Engagement and enrichment activities

ourplace

education is the key to the door

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Introduction

Engagement and enrichment activities outside of the formal and compulsory classes (i.e. extracurricular activities or ECAs) can be significant in the development and growth of children and young people. ECAs can be wide-ranging, incorporating many different types of activities, offered by a range of different providers including schools, local councils and voluntary groups, based in both schools and other settings (youth centres, leisure centres, parks, libraries).

Activities may include, for example:

- Structured sport and active recreation programs in afterschool activities or in community organisations, teams and clubs, involving competitive and/or non-competitive sports and games.

- Musical programs, learning to play a musical instrument and playing in an orchestra/band.

- Other arts and cultural activities such as performing arts - dancing, singing - and/or visual and literary arts such as textiles, painting, writing stories.

- Cultural experiences that can include incursions or excursions such as visits from local elders, going to museums, galleries, the theatre, heritage or significant local sites or immersion in activities of cultural relevance via music, arts and crafts.

- Education-based groups such as tutorials based on school subjects, interest groups and homework clubs engaging on extended subjects of interest such as STEM, history, reading and writing or a focus on life skills and aspirations relevant to broader family, community and working life including youth clubs, volunteering and Scouts and Guides (Donnelly et al., 2019, and European Commission 2021).

Activities such as sport, recreation and creative art give children the opportunity to be part of a team or multi-age group, to develop new skills and capabilities, be healthy and active, to succeed at something they love, and try new experiences. These activities can be the bridge for children and youth experiencing socio-economic disadvantage to not only stay connected to school but to develop the capabilities and skills to thrive in school and broader community life. Opportunities to participate in expanded learning opportunities help reduce the impact of poverty and disadvantage on children's life chances.

This paper outlines the evidence behind extracurricular activities to engage and develop children and young people. It draws on the extensive evidence base on the benefits to health, wellbeing, and educational outcomes of extracurricular involvement including physical activity, music, art, and cultural experiences. It synthesises evidence on barriers and facilitators for participation and draws from a growing knowledge base on the design components and features of more effective programs.

The three chapters are:

1. **Why participation in engagement and enrichment activities matters**: benefits and impacts.

2. **The role of engagement and enrichment in reducing the impact of disadvantage**: greater needs and fewer opportunities for some children and families.

3. **Effective programs and extracurricular activities**: design features and considerations including the critical role schools can play for disadvantaged communities.

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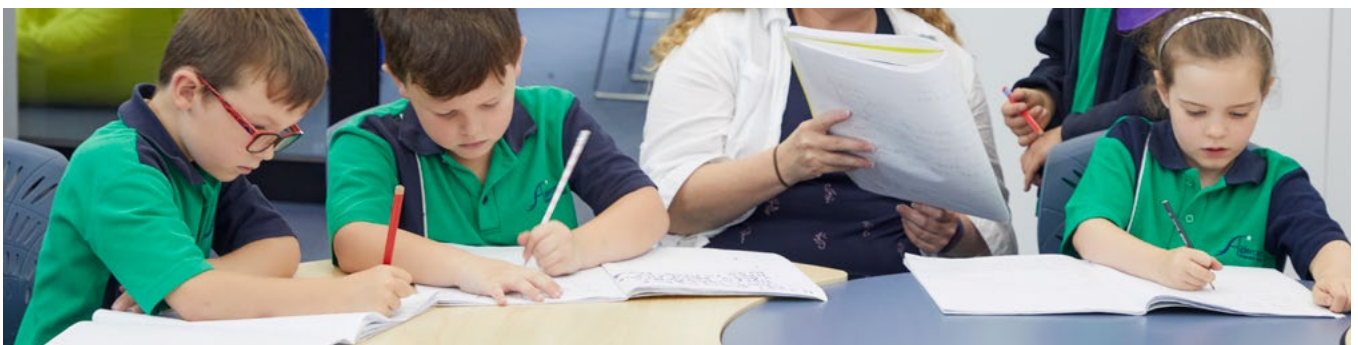
Why participation in engagement and enrichment activities matters

BENEFITS FOR CHILD AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Children and young people of all ages need physical activity, stimulating environments and relationships with adults and peers for physical, cognitive, and social development, health and wellbeing. Aspects of modern life such as time pressures, access to more sedentary leisure pursuits and limitations in the built environment for many children and families have reduced access and participation in a range of activities, most notably physical activities (Clemens & Lincoln, 2018 and Booth et al., 2015).

Organised sport, recreation and creative activities have a range of benefits for child development, all of which impact life outcomes given child health and wellbeing is a predictor of adult outcomes (Fox et al., 2015). Active and engaged children are also more likely to carry positive

habits developed in childhood into adulthood such as being physically active, playing organised sport, regularly playing instruments or engaging in creative pursuits that interest them (Clemens & Lincoln, 2018).

These types of activities help to develop capabilities which contribute to young people's wellbeing and their ability to participate in class, in the workforce and in their community (Kautz et al., 2014; OECD 2015). More specifically, they help young people to:

- Stay engaged in learning, have positive behaviour at school, build stronger relationships with peers and attend school and regularly (Jacobson & Blank 2011; NEA 2008; Redd et al., 2012).

- Develop non-cognitive skills such as perseverance, conscientiousness, self-control, trust, attentiveness, self-esteem, resilience, and empathy and build children's confidence, help them make friends and learn to get along with people (ABS, 2012; Tanner et al., 2016; The Smith Family, 2013) – including environments in which to practice, apply and develop these skills (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

- Build social networks and relationships, including forming positive relationships with other adults and role models and extending peer relationships (Johnston et al., 2014).

Schools can play a critical role in supporting children to participate in engagement and enrichment activities. School provides opportunity to introduce children to new activities, creates space for involvement in physical activities, art, and music, and can reduce the barriers to participation. However, these subjects compete for space in a crowded curriculum and over time have been reducing (Sheppard & Broughton, 2020).

Further still, students in disadvantaged communities are at higher risk of disengaging from school, particularly in

the middle years and adolescence. Students experiencing disadvantage are less likely to have positive interactions with their teachers and other students, negatively impacting their sense of belonging, and leading to higher rates of absenteeism and early school leaving (Thomson, De Bortoli, & Underwood, 2017). Extracurricular activities have been shown to increase social inclusion and connectedness to school for disadvantaged children (European Commission, 2021).

ORGANISED, STRUCTURED AND VARIED ACTIVITIES

Structured activities in particular help lower student's anxiety; increase student's self-worth and peer and school connectedness (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Rose, Williams, Olsson & Allen 2018; Simoncini & Caltabiono 2012) and in turn, increase student engagement and academic performance (VicHealth 2014). Organised activities with objectives linked to student development needs and/or social and emotional learning aims have been shown to be more effectual than afterschool programs offering general activity or care (Fredricks et al., 2019). A recent international review by the European Commission including studies from the US, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, confirmed the range of benefits of participation in organised, extracurricular activities (ECAs), grouping benefits into three main categories:

- Academic achievement.
- Social and emotional skills.
- Behavioural outcomes (European Commission, 2021).

