

# Benefits of extracurricular activities for children

A focus on social inclusion and  
children from disadvantaged  
and vulnerable backgrounds





## Policy context

This research note was prepared as part of the European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC)<sup>1</sup>. Established in 2013, EPIC monitors key and innovative developments in child and family policy across the European Union (EU). The platform hosts resources to support Member States in the implementation of the 2013 European Commission Recommendation, 'Investing in children: breaking the

cycle of disadvantage' (European Commission, 2013). The Recommendation's overarching objective is 'combating child poverty and social exclusion and promoting child well-being'. It consists of three main pillars, namely: (i) access to adequate resources, (ii) access to affordable quality services, and (iii) children's access to participate.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the European Platform for Investing in Children, please see European Commission (2021).

# 1. Introduction/Summary

Events organised outside of the regular school day, otherwise known as extracurricular activities (ECAs)<sup>2</sup>, are seen by many as a way to enable children to become active citizens in their community and develop soft skills such as self-esteem and resilience (Parveva et al., 2018). ECAs can be wide-ranging and incorporate many different types of activities that are offered in addition to the mandated curriculum. Examples include sports clubs, youth clubs, music clubs (learning to play a musical instrument and playing in an orchestra/band), education-based groups (tutorials based on school subjects) and other out-of-school activities such as volunteering and Scouts and Guides (Donnelly et al., 2019). They can be offered by a range of different providers including schools, local councils and voluntary groups and can be based in both schools and other settings (youth centres, leisure centres, parks, libraries).

At present, research on the specific benefits of ECAs for children is fragmented and there are no comprehensive overviews of the existing research. This is perhaps confounded by the fact that ECAs are not a well-defined concept (Bartkus et al., 2012). Given the potential for ECAs to foster social inclusion<sup>3</sup>, it is also surprising that no reviews have explored the extent to which ECAs support social inclusion, or how to best offer ECAs to support disadvantaged and vulnerable children to attend and participate in ECAs across the EU.

## 1.1. Aims of this Research Note

The aim of this research note is to help inform policymakers and other stakeholders about the benefits ECAs can have for children, including on social inclusion outcomes, as well as ways to improve access for disadvantaged and vulnerable children to these activities.

Accordingly, the objective of this research note is to summarise the existing evidence-base on the following three questions:

1. What are the benefits of extracurricular activities for children?
2. To what extent can extracurricular activities improve or support social inclusion for children?
3. How can providers best support disadvantaged and vulnerable children to access extracurricular activities?

We summarise evidence from 34 studies, identified through a targeted search of academic and grey literature. The Annex presents a description of the search methodology

and the criteria that were used to decide whether a source should be included or excluded in the review.

## 1.2. Definition of extracurricular activities

The concept of ECAs is ill-defined and no widely accepted definition has been established in the literature (Bartkus et al., 2012). Loosely, ECAs are ‘a range of activities organised outside of the regular school day, curriculum or course intended to meet learners’ interests’ (UNESCO, 2021). Some researchers, however, have attempted to group certain activity types together, in order to better classify ECAs. As highlighted by Fredricks and Eccles (2006a), until the early 2000s, many studies assessed activity participation through the use of dichotomous measures (participated in any type of ECA, or not), and either aggregated all ECAs together (e.g. considering music, volunteering and sport as one type of ECA), or selected single ECAs (e.g. afterschool football club) in their analyses. Doing so can lead to measurement issues as it does not allow researchers to understand the effectiveness of ECAs by the degree of involvement, different activity types, or the number of different activities participated in.

Since then, some researchers have taken a more nuanced view of activity participation and have looked at differences in the impact of ECAs by activity type (e.g. Eccles & Barber, 1999; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006b; Hansen et al., 2003). For example, Eccles et al. (2003) classifies ECAs into five groups:

-  prosocial activities (volunteer and community service types of activities)
-  performance activities (e.g. school band, drama, dance)
-  sports
-  school involvement (e.g. student government, school newspaper)
-  academic clubs (e.g. mathematics or chess clubs, science fair or tutoring in academic subjects).

2 ECA is used for the singular term: extracurricular activity.

3 See section 2.3.



### **1.3. Methodology**

This research note summarises evidence identified through a targeted search of the academic and grey literature on the benefits of ECAs, their impact on social inclusion and for disadvantaged and vulnerable children in particular. A search protocol was created by researchers with relevant search terms, databases and inclusion and exclusion criteria. This is explained in more detail in the Annex. A total of 34 sources were included in this review.

### **1.4. Structure of this Research Note**

Section 2 discusses the main findings from the review. The section begins with an overview of the included evidence. After that, the discussion of the evidence is structured according to the three main research questions (as laid out in Section 1.1). Section 3 summarises the findings.

## 2. Discussion of Findings

This section presents the key findings from this targeted review. An overview is provided below, before each question of interest is explored in more depth. Studies touched upon a wide range of ECA types, covered children of many ages and used a variety of methodologies. The studies also come from a variety of countries, EU and non-EU. This section presents an overview of the relatively sparse evidence base.

