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Belonging: The Impact of Extracurricular Activities in Urban High Schools

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Introduction

It is acknowledged that parents' values tend to shape young children's identity, however in high school peers have a stronger influence (Bates, 2004). Students in high school are influenced by the opinions of their peers relative to those of adults (Kindermann, 2007; Ryan, 2001) and this impacts their engagement in the school community. Extracurricular activities can function as a catalyst for belonging within the school community and participation can take on an increased level of importance within an Urban School setting challenged by low attendance and poor academic success. Teacher candidates typically come from backgrounds different from those of the students they encounter in urban schools. Sleeter (2001) argues that teacher candidates need to build relationships with students different from themselves through in-class, and community based interactions. This study brought teacher candidates and urban high school students into direct dialogue in an effort to help teacher candidates understand the urban high school students' experience.

This case study of one Urban High School suggests that students who engage in extra-curricular activities develop a connection with their schooling and a desire to become involved within the school community. Senior students within an Urban High School advise beginning educators to forge strong relationships with their students through activities beyond the classroom to support the students' sense of belonging within the school community. Evidence suggests that these relationships will result in enhanced connections within the classroom and enhanced student engagement in academic endeavors. Findings from the students suggest that positive student adult relationships fostered during extra curricular activities enabled a greater sense of self-esteem, confidence and student voice.

Methods

Student within an Urban High School setting were interviewed by teacher candidates about their experiences of extracurricular activities (with a focus on sports) and were asked what advice they had for beginning teachers to become the best educators they could be. Recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed to identify common themes.

Research Questions

- How has participating in extracurricular activities contributed to overall school experience?
- How does participation in extracurricular activities contribute to students' commitment to school?
- How do extracurricular activities create a sense of community and self within the activity, and the school at large?

Results

Theme #1: Relationship building, importance of genuine teacher student relationship

Building relationships with students through extracurricular activities leads to enhanced engagement by students within the classroom. Student feedback indicated that there is a greater sense of commitment to the classroom learning process amongst students who have regular interactions with their teachers outside of the classroom environment.

"Coach did not just focus on the stars of the of the team. He looked out for all of us."

"Well personally I have a better relationship with certain teachers because they have been my coaches. Our whole school comes together, teachers and students to sporting events like basketball games and things like that. So I feel there is a huge dynamic between students and teachers."

Theme #2: Extracurricular activities create student driven communities

Although extracurricular activities are lead by teachers, senior students are important role models for the younger students. It is the students that create safe and inclusive spaces within the extra-curricular activities, which evolve into communities with shared goals.

"Wrestling gave me the motivation to become more involved within my community" ... 1 word to describe myself coming into grade 9 – "lonely" and now in grade 11 – "confident"

"It's kind of scary coming into high school and not knowing where you fit. In grade 9 you feel so small in comparison to everyone else, and when you join a sports team you're accepted, especially by those who are older than you who are on the team. It kind of encourages you to go out there and join more teams to meet more people."

Theme #3: Creating relationship bridges between senior and younger grades.

Students who are actively engaged in extra-curricular activities become positive role models for incoming grade nine students and in doing so, build communities across grade levels. This in turn creates a ground-swell of school pride, and a sense of belonging to the school community.

"I had to get acquainted with a lot of people from different grades because we have to volunteer being on certain sports teams... For sure I know a lot of girls who are younger than me that I wouldn't have talked to before."

"Right now our school is very big on basketball ... Everyone goes to their games and people even watch sports that aren't that big in this school, like soccer and football; people go to the games to show them we're all united as a school... It's kind of a way to allow students to voice themselves. It gives you an identity in the school and allows you to connect to other people."

Conclusions

Senior students who are heavily engaged in extra-curricular activities see themselves as leaders across the school with the potential to build community with the younger aged students. Their leadership in sports typically leads to enhanced engagement within the classroom. As new educators we have a lot to learn from the student leaders who provide us with a good example of how to create meaningful connections within the school community. According to the students' advice to beginning educators, new teachers should adopt an ethic of care for the students they teach, and show an interest in their daily lives. One way of doing this is through engaging with students outside of the classroom.

"Be available as a teacher, and most importantly be yourself. I know that there is supposed to be a divide in the teacher student relationship but if the teacher is able to have their true personality shine through there will be a much better relationship and will create the motivation to try harder in class."

"We have so many different cultures in the school. Just don't be afraid. It's kind of a sink or swim school. You have to earn the respect of the students because we have so many different cultures. If you show that you care and that you're taking an interest in what the students are doing, then you'll for sure get the respect of the students. I do think though that sports and clubs are one of the best ways of doing that."

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Acknowledgments

This project was funded through the University of Ottawa UROP. We also acknowledge the support and participation of the principal, teachers and students of St. Patrick's High School.