

Structured extracurricular activities among adolescents: Findings and implications for school psychologists

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Psychology in the Schools

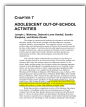
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STRUCTURED EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES AMONG ADOLESCENTS: FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

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One factor that contributes to adolescent positive mental health is active engagement. Engagement is defined as any activity that is initiated to attain an outcome. In general, two forms of activities exist that correspond with engagement: solitary, non-structured, and non-cooperative pursuits, often without adult supervision (e.g., playing video games, watching television) and highly structured, collaborative activities that are under the guidance of a competent set of adults (i.e., structured extracurricular activities, or SEAs). Although large amounts of time spent in unstructured activities is related to negative psychosocial outcomes, participation in SEAs has been related to a variety of positive outcomes for students. This paper reviews current research regarding adolescent participation in SEAs and its effects on academic and personal-social variables (i.e., self-concept, life satisfaction), as well as potential preventive effects for youths considered to be "at-risk" for negative developmental outcomes. The paper also examines research investigating the potential benefits and shortcomings of different types of SEAs. Finally, suggestions for future research and school-based preventive intervention are presented. © 2004 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

A growing number of children and youth are becoming involved in antisocial behavior (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2002). The disruptive effects of these behaviors not only result in negative consequences for such youth that include teacher and peer rejection, school failure and dropout, delinquency, and involvement with drugs and alcohol (Forness, 1992; Parker & Asher, 1987; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992), but also threaten the schooling process for all students. Preventive strategies are needed to help overcome these problems (Meyers & Nastasi, 1999). Structured extracurricular activities (SEAs) represent one such strategy that potentially builds resilience in adolescents by supporting pro-social behaviors, engagement with school and related activities, constructive academic performance, and growth in subjective well-being (Compas, 1993; Larson, 2000; Mahoney, 2000). This paper will selectively review recent research on SEAs and will develop recommendations for prevention efforts in this area by school practitioners.

Rationale for Examining Structured Extracurricular Activities

A sense of belongingness and positive future outlook can lead to constructive outcomes for adolescents (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Michaelson & Nakamura, 2001). In this regard, active engagement in school and community activities may foster belongingness and is fundamental to students' academic motivation and achievement (Miserandino, 1996; Ryan, 2000), as well as their emotional well-being (Eccles, Lord, & Roeser, 1996). Conversely, adolescents who remain disengaged from school and community activities are at risk for a variety of negative outcomes including school dropout (Finn, 1989; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997), antisocial behavior (Mahoney, 2000; Zill, Nord, & Loomis, 1995) and self-destructive behaviors such as suicide attempts (Mazza & Eggert, 2001) and illicit substance use (e.g., Borden, Donnermeyer, & Scheer, 2001).

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Engagement can encompass activities that range from solitary, non-structured and non-cooperative pursuits without adult supervision (e.g., playing videogames, watching television) to highly structured, collaborative activities that are under the guidance of a competent set of adults (e.g., participation in a school sponsored activities such as athletics or performing arts; Kleiber, Larson, & Csikszentmihalyi, 1986; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000). Substantial free time is available to youths, with discretionary activities accounting for approximately 40–50% of their total waking hours (e.g., Larson & Richards, 1994; Larson & Verma, 1999). Of this discretionary time, the majority is spent on nonproductive pursuits such as idle television watching or playing videogames (Chadwick & Heaton, 1996; Larson & Verma, 1999). While such activities, alone, are typically not a concern, they may become problematic when they consume too much time. For example, there is a modest negative relationship between excessive television watching (three to four hours per day, Chadwick & Heaton, 1996) without parent supervision and academic outcomes (e.g., Cooper et al., 1999; Shann, 2001). Further, unstructured, unsupervised time spent “hanging out,” particularly with deviant peers, is related to higher rates of antisocial conduct (Eggert & Harting, 1993; Zill et al., 1995). In general, more time spent in unstructured, unsupervised activities corresponds with less than optimal academic and behavioral outcomes.

