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Middle School Engagement Benefits Of Offering Extracurricular Activities During The School Day

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MIDDLE SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT BENEFITS OF OFFERING
EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES DURING THE SCHOOL DAY

By

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A DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Extracurricular activities are a significant part of the school experience for many students, but there are concerns about the demands placed on students and the overscheduling of their after-school time. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine longitudinal middle school student outcomes based on one school's efforts to provide the benefits of extracurricular activities by offering those activities during the regular school day. This study explored the nature of the relationship between middle school, school-based extracurricular participation and subsequent student views of school connection. The study was conducted in an independent, private, Pre-K through 12th grade school with data collected from interviews with junior and senior students who had participated in the program as middle school students. The collected data showed students had positive recollections from participating in mixed grade level activities and in developing connections to the people in the school. The data showed that offering the extracurricular activities during the regular school day allowed students to participate in more activities and experience the benefits of participation such as developing friendships and exploring areas of interest. The data also showed that students viewed the extracurricular enrichment activities offered at the end of the school day as fun and stress-relieving in a regular school day filled with academic classes. This study offers recommendations for school leaders working to increase school engagement through extracurricular activities.

University of New England

Doctor of Education
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The middle school years in grades six, seven, and eight marks a transition time in the physical and emotional growth of children (Conklin, 2014). It is an important time of exploration and experiential learning as middle school marks the transition from childhood to adolescence forward to adulthood (World Health Organization, 2016). Students' social, cognitive, and emotional characteristics change as they move through the middle school years (World Health Organization, 2016), and they should be given many opportunities to explore areas of interest. Exploring these areas of interest can influence high school, college, and career choices in addition to providing social-emotional connections with peers (Balfanz, 2009). Engagement in school during middle school, demonstrated by attendance, behavior, and grades, has been shown to be very important for future college and career readiness (Balfanz, 2009). Extracurricular activities may provide ways for students to explore these areas of interest in fun and interesting ways and encourage school connectedness and engagement.

Parents reported extracurricular activities, especially participation in multiple activities, cause children stress even though this relationship has not been demonstrated in the literature (Mahoney & Vest, 2012). A small, independent middle school has created a program that allows middle school students to explore extracurricular activities during the regular school day, which helps minimize the perceived stressors brought on by after-school participation. The school encourages participation in sports activities for middle school students, most of which take place after school. Sports participation in middle school has been shown to produce increased prosocial development (Hughes, Cao, & Kwok, 2016). The program allows students to explore interests in non-athletic areas without creating scheduling conflicts with school-sponsored sports.

The extracurricular program, which takes place during the last period of the school day, was initially developed with three goals: increasing middle school arts participation, minimizing scheduling conflicts so that more students can participate in extracurricular activities, and easing the amount of core class time missed by students leaving early for sports activities in the afternoons (Ringley, 2008). The first goal arose from parent and student surveys completed in 2005 for the school's 2006 SAIS-SACS five-year re-accreditation visit in which parents and students requested more arts opportunities for students (McDonald, Reinhold, McChesney, Hendrickson, & Murray, 2006). As the school began to offer the desired arts opportunities, such as band, chorus, handbell choir, and drama, scheduling conflicts began to arise with after school sports activities. The second goal sought to provide students with the opportunity to participate in more activities without overscheduling and scheduling conflicts between multiple activities. Participation in sports activities after school is encouraged by the school and is desired by many middle school parents and students at the school (Parent Survey Data, 2015). The ten-year average of middle school sports participation is 68% (Ringley, 2016). The third goal sought to ease the problem of many middle school students missing core academic classes during the last period of the day for medical appointments and sports teams' early release to attend athletic competitions out of town. Due to the location of the school, sports teams routinely travel more than 100 miles to athletic competitions.

Before the implementation of this program, extracurricular activities, such as performance rehearsals, club meetings, and academic team practices were scheduled during lunch periods or after school (Horn, 2016). The school views these activities, both before and after school, as vital to developing school connection and engagement. This study explored the long-term effects of the extracurricular activities program offered during the regular school day

on school connectedness and engagement by interviewing past participants three and four years after involvement with the program.

Statement of the Problem

Extracurricular activities are a significant part of the school experience for many students, but there are concerns about the demands placed on students and the overscheduling of their after school time (Brown, Nobiling, Teufel, & Birch, 2011). Several studies have attempted to discover links between extracurricular activity participation, academics, and school engagement for high school students. Farb and Matjasko (2012) reviewed 52 studies completed between 2005 and 2010 that explored the connection between extracurricular activities and high school adolescent development showing mostly positive relationships. Limited studies have explored the long-term results of middle school extracurricular participation, and less research is available with a focus on younger students (Schwartz, Cappella, & Seidman, 2015).

The problem that was studied is the importance of extracurricular activities in developing school connection and engagement in middle school students. This study explored the nature of the relationship between middle school school-based extracurricular participation and later student views of school connection. The main audiences for this research are school administrators, parents, teachers, athletic directors, club sponsors, and others who plan for and work with middle school students in a school setting.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine longitudinal student outcomes of one school's efforts to provide the benefits of extracurricular activities by offering activities during the regular school day. The specific areas of focus were on school engagement and school connection. School engagement and connection are important because they have been shown to promote

school success (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Farb & Matjasko, 2012). Student engagement has become an important aspect for independent schools to evaluate to meet enrollment goals. Independent schools have placed an increased emphasis on community building to maintain the strength of the school and stability in enrollment (Gilmore & Rush, 2013). Engagement has been defined with three aspects: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional (Fredricks et al., 2011, Fredricks et al., 2016). Current high school juniors and seniors who participated in the school day extracurricular activities for three years in middle school were invited to participate.

Research Questions

This research was guided by the question: How important are extracurricular activities in developing school connection and engagement in middle school students?

Related research questions include:

- What is the nature of the relationship between middle school school-based extracurricular participation and later student views of school connection?
- How does offering extracurricular activities during the regular school day provide more students the advantages of participation?
- How does the participation in extracurricular activities throughout the school day help avoid the perceived stress associated with overscheduling?

Conceptual Framework

A program was created at an independent day school that offers middle school students the opportunity to explore a wide variety of extracurricular interest areas during the regular school day, which provides students the advantages and benefits of involvement in extracurricular activities without the perceived negative outcomes associated with

overscheduling after school. The study evaluated the long-term effects of this program on student engagement and school connection. The literature reviewed demonstrated the need for visible, organized, in-school activities and clubs in middle school and their relationship to student engagement. The literature also showed the importance of student choice in activity participation (Anderson, Funk, Elliott, & Smith, 2003; Randall, Travers, Shapiro, & Bohnert, 2016). The overscheduling concerns were reviewed in connection with extracurricular activity participation. While the negative effects of overscheduling on students have not been supported in most research studies, parents continue to report family stress caused by participation in multiple activities by multiple children in a family. Studies present contradictory findings. The limited number of studies focused on middle school students demonstrate the need for further investigation.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

This study was conducted with the assumption that extracurricular activity participation in high school offers positive outcomes for high school students, which has been well documented in many previous research studies (Farb & Matjasko, 2012). The primary limitations of this study are the uniqueness of this program and the small sample size of students involved. The outcomes of this study could be used to develop and plan extracurricular opportunities for middle school students in other schools. Future studies could further evaluate similar programs in other schools. Another limitation of this study is the mixed research available that explores overscheduling concerns (Mahoney & Vest, 2012). Overscheduling was not a specific area of research in this study but is connected to the purpose of the program being explored.

The site of this research is the school in which the program is based. The program has been in place for eight years. School administrators, parents, teachers, athletic directors, club

sponsors, and others who plan for and work with middle school students in a school setting may benefit from the findings in that they can be used for future extracurricular programming choices. The scope of the research is a follow up study of previously enrolled students who described their experiences in relation to the research question.

Significance

Extensive research has been completed in the last twenty years exploring positive outcomes from high school and college extracurricular activities. Early adolescence and middle school extracurricular participation studies are much more limited (Schwartz, Cappella, & Seidman, 2015). Middle school is a crucial time during which some students become disengaged with school (Anderman, 2003; Parsons, Nuland, & Parsons, 2014), and fewer studies explore middle school extracurricular activities with even fewer examining the later high school influences. This study specifically identified high school juniors and seniors who participated in a program that provided middle school extracurricular activities during the school day. School connection and engagement are important to students' success in school (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). The long-term effects of the program were examined to ascertain how important extracurricular activities are in developing future school connection and engagement. School administrators, club sponsors, and faculty may benefit from the findings to plan future extracurricular programming both during and after school and to help improve student connection and engagement in school. Independent schools may use the findings as a link to school connection and engagement which has been shown to be connected to increased parental satisfaction with their school of choice (2013 NAIS Report on the High School Survey of Student Engagement, 2014). Parents and students may use the findings from this study to make informed choices about extracurricular participation during the middle school years. Others who

plan for and work with middle school students in a school setting may benefit from the findings as they can be used for future extracurricular programming choices.

Definition of Terms

Engagement – Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) reviewed literature related to the definitions of student engagement and suggested that student engagement has three dimensions which are behavioral, cognitive, and emotional. This definition is further supported by Fredricks et al. (2016).

Behavioral engagement – Behavioral engagement is described as participation in academic, social, and other activities that are considered essential to positive academic outcomes (Fredricks et al., 2011, Fredricks et al., 2016).

Emotional engagement – Emotional engagement is described as positive and negative reactions to school, academics, teachers, and other students (Fredricks et al., 2011, Fredricks et al., 2016).

Cognitive engagement – Cognitive engagement is described as how invested a student is in her or her learning (Fredricks et al., 2011, Fredricks et al., 2016).

Extracurricular activity – A published, peer-reviewed article reviewed many definitions of extracurricular activity found in published literature. They propose the following definition of extracurricular activity that is used in this research: “Extracurricular activities are defined as academic or non-academic activities that are conducted under the auspices of the school but occur outside of normal classroom time and are not part of the curriculum. Additionally, extracurricular activities do not involve a grade or academic credit, and participation is optional on the part of the student” (Bartkus, Nemelka, Nemelka, & Gardner, 2012).

Middle school students – Middle school students are defined as students in grades six, seven, and eight (Alt & Choy, 2000)

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between middle school school-based extracurricular participation and subsequent student views of school connection and engagement by exploring the socio-emotional engagement of students that participated in the program. It also sought to determine student thoughts and feelings about the long-term consequences or benefits of offering extracurricular activities during the regular school day. The researcher sought to advance previous work in the field of middle school extracurricular activities by examining the value in offering extracurricular activities during the regular school day. Studies with contrary findings in extracurricular activity participation and its influence on academic and engagement and the limited number of studies completed in middle school demonstrated the need for further investigation.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Extracurricular activities are an important part of the school experience for students around the world. Extracurricular activities provide students with opportunities to engage with their peers in areas of common interest, the arts, and athletic pursuits. By taking into consideration students' needs for socialization, these activities make school seem more fun and encourage students to be more engaged in school. Students that are more engaged in school will perform better academically. Many studies conducted in the last 20 years have attempted to discover links between extracurricular activity participation, academics, and school engagement, particularly for high school students. Farb and Matjasko (2012) reviewed 52 studies completed between 2005 and 2010 that explored the connection between extracurricular activities and high school adolescent development showing mostly positive relationships. In early research, Darling et al. (2005) explored the association between high school student participation in extracurricular activities and student adjustment, specifically examining connections to grades, drinking, drug use, and academic attitude. Participation in non-sport extracurricular activities showed the highest positive adjustment. Students who participated in sports showed higher positive adjustment than students who did not participate in any extracurricular activities. They noted no variation by demographic or peer characteristics to their findings. Research on extracurricular activities continues and explores their relationships to many variables. Two of the specific areas of research in this study are the influence of extracurricular activity on school connectedness and school engagement.