### 2.1. Overview of reviewed evidence

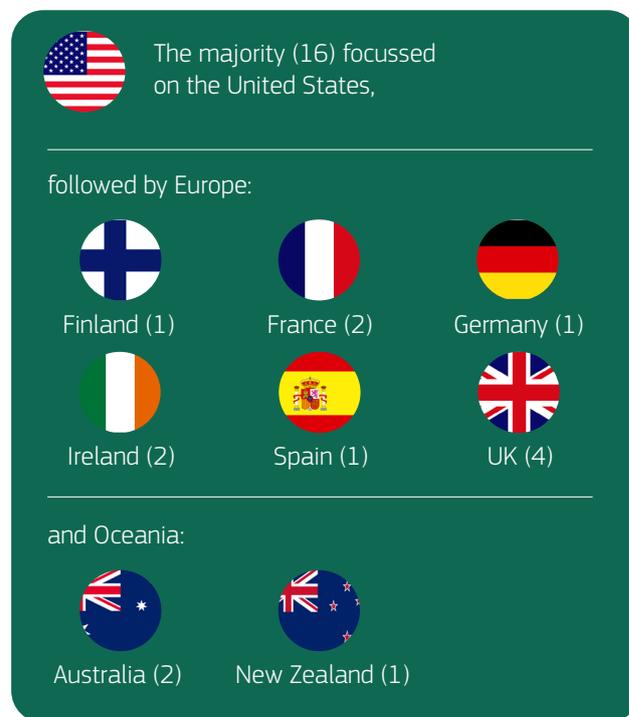
In total, 34 sources were extracted and included in the review.

- 14 sources** were deemed to be relevant to the first question (benefits of ECAs)
- 7 sources** were relevant to the second question (impact on social inclusion)
- 17 sources** were relevant to the third question (access to ECAs for disadvantaged and vulnerable children).<sup>4</sup>

26 studies were published in peer-reviewed journals and 8 were detailed in non-peer reviewed literature (e.g. United Nations (UN) and Office for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports and a university thesis). The reviewed sources covered a wide range of ECA types, including academic, sports and arts activities, as well as social groups for certain groups of children (e.g. Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs)). Of all the studies, 28 were general reviews of ECAs that did not focus on any one activity type, while the remaining 6 studies explored specific ECA interventions/cases. The sources covered children from as young as 5 up to 18 years old. The studies that are included in this review primarily used quantitative approaches to analyse survey data (used in 23 studies). This largely involved analysing large-scale survey responses in order to uncover a statistical relationship between ECA participation and child outcomes. Other methods included systematic review (used in 5 studies), narrative review (used in 5 studies) and interviews (used in 1 study).

Initial searches prioritised EU Member States, but the search was expanded to other OECD countries after it was identified that relatively few studies had been conducted in the EU. Sources covered interventions that

had been implemented in a range of different countries.<sup>5</sup> 6 studies did not focus on data from one single country,



instead adopting a more international review of evidence. Including research from non-EU countries improves our understanding of how ECAs may impact on a range of outcomes. Equally, however, the fact that studies come from different cultural and educational contexts means that findings are potentially less transferable to EU contexts. In the text we have noted where findings derive from non-European studies for transparency. As such, this note provides a general overview of the available evidence of ECAs and their impact on outcomes.

On balance, the evidence suggests that ECAs can benefit children in a range of different ways, including social inclusion outcomes (e.g. school involvement, socialisation, sense of community, teamwork and social responsibility). The evidence also suggests that disadvantaged and vulnerable children do face increased barriers to accessing ECAs and the literature suggests a range of possible ways to address this. The studies, however, also highlight some evidence gaps. In the subsequent sections, we outline the main findings pertinent to our three main research questions. The key findings and evidence gaps are summarised in Table 1.

<sup>4</sup> Please note, this does not add up to 34 as some sources were relevant to more than one research question.

<sup>5</sup> Please note, this does not add up to 34 as some sources covered more than one country or did not focus on selected countries.

**Table 1 Summary of evidence**

 <p>What are the benefits of ECAs for children?</p>	 <p>To what extent can ECAs improve or support social inclusion for children?</p>	 <p>How can providers best support disadvantaged and vulnerable children to access ECAs?</p>
<p><b>Main findings</b></p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ECAs have a range of benefits for pupils, grouped into three main categories:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- academic achievement</li> <li>- social and emotional skills</li> <li>- behavioural outcomes</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Participating in more than one type of ECA is associated with especially positive outcomes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ECAs can improve outcomes related to social inclusion</li> <li>• ECAs can improve peer relationships</li> <li>• ECAs can improve school affiliation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disadvantaged children face extra barriers to accessing and participating in ECAs</li> <li>• Disadvantaged children may be more likely to benefit from ECA participation</li> <li>• School-based ECAs are important, as these are easier to access for some children than non-school based ECAs</li> <li>• Creating safer school climates, teacher education, understanding children's ECA preferences and creating inclusive ECAs can all encourage greater participation</li> </ul>
<p><b>Uncertainties and evidence gaps</b></p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of longitudinal studies assessing the impact over time</li> <li>• Lack of research on the impact of ECA participation duration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of research looking specifically at the relationship between ECAs and social inclusion</li> <li>• Most studies look at individual aspects of social inclusion as opposed to a composite measure across a number of dimensions of social inclusion</li> <li>• Social inclusion benefits should be analysed with respect to specific ECA characteristics</li> <li>• Social inclusion benefits should be analysed with respect to student characteristics (gender, ethnicity, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Further research is needed to understand the interplay between different minority groups and ECAs</li> <li>• More causal inference needed on the relationship between disadvantaged/ vulnerable children and ECA participation</li> </ul>



## 2.2. What are the benefits of extracurricular activities for children?

Overall, research suggests that ECAs have a range of benefits for pupils. As the literature covered by this review focuses on three broad outcomes (i.e. academic achievement, social and emotional skills and behavioural outcomes), this section will be divided accordingly.