In contrast to unstructured activities, SEAs are highly structured activities that emphasize skill building, in which the skill attained increases in complexity under the guidance of competent non-parental adults (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000). Such activities usually involve youth with a wide competency range for that skill. Further, SEAs are voluntary in order to facilitate and maintain investment and intrinsic enjoyment in the activity over time (Larson, 2000). These particular factors embedded within SEAs (i.e., competent supervision from non-parent adults, development and progressive advancement of skills, positive interaction with peers), are considered to be the primary contributors to active student engagement (Larson, 2000).

Research on Structured Extracurricular Activities

A decade and a half ago, Holland and Andre (1987) reviewed the SEA literature and found that SEA participation promoted personal-social development (e.g., self-concept) and academic achievement. However, there were methodological limitations to that body of research (i.e., lack of conceptual frameworks, lack of longitudinal studies, failure to control for self-selection biases, lack of adequate/representative samples; Brown, 1988; Marsh, 1992). A number of studies in the past decade have addressed these limitations and a review of this research (post Holland & Andre, 1987) is needed.

In this paper, SEA participation will be described in the context of ecological systems theory and will emphasize the following domains: supportive social networks, interaction with competent non-parental adults, promotion of individual strengths and school identity. These domains were selected given their conceptual relevance to ecological systems theory and their predominant attention in the recent literature. It should be noted that other domains just beginning to emerge in the SEA literature (e.g., family environment, future educational and career aspirations) may also be salient to ecological systems theory. Although these domains will not be covered in the current review, readers are referred to Singh (1998), Warren (2002), and Fletcher, Elder, and Mekos (2000). Following a brief overview of the four selected domains from ecological systems theory, there will be a discussion of the benefits of SEA participation on academic (i.e., GPA) and intra-personal variables (i.e., self-concept and life satisfaction), and an analysis of the potential benefits and weaknesses of different types of SEA. Suggestions for future research and school-based mental health prevention will conclude the paper.

Ecological Systems Theory and Structured Extracurricular Activities

Ecological systems theory proposes that human development occurs via a reciprocal interaction between the individual and persons, objects, and symbols in the immediate and distal environment that occur over an extended timeframe, resulting in competence or dysfunction (Barber & Erickson, 2001; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). As a result, ecological systems theory is pertinent to SEAs, where such involvement provides opportunities for group collaboration, support from relevant adults, group identification, and development of interpersonal skills (Cooley et al., 1995).

SEAs and supportive social networks. Social networks not only structure what adolescents do with their time but also influence personal values (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Kinney, 1993; Larson & Verma, 1999). Peer-established norms facilitate a sense of belongingness and self-identify, which leads to members experimenting with various social roles that are associated with the peer group (Kinney, 1993; Youniss, McLellan, & Mazer, 2001). Negative outcomes can occur when an adolescent is not part of a social network or he or she belongs to a social network that is involved in delinquent activities. For example, adolescents at high risk of suicide and school dropout are unlikely to be affiliated with any social network (Mazza and Eggert, 2001), and adolescents involved with delinquent social networks are likely to experience incarceration, substance abuse and school dropout (Kiesner et al., 2002; Mahoney, 2000; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000). Positively structured extracurricular activities, on the other hand, can introduce adolescents into productive social networks that are likely to reflect school- and society-based values (Holland & Andre, 1987; Davalos et al., 1999). As will be discussed later, SEA participation may be especially meaningful for teens placed at risk for negative outcomes because it has the potential to alter the dynamics of their social networks (see Mahoney, 2000).

Interaction with competent adults. Resilience and identity can be enhanced through interactions with competent non-parent adult figures (Meyers & Nastasi, 1999; Wentzel, 1998) who can instill knowledge and skills, provide opportunities to challenge youth, and serve as role models (Hirsch, Mikus, & Boerger, 2002). When these interactions are ongoing and perceived positively, adult-constructed goals and values can be internalized (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Roeser et al., 1996). In this regard, SEAs provide opportunities to work with competent adult figures to achieve goals, develop and improve skills, and/or enhance social opportunities.

