

Why Do Some Participate and Some Don't?

Student participation in extracurricular activities is associated with a host of positive outcomes that include increased academic achievement and a reduced likelihood of dropping out of high school. Given the positive benefits garnered via participation, one question that should be addressed is exactly who participates in these activities and reaps the benefits of participation? (McNeal, 1998)

Introduction

Numerous studies have measured the outcome of extracurricular activities on the social and academic well-being of students. However, fewer studies have measured why some students participate and why some students don't participate. This brief defines participation, describes the advantages and disadvantages of participation in extracurricular activities, details the factors that encourage or discourage a student from participating (known here as incentives and disincentives), and discusses the impact that these findings have on schools.

Methodology

The Center for Policy Studies, Educational Research, and Community Development conducted a literature and web search guided by the following questions:

1. What are the benefits to participation in extracurricular activities?

2. Who participates in extracurricular activities?
3. What encourages some to be more actively involved in extracurricular activities?
4. What discourages some from being involved in extracurricular activities?
5. What can a school do to better suit the needs of its students in support of extracurricular participation?

Findings

What Is Participation? Operational Definition

Eccles and Barber (2001) divide participation into five types of activities: prosocial (church and volunteer activities), team sports, school involvement, performing arts, and academic clubs. Because time is limited for students (and teachers), one activity will ultimately win out over another. Eccles and Barber (2001) include prosocial activities because, often times, schools may not measure the extracurricular activities of a student who engages in church or volunteer activity (Jones, & Hill, 2003). It is critical for a school measuring involvement in activity to recognize prosocial activities. This is especially important in regions that have high levels of religious participation.

Advantages to Participation

The abundance of studies shows a correlational relationship with the following benefits to participation in extracurricular activities. The benefits can be summarized into two levels where extracurricular activities are beneficial: the micro or student level, and the macro or school level.

Micro Level

- Higher educational aspirations and expectations of students (Yarworth & Gauthier, 1978)
- Higher levels of academic achievement (Camp, 1990)
- Higher levels of educational attainment (Yarworth & Gauthier, 1978)
- Higher levels of self-esteem (McNeal, 1995)
- Lower likelihood of dropping out of high school (McNeal, 1995)

Macro Level

- The extracurriculum plays a key role in defining the culture of the school (Morgan & Alwin, 1980).
- These groups form a salient aspect of the student's social world and the schools internal structure. This contributes to the personal development and identity formation (Kinney, 1993).

Disadvantages to Participation

- Participation in too many extracurricular activities has a negative effect on academic achievement (Gilman, Meyers, & Perez, 2004)

Incentives to Participation in Extracurricular Activities

- Parental involvement
- Perception by the student that their parents are actively involved in the

activities as well as the student (this could be the result of the socioeconomic status of parents as well; higher income students are more involved than the inverse) (Anderson, Funk, Elliott, & Smith, 2003)

- Student participation in the activity during middle school (carryover effect) (McNeal 1998)
- Availability of the activity in the school

Disincentives to Participation in Extracurricular Activities

The most significant factor leading to the decision of a student to participate in an extracurricular activity is access. Many of the disincentives are therefore the result of access.

- *Stratification of activities based on access.* Activities are open or closed based on academic achievement (no pass-no play); socioeconomic status (pay to play, uniforms, instruments, etc.)
- *Pro-activity by teachers.* Teacher may restrict access to activities for various reasons (significant factor)
- *Lack of participation in the activity as a middle school student.* This could be related to collusion between middle school and high school coaching staffs or teacher collusion for academic clubs (significant deterrent to access) (McNeal, 1998).
- *Unmeasured activity.* Prosocial (service-oriented activity) and church activity is often not measured but should be considered a source of activity especially in a region of high religious activity. (Eccles & Barber, 1999)

Data Detailing Participation Rates

The tables below detail selected data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988.

Table 1
Participation Rates for Each Activity
Type by Socioeconomic Status

Extracurricular Activity	Socioeconomic Status	
	Low	High
Athletics	55.6	65.7
Cheerleading	9.2	9.4
Fine Arts	27.6	32.3
Academics	35.8	42.2
Newspaper/Yearbook	9.5	14.1
Student Government	18.7	27.7
Vocational Activities	10.8	7.1

Source: National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (McNeal, 1998)

Table 2
Participation Rates for Each Activity
Type by Grade Point Average

Extracurricular Activity	Grade Point Average	
	Low	High
Athletics	55.5	62.4
Cheerleading	9.0	10.8
Fine Arts	27.5	33.1
Academics	34.8	48.9
Newspaper/Yearbook	9.7	13.4
Student Government	18.1	29.0
Vocational Activities	11.4	10.7

Source: National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (McNeal, 1998)

Discussion of Findings

Research findings identify an interesting relationship between access to extracurricular activities and participation. Access can be defined as, availability of the activity, willingness of the teacher, staff and/or coach to include a range of students, socioeconomic status of the student, involvement of the parents (or perceived support of the parents by the student), and community support.

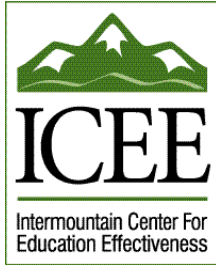
In particular, McNeal (1998) found that students who participated in an activity in middle school were far more likely to continue to participate in that same activity in high school. He also found that teachers were significantly more proactive than previously suspected in restricting access to extracurricular activities.

This phenomenon is specifically recognized in athletics, cheerleading, and fine arts (McNeal, 1998). These structures are relatively closed and don't offer students the opportunity to participate later in their education. The result of students perceiving this type of inequitable treatment can be damaging. Gilman and colleagues (2004) argue that positive (or negative) "adult-constructed goals and internalized values" (p. 31) are significant factors in enhancing resilience and identity. Students who are restricted from participating never "identify with the school" (Finn & Rock, 1989, p. 225). This is especially important for at-risk youth who are generally the population being excluded or marginalized (McNeal, 1998); whereas those students who identify with their school are significantly less likely to drop out (Gilman et al., 2004; McNeal, 1995).

McNeal (1998) argues that schools continue to reinforce the existing social stratification patterns existent in society by employing them in the schools. As schools restrict access to students, the "system will likely further exacerbate the relative disadvantage already experienced by students of lower socioeconomic standing" (McNeal, 1998, p. 196). He more specifically condemns (while acknowledging budget constraints) the pay-to-play system that excludes this key at-risk demographic.

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Idaho State University
College of Education
Intermountain Center for Education
Effectiveness
Dr. Charles Zimmerly
Interim Director

Charles R. Zimmerly, MPA, Ed.D.
*Interim Director, Intermountain Center for
Education Effectiveness
College of Education
Idaho State University*

Spencer Gilbert
Graduate Assistant
*Center for Policy Studies, Education
Research, and Community Development
College of Education
Idaho State University*

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Intermountain Center for Education
Effectiveness
College of Education
Idaho State University
Campus Box 8019
Pocatello, Idaho 83209

Phone: (208) 282-3202
Fax: (208) 282-2244

Website: <http://icee.isu.edu>