

In the Pool, on the Stage & at the Concert: Recreation & Leisure Activities for All

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Too often youngsters with disabilities and other differences are excluded from community recreation and leisure activities. Educators, coaches and others might exclude these individuals from activities because of an inability to conceptualize and implement multi-level participation. If one conceives the orchestra as being only for students who can read music and play an instrument, then it becomes difficult to think about the myriad ways in which a non-musician could participate in that activity. If being on the basketball team is only for those whose skills are 'competitive' in dribbling and shooting, then it becomes difficult to imagine the participation of a child who is blind or has a physical disability.

In other cases, learners themselves may opt out of the available activities. Some students do not see themselves represented in the offerings. Perhaps they perceive (and are correct) that participation in the jazz band requires the 'right clothes' or membership in particular socio-economic or ethnic groups. The school offerings may not reflect their own communities or represent valued activities within their own family or culture.

And other students don't know what is available or do not know how to access what is offered. If you can't read the sign that says 'Lacrosse Try Outs After School Today' or don't know what it means to 'try out' for something, it's unlikely you will appear at the gym at 3:00.

Visions of Inclusive Activities

In responding to the above barriers, we articulate here a vision of what inclusive activities could be like:

1. Understand that all students can learn something from participating in recreation/leisure activities.

Students who cannot physically engage in the game of basketball can still serve as a team manager, statistician, game photographer, motivational coach or free-throw expert. Any student participating as part of such a team will undoubtedly learn about scoring, rules, teamwork and how groups work together to achieve a common goal. Likewise, one need not be able to follow every choreographed step to benefit from the aerobics club, nor does one need to excel in physics, chemistry or biology to appreciate the creativity, problem-solving and interaction that takes place at the science fair.

2. Value participation over competition.

Schools are educational institutions. They exist to support the growth, development and learning of *all* students. Why then are so many extra-curricular and community activity groups focused on competition and winning? Most schools and many community organizations make 'cuts' when forming their sports teams, drama productions, music groups and even their academic groups. How does this type of policy further the social or learning experience of any student?

Instead of counting the number of trophies in the glass cases, touting the number of 'all-state' or 'all-conference' musicians a school or community has cultivated, and advertising the number of

years a group has been invited to the mathematics decathlon, a community might congratulate themselves on how many students are joining and participating in positive, constructive activities that promote learning and cooperation.

3. Understand participation in extra-curricular and community activities as a right of every youngster.

A teacher we know once taught a frustrated math student about arc and angles during games of 1-on-1 basketball. The student slowly started to make the connection from basketball to geometry during these sessions. This kind of creativity can be a catalyst for designing more appropriate classroom supports for learners. That is, if we can examine contexts in which young people are successful (when playing music, during athletic contests, through speech-writing), perhaps we can bring these experiences into weekly lessons while continuing to enhance skills and knowledge through extra-curricular experiences.

4. Expand school and community activity options to include a wide range of interests and needs. If a student cannot find an activity in his or her school, he or she is left to find social opportunities elsewhere. Some students may be successful in finding after-school activities that are interesting and safe. Other students may be unsuccessful in finding appropriate alternatives. Some of the students at Webb Middle School in Austin, Texas, for example, were in gangs. The principal decided to create more extra-curricular options in her school in the hopes of drawing these students into the school and getting them interested in something meaningful (Juarez, 1996). Since many gang members struggle with issues of identity (Vigil, 1988), Juarez formed the groups, in part, to provide students with opportunities to develop self-awareness through memberships that were school-sanctioned. The school began to offer a wide range of extra-curricular opportunities. Students who might have previously struggled to find an extra-curricular match could now choose from over 50 clubs and activities. Titles of these groups included walking, Tejano dance, ultimate frisbee, Pen Pal, Create Your Own Futures, ham radio and Macintosh (Juarez, 1996). School leaders were thrilled not only with the numbers of students who ended up participating, but also with the kinds of learning and excitement that resulted from the new extra-curricular offerings.

Similarly, a student with autism had a difficult time with all of the competitive sports offerings at his school so his principal encouraged him to launch a comic book drawing and discussion group. This group was a perfect fit for the learner with autism but it also attracted several art students and a host of comic book fanatics.

Conclusion

With commitment and imagination, all recreation and leisure activities can be conceptualized, supported and implemented in ways that allow all students active participation. This becomes critical not only because of the benefits of participation to students during their school years, but beyond as well. It is through participation in such activities that many people learn who they are, what they enjoy and how to live, play and learn with others in their community.

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References

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