Establishing a school identity. As Finn (1989) noted, “. . . students who identify with schools have an internalized sense of belongingness—they are discernably part of the school environment and . . . the school constitutes an important part of their own experience” (p. 123). Participation in SEAs therefore can help develop a sense of meaning based on identification with the school and community (Gerber, 1996; Marsh, 1992). This can be important among students who are at-risk for dropping out of school, since these students are unlikely to identify with their school or the values and norms that it fosters (see Davalos et al., 1999; Srebnik & Elias, 1993).

Promotion of individual strengths. In addition to the social benefits, SEA participation provides an opportunity for teens to develop and enhance personal strengths (Camp, 1990; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997). Students generally choose activities of intrinsic interest that fit their personal proclivities (McNeal, 1998). Thus, SEA participation provides a venue to express personal talents and master challenging skills that are consistent with the larger school value system (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1990; Finn, 1989; Maton, 1990).

THE BENEFITS OF SEA PARTICIPATION

A number of studies investigating the relationship of SEAs and various academic and personal variables have been conducted since Holland and Andre's (1987) review of the SEA litera-

ture. An analysis of these recent findings follows, with specific attention to the benefits of SEA participation on school-related variables, personal-social variables and prevention of school dropout, as well as the potential benefits and limitations of different types of SEA. Since the majority of research has focused on school-sponsored activities, this area is the focus of this review.

SEAs and School-Related Variables

Much recent research has investigated the relationship of SEAs with academic variables (e.g., grade-point average [GPA]). One correlational study using a large ($N = 4,422$), nationally representative sample reported that students involved in greater numbers of SEAs were enrolled in more advanced courses and reported higher GPAs (Marsh, 1992). In another study, SEA participation accounted for an additional 11% of the variance in GPA above that predicted by background information (e.g., age, race, socioeconomic status) (Cooper et al., 1999). In both of these studies the effect of SEA participation was nonlinear, with involvement in too many activities becoming counterproductive for academic success, perhaps because high numbers of SEAs can detract from time allocated to school-related tasks (such as homework) (Cooper et al., 1999). School-sponsored activities also appear to provide relatively higher positive effects on academic achievement than community-school sponsored activities (Gerber, 1996). Nevertheless, significant (albeit lower) correlations were found for activities in this latter group, suggesting that non-school sponsored SEAs (e.g., hobby clubs, boy scouts) may also facilitate positive school outcomes (Gerber, 1996; Mahoney, 2000).

In addition to objective academic indicators, SEA participation may influence teachers' expectations. In a recent analogue study by Van Matre, Valentine, and Cooper (2000), hypothetical information on 24 adolescents was presented to 98 teachers and teacher assistants. The background information of each "student" remained constant while the amount of time spent watching television, working or participating in SEAs varied. Teachers reported that students who participated in SEAs were likely to achieve higher grades than the other students and were most likely to attend college.

Nevertheless, the positive relationship between SEA participation and academic progress is not incontrovertible, as other studies have reported little relationship between SEAs and school-related variables (e.g., Antshel & Anderman, 2000; Lisella & Serwatka, 1996; Melnick, Sabo, & Vanfossen, 1992). Some studies reporting insignificant findings have investigated only athletic activities (Antshel & Anderman, 2000; Melnick, Sabo, & Vanfossen, 1992) and sports participation has been related to some personal/social outcomes (e.g., positive peer relationships; Broh, 2002; Holland & Andre, 1994) while being less influential for academic outcomes (but see Silliker & Quirk, 1997). Further, other studies yielding insignificant findings have included only youths from cultural/racial minority backgrounds (e.g., Lisella & Serwatka, 1996; Melnick et al., 1992), limiting generalizability. These contradictory findings reflect the complexity of the relationship between SEA participation and school outcomes that are likely attributed to mediating variables such as type of SEA (Eccles & Barber, 1998; Eder & Kinney, 1995), school size and school climate (Marsh, 1992; McNeal, 1998) and characteristics of the student body (Burnett, 2000). Continued research is needed to investigate how these factors specifically interact with SEA participation to influence educational outcomes.