### 2.2.1. Academic achievement

The benefits of ECAs on academic achievement are the most researched out of all three outcomes. On balance, the **ECAs associated with the best academic outcomes are academic ECAs** (e.g. debate club, maths club, language clubs or student newspaper). Academic grades are linked with participation in academic ECAs in France and the United States (Coulangeon, 2018; Neely & Vaquera, 2017). Non-academic ECAs, however, have also been linked with higher adaptive behaviour, academic grades and academic working skills (Metsäpelto & Pulkkinen, 2012). Yet, based on the sources we reviewed, there is little evidence that ECAs based on sports have an impact on academic achievement. In the United States, ECAs focusing on academic work, music or arts lead to better grades and academic motivation compared to ECAs focusing on sports (Fredricks & Eccles, 2008).

The negative consequences of too much participation in ECAs have also been a focus for study. The implication being that too much time spent on ECAs would distract from spending time on pupils' studies. Yet, **no negative effects of ECA participation on higher education enrolment** (i.e. university or college in the U.S.) was found (Gibbs et al., 2015). This same study also suggests that academic ECAs had the highest positive impact on higher education enrolment.

### 2.2.2. Social and emotional skills

Alongside the development of pupils' academic achievement, many studies have focused on exploring the impact on pupils' soft skills (e.g. social, emotional and behavioural skills). Research has linked ECAs to positive social skills, emotional development and peer relations (Christison, 2013; Heath et al., 2018). In the United States, ECAs in general have also been found to have helped pupils **increase levels of self-esteem and positive behaviour** (Durlak et al., 2010). Pupils also reported higher levels of communication skills, empathy, self-confidence, resilience and happiness at the end of the ECAs. More specifically, the

level of growth in self-esteem increased regardless of the ECA type (i.e. sport-based, music-based or academic-based; Neely & Vaquera, 2017). In New Zealand, pupils who took part in **a combination of sports and non-sports ECAs showed the highest levels of social support<sup>6</sup> and well-being compared to all other pupils** regardless of ethnicity (O'Connor & Jose, 2012).

There is conflicting evidence however, on the effect of ECAs on social and emotional skills based on ethnicity. Some research suggests that ethnicity may be a key factor moderating social and emotional outcomes with some studies showing lower benefits for minorities in the United States (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005), while others show increased benefits for minorities in New Zealand (O'Connor & Jose, 2012). A potential theory for these relationships is that involvement in ECAs involving arts or music 'may affirm and enrich a sense of ethnic identity' (O'Connor & Jose, 2012, p.5), thus potentially increasing social emotional well-being by offering a culturally relevant ECA.

### 2.2.3. Behavioural outcomes

Research has also shown beneficial outcomes of participation in ECAs for internalising (e.g. anxiety or withdrawal) and externalising behaviours (e.g. impulsivity & aggressiveness). **In general, ECAs were linked with better behavioural outcomes** for both boys and girls, based on parents and teacher ratings (Im et al., 2016). More specifically, for boys, sports ECAs were associated with less problematic relationships with peers. For girls, non-sports ECAs were linked with better peer relations, self-management and social competence. ECAs have also been linked with lower internalising behaviour (Metsäpelto & Pulkkinen, 2012).

### 2.2.4. How are these benefits interlinked?

It is important to note that **social, behavioural and academic outcomes are considered interlinked** by many. Bradley and Conway (2016) argue that the social and behavioural benefits of ECAs promote positive academic achievement. In other words, even if non-academic ECAs such as sport, music, or arts might not directly influence academic achievement, the benefits gained from these ECAs have the potential to indirectly change academic performance. Bradley and Conway stress that increases in self-esteem, social capital,<sup>7</sup> and low rates of internalising and externalising behaviour foster educational outcomes. Supporting research, however, on the indirect pathways leading to ECA benefits is lacking. Therefore, the mechanisms of these pathways are not yet clear.

6 Social support was measured using the Social Provisions Scale (Cutrona & Russell, 1987). The scale measures reliable alliance (e.g. 'There are people I can depend on to help me if I really need it'), reassurance of worth (e.g. 'There is someone I can talk to about important decisions in my life') and attachment (e.g. 'There are people in my life who I am close to').

7 Social capital is the concept that the relationships, shared values and understandings between individuals in a society enable people to trust each other and work together (Keeley, 2007).