The articles and books used in the literature review were gathered through online searches in ProQuest, the Education Resource Information Center, EBSCO Host Research

Databases, Education Research Information Center (ERIC) research database, and Google Scholar. Boolean searches were conducted using the words extracurricular activities, middle school extracurricular activities, high school extracurricular activities, middle school engagement, ecological systems theory, young student extracurricular activities, preadolescence extracurricular activities, engagement, school connection, independent schools, and student overscheduling. The snowballing method was also used to find articles related to the research topics. Many research articles exist on the topic of extracurricular activities. The peer-reviewed articles were selected on the basis of their focus on middle school and young children with specific research in the areas of school engagement and academics and have been published in the last ten years. References include studies conducted in many countries in North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia.

Extracurricular Activities and Academics Links

Fredricks (2011, 2012) has conducted and published several peer-reviewed studies and articles on different aspects of the impact of extracurricular activities for high school students. Her individual work and her work with Eccles (2006; 2008; 2010) supports the importance of extracurricular activities for high school students and shows the possible important role that extracurricular activities may play for middle school students. An early study by Fredricks and Eccles (2006) analyzed data gathered from a large longitudinal study of adolescent development. The study was made up of mostly white, middle-class adolescents in grades 7 through 12. Researchers reviewed three years of data to determine a relationship between club and sports participation and youth development. They also examined the data for quantity and breadth of participation in relation to youth development. Their data analysis suggested that greater participation in extracurricular activities is associated with positive academic and psychological

adjustment and positive peer context. The strongest association was seen in the eleventh and twelfth-grade students with lesser association with the ninth- and tenth-grade students. One possible explanation given for this outcome is the greater prestige and visibility of high school extracurricular activities compared to the prestige and visibility of middle school extracurricular activities. Their work supports the need for more visibility of middle school extracurricular activities and the need for more investigation into the role that extracurricular activities play in middle school engagement and connectedness.

Studies conducted specifically to examine extracurricular impact for middle school students are more limited than studies conducted with high school students. One middle school study conducted by Fredricks and Eccles (2008) provided further quantitative work from an earlier analysis of data from the Maryland Adolescent Development Context Study. Families of seventh-grade students were invited to participate in a smaller study. Data was collected from interviews with families over a four-year period. Reported results found that participation in middle school clubs positively related to academics. Eighth-grade students participating in sports had higher rates of problem behaviors while participation in eighth-grade clubs predicted better social peer relationships and resiliency. Some exceptions to these conclusions were noted in relation to race and gender. Club participation for middle school showed more positive effects than sports participation. In the discussion, it is noted that perhaps the benefits of sports participation is not seen until years later, possibly due to the greater visibility of high school sports, supporting the need for organized in-school activities and clubs in middle school.

Current studies support previous work connecting extracurricular activities to academics at the high school level. A recent study showed at-risk high school students who met ACT benchmarks were more likely to participate in extracurricular activities (Marchetti, 2016). Fewer

studies have examined the effects of extracurricular participation in middle school with long-term academic outcomes and school engagement.

Extracurricular Activities and School Engagement Links

Determining the characteristics and definitions of school engagement varies from one study to the next and continues to evolve (Boekaerts, 2016). Fredricks (2011) presented a review of research defining school engagement and how it relates to in-school and out-of-school activities. Fredricks discussed the importance of school engagement and its connection to higher achievement, greater educational attainment, and lower dropout rates. Evidence was also presented of characteristics of programs that increase student engagement and suggestions were made for ways that teachers and program staff can increase engagement of students in any program. The suggestions for increasing student engagement were: having supportive teacher/student relationships, having strong peer relationships, having structure, and having a variety of tasks with real-world applications. Fredricks recommends defining engagement in three areas, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive in future studies. Further research work continues on how to measure and better define engagement (Eccles, 2016; Fredricks, Filsecher, & Lawson, 2016; Boekaerts, 2016; Wang, Fredricks, Ye, Hofkins, Shall, 2016; Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2016; Salmela-Aro, Moleller, Schneider & Spicer, 2016).

Self-concept and self-esteem are important characteristics in measuring school engagement. An Australian quantitative study conducted by Blomfield and Barber (2009) investigated the relationship between extracurricular participation and self-concept of high school students. The study measured reported social self-concept, academic self-concept, and general self-worth of students who did and did not participate in extracurricular activities and also included both sport and non-sport activities. The study showed higher self-concept in

students that participated in extracurricular activities. Even higher self-concept was shown in students that participated in both sport and non-sport extracurricular activities. A large, multi-state study suggested that students involved in extracurricular activities have more positive perceptions of school climate (Martinez, Coker, Mahon, Cohen, & Thapa, 2016). Kort-Butler and Hageman (2011) explored self-esteem trajectories from high school through age 26. Students that had participated in extracurricular activities demonstrated higher self-esteem over time than those who had not participated. Students with a greater breadth of participation showed the highest levels of self-esteem. These studies support the relationship between positive self-concept and self-esteem and engagement in extracurricular activities. More work is needed to determine similar links in younger students.

Elementary and Middle School Students and Extracurricular Activities

While most research studies examining the benefits of extracurricular activities have been completed using data gathered from high school students, some have attempted to make similar connections between extracurricular activities and elementary and middle school student academics and student engagement. In a study of middle school aged students, Hirschfield and Gasper (2011) found a positive relationship between emotional and behavioral engagement with school attendance and a decrease in student delinquency. Young students that participate in extracurricular activities have better social skills, which may help them have fewer behavioral and conduct concerns (Denault & Dery, 2015). Children that participate in a variety of extracurricular activities, including sport and non-sport activities, were less likely to enact bullying behavior (Riese, Gjelsvick, & Ranney, 2015).

Academic outcomes for elementary and middle school students. Some studies have explored the relationship between extracurricular activities and academics in young children.

Examining young students beginning in first grade, a three-year, quantitative study conducted by Schuepbach (2014) showed a relationship between mathematics achievement and participation in extracurricular activities. The sample of students was taken from German-speaking schools in Switzerland. Schuepbach (2014) also examined the relationship between the intensity and quality of the extracurricular activities and math achievement. Students that participated in extracurricular activities at school showed greater gains in mathematics than students that did not participate in extracurricular activities. Greater intensity and quality of the extracurricular activities were also shown to have a greater effect on mathematical outcomes for the young students (Schuepbach, 2014). This study demonstrated the importance of quality school-based extracurricular activities for young students, suggesting that positive academic outcomes might also be possible for middle school students.

Another three-year, longitudinal study was conducted by Metsapelto and Pulkkinen (2012) in Finland with third- and fourth-grade students. Their study examined the relationship between extracurricular participation and teacher-rated socioemotional behavior and school achievement. Metsapelto and Pulkkinen (2012) showed that participation in arts activities such as music, arts, and crafts was related to higher grades, more working skills, and higher adaptive behavior in young students. Academic club participation was shown to be related to better academic performance. Participation in clubs was shown to be related to higher academics and lower internalization of problems. Sports participation did not show a significant positive relationship to higher grades, working skills, or higher adaptive behavior for young children. The study also showed a preference of individual sports for girls and team sports for boys. This study demonstrates the importance for young children to participate in a variety of activities. While sports can be fun, they should be supplemented with other extracurricular activities such as art,

music, or clubs. Park (2010) found similar results when conducting an analysis of data collected from middle school students at a gifted magnet school. The first part of her study showed music to be the only activity contributing positively to academic achievement while sports participation contributed negatively. Sport and dance participation was the only activity shown to contribute positively to well-being. A wider variety of extracurricular activities is important to provide the most positive beneficial outcomes.

Social-emotional outcomes for elementary and middle school students.

Extracurricular activities can help students attain positive social-emotional and developmental outcomes, such as a sense of school belonging, positive attitudes toward school, lower stress, and better relationships. Metsapelto and Pulkkinen (2012) showed participation in performing arts was related to better teamwork and social engagement. Badura et al. (2016) found higher school engagement and lower levels of school stress in Czech Republic adolescents that participated in extracurricular activities. Park (2010) found that extracurricular activities may provide a protective role in dealing with life stressors. Okada (2009) noted higher scores on positive school adjustment for students that participated in extracurricular activities. Knifsend (2014) investigated the connection between extracurricular activities in middle school and social identity development. Results indicated that middle school students' feelings of belonging and academic engagement were linked to school activity participation. School-based team participation showed the strongest links. Akos (2006) conducted a study in the southeastern United States that specifically examined student transition from elementary school to middle school. The study used data gathered from sixth-grade students at one middle school. His study found that sixth-grade student participation in multiple extracurricular activities related to school connectedness and academic achievement.

Studies with younger students have shown many links to positive socioemotional outcomes with peers and attitudes about school which could lead to less negative behaviors in young children. In reviewing data collected from Australian studies, Simoncini and Caltabino (2012) found a connection between extracurricular participation and fewer behavior problems in young children aged five to nine. They defined an extracurricular activity as a structured activity with adult supervision. Discussion addressed the limited studies focused on the benefits of extracurricular activities for young children, which demonstrates the need for more research with children younger than high school. A qualitative case study conducted by Penner and Wallin (2012) examined school attachment and restitution strategies used at a middle school in Canada. Five teachers and five students were interviewed for the case study. From these interviews, Penner and Wallin (2012) identified positive student-teacher relationships that develop a safe, warm, caring classroom and school environment as the characteristics needed by schools to reduce student referrals for inappropriate behavior. Characteristics that increased students' sense of belonging at the school were having fun, meeting friends, extracurricular activity opportunities, and availability of food. In a study examining whether engagement would predict delinquency, Hirshfield and Jasper (2009) found that emotional and behavioral engagement in school led to decreases in delinquency in elementary students.

Leisure activities, such as extracurricular activities, provide positive psychological needs satisfaction especially the need for relatedness (Leversen, Danielsen, Birkeland, & Samdal, 2012). The positive ecological aspects of a school setting have shown the importance of other adults in the lives of adolescents (Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Zumbo, 2011). Wang and Eccles (2012) also posited the importance of supportive relationships with teachers and peers for positive school engagement. Positive support from parents and other adults has been shown to

provide students with more positive perceptions of their leadership skills (Hancock, Dyke, and Jones, 2012). Middle school students need to have opportunities provided at school for extracurricular activities, and the fun and friends that come with those activities, promote a positive school experience and school engagement.

Other Considerations

Student choice in extracurricular activities. Choice of extracurricular activities is important to a child's interest and engagement. Anderson, Funk, Elliott, and Smith (2003) conducted a study to explore children's perceptions and views of parental involvement in many types of extracurricular activities. This research included a variety of extracurricular activities, such as participation in artistic endeavors, sports, and club activities, and surveyed children aged 9 to 11. Reported results found that parental support plays an important role in children's enjoyment of extracurricular activities, but also showed that children should be allowed some choice in activity participation. Parental pressure and disappointment voiced as encouragement to improve were shown to negatively affect children's enjoyment in all activities that were part of the survey. Some gender differences were also noted. Parental support was especially important in relation to artistic endeavors of boys and in relation to sports endeavors for girls. Similar findings exploring parental pressures to participate and succeed in extracurricular activities showed negative effects on the psychological benefits of extracurricular participation in high school (Randall, Travers, Shapiro, & Bohnert, 2016). Knifsend and Graham (2012) suggest that it is important for high school students to participate in extracurricular activities of their choice, and suggest schools provide a wide variety of extracurricular programming opportunities.

