

Extra-curricular Activities in Spain: Sports-related Activities and their Personal and Academical Implications

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Introduction

Activities out of school time are one of the most debated issues in Spain. Which kind of activities (sports, drama, intellectual), how many and how much time is devoted to them are central concerns from school point of view, as well as for their interest in family and social life.

These activities had came to be a complement of many boys' and girls' school day. In some cases, their parents feel worthy for their education having and extended time in instructional setting (Osgood, Ander & Shaffer, 2005). Some other parents appreciate the opportunities of formation and social interaction these activities offer (Mahoney & Vest, 2012).

In any case having extra-school activities is not necessarily associated to successful performance, either in school or the activities themselves, since some children may feel tired, have their sleep-time reduced, fail to keep concentration or even show stress (Cladellas, Chamarro, Badia, Oberst & Carbonell, 2011). In Spanish society is very common that the workday ends late in the evening, many hours after school is over. Thus is not possible for most of them to take care of their children until they are back at home. This situation has made extra-school activities a flourishing big business, existing a profusion of chances for keeping children and youngsters occupied – and controlled – immediately after the school day. Most of these activities could be placed in a midpoint between children education and guardianship (Varela, 2006).

Extra-curricular activities in Spain

Among extra-curricular activities, these that involve cognitive effort, such as languages, arts or music, should be distinguished from, those that are mainly physical, most of them sports-related, like football, basketball, tennis or dancing.

Activities performed by Spanish students from compulsory education – both primary and secondary cycles – usually include a single type, typically related to sports; only 14.6% of the children population are involved in more than two kinds of activities, being always one of them sports (Cladellas, Clariana, Badia & Gotzens, 2013; Cladellas, Clariana, Gotzens, Badia & Dezcallar, 2015). Some of these activities can take place in schools, whether private or public, after classes, as well as in facilities provided by the town-council or private academies and sports clubs. However, many schools, particularly private schools, decide upon a minimal number of students being enrolled in the activities, something that limits their actual offer. It is quite exceptional that different schools of a given city coordinate to share their students and specialise their offer in order to encompass a wider range of activities. On the contrary a small set of extra-curricular activities are customarily repeated in most of the schools. The consequence is that many private institutions not linked to schools cover a large part of the after-school options. That implies moving from one place to another and, frequently, further economical expenses.

In any event, extra-curricular activities are a good opportunity to establish social bonds with children who are not their school-mates. Cases that do these activities alone (e.g. having a tutor exclusively for them) are very few. Moreover, the contact with relatives or with their ordinary teachers is also very scarce.

Prevalence of extra-curricular activities

In the last fifteen years, extra-curricular activities have had a notorious increase in Spain, shifting from a 69% of the children at the beginning of the century to an almost 90% nowadays. This gain in participants is obvious through the few studies developed: Pérez-Díaz, Rodríguez & Sánchez (2001) computed, in one of the first estimations, that 69% of primary and secondary education (i.e. students from 6 to 16 years old, encompassing the compulsive educational range) did, at least, one extra-curricular activity per week. Trilla & Rios (2005) indicated that 77.5% of primary education students practice some extracurricular activities along the academic year. Another study fostered by Barcelona town council (Fundació Jaume Bofill, 2006) focussing on primary education (i.e. 6 to 12 years old children) computed that 77.8% of the students carried out extra-curricular activities, existing just slight differences between girls and boys (77.1% and 79%, respectively). An ensuing study sponsored by Extremadura regional government (Hermoso, García & Chinchilla, 2010) stated that primary education students involved in extra-curricular activities are 84.2% of the population, being 74% girls and 94.4% boys. Finally, a study accomplished by Cladellas et al., (2013) in Catalonia showed that 86.7% of children had some sort of extra-curricular activities. Although the general percentage was slightly larger than that observed by Hermoso et al., (2010), participation by gender was much more balanced, showing an 89.2% of boys and an 83.7% of girls. The figures are roughly the same currently, thus placing the prevalence of extra-curricular activities, in Spanish population aged from five to eighteen, between 80 and 90%, with five hours per

week devoted to such activities in average (Cladellas et al., 2013; Cladellas et al., 2015; Clariana et al., 2014).