SEAs and Personal-Social Variables

Although little research has been conducted in this area, studies have reported significant relationships between SEA participation and constructs such as self-concept (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Yarworth & Gauthier, 1978; Haensley et al., 1986) and life satisfaction (Gilman,

2001; Maton, 1990). One study with a national database of 4,000 high school students found that SEA participation predicted social self-concept and academic self-concept. Further, and similar to findings for school grades, there was a curvilinear relationship between SEAs and academic self-concept, where participating in too many SEAs appears to yield diminishing returns (Marsh, 1992).

Maton (1990) reported that SEA participation predicted life satisfaction among a group of adolescent females who were pregnant and at risk for school dropout. In accord with the school identity hypothesis, Maton's study suggests that adolescents who participate in structured activities view their school experiences in a more positive fashion and this may prevent some students (particularly those at risk for dropping out) from withdrawing emotionally and then withdrawing physically (see Finn, 1989). Further, one recent study reported a positive relationship between SEA participation and school satisfaction, as high school adolescents who participated in greater numbers of SEAs reported more positive school experiences (Gilman, 2001). This finding was obtained even after controlling for social interest, suggesting that SEA participation may benefit school experiences among adolescents, regardless of their level of social commitment.

SEA Participation and Students At-Risk for School Dropout

Ecological systems theory suggests that SEA participation is a positive influence on environmental factors (e.g., peer groups, influential adults, the school environment) that can affect adolescent development. There are a number of adolescents who have poor relationships with adult figures, are socialized with a deviant peer group, and/or are disengaged from the school environment (Dreyfoos, 1990; Larson, 2000). One unfortunate outcome of these negative factors is early school dropout. Considering that school dropout is predicted by the degree to which a student feels connected to the social fabric of the school (Finn, 1989; McNeal, 1995), participation in SEAs may help to prevent dropouts by facilitating students' school identity (Oliver, 1995).

The negative relationship between SEA participation and school dropout supports this assumption. A recent longitudinal study followed 392 seventh graders through their matriculation from high school (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997). Based on direct interviews and an examination of high school yearbooks, the authors reported that school dropouts participated in significantly fewer SEAs than students who graduated from high school. In addition, students who were considered at very high risk for negative outcomes (e.g., extremely low scholastic achievement, high aggression) participated in very few SEAs even several years prior to dropout, supporting the assumption that school disengagement begins well before actual dropout. Almost all students who were considered "competent" (i.e., positive interactions with peers and adults) graduated from high school regardless of their SEA participation, while the probability of high-risk students graduating increased when they participated in more than one SEA. These findings suggest that the relationship may not be as pronounced among more competent adolescents because they are already committed to their school environment.

Nevertheless, to suggest that SEA participation alone facilitates positive outcomes for at-risk (particularly delinquent) students may be an oversimplification because this does not account for social network influences. Another longitudinal study followed 695 students from the seventh grade through age 24 (Mahoney, 2000). Similar to Mahoney and Cairns (1997), adolescents who participated in more than one SEA prior to the seventh grade were more likely to graduate and less likely to be arrested. However, among the high-risk group, the effects of SEAs were only observed if the social network that surrounded the adolescent was also involved in SEAs. Outcomes were negative for adolescents who participated in SEAs but remained in a delinquent peer group.

