

Student Perceptions of Involvement in Secondary-Level Competitive Forensics Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Previous literature in the field of education highlighted the impacts of student involvement in extracurricular activities on student academic and personal development; however, much of this research is oriented towards postsecondary students and not secondary-level students, and the research is broadly focused on extracurricular activities generally rather than focusing on specific categories of activities that require different levels of student involvement. This study explores specifically competitive forensics (speech and debate) and its impacts on student development at the secondary education level based on student perceptions of their own involvement. A mixed methods phenomenology was used for data collection and analysis where students responded to quantitative Likert items and qualitative short answer items through an online survey. These items collectively discussed the categories of academic development, professional and social communication skills, mental health and personal wellbeing to explore general student development. Data analysis showed that sampled students perceived their involvement in forensics to have improved academic performance and development and generally improved social and professional communication abilities. However, the sample is in disagreement in regard to mental health and personal wellbeing; a small majority hold the perception that forensics has improved their mental health, while a significant amount hold the opposite perception. Ultimately, analysis of these student perceptions on forensics provides education professionals a greater understanding of the impacts of forensics and similar extracurriculars on secondary student development. This understanding could further opportunities for learning and development beyond the classroom through extracurriculars such as forensics.

Introduction

About 83% of adolescents in the United States are involved in some form of extracurricular activity, such as sports teams, academic teams, and service organizations (Vandivere, et al., 2000). Much of the research on after school extracurricular activities demonstrates that participation in extracurricular activities promote both academic and personal development. These structured after-school activities foster learning and development beyond the classroom environment through leadership (Hancock, 2012), and lead to positive psychosocial development in students as they transition into adulthood and gain independence (Foubert & Grainger, 2006).

One extracurricular activity that is becoming very popular among secondary students is competitive forensics, commonly referred to as speech and debate. Competitive forensics teams are seen across the United States at the middle school, high school, and college levels. Competition in these teams is divided into two main sections: speech and debate. In competitive debate, students (individually or in teams of two depending on the style of debate) argue opposing sides of a preset topic in front of a judge. At the end of the round, the judge decides which arguments were well supported throughout the debate and which position to vote for. Competitive speech is more performance-based. Speech is often divided into interpretative events and public address events. Interpretive events focus on oral performances of different works of prose, poetry, and drama, while public address events include speeches written and delivered on topics of the students' choosing (Schuschu, 2016). In terms of popularity and involvement, the National Speech and Debate Association reported over 150,000 student members in 2022. Additionally, studies have shown

that student involvement in speech and debate leads to increased analytical skills, reading scores, and self-esteem (Snider & Lawrence, 2011).

However, the majority of existing literature on competitive forensics and its effects on academic and personal development of students is highly oriented towards the collegiate level. This gap causes a significant lack of understanding in the general education community in regards to extracurricular engagement, competitive forensics, and student development and the secondary education level. The lack of knowledge can hinder the quality of curriculum and instruction in the 21st century secondary level classroom.

To better understand these reported effects and address the existing gap in literature, this study will investigate how secondary level students perceive their involvement in competitive forensics and its effects on students' personal and academic development. In addition, the study will attempt to ascertain students' level of engagement to allow for a connection between speech and debate and their lives inside and outside the classroom. Ultimately, the collected perspectives will be presented and compared with findings from previously conducted research on speech and debate and its impacts on high school students. Finally, information learned from this study has the potential to inform teachers and school administrators of the importance of student participation in speech and debate and how it affects learning outcomes. In addition, understanding the perspectives of students themselves through this study can foster a greater urge to shape modern curriculums around the 21st century world through prioritizing critical thinking, communication, and classroom collaboration.

The following research question will guide the study:

What are forensics students of two Montgomery, Alabama secondary schools' perceptions of involvement in competitive forensics on academic and personal development?

The research question specifies a population of forensics students in particular secondary schools in Montgomery, Alabama; as a result, inferences and conclusions developed in this study are specific to this population.

Review of Literature

This review of literature will analyze previous literature involving competitive forensics. Previous studies conducted reveal a positive correlation between forensics, critical thinking, communication, and social skills. The survey of the relevant literature also reveals there is a need for more studies that investigates students' experiences, opinions, and perception on after school forensic organizations.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is the ability to use prior knowledge to objectively contextualize, interpret, evaluate, justify, and articulate previously held assumptions and information (Petress, 2004; Holyoak & Morrison, 2005). Critical thinking is not the simple rote memorization of material or a passive recollection of knowledge or information; it involves reflective and independent thinking. It is about being an active learner and applying higher order thinking skills.

The ability to think critically is vital to the stability of society (Smith, 2001). For instance, individuals in society must use critical thinking skills to process information. They also use critical thinking skills to discern, observe, and make informed decisions. That is why critical thinking has grown important to high school curriculums.

