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Involvement of Young People in Extracurricular Activities in General Education Secondary School – an Opportunity for their Balanced Development

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Abstract

The article addresses important issues related to the daily educational experiences of Polish secondary school students. In the first place it focuses on the general concepts conveyed by the title, such as balanced development, extracurricular activities, and volunteering. The theoretical and exploratory purpose as well as practical and implementation related goals have been formulated. The main research problem was defined as follows: What was secondary school students' involvement in extracurricular activities in school, in the context of their opportunities for balanced development? The study applied a method of diagnostic assessment, a survey technique and a specially designed questionnaire. The survey was conducted in May and June 2022 among 286 secondary school students in the Podkarpackie Region. Majority of the respondents did not engage in extracurricular activities. The students who were involved in some kind of extracurricular activity most often perceived various gains for themselves. The most popular were volunteering projects organised by the school. The students reported that involvement in extracurricular activities most often allowed them to gain knowledge, develop skills and help other people. The gains perceived by the respondents can contribute to their balanced development.

Keywords: involvement, youth, general education secondary school, balanced development, extracurricular activities

Introduction

Many questions related to the issues addressed in the article, have previously appeared in the literature. One of these is as follows: “Is there room for a democratic transition in the Polish school and where could such change be most visible?” (Tłuczek-Tadla, 2022, p. 84). Certainly, young people's participa-

tion in non-curricular activities at school is an important sign of its democratisation and at the same time it is an opportunity for them to acquire knowledge, and develop various skills or necessary social competences.

By engaging in different areas of life, e.g., in personal, public or even political spheres, an individual gains opportunities for all-round development. This is particularly important during adolescence, as this is the period when the individual is growing to reach full maturity. “This stage can be named (...) the age of transformation” (Ziółkowska, 2005, p. 379). Bardziejewska (2005, p. 346) points out that “The young person begins to collect and seek out new physical, social and intellectual experiences in order to be able to sort them out and consolidate them into his/her own models and patterns that better prepare him/her for adulthood (...) This rediscovery of the self (...) is referred to as the process of forming one’s own identity”. The same author continues, “This takes place in two dimensions: personal and social” (Bardziejewska, 2005, p. 346). From the viewpoint of an individual’s development, these two dimensions are equally important, as they guarantee harmonious and also balanced development. Hence, “For a developing individual, defining a personal identity means choosing goals, values, beliefs, interests, needs, a way of thinking and evaluation criteria that can be shown to the world as one’s own” (Bardziejewska, 2005, pp. 346–347). Furthermore, formation of identity on the social level, “(...) involves determining which group a young person belongs to, who he/she relates to, and who he/she is accepted by” (Bardziejewska, 2005, p. 347).

The development of identity on a social level, however, is often difficult for contemporary youth. In her conclusions to her research focusing on secondary school students in the second half of the 1990s, Świda-Ziemba (2000, p. 545) wrote, “Young people feel «separate» and «different». They do not feel that they belong to a generation that in their perception would be some kind of entity in which they participate”. As regards a connection with school, the attachment in many cases is not strong. The author elsewhere points out that the school is: “(...) the first battleground for institutional success (...). In their expectations towards the school, they are like «clients»” (Świda-Ziemba, 2000, p. 247).

The term balanced development, or “sustainable development”, is understood as “the socio-economic development of modern societies which meets their needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. To implement the idea of sustainable development it is necessary (...) to recognise that economic, political, and social factors are inter-related” (Affelt, 2023). The requirement to attribute similar importance to the various factors is particularly significant from the perspective of the issues addressed in the article. Especially social and economic factors can be of interest. It is therefore worthwhile to review in more detail extracurricular activities in secondary schools, what they might involve, and what gains for balanced development adolescents derive from them. Theoretical considerations will cover issues related to extracurricular activities at

school, including e.g. special interest groups, volunteering and various organisations in which students can engage after classes. Obviously, extracurricular activities available to students at school are greatly varied, depending on many factors beyond the control of the school authorities and teachers.

According to the Act of 14 December 2016 concerning *Education Law*: “The essential forms of teaching and educational activities in schools include:

1. compulsory educational activities (...),
7. activities intended to foster students’ interests and talents, in particular with a view to promoting their participation and creativity” (Act of 2017, Art. 109, item 59).