Participation in extra-curricular activities changes significantly when age is considered. According to INCE (2001) extra-curricular activities have a lesser amount of participants from secondary education. For instance, in average, one out of ten students has no extra-curricular activities in primary education cycle, while this figure doubles – two students out of ten – in secondary compulsory education.

When the type of school is considered (private, public or charter) differences are also found, being the percentages 90%, 80.7% and 75.6% respectively (Arufe-Giráldez et al., 2017; Hermoso et al., 2010; Fundació Jaume Bofill, 2006). It is worth noting that in Spain the difference between public and charter schools consists in the latter type of school having the educational costs shared by parents and the State. Private schools, which fees are fully payed by the families, typically include high economical level students, while middle and low economical level students are typically disseminated in public and charter schools. Hence, it is a reasonable assumption that the economical costs associated to subsidized schools would limit further expenses in extra-curricular activities.

Parents' educational level is a strong predictor of the amount of students involved in extra-curricular activities. Different studies (Fundació Jaume Bofill, 2006; Cladellas et al., 2015) show that there exist a positive association between educational level of the progenitors and the proportion of children engaged in more than one extra-curricular activity. This result is partly explained by the general association of educational level and incomes, being those of higher educational level better paid, on average, enabling these families to afford the price of more extra-curricular activities. In any case, most of extra-curricular activities are not subsidized by the administrations, making the participation of children in them a considerable disbursement for their families.

Physical and sports activities

As it has been previously pointed out, sports-related activities overwhelm and have also been more studied. A higher degree of well-being in students that practice sports has been observed by Dimech and Seiler (2011), alongside with some interesting benefits, like preventing delinquency (Gardner, Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2011), having higher school marks (Cladellas et al., 2013; Cladellas et al., 2015) or having more opportunities for social interaction (Schafaer, Simpkins, Svest & Price, 2011), citing just some recent contributions.

Data considering the amount of practice show that physical activities that take place two or three times a week reach the 70% of boys and girls. This figure is similar to the result obtained in the United States of America, where 70% of male students played physical activities at least twice a week, though American girls seemed to be less involved in such activities, lowering the percentage to a 50% (Sánchez-Bayle, Aranguren, Cabello & Huertas, 1998; Steptoe, et al., 2002).

In any event, the kind of activity is clearly different and associated to gender. Dancing and ballet are the main activity for girls in primary education, while most of the boys at the same educational level practice team-sports (e.g. football, basketball, handball). Teenager girls usually prefer individual sports, like swimming or tennis, or team-sports with low contact, like volleyball. On the contrary, contact- team-sports, like football or basketball, are still the preferred choice for most male teenagers (Codina, Pestana, Castillo & Balaguer, 2016).

Many studies show that, in Spain, physical activities typically decrease as students grow up (Martínez-Gómez et al., 2010). This decrease is particularly intense among girls. Molinero, Martínez, Garatachea & Márquez (2011) observed that higher academic demands were associated with a decrease in the amount of physical activities recorded at mid-studies level, being this decrement significantly more intense for the girls. Some authors have considered commitment as a central variable to keep up playing sports (Sousa, Torregrosa, Villamaría & Cruz, 2007). High commitment seems to be associated with a more intense satisfaction when playing sports, thus preventing giving up the activity (Sousa et al., 2007). Similarly, Scanlan, Russell, Magyar & Scanlan (2009) state that persistence is a behavioural consequence of sports-commitment, defining it as a psychological disposition that represents “the wish and the will to keep playing that sport”. Conversely, the degree of commitment is going to be determined by how much amusement is obtained playing the sport, personal investment and sacrifice, the opportunities to be engaged in sports practice, the worthiness of alternative activities and the social pressures, whether positive or negative, associated to sports practice (Scanlan, Russel, Beals & Scanlan, 2003).