Research indicates that critical thinking can be developed both inside and outside the classroom. Smith (2001) states that critical thinking stems from skills developed at the middle and high school levels. The study showed that teaching styles such as didactic lecture can also promote critical thinking in the classroom. This teaching methodology creates a forum for students to discuss and ask questions. It also provides an avenue for students to interact with each

other and the teacher to critically evaluate and analyze the topic at hand. Critical thinking skills can also be developed outside the classroom through extracurricular engagement. According to Snider and Lawrence (2011), students are often told to simply accept rather than evaluate or question the ideas presented to them in class. However, involvement in speech and debate can revert this ideology and encourage students to fundamentally analyze and question aspects of the society around them. In other words, when students are part of a speech and debate team, they are required to evaluate and examine the root causes of controversial issues that face their communities, which fosters dialogue and “global critical thinking”.

Communication Skills

Communication is the ability for an individual to clearly convey or articulate a certain point to others (Ted-Ed Talks, 2021). Communication skills are valuable in several different environments in the modern world, including the workforce, social settings, with family and friends, and with authority figures. Lindsay Parrado explains that our connectivity through technology has harmed our communication and social skills, and that teaching effective communication in schools is vital to strengthening interpersonal relationships (Ted-Ed Talks, 2021). Educational methods to ensure all aspects of communication, such as listening, dialogue, and vocal engagement, include a discussion-based classroom, where the teacher allows students to convey their thoughts on the topic at hand with their classmates—the style is similar to a Socratic seminar (Stott, 2018).

Studies and articles have shown that speech and debate involvement can improve communication and social skills in students as well. The Stanford National Forensic Institute explains that students in speech and debate develop communication skills, which furthers their ability to articulate their own viewpoints and evaluate opposing ideas, both in an academic setting and in the modern world (Stanford National Forensic Institute, 2022). Moreover, a *Forbes* article from 2014 suggested that students’ involvement in speech and debate furthers their ability to “persuade...present clearly...and connect with an audience.” This, in turn, means these students develop skills necessary for successful entrepreneurship and business administration (Sher, 2014; Stanford National Forensic Institute, 2022). Furthermore, studies have shown that extracurriculars in general have been positively associated with psychosocial development (the ability to interact with others), which indicates improvement in social skills with extracurricular involvement (Foubert and Grainger, 2006). However, there is a lack of sufficient literature that directly associates or connects forensics with social development or communication.

Mental Health and Personal Wellbeing

Mental health and personal wellbeing is a serious aspect of adolescent development. Mental health status can impact both personal and academic growth, and focusing on mental health in schools is vital as educators are often the first “line of defense” for students (Barlie, 2021; National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2019). In the status quo, however, adolescent mental health has declined amid the COVID-19 pandemic and increased stress-inducing situations. The World Health Organization (2021) reports that 13% of adolescents experience a mental health disorder, and suicide is the leading cause of death among teenagers aged 15-19. Moreover, the lack of awareness and action on this issue has allowed for the continued decrease in mental health status of teenagers worldwide.

Research has shown that secondary student involvement in speech and debate has significant positive impacts on mental health. Major increases in self-esteem and personal confidence were reported in students involved in competitive forensics teams (Stanford National Forensic Institute, 2022; Snider & Lawrence, 2011). This represents a positive impact towards mental health as high self-esteem is vital to a positive personal image, mental health, and personal wellbeing, while lower self-esteem creates poor, toxic relationships, addiction, and leads to disorders including depression and anxiety (American Psychological Association, 2022; Miskin 2020).

On the other hand, research demonstrates that negative impacts to adolescent mental health may exist as well. A study from Seton Hall University analyzed high school extracurriculars and mental health using student-ranked “depressive scores”; the category “academic clubs”, which includes speech and debate, was reported to have higher depressive scores among the student participants (Gottfried, 2021). This may be due to overexertion or overinvolvement in extracurricular activities. Moore (2019) observed this phenomenon at Furman University, explaining that overinvolvement in high-commitment activities (such as speech and debate) leads to less leisure time, burnout, and mental health decline. However, there is no direct research that links speech and debate specifically to adolescent mental health decline.

Conclusion

After evaluation and observation of literature relevant to impacts of competitive forensics on student development, three categories of impacts were identified and reviewed: critical thinking, communication skills, and mental health and personal wellbeing. All of these categories are important aspects of personal and academic development and are therefore considered competencies of students. The review evaluates relevant research on the relationship between student involvement in forensics and the aforementioned competency categories; studies have shown increases in critical thinking and communication skills with participation, while controversy over the relationship with mental health and personal wellbeing exists. With these evaluations in mind, the perspectives of students and team administrators regarding forensics involvement can be compared to observe dissimilarity or consistency between the perspectives and previously conducted research.

