# Engagement in After-School Program Activities: Quality of Experience from the Perspective of Participants

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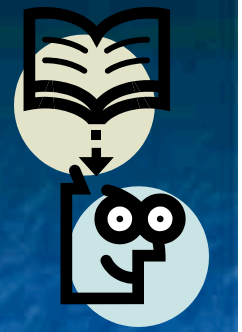
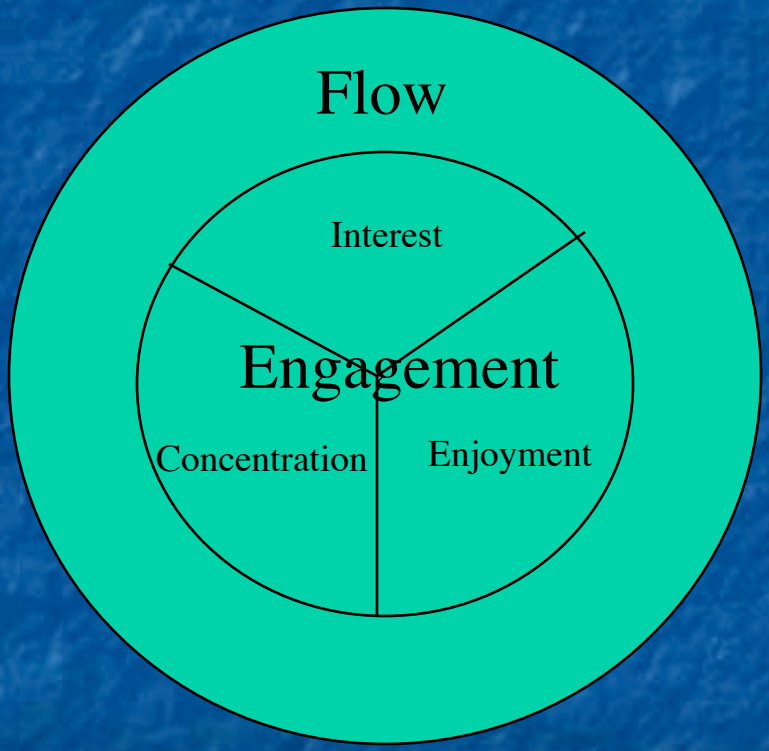
# Introduction



- Extracurricular activities like sports, the arts, community involvement provide opportunities for engagement, challenge, concentration, enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, and initiative (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Larson, 2000; Mahoney, Larson & Eccles, 2005)

# Conceptualization of Student Engagement



- Rapid expansion of after school programs (e.g., 21st *Century Community Learning Centers*)
- In a previous study, we found that after school program led to increased time in such activities, with accompanying increases in intrinsic motivation, concentrated effort, and enjoyment (Vandell et al., 2005)
- **In this study, we compared students' subjective experience and engagement in specific activities during after-school programs.**
- We utilized The Experience Sampling Method (or ESM; see Hektner, Schmidt, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2007)

# Common Activities in After-School Programs

- In our study, we compared students' subjective experience and engagement in the most frequently reported after-school activities. This included:
  - Sports
  - Homework
  - Arts Enrichment
  - Academic Enrichment
  - Sit-down games
  - Socializing

# Sports

- Athletics:
  - build character, instill a respect for the rules, encourage teamwork and sportsmanship, promote healthy competition and perseverance, and provide a sense of achievement (Smoll & Smith, 2002)
  - provide opportunities for developing emotional regulation and initiative (Larson, Hansen, & Moneta, 2006), improved self esteem, confidence, independence, and energy
- Some negative influences have also been found:
  - delayed identity development (Larson & Kleiber, 1993)
  - increased levels of school deviance (Lamborn, Brown, Mounts, & Steinberg, 1992)
  - higher rates of alcohol consumption (Eccles & Barber, 1999)
  - competition anxiety and self-centeredness (Smoll & Smith, 2002)
  - and bodily injury (Dane, Can, Gursoy, & Ezirmic, 2004)
- Declining athletic involvement:
  - 80% of children are reported to drop out of sports between the ages of 12 and 17 (Kirshnit et al., 1989)

# Arts

- There are a dearth of studies on student experiences of the arts and music
- Arts enrichment activities usually include: dance, drama, pottery, painting, sculpture, or organized music
- Participation in the arts can improve academic performance by increasing engagement, motivation, and self-esteem (Winner & Hetland, 2000)
- Capacities engendered by the arts:
  - Creativity
  - Imagination
  - Fluency
  - Originality
  - Critical and divergent thinking

# Socializing

- Socializing can serve as an arena for exploring roles, learning cultural norms, and developing cognitive, social, and emotional self regulation (Larson & Verma, 1999)
- Enrollment in after school programs fulfills students' social goals (Fredericks, Alfred-Liro, Hruda, Eccles, Patrick, & Ruan, 2002)

# Homework

- Many studies have found a positive and significant albeit weak relationship between the amount of time spent on homework and various achievement outcomes, particularly for grades 6-12 (see recent meta-analysis by Cooper, Robinson & Patall, 2006)
- Most studies have found that students report negative experiences when completing homework, especially when doing so alone

# Academic Enrichment

- Supervised activities that are academic in nature without the assignment of homework.
- Even a greater paucity of research on academic enrichment activities than the arts
- With respect to academic clubs, mostly positive outcomes have been found: higher academic performance, greater likelihood in enrolling in college, and more years of college completion than their uninvolved peers (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002)

# Sit-down Games

- Highly engaging for children because they possess many properties inherent to flow experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990):
  - Clear Goals
  - Feedback is immediate, abundant, and unambiguous
  - Increasing challenge
  - Players of games are able to concentrate, exert control over their environment, and become less self-conscious
- Research on sit-down games, let alone in an after-school context is extremely sparse

# Social partners during after-school activities

- Although adolescents enjoy almost any activity more when in the presence of peers (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984), they may pay better attention and concentrate more when doing an activity with adults
- Participating in structured activities with parents or other adults enables children to:
  - Obtain important performance information
  - To improve their skills (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and judgments
  - To evaluate continuation of the activity (Fredricks et al., 2002)
- Activities with ***peers and adults*** may take on a special significance by potentially combining the benefits of enjoyment and concentration critical to positive youth development

# Goals of the study

**Research Questions**

1. Do students have a higher quality of experience in some activities than others, and when interacting with some social partners compared to others?
2. How does the quality of their experience differ by social partner group when controlling for gender and ethnicity?

