‘Designing Feasible Extracurricular Programmes in Unequal Communities: a Preliminary Study Using a Mixed Methods Approach’

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Abstract

Previous research suggests extracurricular activities (ECAs) improve the educational and social attainment outcomes of participating students. This pilot study of extracurricular activities in state schools in East Oxford advances our understanding of research design for extracurricular activities to improve outcomes. Oxford as the location of the pilot is particularly salient due to the level of socioeconomic disparities within the county. This fills an existing gap in the research literature, which can be split into three broad categories: benefits of ECAs, patterns of participation in ECAs, and frameworks for analysing ECAs. Our mixed methods approach combines thematic analysis of primary data sources, and maps this onto the quantitative socioeconomic data from secondary sources, including census data. This approach allows us to analyse the effects of potential social desirability bias which brings a new angle to the stratified patterns of participation, due to the self-selecting nature of extracurricular activities and programme delivery. We find gendered effects in patterns of participation for different types of extracurricular activities and identify key parameters for long-term feasibility of delivering extra-curricular activities. This identifies key stakeholders and communication channels which will inform the research design of future interventions both with regards to closing outcomes disparities in Oxford, and in comparable communities and locales.

Keywords: Extracurricular Activities, ECAs, State Schools, Socio-economic Inequality, Social Desirability Bias, Participation

Introduction

Existing literature analysing the role of ECAs on school students can be broadly divided in three categories: the benefits that ECAs have on social and academic outcomes; the patterns of participation in extra-curricular interventions; and the necessary frameworks and feasibility of this style of intervention. Evidence suggests that social skills and academic attainment are both increased with the introduction of ECAs.

Literature that has been particularly pertinent to our study include Marsh, H. W., & Kleitman, S. (2002). Using three theoretical models, findings show that ECA interventions have nonlinear effects, with implications on the feasibility of our study. It suggests that optimal levels of ECA provision are based on school characteristics and other relevant parameters, including student to teacher ratios. This paper supports the finding that ECAs are beneficial to closing social inequality gaps, especially 'disadvantaged students who are least well served by the traditional educational curriculum'. Similarly, McNeal, R. B. (1998) finds a complex set of structural factors and contextual characteristics that impinge on patterns of student participation. The paper concludes that 'school structure and context are significant determinants of participation in extracurricular activities, effectively altering student access to sources of human, cultural, and social capital'. This result is highly relevant to our study, due to the socioeconomic disparities within the Oxford area, and the particular divide between 'town and gown'.

Papers analysing the impact of ECAs provided a baseline understanding of the factors that would be relevant to assessing the success of an ECA intervention. Eder, D., & Kinney, D. A. (1995) found gender stereotypes and self-selecting participation trends across different types of ECAs. Feraco, T., Resnati, D., Fregonese, D., Spoto, A., & Meneghetti, C. (2023)

sampled 603 students to develop an integrated model of student learning through Bayesian path analysis. This paper highlights the importance of ECAs for developing the ‘soft-skills’ of students, which were key to ‘students’ academic achievement and life satisfaction’.

Burrack et al. (2014) and McNeal, R. B. (1999) further suggest the feasibility of internally run ECAs, and the sustainability of this provision given ‘budget cuts to school music and arts programs’, and the heterogenous impact on gaps in participation ‘between children from low- income and high- income families’, as well as the differential impact on students from ‘various racial and ethnic minority groups.’ McNeal finds that these students have ‘greater likelihood(s) of participating in all types of extracurricular activities studied’.

The impact of extra-curricular intervention is well researched, however, often the nature and delivery of the sessions is secondary to researching the outcomes of these types of intervention. The Oxford Sustainable Development Goals Impact Lab has identified the phenomenon of greater educational and wealth inequality in university towns and cities and intends to show the ways that resources from universities can be invested into their local communities to reduce this inequality. With this in mind, we intend to design a long-term intervention that can bridge a divide between the community in Blackbird Leys and the University of Oxford.

Methodology

This report uses qualitative analysis of notes collected ECA sessions, interviews, and surveys with key stakeholders. While a mixed methods approach was initially intended, the primary emphasis is on qualitative data collection and analysis to evaluate the implementation and feasibility of ECAs. This study aims to assess the immediate and potential long-term impact of ECAs on student engagement, confidence, and social skills, while also determining the feasibility of furthering the project into a longitudinal study. So to effectively do this we gathered data from teachers, school administrative staff, parents, the Oxford SDG Lab, and other Oxford Laidlaw scholars. In doing so we aim to build an evidence-based understanding of the necessary prerequisites for conducting this study in a sustainable, long-term manner.

