Flying High or Crashing Down: Girls’ Accounts of Trying Out for Cheerleading and Dance
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Largely absent from the literature on adolescent girls’ extracurricular activities is exploration of the process and effects of vying for entry to extracurricular activities that are competitive and selective. This qualitative study contrasted the immediate and longer term effects of auditioning for two high school extracurricular activities (cheerleading, dance) on 18 girls who won admission and 18 who did not. One-on-one interviews collected immediately and 2 months following the selection decision reflected the significant impact of the decision on personal, social, and school identity. The findings supported the positive effects for those who were successful and illustrated the devastating and extended effects of not being selected on personal, social, and school identity.

Keywords: extracurricular activities, adolescent identity, adolescent development

The majority of American adolescents participate in at least one extracurricular activity during their high school years. According to estimates produced by the National Educational Longitudinal Study, 60% of high school sophomores and 70% of seniors are involved in at least one extracurricular activity, and a significant number participate in several (cited in Cooper, Valentine, Nye, & Lindsay, 1999). Research has explored the correlates of such extracurricular activity involvement, and most have demonstrated that positive benefits accrue to the student (for reviews, see Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Eccles & Templeton, 2002). Eccles et al. (2003) characterized these benefits as promotive (encouraging positive behaviors) and protective (deterrent to negative or risky behaviors).

PARTICIPATING IN EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES: RELATIONSHIPS WITH ADOLESCENT IDENTITY

The most significant promotive outcomes of extracurricular activity participation are on the adolescent’s emerging personal and social identity
(Barber, Stone, Hunt, & Eccles, 2005; Brown, Mory, & Kinney, 1994; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Eckert, 1989; Eder & Kinney, 1995; Erickson, 1968; Falvey, Coots, & Terry-Gage, 1992; Holland & Andre, 1987; Larson, 2000; Youniss & Yates, 1997). The daily peer interactions that typically occur within their school activity group are highly significant to teens and contribute to and underlie their definitions of personal identity and social reality (Brown & Lohr, 1987; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eccles et al., 2003; Eckert, 1989; Eder, 1985; Schwartz & Merten, 1967; Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 1985). As early as elementary school, participation in organized activities has been shown to shape children’s self-definitions and their most salient peer group (Eccles, 1993; Fine, 1987; Kirshnit, Ham, & Richards, 1989; Kleiber & Kirshnit, 1990), and this continues into and accelerates during adolescence. Participation in extracurricular activities during adolescence contributes to the adolescent’s perception of self (Kinney, 1993), and activity choices grow out of and reinforce emerging identity (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Fredricks et al., 2002). Adolescents may contribute to their personal identity with the sense that they are proficient at an activity, and they come to label themselves with the values and attributes of others within that category (Eder & Parker, 1987; Kinney, 1993). In Fredricks’ et al. (2002) qualitative study of adolescents participating in high school athletics and arts activities, individuals reported that such involvement taught them valuable “life lessons,” increased their self-confidence, and provided unique opportunities to demonstrate competence and feel effective in their world. In a number of studies with adolescents, positive relationships between extracurricular activity participation and self-esteem have been found (Haensley, Lupkowski, & Edlind, 1986; Marsh, 1992; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002).

Extracurricular activities provide an important context in which social communication and interpersonal interactions afford adolescents opportunities to think about themselves from the viewpoints of others and actively experiment with different social roles (Brown, 1990; Eckert, 1989; Youniss & Yates, 1997). Membership in specific activity groups structures adolescents’ selection of friends and their everyday social interactions (Brown et al., 1994; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eckert, 1989; Larson, 1994). To the extent that one spends a lot of time in the activity setting with other group members, it is likely that friendships will be formed, and social relationships will primarily be with these individuals. One’s peer crowd, with its associated culture and values, is influential on one’s sense of identity, social and personal, and on one’s resultant feelings of value, competence, and connectedness (Brown, 1990; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992;
Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eckert, 1989; Kinney, 1993). Adolescents’ involvement in extracurricular activities thus relates to their perceptions of social reality, the selection and formation of friendships, the adoption of a peer culture, and in a larger sense, one’s social identity.

It has been suggested that one mechanism by which positive relationships between extracurricular activity involvement and self-esteem and identity development may be facilitated is having a sense of belonging to the school-based culture (Eckert, 1989; Finn, 1989; Marsh, 1992). Having a salient peer culture within the school contributes to the adolescent’s developmental need for social relatedness, and this contributes to his or her identity as an important and valued member of the school community (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eckert, 1989; Larson, 1994; Youniss, Yates, & Su, 1997). The importance to adolescents of feeling connected to a social world has been viewed as a major developmental task, and active involvement in an activity-based culture in the school is a significant source of feeling integrated and competent (Eccles et al., 2003; Erickson, 1968; Larson, 1994, 2000).

Researchers have found that not all activities have the same magnitude nor direction of impact on identity (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eccles et al., 2003; Harrison & Narayan, 2003). In studies of middle and high school peer cultures it was found that through high status activities—athletics for males and cheerleading for females—the impact on adolescents’ values and behaviors was most pronounced (Eder, 1985; Eder & Parker, 1987; Holland & Andre, 1994; Merten, 1996). Measures of social success were largely based on involvement in these extracurricular activities, and they afforded participants the highest levels of social status, esteem, and prestige (Canaan, 1987; Kinney, 1993; Merten, 1996; Schwartz & Merten, 1967). Ethnographic studies of cheerleading and female middle school and high school cultures showed that cheerleaders had a direct effect on their peer culture, and that they served as the model for physical appearance, fashion, and attractiveness. They were highly visible in the school culture, were considered to be members of the elite school group, and their intragroup values were very different than those represented in other types of activity groups (Eder, 1985; Eder & Parker, 1987; Merten, 1996). Participation in this high-status activity placed members at the top of the social hierarchy in the school and affected the personal and social identity of the cheerleader (Eder, 1985; Eder & Parker, 1987; Merten, 1996).