# Method

- **Participants**
- 8 middle schools in three different states in the Midwest
- Participants were evenly distributed across schools and sites
- N = 165 8th grade students
- Higher percentage of Black and lower percentage of White students than national demographics
- High percentage of low income groups

# Measuring subjective experience and engagement

- Instruments: The Experience Sampling Method (ESM)
  - Digital wristwatches (signaled to beep randomly 5 times daily at non-school hours)
  - Logbook (5 two-page entries with 23 items)

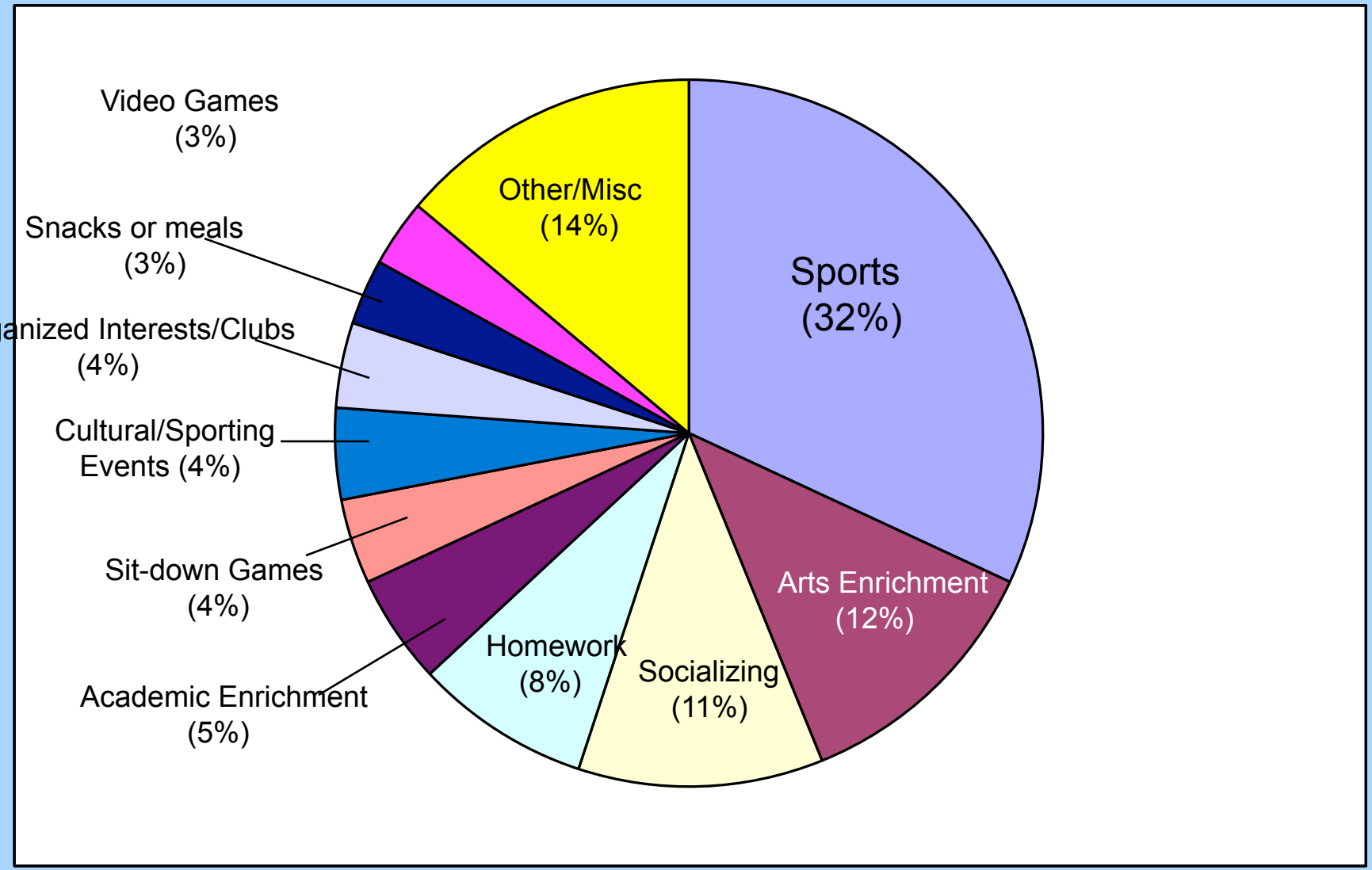
# Method

- **Procedures**
  - Training
    - 45-minute training session with two field staff
    - In data collection week, field staff met with participants daily to check logbooks for accuracy and missing data, answer questions, and provide new logbooks.
    - Most of the participants followed the instructions given without difficulty
  - Coding of activities and social partners
    - Responses related to activities and social partners were coded by two trained coders
    - Inter-coder reliability ranged from **.89** to .**95** depending on coding category