Planning the intervention:

The Oxford SDG Lab arranged many of the fundamental aspects of the programme delivery prior to the onboarding of the Laidlaw scholars. This included the number of schools that would be included in the interventions and which schools would be chosen. Laidlaw scholars were divided into five groups of four and each group was given free rein to choose the content they wanted to deliver during their extracurricular sessions. We have labelled the schools contacted by the Oxford SDG Lab as School A, School B, School C, and School D. These schools were selected because of their locations in areas of high deprivation. The three primary schools (Schools A, B, and C) act as 'Feeder schools' to the secondary school (School D) meaning that for some children the intervention can be sustained over many years. For key demographic information about each school involved in the study see Table A2.

Communication with the schools relied on pre-existing partnerships established by the Oxford SDG Lab and prior community engagement initiatives. While these relationships

provided a method collaboration, we lacked direct, first-hand interactions with key stakeholders during the study. This indirect approach introduced challenges in aligning expectations and effectively managing communication across all parties, occasionally leading to misunderstandings or gaps in stakeholder coordination.

Initially, the schools that each group would be conducting their intervention in was undecided. Although it was established that in the three primary schools the sessions would be targeted towards year 5 and 6 students (aged 9-11,) there was some uncertainty regarding which groups would also deliver to secondary school pupils (aged 13-15.) This meant that each group made the concepts behind their projects feasible for either age range. Table A1 shows an outline of the extra-curriculars arranged by each group.

Primary data sources:

To gather qualitative data from our interventions, each researcher maintained an individual logbook, noting observations about student participation, behaviour, and engagement. The purpose of individual logbooks was to minimise group bias and ensure a comprehensive and unfiltered dataset. Observations by researchers focused on three topics: Environmental factors such as classroom settings, Student behaviours such as participation level, and the Methods used to engage students and how these methods were received by the students.

A separate survey was sent out to two distinct groups: parents of participating students and fellow Laidlaw scholars. The survey sent to Laidlaw scholars included three open-ended questions, one closed-ended question, and a space for any additional comments see Table B1 for the precise questions asked. The questions included were chosen to capture the scholars'

reflections on session structure, student reactions, and any unplanned adjustments made during the delivery of activities, Over the course of the study. The Laidlaw scholars involved in the ECAs were asked to complete this survey after each intervention. The surveys sent to parents included nine Likert scale questions, two open ended questions and a closed question. The Likert scale questions were designed to evaluate parental perceptions of the programme's impact and its feasibility as a long-term intervention while the open/closed ended questions were carefully selected to gather insights from parents regarding their perceptions of extracurricular activities and the factors influencing their children's participation.

We planned to conduct interviews with all, willing, key stakeholders in the longitudinal study. These included schoolteachers, headteachers, school safe-guarding leads, Oxford SDG impact lab coordinators, and the Oxford University local and global outreach lead. Ultimately, after in-person interviews with the Laidlaw coordinator at the Oxford SDG lab and our main contacts at both schools, we surmised that the data that we had collected would be sufficient to conduct our analysis and get a unique perspective from each stakeholder group. We decided that we were likely to receive adequately informative responses from the other stakeholders by asking for written responses to a few short questions that we sent while minimising the time and effort required from the interviewees. Each interview was semi-structured and lasted between 10 and 30 minutes.

Secondary data sources:

To complement the primary data collected during this study, secondary data were used to provide contextual insights and enhance the analysis of participation patterns and feasibility barriers in ECAs. These data sources included publicly available socioeconomic data and school-level statistics obtained from official records and literature.

Socioeconomic data from the Index of Multiple Deprivation (Index of Multiple Deprivation. Consumer Data Research Centre, 2019) were used to map the level of deprivation across the target schools and their surrounding communities. This data was gathered to help contextualise any disparities in resource allocation, attendance, and engagement observed during the ECA sessions. Additionally General school characteristics, such as pupil demographics and eligibility for free school meals were collected from local government databases (Official school data and statistics. UK government, 2023). These statistics were critical for understanding the varying capacities of schools to implement and sustain ECAs. Lastly, Insights from previous studies on the impact and sustainability of ECAs were also integrated into this study.

While secondary data provided valuable context, some limitations were noted. The applicability of wider ranging datasets, such as the OXWell survey, was restricted due to their broader scope and lack of specific focus on the target schools.