### 2.2.5. Evidence gaps

There are methodological limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the results above. Specifically, much of the research measures outcomes at the end of participation in ECAs. Despite this, an argument could be made that **pupils with high academic achievement, social skills or positive behavioural outcomes are more likely to take part in ECAs**. Without baseline measurement of pupils' starting point, the extent to which findings can be applied to a universal population of pupils is uncertain. The majority of studies also examined ECAs through a cross-sectional design without any long-term follow-ups or control groups. Overall, these limitations make it difficult to understand the long-term consequences of participating in ECAs. With regards the lasting benefits of ECAs, **research on exposure to and quality of exposure is lacking** (Im et al., 2016). Much is still unknown about how long pupils need to participate in ECAs before benefits appear and whether certain benefits last longer than others after participating in ECAs.

Overall, there are many types of ECAs and this makes it difficult to untangle which benefits are linked to which types of ECAs. That being said, there is consistency across these studies indicating **positive academic, social, and emotional benefits of ECAs**. Even when looking at different age groups, nationalities and gender, positive benefits are supported. Although effects vary slightly depending on the context and the country, they all suggest positive benefits of ECAs.



### 2.3. To what extent can extracurricular activities improve/support social inclusion for children?

In a step towards increasing quality of life for children, a main point of focus is social inclusion. The UN defines social inclusion as **'the process of improving the terms of participation in society, particularly for people who are disadvantaged, through enhancing opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights'** (UN, 2016, p. 17). Overall, research has related high rates of social inclusion to high quality of life in adulthood including decreased feelings of loneliness, increased self-esteem, as well as improved physical and mental health (Leigh-Hunt et al., 2017). Research on ECAs focuses on certain aspects of social inclusion (e.g. a psychological sense of school membership or community involvement) or related concepts (e.g. prosocial behaviour, such as helping or co-operating with other pupils, or antisocial behaviour such as bullying). As such, these results can be generalised to a certain extent to the wider definition of social inclusion. Overall, research shows that there are some **positive associations between ECAs and social inclusion**. Yet, this relationship has not yet been researched extensively. A reason for this might be due to the difficulty in defining social inclusion, which in turn leads to difficulties in measurement. Hence, it is difficult to understand the granular details of specific ECAs, which could help improve a pupil's social inclusion regarding school, community and friends.

### 2.3.1. ECAs and feelings of school affiliation

**Afterschool ECAs have been linked to an increased perception of school bonding** in the United States (Durlak et al., 2010). More specifically, pupils felt positive feelings towards the school and that school and classroom environments were supportive. This, in turn, was connected to academic achievement. Sport ECAs have also been linked with increased school membership and prosocial peer orientation in minority pupils aged 11 to 18 in the United States compared to non-sport ECAs (Villarreal & Gonzalez, 2016). This suggests that **sport ECAs might be better equipped to increase inclusion compared to non-sport ECAs** since 'sports teams typically consist of many individuals, inherently provide pupils with opportunities to participate in larger peer networks and allow members to consistently spend extended amounts of time together' (Villarreal and Gonzalez, 2016, p.208).

### 2.3.2. ECAs and peer relations

Research in the United Kingdom has shown that **participation in ECAs is associated with lower levels of bullying** (Driessens, 2015). This could be an outcome of an increase in peer socialisation or prosocial behaviour (e.g. helping or co-operating with other pupils) leading to a decrease in bullying. Yet, the study did not investigate this relationship further, nor did it differentiate between types of ECAs. ECA participation has also been linked to increased rates of peer engagement, a greater sense of the importance of community involvement (Christison, 2013) and increased levels of teamwork and social responsibility (Gorard et al., 2017).

### 2.3.3. Evidence gaps

As stated earlier, less is known about the types of activities that are more conducive to inclusion than others and, moreover, the type of inclusion this affects (i.e. peers, teachers, school, family, wider community). Here, there are several other limitations to consider. First, the role of pupils' socio-economic background and demographic characteristics (e.g. distance of home from school or parents' interest in their child's education) in determining

the impact of ECAs on social inclusion is not well known. Since there is a low number of studies researching the link between ECAs and inclusion directly, it should come as no surprise that there are no studies disaggregating the results by demographic characteristics, such as gender or ethnicity. Second, previous studies have focused on individual psychological, behavioural and academic factors to examine rates of social inclusion. People however, do not behave in a social vacuum and hence contextual factors such as family situation, geographical or financial accessibility, matter with regard to our understanding of social inclusion influences. Social inclusion is much more than academic achievement. Unfortunately, these contextual factors have not been fully explored in the studies reviewed.

To conclude, **there is limited research exploring the link between social inclusion and ECAs**, and those that exist have looked at related concepts and not social inclusion specifically. With all this taken into consideration, these general positive results leading to social inclusion may need to be investigated further. Future studies could usefully break down inclusion benefits based on demographic factors and types of ECAs.



## 2.4. How can providers best support disadvantaged and vulnerable children<sup>8</sup> to access extracurricular activities?

