

# The Relation Between Extracurricular Participation and Adolescent Development

Ludmila Z. Hruda  
Jennifer A. Fredricks  
Corinne Alfeld-Liro  
Jacquelynne S. Eccles

University of Michigan

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Inquiries may be addressed to Ludmila Hruda, Combined Program in Education and Psychology, 1400 SEB, 601 East University, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259 or by electronic mail at [lhroda@umich.edu](mailto:lhroda@umich.edu).

## Abstract

The current debate about the influence of extracurricular participation on adolescent development is investigated using in-depth interviews with 41 highly involved and competent adolescents participating in art, drama, music and/or sports. We expand the field by qualitatively investigating the impact of extracurriculars on a variety of academic, social and affective outcomes. Most adolescents reported positive benefits from extracurricular participation; however, some adolescents reported stress over balancing all of their responsibilities. Implications for adolescent development are discussed.

## Background

### ● Prior research on participation in activities

- Participation in extracurriculars is considered a possible pathway to successful adolescent development (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992; Holland & Andre, 1987).
- Although some scholars have argued that extracurricular activities take time away from academics or immerse adolescents in a peer culture that devalues academic pursuits (Coleman, 1961), the majority of research has linked extracurricular participation to positive outcomes including higher achievement, higher educational aspirations, and increased self-esteem.

### ● Limitations of Prior Research

- Most studies compare participants to non-participants on outcomes rather than considering process.
- The majority of studies examine involvement in sports, but there is limited research on other types of activities.
- Most research has been cross-sectional which has made it difficult to determine whether participation influences development or vice versa.

### ● The Current Study

- Uses a qualitative methodology to explore the influence of extracurricular participation on adolescent development in a range of athletic and arts activities both in and out of school.
- Through adolescents' own words we examine the connection between extracurricular participation and developmental outcomes, specifically investigating the hypothesis that involvement can further the overall development of the adolescent (Holland & Andre, 1987).
- We take a multifaceted view of development by looking beyond academics into other domains.

## Methods

### ● Participants

- 41 adolescents (15 males, 26 females) attending high school in southeastern Michigan
- Participants were selected from a larger longitudinal project (Childhood and Beyond Study; P.I.s Jacquelynne Eccles, Rena Harold, Alan Wigfield, and Phyllis Blumenfeld) based on their high level of involvement in extracurricular activities in middle childhood.
- 24 adolescents participated in a single extracurricular activity, 17 pursued more than one activity

- 26 were active in sports, 12 played instrumental music, 9 sang in a choir, 5 were in drama, and 2 were involved in art
- Participants were European-American and from a middle-class socioeconomic background

## ● Procedure

- Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with adolescents about their involvement in extracurriculars from childhood through adolescence, including the impact of the activity on other aspects of their lives

## ● Data Analysis

- Transcripts of interviews were coded for themes including costs and benefits of participation, social adjustment, autonomy, identity, and self-esteem
- Results were organized around three components of adolescent development that surfaced from these themes: academics, social relations and affective development

# Results

## ● Academics

- Benefits to adolescent development
  - responsibility, discipline and dedication learned in activity carries over to academics
  - time management skills needed for participation in extracurriculars help adolescent study more efficiently
  - grades are maintained so that participation can continue
  - teachers/coaches provide guidance and help for the future
- Costs to adolescent development
  - less time for homework and studying
  - acceptance of slightly lower grades during intense periods of extracurricular activity
- Adolescents involved in multiple activities reported the most difficulty balancing academics and extracurricular involvement

## ● Social Relations

- Benefits to adolescent development
  - increased social contacts and recognition in school
  - opportunity to find others who share interests (niche)
  - activity provides a bond for friendship
  - opportunity to develop a social support network
  - sense of belonging to a group
  - learn to get along with others/improved social competence

- overcome shyness
- learn teamwork
- form a close relationship with a non-familial adult (teacher/coach)
- Costs to adolescent development
  - little time for social activities
  - being perceived as different; teased by others concerning involvement
- Involvement in multiple activities provides exposure to a broader variety of people, but forces adolescents to make difficult choices about where and with whom to spend their time

## ● Affective Outcomes

- Benefits to adolescent development
  - improves mood
  - more positive feelings about self/increased self-esteem
  - outlet for expressing emotions
  - outlet for competitiveness
  - learn to handle failure
  - have something of one's own
  - provides escape from everyday worries and concerns
- Costs to adolescent development
  - stress related to balancing competing demands
  - pressure to perform well
  - competitiveness sometimes has a negative effect on motivation
  - experiencing failure can be disappointing
- Involvement in multiple activities gives adolescents little time for themselves and can be very stressful

## Conclusions

- Involvement in extracurriculars has a broader effect than just on academics; it also influences social relations and affective outcomes in adolescence. Research into the benefits and costs of extracurricular participation needs to include these other domains.
- In general, the benefits of extracurricular participation outweigh costs in terms of academics, social relations and affective outcomes. However, our findings indicate that extracurricular participants generally reported both positive and negatives to their involvement. This duality was not only true across the sample as a whole but even within individual adolescents.
- Adolescents who participate in extracurriculars receive opportunities that often

differ from the typical academic curriculum of school including: learning responsibility, demonstrating competence, expressing emotions, and working with a team.

- Adolescents involved in multiple activities often have greater difficulty managing the demands of both academic work and extracurricular participation. However, some adolescents are able to handle multiple activities and thrive on a variety of experiences and a high level of activity. Further research is needed on when extracurricular involvement becomes detrimental to adolescent development.
- The decisions participants make related to their involvement in extracurriculars helps adolescents define not only how to spend their time and with whom to spend it but also who they are and what they value. These decisions are usually made while still within a protected environment (when they are not expected to be totally independent and still supported by parents and teachers).
- These findings bolster the view that schools should support extracurricular involvement because of the multiple influences on development. However, schools and parents should continue to monitor appropriate levels of involvement.

## References

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