Analysis Plan:

We intended to conduct thematic analysis on the responses, to survey and interview questions, to identify themes common across different activities, schools, and the method of ECA delivery.

For this study, we used an inductive approach to thematic analysis. This method was chosen because our study seeks to assess the real-life impacts of extracurricular activities on state school students rather than confirming pre-existing hypotheses. Inductive analysis will be used to uncover patterns and themes from data collected from interviews, surveys, and our observations of students and teachers without the constraint of a predefined structure. This

flexibility is crucial for capturing the diverse and potentially unexpected ways in which participation in extracurricular activities can influence social and educational outcomes in highly unequal communities. Additionally, this approach ensures that we can identify key themes associated with the specific dynamics of gender participation patterns, resource disparities, and school structuring, all of which are crucial variables in understanding the effectiveness and long-term feasibility of extracurricular interventions. Thus, an inductive approach is best suited for accurately reflecting the complex realities of the participants and schools in this study.

Analysis

Student Behaviours & Group Size

There were six student sign-ups for the debate club extra-curricular activity, and the highest turn-out was in the last session, where 5 students attended. The minimum attendance was 3 students.

Two of the students were from Year 6, and the remainder from Year 5. The students from Year 5 had strong rapport with one another; they were confident expressing their thoughts and ideas, but it was often not to do with the focus of the task. One of the children from Year 6 in that session was markedly quieter than his classmates but was still able to contribute confidently to the session, and the other students generally listened well to each other. The increase in confidence among this child – who we will refer to as Child A – was remarked upon by members of staff at the school and aligns with our own observations. Though in the first session his temperament was reserved and shy, by the next session he was excited to be there and had more confidence expressing and defending his opinions among his peers during casual conversation. As the sessions went on, he became more involved in choosing the motions for the debates and presenting his arguments in front of his peers. The sessions also appeared to have strengthened his relationships to his peers especially in regard to his friendship with the other student in his year group. We can see here that it is not necessary for pupils to have met prior to the sessions to nonetheless feel a sense of inclusion.

Incentives for Participation

We produced a poster to increase participation for the extra-curricular activity, however it was unclear whether this was distributed amongst students. Some of the main reasons behind different levels of participation seem to depend both on host school and the nature of the ECA. The ‘Sharing our Stories’ sessions garnered interest at School D that

exceeded the cap placed on the permitted sign-ups (max. 16 children) while having a range of 1-3 students attending the same sessions at School C. Their advertisements at both schools were the same, which may suggest that secondary schools have higher rates of sign-ups or, more likely, that the method of teachers recommending specific students attend the club and its perceived exclusivity draws more attention from pupils. Interestingly, this group reported finding engaging students in the session with more sign-ups more difficult than in the other school. This signals that the actual content of the ECAs is not the driving force behind participation.

The effective methods of increasing student engagement during the sessions included providing each student with their own notebook in order to write down their ideas for each debate. A large A3 sheet of paper was also highly effective for listing key terms and brainstorming for debates. Since the activities were held after school, providing snacks was effective in keeping the students focused on the task. For example, between sessions, students were asked what fruit they wanted for the following session, and during sessions, fruits were rewarded when a student came up with an effective point.

Whilst this may seem straightforward, this made a huge difference in keeping the students engaged, especially those in Year 5 who would otherwise struggle to keep their discussion focused on the task at hand and could easily become restless.

Survey data

In collaboration with the other groups running ECAs for the study, we sent out a physical copy of the survey to all parents and carers with children involved in the ECAs along with a QR code for an online survey. The survey was sent out to 77 families and 11 surveys were returned.

Thematic Analysis

Through careful examination of scholars' reflections on session changes, interviews with stakeholders, and survey data, five key themes emerged that provide a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing the feasibility of extracurricular activities in unequal areas. These are expanded on below.

Flexibility as a Key Requirement

A recurring theme in the responses was the need for flexibility in structuring extracurricular sessions. Scholars frequently reported making both planned and unplanned changes to their session formats in response to the local context, such as lower-than-expected student turnout or scheduling conflicts. This adaptability was essential in ensuring the sessions could still be delivered effectively despite these challenges. In schools situated in unequal areas, where unpredictability in resources and participation is common, the feasibility of extracurricular activities hinges on the ability to adjust the program structure dynamically.