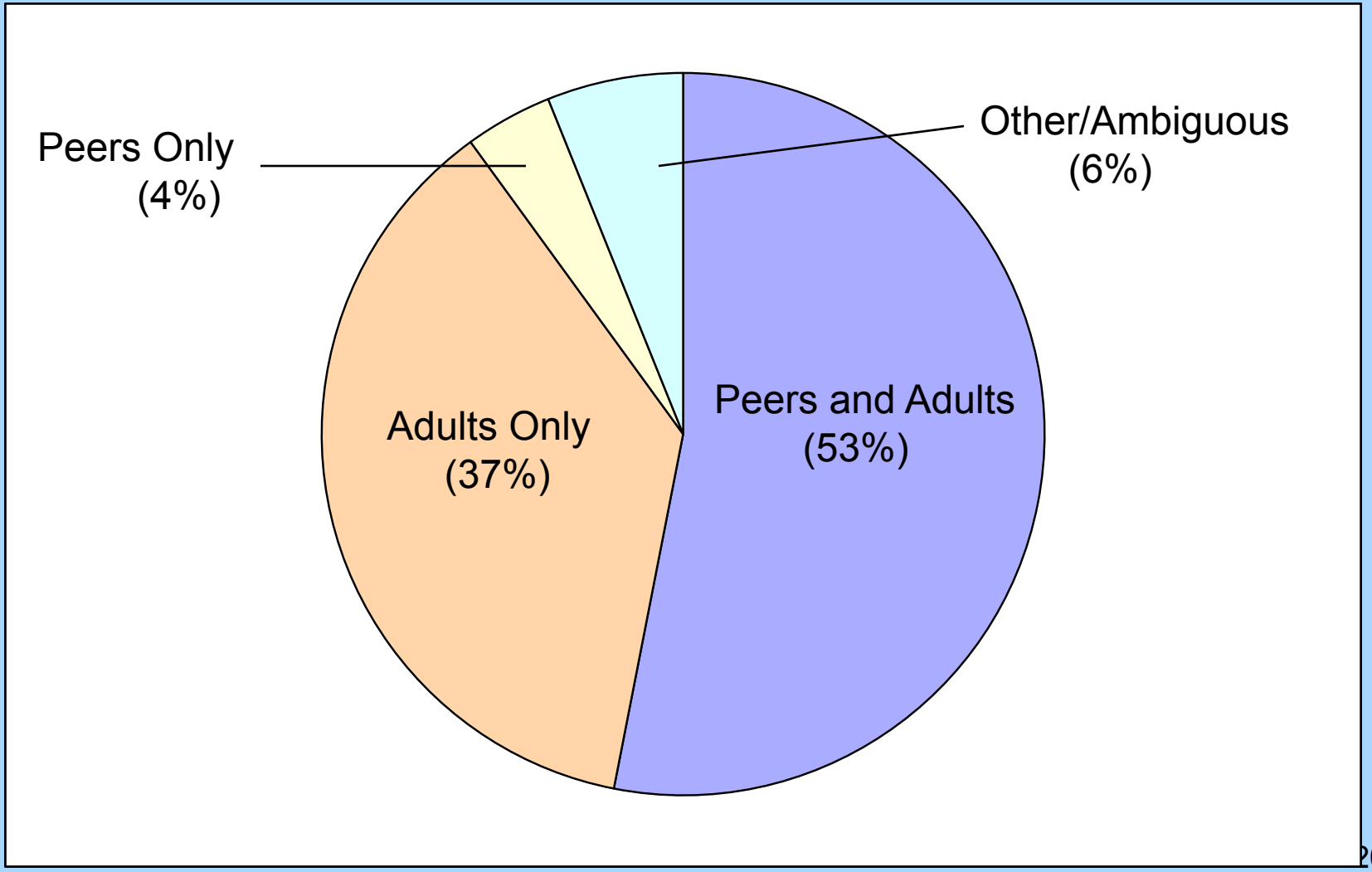
# Implementation

- Wave 1: 1 week - Fall semester (2001-2002)
- Wave 2: 1 week - Spring semester
- Signals:
  - 3:30pm - 8:30pm (weekdays)
  - 10:00am - 8:30pm (weekends)
- Stipend: $1.00 for each logbook entry completed
- Response: 33/35 signals (94%)