Depth, breadth, and type of activities. Depth, breadth, and activity types are important areas to take into consideration to determine a connection between extracurricular activities,

academics, and student engagement. Busseri, Rose-Krasnor, Willoughby, and Chalmers (2006) suggest there is value in examining depth and breadth of activities in extracurricular activity studies. Guevremont, Findlay, and Kohen (2014) examined in-school and out-of-school activities of high school students in Canada using data gathered from a Canadian national study. Guevremont et al. (2014) examined the relationship between in-school and out-of-school activities, drug and alcohol use, and socioemotional and academic outcomes. Both in-school and out-of-school participation were associated with more pro-social behavior, higher self-image, and lower emotional anxiety with some exceptions noted. Sports participation was shown to have a negative relationship to academics, while club participation showed a positive relationship. Non-sport activity showed less likelihood of drug and alcohol use than sports activity. Sterns and Glennie (2010) examined school characteristics to determine if those characteristics influenced the types and numbers of extracurricular activities available to students. They also sought to learn whether there was a relationship between the diversity of activities and academic outcomes. Their study examined the need for financial and human resources to support extracurricular activities. The level of these resources could have an effect on the depth and breadth of activities offered at individual schools and thereby lead to poorer academic outcomes. The study did not show more activities were available at better-resourced schools but did show a relationship between the size of school and number of activities, in addition to a relationship between poverty and participation. A relationship was shown between the number of activities offered by a school and better academic outcomes and lower dropout rates. Participation, rather than the context of in-school versus out-of-school, is important for the positive psychological and academic outcomes. It is important for schools to offer a wide variety of extracurricular activities in high

schools, and there is a need for similar studies examining the benefits of offering a wide variety of extracurricular activities in middle schools.

More recent studies examine the impact of extracurricular activities over time. Kort-Butler and Hagewen (2011) explored self-esteem trajectories from high school through age 26. Denault and Poulin (2009) examined growth curves of depth and breadth of participation in extracurricular activities for students in grades 7 through 11 in Canada. Their study showed that early levels of participation proved to be “better predictors of later outcomes than rates of change over time” (p. 1199). Students with early participation and greater depth and breadth of participation in extracurricular activities showed more commitment to school and society. Agans et al. (2014) examined trajectories and patterns of participation in multiple extracurricular activities and the impact on developmental outcomes in seventh through twelfth grades in the United States. Higher scores of positive youth development were noted with extracurricular participation in multiple activities that continued through high school with fewer negative aspects, such as risky behaviors, depression, and substance abuse. These results indicate the importance of continued participation in multiple extracurricular activities.

Extracurricular activities and friendships. Middle school extracurricular activities provide opportunities for friendships, including mixed grade level friendships, which help foster school engagement. A study conducted by Bowker and Spencer (2009) specifically examined the value of mixed grade friendships for seventh and eighth-grade students. Their study showed that students with mixed-grade friendships reported less loneliness than other adolescents. Girls that did not have friends in their same grade level benefited from having a friend in another grade level. Boys with anxiety that had mixed grade friendships reported less victimization within their grade level. Schaefer, Simpkins, Vest, and Price (2011) conducted a study of middle and high

school students in seventh through twelfth grades, which showed friendships were often connected to extracurricular activities, and that extracurricular activities helped students develop new friendships. Friendships are an important characteristic needed to foster school engagement.

Overscheduling of Extracurricular Activities

Some students participate in a wide variety of extracurricular activities and must balance multiple activities, school work, and family life. Questions have been raised and studies are being developed to examine the quantity of activities in which students participate and the negative effects, if any, caused by student participation in multiple or lengthy activities. This has been referred to as the “overscheduling” hypothesis. Mahoney and Vest (2012) conducted a qualitative review of research studies that examined the hypothesis of overscheduling and its connection to negative developmental outcomes of high school students. Mahoney and Vest (2012) reported that most studies do not support the hypothesis of overscheduling. The goal of their review was to examine the longitudinal positive and negative outcomes of activity participation into adulthood. They concluded that there is no significant relationship between problematic adjustment and activity participation into young adulthood. They also reported finding a significant relationship between positive adjustment in young adulthood and organized activity participation in adolescence. Positive adjustment was measured by educational attainment, voting, volunteering, and positive psychological adjustment. Parental involvement, psychological adjustment, and parental pressures were part of the discussion. Although not supported by data, the author suggests that future studies involve these parental aspects and viewpoints as they may be contributing to overscheduling concerns.

Simoncini and Caltabinos (2012) reviewed literature related to the connection between extracurricular participation and student behavior. They discussed concerns about over-

scheduled students but stated little evidence was shown to support concerns about participation in too many extracurricular activities. Fredricks and Eccles (2010) further examined data from the Maryland Adolescent Development in Context longitudinal study that included data from a fifth-year interview conducted with the families in the previous study. Families were asked about alcohol and drug use and psychological adjustment using three different measures: family involvement, and civic engagement. Their qualitative study examined extracurricular activities and their relationships to these areas. Analysis of the data found that the total number of extracurricular activities was predictive of academic adjustment. However, the data also showed a point of leveling of academic benefit, suggesting that there is a point of too much participation. Specifically mentioned was that no evidence was shown linking high levels of organized activity participation to detrimental youth development. Participation in a larger number of organizations showed a decreased likelihood of drug and alcohol use and an increase in civic engagement. From the same data gathered from the Maryland longitudinal study, Fredricks (2012) further examined extracurricular participation and the concern about overscheduling of students' time. Conducted with tenth-grade students, she examined the breadth and intensity of extracurricular activities and the connection to achievement test scores and grades. Fredricks' 2012 study showed that high levels of participation, defined as five or more activities for more than 14 hours per week, showed academic performance to begin to decline.

Contrary Research on Extracurricular Activities

Some studies examining the relationship between participation in extracurricular activities and academics and school engagement have found no connections which are contrary to the majority of conducted studies. More research is needed to explore these areas with middle school students.

Byrd (2010) examined data gathered from middle school students in Virginia and found no relationship between participation in extracurricular activities and academic achievement or school identification. Roth, Malone, and Brook-Gunn (2010) reviewed literature related to after-school programs and developmental outcomes for lower and middle school students. They concluded that the literature does not support the idea that greater participation in after-school activities is positively related to academic, socioemotional, or behavioral outcomes. A relationship was seen when comparing non-participation in activities to high levels of participation. They stated that academic gains correlated with after-school activity participation to varied depending on the program. Middle school students' attendance was shown to improve by those students with greater participation in after-school programming. The authors suggested that future studies examine the breadth of offered activities.

Shulruf, Tumen, and Tolley (2008) attempted to connect extracurricular activity to a positive attitude toward literacy and numeracy using data gathered from a high school in New Zealand. Their study examined 66 different activities in 12 area groups, such as arts, community service, academic support, and sports. They were unable to support the hypothesis because only team sports participation was shown to positively improve attitudes toward literacy. Their results showed little connection between extracurricular participation and attitudes toward literacy, and they felt more research should be done to justify the considerable investment into extracurricular opportunities for students.

Independent Schools and Retention

Parents seeking alternatives to public education often look to private, charter, or independent schools. Private schools and independent schools do not receive public money and operate by means of tuition dollars paid by parents (Dolin, 2014). According to Dolin, the

biggest difference between independent and private schools is that independent schools are overseen by a board of trustees or board of governors. Independent schools are “close-knit communities that provide students with individualized attention. They challenge students to stretch their minds and go beyond academics to develop responsible, independent, and community-oriented students” (“What Is an Independent School?,” 2016). Independent schools also have unique missions, are governed by a board of trustees, and are supported financially by tuition and charitable donations (“What is an Independent School?,” 2016). Charter schools are publicly funded, governed by groups under a contract, and are exempt from some regulations that apply to public schools (“The Condition of Education - Participation in Education - Elementary/Secondary - Charter School Enrollment,” 2016). Students who attend private and independent schools pay tuition while students who attend charter schools do not pay tuition. Private, independent, and charter schools are perceived by prospective parents as having similar characteristics of being environments favorable for learning with a challenging curriculum, providing a well-rounded education, and populated by high-achieving students and high-quality teachers (Torres, 2014). Independent schools are also perceived to provide advantages in college counseling, character-building, and individualized attention (Torres, 2014). Heads of school and trustees often look to schools’ re-enrollment statistics as an indicator of school value and appeal (Gullia & Jorgenson, 2014). Schools with larger attrition rates can seem less successful.

The recession in the late 2000s caused many independent schools to take strategic steps to manage enrollment and re-enrollment in order to survive. Gilmore and Rush (2013) conducted a year-long study that asked how the recession impacted the financial health of independent schools. Their study showed several steps that schools took after the recession which included increased emphasis on community building to maintain the strength of the school and stability in

enrollment (Gilmore & Rush, 2013). Research has shown a link between strong faculty and student satisfaction (“Ideas and Perspectives ISM Research, Theory, and Analysis,” 2008). In a study completed by Independent School Management in 2008, the top five important factors parents consider in independent schools were safety, faculty caring and concern, character education, faculty expertise, and academic rigor (“Ideas and Perspectives ISM Research, Theory, and Analysis,” 2009). Student engagement has become an important aspect for independent schools to evaluate as they strive to meet enrollment goals.

The National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) conducted The High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) at 54 NAIS schools. The results were sorted into three dimensions: cognitive, which included intellection and academics; behavioral, which included social and participatory engagement; and emotional. A majority of students in the survey stated that they attended independent schools due to friends or family and reported that many participate in four or more hours per week of extracurricular activities. The study also showed that 77 percent of high school students in independent schools mentioned that they are motivated by faculty encouragement, 94 percent of students felt supported by teachers and 88 percent said that an adult at their school knew them well (2013 NAIS Report on the High School Survey of Student Engagement, 2014). Similar findings were shown in the NAIS HSSSE survey in the following year (Torres, 2015).

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Conceptual Framework

A program was created at an independent day school that offers middle school students the opportunity to explore a wide variety of extracurricular interest areas during the regular school day, which provides students the advantages and benefits of involvement in

extracurricular activities without the perceived negative outcomes associated with overscheduling after school. The study evaluated the long-term effects of this program on student engagement and academic performance. The literature review demonstrates the need for visible, organized, in-school activities and clubs in middle school and their relationship to student engagement and school connectedness. The literature also shows the importance of student choice in activity participation. The overscheduling concerns are reviewed in connection with extracurricular activity participation. While the negative effects of overscheduling on students have not been supported in most research studies, parents continue to report family stress caused by participation in multiple activities by multiple children in a family. Some studies with contrary findings to the majority of research and the limited number of studies focused on middle school students demonstrate the need for further investigation.

The benefits of extracurricular activities have been well documented by multiple authors in many locations. Various perspectives have been reviewed in research articles, studies, and dissertations from Europe, Australia, North America, and Asia. Fredricks (2011, 2012) has completed studies examining the impact of extracurricular activities for high school students. She has also completed work with others reviewing measures of student engagement (Fredricks et al., 2011). Eccles has completed a number of studies, including several with Fredricks, showing the positive effects of extracurricular activities for high school students (2006, 2008, 2010). Mahoney and Vest (2012) conducted a qualitative review of research studies that examined concerns about overscheduling and its connection to negative developmental outcomes in high school students. They reported that most studies do not support concerns about the negative academic impact of overscheduling.