Fredricks et al. (2002) offered a theoretical model to explain findings about why adolescents choose to continue or drop out of their current extracurricular activities. They proposed a framework that hypothesized contributions and interrelationships of individual factors, contextual features, and aspects of identity development. If these were all in harmony, the
likely outcome would be continued participation, whereas if there was an imbalance, the individual might choose to quit the activity and reassess longer term involvement. This conceptual account of the decision-making process reinforces the important ties with identity development that have been found by others and thus positions extracurricular activity involvement as having a significant role to play. However, the model does not account for the structures or outcomes that might be associated with a situation in which the individual seeks to participate in an activity, with all of the accompanying influences on peer group and self identity, and is denied access to that involvement. This is the case with a number of high school activities in which there is a competitive process inextricably linked to participation in that extracurricular activity. Adolescents make the initial choice to attempt to become members; however, the decision to allow them to participate is made by others. This competitive selection process has received less empirical attention in the literature addressing adolescent extracurricular participation, and given the ties between involvement and positive promotive benefits on identity formation, it merits empirical consideration.

A large-scale study was conducted to explore these specific types of “closed” high school extracurricular activities through the selection process and its aftermath (Barnett, in press). Quantitative and qualitative data were collected to delve into the effects and meanings ascribed by the applicants throughout the auditioning process and beyond; the qualitative data are the focus of this article. High school girls who formally indicated their intention to try out for selective and competitive cheerleading and dance teams were observed and interviewed on several occasions throughout a 2-month interval. Quantitative measurements were taken of their feelings about themselves and their school, their mood and/or subjective state (positive and negative emotions, arousal, investment), classroom attentiveness and performance, absenteeism and/or truancy, and drug and/or alcohol use. The quantitative measures were collected at eight time periods: at the initial time of application, during the practice sessions just prior to try-outs, immediately on hearing the outcome of whether they were successful or not in making the team, and at 3 days, 1 week, 2 weeks, 4 weeks, and 8 weeks following the outcome. Interviews with successful and unsuccessful aspirants were conducted immediately following the selection decision and again 2 months later.

The quantitative results of the current study were very revealing and quite staggering, particularly in demonstrating the after-effects on many girls who did not make the team, and in the longer term (2 months) persistence of these negative effects. The aspiring team members were initially similar on all of the measures, yet significant differences were detected immediately and thereafter on hearing whether or not her bid was successful. The data indicated that the
mood of the auditioner was immediately affected, with members of the successful group showing significant increases in positive emotions and feelings about themselves and a decline in negative emotions. The opposite was found for those in the unsuccessful group: positive emotions significantly declined while negative emotions increased dramatically. Differences between the groups in positive and negative emotions, although negligible at the start of the study, were pronounced and persisted throughout the 2-month term of data collection. Classroom attentiveness and performance were also effected; however, these changes all but dissipated by 2 weeks after the outcome was announced. Feelings about their school also decreased initially. Girls who were unsuccessful in making the team were also more likely to be absent and/or truant from school the week after the announcement, presumably because of the depressed feelings or shame at facing friends and classmates. Only drug and alcohol involvement were not found to be related to whether girls were successful in their bid to become a member of their high school team.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND APPROACH

Among scholars, there is a growing acknowledgement that quantitative research methodologies are useful in providing a general picture of the research problem, and that in many cases, more extensive qualitative follow-up measures may be needed to more fully extend and explain that general picture (Arnett, 2005; Brannen, 1992; Creswell, 1994; Patton, 1990; Rossman & Wilson, 1994; Silverman, 2000). The summary nature of the quantitative data in this study (Barnett, in press) raised a number of interesting questions about the inner experiences and perceptions of the girls who were going through the process of auditioning for their chosen extracurricular activity. Given the previous literature clearly demonstrating the role of extracurricular activities in adolescents’ personal, social, and school identity development, there is the need to more descriptively probe the effects of being denied entry to these activity cultures on identity formation. In addition, a single quantitative measure of “liking school” also showed a difference between the successful and unsuccessful girls, perhaps reflecting an underlying change in their sense of school belonging and/or connectedness. The numerical data thus suggest differential responses and construals of those who were chosen and those who were not, yet it was not possible to elicit greater detail about what these might be. The qualitative data reported here represent an attempt to further investigate the impact of being permitted or denied entry on the applicants, thereby delving into and extending the quantitative findings, with particular attention to effects on social and personal identity and sense of school belonging. The
goal was to obtain a more complete and richer understanding of the participants’ perspective and subjective experience as they accompanied the process of auditioning for an extracurricular activity (dance or cheerleading squad) and the outcome of whether efforts were successful or not. Interviews were conducted immediately and 2 months following the selection outcome with girls who were successful and also with girls who were unsuccessful in being chosen for the school team. The timing of the two interviews provided descriptive insight into the girls’ reactions to, and the aftermath of, their successful (or unsuccessful) efforts to gain entry to the extracurricular activity, immediate and longer term.

METHOD

Informants

One hundred seventy-three girls from three area high schools participated in the quantitative data collection phase of the study summarized above (Barnett, in press). The schools were of similar size (1,300 to 1,600) and located in a suburban setting to a large metropolitan midwestern city (see Barnett, in press, for detailed sample characteristics). Questionnaires from students at all three high schools indicated that cheerleading and dance were the most highly prized extracurricular activities for girls, and these activities were rated as such by male and female students. Thirty-six girls who served as informants for qualitative data collection were randomly selected from the 57 total girls who were chosen for the dance and cheerleading teams and the 116 who were not. Random sampling was conducted within each team (dance, cheerleading) so that equal representation would be achieved, that one type of activity did not dominate the other (although quantitative data showed no differences between these two activities; Barnett, in press). The announcement of the selection decision was made to the candidates as a group on a Friday evening in the school gym, following 2 days of auditioning before several judges. The morning following the announcement, all of the girls were contacted by telephone and asked if they would consent to be interviewed during the weekend. One of the girls in the unsuccessful group declined the invitation to participate, and an alternate was randomly chosen. A total of 18 girls who were successful and 18 who were unsuccessful in their bid to make the teams were interviewed over the weekend. The successful and unsuccessful groups comprised equal numbers from the dance and cheerleading aspirants.