Kantyka points out that “by seeking to ensure comprehensive development of each student, the school creates conditions for their success, taking into account their individual capabilities and interests. This is facilitated by extracurricular activities on offer at school. The main purpose of extracurricular activities is to support schooling (...), and in particular:

- to enable the all-round development of students showing interest in a specific domain” (Kantyka, 2016, p. 3).

The current level of young people’s participation in extracurricular activities in and out of school has been assessed and reported by Feliksiak and Omyła-Rudzka (2022). According to the authors: “Participation in extracurricular activities is slightly lower than in 2018. As was the case at that time, the most popular are private lessons in school subjects; these are attended by more than half of the respondents (53%). Slightly fewer students attend foreign language courses (decrease from 38% to 35%) and sport activities (decrease from 36% to 33%) (...). The most significant decrease was found in attendance of artistic educational programs, which currently is reported by 11% of the respondents, compared to 16% in 2018” (Feliksiak, Omyła-Rudzka, 2022, pp. 178–179). The authors also point out: “Participation in most types of extracurricular activities is far more frequently reported by students of general education secondary schools, compared to students of technical or vocational secondary schools” (Feliksiak, Omyła-Rudzka, p. 179). It has been shown that “Preferences with regard to extracurricular activities are related to the respondents’ gender. Girls more often than boys attend private lessons, foreign language courses and artistic workshops, whereas boys are more likely to engage in activities related to sports and computer science” (Feliksiak, Omyła-Rudzka, 2022, p. 180). Notably, three in four respondents believe that the consent of the school principals and the parents’ council is sufficient for non-governmental organisations to conduct extracurricular activities in schools (Feliksiak, 2023).

Another area for theoretical consideration is related to volunteering opportunities at school. This is a type of altruistic long-term activity. Kata (2017, p. 4) points out that “This form of activity is understood as an initiative and operation

whereby young people provide support to others – their peers, people in need or the local community”. Young people who volunteer to engage in some projects are driven by a number of motives, including the need to participate in the life of a peer group, to gain recognition from others, or to find ways to learn and develop new skills (Kata, 2017, p. 7). Obviously, volunteering programs organised at school are subject to the related legal regulations. It should be pointed out that “The Act on Public Benefit Activity and Volunteering (Chapter III «Volunteering») is the basic legal regulation applicable to volunteering programs. It defines such issues as:

- who is a volunteer,
- who can benefit from services rendered by a volunteer,
- rights and obligations of a volunteer,
- rights and obligations of a beneficiary” (Komosa, 2022, p. 15).

The rights and obligations of the student as a volunteer are also an important issue. Students are entitled to receive a written certificate of volunteering, and an opinion about their performance; they are also entitled to have their volunteering activity acknowledged on the school certificate (Komosa, 2022, p. 17). The rights are particularly important for their involvement in volunteering programs because secondary school students can be motivated this way to undertake this type of activity.

Object of the study

The present study was designed to investigate young people’s participation in extracurricular activity in general education secondary school as an opportunity for their balanced development. The extracurricular activities taken into account in the study included: school choir, school newsletter, scout team, school theatre, photography club, girls’ shawm orchestra, Polish Red Cross, School Centre for Volunteering Projects, School Film Club, School Caritas Club, School PTTK Club, Students’ Sports Club and other activities of this type, which could be reported by the respondents.

Methodology and object of the study

The theoretical and exploratory purpose of the study was to review the related literature and to obtain respondents’ opinions about their involvement in extracurricular activities, as an opportunity for their balanced development. On the other hand the practical and operational purpose was to draw conclusions from the present study and formulate pedagogical recommendations for school principals, teachers, and counsellors as well as for secondary school students.

Subsequently, research problems were specified. The main problem was formulated as follows: What was secondary school students’ involvement in extracurricular activities in school, in the context of their opportunities for ba-

lanced development? To enable more detailed exploration of the main problem, the following specific problems were defined: What are the respondents' preferences related to extracurricular activities at school? What justifications do respondents give when expressing their willingness or unwillingness to attend extracurricular activities at school? What types of extracurricular activity at school are most often reported by respondents? How often do the students participate in extracurricular activities at school? What personal gains resulting from participation in extracurricular activities at school do the students perceive?