Theoretical Framework

The literature review encompasses studies that reference Ecological Systems Theory specifically examining extracurricular activities and the impact of participation on school engagement, academics, behavior, and school identity. Ecological systems theory, sometimes called human ecology theory, developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), holds that environments experienced by humans throughout their lifetimes influence behavior. Ecological systems theory has been used as a framework in a number of studies examining extracurricular activities and their effects on adolescent development (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). The four constructs of this model: process, person, contexts, and time, have interacting relationships (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 795). Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework is composed of five subsystems displayed in nesting circles: individual, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) as shown in Figure 1. The microsystem, the first circle around the individual, displays the relationships between the child and the closest people and caregivers in the child's life. The microsystem includes parents, teachers, schools, and peers. Mesosystem, the second outer circle, displays relationships between the child's caregivers, such as between parents and teachers. The third outer circle, exosystem, displays influences on a child's life that the child is not directly connected to, such as a parent's place of employment. The outermost ring, macrosystem, represents laws and community culture, beliefs, and values.

Several completed studies examine the impact of extracurricular after-school activities based on ecological systems theory. Eccelles, Barber, Stone, and Hunt (2003) referencing Mahoney, Larson, and Eccelles (2004) state that participation in school-based, extracurricular activities "increases school participation and achievement because it facilitates: (a) the

acquisition of interpersonal skills and positive social norms, (b) membership in prosocial peer groups, and (c) stronger emotional and social connections to one's school." This third area of connection to school and school engagement is a focus of this study.

Ecological systems theory emphasizes the importance of environmental influences on children and individuals. It also emphasizes the importance of connected relationships between the layers of the nested circles. The literature review and this study examined the environmental influences of the middle school's school-day activity program.

Ecological systems theory encompasses the many influences on a child's development. A child's environment at home, at school, and in play groups are important and exist in the smaller circles. Larger environmental groups, such as groups that do not directly contact the child, also have an impact on child development and are represented by the larger circles. Conflict in any of the layers can affect the child. For example, a parent who has a conflict in his or her workplace can affect the child negatively, even though the child has no direct contact with the place of employment. A strength of this theory is that it shows the relationships between the many influences on a child's or individual's development. Lack of social development can be traced to a particular system in the circle diagram. The theory posits that similar beliefs and values in a child's total environment help a child develop positively.

Weaknesses of the ecological systems theory are related to its broadness, which makes it difficult to test. For example, a strength of the ecological systems theory is that it accounts for every environmental influence on a child's positive development. This is also seen as a weakness in that it is difficult to consider every environmental factor affecting a child in research studies. Another weakness is that early ecological systems theory tends to point toward the certain normal household structure of mother, father, and child, without considering other household

formations. In his 2005 book *Making Human Beings Human*, Bronfenbrenner stated that child rearing has evolved and specifically addressed this concern by stating, “most of the reported research was conducted a decade ago and may not, in all instances, apply to

Model of Ecological Systems Theory

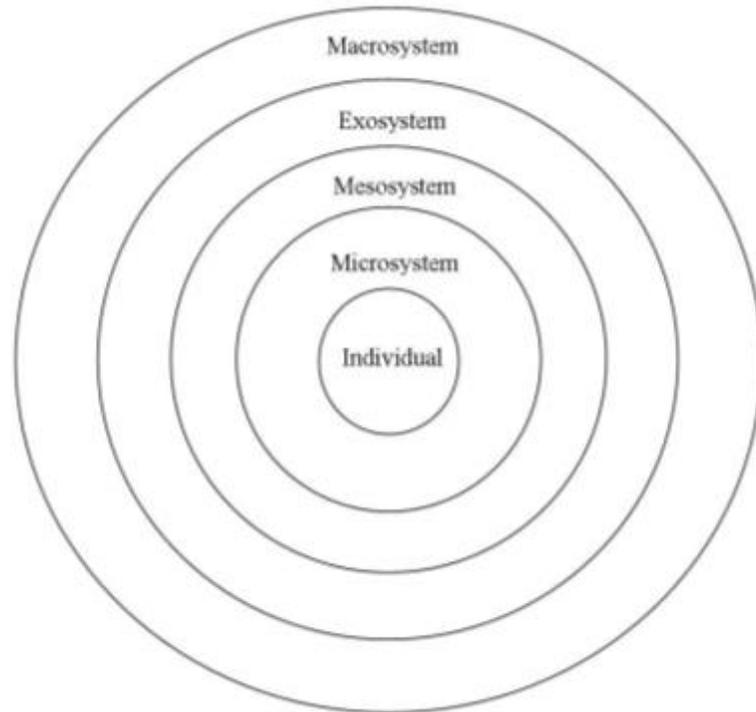


Figure 1. Adapted from “The Ecology of Human Development” by Urie Bronfenbrenner, 1979 Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

the outcome of parent-child monitoring in the present year” (p. 8). He also stated that children in single parent homes are not necessarily at risk in that “new relationships and structures that make possible a constructive change in the course of their children’s development” (p. 8). Ecological systems theory has evolved since its beginnings in the 1970s and now accounts for more influences, such as time in the environment and provides expanded definitions for characteristics in the original theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Conclusion

This study seeks to build on previous work in the field of middle school extracurricular activities by examining the value in offering extracurricular activities during the regular school day. The reviewed literature examined research related to the need for visible, organized, in-school activities and clubs in middle school and their relation to student academics and engagement. Concerns about the detrimental academic effects on students scheduled in multiple or extensive extracurricular activities have not been supported by the current research but may have parental stressor connections rather than student connections. Studies with contrary findings in extracurricular activity participation and its influence on academic and engagement and the limited number of studies completed in middle school demonstrate the need for further investigation.

Farb and Matjasko (2012) suggested further research is needed to explore the connection between the quantity and variety of activities with future positive developmental outcomes. They also suggested further investigation into adolescents' feelings and experiences while participating in extracurricular activities which could be used to determine how the relationship develops between activity, participation and psychological adjustment. This connection has had mixed reviews in previous studies.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this basic qualitative research study was to discover the student perceived, long-term values, if any, of an extracurricular program offered during the regular school hours for middle school students. Extracurricular activities are defined as extra academic assistance classes, additional classes in academic interest areas such as arts and science, and special interest clubs and activities. Middle school students are defined as students in grades six, seven, and eight.

This research was guided by the question: How important are extracurricular activities in developing school connection, school engagement, and academics in middle school students?

Related research questions include:

- What is the relationship between middle school school-based extracurricular participation and later student views of school connection?
- How does offering extracurricular activities during the regular school day provide more students the advantages of participation?
- How does the participation in extracurricular activities throughout the school day address the perceived stress associated with overscheduling?

A program has been created at an independent day school that offers middle school students the opportunity to explore a wide variety of extracurricular interest areas during the regular school day, which provides students the advantages and benefits of involvement in extracurricular activities without the perceived negative outcomes associated with overscheduling after school. This study evaluated the long-term effects of this program on student engagement and school connection.

Basic qualitative research is used to determine interpretation and meaning that people “attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). This study examined the long-term values, if any, of the study site’s extracurricular program during the regular school hours for middle school students. The researcher used a criterion, maximum variation sample to identify students to participate in face-to-face, in-person interviews with the researcher (Creswell, 2013, p. 158). Data was reviewed from the schoolwide administration of the Gallup Student Poll to students in grades 6 through 12. The Gallup Student Poll offers the school a scorecard report in the areas of engagement, hope, entrepreneurial aspirations, and financial/career literacy (Gallup, 2016). This data was obtained from the school’s college counselor as the administrator of the poll.

Setting

The study site is an independent, coeducational, college-preparatory day school in the Southeast. The school population is 670 students in PreK3 through 12th grade. The student body of 670 students is 53% male and 47% female. The ethnicity of the student body is 82% European American (546), 5% African American (33), 5% international students (33), 3.3% multiracial (22), 2.4% Hispanic/Latino American (22), 1.4% Asian American (9), 0.6% Middle Eastern American (4), 0.3% Native American (2), and 0.2% Pacific Islander American (1). In 2016, 32% of students received some form of need-based financial aid. Admission to the school is competitive. For the 2015-2016 school year, 85% of applicants were offered admission, with 86% of those admitted electing to enroll (Diffley, 2016).

The school is accredited by the Southern Association of Independent Schools and Advanced Ed. The school admits academically qualified students without regard to race, creed, color, sex, or national origin and demonstrates a commitment to diversity. There are 69 faculty

members at the study site of whom 62% hold advanced degrees. In addition to teaching, a number coach and lead other extracurricular student activities. The student to faculty ratio is 11:1. The school offers 15 Advanced Placement courses with an overall pass rate for 2016 of 74%. Scholastic Aptitude Test mid 50% ranges are Critical Reading 480-600, Mathematics 490-640, and Writing 460-610 (Diffley, 2016). The researcher is a staff member at the study site and currently manages the schedule for the middle school extracurricular program. Permission to conduct the study was requested and obtained in writing from the Head of School.

Beginning in the 2009-2010 school year, the study site changed its middle school schedule to eliminate mandatory study hall for students and replaced it with an extracurricular period available to all middle school students during the last period of the regular school day. Middle school students are allowed to make choices for each day of the week among clubs, extra academic help, extra ungraded extracurricular classes, physical education classes, academic teams, and global studies classes. Students pick new classes every quarter from approximately 10 different choices per day allowing them to create an individual, self-selected schedule of activities.

Participants

Basic qualitative research is used to determine interpretation and meaning that people “attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). This study examined the long-term values, if any, of the study site’s extracurricular program during the regular school hours for middle school students. The researcher used a criterion, maximum variation sample (Creswell, 2013, p. 158) of students. To be included in the study, students had to meet the criteria of having participated in the middle school extracurricular program for three years (as sixth graders in the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 school year, as seventh-graders in the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013

school year, and eighth graders in the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 school year) and meet the criteria of being currently enrolled at the study site for his or her junior or senior year of high school. By seeking to invite all students that met the criteria to participate, the best data would be gathered to determine if students perceived long-term value from their participation in the middle school extracurricular program. Also, by inviting all of the students who meet the criteria, the sample is a maximum variation sample (Creswell, 2013, p.158), including students with varied interests, levels of academic achievement, and level of participation in the middle school extracurricular program. Three-year participants in the program were chosen as those are students that would have had the most involvement in the program through middle school. There were 40 boys and 24 girls that met the two criteria and represented all of the students that participated for three years of middle school and that have also remained at study site through high school. As there are 128 students in the junior and senior classes, 64 students represent exactly half, or 50%, of the students in those classes. All 64 students meeting the criteria were invited to participate in the study. Of the 64 students that were invited to participate, 18 students chose to participate in the study, six students declined, and 40 did not return the parent or student permission slips. Five boys and four girls elected to participate from the eleventh grade, and seven boys and two girls elected to participate from the twelfth grade. The 18 students that participated represent 30% of the eligible boys and 25% of the eligible girls. Parental and student permission was obtained from all participants.

