

The Co-Curricular Ethos at Blundell's: Creating a Sense of Belonging and Purpose Beyond the Classroom

Introduction

"Leave all the afternoon for exercise and recreation, which are as necessary as reading. I will rather say more necessary because health is worth more than learning." — Thomas Jefferson

While the academic credentials of Blundell's are indisputably first-rate, setting us apart from our competitors in terms of what we offer our students, the co-curricular life of the school is the beating heart of our community. In a school that seeks to equip young people with meaning and purpose, it is important to give them a program that allows them to explore, grow, and thrive beyond the classroom. From discovering hidden talents to building resilience and fostering belonging, we are committed to reviewing, developing, and enhancing our co-curricular offering.

The Importance of Co-Curricular Activities

Scientific research highlights that co-curricular activities play a crucial role in students' cognitive and affective development, educational effectiveness, satisfaction, and in fostering a sense of belonging (Paulino, 2022). Additionally, Eccles et al. (2003) found that students involved in extracurricular activities achieved higher academic performance and were more likely to attend college. Twenty-five years working in boarding schools have left me in no doubt: a strong co-curricular programme is essential to the development of young people. Indeed, this aspect of school life is every bit as important as academia, and boarding schools, with their unique structure and flexibility, are the ideal environment to deliver education. The co-curricular activities which our students enjoy, often reveal untapped potential and moments of growth.

Take the shy student who surprises themselves by landing a main part in the school musical, and finds their voice for the first time. Previously they had felt unremarkable, but now, as they walk around campus, they are stopped by their peers and teachers to offer congratulations on their stunning performance. Then there's the fourteen-year-old girl who has always struggled to make friends, never really feeling like she fits in. Then she joins the theatre tech team, where she discovers a new 'family' with whom she can belong. Or the student facing academic challenges, trying to make sense of their ADD diagnosis, but who suddenly unlocked their creativity through costume design, ultimately earning an A grade in their EPQ. These are just a few of the countless examples I have witnessed where students have flourished through co-curricular opportunities.

James Shone, an advocate for youth development, speaks of the 'balloon' of self-belief inside every child. These balloons can be inflated by young people finding and doing things they are good at, through recognising their unique qualities, and in finding a sense of belonging – a place where they feel they fit in. Co-curricular activities not only create mini communities, in which young people find their place, but they also give teachers, mentors, and coaches countless opportunities to provide positive experiences and offer encouragement and praise. Every positive comment further inflates these balloons, leading to an increasing number of young people spurred on to achieve their potential.

By offering a broad and diverse range of activities, we give our students the best chance of finding what enables them to shine.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

The connection between co-curricular participation and mental health is well-documented. Countless studies have concluded that organised activities, whether sport, outdoor pursuits or the creative arts, can promote good mental health. A 2016 study, on the effect of physical activity on cognitive and mental health in young people, highlighted a wide range of benefits including reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety (Lubans et al., 2016). Physical activities like team sports have long been recognised for decreasing cortisol levels while increasing endorphins, improving mood, and reducing anxiety. Additionally, pupils engaged in co-curricular activities develop self-esteem and self-worth, reducing the likelihood of experiencing anxiety, depression, and social difficulties (JETIR, 2019).

Music has been widely recognised as having profound psychological benefits: singing relieves stress and tension and develops self-confidence. Playing a musical instrument is uniquely associated with engaging every part of the brain leading to enhanced memory, language skills, and emotional intelligence. In his article, "The Positive Influence of Music on the Human Brain," Zhang (2020) writes: "Research shows that the influence of music on people is not only emotional; it has a positive effect on brain development and cognitive development. Different states of the brain understand music in different ways, stimulating specific areas of the brain, causing corresponding physiological effects. As a result, many researchers see music as a potential therapeutic tool rather than mere entertainment."

Drama, too, offers something for everyone, whether it's acting, dancing, designing costumes, building sets, or playing in the orchestra. Working together as a cast and crew encourages collaboration and a sense of belonging. Students in a musical production spend weeks working together, fostering camaraderie, purpose, and mutual support. American novelist and playwright, Thornton Wilder writes: "Theatre is the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being."

Whether in sports teams or creative ensembles, these shared experiences help students feel valued and connected, boosting their self-esteem as well as their sense of meaning and belonging. Which, in turn, allows them to realise their potential in all areas of school life including academia.

Building Resilience

"Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved." — Billie Jean King

Resilience is an essential skill in today's fast-paced and ever-changing world. Yet, in a time where so much is instantly accessible at the click of a button, it is not something we can take for granted. Resilience is built through challenge and perseverance, and when these experiences don't naturally present themselves, we must take responsibility for creating them.

Outdoor education, such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award or Ten Tors expeditions, push students out of their comfort zones. Facing the harsh Dartmoor winds while navigating challenging terrain teaches

students grit, determination, and teamwork. Similarly, team sports require commitment, effort, and collaboration, even for students who may not naturally enjoy them. Let's be honest—not every young person loves sport, just as not every child enjoys maths. But the answer, of course, isn't simply to remove the challenge. If one of my students finds maths difficult, I don't suggest they stop attending lessons. Instead, I make those lessons as accessible, engaging, and enjoyable as possible. Even then, some students may never love maths—but every hurdle they overcome, every mistake they learn from, and every piece of independent work they push through helps build character and resilience that will serve them well long after they leave school.

Our approach to co-curricular activities is no different. Sometimes students will be asked to take part in activities they don't enjoy, that challenge them, or where they don't shine as brightly as their peers. And just as we push them academically when things get tough, we do the same in the co-curricular sphere—encouraging, nudging, and teaching them the value of commitment, open-mindedness, resilience, and perseverance. We remind them that their efforts will lead to something worthwhile: new skills, greater insight, deeper understanding, and perhaps even a new passion.