The girls that participated in the qualitative part of the study were chosen from all three high schools. Five of the informants were African American,
two were Asian American, and the remainder was White. Sixteen of the girls were seniors, 11 were juniors, and 9 were sophomores; they ranged in age from 14.50 years to 18.10 years. Because of the stipulation that parents were required to make contributions to the team (such as the cost of some uniforms, shoes, accessories), it was presumed that the families of informants were all at least middle class. Grade point average (GPA) was at least 3.75 (on a 5.0 scale) for all of the girls because this was a minimum requirement for being allowed to try out. Nine of the girls had been on the school honor roll the previous semester, and all were full-time students. Seven of the girls were employed after school, ranging from 6 to 15 hours working in an average week. Table 1 provides a summary of the characteristics of the girls who were interviewed in the current study.

Interview Guide

An interview guide with open-ended questions was generated using a “grand tour” question with follow-up core questions and probes. The grand tour question is a statement of the question under study in its most general form (Creswell, 2002). The grand tour question for the first round of interviews was “How do you feel about [not] being chosen for the dance and/or cheerleading team?” For the second interview, the grand tour question was “Do you think [not] being chosen for the dance and/or cheerleading team has effected you? How”? Core questions are intended to cover the major research issues being explored in the current study, while not constraining the researcher. If the informant did not address the core issues, open-ended questions were asked. The core issues centered about the purpose of the current study were as follows: feelings, thoughts, and reactions to the decision; the meaning the informant attached to the outcome (immediate and longer term); the immediate reactions of others (friends, peers, family members, teachers); and feelings about the school (immediate and longer term). The core issues were identical for both sets of interviews. In addition, probes included in the interview protocols at both sessions to prompt the informant when appropriate, were “What do you think about that?” “Could you tell me more about that?” “Could you explain what you mean by that?” and “Anything else about that?”

When the interview guide was constructed, two researchers experienced in qualitative interviewing techniques scrutinized the guide, evaluating the wording, structure, and content of the questions. In addition, four female high school students who were not participants in the current study commented on the subject matter and on the wording and content of the questions to elicit responses from their peers. Following the minor changes
### TABLE 1: Demographic Information About the Informants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race and/or Ethnicity</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Team</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>Year in School</th>
<th>Hours Working</th>
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a. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the informants.
b. Rounded to the nearest whole year.
c. School extracurricular activity: D = dance, C = cheerleading.
d. Number of hours worked in an average week.
A peer debriefing process that involved continuous sessions between the interviewers and researchers was used throughout the qualitative study. This process served several functions: (a) it enhanced the credibility of the research, (b) it provided an opportunity for the researcher to get feedback about working hypotheses, (c) it helped to develop and test subsequent steps in an emerging methodological design, and (d) it allowed the researcher to opportunity to minimize the emotions and feelings that may cloud judgment (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Data Collection and Analysis**

When informants had been identified by random selection, they were contacted by telephone and asked if they would be willing to talk to an interviewer about their reactions to the decision. The girls and their parents and/or guardians were familiar with the individual who telephoned because they had been meeting regularly with her during the past few weeks to supply quantitative data. The purpose and structure of the interview was explained, and the same person who telephoned served as the interviewer. Prospective informants were told the interview could take place wherever they felt comfortable; however, that it had to be completed that weekend and would take no more than 1 hour of their time. All of the girls but one who were contacted agreed to talk with the interviewer. Seven of the interviews were conducted in a local coffee house, two were conducted in a fast-food restaurant, and the remainder took place in the informant’s home.

To examine reactions to the outcome after time had passed and to explore any longer term effects of the decision, a second round of interviews was conducted 2 months later. These interviews took place after the final round of quantitative data collection, so as not to contaminate or sensitize the girls in their responses to the scales and instruments that were used. Each of the girls who was initially interviewed was asked if she would meet for an additional “talk” with the interviewer within the next 3 days, at a comfortable location of her choice. The girls were again assured of the confidentiality of all of what they would reveal and reminded that pseudonyms would be used if they agreed to allow excerpts to be cited. All of the informants but one consented to the second interview.

The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and checked for accuracy of transcription. The interview transcripts were then inductively analyzed to capture rich, in-depth, and detailed information, following procedures.
detailed by experts in qualitative analysis (Bryman, 1988; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Silverman, 2000). Words and phrases in the transcripts were initially bracketed to indicate emotion-laden terms and descriptors (e.g., I feel, angry, sad, etc.) and also referents and contexts (they, friend, mom, teacher, school). Each statement or passage was depicted with a brief summary of what the girl was reporting, either explicitly stated or implicitly deduced by her illustration or narrative. These summaries were scrutinized to detect patterns that suggested clusters of ideas, referents, or meanings. The transcripts were reexamined to determine the comprehensive applicability of the clusters and to search for quotations that captured them. Finally, more general themes were identified that best captured the meanings of the interviews, within and across the cluster categories. All of these steps were independently conducted by two teams of graduate students who were unfamiliar with the research focus of the study. In the event of a disagreement, joint sessions were held to discuss the varying perspectives and arrive at a mutually acceptable assignment.