# Figure 1: Program Activities and Frequencies



# Figure 2: Social Partners in Programs with Frequencies

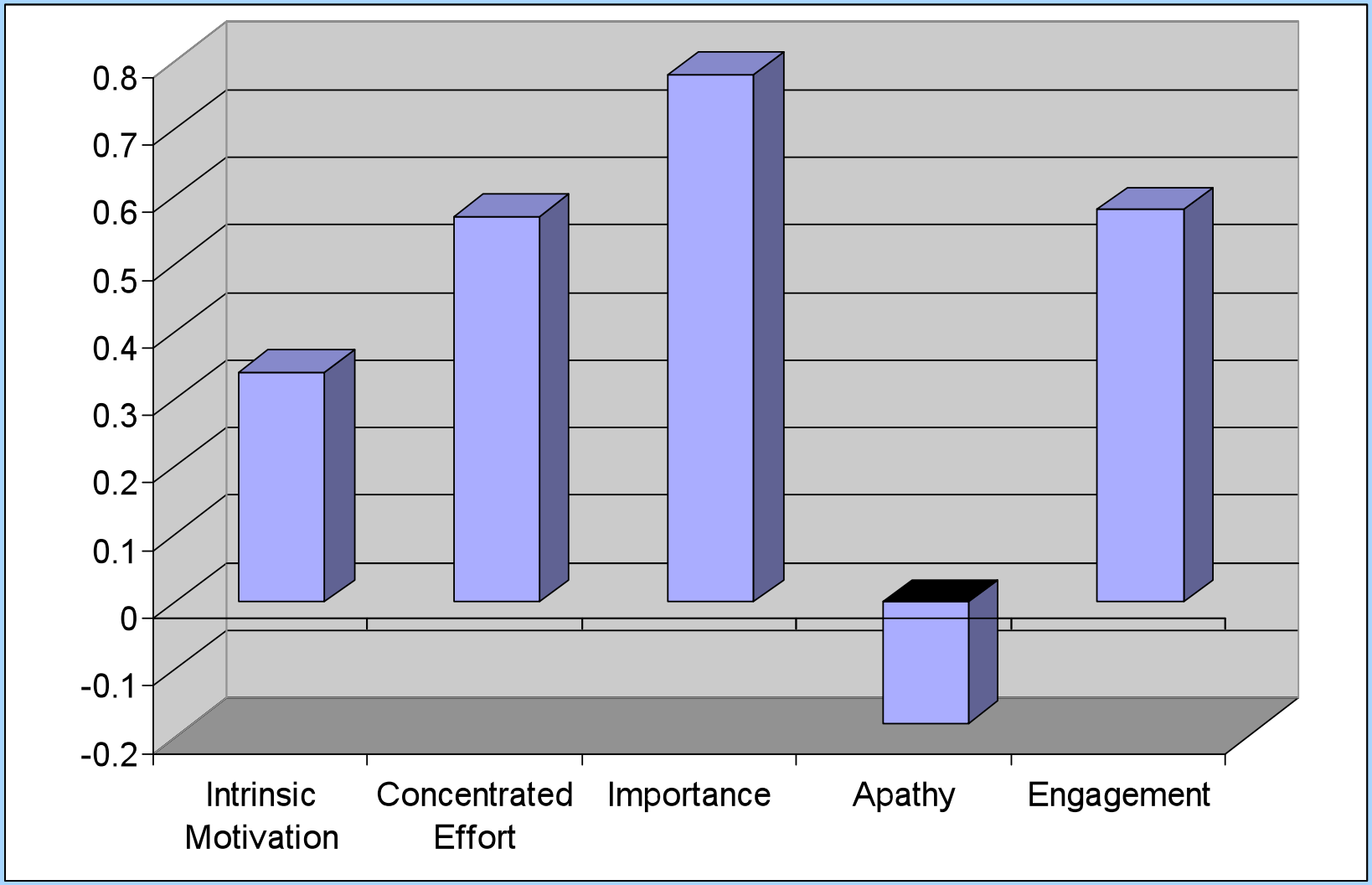


## Table 1: Factor Analysis and Composite Creation

*Factors with eigenvalues over one:*

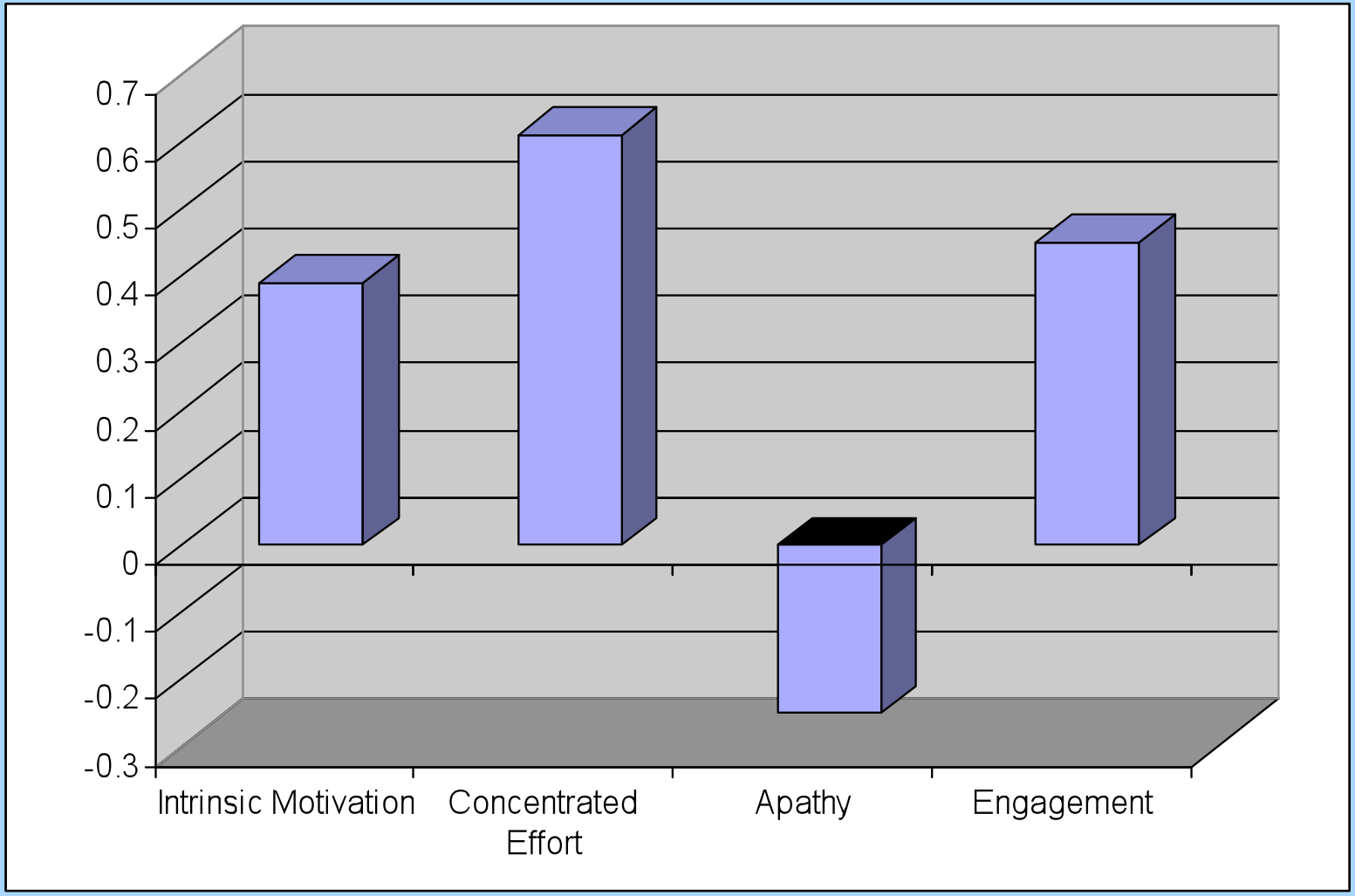
- **Concentrated Effort:** *challenge* (l= .92), *skills* (l = .91), and *concentration* (l = .91). $\alpha$ = .88.
- **Intrinsic Motivation:** *enjoyment* (l2 = .81), *wish* (reversed, l = .78), *choice* (l = .74), and *interest* (l = .61). $\alpha$ = .74
- **Positive Affect:** *proud* (l = .82), *excited* (l = .80), *happy* (l = .72), and *relaxed* (l = .68). $\alpha$ = .75.
- **Negative Affect:** *scared* (l = .80), *worried* (l = .79), *sad* (l = . 73), *angry* (l = .59), and stressed (l = .50). $\alpha$ = .76.
- **Apathy:** *bored* (l = .85) and *lonely* (l = .61). $\alpha$ = .43.
- **Engagement:** *concentration*, *interest*, and *enjoyment. ($\alpha$ = . 77).* (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, & Schneider, 2003).