Methodology

A mixed methods phenomenology was used as the methodological framework for this study.

Phenomenology as a Research Methodology

This study employs a phenomenological approach to observe student perceptions of their involvement in speech and debate. Creswell (2007) defines the research methodology of phenomenology as describing “the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon.” Phenomenological studies first identify a particular phenomenon of interest, which Van Manen (1990) defines as “an object of human experience.” The phenomenon of this study is competitive forensics at the secondary education level, which is observed through Moustakas’s (1994) transcendental phenomenology to observe and analyze participant experiences in the competitive forensics phenomenon. This method of phenomenology “focuses less on the interpretation of the researcher and more on the description of the experiences of participants,” (Creswell). To reduce the influence of the researcher on the analysis of participant experiences, transcendental phenomenology requires a process referred to as bracketing, where “investigators set aside their experiences...to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination,” (Creswell). In order to apply bracketing to data analysis, this researcher maintained a separate journal of independent thoughts in regards to their involvement in competitive forensics; these thoughts were meticulously recorded to separate the researcher’s own thoughts from those of the participants.

Transcendental phenomenology is effective in studying and observing student perceptions of their involvement in secondary competitive forensics because it focuses explicitly on the experience of the student participants. Particularly in regards to studies in education, such as this one, “understanding lived experience can only enhance and enrich the field of education research and practice,” (Farrell, 2020). Phenomenology allows education researchers to better understand and analyze the way in which students learn and respond to certain educational phenomena (Marton

& Booth, 1997). Therefore, the phenomenological approach is the most effective in understanding the lived experiences and perspectives of students involved in secondary competitive forensics.

The Population and the Sample

The population from this study includes all students that had at least a year of experience in competitive forensics at a local middle school and a local high school; the population size was 47 students.

A simple random sample of size 25 was generated out of the specified population through the following procedures:

1. Each student in the population was randomly labeled with a unique integer from 1-47.
2. Technology was used to randomly generate 25 unique integers out of the list of 47 students.
3. The students whose number was chosen were selected to create this study's sample.

Conclusions from this study can be inferred to the general population defined above since random sampling was used to generate this study's sample.

Data Collection

Data collection for students was inspired by the structure of Johnson's (2013) mixed methods approach on student perceptions of the flipped classroom. This study used a similar mixed methods data collection procedure to collect data on student experiences of their involvement in competitive forensics. Both types of data, quantitative and qualitative, were collected through a survey developed through Microsoft Forms. The survey focused on core competency skills and personal development attributes outlined in Chapter 2 of this paper: critical thinking, communication skills, and mental health and personal wellbeing. The survey contained information on this study, the survey's purpose, and the researcher's contact information. Confidentiality was guaranteed to each respondent; participants are referred to in this study by pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. All students were under the age of 18, so parental consent (given through an electronic signature on the survey) was required before participation.

Quantitative data was collected through student responses to statements on a Likert scale. The Likert scale poses a statement to participants, and participants respond by selecting the agreement level that best corresponds to their agreement with the statement. Students could choose six agreement levels: strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, agree, and strongly agree. An even number of agreement levels was used so that participants would be required to take a position (some level of agreement or disagreement) with the statement.

The following Likert scale statements were used:

- Likert scale statements
- My involvement in speech and debate has improved my ability to think critically.
 - My involvement in speech and debate has improved my academic performance
 - My involvement in speech and debate has improved my self-confidence.
 - My involvement in speech and debate has improved my mental health and personal wellbeing.
 - My involvement in speech and debate has improved my ability to communicate effectively.
 - My involvement in speech and debate has improved my social skills and my ability to interact with others.
 - My involvement in speech and debate has improved my personal relationships.

Figure 1: List of Likert Items

The Likert items collectively address the topics of forensics and academic and personal development by discussing themes of academics, communication, and mental health. Qualitative data was collected through a series of four short answer questions on the survey. These short answer questions provide students with an opportunity to elaborate on their individual opinions and perspectives regarding their involvement in competitive forensics.

The following short answer questions were posed to students:

- Short Answer Questions
- How did speech and debate impact your academic and personal development? You can include both positive and negative thoughts. Academic development refers to growth in school and school-related classes or subjects. Personal development refers to growth as an individual. This includes growth in mental health, personal well being, and social skills.
 - How has your involvement in speech and debate impacted your perspective of the world?
 - To what extent has your involvement in speech and debate furthered your ability to think independently and develop opinions independently and open-mindedly?
 - How has your involvement in speech and debate impacted your education amid learning challenges in the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Figure 2: List of Short Answer Questions