The review notes that much of the past research evidence has been problematic as many studies assessed activity participation as dichotomous - participated in any type of ECA, or not – and has not distinguished between activities or consider effectiveness of ECAs by the degree of involvement, different activity types, performance or competitive natures of activities, or the number of different activities participated in. Research over the past 10-15 years, particular in the US, has become more nuanced, including differences by activity type, however, more research is needed to better understand how positive outcomes are best derived (European Commission, 2021).

Broadly, different types of activities have been shown to have particular benefits, all of which have some value for child development (see more detailed discussion to follow). While studies vary, some suggest that academic and psychological benefits from non-sporting related ECAs such as music and arts, can exceed those provided by engagement in sports (Feldman, Farb & Matjasko, 2012, Fredricks & Eccles, 2006, European Commission, 2021).

However, most notably, it is participation in multiple and varied activities which has been found to be beneficial - the EC review noted that "participating in more than one type of ECA is associated with especially positive outcomes" (European Commission, 2021, p.6). Participation in a greater number of organised activities having been linked to better psychological resilience (Eccles 2006, in Kennewell et al., 2022) and a combination of sports and non-sports ECAs can deliver higher social support and well-being (O'Connor & Jose, 2012 in European Commission, 2021).

A recent Australian study using a subsample of 1,477 adolescents recruited as part of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children found that engagement in multiple ECAs had a compensatory effect on locational disadvantage (O'Donnell et al, 2022). Specifically, the difference between the educational expectations and academic outcomes of adolescents in metropolitan and regional communities dissipated when regional participants engaged in three or more types of extracurricular activities, highlighting the potential of access to a variety of ECAs for reducing inequities in educational outcomes.

Non-organised after-school activities such as spontaneous active play, reading for pleasure, and doing homework also contribute to wellbeing and learning, however, children less engaged in organised activities are more likely to report time spent on screens or in sedentary behaviours such as watching television. While 'screen time' per se is not always negative, higher levels of screen time have been shown to be associated with poorer wellbeing in children (Kennewell et al., 2022). Research also shows that participation in

organised ECAs can serve as a protective factor against negative impacts of engagements in risky behaviours in adolescence (O'Donnell et al., 2022).

ECAs can include a wide variety of activities, with programs delivered by a range of providers. No one ECA typology has been universally accepted and research methods and evidence vary (European Commission, 2021, Fredricks et al., 2019, Donnelly et al., 2019). However, two broad and widely researched categories of engagement and enrichment activities for children are:

- Physical activity and sport; and

- Music, dance, creative and cultural activities.

More specific benefits relating to these two broad categories of activities are outlined below.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND SPORT

Participating in sport and physical activity contributes to the holistic development of children and adolescents. Sport and active free play are associated with healthy physical growth, the development of key fine and gross motor skills, increased concentration in academic pursuits and development of social skills (Clemens & Lincoln, 2018; Sport Australia, 2019). Specifically, physical activity improves:

- Health: children's cardiovascular health, musculoskeletal strength and has positive psychosocial benefits with benefits for adult life – physical activity having been shown to reduce the risk of coronary heart disease, stroke, diabetes, hypertension, breast and colon cancer, depression and osteoporosis (WHO, 2010).

- Social and emotional wellbeing: children and adolescents participating in sport show improved psychological health and social connections. Team sport participation also fosters positive peer relationships and relationships with adults (Eime et al., 2013). Research finds children participating in organised sport or physical activities at age 11 show

significantly lower rates of behavioural problems and problems with peers; together with higher rates of social skills and levels of empathy towards others (Chanfreau et al., 2016).

- School engagement and achievement: studies show increased levels of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day can result in children performing better in writing, numeracy, and overall proficiency (Maher et al., 2016, in May, 2022).

MUSIC, DANCE, CREATIVE AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

Engaging in cultural activities, such as creative activities and reading for pleasure, are important for children's health, development and wellbeing (AIHW, 2022a). Participation in creative activities can improve children's self-confidence, self-esteem, resilience, and pro-social behaviour, while recreational reading has been shown to improve imagination, focus, relaxation, and mood regulation and increase social interactions (Bungay et al., 2013; Zarobe et al., 2017, in AIHW, 2022a). For example, children who participate in visual arts and music activities at ages 7–12 years develop better persistence and concentration and learn to work as part of a group. They also show higher levels of engagement and achievement, including:

- Higher academic working skills, higher levels of participation in academic clubs and higher academic achievement.

- Lower levels of social withdrawal, isolation and anxiety (Metsäpelto & Lea Pulkkinen, 2014).

A systematic review examining 28 studies of the health and wellbeing impacts of active participation in music and dance activities (Sheppard & Broughton, 2020) concluded significant associations with determinants of health and identified active participation in these activities as a preventative health tool over the life course. While the review found that more research and better evaluation is needed to understand mechanisms for how benefits are derived, particularly for children's programs, the evidence on positive outcomes was clear.

> **"** Although the specific mechanisms – or even the direction of correlation and causation – are often unclear, evidence has accumulated across several contexts and settings...that increasing physical activity has positive benefits – [including] lowering the health risks associated with a sedentary lifestyle and helping children become better learners."
>
> May, 2022

Specifically, participation was associated with benefits for physical, cognitive and social skills including emotional, psychological and social benefits, increasing interest in social activities, combating isolation and widening social networks. The review also found evidence of dance participation for girls contributing to positive body image and self-acceptance, with teenage girls (13-18 years) seeing dance classes as 'a safe, enjoyable space where they could express themselves emotionally' (Sheppard & Broughton, 2020 p.13).

While studies show mixed results for social and emotional benefits across ethnicities, the European Commission suggests that increased social emotional well-being can be achieved via ECA for targeted cultural groups when the activities are more culturally relevant. Some assert, for example, that ECAs involving cultural relevant arts or music 'may affirm and enrich a sense of ethnic identity' (O'Connor & Jose, 2012, p.5, in European Commission, 2021, p.7).

There is a wide range of literature on the benefits of arts and cultural participation in helping support adolescent development. Many documented benefits relate to school engagement and outcomes (e.g., improved reading ability, academic performance, and raised educational aspiration). Evidence also exists for improved physical and mental health as well as broader development from cultural experiences and museum visits for example, which also 'help young people develop critical thinking, engage in meaningful learning activities, and allow them to be exposed to positive values' (Mak & Fancourt, 2021, p.1). Such experiences are catalysts for self-reflection, contribute to the forming of self-identity, and help cultivate artistic or cultural interests and aspirations which children and young people take forward into their adult life.

CHANGING NEEDS OVER THE LIFE COURSE

Research shows that being physically active and finding stimulating experiences for cognitive social and emotional development are critical for all children from birth. The case for providing stimulating environments for child development in the early years is well established (see companion evidence paper *The Early Years*). Parenting support, influencing home learning environments and participation in high quality early learning programs are key components for meeting development needs over these years.