Following each round of interviews, summaries were sent to each informant and assessed for adequacy and accuracy. All of the informants confirmed that the summaries accurately reflected their feelings and experiences and declined the offer to add, omit, or change the summary in any way. At this point, informants’ names were changed to pseudonyms to protect their identity, and all consented to parts of their summary being published if a pseudonym was used. This process of member checking, or informant response verification, was considered essential in establishing the credibility (internal validity) of the data, ensuring the adequacy of the information that was provided, and protecting against potential misinterpretations and researcher subjectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

After constructing the informant summaries and establishing their credibility, cross-informant comparisons were inductively derived within members of the successful and unsuccessful groups by the graduate student teams. The descriptive summaries and category headings were generated and then compared across the girls within each of the two groups. Following only minimal refinement suggested by this procedure, the result sets of cluster categories were then matched between the successful and unsuccessful groups. This method allowed for scrutiny in deriving similarities and differences in the girls’ experiences in reacting to the selection outcome (Stake, 1998). By conducting comparisons following these steps (intragroup and then intergroup comparative analyses), what emerges is “a powerful conceptual mechanism, fixing attention upon the attributes being compared, without obscuring other knowledge about the case” (Stake, 1998, p. 97). This procedure also contrasted and complemented the thick description contained within the individual informant summaries.
FINDINGS

The findings are reported below as they reflect on aspects of personal, social, and school identity. By contrasting the reactions of those who were successful with those who were not, it was hoped that a richer and more interpretable picture could be gleaned from these qualitative interviews that would serve to be informative and explicative of the quantitative data. The verbatim comments of some of the aspirants are presented, followed by a notation indicating whether the words were spoken the day after the decision was made (immediate) or 2 months later (extended).

Emotional Reactions to the Outcome

Successful aspirants. All of the 18 successful girls reported feeling happy when they heard that they were selected to be members of the dance or cheerleading team. Thirteen of the girls used more intense words to describe their reactions to the decision, using words such as ecstatic, elated, excited, high, and awesome. Four of the girls reported wanted to “jump” and/or “scream” when they first heard the news, and all but one reported restraining their emotions in deference to those who had not been chosen. Seven of the successful applicants said that they felt ecstatic on the inside but that they did not want to show the extent of their emotions because they were (or had become) friends with at least one girl who was not selected. Most revealed that this did not hamper their excitement for themselves but that they tried to temper expressing their joy.

I’ve never been happier! My life is gonna change in big ways. I know I’ll be smiling a lot more now. I feel happy most of the time but now I’m REALLY happy. I want to jump up and down all the time now and I just can’t sit still. (Darlene, immediate)

At first last night I couldn’t believe it. I just sat there and stared for the longest time. Then someone said something to me and said we should party and celebrate and that we could be friends and I felt so happy and I thought about what really happened and I knew how great it was gonna be! (Kendra, immediate)

I’m so much more easy-going now. I was really nervous at first, and I thought a lot about not even doing it. But my friends told me to go for it and I thought about it a lot and I decided to try. This has made me so happy. I’m so glad I put myself out there. Maybe I won’t be so afraid of trying things again. I can’t believe it—well, maybe I can.” (Isabel, extended)

I’m just feeling so good all the time—it’s amazing! I don’t even want to go to my classes ‘cause I have to try to concentrate. I’m flying high all the time now—and it’s been a couple months already and I still haven’t come down.
I’m gonna have a great year next year—this is the best thing that’s ever happened to me. (Judy, extended)

This has been the most awesome thing in my whole life. I feel like I’m the best! And I think . . . I mean, I don’t want to sound like a brat, but I really think I’m great. And I think everyone else is thinking it, too. They all look at me different now. And I think I might become different. (Olivia, extended)

Unsuccessful aspirants. As was expected, the emotional reactions of those who were not successful in their bid to become a team member were in stark contrast. Nine of the 19 who were unsuccessful wept during the interview when they recounted first hearing the outcome, and two were not able to continue the interview for several minutes while they regained some degree of composure. Although six of the girls said they weren’t surprised when they learned the results, these girls were clearly upset and dejected. Four of the girls seemed to be embarrassed about their strong emotional reaction to the interview question, looking away from the interviewer when eye contact had previously been maintained.

I hate my life—this sucks! This is the worst! I can’t believe this happened to me. It seems like everything was going so well and now it comes crashing down. (Helene, immediate)

I just want to run away . . . from everything and everybody. I don’t want anybody to see me. They’re gonna think I’m a total idiot. And I am, I really am. What a loser I am! (Priscilla, immediate)

I just feel so sad . . . and so lonely now. I’m never gonna get over this! At first I thought I’d just forget about it but I can’t. And I try real hard. And it never goes away and I don’t think it ever will. And I try to think of other things but it doesn’t work. (Gracie, extended)

I’m not surprised it happened—everything sucks for me! Sometimes something goes good and I just think it won’t last. Now I have to go through my senior year with this on me. It’s like all dirty and disgusting—and that’s what I feel inside. I hate this—and I hate me!” (Florence, extended)

Meanings Ascribed to the Outcome: Implications for Personal Identity

Successful aspirants. The girls showed two basic reactions to hearing they were successful in their quest to become a member of the dance or cheerleading team. These reactions related to personal identity and appeared to reflect the extent to which dance or cheerleading had already become a relatively stable component of self-identity. For some of the girls, their selection to the team was self-affirming—they reported knowing they
were good at the activity when they declared their intent to audition. The majority of girls in this group attributed their success to a natural ability or talent they possessed. A number of the successful girls had been continuously enrolled in dance or gymnastics, with several having started at preschool or kindergarten age. Some had performed in recitals and vied in competitions previously and had already received feedback from parents, teachers, coaches, and peers that they had the talent and ability to do well in the activity. For these girls, the selection to the school team was rewarding but expected, and the outcome was not likely to add to (or change) the girl’s identity as a “dancer” or “cheerleader” or “gymnast.”

