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Co-Curricular Activities and Holistic School Education in West Bengal

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Abstract

Co-curricular activities are now widely acknowledged as an integral part of school education rather than an area separate from formal learning. This article explores the educational value, policy position, and implementation challenges of co-curricular activities in school education in West Bengal. The study is based on documentary and interpretive analysis of national policy documents, state education policy, official notifications, parliamentary records, planning and budget documents, and selected peer reviewed literature. The analysis indicates that the contemporary policy context in India, particularly after the National Education Policy 2020, supports an integrated understanding of schooling that includes arts, sports, reading culture, student participation, health, and experiential learning. In West Bengal, this orientation has been reflected in initiatives such as house systems, graduation ceremonies, reading promotion programmes, Ananda Parisar, and Shishu Sansad, while Samagra Shiksha planning and annual academic calendars have created institutional space for sports, library activities, Kala Utsav, and art and craft programmes. However, implementation continues to be uneven because of examination pressure, disparities in infrastructure, teacher workload, and regional inequalities. Drawing on the broader research literature, the article argues that participation in co-curricular activities strengthens academic engagement, promotes a sense of school belonging, nurtures leadership and democratic values, reinforces cultural rootedness, and supports student retention. The paper concludes that in West Bengal, co-curricular activities should be understood not as peripheral events but as an essential pedagogic strategy for holistic development, especially when they are connected with inclusive participation, local culture, and school level planning.

Keywords: Co-Curricular Activities, School Education, Holistic Education, Ananda Parisar, Shishu Sansad

1. Introduction

School education has frequently been confined within a narrow emphasis on textbook completion, examination performance, and classroom recitation. Within such a framework, the wider aims of education, including self-confidence, cooperation, creativity, cultural participation, physical well-being, democratic values, and social responsibility, often receive inadequate attention. However, educational thought and policy have increasingly recognized that these dimensions are not secondary outcomes but essential purposes of schooling. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in India clearly moves away from rigid distinctions between curricular and co-curricular learning and advocates a holistic approach to education that incorporates arts, crafts, sports, literature, culture, and experiential learning as integral to the development of children^[1].

In this broader national context, West Bengal presents an important case for study. The state possesses a rich cultural heritage shaped by literature, theatre, debate, music, and a vibrant intellectual tradition. Recent policy initiatives have further strengthened institutional attention to school-based activities intended to promote the all-round development of students^[2-4]. Official notifications issued by the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education, along with related directives under Samagra Shiksha, indicate that co-curricular activities are increasingly being understood not as occasional or ceremonial events, but as necessary components of meaningful schooling^[3]. At the same time, several important questions continue to deserve careful examination. These include how co-curricular activities are conceptualized within policy and practice, what educational purposes they are expected to serve, and how effectively they are being incorporated into everyday school life across

the state.

This article addresses these questions through a policy practice analytical study. It argues that co-curricular activities hold substantial educational value because they broaden the scope of learning beyond formal classroom instruction and create opportunities for participation, belonging, leadership, cultural connectedness, and continued engagement with schooling. In West Bengal, recent initiatives suggest significant progress in the institutional recognition of such activities. Their long-term educational value, however, depends on thoughtful planning, adequate teacher support, appropriate infrastructure, and a sustained commitment to inclusion.

2. Objectives of the study

2.1 The study is guided by four principal objectives

First, it aims to examine the conceptual foundations and educational significance of co-curricular activities in school education.

Second, it seeks to analyze the policy and institutional framework governing co-curricular activities in West Bengal.

Third, it intends to assess the pedagogic and developmental value of these activities in the light of relevant research literature.

Fourth, it attempts to identify the major challenges in implementation and to propose measures for strengthening co-curricular education in the state.

3. Methodology

This article is grounded in documentary and interpretive analysis. It draws on national policy documents, policy materials issued by the Government of West Bengal, board notifications, annual academic calendar documents, parliamentary records, Samagra Shiksha planning papers, and selected peer reviewed literature on co-curricular participation and student development^[1-7]. The study is qualitative in character and does not use primary data collected through surveys or interviews. Rather, it explores the ways in which co-curricular activities are represented in policy, organized within administrative structures, and understood in relation to wider educational concerns when these materials are interpreted alongside established research. This approach is particularly appropriate for a study that seeks to relate policy intentions to educational significance within the specific context of West Bengal.

4. Conceptual Framework: Co-Curricular Activity as Education

The term co-curricular is pedagogically more appropriate than the earlier expression extra-curricular because it conveys integration with the educational process rather than separation from it. Co-curricular activities include sports, games, music, drama, debate, literary clubs, reading circles, student parliament, eco-clubs, art and craft, science exhibitions, and community service, along with other organized experiences that broaden and deepen classroom learning. Their educational significance lies in the fact that many enduring outcomes of schooling, such as initiative, teamwork, self-expression, resilience, leadership, discipline, and civic responsibility, are often developed more effectively through active participation than through

classroom instruction alone.