# Figure 3: Activity Effects for Sports



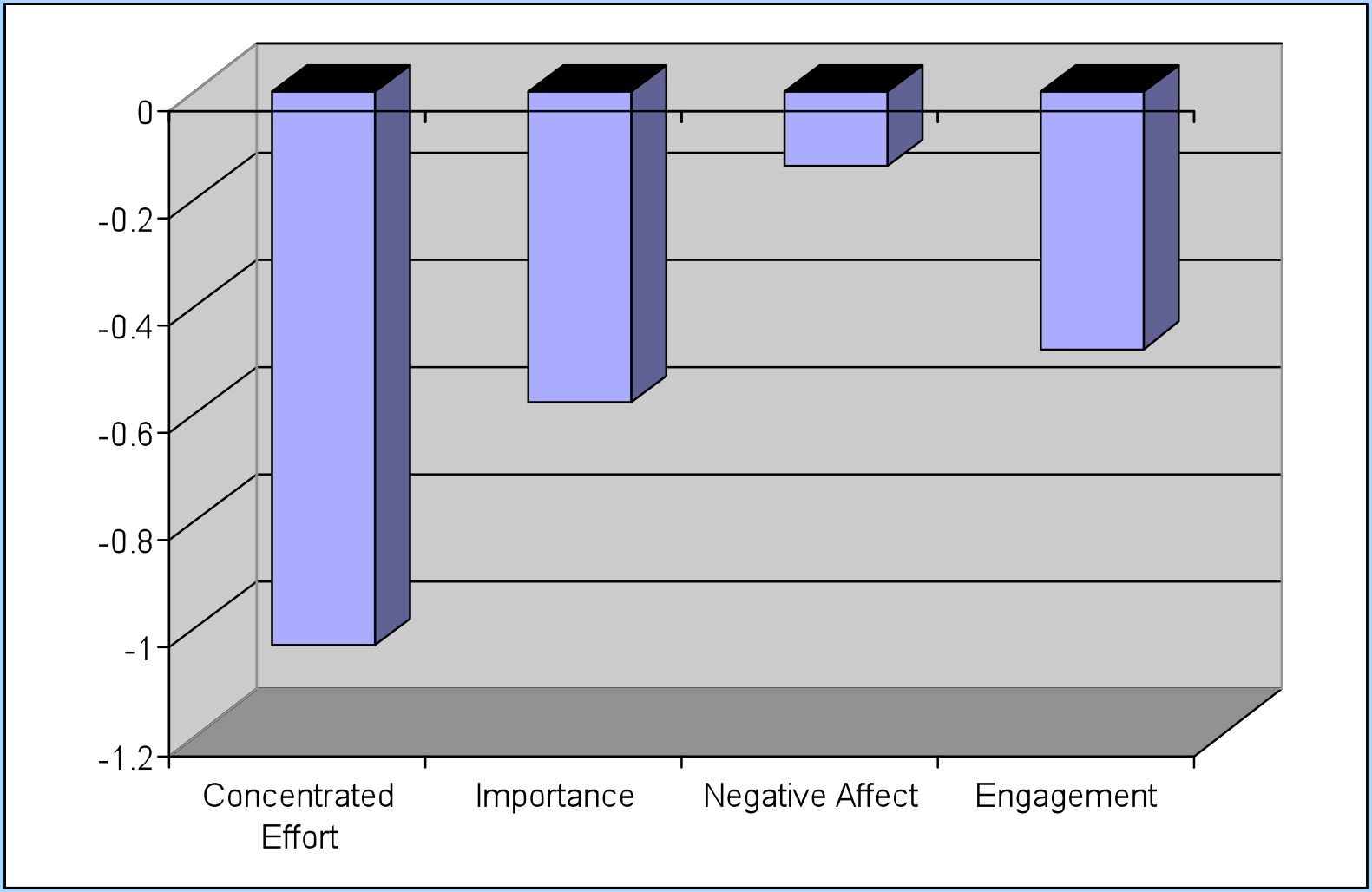

($p < .001$, *ES* = 0.53) ($p < .001$, *ES* = 0.80) ($p < .001$, *ES* = 0.96) ($p < .05$, *ES* = -0.39) ($p < .001$, *ES* = 0.82)

