Extracurricular Activities Improve Life Adjustment

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Does participation in extracurricular activities improve the student's adjustment in home, college and at work? This important issue is discussed and tentative conclusions are reached by the author of this article.

SOME research findings suggest that there is a positive relationship between students' participation in extracurricular activities and their adjustment in home, college and at work. Although the stated purposes of the extracurricular activities are in harmony with the life adjustment aims of education, the present manner in which these activities are typically conducted does not insure this carry-over to the maximum degree possible. This article will discuss the preceding generalizations and will provide some illustrations of ways in which activities might be conducted so that the adjustment values may be enhanced. The presentation will conclude with an enunciation of two general tasks which must be accepted by educational leaders in helping bring about the needed improvements.

What Are Possible Adjustment Values?

The reported efforts to evaluate the contributions of extracurricular activities have not revealed adequately how such activities aid in the growth and development of participants. Students who participate in such activities appear to be superior in most respects to those who do not. It is impossible to state, however, that participation itself is responsible for the superiority. Similarly, studies of student leaders show them to be superior to non-leaders in such qualities as intelligence, school marks, attitudes toward school, diversity of interests, and continuation of education in college. However, there is no proof that leadership experiences caused the development of those qualities. Athletes succeed better than non-athletes when grades, persistence and leadership are considered, but success may come because individuals possess athletic ability rather than as a result of playing on teams. Students who participate in activities most frequently in high school also participate most frequently in college. This result might mean there is a high carry-over between high school and college activities, that one prepares for the other, or it might mean that the basic qualities possessed by the high school student that lead him into activities operate equally well at the college level.[1]

When students, teachers, parents and alumni are asked their opinions regarding the value of participation in extracurricular activities, their attitude

[1] Generalizations based on studies reported by Carl W. Hanson and Paul W. Terry, "Extracurricular Activities: Evaluation," *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*, Walter S. Monroe, editor, p. 427-28. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1950.

is generally quite favorable. Large numbers say that such participation gives training for work and other out-of-school experiences, keeps students in school longer, develops interests and attitudes that help in making friendships, and assists in adjustment in home, college and at work.[2] Of course, there is no proof that such values actually accrue as a result of participation. In spite of a lack of valid evidence that participation in extracurricular activities produces certain desirable results, the fact that those who participate possess desirable attributes and also that participants and other concerned persons believe such values result probably is sufficient to justify confidence in such participation.

Extracurricular Activities and Life Adjustment

School people are currently paying much attention to the life adjustment values in education. The 1953 Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education dealt with that subject. This writer prepared a chapter in the yearbook in which the purposes of extracurricular activities were examined in the light of life adjustment needs.[3] In the case of each of the life adjustment goals, many examples of the possible contributions of activities can readily be cited. Moreover, extracurricular activities by their very nature encourage student participation,

[2] See, for example, J. Lloyd Trump, *The Management of Extracurriculum Activities.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1943. 207 p.

[3] J. Lloyd Trump, "Extraclass Activities and the Needs of Youth," *Adapting the Secondary-School Program to the Needs of Youth,* Part I. 52nd Yearbook, National Society for the Study of Education. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953. p. 160-179.

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teacher-pupil planning, flexibility of offering, and general freedom from traditional controls. These qualities make such activities particularly adaptable for purposes of life adjustment education. In most instances, if a given activity fails to serve life adjustment needs, that activity will not persist in the educational program.

Difficulties with Present Program

Several recent personal experiences of the writer have highlighted certain typical criticisms of extracurricular activities in the United States.[4] While riding in a third-class railroad compartment in England, two trainmen, rather disheveled from their work, came in to share the compartment. The prospects of this enforced companionship did not seem encouraging, but in a few minutes we were being not only entertained but enlightened as they pointed out places of historical interest along the way, told of camping trips, sang some Tyne-side songs, discussed plays and gave other evidences of broad cultural interests. On a Sunday in Paris the parks were crowded with family groups; so were the streets. Children of all ages with their parents were walking, picnicking, playing games and in general having a wonderful time. In Switzerland, happy family groups were also seen singing and taking part in folk dances; again, children of all ages were participating with their parents. There was also the obvious interest of

[4] This article is being written from the vantage point of Pakistan, where the author is currently serving as a Fulbright lecturer.

the Italians in singing and playing music, not merely going to a concert to be entertained by someone else. On a recent afternoon holiday in Pakistan a local college was observed playing a basketball game with a nearby rival. There were very few spectators in attendance because most of the students were busy in neighboring areas playing other games such as cricket, tennis, hockey, and in track and field events. There was no absence of competitive spirit among the players; the game was as hard fought as in the United States. It was interesting, however, to see the handful of spectators applauding good plays on the part of the opposition almost as vigorously as those made by their home team.