All students in sixth- through twelfth grade at the study site participated in a school-sponsored administration of the Gallup Student Poll in the fall of 2016. The Gallup Student Poll is a web-based survey that measures engagement, hope, entrepreneurial aspiration, and career/financial literacy (Gallup, 2016). Parents and guardians were notified of school's

participation in the survey, and an opt-out consent form was available to parents of students participating in the survey. Gallup Student Poll collects, aggregates, and analyzes the data and provides reports to the school via an online scorecard. Gallup does not reveal individual student responses (Gallup, 2016). Permission to use the Gallup Student Poll results was requested and obtained from the Assistant Head of School

Data Collection and Analysis

Basic qualitative studies often use interviews as a form of data collection (Merriman, 2009, p. 23). The researcher received permission to conduct this study from the Institutional Review Board from the University of New England as shown in Appendix A. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2013, p. 160) with the 18 students electing to participate and for whom permission to participate had been granted by parents. The interviews were face-to-face, in-person interviews with the interviewer recording participant responses on recording sheets. The researcher made voice recordings of interviews using digital voice recording in addition to using the interview notes. Interview questions included requests for information about the level and choices of extracurricular participation during middle school. Open-ended questions were used to collect data about feelings and perceived values of and about the extracurricular program. Interview questions are shown in Appendix B. Interviews were scheduled at the participant's convenience. Participant confidentiality was maintained using a numerical reference stored separately from the interviewer's notes and transcribed interviews. Copies of transcribed interviews were given to participants to review for mistakes or misinterpretations, and participants were given the opportunity to make corrections to the transcribed interviews.

The Gallup Student Poll administration is being managed by the school's guidance counselor. The Gallup Student Poll was administered by classroom English teachers to all enrolled students in grades six through twelve, unless parents opted out for their child's participation as described in the Gallup Student Poll administration guide (Gallup, 2016). Copies of the school's Gallup Student Poll results were obtained by permission from the school's guidance counselor who managed the administered the poll..

Participant Rights

In-person interviews were scheduled at the participant's convenience with students electing to participate and for whom permission to participate had been granted by parents. Participation was voluntary, and interview questions can be viewed in Appendix B. Participant confidentiality was maintained using a numerical reference stored separately from the interviewer's notes and transcribed interviews. Copies of transcribed interviews were given to participants to review prior to use in the study.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include the uniqueness of this program to the study site and the limited ability to transfer findings to other locations and sites. Another limitation may be the numbers of students choosing to participate in the study. The goal of the researcher was to conduct interviews with approximately one-third of the eligible students. Approximately 28% of the eligible students chose to participate in the study. High school students three and four years removed from the program would not be subject to the same feeling of coercion, as they are managed and directed by a different administrator.

This study builds on previous work in the field of middle school extracurricular activities by examining the value in offering extracurricular activities during the regular school day.

Specifically, it examined the relationship between middle school school-based extracurricular participation and later student views of school connection and engagement by exploring the socio-emotional engagement of students that participated in the program. It also sought to explore student thoughts and feelings about the long-term consequences or benefits of offering extracurricular activities during the regular school day.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

As stated in the previous chapters, the purpose of this basic qualitative research study was to discover the student perceived long-term values, if any, of an extracurricular program offered during the regular school hours for middle school students. The specific areas of focus were school engagement and school connection. School engagement and connection are important in that they have been shown to promote school success (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Farb & Matjasko, 2012). In addition, student engagement has become an important aspect for independent schools to evaluate to meet enrollment goals. Independent schools have placed an increased emphasis on community building to maintain the strength of the school and stability in enrollment (Gilmore & Rush, 2013).

This research was guided by the question: How important are extracurricular activities in developing school connection and engagement in middle school students?

Related research questions include:

- What is the relationship between middle school school-based extracurricular participation and later student views of school connection?
- How does offering extracurricular activities during the regular school day provide more students the advantages of participation?
- How does the participation in extracurricular activities throughout the school day address the perceived stress associated with overscheduling?

The results of the study, descriptions of participants, and answers to the research questions are summarized in this chapter. The results are discussed in chapter five.

Description of Participants

The researcher used a criterion, maximum variation sample (Creswell, 2013, p. 158) to identify students to participate in face-to-face, in-person interviews to conduct the research. To be included in the study, students were required to meet the criterion of having participated in the middle school extracurricular program for three years (as sixth graders in the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 school year, as seventh-graders in the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school year, and eighth graders in the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 school year) and meet the criterion of being currently enrolled at the study site for his or her junior or senior year of high school. There were 40 boys and 24 girls that met these two criteria and represented all of the students that participated for three years of middle school and that have also remained at study site through high school. As there are 128 students in the junior and senior classes, 64 students represent exactly half, or 50%, of all of the students in those classes. All 64 students meeting the criteria were invited to participate in the study. Of the 64 students that were invited to participate, 18 students chose to participate in the study, six students declined, and 40 did not return the parent or student permission slips. Five boys and four girls elected to participate from the eleventh grade, and seven boys and two girls elected to participate from the twelfth grade as shown in Table 1. The 18 students that participated represent 30% of the eligible boys and 25% of the eligible girls.

Table 1

Students Participating in the Study

<u>Grade Level</u>	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>
Eleventh Grade	5	4
Twelfth Grade	7	2

Analysis Method

Students participated in semi-structured interviews conducted at each student's convenience over a three-week period in February and March 2017. The researcher was available when the students indicated that they had free time during a study hall, after school, or during another free period to minimize missed class time or missed time from other activities. The researcher transcribed the interviews and met with each student after the interviews were transcribed to allow students to read the transcript and make any corrections. The researcher reviewed methods of qualitative analysis methods of Madison (2005), Huberman & Miles (1994), and Wolcott (1994) as described by Creswell (2013, p. 181). The researcher also reviewed qualitative methods described by Bloomberg and Volpe (2012, p. 140) and chose to follow the methods of Bloomberg and Volpe. After transcribing the interviews and checking with the students for the accuracy of the transcriptions, the researcher reread each interview and again listened to each interview to identify the preliminary themes and patterns. The researcher used a spreadsheet to initially organize notes and student answers to each question that was asked during the interviews. The spreadsheet allowed the researcher to make notes of themes and keep counts of the words mentioned by students. The researcher also used spreadsheets to organize data and related quotations to support themes and findings. This chapter serves to report the findings supported by participant quotations.

Extracurricular Participation

Students were asked to describe the enrichment extracurricular classes that they could remember participating in during their years as middle school students. Students reported remembering participation in 25 different enrichment extracurricular activities during the school day with frequencies as noted in Table 2. Enrichment activity descriptions are shown in

Appendix C. While the reported activities do not represent every activity that was offered, they do demonstrate the wide variety of activities that were available to students.

Table 2

Student Reported Extracurricular Class Participation During Middle School

<u>Extracurricular Class</u>	<u>Students Reporting Participation</u>
Art	3
Band	1
Board Games Club	5
Boat Club	1
Book Club	1
Cherokee Life	1
Chess Team	5
Crafts	1
Drama Production and Drama Team	7
Film Club	1
Girl Power	1
Glee Club	2
Latin	2
Math Team	2
Music Technology	2
Photography	1
Physical Education	5
Quiz Bowl Team	3
Readers Corner	1
Recycling Club	7
Scrabble Club	8
Study Halls	4
Sustainable Food Collective	1
Where in the World is?	1
World View	2

Memorable and Helpful Classes

Students were asked to describe his or her most memorable and most helpful enrichment extracurricular activities. Student answers are represented in Table 3. The reasons a certain class was memorable or helpful varied greatly from student to student.

Several students described drama as helpful with public speaking. A senior student said, "I'm an energetic person. I like talking a lot but when it comes to public speaking and stuff like

that I usually just couldn't do it because it made me too nervous, but over the years, drama has really helped me with that." A junior student said, "Drama and being in front of people and singing in front of people has helped me a lot with confidence especially in public speaking and stuff like that." Another senior student said drama "helps me express myself. It definitely helped my public speaking in a way. I don't get as nervous when I go out into crowds." Several other students mentioned drama as memorable or helpful, but reasons differed from student to student. Senior students said of drama, "I did it for fun originally, and then it became actually a part of my life" and "I can channel my energy through acting on the stage and also through my music." Another senior stated drama was memorable "because it has such an impact on me now." A junior student said about drama extracurricular activities, "The teachers were really good at making them fun and making them a fun end to the day."

Recycling Club was also mentioned by students as being memorable. A senior student stated,

Recycling just because you go around basically the whole school and just get all those bins and empty them out, and it's like really helpful I think to all of the teachers. It was nice seeing teachers in their classrooms just doing whatever, and I just enjoyed the people too.

A junior student said,

I think Recycling Club because even though it is not really a big deal, it kind of was. The teacher treated us like we were adults because she let us walk around campus on our own to be able to collect people's recycling bins and then go to the dumpster in the back and dump it out so I felt like that it made me feel more like an adult in a way. More responsible.

Another senior student mentioned recycling saying, "You had, for a whole hour, the freedom of going around the school and some days we would, at the end of class, play either dodgeball or something or basketball either on the playground or the field."

Chess Team was mentioned as memorable and helpful. A senior student explained, "Just because of the different things I learned through that and strategies, and I didn't really appreciate it so much then but now I look at it differently." Another senior mentioned chess "because it's a thinking game. You have to plan out several moves ahead of what your opponent is going to do, or they might do something different and you have to counter."

Activities mentioned as helpful also had curriculum connections. A junior stated the World View activity group "was very helpful because we got to learn about a lot of different religions and philosophies." A junior said, "Math Team was most helpful because I learned new math formulas, equations and tricks, and things like that really helped me not only on high school math team but high school math classes as well." Another junior said, "I've gotten a lot better at math and quicker with math since I joined quiz bowl." A junior said of Math Team, "I kind of used it as an opportunity to get a little bit of edge on my math studies because we would have to learn some things that we didn't even get to in sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade math classes yet." A senior said of Conversational Latin,

It was a really small class, and it was pretty much the same kids the entire time. We went over Latin roots and prefixes and it seems to help because vocabulary is in so many different classes and that class I get reminded of it almost every day.

Other answers included Chess Team and Quiz Bowl Team because "they were the team based ones," Recycling and Scrabble Club "because they were the most interactive," and Glee Club being memorable because of working with a certain teacher. Another junior mentioned the

Quiz Bowl team because “we practiced and then we won our state championship and we knew that our practice had paid off. That was pretty memorable.” A junior student mentioned,

Boat Club was helpful because it introduced me into building stuff, and it also helped me with team work and cooperating with others, with kids that are in high school right now.

It makes bonds over time so it helps develop social skills for people who might not have that type of personality for social skills. People would assume you have hobbies or

similar interests. They can interact and then those people can build up their confidence.

A junior commented about study hall being helpful for getting work done. Another junior student stated that Scrabble Club was a favorite “because all of my friends took it, and I remember hanging out with them and playing Scrabble on Fridays.” One senior said, “I got something from all of them that I was participating in so they're all pretty helpful I'd say.” Sixteen students stated that they continued with a similar activity in high school.

Table 3

Numbers of Students Reporting a Extracurricular Course as Memorable or Helpful

<u>Extracurricular Class</u>	<u>Memorable</u>	<u>Helpful</u>
Board Games Club	1	
Boat Club	1	1
Chess Team	3	1
Drama Production and Competition Team	5	4
Glee Club	2	
Latin	1	1
Math Team		2
Music Technology	1	1
Quiz Bowl Team	2	2
Recycling Club	4	1
Scrabble Club	3	
Study Hall		1
Where in the World Is?	1	
World View		1

Mixed Grade Level Extracurricular and Enrichment Activities

Middle school extracurricular activities provide opportunities for friendships, including mixed grade level friendships. This study supports the work of Bowker and Spencer (2009) who reported the value of mixed grade friendships. Schaefer, Simpkins, Vest & Price (2011) conducted a study of data from middle and high school students in seventh through twelfth grades which showed friendships were often connected to extracurricular activities and that extracurricular activities helped students develop new friendships. Students were asked their opinion about including all middle school grade levels of students in the extracurricular enrichment activities. All but two students noted many positives from mixing all grade levels of the students together for the activities.

