

in the pool, on the stage, and at the concert

extracurricular activities for all

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In many schools, extra-curricular activities serve to separate and sort students. Participation in extra-curricular activities is seen as the right or privilege of high achieving students, as a ticket to a better college, and as a way of preparing some for participation in future competitive activities. Thus, being on the football team is seen as a way of training a few excellent athletes who may go on to play college football; being in the school play or chorus is a way of providing high level theatrical and musical experiences for students who excel in that area who then might pursue these activities at the community level.

Educators might exclude some students from extracurricular activities because of an inability to conceptualize multi-level instruction which allows for a wide range of participation options. If one conceives as the orchestra as being only for students who can read music and play an instrument, then it becomes difficult to think about the ways in which a non-musician could participate in that group. If being on the basketball team is only for those whose skills are competitive in dribbling and shooting, then it becomes difficult to imagine the participation of a child who is blind or has a physical disability.

Learners themselves may also opt out of the available activities. Some students do not see themselves as represented in their school's offerings. Perhaps they perceive (and are correct) that participation in the jazz band requires the "right clothes" or membership in particular socio-economic or ethnic groups. The catalog of options may not reflect their own communities or represent valued activities within their own family or culture.

Finally, some students literally don't know what is available or do not know how to access what is offered. If you can't read the sign that says "Lacrosse Try Outs After School Today" or don't know what it means to "try out" for something, is unlikely you will appear at the gym at 3:00.

visions of inclusive extra-curricular activities

In responding to the above barriers, we articulate here a vision of what inclusive extracurricular activities could be like:



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1 understand that all students can learn something from participating in extracurricular activities

Students who cannot physically engage in the game of basketball can still serve as a team manager, statistician, game photographer, motivational coach, or free-throw expert. Any student participating as part of such a team will undoubtedly learn about scoring, rules, teamwork and how groups work together to achieve a common goal. Likewise, one need not be able to follow every choreographed step to benefit from the dance club, nor does one need to excel in physics, chemistry, or biology to appreciate the creativity, problem-solving, and interaction that takes place at the science fair.

2 value participation

Schools are educational institutions. They exist to support the growth, development, and learning of all students. Why then are so many extra-curricular groups focused on competition and winning? Most schools make “cuts” when forming their sports teams, drama productions, music groups, and, even their academic groups. How does this type of policy further the educational experience of any student? It does not and cannot- especially since these types of judgments about students are incredibly subjective and, sometimes, even biased by teachers’ impressions of students families, academic abilities, and behavior.

In addition to counting the number of trophies in the glass cases, touting the number of all-conference musicians the school has cultivated, and advertising the number of years the school has been invited to the mathematics decathlon, educators might also congratulate themselves on how many students are joining and participating in school-sponsored activities. They might boast about the number of students who joined a club for the first time or collect data on how many hours the average student spends at school after the final bell rings.

3 understand participation in extra-curricular activities as a right

One way to scare students away from school (and, therefore, from academic learning) is to take away activities they love and eliminate work they enjoy. When schools treat extra-curricular activities as a privilege and take them away from the students who struggle the most, they are wasting a powerful educational tool. Since participation in extra-curricular activities may actually increase the attendance of struggling students and boost their performance in the classroom, we need to do everything possible to keep students engaged in them.

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A teacher we know once taught a frustrated math student about arc and angles during games of 1-on-1 basketball. The student slowly started to make the connection from basketball to geometry during these sessions. This kind of creativity can be a catalyst for designing more appropriate classroom supports for learners. That is, if we can examine contexts in which students are successful (when playing music, during athletic contests), perhaps we can bring these experiences into weekly lessons while continuing to enhance skills and knowledge through extra-curricular experiences.

4 expand extra-curricular options

If a student cannot find an extra-curricular home in his or her school, he or she is left to find social opportunities elsewhere. Some students may be successful in finding after-school activities that are interesting and safe. Other students may be unsuccessful in finding appropriate alternatives. Some of the students at Webb Middle School in Austin, Texas, for example, were in gangs. The principal decided to create more extra-curricular options in her school in the hopes of drawing these students into the school and getting them interested in something meaningful (Juarez, 1996). Since many gang members struggle with issues of identity (Vigil, 1988), Juarez formed groups, in part, to provide students with opportunities to develop self-awareness through school-sanctioned memberships. The school began to offer a wide range of extra-curricular opportunities. Students who might have previously struggled to find an extra-curricular match could now choose from over 50 clubs and activities. Titles of these groups included walking, Tejano dance, ultimate frisbee, Pen Pal, ham radio, and Macintosh (Juarez, 1996). School leaders were thrilled not only with the numbers of students who ended up participating, but also with the kinds of learning and excitement that resulted from the new offerings.

Similarly, a student with autism had a difficult time with all of the competitive sports offerings at his school so his principal encouraged him to launch a comic book drawing and discussion group. This group was a perfect fit for the learner with autism but it also attracted several art students and a host of comic book fanatics.

conclusions:

With commitment and imagination, extra-curricular activities can be conceptualized and implemented in ways that allow all students active participation. This becomes critical not only because of the benefits of participation to students during their school years but beyond as well. It is through participation in school extra-curricular activities that many people learn who they are and what they enjoy and develop identities which they build on after they leave school. The student who participates in music activities in school may be more likely to join the community choir and students who enjoyed physical activities in high school will probably feel more comfortable engaging in such activities as adults. Being a full member of one's school community is an important precursor to being a full member of the greater community and society. In other words, inclusion now inspires inclusion later and this alone is an important reason to involve all students "in the pool, on the stage and at the concert".

references:

- Juarez, T. (1996). Where homeboys feel at home in school. *Educational Leadership*, 53, 30-32.
- Vigil, J.D. (1988). *Barrio identity: Street gangs and identity in southern California*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.