However, as children and families grow and life changes, so to do the needs, barriers, and facilitators for participation in engagement and enrichment activities. The influence of child development needs and opportunities at different ages, together with impacts of modern family life and situational and environmental factors, are important considerations when designing and implementing effective ECAs.

## PRIMARY SCHOOL YEARS AS A CRITICAL WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

While engagement in ECAs is beneficial and important in all life stages, the primary school years are a critical window of opportunity for development and prevention. As children transition to full-time school, family life changes and the influence of social and community level factors evolves, bringing new barriers and facilitators over the years 5 to 12. Studies show the impact of engagement in activities in these crucial years being associated with more positive adolescent trajectories (O'Donnell et al., 2022).

Participation in organised activities wanes from around 10–12 years, particularly for girls in sport (Australian Sports Commission, 2022, ABS 2013). Engagement in creative activities and reading for pleasure also declines from this age (ABS, 2019, AIHW 2022a).

Given the skills development and lifelong habit-forming influence of ECAs, the primary school years, and those immediately prior to 'dropping out', are the prime opportunity to take preventative action – to facilitate greater protective engagement and lay the foundations for teenage and adult life.

Key areas for consideration discussed below include:

- Child development and evolving needs and influences
  - o Child development — health, wellbeing, and social and emotional skill development taking place over the years from 5–12 years.
  - o Shifts from parent to peer influence and changes in choices about free time.
  - o Changing needs — higher levels of agency desire for opportunity for peer socialisation, and potential for increase in risky behaviours around 14–17 years.
- Participation patterns and barriers emerging round 8–11 years including
  - o Individual, family and community level barriers preventing ongoing access such as changes to levels of comfort and confidence, changing family life, work, school, homework, and other competing commitments.
  - o Additional barriers for disadvantaged families and neighbourhoods (see also Chapter 2 to follow for more targeted discussion).
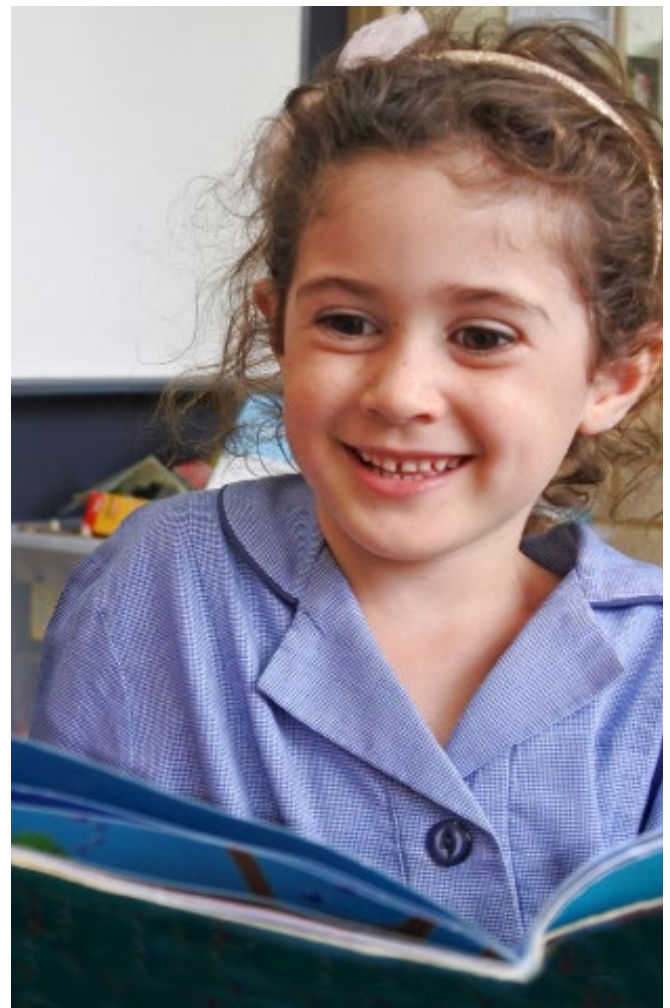
CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND EVOLVING NEEDS AND INFLUENCES

Effective reach and engagement of children and families in organised activities considers the changing needs and interests of communities, families and children as they grow and develop. What is designed and offered for the early years evolves over time as child development needs change and the influence of parents lessens over that of peers together with the need for greater independence and choice.

- During the early years children need nurturing relationships and environments. Parenting support, influencing home learning environments and participation in high-quality early learning programs are key components for meeting development needs over these years. The active nature of children's play is influenced by the nature of these home environments and neighbourhoods, access to open spaces, other families and children, and parents' availability and resources to take children to parks, join playgroups and connect with others.
Affordability and neighbourhood factors such as safe access and transport to open spaces, parks and other recreation facilities, organised clubs and groups also impacts parent choices. These can be barriers to participation in activities for communities where lack of safety and comfort are concerns (see discussion in Chapter 2).

- As children start school and move into the middle years, the relationships and environments change. Schools provide a trusted environment for activities and connections to other families, community networks and organisations (European Commission, 2021). While early experiences of enrichment activities are more directed by parents and carers, free play and non-organised activities become more self-directed and spontaneous in this age group, with children becoming more independent and influenced by peers as they begin pre and early adolescence. The needs, barriers, and facilitators for participation in organised engagement and enrichment activities also evolve (Kemp et al., 2021). Understanding the benefits of participation and fostering greater engagement, particularly in these primary school and pre-adolescent years, and considering the needs of different ages and genders, is important for achieving better life outcomes for children (Kemp et al., 2021; O'Donnell et al., 2022 and Fredricks et al., 2019).

- The middle years coincides with periods of social and emotional development, increased body image concerns and an increased need for peer social connection (Kemp et al., 2021). Girls in particular are more interested in non-competitive activities, opportunities for socialising and safe spaces to feel comfortable to be themselves. Participation in sport is tied to a feeling of enjoyment and mastery and those who perceive they are 'not good at sport' have lower enjoyment and drop out in the middle years, seeking a feeling of belonging elsewhere (Kemp et al., 2021 and Fredricks et al., 2019).

- The primary school and early high school years are when children are building the skills and confidence for good relationships and are navigating conflicts and decision making around the risky behaviours common in adolescence. In this context, organised activities can be a protective factor as well as a vehicle for skills development. The European Commission review observed that benefits can be achieved through different activity types for boys and girls - that sports ECAs were associated with less problematic relationships with peers for boys, while, for girls, non-sports ECAs were linked with better peer relations, self-management and social competence (European Commission, 2021, p.7).

- Young people are looking for more agency and independence throughout this transitional period from childhood to adulthood experiencing development influencing their thinking and decision making, forming their self-identity and social identity (Curtis 2015, in Mak & Fancourt, 2021). This calls for a balance between supported and structured activities with direction by adults, in combination with providing room for self-determination and choice for young people to design, direct and lead their own activities, including social elements of involvement (see also Chapter 3 for more detailed discussion of effective programs).