# Figure 4: Activity Effects for Arts Enrichment



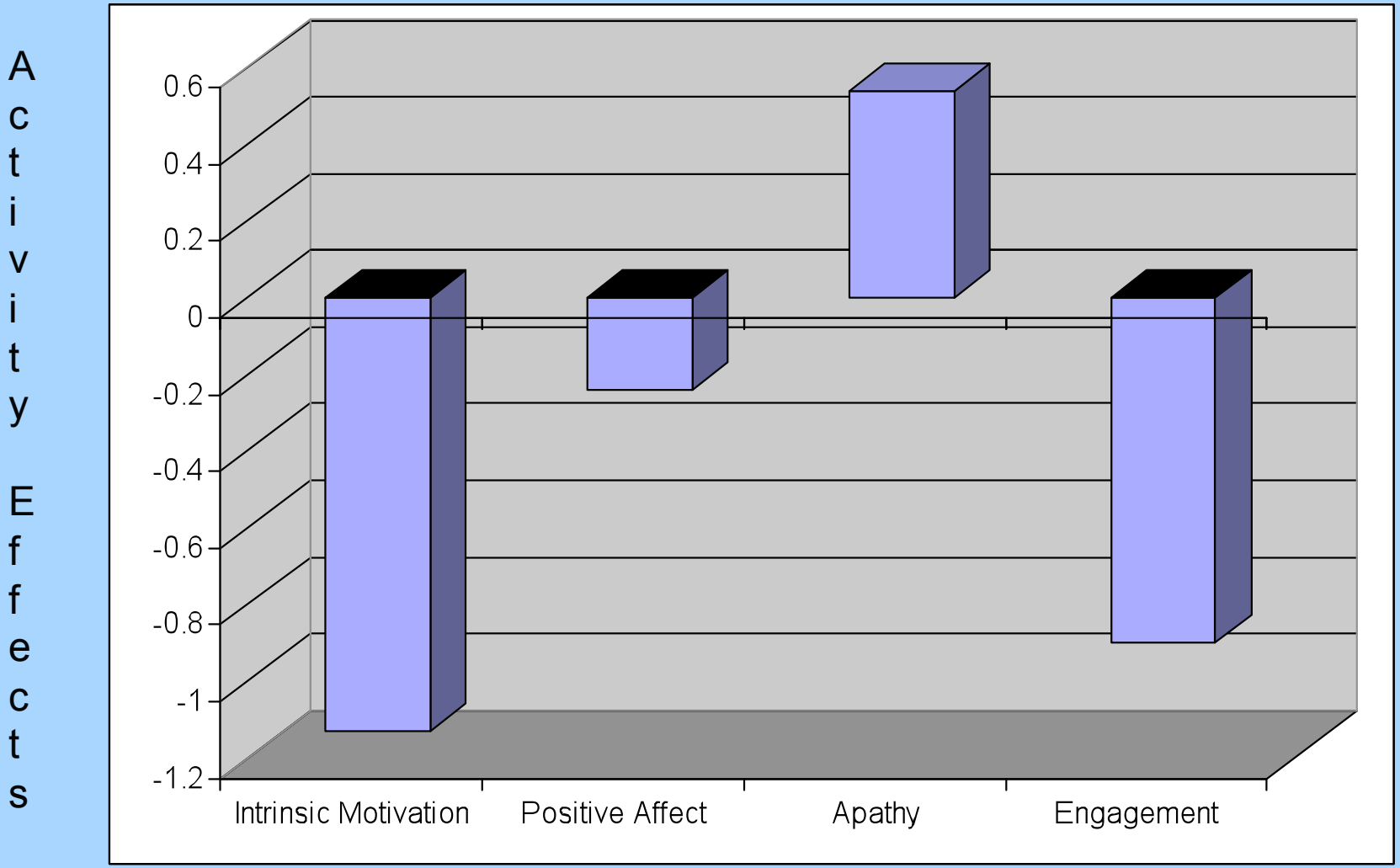

($p < .01$, $ES = 0.61$) ($p < .01$, $ES = 0.72$) ($p < .05$, $ES = -0.39$) ($p < .01$, $ES = 0.63$)