I guess I’m just good at dance—I’ve been taking lessons for 6 years and I guess it paid off. You know, I kinda thought I would make it. I’ve been doing this for a long time and I think I’m a real dancer. And I might want to grow up to be one for real—like in the theaters. (Paula, immediate)

The judges could see I can move a lot and I’m very flexible—I’ve been taking lessons and practicing every week for the last 4 years. They could see I was good. (Gert, immediate)

I would’ve been surprised if I hadn’t made it—I know I’m good at dance. I got award and ribbons. And the other judges were from Washington and they know a lot about this and these judges were good—but I don’t think they were THAT good. So I wasn’t too worried. (Beth, extended)

I’ve been in gymnastics since I was 3, and I’m good at leaps and straddles. This is something I’m good at—my mom told me I would get this for sure and I wanted to believe her and I think I really did but then I kept telling myself that maybe something would happen that shouldn’t and I wouldn’t get it. (Felicia, extended)

For seven of the successful girls, the corresponding label was not a part of their self-identity. Rather, these girls were looking to the competition to help shape their self-perception of themselves. The quantitative anxiety measures showed that these girls were considerably more anxious at the start and throughout the auditioning process. Their comments to the interview question shed light on the higher levels of anxiety that were observed, by relating the importance of the outcome to their developing sense of their own talents and abilities. These individuals were exploring a number of roles and activities, searching for feedback to reveal areas to focus their attention and identity. For these girls, in comparison with those who had more firmly established identification with the activity, they placed added emphasis on the importance of the outcome of the dance or cheerleading competition. The girls who showed this type of response to their successful audition were much more likely to believe that they succeeded.
because they worked harder and/or were more motivated than those who were not chosen.

It made me more sure of myself. Sometimes I think I’m clutzy and I can’t move like some other girls I know but maybe I really can. Maybe I could think about doing this more. (Allison, immediate)

It just goes to show all the hard work I put in—it worked! I went to all the sessions and I trained, too. I lifted weights and did exercises and I got a membership at [local gym] ’cause I wanted to do it and see if I could. (Roberta, immediate)

I was so totally into this—I think I wanted it more than anyone else! I know I did. I didn’t tell anybody but it’s all I thought about and I even wrote about it, but I ended up not turning it in. I know I got myself all worked up but I really, really, wanted it bad! (Emma, extended)

I really wanted to win—I wanted it more than anything I’ve ever wanted in my whole life! I tried my best and I tried to concentrate and focus like my mom told me to do. I know I can do this now—and I feel good about it and I’m gonna keep doing it, and I’m gonna go to a lot more dances and not feel embarrassed. (Carolyn, extended)

Unsuccessful aspirants. The comments from several of the girls indicated that the significance of their unsuccessful efforts went well beyond the activity and/or team for which they were auditioning. Descriptive words such as depressing, sickening, heartbroken, and disgusting were used by the unsuccessful aspirants to relate their reactions to hearing the outcome. For nine of the informants, the negative result was interpreted as a direct reflection of their self-worth. For example, one informant (Stephanie) told about how she didn’t perceive herself to have a “place in life,” questioning “who I am,” and “where I belong.” Similarly, two others (Linda, Marissa) spoke candidly about “never being good at anything,” not “feeling good about who I am,” and “failing as a person.” One of these individuals (Chloe) went on to question whether she should continue her “existence,” and said that she felt she was “just taking up space” and “why—for what reason??” One informant (Anna) provided a fairly lengthy monologue about how she had “never been good at anything” in her life and how she was a “failure as a human being,” finally concluding that there was “no point in trying anymore—why bother??”

I’ll never be the same again. I have nothing in my life that I’m good at. This is another failure and it’s the last! I don’t want to do anything or go anywhere.” (Chloe, immediate)

I’ll never try for another activity again—what good would it do?? I’ll never make it—no matter what I do—I’m just a loser! That’s what I am—I’m a loser! (Anna, immediate)
I can’t figure out why I wasn’t chosen—I know others who weren’t half as good as me and they got picked. I think the judges sucked. They didn’t even look like they knew what they were doing. Who are they anyway? They prob’ly just dragged them in off the street or something. (Linda, immediate)

I feel like I’m not in control of my life—I tried my hardest and did my best and they just told me “no” that I couldn’t do what I really, really wanted to do and tried so hard. This is the pits! Who says they get to tell me what to do? Who let them tell me? They stink! (Ilene, extended)

I’m having thoughts about food all the time and what I put in my mouth . . . it’s not about food—I know it. But I can’t help it. I won’t let myself eat anything with any fat in it. They told me it’s not the food but it’s the only thing I can control in my life. Everything seems like it’s going on around me but I’m not there. This cheer thing made me crazy and now I think different than I did before. I never used to worry about anything so much but I think bad things all the time now. (Priscilla, extended)

I don’t really like myself anymore. I used to think I was okay but now I found out that I’m not and I just didn’t know it. I can’t believe I was fooling myself all this time. People must be laughing at me and thinking how sad and funny I am. I want to go away and die and never come back to see those people. (Helene, extended)

One of the unsuccessful auditioners was a girl (Noel) who had been on the dance team the previous year but was not awarded a spot this coming year. For her, the negative outcome of her efforts was devastating, and she used this to question all that had happily transpired the previous year she participated on the team. While sobbing, she said that she now regarded all of her performances the previous year as “humiliating myself in front of the whole school” and now believed that “people were laughing at me the whole time.” She lamented her magical thinking that brought her to ever entertain the idea that she was a good dancer, and even questioned how “fat and stupid” she “must have looked to everyone” wearing the team’s special outfits and uniforms. For this individual, the outcome effectively obliterated the entire previous year that she had regarded as “the happiest time of my life.”