Since the study was designed as a diagnostic assessment, no working hypotheses were formulated. Consequently, no hypotheses were formulated and the study was treated as explanatory and exploratory research. Quantitative approach was applied (Sułek, 2002; Rubacha, 2008; Pilch, Bauman, 2010). The research strategy and method of diagnostic assessment were selected to match the formulated purpose of the study (Łobocki, 2000). A specially designed survey questionnaire was used. The article will only present the findings related to the characteristics of the research sample and to the issues corresponding to the main and the specific problems. The survey was conducted between 4 May and 15 June 2022 among 286 students of general education secondary schools in the Podkarpackie Region, more specifically in Rzeszów, and in one school in the Przeworsk District.

Elaboration (analysis of the study results)

The following analysis of the study results will focus on the above specific problems.

Participation or lack of participation in extracurricular activities in secondary school and the student's justification of this fact

The respondents were asked: *Do you like to participate in extracurricular activities of interest for you at school?* The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondents' preferences with regard to participation in extracurricular activities of interest for them at school

Item	Response category	Responses (in numbers)	Responses (%)
a	Yes	73	25.53
b	No	192	67.13
b	No data	21	7.34

Source: results of the present study.

Most secondary school students do not like to participate in activities that are not compulsory and require voluntary engagement after school. Analysis of the justifications given by some students next to their responses may provide an explanation. The justifications are listed in the following table.

Table 2. Types of respondents' justifications for their unwillingness to participate in extracurricular activities of interest to them organised at school

Item	Types of responses	Responses (in numbers)
a.	No time	49
b.	There are no such activities	27
c.	I am not interested in that, I do not like it	21
d.	I attend private lessons	8
e.	I do not feel like it	6
f.	I prefer to relax	6
g.	Waste of time, boring	4
h.	I like to do things on my own	4
i.	I do not know if there are such activities	4
j.	No transport back home	4
k.	Not all activities provide opportunities for comprehensive development	2
l.	Compulsory activities at school are enough	2
m.	They are suspended	2
n.	I prefer to spend time outside school	1
o.	A lot of lessons and homework	1
p.	Large groups are stressful for me	1
r.	I do not like contacts with people from my school	1
s.	I am not interested in anything	1
t.	I do not have to	1

Source: results of the present study.

Most often, the students justified their lack of willingness to participate in extracurricular activities at school by saying they did not have time for that. Other types of responses could of course be included in this category but respondents put it this way. Furthermore, many respondents definitely did not know what was going on in their school as regards extracurricular activities. The respondents may have referred to the time when remote learning was organised at school and some activities were suspended and were not continued without the contact in person. This suggests that some students do not pay sufficient attention to this area of school operation, and teachers do not provide comprehensive information to students about the current options related to such activities. The respondents also justified their lack of willingness to participate in this type of activities by saying that they were not interested because, in many cases, they preferred to attend activities organised outside school (frequently private lessons), or they simply want to relax.

Respondents who ticked the answer “yes” were also asked to provide justification.

Table 3. Types of respondents' justifications for their willingness to participate in extracurricular activities of interest to them organised at school

Item	Types of responses	Responses (in numbers)
a.	I want to get better in things which I am passionate about/which are interesting for me	28
b.	They are interesting	18
c.	One can learn something	16
d.	I like to meet people	6
e.	I like sports and I take part in such activities	2
f.	It is great	2
g.	That is something new/interesting	1
h.	Good atmosphere	1

Source: results of the present study.

In this case, students provided fewer justifications simply because a willingness to participate in extracurricular activities was expressed by significantly fewer respondents. The findings show that most students want to engage in such activities because this way they can improve in the cognitive sphere (knowledge, skills, hobbies, things they are passionate about), and because it is interesting. It was far less common that they justified their preferences by referring to the opportunity to improve their interpersonal relations and to spend time in places with a friendly atmosphere.

Respondents' involvement in extracurricular activities in secondary school and their justification of this fact

The students were not only asked whether they liked to participate in extracurricular activities but also if they actually participated in such activities. The question was as follows: *Do you participate in extracurricular activities at school, for example in organisations, volunteering programs, etc.?*

Table 4. Respondents' participation in extracurricular activities at school, e.g., in organisations, volunteering programs, etc.

Item	Response category	Responses (in numbers)	Responses (%)
a	Yes	70	24.48
b	No	207	72.37
b	No data	9	3.15

Source: results of the present study.

Majority of secondary school students (nearly 3/4) do not participate in extracurricular activities. It seems understandable in the context of the data shown in Table 1, reflecting the fact that the majority of the respondents do not like to participate in extracurricular activities which would constitute a significant part of their activity after school. In this question the respondents were asked to give justification to their choice.