### 2.4.1. The benefits of ECAs for disadvantaged and vulnerable students

Although the interest in the benefits of ECAs for disadvantaged pupils has grown, research is still lacking on this topic (Heath et al., 2018). Existing research, however, suggests that **disadvantaged children may benefit more from ECA participation** than privileged children, as the link between ECAs and academic, psychological, social and behavioural outcomes has been shown to be stronger for disadvantaged children compared to their more privileged peers (Blomfield & Barber, 2010; Chanfreau et

8 According to the literature, a variety of factors are used to determine whether a child is from a disadvantaged background or from a vulnerable group in society, which may disadvantage them. Some of these factors include socio-economic status, ethnicity, immigrant status, religion, living in an urban area, gender and having a family member in receipt of some form of social welfare (Coughlan, 2014; Heath et al., 2018; Okamoto, 2013; Sauerwein et al., 2016; Schwatz, 2015). Several studies, many of them from Australia and the United States, use the term 'socio-economic status' to determine disadvantage, using factors such as education, household income and parental occupation to do so (Blomfield & Barber, 2010; Covay & Carbonaro, 2010). In studies with a focus on both Canada and the United States, income has also been used as a means in itself to determine being from a disadvantaged background (Andreassen, 2013; Browne et al., 2013; Holt et al., 2011). Other factors leading to inequalities between children have also been studied, such as sexual orientation (Poteat, 2016), disabilities (Beresford & Clarke, 2010) and migrant status (Coughlan et al., 2014). For the purposes of this note, we refer to these children as 'vulnerable' and children from a low socio-economic background (e.g. defined as low income, low education, from socio-economically disadvantaged areas, etc.) as being 'disadvantaged'. As pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and vulnerable groups can be limited in the developmental opportunities afforded to them, the identification of contexts that are both meaningful and that promote positive development is of paramount importance.

al., 2016; Heath et al., 2018). For example, schools with GSAs<sup>9</sup> report fewer mental and physical health concerns, greater overall well-being, less drug use, less truancy, and greater perceived school safety than students in schools without GSAs. In addition, Heath et al. (2018) found that ECA participation improved language development, academic engagement, social competence and behavioural issues amongst migrant children.

#### 2.4.2. ECA participation and access barriers amongst disadvantaged and vulnerable students

There seems to be consensus in the literature, regardless of the main focus of the study, that **being from a disadvantaged background is associated with lower ECA participation** (Blomfield & Barber, 2010; Coughlan et al., 2014; Covay & Carbonaro, 2010; Eisman et al., 2018; Heath et al., 2018; Okamoto et al., 2013; Sauerwein et al., 2016; Schwatz et al., 2015).

There are likely to be large differences between schools in terms of offering ECAs that match student interests and offer sufficient support to families that enables students to participate (Borgonovi & Pál, 2016). This is because schools need financial, human, infrastructural and time resources in order to provide ECAs. Therefore, ECAs are more frequently offered in advantaged schools that have access to more and better resources compared to more disadvantaged schools, as explained by Snellman et al. (2015) in the context of the United States. Moreover, **for most children from disadvantaged backgrounds, school-based extracurricular programmes provide the best, if not the only, opportunity for ECA participation** as they are more easily accessible in terms of location and cost (Chanfreau et al., 2016; Holt et al., 2012). Indeed, young people from better-off families are much more likely to engage in a range of activities out of school – including music and sport. The main reasons behind the disparities seem to be cost barriers, physical access difficulties and a fear of not fitting in (Donnelly et al., 2019). Hence, schools with a high proportion of students from a low socio-economic background may not be able to afford to provide a sufficient range of ECAs, and the children are less likely to access ECAs outside of school. Thus, **disadvantaged children have less opportunity to participate in ECAs.**

Evidence suggests that participation in ECAs varies by activity type, minority grouping, the socio-economic status (SES) of the child, the proportion of children at a school from a low-SES<sup>10</sup> and time. Children from low-SES groups

tend to be more involved in sport activities, while children from high-SES families tend to take part in more culturally oriented activities (Blomfield & Barber, 2010; Sauerwein et al., 2016). There also seem to be different mechanisms at work in schools depending on their SES status. In low-SES schools, children from immigrant backgrounds participate significantly less in ECAs compared to other students. In high-SES schools, however, they participate almost as much. Moreover, as the proportion of students from an immigrant background rises in high-SES schools, ECA participation increases. The pattern is the opposite in low-SES schools; ECA participation among students from an immigrant background in the United States declines as the proportion of students from an immigrant background increases (Okamoto et al. 2013). Further, Coughlan et al. (2014) found evidence that participation rates for children from immigrant backgrounds increased with the length of time that the child has been residing in the country. Hence, **students from immigrant backgrounds are less likely to participate in ECAs, but this effect diminishes over time and in schools where a larger proportion of the children are from immigrant backgrounds.** In addition, there is evidence that ECA participation rates differ according to ethnicity (Covay & Carbonaro, 2010), gender (Eisman et al., 2018; Heath et al., 2018)<sup>11</sup> and geographical area studied. According to a study based in Ireland, religious minority (i.e. non-Roman Catholic) children participate significantly less in sporting activities but slightly more in community-based activities (Coughlan et al., 2014).

