



Department
for Education



Extracurricular activities to develop life skills

Findings and lessons for practice

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About this paper

This paper identifies lessons for practice drawn from a process evaluation of the Essential Life Skills (ELS) Programme, conducted by Ecorys and Ipsos MORI on behalf of the Department for Education (DfE). ELS was a DfE initiative targeted particularly at disadvantaged young people, designed to enhance life skills through supporting the development of extracurricular activities. The programme was delivered across 12 Local Authorities identified as Opportunity Areas (OAs) by the Department, selected on the grounds of facing limited opportunities in respect of upwards social mobility.¹

ELS provision supported a wide range of activities, including sports, arts, debating and information technology (IT). Activities were typically delivered within term time, although they were also run during school holidays as well as being delivered in residential settings or at weekends. Provision was designed to promote the development of life skills such as teamwork and resilience.

The paper is intended to be of interest to schools and other organisations involved in developing and running similar extracurricular activities for young people. It first details the role extracurricular activities can play in developing life skills, before highlighting some of the key outcomes achieved by the ELS programme. The paper then presents lessons for practice that can help achieve such outcomes, drawn from the evaluation evidence. This includes:

- Considerations when designing extracurricular activities, including sustainability
- Recruiting children and young people to extracurricular activities and maintaining engagement.

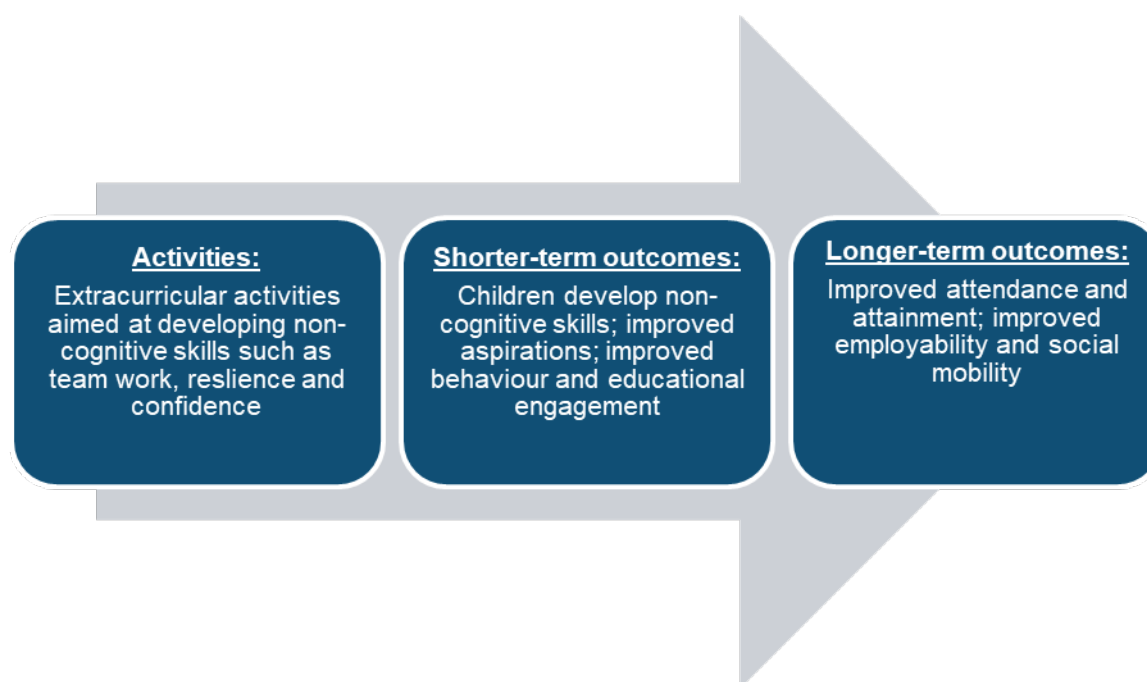
The full report can be accessed on [evaluation of the essential life skills programme](#).

¹ For more information on Opportunity Areas, see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-and-opportunity-areas>

Life skills and the role of extracurricular activities

The ELS programme was based on a growing body of evidence that links non-cognitive skills, including resilience, self-efficacy, and other emotional and social skills, with improved educational, labour market and wellbeing outcomes. Evidence suggests that extracurricular activities can play a key role in building these skills² and can benefit all pupils, including improving outcomes around attainment. However, there is evidence that wealthier children and those in private schools are more likely to access and utilise extracurricular provision relative to their less socio-economic advantaged peers.³ Designing provision to ensure children from all backgrounds are able to take part and access the benefits engagement in extracurricular activity can offer is an important consideration from this perspective. This was a specific aim of the ELS programme.

The diagram below sets out how extracurricular activities can influence longer-term educational and employment outcomes:



² Cunha, F., Heckman, J. J., & Schennach, S. M. (2010). Estimating the technology of cognitive and non-cognitive skill formation. *Econometrica*, Vol 78 (No 3), 883-931.

³ Sutton Trust (2014). 'Research Brief: Extra-curricular Inequality'

Outcomes of extracurricular activities

Reflecting on the ELS programme highlights that extracurricular activities offer a range of benefits, not just for young people but also potentially for organisations delivering them and wider communities. For young people, the programme helped to develop a range of valuable life skills, putting them in a better position to progress in education, achieve qualifications, and ultimately succeed in the labour market.

