

Laidlaw Scholars - Extracurricular Activity Provision in Oxford

Exploring the role of extracurricular activities in state schools: how might provision of after-school clubs impact educational and social outcomes?

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Aim:

Our research chapter aims to reveal the impact of extracurriculars, particularly when considered in a state-school context. Alongside a deliverable extracurricular pantomime club, we will conduct mixed-methods research to investigate the role extracurriculars play in creating a sense of belonging in the academic environment through educational and social outcomes.

Objectives:

We have identified key impacts of extracurriculars that our research will focus on due to their associated improved social and educational outcomes. Our research objective is to explore whether extracurriculars can have the following impacts:

- **Encourage self-confidence:** Improve children's trust in themselves such that they acknowledge their abilities and aspire to succeed.
 - Self-confidence will be an important part of our club as children will have to learn how to voice their opinions respectfully and confidently in order to navigate group dynamics and teamwork, whilst also engaging with the comical nature of pantomime.
- **Build soft skills:** Encourage soft skill development through interactions outside of traditional curriculum activities.
 - Our pantomime club will aim to provide children the opportunity to learn skills in creativity, performance, planning, literacy and public speaking.
- **Cultivate friendship:** Support collaboration and empathy between students by creating opportunities for children to get to know others within their peer-group better.
 - In particular, our club will support collaboration and empathy between students by demonstrating the value of difference, such that children appreciate not only their skills but also those of others, thus aiding the formation of friendships between pupils who may not usually interact.

Key Sustainable Development Goals:

- **3 Good health and wellbeing**
 - Extracurriculars yield an important role in improving pupil wellbeing through increasing self-concept and offering children the opportunity to explore identity and soft skill development in a low-pressure environment.
- **4 Quality Education**

- 4.4 Increase the number of people with relevant skills for financial success.
 - Extracurriculars provide key opportunities for soft skill development necessary for entry into the competitive job market and also a pupil's engagement with the 'hidden curriculum'/integration into the academic school environment and stronger academic performance.
- 4.8 Build and upgrade inclusive and safe schools
 - Our extracurricular should create an inclusive and effective learning environment by encouraging students to work together, appreciate differences and feel like they are making an important contribution in the school environment.

Our research into the impact of extracurriculars will provide foundational context for future programmes and the expansion of university engagement with state-school extracurriculars, ultimately meaning this area of pupil deprivation can be targeted to better work towards the sustainable development goals.

Programme Outline

With the help and creativity of pupils from years 5-6, we will be putting on a pantomime production of Alice in Wonderland. Pupils will have the opportunity to take part in different aspects of production, from performing on-stage, to costumes, set design and script production, depending on pupil preference. All roles are crucial parts of the team – no matter where your strengths lie, your contribution will be massively valued.

To put this all together, sessions will be twice a week for four weeks: pupils can come to one or both weekly sessions, but we do ask that you are consistent with the sessions you attend. In the first week, we'll explore different aspects of stage production so that you can discover your project superpower. Afterwards, we'll separate pupils into groups to focus on a specific section of the story for the rest of the extracurricular programme. Within these groups, some members will explore acting whilst others will design and create costumes and props, but all will work together to explore how they want their scene to develop. As Alice in Wonderland was written by former Oxford maths professor, Lewis Carroll, we also aim to perform the pantomime in an Oxford college to celebrate pupils' hard work and complete the project.

The dreamlike nature of Alice in Wonderland provides the perfect opportunity for children to create their own story and bring the magic of Wonderland to life. With the exciting chance to work on a scene within the story, students will take the lead in determining how characters are portrayed, where the story goes, and how the final production appears on stage. As such, the only question that remains is: who do you want to be?

