

## PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS-RELATED EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES: A STRATEGY THAT ENHANCES SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

JEROME ST-AMAND *University of Alberta*

STÉPHANIE GIRARD *Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières*

MARIE-HÉLÈNE HIROUX *École secondaire d'Anjou*

JONATHAN SMITH *Université de Montréal*

**ABSTRACT.** This article outlines a strategy that we, as high school teachers, used in the academic year 2012-2013 to improve a student's school engagement. Extracurricular activities such as sports have proven useful (among other strategies) to counter school disengagement, specifically in enhancing positive social relations among the teachers and students involved. The authors present an approach implemented in partnership with the students, and discuss the consequences of this strategy for the students and the desired improvements. Finally, we emphasize the importance of peer involvement, teachers' collaboration, and the teachers' willingness to inspire and empower change.

### PARTICIPATION À DES ACTIVITÉS PARASCOLAIRES SPORTIVES : UNE STRATÉGIE POUR SOUTENIR L'ENGAGEMENT SCOLAIRE

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cet article porte sur une stratégie que nous avons mise de l'avant à titre de praticiens afin de susciter l'engagement d'un élève à l'école pendant l'année scolaire 2012-2013. Le recours à une activité parascolaire axée sur le sport pour favoriser l'engagement de l'élève s'est avéré en partie efficace pour contrer ce phénomène, notamment en suscitant la qualité des liens sociaux entre tous les acteurs impliqués. Les auteurs présentent la stratégie élaborée en partenariat avec l'élève, les retombées de celle-ci et les améliorations souhaitées. Finalement, ils soulignent l'importance de l'implication des pairs, de la collaboration entre les enseignants, et de la capacité des praticiens à inspirer et à susciter du changement chez les élèves.

In September 2012, we each held a teaching position at a high school near Montreal, and started to collaborate while pursuing a PhD in Educational Psychology at the Université de Montréal. At the beginning of that school year, we observed that Marc (fictional name), a 16-year-old boy in one of our

schools, showed signs of disengagement, which we believed could lead to a challenging school year both for him and for us. For instance, Marc was engaged in very few school-related tasks; he did not ask his teachers for help and rarely handed in his homework on time. Marc seemed bored, weary, and showed very little initiative when undertaking school-related tasks. Outside of class, such as lunchtime or after school, Marc's situation seemed no better. He did not participate in any of the educational projects or extracurricular activities offered by the school. Even though he did not have major discipline problems and was frequently able to achieve passing grades, his lack of engagement had an adverse effect on him, specifically on his social relationships with peers during teamwork. In fact, what worried us the most was Marc's lack of positive social relationships with his peers and his teachers, which we believed was negatively affecting his school engagement. In class, for instance, every teamwork activity proved a burden for him. He preferred not to get involved with his peers and avoided cooperative tasks and collaborative play. Outside the classroom, Marc's lack of social bonds led him to be often alone. We therefore considered it our responsibility as his teachers to spur on positive social relations and Marc's engagement in classroom-related tasks.

#### **STRATEGY TO ENHANCE SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT**

A large body of research shows that extracurricular activities are beneficial for students. For instance, many educational researchers have suggested that participation in extracurricular activities can be an effective means to develop students' interpersonal competence (Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003) and school engagement (Beauregard & Ouellet, 1995; Fisher & Theis, 2014). Mahoney et al. (2003) noted that extracurricular activity participation is associated with increased interpersonal competence over time and, ultimately, to school success: "Extracurricular activity participation provides opportunities for advancing adolescent interpersonal competence, inspiring challenging life goals, and promoting educational success. One such opportunity is the chance to form positive relationships with peers and adults outside of the classroom" (p. 410).

Researchers have suggested that through participation in extracurricular activities, students develop their interests in school and strengthen their sense of identity (Oliver, 1995, cited in Davalos, Chavez, & Guardiola, 1999). Also, schools that run activities that encourage positive interactions of students with one another foster greater school engagement (Beauregard & Ouellet, 1995; Fisher & Theis, 2014). Low in cost and involving educators, such participation can reach both girls and boys of all social and economic statuses (Marques, Martins, Santos, Sarmiento, & Carreiro da Costa, 2014). Mahoney et al. (2003) have suggested a close relation obtains between participation in extracurricular activities and students' school engagement:

At the most general level, extracurricular activity participation reflects school engagement. On the one hand, this means that the individual routinely experiences a sense of meaning and purpose connected to the educational process that is qualitatively different from, but supportive of, school engagement in the classroom. (p. 410)

### *Choosing the right extracurricular activity*

It is one thing to know that participation in an extracurricular activity could contribute to Marc's school engagement however another matter entirely to ensure that Marc chose the "right" activity. This remained a challenge because the list was very long in our school. We had sports-related activities (e.g., basketball, badminton, volleyball, individual training), cultural events (e.g., dance, science), arts (e.g., painting, photography) and linguistic exchange programs, as well as supervised study hall every day at lunchtime. In spite of an extensive list of activities, we wanted to encourage Marc to choose an activity according to his interests. We therefore asked him simple questions such as: "What are you interested in?" "What are some of your leisure activities?" "What do you like to do after school?"

It was evident from the answers Marc was providing that hockey was one of his passions. He loved hockey, knew most of the National Hockey League players and was eager to talk about the last Stanley Cup final, his favorite team, players and, of course, his own hockey team. The fact that Marc enjoyed sports was a pivotal lever. Other authors have highlighted the positive contribution of sports-related extracurricular activity on students' aspirations and social lives, for instance Davalos et al. (1999) noted that:

One type of extracurricular activity that has received scholarly attention is athletic participation. It is assumed that involvement in interscholastic athletics exposes students to peers that otherwise they would not encounter. Those in support of athletics believe that participation in group sports exposes the individual to academically oriented peers and thereby fosters socialization experiences that have a positive effect on the student's educational aspirations. (p. 62)

In encouraging Marc to participate in an extracurricular activity, our objective was also to improve Marc's school engagement in classroom-related tasks. We believed the best way to achieve that was to give him the opportunity to connect with adults and peers through an extracurricular activity. Behind this lay the hope of possibly transferring this extracurricular engagement into the classroom.

Marc had spoken of his physical education teacher who ran a fitness activity class during lunchtimes. Young athletes from the sport-study program regularly attended this activity. Marc thought it would be beneficial for him to attend this extracurricular activity and agreed to meet with his physical education teacher to follow a personal fitness program that would help him achieve his goal of improving his skating speed. The physical education teacher ran

a fitness activity twice a week, during lunchtime. On those days, as agreed, Marc would eat his lunch at the school's cafeteria and then go to the activity. On some occasions, we showed up to the activity to support Marc's efforts to improve his school engagement.

Although we never pretended to be counselors, we worked to choose the right words and tone while communicating with Marc. We wanted to show him a high level of empathy and listen actively to what he had to say about his situation, with no judgment and criticism, so that Marc could feel supported. We wanted him to know that we would be there for him every step of the way. As Osterman (2010) pointed out, students interpret sound teaching through the lens of caring behaviors. This pedagogical perspective led us to provide individual care, attention, and academic as well as social support. Therefore, our strategy consisted of building and sustaining Marc's school engagement through strong social bonds.

#### ***Building social bonds: The contribution of significant adults***

At our first meeting, Marc expressed enthusiasm and no opposition whatsoever. As we walked together toward the gym, it was a first opportunity to get to know each other and have a few laughs. He spoke openly about his weekend and the movie he had seen at the cinema. Marc recommended that we watch it. We felt that he wanted to initiate a relationship with us, and that he was only waiting for a significant adult to listen. We were hoping that Marc would also connect with Luis (fictional name), the physical education teacher, who specialized in special education. Positive outcomes of the strategy depended in part on forging those positive social bonds. When we arrived at the gym, Luis introduced himself and expressed enthusiasm to help Marc achieve his goal of improving his skating speed. Luis was very pleased to meet Marc personally for the first time and they talked about sports-related topics. Luis was an experienced teacher. He had dedicated himself to teaching physical education for 20 years and knew very well how to use sports as a vehicle for personal change. His involvement in this activity enabled us to feel a little more confident, since teaching sports was not our specialization. In our view, it was a happy start for everyone involved.

