esports activities, tournaments, rosters, and other information for interested community members on school websites and social media channels would allow greater engagement by a broad audience that includes college and industry recruiters.
- Adding esports to building announcements, calendars, newsletters, and pep rallies would enhance a more connected learning environment that further networks the students involved in esports with peers and social opportunities.
- As the connected learning environment fosters a student's self-efficacy through mastery and positive verbal persuasion, it creates a symbiotic relationship that strengthens the student's affiliation with the school.

Implications for Policy

- When considering expanding the reach of esports, this research indicated that the most direct link to doing so is through increasing the numbers of slots available in Gaming Concepts and esports.
- This requires additional teaching and coaching personnel and could also work to sustain the programs by implementing STEM career pathways that support the academic skills built through gaming.
- Additional coursework leading to college scholarships and post-high school enrollment and pipelines in higher education or related work fields would support KSDE's Kansas Vision for Education (Kansas State Department of Education, 2020).

Implications for Future Research

- Females continue to be underrepresented in esports and findings from this study reinforced the perception that their experiences outside of their immediate team differ significantly from that of their male peers.
- Specific inquiry into the experiences of female esports players in USD 259 would expand on the findings of this research and could benefit the district by revealing strategies regarding recruiting and supporting this underrepresented demographic in the competitive esports

Implications for Future Research

- Findings from this research revealed student esports players, coaches, and administrator perceptions that **the role and engagement of their parents** was important for their student's access to technology, time to practice, and **as an advocate** supporting engagement in esports.
- Conducting future research in USD 259 on this topic could inform understanding of what kinds of esports **resources are needed at home** (eg. transportation, equipment, technology), **build parent understanding** of how esports, academics, and career opportunities work together, and encourage positive perspectives regarding gaming as a **legitimate and valuable** activity (High School Sports League, 2022).

Revisiting the Research Questions

1. How do esports team members perceive their involvement in esports to influence their connection to their school?
 - Team Members with the WPS esports program deepened their connection with the school through interest-based learning, access to opportunities, and building relationships while engaged in esports.
 - Esports increased team member sense of self-efficacy, i.e.: confidence and affiliation through belonging.
2. How do esports team members describe their engagement with their educational experiences at school before and after joining their team?
 - Esports created academic differences in team member engagement before and after participation.
 - Stronger relationships with peers and adults, better communication and leadership skills, better attendance and grades.
3. How do adult research participants describe the educational ecosystem before and after the implementation of esports?
 - Space, budget, and personnel resources constituted the main physical elements of this ecosystem that were perceived to be impacted by the implementation of esports.
 - Esports team members demonstrate greater engagement, connection, and pride in themselves and their school.

Thank You

On behalf of **Wichita State University**, the College of Applied Studies, and the **Department of Educational Leadership**, we extend our sincere appreciation to the **Wichita Public Schools** leadership for inviting our Field Research Team to conduct this study in USD 259.

It has been an **outstanding learning experience** for the doctoral candidates, and it is our hope that the information is genuinely useful to the district.

Questions?