Positive Student Engagement Despite Resource Limitations

Despite the challenges posed by resource limitations and varying levels of organization across schools, scholars consistently highlighted the positive engagement of students during the sessions. Scholars noted that students responded well to activities that were engaging and aligned with their interests. This suggests that extracurricular activities can indeed thrive in unequal areas, provided they are designed to be relevant and engaging for students. The positive reactions from students indicate that extracurriculars are not only

feasible but also impactful when properly tailored to the needs and preferences of the students.

Inconsistent Participation as a Feasibility Barrier

A major barrier identified through the thematic analysis was the inconsistency in student attendance. Several scholars reported varying levels of participation, with some sessions having as few as two or three attendees. This inconsistency presents a challenge to the feasibility of sustaining extracurricular programs in the long term. Schools in unequal areas may face barriers such as logistical difficulties and lack of consistent student engagement, making it harder to plan and execute extracurricular activities. Addressing these barriers will be essential in ensuring the ongoing feasibility of such programs.

Mixed Anticipation for Future Sessions

While most scholars expressed enthusiasm for continuing the extracurricular activities, there were mixed feelings regarding the feasibility of future sessions. Concerns were raised about the sustainability of these activities, especially given the challenges of low attendance and resource constraints. This indicates that while the initial pilot programs showed promise, the long-term feasibility will depend on addressing these logistical hurdles, such as securing consistent funding, improving communication channels, and ensuring regular participation.

Logistical Challenges

Finally, the analysis underscored the significant impact that logistical issues have on the feasibility of extracurricular activities in deprived areas. Scholars noted differences in the level of preparedness and resources available at different schools, which directly influenced

the ease with which the activities were conducted. Schools with better organizational structures were able to provide smoother experiences, while those with less support posed greater challenges. This highlights the need for stronger logistical support and better communication between schools and external organizations to enhance the feasibility of running these activities in unequal environments.

Conclusion

Overall, the thematic analysis revealed that extracurricular activities in schools located in unequal areas are feasible, but their success is highly dependent on the adaptability of the program, student engagement, and the resolution of logistical challenges. The need for flexibility in program design and delivery, coupled with strategies to address inconsistent participation, will be key to ensuring the long-term sustainability of these activities in under-resourced schools.

Results

Discussion

This style of intervention can only work in schools which are already open to the concept of extra-curriculars. It demands a certain attitude from parents, teachers, and administrative staff with institutional frameworks necessary to support them. A key challenge that was faced throughout the course of the intervention was maintaining transparent and timely communication channels across different stakeholders, in order to harmonise expectations. Here, there was a clear contrast between different schools participating in the programme, despite being within a small geographical radius. Schools which already had existing levels of provision for communicating with parents and those immediately responsible for the students were much better equipped to implement ECAs. This effect was even greater in schools which already had some level of after-school provision, versus schools where these activities were not in place. In other words, the resource levels but also the level of experience in each school critically determined the effectiveness of communication between stakeholders involved, which directly affected the feasibility and outcomes of the ECAs for students.

Towards those conducting the intervention, there was an expectation that future programmes ought to last longer than 4 weeks. Interview data suggests that a top priority for the wellbeing of the children involved is to have continuity and longevity in the intervention. This year that was not feasible due to the constraints on the SDG Lab and Laidlaw scholars. Ways to overcome this in future years could involve adapting the nature of the intervention to include volunteers from local secondary schools to host the ECAs. There are multiple benefits to this including better matched term-times allowing a more substantial intervention, mutual benefit for volunteers in their career and social development, and stronger community links between three education institutions (university, secondary school, primary schools.)

That said, teacher and parent testimony suggests that part of the motivation to involve the children in these ECAs is the unique opportunity to interact with university students. Regardless, this is a possibility that ought to be considered by future Laidlaw scholars.

Two significant areas identified for improving the feasibility and success of the programme are patterns of participation and barriers to successful implementation. In both these areas, our study corroborates the findings of the research literature. In particular, resource provision and other administrative capacities which are immediately adjacent to the delivery of ECAs themselves are critical to the feasibility of these activities. Communication structures are particularly key, both between parties external with the schools involved, between schools and parents of the students, and in turn how ECAs were communicated with students. The complexity and difference in these channels directly shaped the feasibility of ECA interventions, which are particularly important in contexts of high socioeconomic inequality.

