

Closing the attainment gap: Children need a place to excel and thrive

August 23 2019, by David Glynn-Percy



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Recent statistics from The Education Policy Institute suggest [it will take another 100 years](#) to bridge the academic attainment gap between rich and poorer students in the UK. And [according to the Sutton Trust](#), eight elite schools sent as many pupils to Oxbridge between 2015 and 2018 as three-quarters of all the state schools in the country.

The Department of Education claims [teaching "character" to poorer](#)

[pupils](#) will help to raise their academic standards—as though somehow students from more disadvantaged backgrounds lack "grit," "perseverance" and "resilience." There is no research to support this argument. Poorer students [lack opportunities, not character](#).

My research suggests an [alternative route](#)—a route which begins in [primary school](#), through extra-curricular activities. The benefits obtained by [children](#) and young people who participate in these activities are [well documented](#). Benefits include greater self-esteem, resilience and a chance to make new friends. Extra-curricular activities have also been shown to [boost grades](#).

But [studies show](#) that disadvantaged children are less likely to participate in these groups. And beyond the age of 11, participation in them diminishes for all pupils. By this age, a child who has never participated in extra-curricular activities never will. So early introduction and positive experiences are key to sustaining participation.

I wanted to discover what triggers and sustains extra-curricular activities for children in primary school and what the benefits were of this sustained participation. To do this, I documented 20 stories of disadvantaged Free School Meal children who were judged by their school to be facing significant adversity in their lives, between the ages of nine and 11, who had never engaged in extra-curricular activities before.

Competition and feedback

The first notable discovery was that 16 of the 20 stories featured a disadvantaged child being invited or selected to participate, rather than choosing to do so out of their own volition. Eight of the schools incorporated their activities into the school day—usually at lunchtime—in order to be available for those children who never

habitually remain for after-school clubs when historically most of these activities occur.

Other notable findings were that each club in my research was structured by competition or projects. Many of the extra-curricular activities I studied—for example, debating, football, art and running clubs—competed against other schools and gave the children an opportunity to represent their school. Improving competence was important to compete successfully. My research revealed not only the importance of feedback from the adult structuring the activity, but equally the importance of the feedback received from other children, which really enhanced their enjoyment of the experience and raised their competency levels.

In many cases, within six months of starting the activity, the children featured had developed into an ambassador for it and were encouraging and initiating new members. Seven of the 20 children had better school attendance after participating and a quarter of the children improved academically in class.

Six of the children subsequently chose to participate in other extra-curricular activities. Four children had immediate improvement in their academic work. Nineteen of the 20 children were perceived by their school to be more resilient and confident as a result of participating.

Educational implications

It is clear from this research that many children do not always habitually chose to participate in activities. So activity provision is not enough. A helping hand to guide a child to participate is required. It isn't "character education" that poor and disadvantaged pupils require, but pathways to positive experiences to succeed and feel valued.

Extra-curricular activities provide a rich vein of positive experiences which may be particularly significant for children struggling to succeed in the classroom.

The findings also illustrate that success breeds success. Once a child has experienced achievement in one domain, there is a tendency for it to spread into other areas of school life. Extra-curricular activities may provide a valuable catalyst for schools to bolster a child's sense of identity and belonging in the [school](#), offering them a meaningful experience that allows them to excel and thrive.

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