Making friends in other grade levels was noted by many students. A senior student said, "It was cool that it wasn't just one grade because I was so used to just hanging out with people in my grade but it was nice that I got to meet other people from other grades and like through that, I was able to make friends with people that weren't just in my grade. I think that was, like, nice, especially for like things like music exploratory where you wanted to collaborate with other people that weren't just people you always knew."

A junior student said,

"I liked it because I feel like usually the grade above you and the grade below you you're really close with, like it's not necessarily such a big jump between because, like, I have friends in the grade above me and the grade below me now."

Another junior said, "I met a lot of people, like, I'm still kind of either friends or acquaintances with now. It was just a new experience, you know. Get to meet new people."

Interact.” When discussing a current friend, a senior student said, "I would have never met him if it weren't for enrichment because all of our other classes were kind of separated."

Many students talked about the positive relationships between the younger sixth-grade students and the older eighth-grade students. A junior student said,

I'd say it's challenging at first because you don't know the people, and then you start to build a bond with them, and you get to become more comfortable with talking to people in general, so the more you essentially talk with people, the more you feel comfortable with it. They're always going to treat you with respect. So seeing that in action just builds up the person's confidence.

In discussing how it felt to be a younger student, a junior student said,

Everyone got along. It wasn't like 'Oh, you're younger than us. Don't talk to us,' or 'Oh you're older stay away.' Everyone just kind of mingled together and I liked that a lot, especially if you're the only sixth grader with a bunch of eighth graders and they'd include you and stuff. A lot more important and less scared.

Another junior said, "In Board Games Club, I remember specifically that sometimes I'd be on a team with two eighth graders if I was in sixth grade, which kinda made me scared, but as I progressed through the year I got closer to them, and it helped me make new friends and vice versa too." A senior student said,

My sixth grade year I was with like all the cool seniors. Gave me a chance to have a connection with people that were even older than eighth grade, so at first I was intimidated but eventually just like through our similar interests in music and taste and stuff like that, I really got to know a lot of them pretty well, and I thought that was cool.

Another junior student said,

Being a sixth grader, I think I remember, like, at first being super nervous to interact with the eighth graders, but the enrichment classes definitely helped me to be able to get to know them and feel like more of a part of a bigger school rather than just my grade or just my class.

Another junior said,

It was good to have those older kids in classes with you. I would look up to the eighth graders and be like ‘Man, I really want to be like them one day because they are so talented and not afraid to be on the stage and everything.’ I got some motivation from them.

Another senior said, “Being in class with someone older it’s like ‘Oh, I can't wait to get to that grade’”

In discussing how it felt to be an older student in mixed grade level activities, a senior student said,

It definitely helped the connection because being in the enrichment you're with kids from all like sixth through eighth grade, so you get to meet people from other grades and depending on what the activity was, the older kids could mentor you, and once you got to eighth grade then you could mentor other kids, and you got to meet a bunch of people with similar interests as you and all work together for the same kind of goal; and so it kind of created a sense of community with the people that you were with, and that could carry on for years after middle school.

A junior said, “As an older student it was nice to be able to lead the younger students and have some sort of influence in their lives.”

Teamwork skills were noted by two students. A junior student said,

It definitely helps having some younger people in some classes with some other people because it's just kind of forces you to work together a bit more cause then you're not forced to, like, work with friends. You have to work with people you're not really well versed in, and your personalities may clash; but if they clash too much, then you're not going to make any progress.”

Another junior student said, “When I was in eighth grade, I'd have a sixth-grade teammate and stuff like that. So it helped me with, like, teamwork in like Board Game Club or Math Team or Quiz Bowl and, like, also helped by creating new friends. It was pretty fun.”

Two students noted that having mixed ages of students in the activities did not affect their experiences. For example, a senior noted, “It didn't really change the experience whether I was with someone that was a year younger than me versus a year older than me. We all just had a good time, so age didn't really affect anything.” Another senior noted, “It was nice to see other faces, like younger kids taking part in it and having fun and doing it as well. But I mostly stuck with my grade.”

School Connection

Fredricks (2011) suggested that having supportive teacher/student relationships, having strong peer relationships, having structure, and having a variety of tasks with real-world applications were all conducive to increasing student engagement. Penner and Wallin (2012) identified positive student-teacher relationships that develop a safe, warm, caring classroom and school environment as the characteristics needed by schools to reduce student referrals for inappropriate behavior. Characteristics that increased students' sense of belonging at the school were having fun, meeting friends, extracurricular activity opportunities, and availability of food. Wang and Eccles (2012) also posited the importance of supportive relationships with teachers

and peers for positive school engagement. In examining the positive ecological aspects of a school setting, Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, and Zumbo (2011) showed the importance of other adults in the lives of adolescents. A follow-up study by Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, Guhn, Zumbo, and Hertzman (2014) examined the perceived extent of family, school, and community support in children's self-reported emotional well-being. While all three areas of support were shown to be important, support from adults in the school were most important to children's self-reported emotional well-being.

The researcher asked each student a question about how participating in middle school enrichment classes affected his or her feeling of connection to the school. All students answered that the enrichment classes increased connection, but not directly to the school itself. A senior student said, "I think the classes made you feel more connected. It made everyone like come together for the purpose of having a fun extracurricular." Another senior student stated, "You could really bond with people over things that weren't just academics. Weren't simply academic things, but more things that you were passionate about or just things you like to do for fun." Statements from the students demonstrated a theme of connection to the people in the school, rather to the school itself.

Many students discussed the connections the courses built with core subject classroom teachers. Connection to faculty members was mentioned in twelve of eighteen interviews. A senior student stated,

It made me like the school more because it was an ability to do, and you got experience with more teachers than just the teacher you would normally have. You get outside just the core teachers, so that was really cool, so it made me more...feel more connected to the faculty.

Another senior student said, "You had teachers you wouldn't normally have. It was cool to have someone else." A junior student stated,

I think it helped me connect a lot to my teachers, too because if I had a teacher or subject as a core subject as well as enrichment, I definitely felt closer to them than I would have just if I was just taking them for like a core class.

Another junior stated,

I liked being in the Glee Club and Drama Club. I was able to connect with the teachers and that kind of built a relationship that I could build on later in high school. I already had a connection to the teachers, so I felt more comfortable being who I wanted.

These statements support the findings of Oberle et al. (2011), Oberle et al. (2014) and Wang and Eccles (2012).

The most mentioned connection was to friends and other students, especially students who had similar interests, students in other grade levels, and students that they had not met before that became friends. Connections with other students were mentioned in thirteen of eighteen interviews. A junior student stated,

It made me feel more like a home away from home in a way. Interacting with other students, older and younger, it made it feel like you had come from home and went straight into another home where everyone included you and were happy to see you every day.

Another junior student stated, "We all had similar interests and liked things that we all liked to do, like play board games or study geography or have Quiz Bowl or connect in math. So we all had similar interests which is why we were in that class." A senior student said, "Since it mingled the grade levels, and that was cool, and I guess that would be more of your connection

because you're not just with the same kids you've been with since you were five. It's with the other grades higher and lower." Another senior student stated, "I felt more connected because you got to meet different people that you may not have talked to otherwise and form relationships with them there and continue those through the rest of the year." Another senior student said,

I got to know a lot of the older kids that were there, and we would still talk with each other even though we weren't in the little club doing our own thing, and I think it was just some kind of connectedness that goes with it. You still see them and talk to them outside, and I think that's really cool.

Three seniors specifically discussed long-lasting friendships developed through the enrichment classes. The student stated, "So many of my best friends, I wouldn't be as close with as I am now if it wasn't for those classes." Another senior student stated, "There were people I usually wouldn't hang out with. I became friends through my enrichment classes, and so some of my friends I've made through drama in sixth grade I'm still friends with now." A third senior discussed a long-term and on-going friendship developed through an enrichment class with a student that was two years younger. The student mentioned that even though the friend had to move away, they still kept in contact.

Good feelings of being a part of a team or club were mentioned by three students. A junior student said, "It made me feel like I was part of a team. I know that is such a basic answer. I'm still really proud of the teams I'm a part of. It gave me something to be proud of my school and other people." Another junior said, "The team mentality was a cool thing for me because you got to be part of something. It made the school day more fun." Another junior student said, "I

could definitely feel that being part of a club, rather than just the classes I was supposed to take, allowed me to contribute something to the school or be a part of it.”

School connection was summed up by a senior student that stated, "I wouldn't say it connected me more to the school, just to the people in the school, my friends, and whoever else took the class."

Offering Classes during the Regular School Day

Students were asked their opinions on the extracurricular enrichment classes being offered during the regular school day and how that affected their ability to participate. All students said that they liked that the activities took place during the school day, but gave different reasons when asked why. Some students noted transportation issues and scheduling conflicts. A junior student said,

It was better that it was during the school day. I have two younger siblings. It would take forever to get them in the car for me because my mom is the one that drives back and forth to get to school. Before school starts to do it, that would be a pain. And for break and lunch, I like socializing so, and after school, I have sports and stuff.

A senior student said,

If it were after class, I probably wouldn't be as motivated to show up because I want to go home, and I think there's other stuff. I used to do gymnastics, and now I do karate and that's after school, and if I didn't have as much time, like, to get to it, I would have to choose between doing things school related or not.

Another senior said, “Before and after school probably would have been difficult because, at that time, I couldn't drive myself, and I had no transportation to get there, but having it during the school day was definitely helpful.” Another senior said, “I participated more when it was offered

during the school day because after, I have like sports and stuff like that, and I live far away so I wouldn't really be able to go.”

Other students noted different conflicts before or after school. A junior student said, Having them during the school day definitely made them feel more like a class, and whereas if they were after school or break or lunch, it might have been easier for me to make excuses to not be there or to feel like I have other things that I need to do that take priority.

Another junior said,

I think it's much better to have classes like that during actual class, like seventh period, because a lot of times people don't have time after school or before school because they might want to sleep in because they were up late studying the night before or after school they make have sports and things like that. It was helpful to be able to do an extracurricular activity as part of my school day.

Two students mentioned the advantages of having all members of a team present when activities were offered during the school day. A junior said, “It just makes my life easier. Makes it more available to me and it also helps and it also helps that particular club with everybody there everybody can communicate.” A senior said,

I think during the school day it would be better because you have more people who would be interested in it, and then also I guess you have larger groups as opposed to before school or after school when people probably would have sports or something.

Two students mentioned the variety of activities. A senior student said,

It was really nice because like I can't do, like, five different things outside of school. I couldn't commit to all of those, but if I were to do it in school, then I could get a little bit

each day of something else, and it made you able to take, like, around five classes that or five extracurriculars that you wouldn't be able to take otherwise.

Another senior student said,

I'd say it both helped and hurt in a way because it helps in that rather than meeting after school or something you're not taking extra time out of your day, but at the same time, doing all of it during school rather than after or before, there's a limited amount of things that you could take. You could only fit like five activities in a week so there may be a few that you would have to decide not to take because they couldn't fit into your schedule.

Stress from Overscheduling

No students mentioned stress from overscheduling. Surprisingly, many students mentioned that the activities at the end of the school day were a stress relieving and fun way to end the day. This supports work by Park (2010) who found that extracurricular activities may provide a protective role in dealing with life stressors. A junior student said,

I think it's just middle school kids are just so stressed out all the time I think, and usually it's about nothing, but I think they're just so stressed out, and they need a break just to do something fun and not necessarily it has to be like school related or for a grade or something like that.

Another junior student said,

I think my favorite part about it was that it was during the school day because lots of times I'd be like super stressed or whatever, and then at the end of the day you get to do something like less intensive so it was more of like a de-stressor.