Table 5. Respondents' justifications for their unwillingness to participate in extracurricular activities at school, e.g., in organisations, volunteering programs

Item	Types of responses	Responses (in numbers)
a.	No time	45
b.	I do not feel like it	8
c.	I am interested in other things	4
d.	Little time for other things than studying	3
e.	No activities are interesting for me	3
f.	There are no frequent activities promoting participation	3
g.	Problem with transport	3
h.	No such activities	2
i.	I attend activities outside school	2
j.	A break from studying	1
k.	Meeting new people	1
l.	Students are not always informed about these	1
m.	I do not know	1
n.	There were none	1
o.	Large groups are stressful for me	1
p.	I do not like contacts with people from my school	1
r.	I am not interested in anything	1
s.	I do not have to	1

Source: results of the present study.

The data shown in Table 5 show that most students justified the fact they did not participate in extracurricular activities at school by saying they did not have time for that. These findings are very similar to the result presented in Table 3. Far fewer respondents reported that they simply did not feel like doing that, or that no extracurricular activities on offer at school were interesting for them. Very few respondents pointed to a problem with transportation back home, and mentioned the fact that if they came back home late they would not be able to prepare for the next day at school, or to relax properly after school.

Secondary school students who engaged in extracurricular activities in their schools gave the following justifications.

Students who were involved in extracurricular activities most frequently pointed out that they could help other people this way and they simply liked such activities. Other respondents wrote that by doing that they were investing in their growth, mainly in the cognitive sphere, i.e., they could get better in things they were passionate about, improved their knowledge and skills and were doing things that they were interested in.

Variety of extracurricular activities in general education secondary school

Students could also tick many types of extracurricular activity which may be available in schools. The respondents marked those activities which were on offer in their schools, and – more importantly – which they found interesting.

Table 6. Respondents' justifications for their willingness to participate in extracurricular activities at school, e.g., in organisations, volunteering programs

Item	Types of responses	Responses (in numbers)
a.	Helping others	19
b.	I like it	8
c.	Getting better in things which I am passionate about, in my knowledge and skills	6
d.	Interesting	4
e.	Getting to know new environments	2
f.	It's great	2
g.	Volunteering is extremely valuable	2
h.	I participate outside school	2
i.	I was encouraged by my school mates	1
j.	I like sport	1
k.	Involvement in social activity	1
l.	New experiences	1
m.	I like working with people	1
n.	I wanted to do something at school	1
o.	Additional grade	1
p.	I need that for my scholarship	1
r.	Impact on the environment	1
s.	I have nothing to do	1

Source: results of the present study/

Table 7. Types of extracurricular activity in general education secondary schools

Item	Response category	Responses (in numbers)
a.	School Choir	7
b.	School Newsletter	25
c.	Scout Team	4
d.	School Theatre	10
e.	Photography Club	6
f.	Girls' Shawm Orchestra	0
g.	Polish Red Cross	7
h.	School Centre for Volunteering Projects	23
i.	School Film Club	20
j.	School Caritas Club	26
k.	School PTTK Club	3
l.	Students' Sports Club	17
m.	other activities (7
	No answer	158

Multiple responses were allowed

Source: results of the present study.

As shown in Table 7, students who reported they engaged in activities at school (nearly 1/4 of the group) marked various types of activities. Most commonly, however, the respondents engaged in volunteering projects in the frames of School Caritas Club, or School Centre for Volunteering Projects – a total of 49 responses. Other responses selected by the students were mostly related to

clubs or group activities allowing them to pursue their interests. These include: School Newsletter, School Film Club, Students’ Sports Club, and School Theatre. The respondents least frequently engage in activities of School PTTK Club and Scout Team.

Students about the frequency of their participation in extracurricular activities

Students who engaged in extracurricular activities at school were also asked how often they participated in such activities. The data are shown in the following table.

Table 8. Frequency of respondents’ participation in extracurricular activities at school

Item	Response category	Responses (in numbers)	Responses (%)
a	Always, whenever it was possible	51	17.83
b	Yes, fifty-fifty (at times – yes, other times – no)	39	13.64
c	Rarely, I used far less than half of all the opportunities	22	7.69
d	No data	174	60.84

Source: results of the present study.

Less than one in five students who engaged in some extracurricular activities at school reported they did that whenever it was possible. More than half of the respondents did not provide answers to this question, and the remaining approximately 20% of the study participants admitted they did not engage in these activities regularly (“yes, fifty-fifty” or “rarely”). Generally the results show that the students did not engage regularly in extracurricular activities at school.