The foregoing and other experiences on this present trip have made a deep impression upon the writer. At least three characteristics of these activities stand out. First, there is more emphasis on participation and less emphasis on watching. Second, there is more emphasis on family participation; parents are playing games and engaging in many other activities with their children. Third, the costs of the activities are relatively low; elaborate stadiums, gymnasiums, supplies and equipment are not found as frequently in other lands as they are in the United States. Whether these characteristics add to the possible adjustive values of extracurricular activities in home, college or work cannot at this moment be validated, but the possibility certainly exists. School authorities in the United States may be following the mores in furthering present practices in the management of extracurricular activities; on the other hand, blaming public opinions and pressures may be a convenient alibi for a lack of vigorous attacks on improvement projects.

Activities Contribute to Adjustment

Adjustment to home presents many problems. Students must share in family responsibilities, family recreation, family harmony, and the like. In some schools, considerable emphasis in the extracurricular program has been given to family activities. There are family hobby nights when the shops and laboratories of the school are made available to family groups. Father and son, as well as mother and daughter, work together to build a boat, reupholster furniture, and what not. Family groups in dramatics classes develop radio and TV programs, thus increasing their knowledge and appreciation of these arts and also learning better to work and play together. Games are taught that can be played by family groups with varied age and skill requirements. Family music groups are also encouraged. The list could be extended to great length. What is needed is imagination and planning by teachers, students and parents.

Many schools now offer family living courses and also provide materials on this subject in other courses. Special interest clubs may be organized to supplement this work or add it if the curriculum does not otherwise provide this instruction. Materials on boy-girl relations, family and other adult relations, family budgets, and the like, may become the subject content for discussions, demonstrations and projects.

Probably the most fundamental contribution that extracurricular activities can make to home life is by providing

opportunities for boys and girls to learn better to work and play together. Sound home life is based upon the development of satisfactory relationships between growing boys and girls and young men and women. That is why there must be increased emphasis upon coeducational physical education, social and intellectual activities. The ideals of partnership, companionship and mutual respect which are so basic to successful home life may be taught and experienced very effectively through extracurricular activities.

The values of elementary and secondary school activities in helping students adjust to college life are so obvious that they scarcely require emphasis. Extracurricular activities are, of course, a very significant part of a college education. The dramatics, variety shows, social functions, dormitory and house programs, athletics, publications and other college activities grow naturally out of similar activities in the lower schools. Thus, elementary and secondary schools should provide opportunities for students to discover areas of special interest and competence and then to help them become effective participants in these areas.

This requirement of training for participation has been all too frequently neglected in elementary and secondary schools. Young people do not inherit the necessary know-how to plan and conduct organization business, be effective as group leaders and members, plan imaginative programs that involve all the members, tap available resources, and do the many other things necessary for successful activity programs. These skills must be learned. Why such matters are left to trial and error learning, as they are in many schools, is difficult to understand.

Too many teachers have had a laissez-faire attitude toward extracurricular activities. However, since students have been found to consider such activities more interesting and worthwhile than the regular school subjects,[5] it is only sound psychology that teachers should take advantage of this interest to aid students in learning how to make such activities more effective in the adjustment process. Incidentally, much more is needed than the teaching of parliamentary procedure. Students need training and experience for group membership including the roles of leader, recorder, observer, consultant and member. They need help in learning how to plan, manage and evaluate programs. They need to be taught the kinds of games and social activities that can be carried on at home, in work groups and in college. They need to exchange experiences with students in other schools. They must learn the importance of budgeting time and energy so that recreational and other activities do not occupy so much time that satisfactory results are not achieved in school subjects. This self-direction is usually accepted as the ultimate goal of the guidance program. College personnel officers testify that students who have learned to balance their time properly and who have a wholesome interest in activities are almost certain to achieve satisfactory college adjustment.