#### 2.4.3. Improving access for disadvantaged and vulnerable children

Given the potential benefits discussed above, offering all children the opportunity to access ECAs, **especially ECAs provided at school**, could improve child outcomes (Chanfreau et al., 2016). For many disadvantaged children, schools are the most convenient location for children to access ECAs (e.g. there are no transport costs, ECAs are less likely to be provided in more impoverished communities) so the **supply of school based ECAs could be expanded** (Donnelly et al., 2019). Further, if policymakers wish to improve ECA access, a possible solution is to ensure that these types of activities are affordable for children regardless of their socio-economic background (Covay & Carbonaro, 2010). Children from low socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to be able to afford to pay for ECAs, hence, expanding the availability of low-cost or free ECAs could encourage uptake amongst disadvantaged students.

9 Gay-Straight Alliances, also known as Gender and Sexuality Alliances, are school-sponsored programmes and groups that provide a setting for LGBTQ students and their allies to receive support, socialise with one another, learn about LGBTQ issues, and advocate for equity and justice in schools (Poteat 2016).

10 Schools with a high proportion of children from a low SES are referred to as 'low-SES' schools and those with a low proportion of students from a low SES are referred to as 'high-SES' schools.

11 These studies all focus on the United States.



Policymakers could also consider the specific needs of the targeted groups of children, as well as broader needs associated with the geographical location (Andreassen, 2013; Chanfreau et al., 2016). This is of particular importance given the fact that participating in ECAs can provide developmental experiences that disadvantaged children may not be able to access elsewhere (Blomfield & Barber, 2010). Indeed, elaborating effective policies to best support disadvantaged children to access ECAs may require many types of **interventions in numerous geographical areas** (Covay & Carbonaro, 2010).

**Encouraging disadvantaged and vulnerable children to participate more in ECAs** has also been mentioned as a potential means of improving participation in ECAs, mainly in studies with a focus on the United States (Eisman et al., 2018; Schwartz et al., 2015). This could be done by making students feel safer in the school environment or by tailoring ECAs to pupils' interests. Furthermore, policies **creating a safer school climate for vulnerable children may encourage them to get involved in ECAs**. This could be done via teacher education and training. According to Poteat (2016, p.14), GSAs should be supported with 'efforts linked to safer school climates and student well-being, such as adopting anti-bullying policies that specify protection on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity or expression, ensuring the representation of LGBTQ individuals and issues within standard course curricula, and hosting in-service trainings for teachers and staff on LGBTQ-related issues'.

Policies could also aim to develop **specialised ECAs for children who cannot access usual ECAs and raise awareness among teachers**. Beresford and Clarke (2010) focus on ECA access for disabled children and mention several measures that could help in supporting them. For instance, teachers' skills and knowledge could be reinforced through training in order to make them work

proactively with disabled children (interpreting behaviours, supporting and facilitating friendships between disabled and non-disabled children, as well as providing, fostering or modifying activities in which all children can participate). Teaching material and support may also be re-considered to make them more inclusive. The physical environment could also be adjusted, if necessary, to grant access to all children.

#### 2.4.4. Evidence gaps

As pupils can belong to more than one vulnerable/disadvantaged grouping, further research is needed to understand how the interaction of these different groupings can influence children's engagement with ECAs (Okamoto et al., 2013). Furthermore, while some patterns have been identified regarding the relationship between ECAs and disadvantaged and vulnerable children in the literature, there remains a need to investigate the causal pathways to build concrete policy recommendations (Coughlan et al., 2014; Schwartz et al., 2015).

In order to prevent ECAs from playing a role in perpetuating socio-economic inequalities and limiting chances for social mobility (Covay & Carbonaro, 2010; Donnelly et al., 2019), research is needed to understand how ECAs can reduce the gap between more-advantaged and less-advantaged students. For example, understanding different minority groups, the way their characteristics affect the different outcomes, their preferences for ECAs and the drivers of their preferences would need to be identified in order to understand how ECAs could be tailored to the specific needs of certain target groups before enacting any specific policy measures. Moreover, in aiming to address the differences between disadvantaged and more advantaged children, there is a risk of accentuating rather than attenuating them and caution should be taken in order to ascertain the nature of the differences and their drivers (Coughlan et al., 2014).



### 3. Conclusion

Participating in extracurricular activities (ECAs) can offer children numerous benefits, such as developing interpersonal competencies, and, in the long-term, higher educational achievement, better employment outcomes and better mental health (Mahoney et al., 2005). Access to and take-up of ECAs, however, is more challenging for certain groups of disadvantaged and vulnerable children, which could potentially contribute to exacerbating social and economic inequalities. Hence, making sure that all children have equal access to ECAs is important. The objective of this research note was to provide an overview of the existing evidence base by summarising the conclusions of 34 sources as they pertained to: i) whether or not participation in ECAs is beneficial for children; ii) the extent to which ECAs promote social inclusion; and iii) how disadvantaged and vulnerable children can be supported to access ECAs.