Using a mixed data collection procedure allows the study to observe, understand, and analyze the perspectives of students in a holistic manner. The quantitative data provides a sense of the general perceptions and opinions of the sample, and the qualitative data is used to better understand how and why the reported perspectives were developed. Using only one type of data collection method (qualitative or quantitative) would not provide this researcher with the information necessary to thoroughly understand general student perceptions or understand why the perceptions exist.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis was conducted by first calculating the percentage of responses for each agreement level for each Likert item. Then, a bar graph depicting the percentage of responses for each agreement level was constructed for each Likert item. A bar graph for condensed data was constructed to display the percentages of two collapsed levels of agreement: agree or disagree. The condensed data consisted of the sum of all percentages of each disagreement level and the sum of all percentages of each agreement level. All graphs were constructed using Google Sheets. After the two graphs for each Likert item were created, the general trend or perspective based on the graphs was determined, and different observations on the graphs' distribution were made. These bar graphs allow for a clear comparison between different agreement levels for each item.

Inductive data analysis procedures were used to analyze qualitative data collected through the survey. This method of data analysis was used to "allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw [qualitative] data" (Thomas, 2006). First, student responses from short answer questions were transcribed into a Microsoft Excel sheet and printed. Each response to each question was read thoroughly multiple times through a close reading process before any observations were made. Then, inductive coding procedures were used to mark and highlight recurring themes across student responses. These procedures involved the researcher first identifying themes addressed in student responses and then marking student responses that discussed similar perspectives of those themes. After the themes were marked, general broad categories that encompassed the discussed themes

were developed. These categories will be presented in data analysis along with selected student responses that reflect the themes and perspectives of the sample. Using this method of data analysis allows for the inclusion and representation of the many perspectives expressed by students; dividing the statements by categories allows for a more organized approach to developing conclusions based on this data.

Findings

Quantitative Findings

Quantitative findings from analysis of Likert item responses will provide a general overview and understanding of the perspectives of this sample. The Likert items were separated into three categories: academic development (Likert items 1 and 2), mental health and personal wellbeing (Likert items 3 and 4), and communication and social skills (Likert items 5-7). By analyzing student responses to Likert items in each of these categories, the general perception of the sample regarding competitive forensics and each category can be more clearly observed.

Academic Development: Likert Items 1 and 2

Likert Item 1: My involvement in speech and debate has improved my ability to think critically.

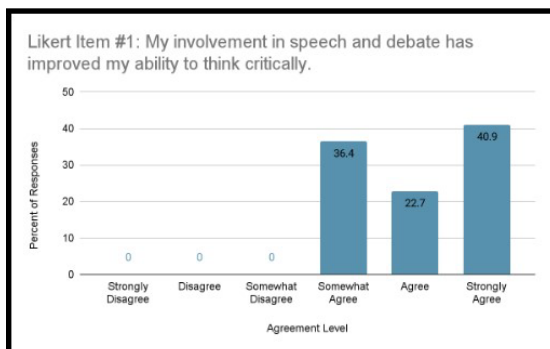


Figure 3: Raw Data for Likert Item 1

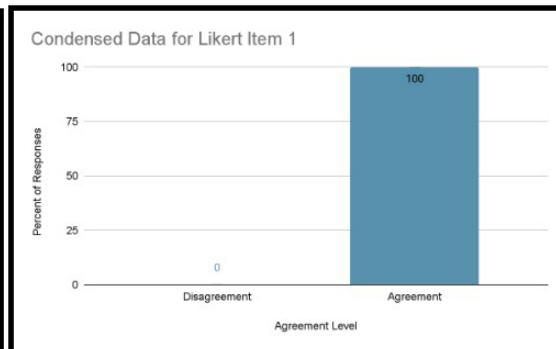


Figure 4: Condensed Data for Likert Item 1

There is clear agreement across the sample in regard to critical thinking and competitive forensics. Ultimately, it can be concluded that the perception of students in the sample is that involvement in competitive forensics is conducive to the development of critical thinking skills.

Likert Item 2: My involvement in speech and debate has improved my academic performance.