Gains for secondary school students from participation in extracurricular activities

Respondents were also asked an open-ended question about their personal gains from engaging in various extracurricular activities at school. The gains reported by the students were analysed and divided into the following categories, shown in the table below.

Some respondents reported only one personal gain, others listed a few benefits. Students most often mentioned those benefits that contributed to their personal growth, such as acquisition of new knowledge or skills, or achieving a higher position at school (better opinion about their conduct). Respondents also acknowledged that such engagement provided opportunities for helping others and for making new friends with people their age (perhaps not only the classmates) or for spending their leisure time in interesting ways.

Table 9. Gains perceived by the respondents, resulting from participation in various extracurricular activities at school

Item	Response category – ordered according to the frequency of the specific answers	Responses (in numbers)
1.	Personal growth, self-realisation	19
2.	Helping others	19
3.	Better grade for conduct on the certificate	16
4.	Meeting new people of the same age	15
5.	Gaining new experiences (knowledge, skills)	11
6.	Interesting ways to spend free time	10
7.	Gaining experience in team work	5
8.	Being active, participating in something, doing some work	4
9.	Doing what one wants	2
10.	Opportunity to acquire qualifications	1
11.	Getting to know the world	1
12.	Getting to know oneself	1
13.	Learning to be responsible	1
14.	Overcoming stereotypes	1
15.	Learning to organise one's free time	1
16.	Satisfaction	1
17.	Temporary absence of stress	1
18.	Time off from lessons	1
	No response	87 individuals

Source: results of the present study.

Conclusions

Based on the current findings as well as the purpose of the study, and the main and the specific problems formulated herein, it is possible to present the following conclusions.

In the first place, the theoretical and exploratory purpose was achieved through the review of the related literature and the analysis of the respondents' opinions concerning the object of the study. As regards the practical and implementation related goals, the following conclusions have been formulated covering the specific problems:

1. Majority of the respondents do not like to engage in extracurricular activities at school.

2. Respondents who do not want to participate in extracurricular activities at school most often justify their opinion with the lack of time and lack of desire to get involved. On the other hand, the students who like to participate in these activities explain that, in this way, they can pursue their hobbies, and interests, and that they are curious to see what happens during such activities.

3. Similarly, the majority of the respondents reported they did not participate in extracurricular activities at schools.

4. According to their justifications, the respondents did not engage in extracurricular activities due to the lack of time and because they did not feel like doing that, or because they were interested in other things. Those respondents

who participated in such activities wrote that this was an opportunity to help others, and that they liked this type of activity.

5. The respondents most commonly engaged in various volunteering programs at school.

6. Most students did not participate regularly (i.e., whenever it was possible) in extracurricular activities at school.

7. The respondents acknowledged various personal gains resulting from activities undertaken at school. Those mentioned most often included the benefits for one's personal growth, as well as the opportunity to achieve higher academic position at school (better grades for conduct), and to make friends with other school mates.

Hence, it is possible to say that young people's engagement in extracurricular activities at school contributes to their balanced development. This final conclusion is mainly based on the type of activities in which the respondents engage, and the gains from these activities reported in the survey.

By reference to the practical and implementation related goals, the following pedagogical recommendations have been formulated for the specific entities.

Pedagogical recommendations for principals of general education secondary schools, teachers and counsellors:

1. It would be advisable for secondary school principals, teachers and counsellors to draw attention to the importance of young people's extracurricular activity at school in the context of the gains for their growth, especially for their balanced development. Teachers/tutors and counsellors could initiate discussions about this during weekly form meetings or individual meetings with students.

2. It would also be worthwhile to assess the needs of secondary students related to activities of various types presenting opportunities for adolescents' involvement after classes. Based on such assessments, decision-makers should adjust the available extracurricular options to match the students' actual expectations. It is also important to ensure that such activities are conducted in an attractive way.

Pedagogical recommendations for students:

1. It would be advisable for students to independently initiate discussions, e.g. during weekly form meetings and other events, about what is going on at school, mainly with regard to extracurricular activities.

2. It would be a good practice for students to share information with their schoolmates, e.g., during weekly form meetings or other events, about their personal gains from participation in volunteering programs, science clubs, scout team and other activities after classes. Some young people may be more easily and successfully encouraged to participate in such activities by their peers than by their teachers or school counsellors.

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