A junior student said, "It was always seventh period, so it ended the day on a high note with like fun and being with your friends and teamwork and fun games and things like that. I would

always try to go since it was a happy moment.” A junior student said, “If your day had been really stressful up until then, you knew you were going to have a like quite an interesting and whimsical seventh period which would help the day end on a high note.” A junior said, “People can build up their confidence when they don't have a lot of confidence and that could lead you further in life like now just seeing, not being so stressed out about everything.” A junior said, “Having it seventh period was really nice. Just...like I knew that time of that day was for that class, so I could fully focus on that one thing without worrying about everything else I had to do.” A junior student said,

It gave you something to look forward to at the end of the day, like, rather than just like getting through all your classes and having a study hall right at the end or something or more classes, it was, it just gave you something to look forward to.

A junior student said, “I remember looking forward to them every day, and if they were one day a week I would like ...be like ‘Ugh I have to wait a whole other week until I can do this again’ but it was a nice end to the day.” Another junior said, “It was just nice to let off energy.” A senior student said,

I really enjoyed doing enrichments when I was in middle school, honestly. I think it would be kind of fun if we could do it again in high school, and just take a break from all the studying and the homework and the classes.”

Other Data on Extracurricular Classes Offered During the School Day

Three students mentioned that the enrichment extracurricular activities helped lead them to future college majors and possibly careers. A senior student said that the activities led to "what I want to do with my life, and I'm going to college for it, so I think it made an impact on my life

that I wouldn't have guessed back then." A junior said, "I feel like it's like I said it's gotten me on track to realize what I want to do whenever I go to college now." A senior said that it was kinda like that next step when going into high school. You know what you are into and what you like to do so, it gives you that mindset that, 'Oh, I did this in middle school, and now I can do it again in high school.' I had fun with it. It definitely helps you with your decisions there.

Gallup Poll Data

All students in sixth through twelfth grade at the study site participated in a school-sponsored administration of the Gallup Student Poll in the fall of 2016. The Gallup Student Poll is a web-based survey that measures engagement, hope, entrepreneurial aspiration, and career/financial literacy (Gallup, 2016). The Gallup Student Poll collects, aggregates, and analyzes the data and provides reports to the school via an online scorecard. Gallup does not reveal individual student responses or names (Gallup, 2016). Permission to use the Gallup Student Poll results was requested and obtained from the Assistant Head of School. In the report provided, 64% of all students at the study site in grades six through twelve were classified as engaged, 25% were classified not engaged, and 10% were actively disengaged.

Summary

This chapter described the results and findings of a study to discover the student perceived, long-term values, if any, of an extracurricular program offered during the regular school hours for middle school students with a particular focus on school connection and school engagement. The results from 18 student interviews sought to answer the question: How important are extracurricular activities in developing school connection and engagement in middle school students?

Related research questions included:

- What is the relationship between middle school school-based extracurricular participation and later student views of school connection?
- How does offering extracurricular activities during the regular school day provide more students the advantages of participation?
- How does the participation in extracurricular activities throughout the school day address the perceived stress associated with overscheduling?

Each student remembered and reflected on a unique experience with a wide variety of extracurricular enrichment activities during his or her time in middle school. While each was unique, common themes developed to answer each of the research questions and provided areas for further exploration. The following chapter will present interpretation of the findings, implications, recommendations for action, recommendations for further study, and conclusions.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Sir Ken Robinson has written extensively on creativity, personalized education, the importance of the arts in education, and the importance of leaders' roles in developing school climate (Robinson, 2009; 2011; 2014; 2015). In his latest book, he profiles schools and ideas that are examples of what can happen when educators explore a more personalized approach to education. He states, "Many highly talented, brilliant people think they're not because the thing they were good at in school wasn't valued or was actually stigmatized" (Robinson, 2015, xvi) and "We each have our own personalities, talents, interests, hopes, motivations, anxieties, and dispositions. Profound things can happen when students are given room to explore their own interests and capacities" (Robinson, 2015, p. 89). The focus of this study is a middle school program that offers extracurricular and enrichment activities during the regular school day. This program has provided students with opportunities to explore personal areas of interests and to interact with students and teachers that have similar interests.

The purpose of this basic qualitative research study was to discover the student perceived, long-term values of the extracurricular program offered during the school day. The specific areas of focus were school engagement and school connection. School engagement and connection are important in that they have been shown to promote school success (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Farb & Matjasko, 2012). In addition, student engagement is an important aspect for independent schools to evaluate to meet enrollment goals, and they have placed an increased emphasis on community building to maintain the strength of the school and stability in enrollment (Gilmore & Rush, 2013). The researcher interviewed nine junior students and nine

senior students to gather reflective thoughts and feelings of the program several years after participation to answer the research questions at the center of this study.

This research was guided by the question: How important are extracurricular activities in developing school connection and engagement in middle school students?

Related research questions included:

- What is the relationship between middle school school-based extracurricular participation and later student views of school connection?
- How does offering extracurricular activities during the regular school day provide more students the advantages of participation?
- How does the participation in extracurricular activities throughout the school day address the perceived stress associated with overscheduling?

This research supports the work of previous researchers in extracurricular and enrichment activities for students and advances work in this field with middle school students as the focus. This chapter provides an interpretation of the findings, answers the research questions, discusses additional findings from the study, discusses implications, provides recommendations for future study, and summarizes conclusions.

Interpretation of Findings

The researcher interviewed 18 junior and senior students that had participated in the middle school extracurricular enrichment program during the school day for three years during sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. The students were asked ten open-ended questions about their thoughts and feelings on their participation in the program. Students recalled participation in 25 different enrichment and extracurricular activities that were offered during the school day. For the purposes of this study, the researcher did not ask students to consider activities that took

place after school, such as participation on sports teams, or other outside-of-school activities as the purpose was to specifically examine a school program that was offered during the regular school day. The reported activities did not represent every extracurricular activity offered to students during the regular school day but did demonstrate a wide variety of interests and pursuits of the students that chose to participate in the study. Varied student interests were also noted in the wide variety of activities that were mentioned as most memorable and helpful, which again shows that student interests and passions are personal in nature. The 18 students named 13 different activities as most memorable or most helpful including drama, Recycling Club, activities with curriculum connections, team activities, and some activities that were just for fun, such as Scrabble Club and Gameboard Club. Students reflected on many different reasons for a particular activity being memorable or helpful which demonstrates that the reason for engagement with a particular activity was personal to each individual student. When asked if he or she had continued with a similar activity in high school, 16 of 18 students answered positively which indicates that the activity was something of long-term and continued interest. In discussing the need for personalized education, Sir Ken Robinson wrote that it is important to enable students “to pursue their particular interests and strengths” (2015, p. 83). By providing a wide variety of extracurricular activities for middle school students in this program, students are given the opportunity to explore personal areas of interest which helps lead to future school engagement as demonstrated by the number of students that continued with activities through high school that they had first explored in middle school.

What is the relationship between middle school school-based extracurricular participation and later student views of school connection? The relationship between school-based extracurricular participation and later student views of school connection showed different facets that were both expected and unexpected by the researcher. Students mentioned teamwork, positives of mixed grade level activities, and developing connections to the people in the school, such as other students who later became friends, teachers, and other staff members.

Through different questions asked by the researcher, students expressed over and over the importance of the friendships and relationships formed with other students, relationships formed with students older and younger than they were, and the opportunities to make friends with similar interests through their participation in the middle school extracurricular activities offered during the school day. Some students stated that the friendships that they had made during the middle school activities were long-lasting and are still strongly in existence. They referenced these friendships when discussing their connection to the school. This finding supports the work of Schaefer, Simpkins, Vest, and Price (2011) whose study showed that extracurricular activities helped students develop new friendships.

Positive relationships between older and younger students were mentioned by most of the students. Some students talked about how, as young sixth graders, they were a little scared or nervous around the eighth graders at first, but that they quickly learned that they would be accepted by the older students. The relationships with older students gave them confidence and helped them develop friendships across grade levels with students that had similar interests. Students also reflected on being older eighth graders and mentoring younger students. Only one student mentioned that while not minding having older or younger students in the activities, he

mostly stayed with students in his own grade. This finding supports the work of Bowker and Spencer (2009) who reported the value of mixed grade friendships.

Many students also mentioned connections built with core classroom teachers. Positive relationships and connections built with faculty members was mentioned in twelve of eighteen interviews. Positive teacher and student relationships supports the work of Fredricks(2011), Penner and Wallin (2012), and Wang and Eccles (2012) who discussed the importance of supportive relationships with teachers for positive school engagement. One student summed up the feelings expressed by many in the interviews by saying, “I wouldn’t say it connected me more to the school, just to the people in the school, my friends, and whoever else took the class.” This feeling of connection with other students and the feeling of connection with teachers was expressed by most of the students that were interviewed. Based on the findings of this study, extracurricular activities offered during the regular school day build connections to students, teachers and other people in the school, not to the school itself.

How does offering extracurricular activities during the regular school day provide more students the advantages of participation? All 18 of the students that were interviewed stated that they liked that the activities were offered during the regular school day rather than after school. By offering the activities during the school day, students did not have conflicts with other after school activities or have transportation concerns. Students also appreciated that, by offering the activities during the school day, all team members were able to be present, which some expressed had been an issue with some high school activities that currently meet after school. Students stated that they were able to participate in more activities because they were offered during the school day. Only one student expressed that he wished he had been able to do more than five of the activities, one for each day of the school week and felt limited by the

program. This study showed that offering the extracurricular activities during the regular school day allowed students to participate in more activities and experience the benefits of participation such as developing friendships and exploring areas of interest.

How does the participation in extracurricular activities throughout the school day address the perceived stress associated with overscheduling? The researcher expected to find that by scheduling the extracurricular activities during the school day, students perceived less stress due to less scheduling conflicts with students' after school time. Surprisingly, no students mentioned extracurricular activities causing scheduling stress after school. Perhaps this was because the activities were offered during the school day rather than after school. Some stated they were able to participate in more activities because they were offered during the school day but none mentioned overscheduling stress as a reason to not participate. The discussion of overscheduling stress led to the most surprising find in the study. More than half of the students, 11 of 18, mentioned that they viewed the extracurricular enrichment activities offered at the end of the school day as a fun, stress-reliever in a regular school day filled with academic classes. This idea supports Park's (2010) suggestion that extracurricular activities may provide a protective role in dealing with life stressors. The extracurricular enrichment program at the end of the day gave students something to look forward to and helped alleviate some of the stress caused by strenuous academic workloads.

How important are extracurricular activities in developing school connection and engagement in middle school students?

Providing opportunities for students to connect with others with similar interests and participate in fun activities at the end of the school day provided positives for students. Students reported being more connected to teachers, staff members, new friends, old friends, and other

students, and continuing these friendships and connections through high school. Students did not say they felt connected to the school itself. The students stated they built relationships with the people in the school which made them feel more connected and engaged at school. By offering the extracurricular and enrichment activities during the school day, students were able to participate in more activities and interact with more students. The many activities that were offered also allowed them to explore more, and a wider variety of activities than if they had only been scheduled before or after school. The activities offered during the school day also provided a fun and stress-relieving time at the end of each school day that students saw as a very positive thing. Extracurricular activities can be an important element of building school connection in middle school students.