The Benefits/Shortcoming of Different Types of SEAs

Recent research has begun to explore the benefits/potential shortcomings of particular types of SEAs. For example, participation in athletics is a SEA of choice for many adolescents (Antshel & Anderman, 2000; Larson & Verma, 1999; McNeal, 1998) and has been the focus of much research (Broh, 2002; Gerber, 1996; Holland & Andre, 1987). The potential benefits of athletics have been well documented (e.g., Antshel & Anderman, 2000; Cooper et al., 1999). For example, students who participated in athletics were almost twice as likely to remain in school as students who did not participate in athletics (e.g., Davalos et al., 1999; McNeal, 1995). However, these benefits may differ across gender groups, with males gaining more from sports due to the values expressed by the athlete's peer group, school, and larger community (Eder & Kinney, 1995; Holland & Andre, 1994). These conclusions are further complicated by recent longitudinal studies reporting that participation in sports teams corresponds with greater rates of alcohol (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Eccles & Barber, 1999) and illicit drug use (Eccles & Barber, 1999) when compared to students participating in other SEAs. The degree and likelihood of such negative outcomes are contingent on the quality of coaching, the peer group that surrounds the athlete, and the cultural meaning of the activity within the school and community (Larson & Verma, 1999).

Prior research suggests that participation in structured educational activities in the fine arts has positive relationships with outcomes such as increased social exposure and school identity, as well as prevention of school dropout (McNeal, 1995). However, longitudinal studies found that while adolescents participating in fine arts activities were more likely to enjoy their schooling experiences, there was an increased probability of drinking use for female participants (Barber et al., 2001; Eccles & Barber, 1999). Finally, while participation in academic clubs is also viewed as a potential preventative factor, the perceived peer social status of these clubs is lower than athletics (McNeal, 1995). Nevertheless, students who participate in academic activities fare better academically, typically reporting higher GPAs and being enrolled in college at 21, than either noninvolved peers or students who participated in other SEA categories (Eccles & Barber, 1999).

One explanation for these findings may be related to the interaction between the activity the adolescent chooses, the social network that supports the activity, and the personal characteristics of the adolescent (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eder & Kinney, 1993; Raymore et al., 1999). For example, a series of longitudinal studies (Barber et al., 2001; Eccles & Barber, 1999) asked students who were in the 10th grade in 1983 to identify themselves with a specific character from the then-popular film *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes, 1985). The characters in the movie were described as the Princess, the Jock, the Brain, the Basket Case, and the Criminal. Adolescents who identified with the "Jock" participated in more athletics and possessed a moderately high GPA, the highest self-esteem, and the lowest social isolation. However, members of this group were also more likely than other groups to use alcohol. Adolescents who related most to the "Criminal" character had adequate GPAs in high school and used alcohol at a level that was similar to the "Jocks." However, members of this latter group were less likely to finish college than any other group and also reported the highest levels of depression. The fundamental difference between these two groups appeared to be their peer groups. While both groups engaged in equal amounts of risky behaviors during high school, "Jocks" largely affiliated with a positive peer network and were engaged in a high social-status activity. Those who identified with the "Criminal," on the other hand, affiliated with peers who were engaged in delinquent activities, engaged in low status activities and were less interested in attending college. The authors surmised that by virtue of their peer group, "Criminals" did not readily identify with the school culture and many subsequently dropped out. Further research is needed for confirmation, however, the results illustrate how the

social network and activities selected may interact to yield different psychoeducational and mental health outcomes.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Recent SEA research has incorporated complex statistical designs and longitudinal methods that further contribute to the understanding of its potential benefits to a number of school-related and mental health outcomes. Nevertheless, future research is clearly needed to explore a number of topics. For example, the results have primarily been correlational in nature. Future research is needed to directly address causal connections between SEAs and various outcome variables using experimental designs and/or qualitative methodology. Further, empirical studies using methods such as path analysis would help determine the salience of ecological systems theory to SEA participation. Moreover, a key limitation to SEA research continues to be a self-selection bias. Longitudinal research incorporating an experimental design could address this issue by comparing students on a number of variables (e.g., self-concept, GPA) before, during, and after SEA participation to fully understand the magnitude of its benefits.