Patterns of Participation

The first notable observation that would inform our approach to the participation aspect of research design was the gender imbalance of the children who opted to sign up to the debating sessions. Out of the 6 students who were signed up to the programme, 5 were boys with the only girl who signed up never attending the club. Figure 1 shows the number of boys and girls attending each ECA. It is clear from the graph that altogether the ECAs had a negligible difference between the attendance of boys and girls with 26 male attendees to 27 female attendees. However, there was a significant gender imbalance in many of the clubs suggesting that the advertising for each club had attracted the attention of different demographics. Although gender imbalance is often an issue when running ECAs (include reference) we are confident that if each cohort of Laidlaw scholars also produces a wide

variety of different ECAs then this should not present an issue in the long-term outcomes of the study.

the nature of the ECA should not make a difference.

Barriers to Successful Implementation

For this style of extra-curricular engagement to run any barriers to successful implementation must be overcome. To do that, it is first necessary to identify the barriers facing different stakeholders and assess the feasibility of overcoming them.

For school administrators it is important that putting on an intervention in this manner does not unfairly increase workload without proper compensation. We found that in schools which had a pre-existing framework for introducing ECAs after school, less time had to be spent by school administrative staff in communicating the programme. It is an issue for the feasibility of the programme if there is the additional burden of creating new channels for organisation and communication. Our data shows that while school staff feel positively towards the impact of the programme, in schools which have little, or no, provision for ECAs prior to the intervention the barriers faced by the school can be insurmountable. School B is an example of this.

Recommendations

Early Engagement:

It is essential to initiate early planning, including timely contact with schools to arrange the necessary logistics. This is particularly valuable when there is preparatory work to be done vis a vis research materials and strategies.

Consistent Communication with Parents:

Maintaining committed and consistent communication with parents is critical, particularly as they are key stakeholders, especially for interventions at the primary school level, which was the focus of most groups in this pilot study.

Incorporation of Self-Led Content:

Incorporating elements of self-directed content is recommended. For instance, the debating group found that children were significantly more engaged when they had the opportunity to participate in selecting discussion topics.

Targeted Messaging and Representation:

Consider that the children targeted for these programmes are often those who have not previously had access to extracurricular initiatives. This lack of exposure may result in limited awareness of what certain activities entail, potentially making them more hesitant to participate.

For example, our debating group appeared to be self-selecting in nature, with many participants demonstrating some prior understanding of debate formats. Several referred to a

school-based debate on nutrition held during an assembly, which may have influenced their decision to join.

Addressing Gender Imbalances:

Gender imbalances should be carefully considered during the planning and promotion of activities, as well as in the advertising of the programmes. We found at least one ECA group with a significant and sustained imbalance – this can certainly be something to consider when designing programmes.

Sustained, Long-Term Programme Design:

The programme must be designed with long-term sustainability in mind. Schools generally struggle with ad hoc, short-term initiatives, which not only have a reduced impact on participants but also pose logistical challenges for schools. The feasibility of short-term projects is often undermined by their unpredictable nature, making them more difficult to plan and often frustrating for school staff.

Minimising the Burden on Schools:

Efforts should be made to minimise the burden placed on schools, particularly as schools serving underprivileged communities are likely to be under-resourced. Staffing constraints are a significant factor in determining whether schools can support extracurricular programmes. As noted by Tina, a home-school liaison worker at School A, one of the primary advantages of the programme was that the clubs were externally led. Providing schools with the content to run clubs independently would still require considerable human resource investment, limiting the potential benefits.

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Appendix A: Description of Extracurriculars and schools participating in the report

Table A1

A summary of the clubs offered by the 2024 Oxford Laidlaw Scholars cohort to local primary schools.

Club	*Description*
Alice in Wonderland	Children were given the opportunity to perform in and produce costumes for an abridged pantomime of Alice in Wonderland, showcased at the end of the four-week programme to their parents and teachers.
Know Your World	After four weeks learning about different countries and cultures, children were asked to identify what they most value in a country and design their own nations.
Oxford Junior Debate	The club exposed children to formal practices of debate through age-appropriate motions and offered the opportunity to develop public speaking and debating skills.
Sharing our Stories	Focusing on storytelling, poetry, and drama, the club provided children a space to engage with public speaking and creativity, as well as tools for analysis in English Language lessons.
Young Detectives	Children prepared a mystery challenge including a script and clues that was delivered as an interactive experience to their peers at the end of the four-weeks.

