

## School Clubs - Who are they good for?

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The benefits of club activities are obvious. They give students the opportunity to pursue hobbies and make friends. They encourage co-operation and team building. Many of them encourage exercise. And, the kids aren't at home getting into trouble. They say "the devil finds work for idle hands." However, there is something in the implementation of school clubs, and the time that students spend in club activities, which (as a foreigner) I'm struggling to understand.

The first surprising thing is the amount of time spent by students at their club activities. I hear, mostly from my students, that club activities are generally for two hours after school, and about four hours on a Saturday or Sunday. High school and junior high school students have so little free time. They're often in my last lesson of the day. Having left home before 8 a.m., they've gone from school to their club activity at 3:30. From there, they've gone to juku. And then they've rushed from juku to their English conversation class. When do these students get a chance to relax? This child (young person) is going to get home at 9 p.m., and start their homework and study for the day. I've been told by junior high school students that their usual sleeping hours are from 2 - 6 a.m.

Most of these clubs are supervised and administered by a teacher, who watches and gives tips at practice, and drives the students to competitions or events. We all know how busy teachers are. In dealing with helicopter parents, administering clubs, and planning for events, it must seem like the actual teaching of the lessons is the easiest part of their day. It's naive to think that the "extra duties" performed by teachers are not detracting from their ability to teach the best lessons possible.

The way I look at it is this. The greatest stakeholders in the student's education are the students, the parents, and the teachers. I wonder which of these groups the current system of clubs benefits.

It puts stress on the students who don't get to use that time for study. Homework and study time must be made

up somewhere else in their day. Too often it is made up late at night.

Parents must regret that up to sixteen hours per week of their child's time is made up of club activity and not study. They must be anxious that their child has to stay up late into the night to finish their homework or do enough study.

The teachers seem like the real losers in this situation. After a day teaching the regular lessons, they must spend time speaking to parents and administering club activities, which often reach into their weekends. By the time they get home at the end of the day, they still have their lesson marking and report writing to do.

I once had a junior high school student tell me that he was only six months into the first grade and he already hated the tennis club. It became a bit of a joke in our lessons. "How are you?" I'd ask every week. He'd respond, "I hate tennis. I hate tennis club. But otherwise good." Finally, I suggested to him that, surely, if he told his parents how much he hated his club, that he had made a horrible decision at the beginning of his junior high school life, they could talk to the school and let him quit, or change clubs. He responded that it looks bad on an academic record. He was concerned that a prospective university might look at his application and say, "I see you didn't stick out your tennis club for three years in junior high school- I'm afraid we don't have room for rebels and delinquents at this university." Yes, I'm being flippant here. But that's because I think it's absurd that a university would be petty enough to penalise somebody for a mistake they made when they were thirteen years old.

While planning this article I asked a Japanese friend about the positives of school clubs. She said that one of the most important things that students learned from their club activity was "grit", the ability to stick at something, for three years, whether you want to or not. Parents want to see that their child has the ability to stay committed to something, even if they are not enjoying it. When it's cold and raining, and you don't want to go to practice, you go. When you've got tests and other deadlines, you still go. When you're getting towards the end of junior high school, and all the initial interest you had in the