Implications

“The power of visionary leadership in effecting change: and the need for principals and teachers to create the conditions in schools in which students will flourish and give their best” (Robinson, 2015, p. 41). One of several schools that Robinson (2015) profiled was Smokey Road Middle School in Newnan, Georgia. In discussing leading the transformative change that took place at the school in the mid-2000s, Robinson quoted Dr. Laurie Bannon, the principal of Smokey Road Middle School as saying,

Whatever is important to the student is the most important thing. Nothing is more important than something else: football, band, math, English. We weren't going to tell the student that football wasn't important, that math was what was important. Our approach was that if football was most important to you, then we were going to do whatever it takes to keep you in football. When we started taking that approach, when kids started seeing what we valued what they valued, they started giving back to us what we valued.

Once we started building a relationship with the kids, they'd feel guilty about letting us down. They might not like math, but they didn't want to let that math teacher down. Then the teachers could finally teach instead of writing discipline referrals. (p. 4)

The results from this study have three implications: 1) Extracurricular and enrichment activities offered during the school day allow more students the advantages of participation; 2) school connection is related to relationships with the people in the school, not to the school itself; 3) extracurricular and enrichment activities offered during the school day can be stress relievers rather than adding to student stress.

Extracurricular and enrichment activities offered during the school day allow more students the advantages of participation. All of the students indicated that they liked that the activities were offered during the school day, which allowed them to participate in more activities without conflicts with other after-school activities or having difficulty with transportation. Schools looking to provide more students with the advantages of participation could look to creative scheduling ideas to create an activity block of time during the regular school day.

School connection is related to relationships with the people in the school, not to the school itself. In the same way that Robinson (2015) discussed Smokey Road Middle School, students that participate in this extracurricular and enrichment program are allowed to pursue personal areas of passion or interest with friends and teachers with similar interests under the guidance of a lead teacher. This has allowed students to build long-lasting relationships with people within the school. It has also shown the students that the adults and other students in the school care about them, and it has led to strong connections with people in the school.

Fullan (2001) wrote about the importance of relationships and relationship building to lead change. Schools looking to increase school connection should work toward providing wide varieties of extracurricular and enrichment activities to give students many choices of activities to experience. By providing the activities during the school day, more teachers have the opportunity to participate in building those relationships with the students which are important for school connection and engagement. Schools should also work toward positive relationship building with all people in the school community, administrators, teachers, staff, students, and parents. It is an important element for students to be engaged in schools and their education.

Extracurricular activities offered during the school day can be stress relievers rather than adding to student stress. Park's (2010) suggested that extracurricular activities may provide a protective role in dealing with life stressors. More than half of the students interviewed noted that the activities at the end of the day helped them relieve some of the stress of the academic work required by the study site school. The students said that the program gave them something fun to look forward to at the end of the day and helped them get through tough and stressful days. Some also noted that the activities helped them make friends during middle school, which is a time that friendships were not always easy to make or keep. Schools should continue to offer these activities in such a way that all students are provided the opportunity to participate.

Recommendations for Action

This study suggests that extracurricular and enrichment activities offered during the school day in middle school provide more students with the advantages of participation, which includes school engagement. Schools exploring ways to increase student engagement could look

at creative scheduling ideas to create an activity block of time during the regular school day as the study school has done.

This study also suggests that, even among a very small sample of students, activity interest is quite varied as demonstrated by the large number of activities that were remembered and noted as memorable or helpful. Schools should work toward providing a wide variety of extracurricular and enrichment activities to give students many choices of activities to experience. This will encourage students to try many different activities and explore personal interests with like-minded friends and faculty members.

This study suggests that an important element of building school engagement for students is the relationships that students have with other students, staff, and faculty members. Extracurricular and enrichment activities help students foster new friendships and enhance current ones. Schools should work toward positive relationship building with all people in the school community, administrators, teachers, staff, students, and parents. Community relationships are an important aspect for independent schools to consider as noted by Gilmore and Rush (2013) whose study showed that many independent schools increased their emphasis on relationship and community building after the recession to maintain the strength of the school and stability in enrollment. School leaders should work to provide fun activities for all members of the school community.

Finally, this study suggests that extracurricular and enrichment activities can be stress-relievers for students in a rigorous, college preparatory environment. Schools exploring ways to help middle school students manage stress could provide fun and structured activities for students. This could help middle school students foster new friendships and strengthen current ones.

The results of this study will be presented to the administrative team and the middle school teachers at the study site. The results of this study will allow the study site to evaluate the current program to make enhancements to further build school engagement and support enrollment goals. This study could also be presented at the local, state, regional, and national level at future independent school conferences which would provide other independent school leaders ideas encouraging school engagement through extracurricular and enrichment activities in middle schools.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study has led to questions and areas of study that could be explored by future researchers in the field of extracurricular activities and school engagement.

Future Study Recommendation 1: Future studies could explore parental views of extracurricular activity participation.

Middle school students are not able to provide their own transportation to and from multiple activities at the study site. It is often the parents' responsibility to provide transportation for multiple children to multiple activities. Parental views on the program could be compared to student responses from this study and explore the parents' thoughts and feelings on school connection from their perception.

Future Study Recommendation 2: Future studies could examine the importance of student choice in activity participation.

Anderson, Funk, Elliott, and Smith (2003) conducted a study to explore children's perceptions and views of parental involvement in many types of extracurricular activities. Middle school is the time when students begin to demonstrate independence from parental choices. With a multitude of choices, current middle school students could be interviewed to

ascertain thoughts and feelings on their ability to make choices about activities and parental pressures to participate in certain activities.

Future Study Recommendation 3: Future studies could explore teacher perceptions of extracurricular enrichment activities offered during the regular school day.

Teacher involvement in building relationships with students is key to providing quality activities that students enjoy. Teachers could be surveyed or interviewed to discover themes related to their thoughts and feelings on extracurricular and enrichment activities as they take on the roles of leaders of the activities. In specifically looking at the program at the current study site, teachers could be asked the importance of relationships building during the extracurricular enrichment program and thoughts on the variety of offerings.

Future Study Recommendation 4: Future studies could gather results from junior and senior students that are no longer enrolled at the study site.

In independent schools, students that choose to leave the school do so for different reasons, such as finances, moving from the area, or unhappiness with the school or school programs. Students that leave the school may represent a certain level of disengagement with the school. Students that are no longer enrolled at the study site school could be interviewed with similar questions like the ones in this study and the answers compared to the findings in this study.

Conclusion

Fredricks' (2011) suggestions for increasing student engagement were the following: having supportive teacher/student relationships, having strong peer relationships, having structure, and having a variety of tasks with real-world applications. Sir Ken Robinson described teacher Laurie Barron, who said she was

unable to make headway with her middle school students until she acknowledged that what they felt was the most important to them was the most important thing. Football or art or music (or for that matter, science or literature or history) got them through the rest of the day and made the classes that didn't engage them tolerable. (Robinson, 2015, p. 89)

This basic qualitative study sought to discover the student perceived, long-term values of the extracurricular program offered during the school day. The specific areas of focus were school engagement and school connection. The study has shown that students found value in the extracurricular program offered during the school day. Specifically, they valued the relationships built during their time in the program with other students and faculty, they valued being able to participate in more and a wider variety of activities without conflicts, and that they valued having a fun and stress-relieving activity time at the end of the day. The program has been successful in encouraging school engagement.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval



UNIVERSITY OF
NEW ENGLAND

Institutional Review Board
Olgun Guvench, Chair

Biddeford Campus
11 Hills Beach Road
Biddeford, ME 04005
(207)602-2244 T
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Portland Campus
716 Stevens Avenue
Portland, ME 04103

To: Angela Ringley

Cc: Ella Benson

From: Olgun Guvench

Date: February 8, 2017

Re: IRB Protocol Approval: Initial

Project # & Title: 013017-028, Middle School Extracurricular Activities: Are There School Connectedness and Engagement Benefits of Offering Activities During the Regular School Day?

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research has received and reviewed the materials you submitted in connection with the above referenced study including the requested revisions. Your study has been approved by the UNE IRB after expedited review. This study is a not greater than minimal risk study.

If you wish to change your protocol at any time, you must first submit the changes to the IRB and receive its written, unconditional approval before implementing them. This includes any changes to the version of the consent forms approved by the UNE IRB. If the subjects of your study are exposed to any unusual or unanticipated risk or injury as a consequence of participating in it, you must report such events to the IRB within one working day of the occurrence.

Approval for this study expires on the date indicated below. If you need to continue your research project beyond that date, please submit a formal request (as outlined on the IRB website) at least 60 days prior to the expiration date. Please notify the IRB if you terminate the study before completing it, or upon concluding it.

Attached you will find stamped versions of the approved informed consent and assent forms, which must be used in the research.

The IRB wishes you well with your research. Please contact the IRB (IRB@une.edu) with any questions.

Sincerely,



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IRB Chair

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Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. What grade are you in right now?
2. What middle school enrichment classes did you participate in during middle school?
3. Did you continue with a similar class during high school? Why or why not?
4. Did you take any enrichment classes just for fun? Which ones?
5. Which enrichment classes stick out to you as most memorable? Most helpful? Why?
6. How did participating in middle school enrichment classes help you become more interested in a certain topic or subject?
7. Describe your experience with younger and older grade level kids during enrichment classes.
8. How did offering the classes and courses during the school day rather than meeting at other times (such as before and after school or during break and lunch) affect your ability to participate?
9. Would you describe your experience with middle school enrichment as positive, negative, or neutral? Why?
10. How did participating in the middle school enrichment classes affect you feeling of connection to school?

Appendix C

Descriptions of Extracurricular and Enrichment Activities Reported by the Students

Art Club – Participating students worked with art teachers on individual art pieces of each student’s choice one or two days per week.

Band – Participating students met twice a week and learned to play band instruments.

Board Games Club – Participating students played classic board games once per week.

Boat Club – Participating students worked one day a week to build a full-sized wooden sailboat.

Book Club – A middle school book club that met one day a week for students who were interested in reading and discussing works of fiction beyond the English curriculum.

Cherokee Life – Participating students met once per week to learn Cherokee customs and Native American games.

Chess Team – A practice time one day per week for the middle school chess team.

Crafts – Participating students worked on individual craft projects one day a week on a variety of topics including global studies.

Drama Production and Competition Team – Students met twice per week to rehearse for a fall stage production and practice for drama competitions.

Film Club – A variety of film clubs were offered to students on topics, such as sports, classic movies, overcoming odds, and other popular themes.

Girl Power – A group of girls that met one day a week to discuss ways to empower girls by celebrating individuality, honoring diversity, getting along with others, academic hurdles, cyber trends, proper use of social media, having health & positive social/emotional relationships, growth and self-care.

Glee Club – An ensemble of singers that met one day a week to learn songs and dances.

Conversational Latin – An extracurricular class, meeting one day a week, that helped students learn Latin stems.

Math Team – Math team students met twice a week to practice for math competitions.

Music Technology – Participating students met one day a week and learned songwriting skills. Students worked to produce and record original music.

Photography – Participating students met one day a week to learn photography techniques.

Physical Education - Participating students chose physical education classes beyond the required curriculum.

Quiz Bowl Team – Quiz Bowl Team students met twice a week to practice for quiz bowl competitions.

Reader's Corner – A book club for boys that met one day a week to encourage reading.

Recycling Club – Participating students collected paper, cardboard, and plastic bottles from various locations around the campus and moved these materials to large recycling bins.

Scrabble Club – Students met once a week to play the Scrabble board game.

Study Halls – Study hall provided a quiet room to complete homework or study.

Sustainable Food Collective – This group met one day a week and was dedicated to exploring sustainable food choices needed by the school, the local community, and the world.

Where in the World? – Students met one day a week to review current events and play geography games.

World View – Students met one day a week to discuss and compare different religious world views on theology, law, psychology, philosophy, politics, ethics, and history.