Table A2

Pupil demographics at the target schools

	John Henry Newman Academy(School A)	**Rose Hill Primary(School B)**	**Orchard Meadow(School C)**	**Oxford Academy(School D)**	**Oxfordshire avg**	**National avg**
Total number of Pupils	365	293	227	1159	312	276(primary) 1054 (secondary)
%free school meals	39.30	44	39.40	45.60	15.70	24.60
%with SEN support	27.60	22.60	20.70	25.40	unrecorded	13.50
%pupil premium	43	?	?	?	unrecorded	20.80
% meeting exp. standards in reading, writing, maths	46	14	32	N/A	60	60
% meeting higher standards in r,w,m	2	0	0	N/A	8	8
%persistent absence	27.80	37.40	13.40	45.60	14.60	16.20

Appendix B: Survey and interview questions used in data collection from stakeholders

Table B1: Survey questions sent to Laidlaw scholars

- Did you make any changes (planned or unplanned) to the structure of the session? Why?
- Would you consider this session to be a success? Why?
- Did students react positively to the intervention? Was this surprising?
- Are you looking forward to the next session?

Table B2: Survey sent to Parents

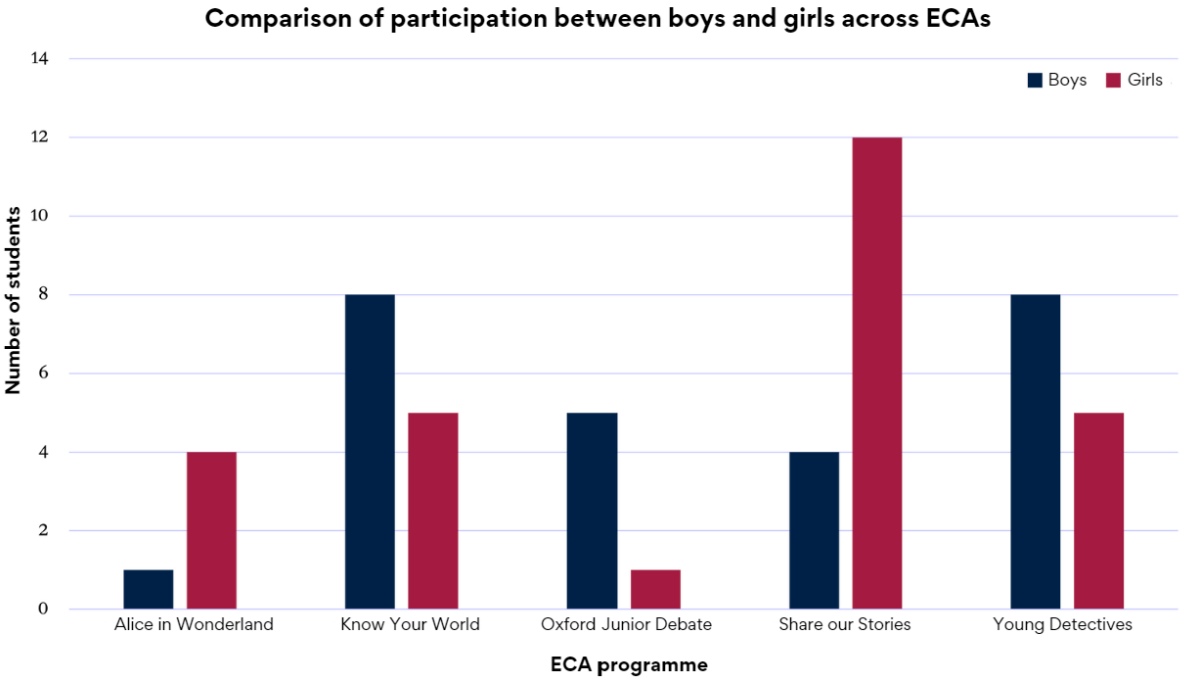
- Are there any barriers preventing your child from taking part in more ECAs?
- Do you believe ECAs are useful for your child?
- What skills do you want your child to develop from ECAs?

My child has improved the following skills (Likert scale):

- Confident
- Comfortable
- Adapt
- Curious
- Rarely Gives Up
- Reading
- Expectations
- Long-Term Benefit
- More Involved