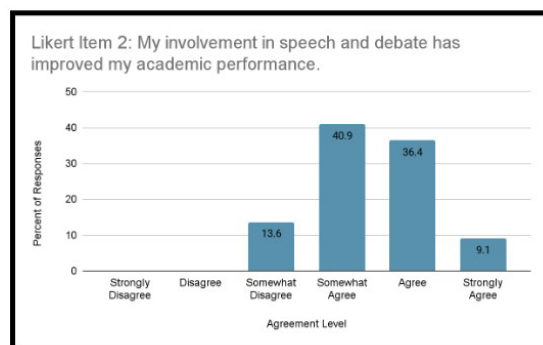


Figure 5: Raw Data for Likert Item 2

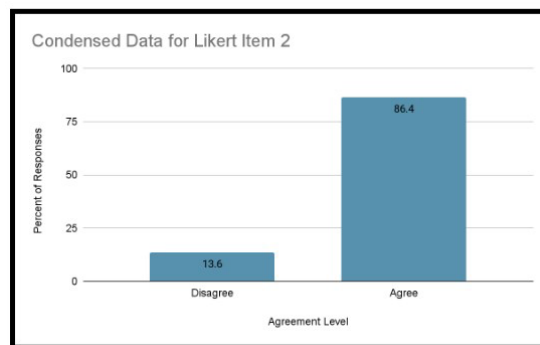


Figure 6: Condensed Data for Likert Item 2

There is consistent agreement for Likert item 2 as well at about 86.4% agreement. About 13.6% of the sample was in disagreement with this statement, but based on Figure 3, all of these students responded with “somewhat disagree”, which is the lowest level of disagreement. Even when students disagreed, their disagreement with the statement regarding academic performance was minimal. Ultimately, this sample of secondary students perceive that their involvement in competitive forensics has been conducive to academic development. This is shown through significant student agreement towards Likert items 1 and 2, which discuss two components of academic development: critical thinking and academic performance.

Mental Health and Personal Wellbeing: Likert Items 3 and 4

Likert Item 3: My involvement in speech and debate has improved my self-confidence.

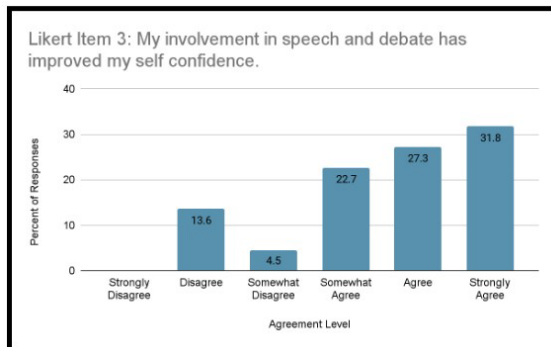


Figure 7: Raw Data for Likert Item 3

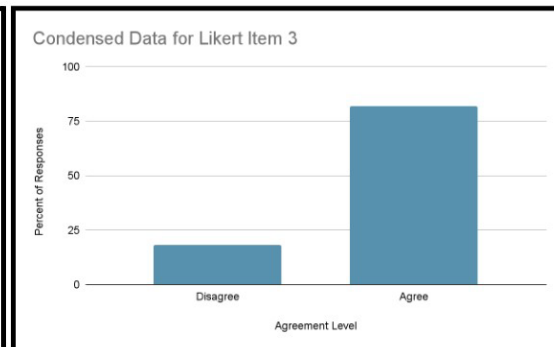


Figure 8: Condensed Data for Likert Item 3

A significant majority of the sample is in agreement with this statement (about 80%). However, there is increased disagreement (about 20%) relative to the percent disagreement from the sample in the academic development section. Ultimately, we conclude that since a large percentage of the sample is in agreement with the sample, the perception of this sample is that involvement in competitive forensics has improved self-confidence.

Likert Item 4: My involvement in speech and debate has improved my mental health and personal wellbeing.

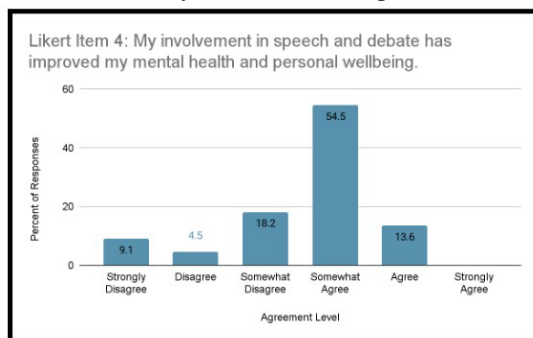


Figure 9: Raw Data for Likert Item 4

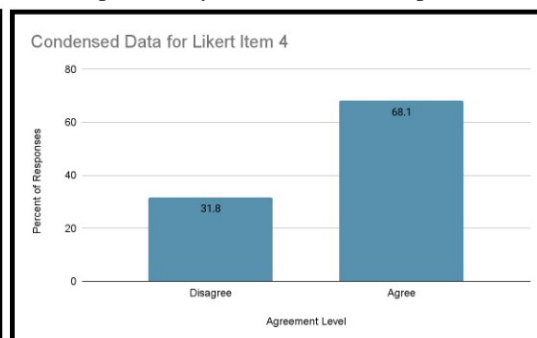


Figure 10: Condensed Data for Likert Item 4

The general perception based on the graphs above is agreement, but this agreement is significantly less compared to the levels of agreement in the previous Likert items. For instance, Likert items 1 and 2 (academic development) have 100 and 80 percent agreement, respectively, while this Likert item, which addresses mental health, has an agreement level of about 68.1%. Even though the majority of the sample is in agreement with this statement, 54.5% of students, which is the majority of students in agreement, ranked the lowest level of agreement (somewhat agree).