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

Participation in ECAs for primary school aged children is largely limited by the available opportunities and the attitudes and availability of parents and carers to both the activities and the organisations running them (Callanan et al., 2016, Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson 2014, VicHealth 2014; VicHealth 2018). In summary, identified barriers include:

- Limited range of activities.
- Limits on numbers and long wait lists.
- Limited staffing / limited skills of staff.
- Parents attitude towards school.
- Parents attitudes towards activities.
- Cost of activity and equipment.

In particular, participation in organised after-school activities (such as sports, dancing, and clubs) often has an associated cost, which may be prohibitive for low-income families. These and other more specific barriers to participation are outlined in Chapter 2.

As shown in Table 1 below, time commitments are an issue for participation in organised physical activity for over 10 per cent of all school aged children, but most notably for primary school aged children aged 5 to 8 years, with one in five parents listing this as the reason for non-participation. Cost and transport barriers are greatest for parents of children aged 5 to 11 years compared to other age groups.

Participation in sport is impacted by availability of activities but also individual and family attitudes and comfort. As children develop, their enjoyment of physical activity can wane, with one in three (35 per cent) children aged 12-14 years not liking physical activities and this developing from early ages of 9-11 with nearly one in four children not liking physical activity. Dropping out of organised (competitive) sport, can be an issue for older primary school aged children as skills and mastery becomes more important and the need to feel 'good at it' in order to participate can be off-putting.

Table 1: Barriers to participation in organised physical activity or sport, by age group (Australian Sports Commission, 2022)

Age group	Wrong age / too young / too old	Not enough time / too many other commitments	Doesn't like physical activity	Can't afford it / transport
0–4	73.3%	5.2%	0.8%	2.2%
5–8	16.3%	21.4%	11.6%	7.0%
9–11	1.0%	11.4%	23.5%	8.0%
12–14	1.0%	10.3%	34.7%	0.0%
Total	**47.9%**	**9.1%**	**8.9%**	**3.3%**

2

Facing disadvantage – greater needs, fewer opportunities

Despite the known benefits of participation in organised, out of school engagement and enrichment activities for health, development, wellbeing and educational outcomes, participation levels internationally and in Australia could be improved. While all children need greater facilitation for involvement in these activities, those in communities experiencing disadvantage have greater needs for support. These children are participating at lower levels and are facing multiple barriers to engagement.

Expanded opportunities needed for all children, but especially for low-income families

Rates of participation in creative and cultural activities are relatively high when considering how children spend their free time outside of school hours. For example, most children (79 per cent) of children aged 5–14 read for pleasure outside of school hours (ABS, 2019, in AIHW 2022a), and self-reported ABS data indicates nearly two-thirds (63 per cent) of children aged 5–14 participated in one or more creative activities outside of school hours, such as drama, singing, playing a musical instrument, dancing, art and craft, creative writing, or creating digital content.

While on face value these participation rates seem positive, looking beyond the average number engaged in an activity in any given week to the participation patterns for different groups and locations, engagement levels and nature and quality of activities vary. For example:

- While a high number of children are reading, most children spent less than five hours reading each week, considerably less than the number of hours spent on screen time.

- Around 90 per cent of Australian children are looking at screens each week, and most of them are doing so for 10 or more hours. Screen time includes watching TV, using the Internet or playing screen-based games (e.g. playing games on consoles and activities via smart phones or tablets).

- Children living in the highest income households were much more likely to participate in creative activity (75 per cent) compared to children in the lowest income households (55 per cent).

- Participation declines with age, for example:

  o Participation in creative activities was 67 per cent for 5- to 8-year-olds, compared with 57 per cent for 12- to 14-year-olds

  o 80 per cent of 5- to 8-year-olds were engaging in reading for pleasure, compared to 73 per cent for 12- to 14-year-olds.

Higher household income is associated with more participation in organised activities such as music lessons, art classes, and club-based activities such as boy scouts. Children in high-income families also spend more time reading and doing homework while children in low-income families spend more time watching television and playing videogames (Dumais, 2006; Ferrar et al., 2012 in Kennewell, et al., 2022).

The nature of participation in creative, cultural and arts related activities also varies across households with higher income households participating at higher rates, and more frequently in organised activities (e.g. in classes or lessons) over spontaneous or self-directed activities. Where they are engaged, lower income households are more likely to be participating in less structured activities such as arts and crafts which are more easily accessed and do not require high cost or transport, and which may not have the same social and emotional learning benefits of more organised activities (Mak & Fancourt, 2021).

Similarly, data from a recent UK study found that children from the highest income households were nearly three times more likely to participate in music activities and twice as likely to engage in dancing outside school, compared to the lowest income households, with participation rates

higher for girls compared to boys, and higher for those from a white ethnic background (Donnelly et al., 2019).

Similar trends are observed for participation in culture and arts activities. A recent UK study of nearly 2000 children aged 11-15 years found that socio-economic factors predicted arts engagement outside of school, with children from lower socio-economic families being less likely to participate in the arts or engage with culture such as visiting an archive, museum or heritage site (Mak & Fancourt, 2021).

National results for physical activity in Australia are more dire. Most Australian children don't do enough physical activity to grow up fit and healthy. The Australian Department of Health (2017) recommends:

- Children aged 5–12 years should engage in 60 minutes or more of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity every day.
- On at least three days per week, children should engage in activities that strengthen muscle and bone (The Department of Health, 2017).

The ABS (2013) found in that four out of five children aged 5–17 years did not meet the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity every day. More recently, *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)* found in 2018 that among 11–12-year-old children, only one in seven met the Australian guidelines for physical activity of at least 60 minutes per day (15 per cent on weekdays and 16 per cent on weekends). The LSAC reports confirmed that activity levels are declining compared to LSAC previous years' health check points, and to ABS data, and that results are poorer for girls when compared to boys (Gasser et al., 2018).

It is likely that future measures will also record declines given the interruptions to organisations for group activities and sports over the years 2020-2022 with COVID-19 lockdowns across many states limiting organised groups, music, dance, arts and sporting activities and gatherings.

Ausplay (Australian Sports Commission, 2022) is a national annual survey which tracks involvement in physical activities and organised sport from over 20,000 households. Most recent data shows that while the percentage of children aged 0-14 years participating in organised out of school sport or physical activities increased in 2022, participation remains far below pre-COVID levels, at only 47 per cent participating in at least one activity per week, compared to 60 per cent or higher in the years prior to 2019-20 (see Figure 1).

Again, participation levels vary by location and household income in association with a range of barriers for children in communities experiencing disadvantage (see the more detailed discussion to follow).