[5] Harold Hand, *Principal Findings of the 1948 Basic Studies*, Illinois Curriculum Program Bulletin No. 2. Springfield, Illinois: Office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1951.

Activities can also certainly assist in adjustment to work. Some of the more obvious contributions will not be discussed here. Among these are the discovery of interests and abilities through hobby and special interest clubs, assembly, home room and other programs designed to provide information about vocational opportunities, job seeking, success attainment, and so on, articles about work in school publications, stimulation toward scholastic achievement through contests and awards, and the development of such attitudes as responsibility, integrity and initiative while taking part in extracurricular activities. All of these possibilities are present and may help in adjustment.

Special emphasis, however, should be given the contributions of activity participation in improving inter-personal relationships. Work in these times is largely a group operation; relatively few persons work entirely alone on jobs. Success is conditioned by the ability of persons to get along with each other. Although it is in this area of improving inter-personal relationships that extracurricular activities should make their most valuable contribution, this aspect of participation frequently receives little attention. Improvement of group work, utilization of sociometric techniques to discover difficulties and the application of remedial measures, more careful training of leaders and members, development of programs that involve more doing and less listening, involvement of the total group rather than having activities controlled by cliques, and increased alertness of teachers to inter-personal relationships are a few of the areas and techniques that are needed.

Space does not permit an accounting of other ways in which activities may contribute to adjustment in home, college and at work. For example, nothing has been said directly about the importance of general physical and mental adjustment, the therapeutic value of creative activity, the significance of the development of hobbies and special interests, the making of lasting friendships, and many other possible outcomes. The significant thing about all this is that these outcomes do not result automatically. Educational leaders must deliberately plan programs with adjustment outcomes in mind.

Two General Tasks for Education

Suggestions for improving activities have been implied and specifically stated in foregoing paragraphs. Two general suggestions are proposed in concluding this discussion.

First, educational leaders must help both lay and professional persons view extracurricular activities as an integral part of the educational program. That they are not so regarded at the present time is relatively easy to document. So long as activities are expected to be partially if not completely self-supporting, charges are made to attend or participate, eligibility requirements of a scholastic nature are a prerequisite for participation, records of participation are either not kept or are inadequate, sponsors are appointed on unsystematic bases, sponsor time and responsibility are not calculated in equalizing work loads of teachers, evaluation seldom practiced either for individuals or the program in general, and so on, extracurricular activities are *not* an integral part of the educational program; they

are, rather, things apart with different principles of management from those applied to the regular school subjects. It is this different treatment which limits the potential contributions of extracurricular activities to the adjustment of students. These differences are not an inherent or a necessary adjunct of the activities themselves; they have rather resulted from the fact that lay and professional persons, especially educators, have never clarified their thinking with regard to the proper role of the so-called extracurriculum. This clarification then becomes an imperative task for educational leaders, a task that will challenge all the known techniques of democratic leadership.

The second suggestion is not unlike the first. Educational leaders must recognize that known principles of learning apply to extracurricular activities as well as to other learning experiences in the educational program. Motivation to learn is necessary; interests should be utilized and steps taken to develop new and deepened interests. Experiences must be provided at times when students are most ready for them. Transfer of training from school to home, college and work is not automatic; identical elements must be observed and generalizations consciously developed. Individual differences in interests and abilities must be recognized and programs planned accordingly. At the present time, many schools operate under the fallacious assumptions that students already are aware of all of their possible interests, and that activities are needed mainly, if not exclusively, for those whose abilities already are highly developed. The list of learning principles could be extended. Educational leaders again must utilize all of the known techniques of democratic supervision to secure attention to these principles by faculty members and an appreciation of them on the part of lay citizens.

Extracurricular activities have been recognized in the schools of the United States for more than one half of a century. They have received enthusiastic support from school people and the public for more than a quarter of a century. It is now time that educational leaders extend efforts so that extracurricular activities may make their greatest possible contribution to the adjustment of young people.

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