Based on the data collected from Likert items 3 and 4, the conclusion can be made that the students in this sample have contrasting perspectives of their involvement in competitive forensics on their mental health and personal well-being. A slim majority of students perceive that involvement in competitive forensics has furthered their mental health and wellbeing, but a significant number of students also hold the perception that their involvement in competitive forensics has either had no impact on their mental health or has had a detrimental impact on their mental health.

Communication and Social Skills: Likert Items 5-7

Likert Item 5: My involvement in speech and debate has improved my ability to communicate effectively in professional settings.

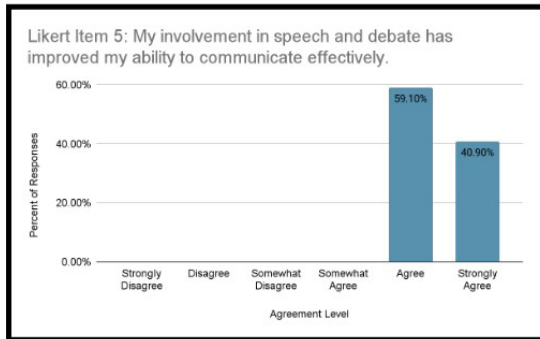


Figure 11: Raw Data for Likert Item 5

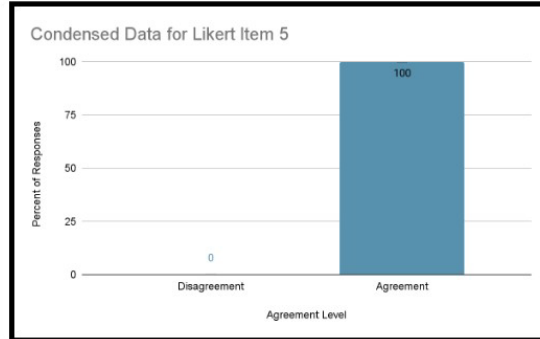


Figure 12: Condensed Data for Likert Item 5

Based on both graphs, there is clear, consistent agreement across the sample for this Likert item. Therefore, the conclusion that this sample perceives their involvement in competitive forensics to have been beneficial to the development of professional communication skills can be made.

Likert Item 6: My involvement in speech and debate has improved my social skills and my ability to interact with others.

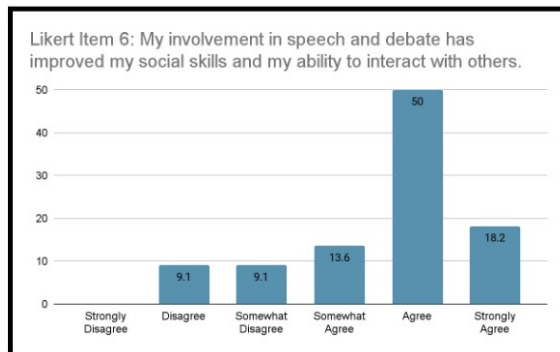


Figure 13: Raw Data for Likert Item 6

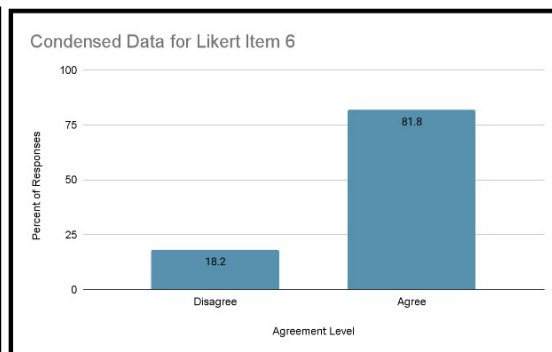


Figure 14: Condensed Data for Likert Item 7

There is a significant majority of the sample in agreement with this Likert statement (about 81.8%). This indicates that the majority of the sample perceives that their involvement in competitive forensics has been conducive to the development of their social skills. However, there are stronger levels of disagreement that were ranked by the sample per Figure 11 that were less ranked for other Likert items. This indicates that there is strong disagreement for this Likert item among a small number of students in this sample.

Likert Item 7: My involvement in speech and debate has improved my personal relationships.

