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PARTICIPATION IN EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES AS A TOOL FOR PRESERVING THE MENTAL HEALTH OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract*. This article examines how the participation in extracurricular activities effects the mental health of early adolescent students. Adolescents living in Ukraine experience chronic stress, which has become the norm for them, so it is important to investigate the relationship between structured extracurricular activities and psychological well-being of schoolchildren. The study involved 120 secondary school students aged 10-16 years (68 girls, 56.7%). Standardized instruments were used, such as the Spence Childhood Anxiety Scale (SCAS), the Children's Symptom Checklist (PSC), the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ), the Difficulty in Emotional Regulation Scale (DERS), the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), and the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS). In addition, data were collected through a questionnaire on interests and frequency of participation in extracurricular activities, namely: sports, intellectual, creative and socio-communicative. The results of the study showed that students had a high rate of internalization and externalization of anxiety, difficulties in psychosocial functioning, below-average scores in empathy and difficulties in emotional regulation. Using Pearson correlation analysis, a relationship was found between intellectual and creative extracurricular activities and motivation, empathy and psychosocial functioning. Gender differences were found between adolescent boys and girls, where girls show a greater interest in creative activities and have a higher level of empathy. Students of eighth and ninth classes noted lower intrinsic motivation compared to younger classes, and younger classes were more involved in extracurricular activities. Students who were more involved in extracurricular activities reported greater motivation and empathy, better emotion regulation, and less anxiety. The results confirm the need for a variety of extracurricular activities and their regularity in educational institutions in order to build mental resilience in students who are in a state of long-term stress due to full-scale war.*

Keywords: *extracurricular activities, adolescent mental health, anxiety, motivation, empathy, emotional regulation, psychosocial functioning.*

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УЧАСТЬ У ПОЗАКЛАСНИХ АКТИВНОСТЯХ ЯК ІНСТРУМЕНТ ЗБЕРЕЖЕННЯ МЕНТАЛЬНОГО ЗДОРОВ'Я УЧНІВ СЕРЕДНЬОЇ ШКОЛИ

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Анотація. *У цій статті вивчається як участь у позакласних активностях впливає на ментальне здоров'я учнів раннього підліткового віку. Підлітки, які проживають на території України, переживають хронічний стрес, який став для них нормою, тому важливо дослідити взаємозв'язок між структурованими позакласними активностями та психологічним благополуччям школярів. У дослідженні взяло участь 120 учнів віком 10-16 років (68 дівчат, 56,7%) середньої школи міста Києва. Було використано стандартизовані інструменти, такі як Шкала Дитячої Тривожності Спенса (SCAS), Список Дитячих Симптомів (PSC), Опитувальник Емпатії Торонто (TEQ), Шкала Труднощів у Емоційному Контролі (DERS), Багатовимірна Шкала Сприйнятої Соціальної Підтримки (MSPSS) та Шкала Академічної Мотивації (AMS). Окрім цього, були зібрані дані через анкетування по інтересах та частоті участі у позакласних активностях, а саме: спортивні, інтелектуальні, творчі та соціально-комунікативні. Результати дослідження показали, що в учнів високий показник інтерналізації та екстерналізації тривоги, труднощі у психосоціальному функціонуванні, показники нижче середнього по емпатії та труднощі у емоційній регуляції. За допомогою кореляційного аналізу Пірсона було знайдено зв'язок між інтелектуальними й творчими позакласними активностями та мотивацією, емпатією та психосоціальним функціонуванням. Знайдені гендерні відмінності між хлопцями та дівчататми підліткового віку, де дівчата проявляють більший інтерес до творчих активностей та мають більший рівень емпатії. Учні восьмих та дев'ятих класи відмічали у себе нижчу внутрішню мотивацію у порівнянні з класами молодше, а молодші класи більше залучені до позакласної діяльності. Учні, які були більш залучені у позакласну діяльність відмічали у себе більшу мотивацію та емпатію, кращу регуляцію емоцій, та меншу тривожність. Результати підтверджують необхідність у різноманітті позакласних активностей та регулярності їх проведень в закладах освіти з метою формування ментальної резильєнтності учнів, які перебувають у стані довготривалого стресу через повномасштабну війну.*

