

# An Exploration of the Academic Supports Available to Post-Primary Students Who Participate in Extra-Curricular Activities

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## ABSTRACT

This study surrounds post-primary teachers' strategies to accommodate students who participate in extra-curricular activities (ECAs). While ECA participation is well documented, fewer studies focus on resources to facilitate learning following ECA absenteeism. Interviewing seven post-primary teachers, explored ECAs' advantages and disadvantages, scrutinised classroom withdrawal, and evaluated the strategies to support ECA absenteeism. The findings highlighted that ECAs offer students life-long skills which facilitate learning. Absenteeism was identified as the greatest challenge, directly impacting on learning and continuity for various students and subjects. School complexities were highlighted as all schools do not have ECA policies, and as a result little academic supports are available for students.



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## INTRODUCTION

The motivating factor for this study arose from the teacher's personal experience, as a student, missing class time as a result of ECA participation. Post-primary schools nationwide encourage their students to participate in ECAs, however Fahey *et al.* (2005) highlight the gap in policies surrounding such activities. The recently reformed Junior Cycle introduced Wellbeing, as a new area of learning, which resonates with ECAs. However, ECAs are still classified as the hidden curriculum, and little strategies to accommodate ECA absenteeism are published. This has created a professional interest for the researcher to gain a deeper knowledge and understanding of teacher's pedagogies towards ECA absenteeism. Semi-structured interviews were adopted to draw upon teachers' experiences with ECA absenteeism investigating the responsibility of missed content, resources to accommodate ECA classroom withdrawal, and the behaviour of students following ECA absenteeism.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

Due to the gap in the literature, qualitative research was deemed the most appropriate methodology, to acquire new knowledge (Hox and Boeiji 2005). The researcher conducted seven semi-structured interviews with post-primary teachers. Each semi-structured interview, both virtual and in person, lasted approximately 30 minutes. An interview schedule was carefully designed in accordance with the emerging research questions. This informal approach was crucial for this investigation, as it allowed for richer data to be disclosed including teachers' experiences and philosophies. Convenience purposive sampling was used to select the participants for interviews. These interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Data trustworthiness was an integral factor when conducting this research, and similarly ethical considerations were always adhered to during this study.

## FINDINGS/ RESULTS

### Post-Primary Teachers' Perceptions towards ECAs

Participants highlighted that the introduction of Wellbeing, as a new area of learning, into the Junior Cycle Framework (Honan 2016) has helped post-primary schools acknowledge the importance of ECAs. Participants highlighted that the programme is designed to "counteract" areas that may be bothering them. Participants echoed the advantages of ECAs and alluded to the transferability between ECA and academic skills, including "discipline, teamwork, responsibility, timekeeping and respect". Contrarily, participants identified classroom withdrawal as the greatest ECA challenge, as it potentially leads to a "lack of continuity in their work".

### Post-Primary Subject Areas

Various subject areas are impacted to different extents following ECA withdrawal. Geography was identified as a subject that requires little additional resources as the textbook does a "relatively good job in explaining content". However, missing Irish class leads to a negative domino effect, students miss "important aspects of the language" which "transpires into your other skills, your listening, your writing, your overall communication". Similarly for practical subjects, e.g., engineering, ECA absenteeism has a greater impact as "it is very difficult" to get project time back. Even though participants understood the impact of ECA absenteeism on their subject areas, when asked about the academic supports available to accommodate these students, participants highlighted the gap in literature pausing for thought which shows not enough emphasis surrounds this topic, "that is a good question, let me see...". Most participants acknowledged that prior to COVID-19's introduction of technology, there was "not necessarily anything in place". Some teachers took an individual approach via formative assessment and additional time.



### Post-Primary Schools' Approaches towards ECAs

The interviewees revealed the complexities of post-primary schools as each approach differed regarding ECA policies. Some schools only permitted their students to partake in "one A sport and one B sport", where other schools had no cap on the amount of ECAs which led them to "run into difficulty". The schools with no ECA policies stated that by default the onus of missed content fell on the students, however, this was not "communicated properly...it just happens". Another participant outlined that their school management place a huge emphasis on making ECA and academics "both work in tandem".

## DISCUSSION

ECAs refer to those activities that do not pertain to the scope of the formal curriculum. Schools nationwide offer their students a wide range of ECAs, however they can sometimes be seen as separate from the curriculum itself. There are numerous advantages associated with ECAs, including improving students' personal development – mentally, physically, and emotionally, by acquiring new life-long skills, and by affording the chance to achieve university scholarships. Contrarily, the disadvantages include increase in stress and pressure balancing both codes, the financial implications, and absenteeism. Classroom withdrawal is a direct consequence of ECA participation, which has a potential negative impact on students academically, physically, and mentally. A gap in the literature exists regarding how post-primary teachers accommodate students who participate in ECAs. It is crucial teachers acknowledge the importance of ECAs and academics, to ensure both codes work in tandem.

## CONCLUSIONS

The literature and participants highlighted ECAs' central role for young people, alluding to their numerous advantages. While post-primary schools and teachers encourage student participation, an evident gap exists concerning policies and academic supports to accommodate ECA absenteeism, which warrants further research. It is crucial all post-primary schools offering ECAs implement the correct policies, and similarly their teachers should ensure they have appropriate academic resources available for ECA absenteeism, so at the very least, students are availing of the same content.

## KEY REFERENCES

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