A substantial body of research supports this understanding. Eccles and Barber showed that different forms of school activity participation are associated with distinct developmental outcomes and that organized involvement plays an important role in adolescent growth^[8]. Eccles *et al.* further emphasized that participation in such activities provides an important context for identity formation, competence development, and the building of social relationships^[9]. Fredricks and Eccles found positive associations between participation and both academic and psychological outcomes, while Mahoney and Cairns demonstrated that involvement in school-based activities can reduce the risk of early school dropout^[10, 11]. More recently, Thoun *et al.* reported that sustained participation is especially significant for students at risk, as continuity in involvement lowers the likelihood of leaving school prematurely^[13]. These findings indicate that co-curricular activities should not be regarded as secondary to academic work, but rather as an important means of strengthening academic engagement and students' sense of belonging to school.

This perspective is particularly relevant in the Indian context, where educational achievement is often assessed primarily through examination performance. If education is understood as the balanced development of the whole person, co-curricular activities must be recognized as an integral component of educational practice rather than as an optional addition.

5. Policy and Institutional Framework in West Bengal

The policy foundation of co-curricular education in West Bengal is shaped by both national and state level frameworks. The National Education Policy 2020 provides the broader normative basis by emphasizing holistic and multidisciplinary learning and by recognizing the educational significance of arts, sports, and experiential activities^[1]. In a similar direction, the State Education Policy of West Bengal 2023 reflects this orientation through its emphasis on child centered schooling, wider developmental outcomes, and institutional practices such as Shishu Sansad, which encourage participation, responsibility, and democratic engagement within school life^[2].

An important administrative development took place in 2022 through a notification circulated by the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education regarding the implementation of various activities for the overall development of school students. This notification identified several specific initiatives, including house systems at the secondary and higher secondary levels, the promotion of reading habits, the observance of graduation ceremonies, Ananda Parisar, and the formation of Shishu Sansad^[3]. The importance of this measure lies in its formal recognition that activities beyond the conventional academic routine are essential to the all-round development of learners.

Further evidence of institutionalization can be seen in the Annual Academic Calendar 2025 of the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education. The calendar refers to Ananda Parisar as a platform for the development of soft skills and acknowledges graduation ceremonies as part of school transition support^[4]. This inclusion in the annual calendar is

significant because co-curricular initiatives often remain ineffective not due to lack of intent, but because they are not supported through protected time and systematic scheduling within the school programme.

Additional insight into the implementation of these initiatives is available from parliamentary records. In a Lok Sabha reply concerning projects under Samagra Shiksha in West Bengal, it was noted that the final period of each Saturday under Ananda Parisar was being used for activities such as life skills education and hackathons; schools were being linked with rural libraries to encourage reading habits; Shishu Sansad had been formed for students from Class V to X; and graduation ceremonies were organized during Students' Week [5]. This evidence suggests that the understanding of co-curricular activity in West Bengal extends far beyond annual sports meets and cultural functions. It increasingly includes reading culture, student leadership, civic preparedness, and soft skill development.

Institutional support for these initiatives is also reflected in financial planning. The Project Approval Board minutes for West Bengal under Samagra Shiksha for 2025 to 2026 include provisions for sports and physical education grants, library grants, Kala Utsav, and the strengthening of art and craft rooms in secondary schools [6]. Such allocations are important because educational reforms often remain only at the level of policy unless they are supported through planning and budgetary commitment. In addition, reports of SCERT West Bengal indicate sustained work in areas such as cultural mapping, role play competitions, folk dance activities, and curriculum development aligned with NEP 2020, thereby strengthening the broader cultural environment within which co-curricular education can flourish [7].

6. Educational Significance of Co-Curricular Activities in West Bengal

Co-curricular activities contribute to educational quality through several interrelated dimensions. First, they strengthen academic engagement. Rather than distracting students from formal study, evidence suggests that participation in such activities often improves motivation, time management, self-confidence, and attachment to school, all of which positively influence academic learning [10, 12]. In the context of West Bengal, initiatives such as reading habit programmes, library linkages, debate, theatre, and arts-based activities can meaningfully enhance language development, concentration, communication skills, and interpretive ability. Participation in debate helps students develop reasoned argument and public speaking, while engagement in drama encourages memory, expression, and teamwork. In a similar way, involvement in music and fine arts cultivates discipline, regular practice, and aesthetic sensibility. These outcomes should be understood not as secondary benefits, but as important forms of educational development.

Second, co-curricular activities promote a sense of belonging and improve student retention. This is particularly significant in settings where students may experience school as stressful, rigid, or disconnected from their lived realities. Mahoney and Cairns demonstrated that participation in school activities can reduce the likelihood of early dropout, while Thouin *et al.* observed that sustained involvement is

especially beneficial for students already at risk of leaving school [11, 13]. These findings are highly relevant to West Bengal, where official planning documents continue to identify problems related to transition and dropout at higher stages of schooling [6]. Institutional practices such as house systems, graduation ceremonies, Ananda Parisar, and Shishu Sansad can help students experience school as a participatory community in which they feel recognized, included, and valued.