Ключові слова: *позакласна діяльність, ментальне здоров'я підлітків, тривожність, мотивація, емпатія, емоційна регуляція, психосоціальне функціонування.*

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Introduction and current state of the research problem. Adolescent students in realities of war are under the influence of stress factors, which affects their mental health. Their emotional state, behavior and psychosocial functioning affect motivation to learn and the ability to regulate their own emotions. According to WHO data 2024, adolescent students who have been exposed to armed conflict show a higher level of disorders in communication and emotional regulation compared to their peers where there is no conflict.

Extracurricular activities that students choose themselves can be a potential protective element for their mental health. Foreign publications widely describe the impact of extracurricular activities, however, in Ukrainian researches have mainly studied this topic in specific areas, for example, only the impact of sports on the psychological state of a student.

Secondary school students are going through a critical period of personal identity formation, so their involvement in various types of activities directly affects their development of motivation, social skills, empathy, and emotional resilience. Currently, there are few Ukrainian studies published over the past four years on the relationship between extracurricular activities and students' psychological health, which in turn complicates the development of effective methods where with the help of activities conducted outside of class is possible to improve the emotional state of the student.

There are many foreign publications on the impact of extracurricular activities on the well-being of adolescents. Eccles, Barber, Stone and Hunt wrote that students who participate in structured extracurricular activities develop diverse interests and motivation for learning. Mahoney in 2003 described that the involvement of high school students in extracurricular activities forms the adolescent's identity and reduces the risk of deviant behavior.

Ryan's Self-Determination Theory describes how intrinsic motivation is related to social support and a sense of belonging to a group or community. Guay and Demchuk point out the tendency for adolescents to experience a decline in intrinsic motivation with age due to increased academic demands and peer pressure. O. Nikonenko examines amotivation in adolescents with a lack of clear goals.

Adolescents who are in a condition of chronic stress have a harder time regulating their emotions according to WHO 2024. Gozak described how Ukrainian students living in war show higher levels of alienation and aggression. Martyniuk's studies describe the relationship between anxiety and unregulated emotional sensitivity in adolescents who have chronic stress.

The impact of extracurricular activities on the mental health of adolescents is an under-researched topic in Ukraine.

The purpose and objectives of the study. The aim of the article is to empirically investigate the relationship between the participation of adolescent students in various types of activities and their mental health in the conditions of a full-scale war in Ukraine. To do this, it is necessary to involve students in grades 5-9 and determine their level of interest and level of participation of extracurricular activities, determine their motivation for learning, their level of anxiety, empathy, emotional regulation, psychosocial functioning and sense of social support. Next, it is necessary to analyze gender and age differences and establish correlations between participation in extracurricular activities and mental indicators in students, in order to identify protective factors in mental health in adolescents.

Research methods. The study was conducted using standardized psychometric instruments including the Spence Child Anxiety Scale (SCAS), the Pediatric Symptom Checklist (PSC), the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ), the Difficulty in Emotional Regulation Scale (DERS), the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support

(MSPSS), and the Academic Motivation Scale. Pearson correlation analysis and ANOVA were employed to examine relationships between variables and age-related trends. Cohen's d was used to calculate effect sizes for group comparisons.

The statement of the main material research. In our research 120 students (68 girls, 56,7%) of secondary private schools in Kyiv and Kyiv oblast participated, specifically grades 5-9, where the average age of the surveyed students is 12 years in the range of 10-16 years. The survey was conducted with the permission of the school administration. The students were informed that the questionnaire is anonymous and voluntarily. The largest group of participants was grade 6 (46 students, 38,3%), followed by 7th (25 students, 20,8%), 5th (24 students, 20,0%), 9th (19 students, 15,8%), and the smallest group was grade 8 (6 students, 5,0%). For a more expedient analysis, the eighth and ninth grades were combined into one category, since they are the smallest in number and both classes are at a similar stage of adolescence. After conducting the questionnaire and analysis, the following data were obtained.