PARTICIPATE IN ORGANISED OUTSIDE-OF-SCHOOL HOURS SPORT OR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY 1+ PER WEEK
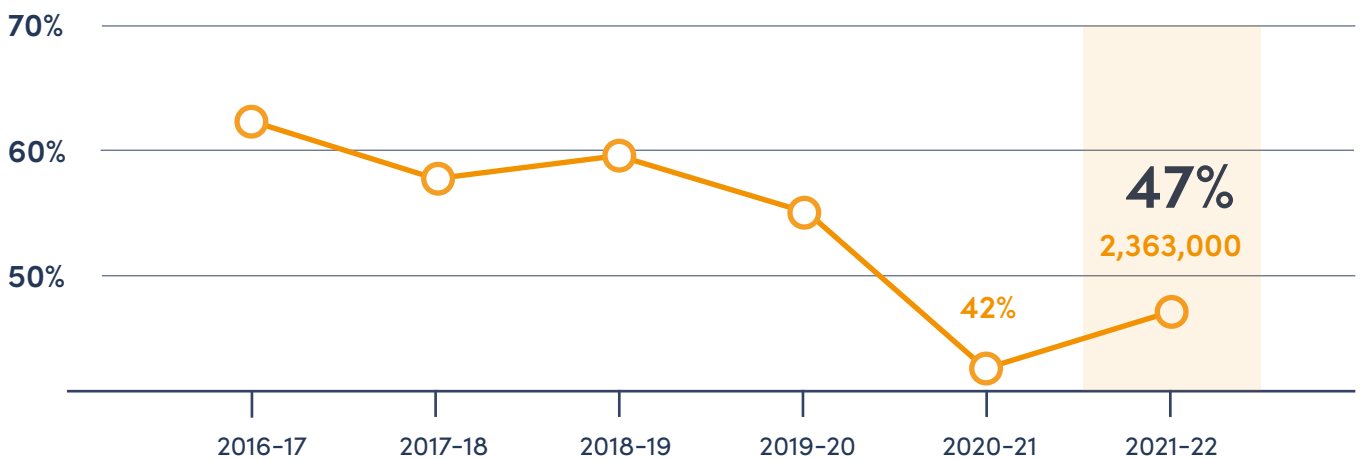

Figure 1: Children aged 0-14 yrs participating (Australian Sport Commission, 2022)

CHILDREN IN FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES EXPERIENCING DISADVANTAGE: BARRIERS, NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

While all children could be provided with greater opportunities for positive engagement and enrichment via ECAs, the needs, barriers, and associated benefits for those in communities experiencing disadvantage are significant considerations for supporting all children to thrive. Increasing opportunities and developing solutions which consider the current barriers to access and participation for vulnerable children can not only provide benefits for child development but can mitigate against the risks of growing up in poverty.

Extracurricular activities are a bridge to better outcomes for children experiencing disadvantage, their families and their communities. The opportunities created through the relationships, structures and safe spaces of extracurricular activities compensate for limited resources and lack of opportunities and/or negative influences from neighbourhoods, peers and families. These opportunities help children develop skills and increase school attendance. They are also a way for children to spend time in a positive environment where adults pay attention, praise and encourage them – which helps build their self-esteem and wellbeing.

The reality is however, that children growing up in low-income households have much less access to after-school activities such as sport, music and dance that help build their confidence, develop their social networks and interpersonal skills, support their health and fitness, and help them develop new skills (ABS 2012; Motos 2016; Tanner et al. 2016; The Smith Family 2013). Australian data shows that at least half of the children living in the most disadvantaged communities participate in no after-school activities (The Smith Family 2013). Children are less likely to do extracurricular activities if they live in:

- Families with lower income.
- Single-mother households, with the mother not in paid employment.
- Jobless couple households (Rioseco, Baxter & Warren, 2018).

Lower income households are less likely to meet the activity guidelines or to be involved in organised sport compared to those on higher incomes (Australian Sports Commission, 2022). Rates of physical activity are much poorer outside major cities and for children in lower socioeconomic areas - see Figure 2 (AIHW, 2022a).

(a) Regional & remote includes Inner regional, Outer regional and Remote areas. Note: Met recommendations each day in the 7 days before interview.
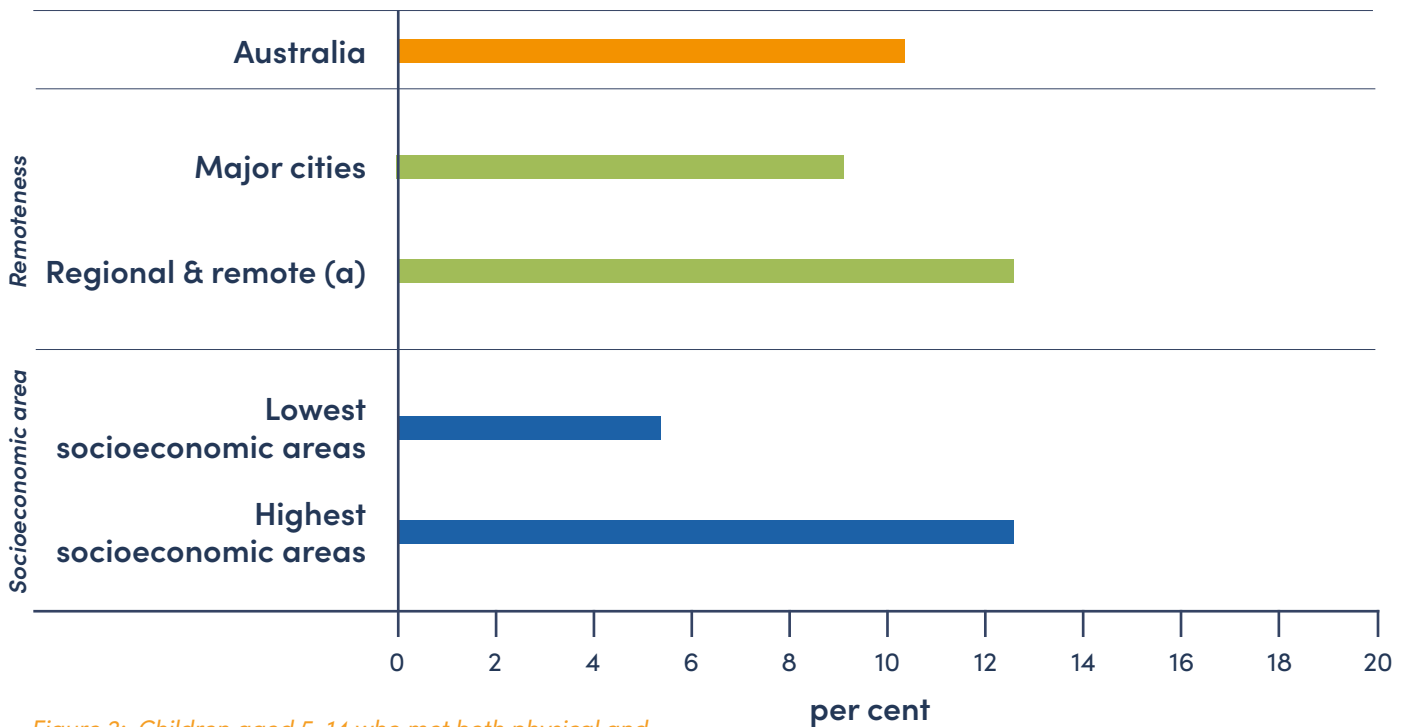

Figure 2: Children aged 5–14 who met both physical and screen-based activity recommendations, by selected population groups, 2011–12 (ABS, 2013, in AIHW, 2022a)

The European Commission review of 2021 confirmed the consensus in the literature from the US, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, that being from a disadvantaged background is associated with lower ECA participation. More detailed studies from Australia confirm differences in how children spend their time after school.