Connections of physical and sports activities with school achievement

There are a variety of data sources that support that physical activities and sports provide many benefits. Beyond the social and personal benefits already declared, physical activities and sports produce beneficial effects on cognition and school performance. Specifically, results suggest that physical activities sensibly reduce stress, anxiety and depression, and improves learning and memory. The joint consequence of all these effects not only makes people healthier, but it also supports a higher school performance (Pastor, Gil, Tortosa & Martínez, 2012). Considering the effects of physical activity on specific subjects, Rasberry et al., (2011) hold that these effects are particularly sensible in Mathematics, English and Science. Hence it can be deduced that physical activities benefit those subjects that demand a high level of attention and concentration in the task (Rasberry et al., 2011). On the contrary, sports and physical activity seemingly have no effect on the marks in subjects such Physical Education and Arts. Physical Education should be expected to have many common variance with extra-curricular sports, at least considering the physical shape. The paradox, hence, suggests that it might exist deep discrepancies in the way sports are treated in the school and out of the school, though no further data currently pro-

vides some light on this point. The findings of Cladellas et al., (2013) are coincident with the conclusions of Mahoney & Vest (2012), showing that a moderate practice (between two and five hours per week) contributes the best to school performance, while less or more time devoted to sports has no effects or it may even be counter-productive.

Practical recommendations

The results compiled in this paper shed some light on how to plan and make decisions about extra-curricular activities, in order to provide a personalised approach that fits each student. In infancy and early adolescence parents typically decide which activities their children are going to be involved in. If the only concern is filling the gap between the school-day and the work-day, ensuring that children are in care of an adult, there exist many alternatives that do not include an overload of activities that may deplete children's energy. In that sense, activities that have a low cognitive demand, like sports, have shown to be favourable up to a given point (up to five hours per week).

More hours hinder attention and concentration. Not to say that cognitively demanding tasks, like languages, music, chess or equivalent activities, directly use the same resources that are involved in ordinary school activities, thus accumulating cognitive fatigue. The best contribution of physical activities rely, on the one hand, in the improvement of health and physical shape (fostering blood circulation, removal of toxins and many other body betterment) something that supports a finer work of the brain at its very mechanical level. And, on the other hand, physical activities do not use the same kind of resources that cognitive activities do, particularly when physical activities are approached in a playful manner. On the contrary, a highly competitive approach may also involve cognitive resources, like high concentration and many decision taking, setting apart tiresome training. That is what makes competitive sports counterproductive for school achievement.

The recommendation for parents and educators are, therefore, quite clear: filling the gap between school-day and work-day is a legitimate goal, particularly in Spain where this gap is huge, but it is a misleading decision filling it with school-like activities. More activities of this kind imply more fatigue and worse conditions for quality learning. Similarly, when sleep time is reduced – for whatever the reason – brain restoration is compromised, yielding to lower efficiency. Playful activities can also fulfil the goal of having children under supervision, though not at the cost of exhausting their brains.

Sports and physical activities, moderately competitive, are good candidates to fit these conditions, alongside with many other activities that do not demand concentration. Of course, school-like activities (like music, languages and so on) can also be included but it should be thoroughly considered the expense of energy that they involve. In that case, the point is not taking advantage of the time gap to provide more instruction. Although other conditions are also present, school time takes into consideration how much time attention can be sustained and how much mental work

a student can produce. There are certainly individual differences, but neither attention nor mental works are infinite.

Many educational systems – being the Spanish one of them – focus on marks rather than on quality learning. That involves many hours of painstaking tasks related to homework or preparing exams, mostly aimed to memorizing. Setting apart the low quality of this kind of learning, it also takes a lot of time (Cladellas & Castelló, 2017). Hence, the combination of extra-curricular activities and school-related tasks that must be done at home may generate a schedule that stretches for more than eight hours a day, something that would probably be considered as unbearable for an adult. Fatigue is a predictable consequence and that worsens the quality of learning eventually achieved. Furthermore, if time is stolen to sleep brain efficiency is diminished and the quality of learning falls dramatically.

As adolescence goes on, both school and sports activities become more demanding, particularly when sports are competition-oriented. The consequence is that many students, mainly girls, give sports practice up. That entails losing the benefits of a moderate practice of physical activity and, consequently, also make school performance decrease. It should then be considered keeping opportunities of non-competitive physical activities, just as a source of well being. It requires changing some social values associated to sports, like reducing the value of winning. Implementing educational programs that foster a playful and healthy approach to sports would be a good starting point to keep the many benefits this practice carries with it: not only in school achievement but also in preventing delinquency, in expanding social interactions, and in a healthier way of life.

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