



TRAINEE TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON CO-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES AT SCHOOL

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INTRODUCTION

The capacity of Co-curriculum or Extracurricular activities to support the overall development of students is well known and researchers continuously have pointed out multiple benefits of engaging students both in physical and non-physical activities. Teachers are inevitably responsible for the successful implementation of the co-curriculum at school. Hence, it is important to educate, train and motivate trainee teachers by offering co-curricular activities as a subject despite the specialization of the teacher education programmes. This is to support novice teachers to promote co-curriculum when they start practising as teachers. However, conducting co-curricular activities has been hampered by several issues such as lack of resources, lack of teacher contribution and extended closures of schools for various reasons. This study intended to investigate how a set of trainee teachers who were offered co-curricular activities as a core subject in a four-year special degree programme responded to a questionnaire that investigated their capacity, motivation and attitudes toward the implementation of co-curriculum, physically at school premises and remotely during extended school closures.

Background

Activities that can take place hand in hand with the core curriculum could be identified as co-curricular or extracurricular activities. In an attempt to define these activities, Bartkus et al (2012) state,

“Extracurricular activities can be considered from the perspective of a continuum that ranges from direct to indirect. A direct extracurricular activity is one that is more closely associated with the student’s major or curriculum. An indirect extracurricular activity is one that is relatively unrelated to the students’ major or curriculum” (p.699)

However, many researchers have pointed out the multiple benefits of a co-curriculum for the total development of a child (Buckely & Lee, 2021; Jayasinghe and Nawaratne, 2020; Chalageri and Yarriswami, 2018). For example, Buckely & Lee (2021) found that co-curricular activities improved students’ self-confidence, teamwork, self-management, critical thinking skills, communication skills, socializing, stress relief and improved opportunities for higher education. Chalageri and Yarriswami (2018) state that “Co-curricular activity is also an effective platform to absorb values like social, aesthetic, cultural, recreational and disciplinary among students”. In a study conducted by Kumarasinghe and Udeshika (2015) on a set of selected fresh graduates in Sri Lanka, it was revealed that having done co-curricular activities increased their employability and it was a determining factor in their job selection. Furthermore, co-curricular activities help students to achieve better grades in examinations as class attendance can be improved. A study conducted by Rathore et al (2018) in a high school in Pakistan using 150 students found that attending co-curricular activities improved the attendance of students, thereby indirectly helping their academic performance.

Nevertheless, to reap the benefits of conducting co-curricular activities, teachers should play a pivotal role and this has been repeatedly highlighted by researchers. In a paper presented by Chalageri and Yarriswami (2018), teachers’ role in organising co-curricular activities has been described as follows.



1. The teacher must be a good planner so that the different activities could be carried out systematically throughout the year.
2. It should be the duty of the teacher to give more and more opportunities to the child while performing co-curricular activities.
3. The teacher should act as an innovator by introducing some innovative programmes.
4. The teacher must be a good organizer so that the students experience a maximum of the co-curriculum.
5. He should also act as director, recorder, evaluator, manager, decision maker, advisor, motivator, communicator, and coordinator so that the student and child could gain the maximum of the finer aspects of co-curricular activities.

This re-establishes that teachers' contribution is essential in the successful implementation of the co-curriculum in schools.

However, several teacher-related issues have caused hindrances in conducting co-curricular activities. Perera and Jayawardana (2011) investigated a teachers' training programme in Sri Lanka using 190 teacher mentors as participants. The study found that most of the trainee teachers lacked the motivation to support or implement new co-curricular activities at school and did not give priority over academic work due to time constraints and lack of training. Similarly, Nelson et al (2017), in a study that investigated teacher perception of co-curricular studies in Kenya, observed that teachers did not consider co-curriculum important as it did not contribute to the student appraisal at the end of the year. Although teachers knew the multiple benefits of the co-curriculum, teachers were reluctant to spend time promoting it. Adding to that, Jayasinghe and Nawaratne (2020), in a survey done in Western and Central provinces in Sri Lanka using a student sample of 450 senior secondary students found that co-curricular engagement was very low and the teachers and students have negative attitudes toward spending time on the co-curriculum due to examination-oriented education. As a result, students were deprived of many benefits for their overall development. Thus, the same researchers recommend that it is necessary to motivate both teachers and students to increase student participation in co-curriculum.

Generally, in the Sri Lankan context, few physical education teachers are allocated per school and external coaching facilities are considered expensive (Silva, 2021). Therefore, during conducting co-curricular activities, subject teachers' contribution is accounted for. However, there is no evidence of any in-service programme that provides training to subject teachers to support the co-curriculum at school. Therefore, educating and motivating teachers before they enter the school seem to be prerequisites for the successful implementation of the co-curriculum. Hence, it is important to investigate how novice teachers feel about the co-curriculum and evaluate the attention given to co-curriculum in teacher training programmes.