Interest in extracurricular activities was rated on a scale of 1-4, with 1 being the least interested and 4 being the most interested. Based on the results in Table 1, the students' highest level of interest in terms of total number was in intellectual activities, where on average students responded with a score of 3.05 (all subsequent scores will be reflected in the average), followed by sports activities (2.98), social-communicative (2.72), and creative activities (2.70). The obtained scores for extracurricular activities show that students' involvement in activities is relatively the same, which is typical for students to have various types of activities at the same time [6]. The level of frequency of students' engagement in activities was rated from 1 to 5 points, where 1 is not involved and 5 is often involved. Students are most often engaged in intellectual activities (3.82), followed by sports (avg. 3.67 points), creative (3.47) and socio-communicative (3.14). However, it is worth noting that in socio-communicative activities the standard deviation is 1.61, which indicates how there is a difference among students by age who are socially involved with each other and in school life [1].

Table 1.

Interest and Frequency of Extracurricular Activity Participation
SD: standard deviation, M: median

Activities	Average score	SD	M
Interest: Sport	2.98	0.57	3
Interest: Intellectual	3.05	0.6	3
Interest: Creative	2.7	0.74	2.75
Interest: Social communication	2.72	0.64	2.75
Frequency: Sport	3.67	1.08	4
Frequency: Intellectual	3.82	1.06	4
Frequency: Creative	3.47	1.05	3
Frequency: Social communication	3.14	1.61	3

Motivation was assessed on a scale of 1-7 points, which was divided into three types: intrinsic, extrinsic and amotivation. As shown in Table 2, intrinsic motivation was assessed on the subscales Stimulus (4.66), Achievement (4.23), Knowledge (4.12), with an overall mean score of 4.37 for intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation was also divided into three subscales: Identified (4.64), Extrinsic (4.48) and Introjected (4.12), with an

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average score of 4.41. Amotivation scored 3.05 points on average, indicating a relatively low level of unmotivated students in general. The general motivation profile shows average indicators of intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation, and low indicators of amotivation, which is typical for adolescents, in whom, compared to primary school students, the level of motivation gradually decreases from high to average [2].

Table 2.

Academic Motivation Scale Results SD: standard deviation, M: median

Type of motivation	Average score	SD	M
Intrinsic: To Know	4.21	1.54	4.25
Intrinsic: Achievement	4.23	1.37	4.25
Intrinsic: Stimulation	4.66	1.31	4.5
Intrinsic (Total)	4.37	1.32	4.25
Extrinsic: Identified	4.64	1.37	4.75
Extrinsic: Introjected	4.12	1.52	4
Extrinsic: External	4.48	1.13	4.75
Amotivation	3.05	1.24	2.75

Empathy was assessed using the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) on a scale of 0-64. The mean score was 37.58 with a standard deviation of 8.71, with scores ranging from 0 to 54. This score is significantly lower than the mean score in other studies (45.0) [15], indicating low levels of empathy in adolescents. Below-average levels of empathy are associated with impaired social-emotional development, a phenomenon commonly observed in youth under chronic stress and armed conflict [16]. In particular, low levels of empathy have been associated with low levels of social engagement [5].

Anxiety was measured using the Spence Child Anxiety Scale (SCAS, range 0-114). In Table 3, the mean score was 37.55 (T-score ⩽60 is normal) with a standard deviation of 19.74. The Spence scale measures obsessive-compulsive disorder (7.22), social phobia (6.68), general anxiety (6.44), panic disorder (6.62), separation anxiety (5.52), and fear of physical harm (5.06). The variability of the results is quite high. High levels of anxiety are one of the most characteristic features of adolescents, especially those who have experienced trauma [7; 16], nevertheless, most students (88%), show a normal level of anxiety.

Table 3.