Figures

Figure 1



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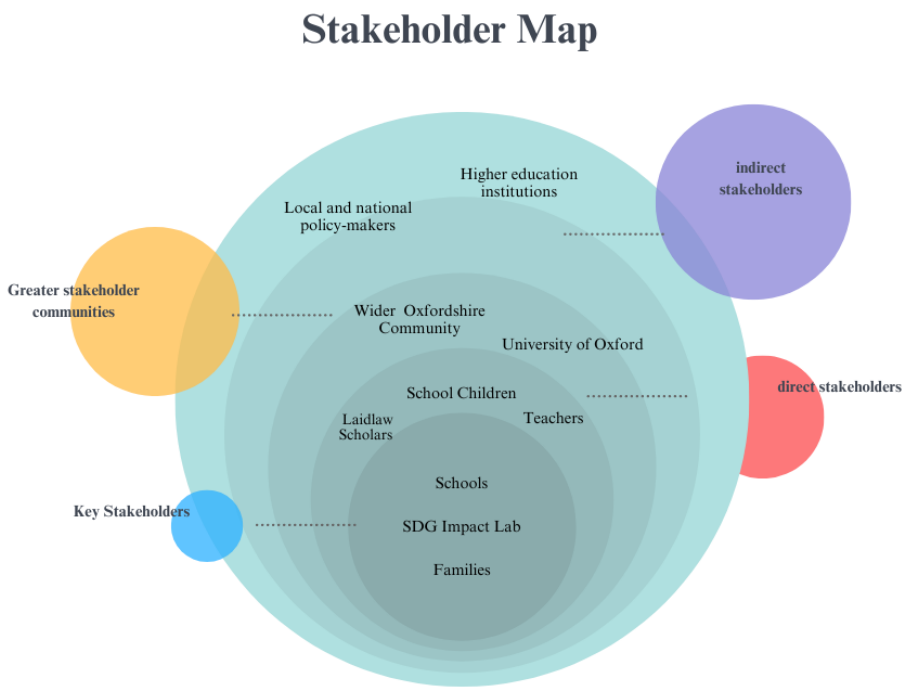