Third, co-curricular activities play an important role in democratic, civic, and cultural education. Student parliaments and leadership structures introduce children to the principles of representation, responsibility, and collective decision-making. Reading circles, literary clubs, and cultural programmes help create a school environment in which ideas, language, and creative expression are actively encouraged. SCERT's cultural mapping activities further highlight the educational value of grounding school life in local cultural resources, including folk traditions, festivals, handicrafts, music, theatre, and sports practices [7]. In a culturally vibrant state such as West Bengal, co-curricular education can therefore connect children with their immediate social environment while also preparing them for participation in a wider democratic and cultural sphere.

Fourth, co-curricular activities support holistic development in a comprehensive sense. Physical education contributes to health, stamina, coordination, and discipline. Artistic activities foster imagination and emotional expression. Collective events encourage teamwork, cooperation, and respect for diversity. Soft skills programmes, as noted in official materials, also have the potential to strengthen financial literacy, digital competence, and communication skills [5]. Co-curricular activities thus broaden the educational scope of schooling beyond a narrow emphasis on examination performance and certification.

7. Challenges in Implementation

Despite these advances, the implementation of co-curricular education remains uneven and is shaped by several structural constraints. One of the most significant challenges is the pressure exerted by examinations. At the secondary and higher secondary levels, schools often regard co-curricular periods as secondary to syllabus completion and test preparation. As academic demands intensify, these periods are frequently shortened, postponed, or converted into regular teaching sessions. This tendency reflects a deeply rooted educational culture in which academic success is primarily measured through performance in written examinations.

A second challenge lies in the unequal institutional capacity of schools. Considerable disparities exist in relation to playground facilities, library resources, teacher availability, leadership effectiveness, community involvement, and overall infrastructure. Schools located in rural and socially disadvantaged areas often lack the material and organizational support required to conduct a broad range of co-curricular activities on a sustained basis. Although financial provisions under Samagra Shiksha have created new possibilities, the actual impact of these grants depends largely on school level implementation, local initiative, and administrative support [6].

A third concern relates to teacher workload and professional preparedness. Meaningful co-curricular education demands forms of engagement that go beyond conventional classroom instruction. Teachers are expected to organize clubs, mentor students, guide debates and dramatic performances, supervise sports and cultural programmes, and connect participation with broader educational development. In the absence of adequate training and sufficient time, such activities may remain symbolic rather than genuinely developmental. In this context, the role of SCERT and district level teacher support mechanisms becomes especially important [7].

A fourth challenge is the persistence of inequality within participation itself. Students from relatively advantaged social backgrounds often enter school with greater confidence, stronger language abilities, and more active parental support. As a result, they are more likely to take part in visible activities such as debate, public speaking, and leadership roles. Unless schools consciously create inclusive opportunities and provide support for shy students, first generation learners, marginalized groups, and differently abled children, co-curricular spaces may end up reinforcing rather than reducing existing inequalities.

8. Suggestions for Strengthening Co-Curricular Education

Several measures may be adopted to strengthen co-curricular education in West Bengal. First, schools need to develop annual co-curricular plans that are aligned with the academic calendar, local context, student profile, and available institutional resources. Such activities should be organized throughout the year rather than being limited to a few ceremonial occasions. Second, co-curricular periods, particularly the protected time provided under Ananda Parisar, should be carefully preserved and regularly monitored to ensure their actual implementation in schools [4, 5]. Third, teacher development programmes should place greater emphasis on practical preparation in areas such as club facilitation, theatre and debate, sports organization, library promotion, arts integration, and democratic forms of student participation.

Further, schools should make more effective use of existing public resources, including library grants, sports grants, Kala Utsav, cultural mapping materials, and local community institutions [6, 7]. Inclusion should also be treated as a central principle in the design and conduct of co-curricular activities. In this regard, schools must ensure meaningful participation across gender, caste, class, disability, and rural urban differences, while also rotating opportunities for leadership and public performance among students. Finally, the evaluation of co-curricular education should extend beyond the mere counting of events conducted. Greater attention should be given to indicators such as student participation, continuity of involvement, confidence, reading engagement, teamwork, and sense of belonging within the school. These indicators are more appropriate for assessing the true educational value of co-curricular activities.

9. Conclusion

Co-curricular activities occupy an important place in education because they link formal learning with

participation, social interaction, culture, physical development, and citizenship. In West Bengal, recent policy and administrative initiatives indicate a growing effort to institutionalize this perspective through measures such as house systems, reading promotion programmes, graduation ceremonies, Ananda Parisar, Shishu Sansad, sports and library support, Kala Utsav, and the strengthening of art and craft education [3-7]. The broader body of research also supports the significance of these initiatives, showing that structured participation in co-curricular activities contributes to academic engagement, psychosocial development, a stronger sense of belonging to school, and a reduced risk of dropout [8-13].

The key educational concern, therefore, is not whether co-curricular activities should be included in school life, but how they can be organized in a meaningful and equitable manner across all schools. If West Bengal seeks to advance the humanistic and democratic purposes of education, co-curricular activities must be recognized not as supplementary or recreational alone, but as an essential pedagogic strategy. Their greatest value lies in helping schools become spaces where children are able not only to prepare for examinations, but also to develop as competent, expressive, responsible, and culturally rooted individuals.

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