Evidence from evaluating the programme shows that extracurricular provision can promote a range of specific benefits including enhanced confidence, resilience, relationships, and social and emotional intelligence. When effectively designed and targeted, such provision can also successfully engage those from disadvantaged backgrounds, ensuring that those who historically may not have had the opportunity to participate and benefit from such participation can do so.

Insights from children and parents/carers help to evidence and illustrate the positive impact such activities can make. Part of this is around the positive effects of a regular routine and promoting commitment:

“It’s building resilience and setting them up for getting older really, sticking to it, not doing it for a week and giving up” (Grandparent).

The knock-on benefits for education are also apparent:

“I think personally it’s just made his schooling so much easier as well. Especially this year. I think he found it very difficult coming up here and going to high school” (Parent)

“...I can concentrate on things for much longer now and am not phased by the small things I was” (Child)

For many young people, engaging in such activities can be key in building confidence and independence:

“It boosts your confidence and helps improve your teamwork skills and it’s also a place that you can express yourself and relax and enjoy yourself. I went on some of the trips and it basically just gives you the opportunity to do things you wouldn’t normally. On residential we went on the high ropes and mountain biking and on the boats and it’s a place you can relax and not get judged for stuff” (Child)

“It’s the confidence she’s had in the last year, she’s come on leaps and bounds. She wouldn’t have done anything like this in the past, no way. Maybe if she’s been given a bit of a shove but you’ve got to sort of be there as well, that familiar face. So she has been to stuff before but I’d have to be there for it all” (Parent).

Outcomes for schools and other organisations involved in ELS delivery were also apparent. New partnerships were formed, as well as schools reporting that teachers were better equipped to deliver similar activities to ELS in the future.

Extracurricular provision can also be used to promote outcomes within communities, for example from running activities across different schools to promote integration and help build a sense of community.

Designing extracurricular activities

The ELS experience shows that making use of local data and knowledge, feeding in the pupil voice, adopting an approach designed to benefit from local opportunities, and thinking about how to develop a lasting legacy, can all promote success when designing extracurricular activities.

Depending on the delivery context, a range of approaches and models may be appropriate. The ELS programme highlights that designing and delivering extracurricular activities within schools, and other educational contexts, can be highly successful, but also that engaging external providers to deliver provision can work well and opens up the possibility of cross-school and collaborative activities.

Coordination of activities across clusters of schools and/or the wider community can also play an important role in highlighting local employment opportunities, where activities (e.g. IT) are designed with reference to prevalent local economic sectors and/or seek to engage employers in delivery. Where carefully designed and managed, cross-school activities can also help bring children and communities with different backgrounds together, as well as broadening young peoples' horizons.

As part of the ELS programme, many schools, colleges and external providers also sought to co-develop activities with children and young people. This can aid recruitment and engagement, as well as functioning as an extracurricular activity in itself.

From a sustainability perspective, when thinking about types of activities and their design, the ELS programme demonstrates that using programme-based funding on equipment that can be re-used (e.g. sports equipment) can help create a lasting legacy. Likewise, using such funding to upskill existing staff to deliver activities, beyond the immediate funding period, can also be highly beneficial from a legacy perspective.

Recruitment and engagement

The ELS programme highlights several factors that can help promote engagement and retention in extracurricular activities. These include a focus on engaging with, and communicating to, parents around the potential benefits of such activity, holding ‘taster’ sessions to offer young people and parents a concrete sense of what activities will involve, developing an attractive ‘extracurricular offer’ with a range and variety of activity, and focusing on addressing potential barriers to engagement.

From the perspective of schools, providers and indeed young people participating, running ELS provision highlighted that securing parental support is a key success factor. Effective communication with parents, covering what the activities will involve and the benefits of taking part, is likely to be an essential part of recruiting and engaging young people.

When engaging external providers without an existing trusted relationship with parents (e.g. where VCS organisations rather than schools are delivering activities), schools and colleges can play an important role in brokering these relationships – hence maximising recruitment and engagement. Linked to the design of extracurricular activities, the ELS experience reinforces the importance of offering a wide range of activities for young people with different interests and aptitudes. Alongside this, tailoring activities to the needs of young people being engaged, and taking account of local contexts, are also significant considerations in promoting recruitment and continued engagement.

Holding taster sessions can offer an effective way to engage young people and their families. Where activities are developed to take place in community settings, outside of schools and other educational settings, such sessions can be important in enabling parents and teachers to see activities in action and be reassured about their safety. Where resources allow, regular updates and contact with parents (e.g. via SMS and email) can further help develop a trusted relationship over the course of delivery.

Promoting engagement is also about effectively addressing barriers. The experience of engaging young people on ELS provision reinforces the importance of addressing, for some, low confidence and negative preconceptions of extracurricular activities. Specific concerns are also important to address, for example young peoples’ perceptions that they do not have the required skills to take part, or practical barriers to involvement such as cost. Again, communication can be key to overcoming these barriers. This may imply subsidising costs for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, including support with travel costs where required.



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