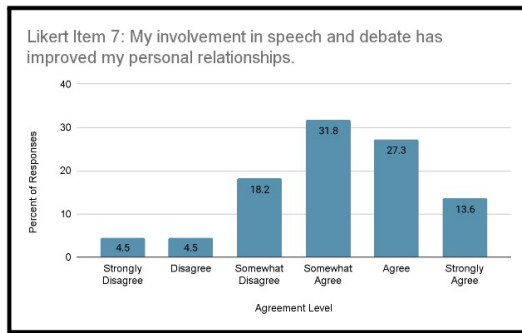


Figure 15: Raw Data for Likert Item 7

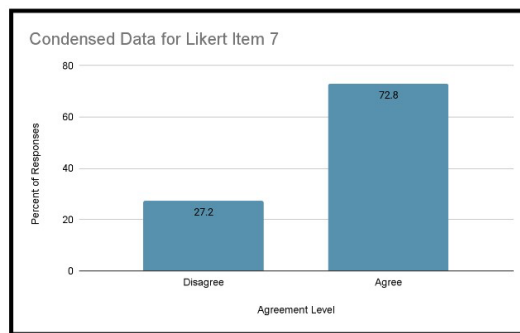


Figure 16: Condensed Data for Likert Item 8

There is a clear majority in agreement with this Likert item, but there is also strong disagreement among a smaller minority of the sample. Therefore, the conclusion can be made that the majority of the sample holds the perception that involvement in competitive forensics has boosted their personal relationships while a smaller minority of the sample perceive that their involvement has had no impact or a detrimental effect on their personal relationships. Ultimately, when observing communication and social skills, the narrative developed from these results is that the majority of students perceive their involvement in competitive forensics has improved their professional and social communication abilities. There is, however, a minority of the sample that holds the perception that involvement in forensics has been detrimental to or has no impact on social communication or social skills.

Qualitative Findings

Qualitative findings will provide insight into the reasons for these perspectives held by the students. After inductive data analysis procedures for the qualitative data were completed, five categories of content were developed based on student responses: academic performance, exposure to the 21st world, mental health, professional communication, and social communication. Names of participants used in this section are merely pseudonyms and not the real names of the participants.

Academic Performance

Students in the sample noted that involvement in forensics led to better academic performance primarily in social science/humanities classes. Kiara’s statement below demonstrates this perspective:

“I saw myself become more confident...in my classes, particularly English and history. I could also write arguments and essays better, resulting in higher grades.”

Jacob’s statement expresses the perspective from the sample that involvement in competitive forensics boosted academic development through the development of critical thinking skills:

“Speech and debate allowed an extension of my academic skills during the [COVID-19] Pandemic, especially with critical thinking skills.”

Exposure to the 21st Century World

Kathy explains that her involvement in competitive forensics improved her academic development through increased exposure to the real world:

“I have gained a greater appreciation for what is going on in the world around me such as discrimination, climate change, and poverty.”

As can be seen, the general perspective of secondary forensics students in this sample is that involvement in competitive forensics has furthered academic development. This perception was formed through an increase in performance in school classes, an expansion of critical thinking skills, and better knowledge of the modern world.

Mental Health

Several students commented that their involvement in competitive forensics resulted in greater self-confidence, self-esteem, and mental health. Julie and Hunter’s statements provide further insight into this category:

“[Speech and debate] serves as a way for me to channel and express my emotions...it improved my mental health in that regard.”

“Despite brief moments of stress, speech and debate has improved my mental health by improving my general sense of self.”

Conversely, other students in the sample commented on detrimental effects on mental health with involvement in competitive forensics. For instance, Sarah’s statement discussed adverse effects on her stress and anxiety levels rooted in involvement in forensics:

“Time commitment [for speech and debate] detracted from schoolwork, making me more stressed. Stress stemming from competitions...definitely contributed to a downward spiral. My mental health worsened, for sure.”

Professional Communication

Several students in the sample expressed the perspective that their involvement in forensics has improved their professional communication skills. Patrick and Laura’s responses elaborate on the development of professional communication abilities through forensics:

“Debate has made me more comfortable with networking and meeting and making connections with professionals; this has given me plenty of opportunities to expand my interests and build my resume.”

“[Forensics] has taught me valuable lessons on voice projection and presentation, and I believe that it has ultimately improved my communication and public speaking skills.”

Social Skills and Social Communication

Another perspective expressed by students in the sample regarding communication was that involvement in forensics impacted social communication abilities. Scarlett discusses her social development with involvement in forensics:

“Coming out of COVID and isolation and joining speech and debate really allowed me to land my feet back into large groups and talking in general by boosting my self confidence.”

Other students perceived that their involvement in forensics lacked an impact on social communication. Luke describes this perception:

“Speech and debate was impactful when it came to speaking in front of an audience, but I did not feel that it improved my social skills or personal relationships.”

This division in perceptions was clear in student responses quantitatively and qualitatively.

Conclusion

The conclusion will present a discussion of the findings to answer the research question, limitations to the study, and implications of the findings. Areas and suggestions for further research regarding this topic will also be offered in this chapter.