# Figure 5: Activity Effects for Socializing



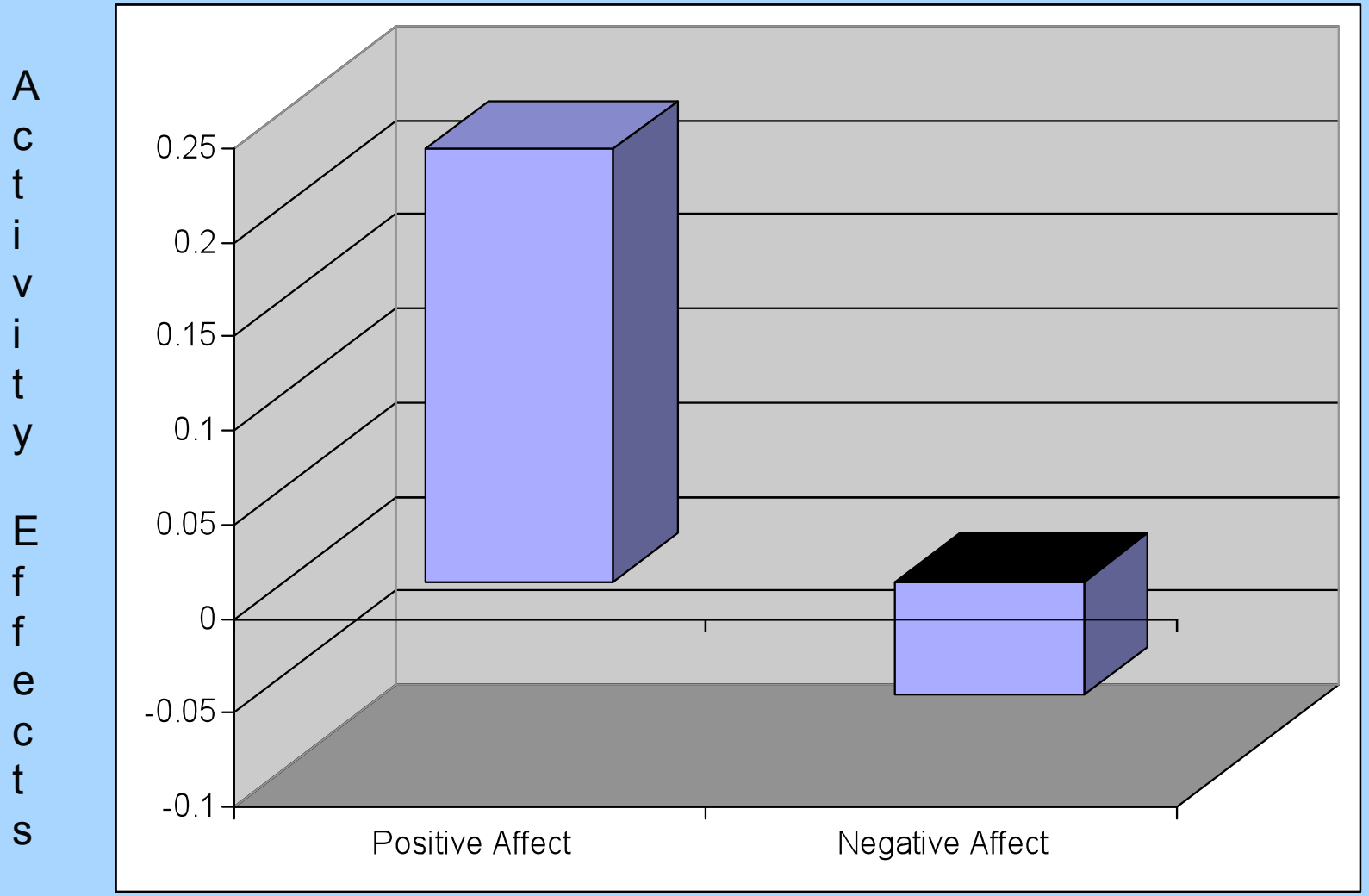

($p < .001$, $ES = -1.24$) ($p < .001$, $ES = -0.70$) ($p < .05$, $ES = -0.42$) ($p < .001$, $ES = -0.67$)

# Figure 6: Activity Effects for Homework




($p < .001$, $ES = -1.82$) ($p < .01$, $ES = -1.03$) ($p < .001$, $ES = 1.17$) ($p < .001$, $ES = -1.27$)

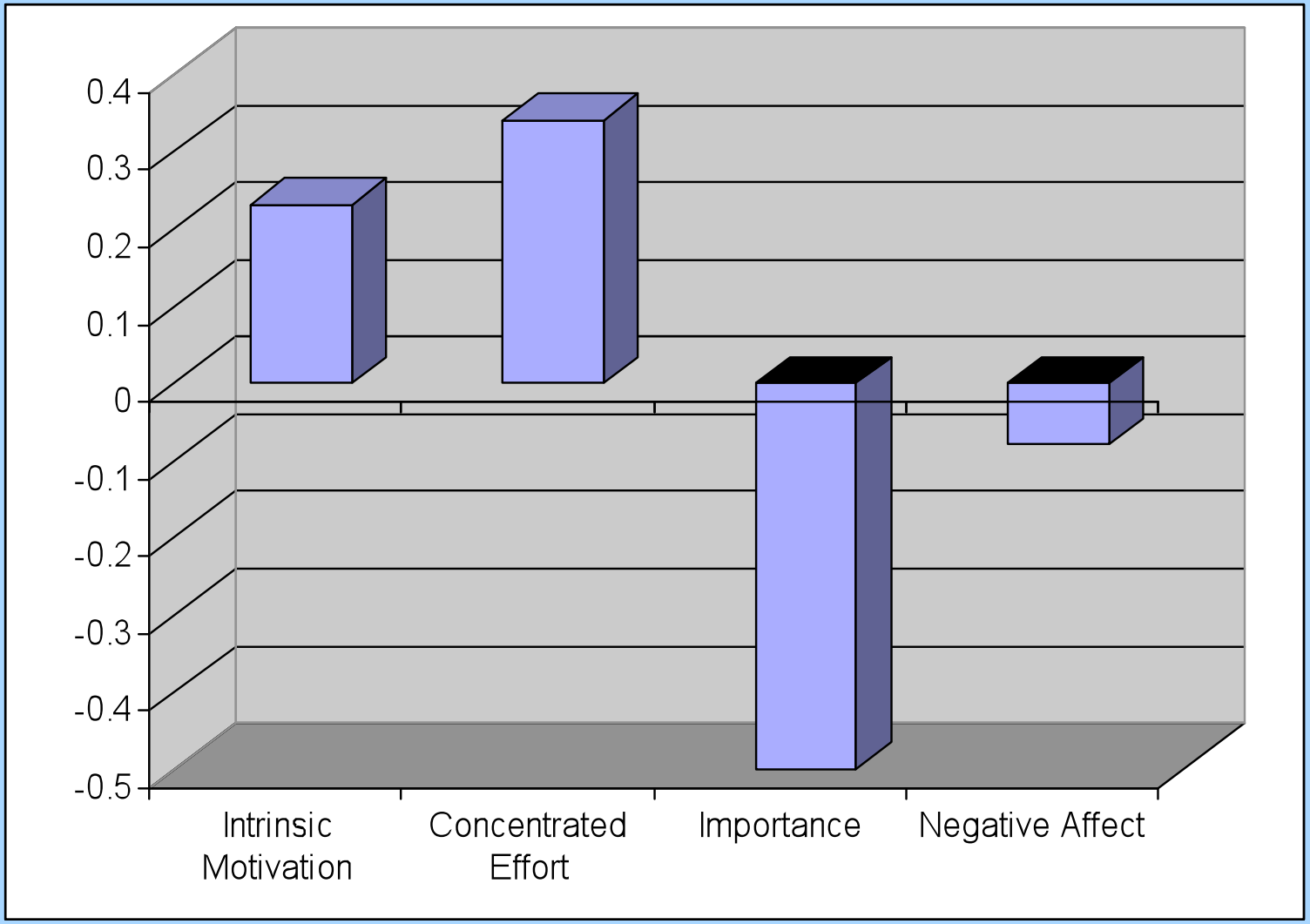
# Figure 7: Activity Effects for Academic Enrichment




($p < .05$, $ES = 0.38$)