Objectives of the study

1. To investigate the capacity and motivation of trainee teachers to promote co-curricular activities in schools.
2. To understand the attitudes of trainee teachers towards co-curriculum.
3. To evaluate the possible issues faced by teachers and gather their suggestions to overcome them in the view of improving the co-curriculum at school.
4. To suggest improvements to teacher training programmes

METHODOLOGY



Using a survey design, this study has attempted to understand the attitudes, capacity and motivation of a set of trainee teachers towards co-curriculum at school. The sample consisted of 97 trainee teachers of a Bachelor of Education programme approved by the University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka and conducted by a private campus. The total population was approximately 200 trainee teachers who were offered “Co-curricular Activities” as a core subject in their 3rd year of the four-year special degree. A survey questionnaire was used to collect data, and it was piloted using five selected students from the same group who volunteered. After doing a few minor language edits, the questionnaire was distributed using a Google form through the students’ official WhatsApp group where all students were actively participating. Since everyone in the group had the opportunity to take part in the survey, the sample was considered a probability sample. A total of 97 responses were received making the confidence level of the sample 85% and the margin of error 5%. The research instrument consisted of 17 closed-ended and 03 open-ended questions to collect data on the demography of the participants, their attitudes and readiness to implement co-curriculum along with suggestions for the successful implementation of co-curriculum at the school level. Data collected through closed-ended questions were analysed quantitatively and presented using percentages and demonstrated in pie charts. Responses to open-ended questions were analysed qualitatively following a thematic approach.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demography

The survey was conducted among a trainee teacher population of approximately 200, and 97 submitted their responses making the rate of response around 48.5%. Out of the 97 respondents, 90 (92.8%) were females and 7 (7.2%) were males. The age of the sample ranged from 53.6% in the 20-24 years range, 32% in the 25-29 years range, 9.3% above 35 years and 5.2% in the range of 30-35 years. 53.6% of the respondents were unemployed, 39.2% were already full-time teachers and 7.2% were part-time teachers.

Respondents’ exposure to co-curricular activities

The survey collected information about the respondents’ exposure to co-curriculum at the school level. 96 out of 97 (98.9%) respondents had done some type of physical co-curricular activity and 91.6 % of respondents had done non-physical co-curricular activities at school. A majority had stated that they did track and field events, team sports and dancing as physical co-curricular activities. On the other hand, the most common non-physical co-curricular activities were various speaking-related activities, clubs and societies, painting, and games such as chess and carrom. Out of the respondents who already have started working as full-time and part-time teachers, 82% said that they help their students with co-curricular activities.

Respondents’ attitudes, capacity and motivation toward co-curricular activities

The present study specifically investigated the trainee teachers’ attitudes and readiness to assist students in their co-curriculum. The survey revealed that 86.5% of the participants believed that both physical and non-physical co-curricular activities are important for student growth while 13.5% believed that physical activities are the most important for students. In addition to that, 92.7% pointed out that the of co-curriculum should be made compulsory at school. Out of the rest of the respondents, 3% believed that co-curriculum should be made compulsory only at the primary level and 2% said that it should be made compulsory at the secondary level. Moreover, 95.8 % of respondents believed that equal weightage should be given to both academic curriculum and co-curriculum during extended school closures. Hence, it is observable that the participants have developed a positive attitude about the co-curriculum at school.



The questionnaire consisted of several polar-type questions investigating the trainee teachers' readiness to promote co-curriculum and the responses have been tabulated as follows.

Table 1. Trainee teachers' responses to polar questions

QUESTION	YES	NO	MAYBE
Do you think you have the capacity of helping students with co-curricular activities if you are given the opportunity?	89.6%	0%	10.4%
At school, would you consider giving time for students to do co-curricular activities during academic work?	75%	8.3%	16.7%
Would you consider staying after school hours helping students with co-curricular activities?	74%	2%	24%
Would you consider going to school in regular intervals to help students with co-curricular activities during school holidays?	54.2%	13.5%	32.3%
Do you think co-curricular activities could continue online effectively, during extended school closures?	24%	30.2%	45.8%
If you have to undergo training to support students with a co-curricular activity, are you ready to do so? (e.g. Learning public speaking to train students to speak)	92.7%	1%	6.3%

The following charts depict the trainee teachers' willingness to take part in co-curricular activities at school physically and on an online forum