Anxiety Levels (SCAS) SD: standard deviation, M: median

Anxiety type	T-score	SD	M
Anxiety: Separation	5.52	2.97	6
Anxiety: Social Phobia	6.68	4.2	6
Anxiety: OCD	7.22	3.84	7
Anxiety: Panic	6.62	5.49	6
Anxiety: Physical Fear	5.06	3.14	5
Anxiety: Generalized	6.44	3.65	6
Anxiety (SCAS Total)	37.55	19.74	37

The assessment of behavioral and psychosocial functioning was carried out with the Child Symptom Checklist (PSC) questionnaire. The overall mean in Table 4, was the score of 28.65 with a standard deviation of 11.94. The PSC divides scores into internalizing (12.66) and externalizing (15.99). When divided into categories, we have the following: 5.8% of students fall into the “Good” functioning range, 26.7% “Average”, 14.2% “Reduced” and

53.3% "Very Low" functioning. The data show that the surveyed students have higher rates of psychosocial difficulties than the norm for European students [1]. According to studies, armed conflicts cause difficulties in internalizing and externalizing at school age [1; 16].

Table 4.

Psychosocial Functioning (PSC) SD: standard deviation, M: median

Subscales	Average Score	SD	M
PSC: Internalizing	12.66	6.14	14
PSC: Externalizing	15.99	6.61	16
Psychosocial Health (PSC Total)	28.65	11.94	31

Previously, we have mentioned that the level of anxiety based on SCAS is considered normal for 88% of students, however, based on PSC, the psychosocial functioning that is caused by anxiety is very low. One of the reasons, is that students who live in Ukraine are living in a prolonged conflict. They have normalized their certain aspects of anxiety and do not self-report anything severe, while mentioning their issues with emotions and behaviour [6].

Social support was measured using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS, range 0-6). Based on Table 6, students reported relatively high levels of support from family and friends, with a mean of 3.96, standard deviation of 1.30, with family support scoring 4.11 and friends scoring 3.72. Family support outweighed friend support, which is consistent with other studies that have shown that children continue to receive more support from family during adolescence [4; 13].

Table 5.

Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) SD: standard deviation, M: median

Type of social support	Average score	SD	M
Social Support: Family	4.11	1.51	4.25
Social Support: Friends	3.72	1.66	4
Social Support (MSPSS Total)	3.96	1.3	4.04

The Difficulty in Emotional Regulation Scale (DERS) measured difficulties in emotional regulation. The mean score was 58.13 with a standard deviation of 20.96 in the following data (Table 6). The scale is divided into subscales: Awareness (13.47), Strategy (11.38), Goals (8.98), Impulse (8.83), Clarity (7.95), and Rejection (7.52). The highest mean score was obtained for the Awareness subscale, which reflects an increased but unregulated sensitivity to one's emotional states, which is the norm for adolescents with high levels of anxiety and stress [11].

Table 6.

Emotional Regulation Difficulties (DERS) SD: standard deviation, M: median

Subscales	Average score	SD	M
DERS: Non-Acceptance	7.52	6.17	6.5
DERS: Goals	8.98	4.14	8.5
DERS: Impulse	8.83	5.19	8
DERS: Awareness	13.47	4.13	13.5
DERS: Strategies	11.38	6.39	10
DERS: Clarity	7.95	3.6	8
Emotion Dysregulation (DERS Total)	58.13	20.96	58

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The results were further analyzed by comparing the difference between boys and girls using a t-test and Cohen's d was used for the sizes.

Girls, compared to boys, show a greater interest in creative activities, on average 2.99 and 0.62, respectively, with $t(118)=5.31$, $p < .001$, $d=0.98$. No significant differences were found for sports, intellectual, and social-communicative activities. Other publications support a similar trend, where girls tend to engage in creative activities, however boys show more interest in intellectual activities [8]. Girls also practice creative activities more often than boys (3.67 and 0.96, respectively, $t(118)=2.68$, $p=.009$, $d=0.60$), while boys are more involved in intellectual activities (boys: 4.09, girls: 3.63, $t(118)=-2.23$, $p=.028$, $d=0.44$). Adolescents typically engage in activities that emphasize their inner personality and are typical for their gender [5; 14].