For example, a South Australian study of the South Australia Wellbeing and Engagement Collection including data from over 60,000 students from year 4 to year 9, examined the nature of afterschool activities and associations with a range of wellbeing constructs. The study found that the most frequent after-school activities among children from all SES backgrounds were screen-based activities, such as TV, videogames, and social media, however findings for children from lower SES backgrounds showed lower levels of engagement in some creative activities and higher levels of the screen-based activities which were also negatively associated with wellbeing. Students from low SES backgrounds:

- Participated in sports, homework, reading and playing music on fewer days per week than students from high SES backgrounds; and

- Spent time with friends, watched TV, played videogames, and used social media on more days per week than students from high SES backgrounds.

Amongst children from low SES backgrounds:

- Screen-based activities were negatively associated with nearly all wellbeing constructs

- Sport, "hanging out" with friends and doing homework were positively associated with wellbeing outcomes. (Kennewell et al., 2022, p.7)

Children in higher income households are more likely to participate in organised activities outside of school, offered by other organisations or clubs. The availability of affordable, local activities is a major barrier to participation for children from lower income households - fewer activities are on offer in disadvantaged communities and disadvantaged schools generally do not have resources to offer a range of activities (European Commission, 2021).

If children and their families experience challenges living where they live, it can prevent participation in the types of organised activities that bring so many benefits for child. Studies of locational disadvantage and opportunity structures show that neighbourhoods influence "their engagement with enrichment activities, their post-school aspirations, and their knowledge of routes to achieve them" (Skattebol & Redmond, 2019), leading to greater social exclusion.

Even when services and activities are available in the community, or even in neighbouring areas, stress associated with poverty, and a lack of material support and basics such as food and clothing can prevent participation in school and extracurricular activities. Levels of comfort and safety considerations may include a range of issues for different ages, differ by gender and cultural and family groups, leading to the need to consider nuanced issues, barriers, and facilitators in each neighbourhood (Heath et al., 2022, Fredricks & Simpkins, 2012).

Young people interviewed as part of the Australian study of middle years child wellbeing, for example, described how they experienced shame, how they are excluded and marginalised, and are absent from school as they try to avoid shame and bullying – experiences which also impact capacity to engage in engagement and enrichment activities (Redmond & Skattebol et al., 2016).

Barriers to access and participation noted across the literature include:

- Stress and lack of material basics for health and wellbeing.

- Limited access to equipment, shoes, clothing, and other resources for participation.

- Lack of affordability of fees / registrations.

- A lack of transportation.

- Safety concerns.

- Discomfort or low levels of acceptance, belonging or connectedness.

- Poor self-efficacy or belief, lack of mastery of skills, being 'no good at it'.

- Lack of information on the benefits of participation, availability of opportunities and/or skills to navigate registration.

- Parent and family attitudes to involvement and/or competing needs at home.

- A lack of local providers and staff and/or funding and regulatory issues related to the set up and administration of organised after-school activities.

Research shows that where these individual and situational barriers can be overcome and participation opportunities

created and facilitated for children in the primary school and early high school years, the benefits are considerable for young people into adolescence and adult life (European Commission, 2021, Health et al., 2022). Participation in extracurricular activities by children experiencing disadvantage have been shown to:

- Be a protective factor against impacts of risky behaviour in adolescence, with impacts observed up to four years later (O'Donnell et al., 2022).

- Improve educational expectations and outcomes in regional areas compared to metropolitan areas (O'Donnell et al., 2022).

- Be a protective factor against social exclusion for disadvantaged groups on income support, with after school activities mitigating against the negative effects of prolonged income support and associated social exclusion of young people when they were at school (Ryan and Sartbayeva, 2011).

- Increase sense of belonging to the point of closing the gap on peer connectedness observed between higher and lower income suburbs (O'Donnell, 2021, see Figure 3).
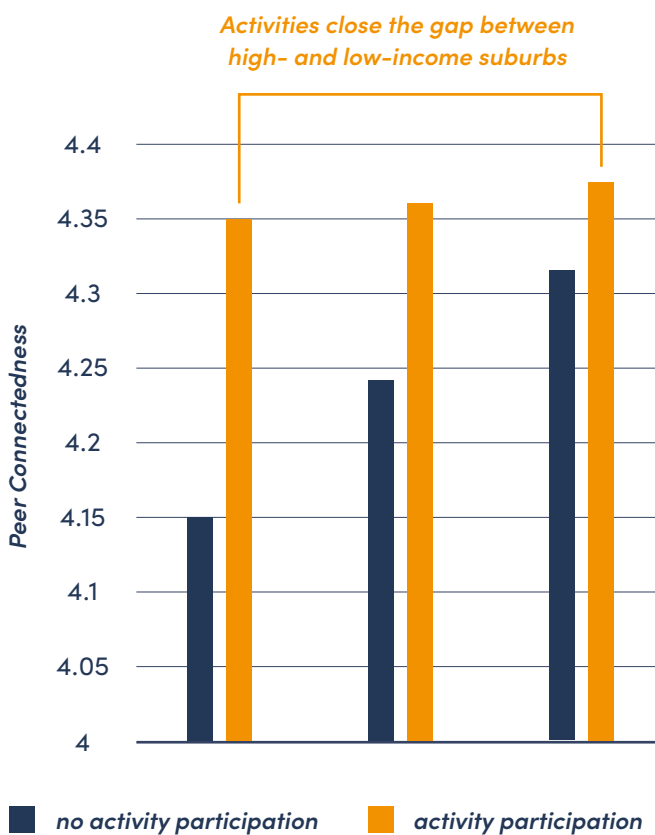

Activities close the gap between high- and low-income suburbs

no activity participation   *activity participation*

Figure 3: Peer connected measures by activity participation and community income category (O'Donnell, 2021)

Barriers from locational disadvantage are considerable, and are difficult to counter without intervention, investment, and ongoing resources. Schools are a central component of solutions for communities lacking the opportunity structures which lead to higher engagement and better outcomes (see Chapter 3) and building community capacity to deliver programs and source and train coaches and volunteers, provides sustainable services. The Active After Schools Community program (see Box 1) is an example of a program aimed at addressing community capacity. Initially developed in 2004 to increase sport participation and use community sport to mitigate issues of low social cohesion in struggling metropolitan pilot locations, the program is now a nationwide program involving more than 25 per cent of Australian primary schools by 2014 (Australian Sports Commission, 2014).