Another important direction is to examine the differential positive and negative effects of various types of SEAs. For example, more information is needed about why students choose particular SEAs (Mahoney, 2000), and more information must explore the adolescent's social network, their self-identity, and how these variables interact to determine SEA choice and subsequent psychosocial outcomes. Further, the majority of research has focused on school-sponsored SEAs. Non-school sponsored activities can also be related positively to academic outcomes (e.g., Gerber, 1996; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000) and more research is needed to learn how non-school sponsored activities affect adolescents' school experiences.

Finally, most of the SEA research has been based on self-reports, which introduces such potential artifacts as social desirability and expectancy effects. While recent studies have included information from peers (e.g., Barber et al., 2001), additional data using alternative data collection strategies (e.g., momentary time sampling; see Larson, 2000) as well as input from parents and non-parents (coaches, teachers, mentors) is needed to assess the impact of SEAs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

Although more empirical work is clearly needed, there is consistent evidence to suggest that SEAs have the potential to promote mental health among all youths and particularly those placed at risk for negative academic and interpersonal outcomes (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997). Getting at-risk teens involved in a structured activity of their choice, under the influence of positive social networks and competent adults, may lead to demonstrable positive outcomes (including high self-esteem and life satisfaction, engagement with school, social competence, improved school performance and graduation). One important qualification is that the student's social network can influence the effects of SEAs (Barber et al., 2001; Mahoney, 2000). Therefore, practitioners need to target the social network (Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000) when implementing SEAs. Involving the peer group in SEAs may be just as important for positive outcomes as involving the adolescent. As Mahoney (2000) stated, "The willingness of the individual to participate, the success he or she achieves in the endeavor, and the support received from peers may be critical features of the process" (p. 513).

Getting an adolescent involved in *any* activity may not garner success if the school psychologist does not consider (a) the perceived social status of the activity, (b) intrinsic interest in the activity, (c) the quality of the adolescent's social network and (d) the non-parent adult who is part of the activity. Mandating that the youth become involved in an activity that contains youths or

adult figures that are not appealing or are not positive influences, or that he or she perceives to be of low social status or uninteresting will likely result in less than desirable outcomes (including dropping out of the activity). Further, choosing the activity for the youth undermines one of the key components of SEA success (facilitating intrinsic motivation, empowerment and life satisfaction through voluntary choice). Thus, it is important that school psychologists work with the adolescent to explore activity possibilities and to have them choose their preferred activity.

Further, once an activity has been identified, the school psychologist must determine whether the activity may benefit or hinder development. Specifically, using the criteria that define SEAs, non-school-sponsored activities may contain some semblance of structure, be sponsored by an established institution (e.g., a school or community center) and may include a specific activity that is of intrinsic interest to the youth (e.g., an after-school basketball program). However, if the activity does not include active supervision by one or more competent adults and involves a delinquent peer group, it is likely that participation will impede positive outcomes (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000).

School psychologists are at a distinct advantage by virtue of their close affiliation with and proximity to the school system and administration. Many schools have either cut SEAs from the curriculum or have severely constrained eligibility for participation of students who are doing well in school (i.e., “no pass no play” policies). Such policies can prevent participation by those who need these activities the most (Burnett, 2000). While SEAs can benefit all students, these activities can be particularly important for those who do not identify with their school. Involving these students in SEAs may enhance their affiliation with school, which may lead to positive outcomes.

Finally, this paper does not mean to imply that school psychologists must advocate that every child participate in an SEA. Indeed, the decision to sponsor school-related SEAs may be based on a number of factors outside of the school psychologist’s (and even building administrator’s) control. Such factors would include financial resources, size of school enrollment, and school social culture, among others. Nevertheless, school psychologists can use their position and influence to ensure that SEAs are available for students most in need of these activities. Given the documented benefits of SEA participation for many students, school psychologists should begin to focus on ways to facilitate their school’s understanding of these benefits.

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