Each Friday during lunchtime, we gathered in one of Marc's classrooms and invited him to share with us the content of his logbook. In this logbook, Marc had his personal training program and also space to write about sports tournaments, personal issues, his friends, his girlfriend, anecdotes, life stories, his family, and his leisure activities. He was free to write anything that he considered important about his life and share it with us if he wanted to. Ultimately, the weekly meeting was a way to build a closer relationship and reinforce his active efforts. During the meetings, Marc could also share his feelings and perceptions about any situation that had been brought to his attention. The conversation could include anecdotes and observations from both sides. In

our view, it was the perfect time to work on building and sustaining a positive teacher-student relationship and motivating Marc to engage even more in his extracurricular activity and in his school-related tasks.

***Bonding with peers through participation in extracurricular activities***

It did not take long for many of Marc's peers to hear about the activity and the time and energy we devoted in those weekly meetings. In the fourth week, some of Marc's peers showed signs of interest in participating, and as it was available to all, we were very pleased to welcome new students. David (fictional name) was the first of his peers to show up at the gym. We took the time to explain to him the objectives and the general rules of the activity, and that he was welcome to attend the weekly meeting with us at lunchtime. Since David showed no behavioral problems or lack of school engagement, we anticipated that his presence would have a positive influence on Marc. With this in mind, Luis planned a few workouts where the two students could train and share equipment together. For us, it made sense to expose Marc to an academically-oriented peer in the hope of spurring on Marc's school engagement. After a few weeks, Luis reported that the two students trained well together. As for the other young student-athletes present at the gym, Luis observed that they never interacted with Marc and David, but that did not seem to bother them in any way.

After a few weeks, Marc and David had become accustomed to engaging in the activity. They rarely missed a training session and had fun with us sharing events from their logbooks once a week. Most of the time, Marc's stories from his logbook described sports tournaments, hockey games, or films he had watched. On a few occasions, he talked about his older sister Melanie (fictional name) and how proud he was of her accomplishments. At that time, she had just been admitted to university. He also told us that she was an excellent classical ballet teacher with much creativity in her choreographies. However, Marc rarely talked about his parents. On our way to the gym once, he told us that he often missed his mother because she had to travel a good deal as part of her work. That was the only time he talked about his parents.

Two more peers, Peter and Mike (fictional names), joined us during the year. These were two very respectful and polite teenagers with plenty of potential. Peter excelled in mathematics and had been playing for the school badminton team for two years. Mike also liked school and was part of the soccer team. Their motivation to participate in our activity, as they explained, stemmed from the team spirit that prevailed in our small group. As the year went by, it became easier for us to attract young people to participate in our activity. In fact, students who had a natural love of sports came to us with sports-related goals and not necessarily to improve an academic-related issue. However, very few girls showed interest in what we were doing, perhaps because they perceived the activity as a "boys' club" only, despite the fact that Linda (fictional name)

was present at the weekly meetings. In any case, Peter and Mike contributed positively by sharing events and stories with us from their logbook. We speculated that they perceived the activity as a way to fill their need for affiliation.

Towards the end of the school year, the discussion topic of the last weekly meeting caught our attention. While discussing their future career aspirations, all the boys, except Marc, expressed ideas about what they'd like to do in the future. Mike wanted to be an aircraft pilot and had already gathered all the information he needed for this. He stressed the fact that he was looking to graduate from high school to pursue his dream. David, for his part, wanted to join the navy. His father had been in the navy for several years and he wanted to follow his path. As for Peter, he had difficulty choosing between engineering and law. At the very least, he had a small idea of what he wanted to become professionally. Marc was simply not able to mention one profession he could possibly choose in the future. It was even difficult for him to specify any professional interests and to imagine what his future might look like. At the end of that meeting, we told Marc that he was welcome to discuss his aspirations at any time. That made him smile and he said, "thank you."

#### **OBSTACLES AND LIMITATIONS OF THE ACTIVITY**

To our surprise, two colleagues were not fond of us using such an activity to encourage Marc's academic engagement. They felt that Marc should just stay after school to complete his homework or his classroom tasks. Although we were not against the idea, we simply believed that there were other and better ways to improve Marc's engagement. In fact, Marc's school disengagement annoyed our two colleagues and they did not understand why we would put such efforts into helping a student who didn't seem to care at all. It was, therefore, difficult for us to convince them that, in our view, the activity could build and sustain strong social bonds and that, in turn, could lead to more engagement. Among some of our colleagues who understood what we were trying to do was Marc's French teacher. In fact, Linda never hesitated to participate in the weekly meeting with us to consolidate our support of Marc. Unfortunately, we did not manage to convince other colleagues to take an active part in our activity.