The goal of the study is to provide a narrative of student involvement in competitive forensics on academic and personal development through the student perspective. To guide the inquiry, the following research question was posed:

What are forensics students of two Montgomery, Alabama secondary schools’ perceptions of involvement in competitive forensics on academic and personal development?

To answer this question, a mixed methods phenomenological approach was used. After qualitative and quantitative analysis, the categories of academic development and personal development were organized into subcategories: academics, communication and social skills, and mental health and personal wellbeing.

Quantitative data showed that forensics students of the two secondary schools perceive their involvement in competitive forensics to have been conducive towards academic development, with strong agreement among corresponding Likert items. This perception was formed through an increase in performance in school classes, an expansion of critical thinking skills, and better knowledge of the modern world based on student responses in qualitative data. These descriptions correspond with the reported effect of forensics improving test scores, reading skills, and other facets of academics (Stanford National Forensic Institute, 2022; Snider and Lawrence, 2011). Ultimately, at the secondary level, academics are perceived to be improved with forensics involvement, concurring with the literature.

The students perceive their involvement in forensics to have largely improved both professional and social communication abilities, per data from corresponding Likert items. This is because of the perspective that forensics has provided these students with opportunities to practice and expand public speaking and networking skills, which improves professional communication skills. These perceptions on professional communication concur with the reported effects in the literature that forensics boosts public speaking, networking, and leadership through communication (Sher, 2014; Stanford National Forensic Institute, 2022). Social communication skills were perceived to have been developed through greater self-confidence, which was especially important amid a lack of regular socialization

amid the COVID-19 Pandemic. This perception is similar to the positive impact that extracurricular involvement has shown on social development and communication (Foubert and Grainger, 2006), but no direct connection between this perception and literature on forensics and social skills can be made since there is a lack of sufficient literature on that topic. A smaller minority of students have expressed the opposite perspective of social skills that forensics involvement has had no impact or a detrimental impact on social communication abilities. This perception contradicts Foubert and Grainger's conclusions, but again, no connection to literature on forensics and socialization can be made.

Ultimately, the sample's divided perceptions of involvement in competitive forensics on mental health and personal wellbeing are reflected through these student responses as well. Some students have explained that involvement in forensics has boosted their mental health by providing a mechanism for emotion processing and increasing self-esteem. Other students believed that competitive atmospheres created increased feelings of stress and anxiety, leading to a detrimental impact on mental health. This division of perspectives reflects the division of conclusions in the relevant literature. Literature discusses perspectives of forensics and greater self-confidence and mental health (Stanford National Forensic Institute 2022; Snider and Lawrence, 2011; Miskin, 2020). However, other studies highlight detrimental effects of extracurricular involvement on mental health, with higher rates of depression and anxiety among more involved students (Gottfried, 2021; Moore, 2019). Overall, the perception of students regarding forensics and mental health varies on the individual student as evidenced by the clashing perspectives.

Limitations

The population used in this study is a significant limitation to the scope of the inference of the above conclusions. Since the population was defined as the forensics students at two secondary schools in Montgomery, AL, the conclusions from the selected sample can only be generalized to this population. Therefore, the conclusions from this study only provide information on the perceptions of these students. However, the conclusions can serve to provide a general understanding of secondary student perceptions of competitive forensics, but further research which expands the scope of population can be conducted to provide more general information on the secondary student perceptions.

A transcendental phenomenology was used to avoid researcher interpretation and bias in data analysis through the process described in chapter 3. However, researcher influence on analysis is ultimately inevitable as the researcher is the individual conducting the analysis and interpretation of data. Even so, the researcher's personal thoughts and perceptions on this topic were kept separate through a reflective journal (as described through the process of bracketing in chapter 3) to minimize any influence these biases may have had on final analysis of the data.

Implications

The current literature on forensics and student development did not sufficiently discuss or examine students at the secondary education level. The findings of this study provide more information as to how involvement in forensics impacts student development personally and academically at the secondary level through the student perspective. This information allows education professionals to better understand the impacts of competitive forensics and similar extracurriculars at the secondary education level, which furthers opportunities outside of the classroom setting for the development of core academic skills such as critical thinking. The information on student perspectives can aid teachers at the secondary level in integrating forensics practices of research, argumentation, and communication to foster academic development and performance as well. Ultimately, the better understanding of these secondary students' perspectives allows for the development and implementation of a more comprehensive curriculum in schools that furthers student development particularly at the secondary level of education.

Areas for Further Research

The biggest area for further research stemming from the conclusions of this study is expanding the scope of the population to account for greater geographical diversity and to represent secondary students with different settings in their forensics organizations. This would provide a more general understanding of the perceptions of secondary forensics students. The study also concluded that perceptions of forensics on mental health were divided across the sample. Further research that focuses solely on the impacts of forensics on student mental health can clarify this division or offer more insight into why this division exists and why students perceive these impacts differently.

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