Overall, participating in ECAs, regardless of gender and ethnicity, is associated with positive outcomes. There are multiple types of ECAs and there is evidence that academic achievement is best reached by academic ECAs, such as through school curriculum based clubs (e.g. science club, maths club), while more positive emotional, social and behavioural outcomes can be achieved by a wide range of ECAs (e.g. academic, sport, arts or music), depending on the interest of the pupils. Pupils with the most positive outcomes were also those who participated in two or more ECAs of different types (e.g. academic and sport, or academic and music) and so it might be useful to encourage pupils to try a wide range of ECAs. Although authors mostly agree that ECAs are beneficial, it is also recognised that there are some important research gaps. More research should be undertaken to investigate the causal links between ECAs and outcomes, as well as how the duration of ECA participation affects outcomes. In addition, the findings were largely consistent across

research from Europe, Oceania and North America. A large proportion, however, of the evidence did come from non-EU countries, meaning there is a lack of evidence on the generalisability of these findings to the EU context.

Further, there is evidence to suggest that outcomes related to social inclusion, such as school bonding, school membership, peer pro-social orientation, bullying, peer engagement, sense of community, teamwork and social responsibility improve as a result of ECA participation.

The weight of the evidence also suggests that disadvantaged and vulnerable children may benefit more from participation in ECAs than more advantaged and less vulnerable children. Being from a disadvantaged background, however, or belonging to a vulnerable group is associated with less participation in ECAs as these children face barriers to accessing ECAs compared to their more advantaged and less vulnerable peers. Reasons for this include children not feeling like they fit in, ECAs not being offered at schools with access to fewer resources and not being able to afford to access ECAs. There are, however, ways that access could be improved. Schools with a high proportion of disadvantaged students could be helped to establish more resources to offer more ECAs. Increasing the ECAs offering at schools could support access for disadvantaged pupils, as school-based access is easier for many groups of disadvantaged children. Similarly, more could be done to better understand what works best for different groups of disadvantaged and vulnerable children, so that ECAs can be tailored to the specific needs of certain target groups, matching their interests and likely increasing uptake. School policies aimed at creating safer and more inclusive environments may encourage more children to get involved in ECAs. Teacher education and training could help them to be more sensitive to the needs and wants of certain groups of children.

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# Annex. Methodology

Information in this research note was collected by means of a targeted review that consisted of seven steps, each of which is detailed below.

## Step 1: Framing the research questions and developing the protocol

First, broad research questions were developed within the team and in conversations with the DG EMPL to help guide the search:

- Question 1: What are the benefits of extracurricular activities for children?
- Question 2: To what extent can extracurricular activities improve/support social inclusion for children?
- Question 3: How can providers best support disadvantaged and vulnerable children to access extracurricular activities?

## Step 2: Identifying relevant literature (database searching)

To ensure consistency and replicability of the information, the same search terms were used for all databases. We undertook a test search to determine which databases and

search terms returned the most relevant results. After a few different search term combinations were tried, the following string generated the most relevant sources:

- *(child\* OR youth\*) AND (“extracurricular” OR “extra-curricular” OR “extra curricular”) AND (benefit\* OR impact\* OR improve\* OR effect\* OR outcome\*) AND (“social inclusion” OR disadvantage\*)*.<sup>12</sup>

Including additional terms such as ‘after school’ and/or ‘club’ did increase the number of identified studies, but a high proportion of these were irrelevant to the topic of interest. The string presented above provided a good balance between a manageable number of studies, whilst maintaining a good degree of relevance.

Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), EBSCO and Google Scholar returned the most relevant sources. Other databases, such as the Cochrane library, were also tested, but they either returned an unwieldy number of sources, or less relevant evidence. ERIC was included as it specialises in education-related sources, and thus would be expected to return more pertinent material, particularly for school-based extracurricular activities. Google Scholar and EBSCO were also included as they search a wide variety of topic areas and journals. Results from the initial search are presented in Table 2 below.

**Table 2 Search Results**

Name of Database	Additional Filters	Number of Search Results Selected for Screening
EBSCO	Results limited to since 2000	130
ERIC	Results limited to since 2000	174
Google Scholar	Results limited to since 2000 Limited to first 100 results	100
Total number of search results to be included in screening:		404
Total results after automatic removal of duplicates:		345
Total number of sources screened:		345
Number of additional duplicates removed during screening		4
Total number of sources originally identified for review		85
Total results after refining eligibility criteria		39
Total results excluded due to lack of relevance		9
Total number of search results added through hand search:		4
<b>Total number of sources included in research note:</b>		<b>34</b>

<sup>12</sup> Some studies identified by the search string referred to certain groups of children as ‘disadvantaged’, but we chose to incorporate the word ‘vulnerable’ in the write-up as we deemed this as a more appropriate way to describe some groups of children.

### Step 3: Study selection (screening)

After conducting the search, we used an automated function in Endnote to remove any duplicates. The remaining titles and abstracts were screened against the inclusion criteria outlined below to confirm whether each source would be selected for full text review.

Inclusion criteria:

- must have been published in the last 20 years (2000-2020 inclusive) with the most recent research being prioritised;
- studies must concern people under the age of 18;
- priority will be given to studies that cover EU countries, with research from other OECD countries being consulted as needed;
- priority will be given to studies for which it is explicitly clear in the title or abstract that they are relevant to the research questions;
- sources must have been published in English.