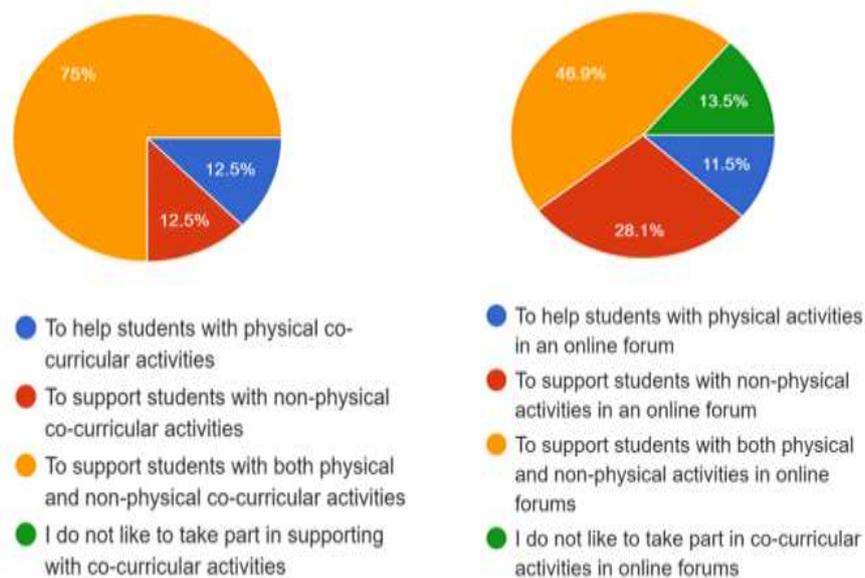


Figure 1. Trainee teachers' willingness to support co-curricular activities



While analysing the data presented in Table 1 and Figure 1, it is suggestive that close to 90% of the participants were confident about their capacity of assisting students with the co-curriculum and ready to even undergo specific training if the opportunity is given. Moreover, 75% of participants clearly understood the importance of co-curricular activities and showed their willingness to allocate time for it between academic work while 74% said that they were ready to spend time after usual school hours, assisting students in the co-curriculum. 54% of trainee teachers were ready to allocate time for the co-curriculum even during the school holidays. However, the participants were not confident about the practicality of the implementation of a co-curriculum through distance mode during extended school closures. All the participants showed their willingness to help students with either physical or non-physical activities. Comparatively fewer participants agreed to help students online both with physical and nonphysical activities and only 24% of participants agreed that there was a possibility of continuing co-curricular activities online. On the other hand, 92.7% of participants were ready to undergo training programmes to support the co-curriculum if opportunities are provided, showing a clear enthusiasm for promoting the co-curriculum at school.

Issues and suggestions as presented by the trainee teachers

Open-ended questions in Google form have attempted to collect qualitative data about the trainee teachers' perspectives on the co-curriculum. 75 respondents mentioned various issues that can hamper the implementation of co-curriculum at school. The most common mentions were lack of time due to an examination-oriented education system, unavailability of an appraisal system for the co-curriculum, lack of facilities and equipment, lack of interest of students and parents, unawareness of benefits of co-curriculum, possible physical injuries, lethargy of students and addiction to electronic devices, negative attitudes of parents and teachers, lack of institutional support and the pandemic situation where social distancing was advised. Although respondents were positive about continuing co-curricular activities during school closures, they said that lack of training and unavailability of resources could obstruct the activities, if conducted remotely.

In addition to those, the respondents suggested several strategies that could promote the co-curriculum among students. Implementation of new interesting activities to suit the modern world, educating the parents and the school community about the benefits of co-curriculum, implementation of a system to take co-curriculum into national evaluation system or to award marks for university entrance and employment, suggesting the authorities to provide compulsory budget allocations, training teachers and providing master trainers, making co-curriculum compulsory, establishing a reward system to motivate students and teachers, ensuring a safe environment and providing high-quality equipment, and allocating adequate time during the school time were some of the most commonly suggested strategies by the participants.

Observations made towards improving teacher training programmes

Unlike the research evidence provided in the literature review by Nawaratne (2020) and Jayawardane (2011), all 97 participants who took the survey showed considerable interest in promoting the co-curriculum in the school and demonstrated a willingness to receive training if provided. Trainees showed a positive attitude toward the importance of the co-curriculum, suggesting that they have sufficient motivation to actively participate in the co-curriculum, maintaining a balance with the core curriculum. Furthermore, some participants suggested that suitable training should be given to the subject teachers to support the co-curriculum.

However, there is no evidence in the literature about any continuous professional development programme that targets training subject teachers on the co-curriculum.



Hence, the observations suggest that there is space to broaden the opportunities provided to trainee teachers by strengthening the subject area related to co-curricular activities in teacher training programmes.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper is written based on a survey conducted on a set of trainee teachers who were offered “Co-curricular activities” as a core subject in a 4-four-year special degree in a Bachelor of Education programme. The findings of the research suggest that most of the participants have developed a positive attitude towards the co-curriculum and are optimistic about paying equal weightage to the co-curriculum. Furthermore, the study found that trainees were ready to allocate time at school as well as off-the-clock hours assisting students’ physical and nonphysical co-curricular activities. However, participants identified several issues that could impede the effort of conducting co-curricular activities successfully. Lack of value given to the co-curriculum in the education system and lack of resources were general issues observed by respondents. Practical constraints of the continuation of co-curricular activities during the school closures were another issue and participants were generally skeptical about the success of co-curricular programmes conducted remotely.

The study suggests that although trainee teachers demonstrated an optimistic view towards the implementation of co-curriculum and were ready to extend necessary commitments, external issues such as lack of facilities and the present educational policy could hamper their effort. Therefore, changing the education system by giving due recognition to the co-curriculum and institutional intervention in providing facilities is necessary, if the true contribution of the teachers is to be taken into the effective implementation of the co-curriculum. On the other hand, as the trainee teachers showed a significant interest in being educated about co-curricular activities, more time could be allocated to broaden the subject area related to the co-curriculum covered in the teacher training programmes.

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