At the very beginning, we expected quick results considering our commitment and goodwill, and the presence of three other nice teenagers (Mike, David, and Peter) and some colleagues who remained active with us throughout the year. With these conditions in place, we thought that Marc would rapidly engage in classroom-related tasks and that he would be greatly influenced by his peers to engage in his schoolwork. We realized, however, that improvement could take more time than we had expected. This might be because our weekly meetings did not allow us to discover why Marc was so reluctant to tell us why he had never wanted to engage in his classroom-related tasks. One reason for this

might be that at one point we had 12 students participating in our meetings, so sharing feelings or life stories became more complicated. Another reason could have been that Marc just did not want to talk to us about it. One limitation of our strategy was that we, as teachers, were not trained as psychologists; the involvement of other specialized professionals, such as psychoeducators or social workers, could have contributed to reach out and help Marc.

Our objective was to improve Marc's school engagement. Did it work? We cannot answer with a definite yes. However, we can point to certain outcomes worth highlighting.

First, Marc became more collaborative throughout the year. As the months went by, Luis reported that Marc increasingly enjoyed sharing the equipment and training in teams, discussing innovative physical exercises or working out with his partners to realize common goals such as lifting more weights or running for longer periods of time. The interesting thing is that these adolescents conducted their training in an uncompetitive manner. They constantly encouraged and assisted each other.

Second, Luis reported improvements in Marc's and other participants' physical fitness, such as strength and endurance. These physical benefits derived from weight lifting, bicycle exercise, step aerobics, jogging, and many other forms of physical activity. All through the year, Luis used these physical improvements as reinforcers to motivate the students to keep training and not give up. In the second month of the program, Peter, who had been an avid smoker since the age of 13, decided to quit smoking. To explain his decision, Peter simply said that everyone in his family was against smoking. We don't know, therefore, whether our activity had something to do with this but, in either case, it was good news. Marc and the other participants told us on many occasions that they also felt more relaxed following their training. They reported being more attentive in class, even if not necessarily more motivated to *complete* their tasks.

Despite the fact that we cannot assert that Marc became significantly more engaged in classroom-related tasks, Marc's social relations improved, and there is evidence to believe that this was due to our strategy. Davalos et al. (1999) noted that, "one argument in support of extracurricular activity is that it may provide a positive support network for students who otherwise may feel excluded" (p. 63). It is possible that, in part because of what he experienced, Marc managed to build and sustain close social bonds with Mike, David, and Peter, who were more academically-oriented peers. Coupled with these healthy peer relationships, we, as teachers, felt a closer social bond with Marc. Our weekly meetings allowed us to provide support and talk about so many things with Marc that we all felt a strong team spirit. These weekly meetings may have contributed to building and sustaining a strong social bond with Marc and the other participants. In our view, it could not have been otherwise because our weekly meetings were fun and lighthearted. Although we can

never be sure that Marc had developed a greater connection or attachment leading to engagement with school because of this experience, it is evident to us that Marc enjoyed his training partners, the weekly meetings with us, and the support we provided.

As for all of the teachers involved in this activity, ourselves included, we noticed two positive impacts on ourselves: a better team spirit and more efficient teamwork, as well as improvement in the extracurricular activities offered to the students. First, the activity led to greater collaboration between teachers. Coordinating this strategy meant organizing meetings, where we would share personal experiences with Marc in a friendly, creative, and fun environment. These meetings also allowed the French, English, and Mathematics teachers to help each other by sharing ideas, as well as staying informed on Marc's progress during the fitness activity supervised by his physical education teacher. Cooperating professionally led to teachers improving the extracurricular activities offered at school, while adding new ones in order to satisfy the needs of their students. The positive impacts on the staff and the school as a whole were unexpected, but appreciated.