The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire showed that girls scored significantly higher on empathy $t(118)=3.02$, $p < .003$, $d=0.57$. This indicator is one of the largest differences by gender. In addition, this reflects the socialization process in girls, since girls mature earlier in socio-emotional adolescence. However, despite a significantly higher score than boys, girls score below the global average [15].

Next, trends by age and grade were examined using Pearson correlation and ANOVA for students in grades 5-9. In cases where ANOVA was significant, a t-test was performed to detect differences between grades, and Cohen's d was used to calculate effect sizes.

The student's adolescent age was negatively correlated with interest in social communication activities ($r = -.26$, $p = .004$), creative activities ($r = -.21$, $p = .021$), intellectual ($r = -.20$, $p = .026$), and sports ($r = -.22$, $p = .016$). The data show that with growing up, interest in extracurricular activities is lost. Using ANOVA analysis, significant differences were found between classes in interests in intellectual activities ($F(4, 115) = 4.28$, $p = .003$), creative ($F(4, 115) = 3.07$, $p = .019$), and social communication ($F(4, 115) = 4.48$, $p = .002$). The greatest interest in various activities is present in 6th grade students, but the lowest is in 7th grade. The average social communication activity score in 6th grade is 2.87, and in 9th grade it is 2.38. This is typical for adolescents, where their interest in engaging in certain leisure activities narrows in mid-adolescence and becomes more specific as they form their own identities [8; 10].

The level of motivation and its type are reflected differently in students according on the grade. Intrinsic motivation is negatively correlated with age ($r = -.31$, $p = .001$), which indicates a strong age trend. The trend was confirmed using ANOVA analysis ($F (4, 110) = 6.09$, $p < .001$). Comparing the 5th grade with other grades, we saw that the 5th grade students have significantly higher intrinsic motivation compared to other grades. According to the data obtained, motivation decreases with age. The average motivation score in the 5th grade is 5.19, where in the 8th and 9th grades the average score is 3.04 and 3.98, respectively. In the 9th grade, the intrinsic motivation "To Know" is slightly higher than in the 7th grade, since a certain number of students are preparing to enter college and see the need for studying, or have found subjects and activities that they like. The general trend of decreasing motivation levels in secondary school is explained by increasing learning demands, more control, and increased peer pressure [9]. The level of amotivation remains at a similar level across grades, with no significant changes ($r = -.02$, $p = .824$; $F = 0.09$, $p = .985$).

No significant correlation was found in the overall perception of social support ($r = -.06$, $p = .493$), however, significant data were found by ANOVA analysis ($F (4, 115) = 3.94$, $p = .005$). When making pairwise comparisons, the following was found: 5th grade students reported a higher level of support compared to 7th grade ($p < .001$) and

8th grade ($p < .041$), and 7th grade students reported a lower level of support compared to 6th ($p < .030$) and 9th grade ($p < .012$). According to the data obtained, we see how adolescent students in 7th grade experience less social support, a phenomenon typical of adolescents who transition from early to middle adolescence, due to self-consciousness, peer pressure, and changing perceptions of family relationships [7; 13]. Social support, or its perception, improves in 8th and 9th grades, as they grow and gain emotional maturity.

Pearson correlation analysis was performed between the main variables, namely: intrinsic motivation (IM Total), amotivation, empathy (TEQ), anxiety (SCAS Total), psychosocial functioning (PSC Total, Internalizing, Externalising), perception of social support (MSPSS Total), emotional regulation (DERS Total), interest in activities and age.

The strongest correlations were found between anxiety, psychosocial functioning, and emotional regulation. Anxiety was positively correlated with overall psychosocial functioning ($r = .70$, $p < .001$): internalized ($r = .73$, $p < .001$) and externalized ($r = .59$, $p < .001$), and emotional regulation ($r = .59$, $p < .001$), suggesting that students with higher anxiety have poorer psychosocial functioning and have more difficulty with their own emotional regulation. Adolescents with anxiety often have behavioral problems and dysregulated emotions [11; 16]. Difficulties related to emotional regulation and anxiety are found in the same individuals, not spread across groups [4].