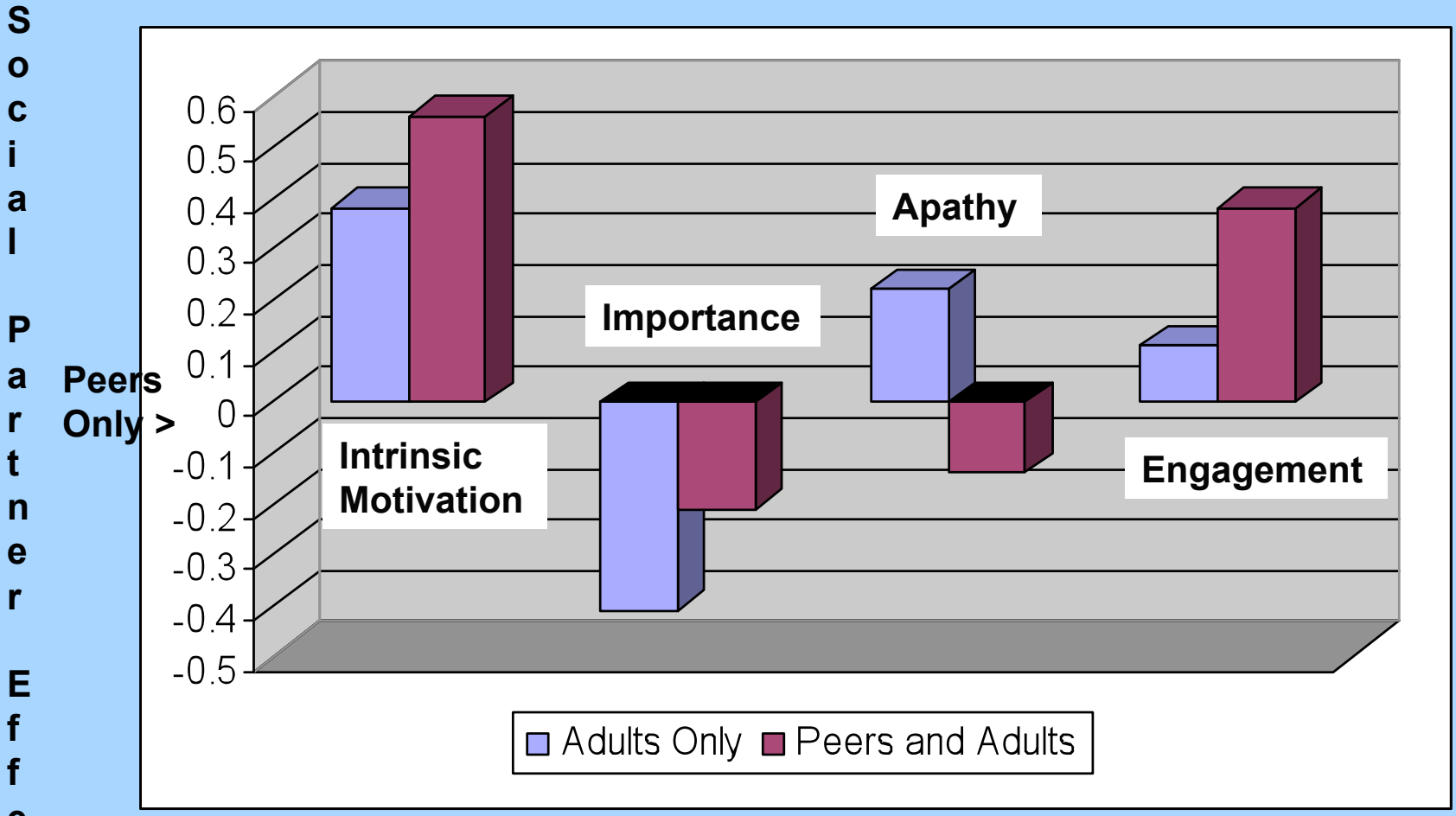
($p < .05$, $ES = -0.18$)

# Figure 8: Activity Effects for Sit-Down Games




($p < .05$, $ES = 0.48$) ($p < .01$, $ES = 0.20$) ($p < .05$, $ES = -0.60$) ($p < .05$, $ES = -0.42$)

# Figure 9: Social Partner Effects

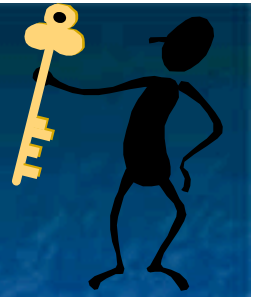



| Intrinsic Motivation | Importance | Apathy | Engagement |
|---|---|---|---|
| Adults Only<br>$p < .01$, $ES = 0.38$<br>Peers and Adults<br>P < .001, ES =0.58 | Adults Only<br>$p < .01$, $ES = -0.49$<br>Peers and Adults<br>*NS, ES* = -.25 | Adults Only<br>$p < .05$, $ES = 0.49$)<br>Peers and Adults<br>*NS, ES* = -.31 | Adults Only<br>*NS*, *ES* = 0.15)<br>Peers and Adults<br>$p < .01$, $ES = .53$ |

# Discussion

- Results suggest that after-school programs can be unique environments in which adult supervision and peer interaction are offered simultaneously, a combination likely to result in peak engagement and intrinsic motivation

# Implications for Practice



- The positive experience of youth while playing sports and during arts enrichment activities both in terms of intrinsic motivation and concentrated effort suggests additional justification to maintain or increase resources for programs in the sports and the arts
- Programs would seem to maximize students experience by reducing idle time for socializing and maximizing structured, adult-supervised activities
- With respect to homework the issue of practice appears to be one of emphasis. Emphasizing homework to the exclusion of other activities would likely result in a more negative experience for participants overall, resulting in reduced voluntary attendance.
- The experience of participants may be improved by:
  - considering academic alternatives to homework or
  - by structuring homework time to be similar to the format of academic enrichment activities

# Limitations

- Small and not nationally representative sample size
- Self-report data
- Results are primarily correlational, making inferences about causal relationships only speculative
- While this study focused on specific activities within programs, it did not specifically address outcomes associated with participation in those activities (i.e. influence on academic achievement)
- Future research is needed to identify specific characteristics and outcomes associated with various activities in after-school programs, and how those outcomes vary by program type

# Policy Implications

- Valued outcomes of sports, arts, and other enrichment activities are:
  - Appreciation
  - Joy
  - Interest
  - Deep concentration
  - Overall engagement
- These positive experiences enrich the lives of youth but are not easily measured. Once engagement is quantified and measured in specific activities, engaging activities deserve justification based on intrinsic and experiential grounds.

# Questions - Comments