ACTIVE AFTER-SCHOOL COMMUNITIES (AASC) CASE STUDY: BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY (AUSTRALIAN SPORTS COMMISSION, 2011)

The Active After-school Communities (AASC) program – now known as Sporting Schools - was an Australian Government-funded program that provides primary school-aged children with access to free, fun, safe, inclusive and structured physical activities in the after-school timeslot of 3.00–5.30pm. The AASC program was designed to engage traditionally inactive children in structured physical activities that focus on mobility skills and motor-skill development. Program objectives included:

- Enhancing the physical activity levels of Australian primary school-aged children through a nationally coordinated program.

- Providing increased opportunities for inclusive participation in quality, safe and fun structured physical activity.

- Growing community capacity and stimulating local community involvement in sport and structured physical activity.

The AASC program was evaluated over 2005–2011 using social research and comparison cohorts to assess the impact of the program. Key findings of the evaluations showed that the AASC program:

- Had a high satisfaction rate among participants,

- Decreased sedentary behaviour in the hours immediately after school, and

- Improved the capacity of the community to deliver sport.

Building the capacity of communities to create and maintain opportunities for physical activity included building pathways within local community organisations and stimulating community involvement, with approaches that:

- Encouraged local community partnerships,

- Promoted a local community approach to increasing participation in structured physical activity, and

- Provided participating schools and OSHCS with support to determine programs that meet the needs of their community.

The program increased the capability of schools and community sporting organisations to provide sport, train coaches and attract volunteers, increasing the available opportunities for children to participate locally. Evaluations of AASC reported community capacity building indicators such as:

- 79 per cent of parents and 76 per cent of schools and after-school care providers agree the AASC program is stimulating community involvement in sport

- 65 per cent of sporting club community coaches agree the program leads to more children joining local clubs

- 83 per cent of schools and after-school care providers agree the program has increased their ability to provide sport or other physical activity to primary school-aged children

- 95 per cent of schools report physically inactive children feel welcome participating in the program.

Effective programs and extracurricular activities

The benefits of extracurricular activities are well proven although at present, research on the specific benefits of ECAs is fragmented, and ECAs are not a well-defined, and consistently researched concept (Bartkus et al., 2012 in European Commission, 2021).

Research in the US is more advanced in terms of detailed program evaluations and meta-analysis relating to programs for groups and communities experiencing disadvantage. While the definitions of activities and the range of research approaches varies, making comparative conclusions difficult, and generally there is a call for greater illustrative research, particularly at the program level (European Commission, 2021), there is sound evidence relating to general design of community after-school programs and optimal design features as they relate to communities experiencing in general.

SCHOOLS AS A CENTRAL COMPONENT FOR BETTER OUTCOMES

The greatest barriers to participation for children experiencing disadvantage relate to access – the lack of affordable, local, and convenient activities, offered by trusted organisations where families feel they belong (Donnelly et al., 2019).

Schools in particular can be safe and trusted places where engagement and enrichment activities can help children thrive, helping to counter the often-restricted experiences of some communities with otherwise limiting opportunity structures. Where provided via schools, using school facilities and staff, these opportunities also offer added avenues for student engagement and educational achievement, and positive feelings of school belonging developed through relationships and connections. Sport and team games in particular have been found to be beneficial for fostering school inclusion for disadvantaged children (European Commission, 2021).

There are many benefits to providing engagement and enrichment activities through schools, particularly for children experiencing disadvantage, including:

- Removing barriers to access for students and parents, particularly as transport is not required and children can participate without relying on parents who might have work commitments or be experiencing challenges that make regular participation challenging, such as mental health concerns (Callanan et al., 2016; Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson 2014)

- Fostering positive attitudes towards school and opportunities for positive relationships with the teachers running activities (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson 2014)

- A cost-effective site for running activities that takes advantage of available school resources, maximising public capital investments.

- School staff can be trained for involvement in activities, building skills, relationships and sustainability for programs (Mears & Jago, 2016).

The most considerable benefit of school-based extracurricular activities is for student engagement, school relationships and belonging which have been shown to improve school engagement and educational outcomes. Effective student engagement is key to:

> 66
>
> **'For most children from disadvantaged backgrounds, school-based extracurricular programmes provide the best, if not the only, opportunity for ECA participation."**
>
> (European Commission, 2021, p.10)

- Achieving, maintaining and improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged students (Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre 2017; Marzano 2013).

- Closing the achievement gap for disadvantaged students (Ministerial Council on Education 2008; Marzano 2013).

- Promoting the health and wellbeing in adolescence, through strong peer, family and neighbourhood connections (Viner et al., 2012).

- Building strong relationships and connections within the local and broader community, supporting student's success beyond the school environment (Pridham & Deed, 2012)

Box 2:

DOVETON'S ENGAGEMENT AND ENRICHMENT PROGRAM (DEEP)

Doveton's Engagement and Enrichment Program (DEEP) provides students with opportunities to develop skills and knowledge through extra-curricular activities. The program addresses the greatest barriers of access with participation in activities growing more than three-fold from 15 per cent of students to 50 per cent of students at Doveton college over four years.

DEEP activities are structured with clear outcomes and pathways, designed to build and foster genuine opportunities within the school, the local community and within the broader community, allowing students to build on and develop the skills required to be successful beyond the school environment.

Opportunities are provided to students through a range of activities targeting student engagement. DEEP activities run for six to 12 weeks and are offered before school, during lunchtime and after school. DEEP activities are offered over three streams:

Increase opportunities and aspirations beyond the local community

Increase:
1. Confidence in ability
2. Motivation to achieve at higher levels
3. Opportunities beyond the school environment

Provided opportunities for students to:
1. Build self esteem
2. Discover possibilities
3. Increase awarness of skills and interests

Before DEEP's introduction in 2013:

- Less than 15 per cent of students at Doveton College participated in formal programs outside of school

- Less than five per cent of students at Doveton College participated in formal performance-based activities outside of school

In 2017, in the 4th year of DEEP: Fifty-four per cent of students participated in DEEP activities.

Schools can be welcoming community spaces and particularly powerful catalysts for engagement and change. Barriers to participation can be lessened when activities are in the neighbourhoods where children and families live, when information is available in diverse languages, and activities are designed with the local cultures and community needs in mind. Actively cultivating relationships with families and the community can help in development of the right kinds of activities to bring local people together and build social capital to not only improve child development but to break cycles of disadvantage in communities.

Schools are well positioned to take a leading role in these types of initiatives. Designing schools as community hubs and leveraging the school environment and school community relationships to draw others in, creating welcoming, safe, culturally appropriate spaces for adults; as well as access services, practical supports and learning opportunities can be significant (McShane et al., 2012 and McShane & Wilson 2017). However, disadvantaged schools generally lack the resources (i.e. financial, human, infrastructural and time) to provide a wide variety and number of activities that match student interest and offer sufficient support to families to participate (Borgonovi & Pál, 2016, in European Commission, 2021). Partnerships with community organisations and investment in community capacity building can be an important contributor to sustainable provision of engagement opportunities.