Meanings Ascribed to the Outcome: Implications for Social Identity

Successful aspirants. Thoughts about others’ reactions to the outcome of the auditions produced similarly anticipative responses from those who were successful. Many of the informants said that they called “everyone I know” to tell them the good news, and several said that friends were waiting for them outside the school to hear the outcome. Eight of the girls left the school and immediately went “to party” and “celebrate” the great news, with several
calling parents to share their excitement. All of the girls said they couldn’t wait to either “tell everyone” or have others learn about their success. They all indicated their gleeful anticipation at returning to school on Monday to receive the congratulatory remarks and good wishes of their peers and teachers. One of the girls said that being on the receiving end of this outpouring of celebratory comments was “the best part of all of it” and she wished, for the first time in her life, that “school was held on Saturdays.”

Three of the girls who successfully auditioned said that the outcome would not change their friends or social interactions at the school. For two of the three, this was the first time they had sought to be a member of the team. It wasn’t clear to the interviewer whether the girl’s report that her peer group would not change was meant to impress the interviewer as a humble gesture or whether she fully intended to maintain her existing nonactivity friendships. However, for the others who won a place on the team, they anticipated the outcome would change some aspect of their social life. Primarily, most reported that their inclusion into the high status school activity would make a difference in the time and energy they had available for nonteam relationships. Of the 15 girls who said that their friendships and dating relationships were likely to change, 13 felt this was just a necessary consequence of needing to be so actively committed to a school activity. Only 3 girls replied that they were being “honest” about informing us that they only wanted to be seen now with, as one girl put it, “the right kind of people.” Thus, for the majority of the successful applicants, their social relationships were seen as changing to reflect their newly acquired status on the team.

I’m gonna get more friends and go out more. I can’t wait. I’m gonna have lots of friends. Everyone knows who I am and they want to hang with me. (Susan, immediate)

There’s this group, you know, and they can pick who they want and you can’t get them to like you . . . and now I think I’m gonna get picked! I know it’s all because I got picked. This has changed my life! I’m gonna get to go out a lot and be involved in everything—and it’s all cause of this! (Henrietta, immediate)

Now I’m somebody . . . I never thought anyone cared too much . . . but this is my chance! I’ve already seen it—people come up and congratulate me and tell me I did a good job and I don’t even know who they are. Oh maybe I’ve seen ‘em but I didn’t know their name or anything. I can’t believe it happened so fast. And next year is gonna be even more awesome! (Natalie, extended)

I think this is going to be really cool. I’m gonna be one of the big people in my school and everyone’s gonna want to hang with me and be my friend. It’s already started! This is gonna be the best school ever! I love this school! (Laurie, extended)
Consistent with previous research (Eder & Parker, 1987; Merten, 1996) and our questionnaire data about the high status afforded dance and cheerleading members, 18 of the girls were aware of their elevated status in the school. They spoke about their increased visibility in the school, and the popularity that would likely accrue to them because of being a team member. Six of the girls said they would now qualify for dates with certain of the more accomplished or attractive athletes and others.

Boy I can’t wait—I’m gonna be much much more popular now. I couldn’t do stuff before but now I can. There’s so many good things that are gonna happen now . . . so many things . . . and I’m gonna be liked so much more. (Maddie, immediate)

I should have no trouble getting asked to go to a dance by someone I’ve been wanting to go with—now they’re gonna think I’m a hotty! (Henrietta, immediate)

These guys started talking to me. I know it’s ‘cause I’m gonna be a cheerleader and they think it’s cool. And now I’m so cool and they want to be with me and be around. I really like that. If I hadn’t made it, it wouldn’t have happened. (Emma, extended)

It was interesting to find that three of the successful girls spoke about the enhanced relationships with their mother that they anticipated would occur. One of the girls said that the decision would likely increase her mother’s acceptance of her, and two others remarked that this was a way of getting closer because her mother had been a cheerleader in her high school years. As the girls related their feelings about solidifying or further establishing a mother-daughter relationship, it was clear from their affect that this outcome carried a great deal of importance to them.

Maybe my mom will notice me more. She’ll have to take me out and get me some things so I can dance and get the outfits. Maybe she’ll spend more time with me now. I don’t care about the money. I could talk to her. And we could look around together at the stores. (Natalie, immediate)

My mom’s gonna be so happy now . . . maybe even more than me. She was a cheerleader when she was young and she always talks about it and she really wanted me to try out. She tried showing me some moves and stuff. (Maddie, extended)

*Unsuccessful aspirants.* Several of the girls reported that the negative decision would have a “disastrous” effect on their life in terms of their friendships and social relationships in and out of school. Returning to school on Monday morning was actively dreaded by virtually all of the unsuccessful informants. Sixteen of the girls shared their reaction that “the
worst part” was having “to face other people” and especially those that were not informed about the outcome, and that they would be asked “THE BIG QUESTION,” as one girl (Opal) so aptly labeled it. Four of the girls said they didn’t want to face the “looks of pity” that they anticipated receiving, and 11 informants dreaded the “looks” they knew they would be getting, reflecting pity or “mocking me for even trying out.”

I know I’m a failure in life but now everyone else in the whole school does, too. I can’t believe it! They’re all gonna hate me and I hate them! (Opal, immediate)

This is totally humiliating—everyone’s gonna know what a failure I am—again! I tried out for the play but I didn’t make that either. I can’t believe it—why did I do this again? Can’t I learn? Now everyone’s gonna know I’m stupid. I can’t stand them all looking at me—I know what they’re thinking. (Gracie, immediate)

Yeah, we were pretty close, but she has other new friends now and I don’t fit and she’s just feeling sorry for me now. I don’t want her pity—big deal. I don’t care if anyone likes me—it doesn’t matter anymore. I just want to get out of here. (Rena, immediate)

I know girls who made it and I don’t want to talk to them—it makes me sick—they make me sick. They walk around like they’re so special and they aren’t and they act like they’re so great. I want to puke when I see them. And I know they look at me and think I’m pitiful. (Stephanie, extended)