Rationale

Through our Laidlaw Research Project, we will provide foundational groundwork for a longitudinal study aiming to guide government education policy by investigating the importance of extracurricular provision. Extracurricular activities are a formative part of pupil upbringing: extensive literature reveals benefits from extracurricular engagement in both academic (skills directly related to curriculum success) and non-academic (a holistic focus on the pupil's soft skills) contexts (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2014). Nevertheless, stark disparities exist across socioeconomic backgrounds, with Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson's work also revealing pupils from lower SES households engage with after-school clubs to a lesser extent than children with more privileged upbringings. This is for reasons including financial cost, school facilities and transportation commitments. Resultantly, pupils from deprived backgrounds face significant disadvantages in the acquisition of cultural, educational and social capital needed for assimilation into the school environment. Long-term, this contributes to unequal educational attainment outcomes across the social classes, with pupils on Free School Meals significantly underachieving compared to their peers from higher income households at GCSE in 2022.

In South-East Oxford, there are neighbourhoods where up to 35-39% of children live below the poverty line. Additionally, in the deprivation index domain of 'education skills and training', areas like Blackbird Leys, Northfield Brook and Rose Hill and Iffley are examples of the 10 Oxford areas that fall in the most deprived nationally (IoD, 2019). We hope to directly target this inequality by increasing self-confidence and collaboration for pupils in South-East Oxford through extracurricular engagement with a creative pantomime production of Alice in Wonderland. We selected a pantomime because it is best suited to our objectives to improve pupil self-concept and self-confidence, encourage development of interests and soft-skills, and increase pupil collaboration as they recognise strengths of their peers. We hope this will increase positive associations with the school environment. Observations and interactions through this delivery will be invaluable in guiding the direction our research takes, whilst exploring the role of the University in the local community.

More broadly, our research project aims to reveal the potential impact and scope of extracurricular provision in state-schools, namely by exploring the role extracurricular activities play in belonging and why a sense of belonging is imperative to academic attainment and aspiration. Leading sociologists have identified class differences in perceptions of the school environment, with lower-class pupils less likely to think positively of school. Lareau's sociology theories of concerted cultivation (middle class parenting style) vs natural growth (lower class parenting style) offer one explanation by outlining how children from wealthier social backgrounds lead scheduled and organised lives, with parents encouraging their children to develop socially, creatively and academically within the constraints of their supervision (Lareau, 2011). The lower levels of preparation and supervised support for lower-class children means they have less opportunities to develop skills like punctuality and verbal reasoning. Mastering these skills can ease integration into school and work environments as they are part of the 'hidden curriculum' - non-academic rules that children are judged on and expected to adhere to. It is thus thought that lower-class pupils' lower levels of familiarity with these expectations can contribute to negative associations and lack of belonging in the school environment. Exploring the delivery of extracurricular activities to lower-class pupils is

thus of critical importance to uncover whether this provision can help reduce attainment disparities across the classes by providing lower-class students exposure to the development of skills, relationships and values in a low-pressure environment.

Additionally, our literature review revealed that self-belief is particularly important for raising academic and non-academic learning outcomes: without it, children doubt their capabilities and focus on their negative traits rather than their strengths, leading to feelings of failure. Goble (2020) highlights how participation in play productions increases social connections, confidence, identity, interpersonal skills and improves mental health, directly preventing the formation of negative self-belief. Students were also identified to develop positive responses to setbacks, build resiliency and problem solving skills in productions, and to encounter different perspectives. Furthermore, the incorporation of group work for the pupils in our design is linked to positive interdependence theory: as different pupils are focused on different sub-tasks like prop design or performance, students perceive the contribution of each individual as essential for success of the production (Scager et al., 2016). This promotes individual accountability and promotive interaction, in-turn strengthening friendship and facilitating others' tasks. We thus have the exciting opportunity to look in more detail at the particular benefits of our extracurricular design, to assess how impactful certain extracurriculars may be in developing friendships with peers, and the subsequent impacts this may have on aspirations and attainment. Ultimately, this will provide guidance and evidence-based strategy for future projects aimed at using extracurriculars to reduce inequalities in the UK education system.

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