GENERAL PROGRAM AND ACTIVITY DESIGN FEATURES

Evaluation research and meta-analysis have investigated facilitators and design features which lead to better engagement and outcomes (see Fredricks et al., 2019; Heckman & Sanger, 2013). Box 4 also provides a detailed list of recommendations from a recent comprehensive review and handbook for engaging disadvantaged students by Fredricks et al., (2019), drawing strongly on US-based evidence where more robust evaluations have been conducted.

Factors that drive the effectiveness and impact of engagement and enrichment programs include:

- Organised and structured activities: Planned and intentional activities that are supported by adults consider both the development needs and the interests of students, including:

  o Being responsive to developmental needs and differences within student populations, ages and genders and diverse needs. This can include embedding purposeful social and emotional learning skills or building on existing skills and capabilities, as well as providing choice and comfort to meet diverse needs and interests.

  o Providing a wide range of activities that reflect students interests and suggestions as well as stimulating new ideas, for example, pop-up play spaces, where students can try out new things, with no ongoing obligation, registration, or financial commitment.

- Offering a breadth of activities: Children and youth who participated in a mix of activities such as sporting and non-sporting activities, and those that extended beyond the activities provided at school - for example, homework clubs that also extended STEM activities, projects and/or include excursions - achieve greater benefits related to social and emotional skills development and academic motivations and outcomes. For older participants, experiences which link to real world contexts, and provide hands on learning via activities that extend on school / provide something not delivered within school, impact a broader range of child and youth development domains and help build connections to worlds of interests, skills, and social networks for participation in community life and work beyond school.

- Frequency and duration ('dose'): Greater frequency and longer durations have more impacts, and better outcomes are achieved from consistent attendance.

- Location and community involvement: Activities held in the community where children and young people live reduce barriers to entry (transport cost etc) and yield benefits for community connectedness and belonging, including developing positive relationships with adults and peers:

  - Providing extra-curricular activities at school is convenient for parents and students and a more trusted environment, further builds positive relationships with school.

  - Particularly for adolescents, being with peers and non-familial adults matters - programs that build on their 'need for relatedness' and offer opportunities to develop these relationships have the best chance to attract and retain older participants.

  - Partnering with other community groups fosters resource sharing and expansion of social connections.

- Co-design: Working with young people to scope and design programs. Research on engaging young people in sporting programs highlights the value of co-design for building confidence and comfort in participating and be responsive to the needs and contexts of young people (O'Reilly et al., 2022; Recreation Aotearoa, 2020).

- Staff capability: Program quality improves with improved quality of staffing. Actively hiring staff from local neighbourhoods and investing in staff development and training is more effective than relying on staff from outside the local area who are less familiar with local cultures and challenges (see LA's Best for example). Staff from outside the area are also less likely to remain consistent and available in sustainable ways compared to local staff and developing relationships with staff over time is a key factor in ongoing participation (Hirsh, 2005). Also including skilled teaching staff builds positive relationships between students and teachers and improves student attitudes towards school, increasing engagement and participation in schooling.

Box 3:

LA'S BEST – PROGRAM FEATURES INCLUDE QUALITY STAFFING; STUDENT AND COMMUNITY NEEDS; AND EVALUATION AND RESEARCH:

LA's Best, a nationally recognised after-school program that serves low-income students, offers an example of how to create engaging and high-quality after-school programming. The program has made a large investment in staff recruitment and training. In order to reflect the ethnicity and daily experiences of students in program, they actively hire staff from local neighbourhoods. Staff members at each site receive training on how to deliver engaging activities. The program also has a deep commitment to supporting youth's needs and interests and monitoring program quality and implementation through planning, assessment, and collaboration (Heckman & Sanger, 2013). Program evaluations show that students attending LA's Best programs have more positive attitudes toward school, higher engagement, attendance, and achievement, and a lower likelihood of dropping out of school as of their participation (Huang et al., 2005, 2008).

(Fredricks et al., 2019)

- **Student agency, leadership, and involvement**: Children and youth agency and ongoing involvement is important as opportunities to make meaningful decisions related to activities and routines lead to higher ownership, belonging and engagement (Fredricks, Bohnert, & Burdette, 2014). Programs need to strike a balance, particularly for adolescents, between structured activities supporting competence, autonomy, and interpersonal skills, and unstructured activities in which youth can 'simply relax and hang out with their friends' (Gillard & Wilt, 2008, in Fredricks et al., 2019). Peers are a key reason why youth both join and decide to stay in activities and after-school programs (Fredricks et al., 2002; Hirsch, 2005). Meaningfully involving students in the design of activities offered, and enabling students to lead extra-curricular activities, develops student's leadership skills and encourages multi-age connections across the school community.

- **Evaluation, monitoring and planning**: A focus on continuous improvement leads to more effective programs – for example, embedding evaluation processes, monitor trends and using these to inform planning, and taking opportunities to test, pilot and refine activities. Community based programs which balance implementation fidelity of proven after school activities with innovation and student and community lead refinements and new ideas. See also the companion evidence paper *The Glue* on the nature of evaluation and research functions

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS IN ORGANISED AFTER-SCHOOL ACTIVITIES FROM THE HANDBOOK OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT INTERVENTIONS – WORKING WITH DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

Recruiting and retaining participants

- Make programs more accessible by reducing cost, offering scholarships, and providing transportation

- Diversify recruitment by reaching out to communities that are not as familiar with the benefits of organised after-school activities

- Utilise peer networks to help recruit youth and have group-based projects to help retain youth

- Design activities that are culturally relevant, meaningful, and address issues youth feel are important

- Cultivate a supportive program culture that celebrates diversity

- Collect data on student engagement and program quality and use this data to allocate resources and inform program design

- Use evidence-based practice to sustain or improve program quality

- Establish policies that honour youth and their families' culture (e.g., inclusive language policies)

- Cultivate family school community partnerships.

Engagement

- Offer a variety of developmentally appropriate, stimulating, and challenging experiences to complement rather than merely extend what students learn in school

- Tailor activities to fit personalized need, that is, "meet the students at where they are" to foster competence and autonomy

- Place youth voice at the centre of programming by giving youth opportunities to provide input on program content and operations

- Hire culturally responsive staff who reflect the diversity of participants

- Train staff on how to create engaging activities, build high-quality relationships, as well as bridge differences and address challenging situations

- Retain high-quality staff by offering professional development, networks, and other resources

- Provide stable and safe space for students to build relationship and trust with supportive adults and peers

- Structure activities to foster sense of community and that what youth do in the program matters to them and their community

- Support youth's existing friendship and encourage formation of new connections to promote sense of relatedness.

(Table 16.1, Fredricks et al., 2019, p. 238)

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