After applying the inclusion criteria, 39 sources met the criteria and were selected for a deeper review. Upon

further reading, it became apparent that nine sources did not meet the original criteria. Sources failed to meet the original criteria largely because they concerned out-of-scope countries and/or the main focus did not align with the research questions. Accordingly, a total number of 30 sources were identified for inclusion.

### Step 4: Complementary evidence gathering (hand-search)

Upon reviewing sources identified in step 3, a number of gaps were identified. These included inclusivity issues, for example the accessibility of ECAs to disadvantaged and vulnerable children. Hand searching was used to identify four sources to be included in the review, for a total of 34 sources overall.

### Step 5: Extracting relevant data and information from the selected sources

To ensure consistency across the team when reviewing the sources to be included in the analysis, a data extraction tool was created to record information from the reviewed papers. The extraction table headers can be found in the table below:

**Table 3 Categories in data extraction template**

Data extraction category	Description
Reference number	Unique citation number given to each article
Reference	Full article reference
Include/exclude	Whether, on reviewing the full text, the article should still be included in the extraction stage
Brief summary	Abstract of the article / summary of what the study is about
Publication type	Dropdown selection: Journal article, report (grey literature), book chapter, conference proceedings, thesis, other
Methodology type	Dropdown selection: quantitative - primary data collection, quantitative - secondary data, qualitative, mixed methods, case report, narrative review, systematic review, systematic review and meta-analysis, scoping review, other
Methodology detail	Further information on the study methodology
Type of extracurricular activity	Type of activities the study is referring to (e.g. sports, arts, etc.)
Geography	Country/region the study was conducted in
Study population	Type of study participants (e.g. children under 11)
Relevant / unusual inclusion criteria	Any relevant or unusual inclusion criteria used for including article in review
Relevant to Question 1?	Yes/No
Type of benefits?	E.g. develop soft skills such as leadership/teamworking/confidence, better education outcomes, better mental health, etc.
How are benefits measured?	E.g. what were the research tools/techniques and measurement methods used to infer effectiveness (surveys, psychological assessment, statistical analysis?)
Short-term benefits	Evidence of the benefits of extracurricular activities for children in the short-term (details of immediate effects and the timeframe for these)

Data extraction category	Description
Long-term benefits	Evidence of the benefits of extracurricular activities for children in the long-term (details of long-term effects, giving details of when follow-up conducted)
Relevant to Question 2?	Yes/No
Social Inclusion definition	How is social inclusion defined? (e.g. in terms of employment outcomes, education outcomes, etc.)
How are social inclusion outcomes measured?	E.g. what were the research tools/techniques and measurement methods used to infer effectiveness (surveys, psychological assessment, statistical analysis?)
Short-term benefits?	Evidence that extracurricular activities improve/support social inclusion in the short-term (details of immediate effects and the timeframe for these)
Long-term benefits?	Evidence that extracurricular activities improve/support social inclusion in the long-term (details of long-term effects, giving details of when follow-up conducted)
Relevant to Question 3?	Yes / No
How are disadvantaged children defined?	E.g. low-income, eligible for free school meals, ethnic minorities, having a disability, etc.
How can disadvantaged children be enabled to better access extracurricular activities	Evidence/examples of how disadvantaged children can be enabled to have better access to extracurricular activities (e.g. funding, increased/more targeted offering, interventions)
Policy recommendations	Details of any policy recommendations mentioned by the study authors regarding the three research questions
Recommendations for further research?	Any recommendations from the study authors for areas for future research
Study limitations	Limitations as reported by the study authors and further limitations identified by the article reviewer
Study strengths	Strengths as reported by the study authors and further strengths identified by the article reviewer
Quality appraisal	Each article will be assessed against set quality criteria (outlined in the table below)
Overall conclusions	Summary of main findings of the study
Additional comments	Any additional notes on the article.

## Step 6: Analysis and synthesis of the evidence

Findings from the different data sources were collated and presented according to our three main research questions. The data extraction sheet enabled consistent findings to be identified and grouped together. This enabled key themes to be drawn out and synthesised in a structured approach.

## Step 7: Interpreting the findings

One approach to assessing information is to review the quality of evidence of each source by assigning a score based on the level of rigour in the methodology used to generate the evidence. While this had been planned for this project, we were unable to carry this out due to the type of research available in this area. Typically, quality of evidence is conducted on intervention studies looking at programme-specific evaluations. However, our sources largely relied on wider evidence drawn from literature

reviews and analysis of larger population survey datasets - not from specific interventions or programmes - hence, do not lend themselves to quality reviews in the same way as intervention studies. Therefore, while the evidence in this report reflects the available evidence, it should not be taken as definitive given the lack of causal studies.

In addition, there were some limitations in terms of scope of the studies we reviewed. There was a lack of specific research into how different components of ECAs benefit children. Therefore, we were largely unable to draw out what specific components of ECAs led to certain benefits. We also identified a lack of longitudinal studies missing potential longer-term benefits. Lastly, despite careful searching there is a lack of studies in the EU on ECAs, so we had to draw on sources from non-EU countries (particularly the United States), meaning that findings may not be generalisable to the EU context.

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