Figure 3

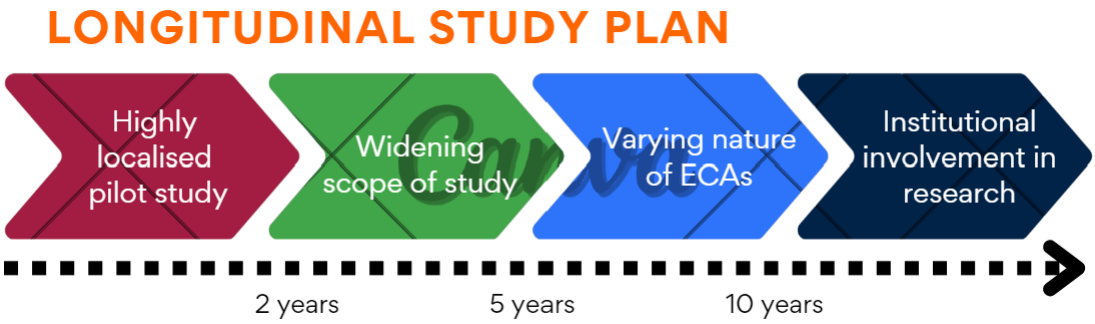


Figure 4

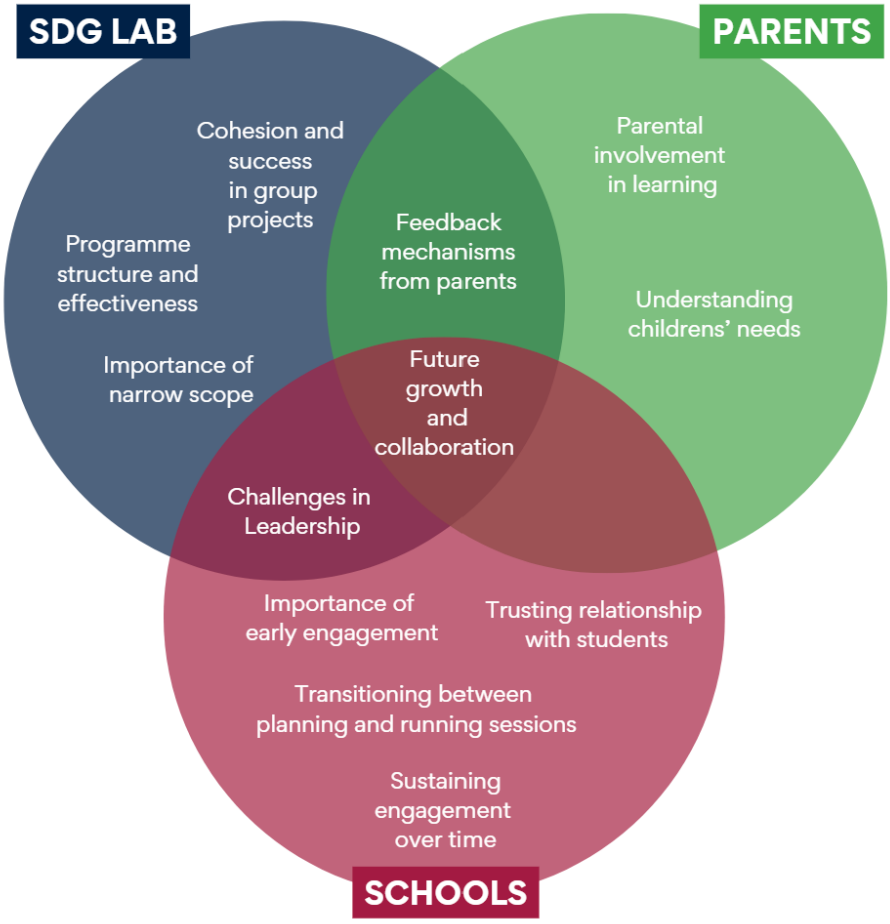
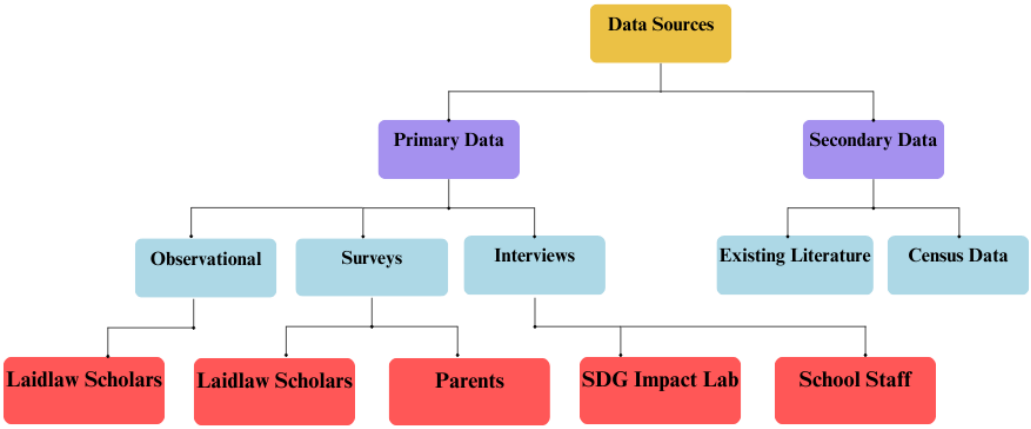


Figure 5



Concluding Summary

This pilot study in East Oxford, part of a city with significant socioeconomic disparities, explores a research design for extracurricular activities (ECAs) to enhance students' educational and social outcomes. This research addresses gaps in the literature by examining the benefits of ECAs, participation patterns, and frameworks for analysis. Using a mixed-methods approach, we combine thematic analysis of primary data with socioeconomic data from secondary sources. Our findings reveal gendered participation patterns and identify key factors for the long-term feasibility of ECAs, offering insights for future interventions in Oxford and similar areas.

→ Collected qualitative data from observations, surveys, and interviews

→ Compared with quantitative data from secondary sources, such as census data.

→ Accessed interventions, designed and delivered by Oxford Laidlaw Scholars, targeted Year 5 and 6 students in three primary schools and Year 9 students in a secondary school. Observational data was recorded in logbooks, surveys were distributed to parents to evaluate the programme's feasibility, and semi-structured interviews with school staff and stakeholders

provided insights into logistical challenges and benefits. An inductive thematic analysis was then conducted on this data.

Patterns of participation - we found a significant gender imbalance in three of our five ECA programmes, and a moderate imbalance in the remaining two. This should be kept in mind at the programme design stage of any future study, to maximise diversity of participation.
Necessary pre-existing frameworks - the success of our study depended on schools with openness to, and the capacity to oversee, ECAs. This can be an issue, as we had to withdraw from one of our partner schools due to a lack of such a framework.
Key benefits – for a number of the school we worked with, the primary benefit that staff cited was the provision of external ECA leaders. When offered the possibility of providing ECA content and planning to be delivered by school staff, the issue of funding and time resources came up repeatedly.

- Significant gender imbalances were found in three of five ECA programmes; this should inform future programme design for diversity.
- The study's success relied on schools with existing frameworks for ECA oversight, highlighting the need for capacity in such schools.
- Key benefits cited by schools included external ECA leaders; however, concerns about funding and time were raised when school staff were asked to deliver ECAs.