She’s my best friend—she WAS my best friend. She called me a lot but I saw it was her and I’m not talking to her. Prob’ly never again! She thinks she’s so great now and she’s changed and I know she’s so different than when we were friends. Now she thinks she’s better than me and she isn’t but they all think they are. (Emily, extended)

I can’t wait to get out of here for good. I’m just waiting ‘til I can leave and get away from this place. I thought I had friends but I don’t anymore. They all think I’m a loser and I don’t care what they think. (Marissa, extended)

Clearly, for several of the unsuccessful aspirants, the effects of not making the team extended well beyond the school boundaries. In particular, the words of another individual (Jenny) who had gone through the auditioning process with a close friend, who was ultimately successful in securing a place on the cheerleading team, reflect the longer term deleterious effects of not making the team. This unsuccessful friend now reported being “unable to look her in the face” and “not wanting to spend time with her much less see her face.” She said that it “would be too hard” to be in her company and reported that “they made big plans together” that now were “ripped to shreds.” She went on to question whether they could ever
be friends, or even acquaintances, and reported feeling that “I never want to be around her anymore.”

**Meanings Ascribed to the Outcome:**
**Implications for School Identity**

*Successful aspirants.* The quantitative data showed that ratings of how much the individual liked school did not change much for the successful girls after hearing the decision, and post hoc analyses revealed that this was not because of an existing high level of involvement in school-related activities. Cell means indicated, however, that at the start of the competition and following the audition, there was already a high level of school spirit shown by all of the applicants. Interviews with the girls who were successful further revealed that the sizeable (significant) differences that were observed in feelings about their school between the successful and unsuccessful girls were because of the dramatic drop shown by those who were not chosen. However, comments made during the interview revealed that the successful girls did relate more positively to their school community and saw opportunities to enhance morale and visibility.

The informants who became members of their school team were not only elated at their own success but also said they were glad they could now show “more school spirit.” Three of the girls remarked that being chosen for the team was a way of “helping their school” and fostering “team spirit” among their peers. They indicated they felt closer to their school and “more a part of things” as a direct result of successfully auditioning for the dance or cheerleading teams. Two of those selected to be cheerleaders said that they intended to wear their uniforms out of school so they could serve as “ambassadors” to the public in representing their school. Two of the girls also commented that they felt closer to their teachers, and one said she was now “more understanding of the principal’s job.” For many of these girls, there was a clear identification with the school itself and with the broader school community.

This is an awesome place! I love my school! I can’t believe this has happened—I feel so great that I could try and look at all the stuff we’re gonna get to do—it’s so cool! (Paula, immediate)

We’re going to get more respect, and even from the teachers. I know they know who made it and they like that. It’s gonna make a difference—I know it. (Roberta, immediate)

I feel like I belong here—it’s awesome. I didn’t feel like this before. (Allison, extended)
I’m gonna wear all my uniforms out wherever I go—and everyone’s gonna see that I’m in this school. It’s gonna be so great next year. And I’m gonna dress up so I look really good in the colors. (Emma, extended)

Unsuccessful aspirants. Many of the emotional comments of the informants who were unsuccessful in securing a place on the team were about how their feelings changed about their high school. The quantitative data revealed a significant and dramatic drop in ratings of how much these girls “like school” and “felt like going to school.” The responses to the interview questions further probed this decline and obtained more descriptive information about school identity of those who did not make the teams. One girl (Marissa) said that one of the primary reasons she applied for a spot on the team was “to find a way to be connected with my school” and that “now it’s just the opposite—I want to run as far away from this school as possible!” Two of the informants expressed their distaste for their school that “makes us work so hard to get on a team—and why? for what reason?” (Ilene), while another said “this whole thing shouldn’t be allowed in school—why can’t we just all be helped to feel like we’re winners?” (Bonnie). One girl whose friend auditioned with her and was successful remarked, “This school has made me break up with my best friend—they don’t care about us! They don’t care if we’re happy or even if we learn anything! Why do they do this to us?!” (Noel). It was clear from these comments, and similar others, that perceived ties to the school and feelings of being connected to the school community suffered tremendously for these girls.

I’ll never put myself out there again. I was stupid. This school’s stupid. I’ll never do it again. They made me feel this way. (Karen, immediate)

I’ll never try out for anything ever again. This school sucks. I’ll never go to any of their stupid things. Everyone looks at me and feels sorry for me. Why bother? (Bonnie, immediate)

This is gonna completely and totally ruin my school years—’til I graduate. And for years and years after. (Florence, extended)

I hate this school. I don’t know what I ever liked about it. It’s all a fake. I can’t believe I ever thought this was a good place. It’s not. I’m stupid. I feel sorry for anyone who wants to go here. (Daphne, extended)

DISCUSSION

The importance of discretionary activities as an arena in which teens can be more expressive, communicative, and exploring of themselves, in contrast
to the more rigidly structured venues of school, work, and in many cases, home suggests that participating in such activities may provide unique and expansive opportunities for the development, expression, and refinement of identity (Barber et al., 2005; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Erickson, 1968; Fredricks et al., 2002; Kinney, 1993). Conceptual models (Fredricks et al., 2002) and a wealth of empirical and theoretical literature provide support for the thesis that participation in extracurricular activities is important to the developing adolescent’s personal, social, and school identity. Numerous studies have promoted extracurricular activity involvement as conducive to positive self-esteem (Blass & Bauer, 1988; Elder & Conger, 2000; Falvey et al., 1992; Fitch, 1991; Fredricks et al., 2002; Haensley et al., 1986; Marsh, 1992; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002; McNeely et al., 2002), active identity exploration (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Erikson, 1968; Falvey et al., 1992; Fredricks et al., 2002) and enhanced opportunities for socialization and the development of social skills (Barber et al., 2005; Brown & Lohr, 1987; Brown et al., 1994; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Eckert, 1989; Haensley et al., 1986; Youniss & Yates, 1997). If there has been any departure, it has been the failure to detect such effects (Eccles et al., 2003). The suggestion that extracurricular activities may in fact be detrimental in many of these ways to adolescents has not received much conceptual attention, and little direct empirical examination. This is an important line of research because it addresses the negative implications of adopting into one’s identity an activity-based label, which has only previously been explored for its largely positive contributions (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eckert, 1989; Fredricks et al., 2002). This qualitative study provides insight into the negative effects that certain types of extracurricular activities might render to high school students aspiring to join an extracurricular activity. The voices of those who have and have not been successful in their bid to become a team member supports and extends conceptual and empirical efforts about the contribution of extracurricular activities to personal, social, and school identity.