#### WHAT WAS LEARNED?

In light of our experience, we, as high school teachers, learned a few things we'd like to share with those wishing to implement such a strategy. First, the teacher involved must be willing to inspire and empower change. In conducting such a strategy, teachers have to believe in each student's ability to change. In our perspective, one way to enable change is to consider students' interests and to provide a range of opportunities for students to participate in activities they enjoy and want to perform (e.g. sports, dance, arts, music, theater, improvisation, etc.). Second, there can never be enough emphasis on the importance of collaboration between general and special education teachers, among teachers teaching different academic subjects, and between teachers and principals. Because of the many tasks teachers have to perform each day, we acknowledge that ensuring continuous communication and close collaboration among all parties remained a challenge for conducting such a strategy; it required of us weekly collaboration, but it was, indeed, one important key to success. Third, we should not forget to mention that peer involvement was a central component of our strategy. In fact, peer involvement allowed us to promote our strategy and to attract more students. It was also a way to persuade a few reluctant colleagues to join us throughout the school year. Finally, when dealing with at-risk youth whose behavior can negatively affect their academic success, participation in an extracurricular activity can be an efficient and low-cost solution. In our view, we believe that *punishing* disengaged students by forbidding them to participate in such activities should be avoided.

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JEROME ST-AMAND is an Assistant Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Alberta. Prior to joining U of A, he completed his MA and PhD degrees at the Université de Montréal. Between 2002-2014, he spent 12 years teaching high school in the public system in Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec. His research activities explore a variety of issues related to classroom management, school effectiveness, leadership, and improvement. [jstamand@ualberta.ca](mailto:jstamand@ualberta.ca)

STÉPHANIE GIRARD is a professor in the Human Kinetics Department of the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières. After obtaining her bachelor's degree in Special Education in High School, for 8 years, she taught adolescents experiencing various behavioral issues. During this period, she completed a master's degree (MA) and a doctorate (PhD) in Educational Psychology of Physical Education at the Université de Montréal. Her research program seeks to support the motivation of students in physical education and physical activity, taking into account their special educational needs. [stephanie.girard3@uqtr.ca](mailto:stephanie.girard3@uqtr.ca)

MARIE-HÉLÈNE HIROUX, MA, BEd, is a specialized education teacher. Over the past 10 years, she has worked with students who have learning disabilities. Her research has focused primarily on school motivation and implementing efficient educational practices with at-risk teenagers. [mh-hiroux@cspi.qc.ca](mailto:mh-hiroux@cspi.qc.ca)

JONATHAN SMITH holds a Master of Arts degree in Educational Psychology and is completing a doctoral program in the same field. His research focuses on fluctuations of academic motivation across the primary to secondary school transition. [jonathan.smith@umontreal.ca](mailto:jonathan.smith@umontreal.ca)

JEROME ST-AMAND est professeur adjoint en psychologie de l'éducation à l'Université de l'Alberta. Préalablement à son arrivée à la U o A, il a complété un doctorat (PhD) et une maîtrise (MA) à l'Université de Montréal; entre 2002 et 2014, il enseigne pendant 12 ans au niveau secondaire dans le réseau public à Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec. Ses intérêts de recherche portent sur la gestion de classe, l'efficacité pédagogique, le leadership scolaire et l'amélioration des environnements socioéducatifs. [jstamand@ualberta.ca](mailto:jstamand@ualberta.ca)

STÉPHANIE GIRARD est professeure au département des sciences de l'activité physique à l'Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières. Diplômée en enseignement en adaptation scolaire au secondaire, elle a enseigné près de huit ans auprès d'adolescents présentant différentes problématiques comportementales. Pendant cette période, elle complète une maîtrise (MA) et un doctorat (PhD) en psychopédagogie de l'éducation physique à l'Université de Montréal. Son programme de recherche vise à soutenir la motivation des jeunes en éducation physique et lors de la pratique d'activités physiques, en tenant compte de leurs besoins particuliers. [stephanie.girard3@uqtr.ca](mailto:stephanie.girard3@uqtr.ca)

MARIE-HÉLÈNE HIROUX, MA, BEd, est enseignante en adaptation scolaire au secondaire. Elle oeuvre depuis une dizaine d'années auprès d'élèves présentant des troubles graves d'apprentissage. Ses intérêts de recherche portent principalement sur la motivation à apprendre et sur les pratiques pédagogiques probantes auprès des adolescents en difficulté. [mh-hiroux@cspi.qc.ca](mailto:mh-hiroux@cspi.qc.ca)

JONATHAN SMITH est titulaire d'une maîtrise en psychopédagogie et complète actuellement un doctorat dans le même domaine. Ses recherches portent sur les fluctuations de la motivation à apprendre dans le contexte de la transition primaire-secondaire. [jonathan.smith@umontreal.ca](mailto:jonathan.smith@umontreal.ca)