The negative impact of smartphone overuse on the wellbeing of children and teenagers is indisputable. One notable example is the overstimulation of dopamine receptors, which can lead to desensitisation over time. Challenging tasks - like learning a new skill or meeting physical and mental demands - require sustained effort and delayed gratification. This process promotes balanced dopamine release, strengthening the brain's reward system and helping to reset it. Daunting experiences offer invaluable lessons. They teach students to persist through discomfort, adapt to new situations, and emerge stronger. This resilience equips them to face life's inevitable challenges with confidence, both during their time at school and beyond.

Inclusivity and Opportunity for All

Blundell's co-curricular program is founded on inclusivity, ensuring there is something for everyone. Mahoney et al. (2005) found that participation in extracurricular activities was associated with a greater sense of school belonging and lower levels of social isolation. This association highlights the importance of inclusivity in fostering a sense of community within schools. Whether it's sports, music, drama, or outdoor activities, we aim to meet students where they are and help them thrive.

In sport, our philosophy of "sport for all" ensures that every student, from the most competitive athlete to the cautious beginner, has a chance to participate and enjoy. In my first few weeks at Blundell's I remember being struck by the enthusiasm of the U14B rugby coach. I watched as he converted a group of hesitant and apprehensive boys - unsure about the physicality and potential discomfort of rugby - by meeting them at their level. With gentle encouragement, he introduced them to new skills at a pace they felt comfortable with. It was remarkable to see these boys, initially full of trepidation, begin to take genuine pleasure in the game. The stereotype that rugby is only for fearless, alpha-male types was overturned thanks to the inclusive approach adopted by the coach. This inclusive spirit extends beyond rugby; our Director of Cricket dedicates as much time to the least experienced cricketers as to the 1st XI, and our top netball coaches invest in developing every pupil, regardless of their ability, fostering their enjoyment and love of being part of a team.

Those leading the creative arts at Blundell's share this same commitment to giving every student the chance to experience and enjoy their disciplines. In Year 7, every student takes part in the summer series of short plays, relishing the opportunity to act and perform for an audience. They also all join the School House choir, performing at the Salvete Scholastici service, alongside the chamber choir, in their first term. Opportunities for growth are open to all, with no limit to what can be achieved.

The range of activities is extensive, from fives, chess club, and costume making, to mountain biking, water polo, sailing, table tennis, and pickleball, to name just a few. This breadth ensures that every student can find an activity they love and pursue it with enthusiasm.

A Word of Caution: Balancing Busy Lives

"A generation that cannot endure boredom will be a generation of little men... of men in whom every vital impulse slowly withers, as though they were cut flowers in a vase." — Bertrand Russell

While some students may excel as the lead in a play, the star of the 1st XV rugby squad, the first violinist in the orchestra, and an Oxbridge scholar all at once, others will struggle under such immense pressure if left unchecked. Children and teenagers need time to simply be — to chat around the breakfast table, to get bored, to play, to relax, and to breathe. Over-scheduling every moment of their day does them a grave disservice.

Particularly in sport, we have witnessed a considerable increase in what is expected from school aged children when it comes to training programmes. Twenty years ago, pre-season training consisted of a couple of hours the day before term started, largely with the purpose of reminding pupils how to hold a hockey stick and ensure everyone had the correct kit in tow. Club sport required just one training session a week, and school sport was limited to one sport per term. Today, as young people face increasing pressure to attend numerous training sessions outside school and participate in sports spanning multiple terms to remain competitive against rival teams, we recognise our responsibility to keep a close eye on the schedules of our busiest pupils.

Without wanting to detract from the very many benefits of co-curricular endeavours, and while a full co-curricular schedule undoubtedly offers valuable lessons in time management and responsibility, maintaining balance is essential. At Blundell's, we are committed to monitoring the schedules of our busiest pupils, offering mentorship, advice, and guidance, and, when necessary, giving them permission to pause, say no, and find time for themselves.

Conclusion

The co-curricular ethos at Blundell's is simple yet profound: inclusivity, opportunity, and a commitment to fostering growth. Whether a student is a concert pianist or picking up a drumstick for the first time, every individual is encouraged to explore, participate, and find their place. Our co-curricular program helps students develop confidence, resilience, and a lifelong love of learning. It is through these activities that they discover their passions, connect with others, and prepare for the challenges and opportunities of the future.

I reflect on my own time at boarding school: Coach journeys to fixtures, lost in my thoughts as I gazed out at the rolling Somerset countryside. The first time our crew managed to stand up in the boat—eight of us perfectly balanced—realising how much we relied on each other. Roasting foil-wrapped bananas stuffed with melting chocolate buttons over a campfire after a gruelling head race. Sharing meagre army rations on exhausting treks through the Mendip Hills, heavy backpacks weighing us down but laughter sustaining us as we completed our mission with dogged determination. Stepping onto the stage, heart pounding, blinded by stage lights in my debut as Anne Frank. Singing at the top of my lungs in chapel—perhaps not particularly tunefully, but with great gusto nevertheless. Taking cheeky shortcuts in cross-country, delighting in outfoxing the teacher on duty.

But more than any single moment, it was the journey—discovering the world around me, testing and challenging my limits, forging friendships that will last a lifetime, and embracing every opportunity that made life at boarding school so rich, so exhilarating, so extraordinary. This is what I carry with me. And this is the gift we must pass on—to inspire future generations to embrace every opportunity, push beyond their boundaries, and to treasure the adventure of life.

“Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn’t do than by the ones you did. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.” —Mark Twain

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