**Effects on Personal and Social Identity**

These findings validate and significantly extend the literature noting the beneficial effects of participating in school-related extracurricular activities for adolescent girls. The strong emotional reactions of the girls who aspired to be a member of the school cheerleading or dance team confirmed and vividly depicted the extent to which the aspirants attached personal and social significance to their quest. In addition, the emotional expressiveness of the girls displayed through these interviews corroborates literature that
has shown heightened emotionality to be a typical characteristic of adolescent girls (e.g., Larson & Richards, 1994; Larson, Clore, & Woods, 1999).

The emotional reactions of the successful and unsuccessful aspirants converged to prominently detail the personal and social meanings ascribed to the outcome. For those girls who were successful in their bid to become a team member, the feelings of elation resulted from affirming or consolidating their identity as a “dancer” or “cheerleader” or “gymnast,” demonstrating their competence or perception that they possessed valued skills (Barber et al., 2005; Fredricks et al., 2002). Although several of the unsuccessful aspirants externalized blame for the outcome on the inferior quality of the judges, the vast majority revealed self-critical internalized assessments. For many, the result of being denied entry to the team ignited feelings of incompetence, lowered self-worth, and doubt about their previously held identity as a “dancer” or “gymnast.” For these girls, the negative outcome from the auditioning process signaled more than the lack of access to a team. Just as the successful aspirants saw that there would be heightened status and previously closed social opportunities accruing to them, the unsuccessful girls wanted to withdraw from all social networks, especially those relationships with friends who were successful in their bid. And although it might be expected that there would be a lot of emotion displayed immediately after hearing the decision, the sting of many of these reactions persisted after a period of 2 months. Clearly, the salient desire of adolescents to feel affiliated and securely connected to a social world (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Erickson, 1968; Fredricks et al., 2002) was upended for many of these girls.

Effects on School Identity

There is also a significant base of support (Davalos, Chavez, & Guardiola, 1999; Finn, 1989; Jacobs & Chase, 1989; Jordan & Nettles, 1999; Marsh, 1992) for the contention that school identity (a sense of “belonging,” “identification,” or “connectedness” with school) is related to many of the positive effects that have been found with healthy adolescent psychosocial functioning. This line of reasoning posits that students develop a feeling of connectedness with their school through extracurricular activity involvement, which then results in the positive outcomes that have been empirically identified. The interviews with the successful girls in the current study support the connection between involvement in school-related extracurricular activities and school identity. For the girls who were successful in the competition to become a dance or cheerleading team member, this did not change much. However, the findings of the current study also revealed a sharp contrast with those that have
been published, indicating the opposite effects of wanting to get involved in a school-related activity and being turned away. The informants in the current study revealed how the initial affinity they felt for their school was reversed and resulted in an active antipathy and aversion to their school. These effects were shown to extend at least 2 months after the decision to deny them entry had been made. It is sad to note, these feelings of alienation and hostility generalized, for many of the students, to other school-related activities and events.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

For most of the girls the negative effects of being denied entry to the team to which they aspired remained after a 2-month interval, and further longitudinal research would have to look at longer term effects. The depression, anxiety, self-doubt, and withdrawal from social and school relationships, and the loss in some cases of close friends and social networks, would strongly suggest that these types of extracurricular activities are only positive for those who are allowed admission. The devastation that can be wrought from unsuccessfully competing for such opportunities might well be more strongly negative than the positives of winning entry. The current research thus supports and extends previous efforts that have found that adolescents’ involvement in extracurricular activities relates significantly to their personal, social, and school identity. Future research efforts addressing extracurricular activity participation clearly need to expand their scope to include successful and unsuccessful aspirants to these types of selective and competitive activities.

The cheerleading and dance activities explored in the current study may well have elicited stronger emotional reactions than might have been shown with other school-related or other extracurricular opportunities. Indeed, research has shown that adolescent girls are more concerned with popularity than achievement or success (Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Eder, 1985; M. Rosenberg, 1965; F. R. Rosenberg & Simmons, 1975), and these two activities convey the higher degrees of status and visibility than most other high school activities (Eder, 1985; Eder & Parker, 1987; Merten, 1996). However, the reactions surrounding the ecstasy and pain attached to winning or losing entry to these activities might also be equally salient to adolescents who fervently aspire to other teams or clubs. Additional research will have to explore the generalizability of these emotional responses to other types of activities within and outside the high school setting.

The results suggest that school personnel and parents should pay more attention, in the immediate and longer term, to those who are unsuccessful in auditioning for these selective and highly valued school activities.
School-related activity experiences might be expanded to include more aspirants, for example, by having multiple cheerleading and dance teams individually aligned to the various sport and spirit activities. In addition, the auditioning process might be revisited to place less emphasis on the dichotomous “win–lose” outcome and add other types of recognitions for effort and participating. Finally, the possible devastating effects on the girls who are unsuccessful in their bid to secure a place on the team should be recognized by counselors and parents, and appropriate strategies designed to assist these girls in appropriately situating the outcome.

REFERENCES


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