Amotivation has positive correlations with general anxiety ($r = .39$, $p < .001$), general psychosocial functioning ($r = .36$, $p < .001$), its externalization ($r = .37$, $p < .001$) and internalization ($r = .30$, $p < .001$), and emotional regulation ($r = .39$, $p < .001$). Here we see that adolescent students who are not interested in learning, at the same time, experience anxiety and have behavioral problems and unregulated emotions. Problems with emotional control and amotivation have in common low self-efficacy and reduced goal-directedness [2]. It is worth adding that amotivation is negatively correlated with intellectual activity ($r = -.27$, $p = .003$), showing a link between alienation and a decrease in cognitively stimulating activities.

Intrinsic motivation is positively related to feelings of social support ($r = .23$, $p < .004$) and interest in intellectual activities ($r = .26$, $p < .004$) and negatively correlated with age ($r = .31$, $p < .001$). From this, we see that students who feel high support from others tend to have higher intrinsic motivation, which is supported by Self-Determination Theory, which states that belonging and support are fundamental to autonomous motivation [12; 13]. The positive relationship between intrinsic motivation and intellectual activities is explained by the fact that motivated students often seek cognitively stimulating activities in extracurricular activities [14].

Empathy is positively correlated with a sense of social support ($r = .33$, $p < .001$) and with activities: intellectual ($r = .26$, $p < .005$), creative ($r = .24$, $p < .009$) and socio-communicative ($r = .18$, $p < .043$). On the other hand, empathy is negatively correlated with psychosocial functioning (general ($r = -.20$, $p < .027$), internalized ($r = -.18$, $p < .045$) and externalized ($r = -.19$, $p < .034$)) and emotional regulation ($r = -.25$, $p < .005$). Students with greater empathy reported fewer problems with emotion regulation, a better sense of social support and greater involvement in various activities. This shows that empathy is a socio-emotional resource, as students who understand the feelings of others are more involved in communicating with others and are better able to adapt [5].

Emotional dysregulation is negatively correlated with intellectual activities ($r = -.37$, $p < .001$) and with feelings of social support ($r = -.28$, $p < .002$). Students with low levels of emotion regulation feel weaker connectedness to others, which in turn leaves fewer resources for developing the necessary skills for regulation [7].

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According to the data described above regarding intellectual activities, is that intellectual activities play an important factor in the well-being of adolescents. Participation in structured and cognitive activities is associated with better academic performance and psychosocial well-being [8]. Interest in sports activities is negatively correlated with anxiety ($r = -.23$, $p < .012$).

Conclusions and perspectives of further researches. The study shows that extracurricular activities play an important role in the mental health of secondary school students living in war-torn Ukraine. From the data obtained, it can be concluded that the psychological state of adolescents is characterized by high levels of anxiety, difficulties in psychosocial functioning, low levels of empathy and problems in emotional regulation. The results of the study are consistent with international studies in the context of the impact of chronic stress on the development of secondary school students.

Correlations were found between participation in extracurricular activities and mental health indicators, specifically, students who are involved in sports activities and in intellectual activities show lower levels of anxiety and difficulties in emotional regulation compared to other students who are less involved in such activities. Also, participation in creative and socio-communicative activities is associated with higher levels of empathy and better psychosocial functioning.

Students in grades 8-9 show a lower level of motivation than students in grades 5-6. Students in grades 5-6 are the most interested in extracurricular activities, older students noted less interest. Students in grade 7 showed a lower level of empathy, which is typical during the transition from early to middle adolescence. The difference between boys and girls is not significant, but it can be noted that girls are more interested in creative activities and have a higher level of empathy compared to boys, while boys are more involved in intellectual activities.

The obtained results have practical significance for school psychologists, teachers and social workers. Creating and involving students in extracurricular activities helps in creating psychological resilience in students in war conditions. Further research is needed to see the trend and dynamics in the mental health of students involved in extracurricular activities, and to create psychological and pedagogical support programs for secondary school students.

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