

Why Do Extracurricular Activities Prevent Dropout More Effectively in Some High Schools Than in Others? A Mixed-Method Examination of Organizational Dynamics

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Abstract

This study describes policies and practices implemented in 12 high schools (Quebec, Canada) that more or less effectively leveraged extracurricular activities (ECA) to prevent dropout among vulnerable students. Following an explanatory sequential mixed design, three school profiles (*Effective*, *Ineffective* and *Mixed*) were derived based on quantitative student-reported data. Qualitative interviews with frontline staff revealed that in *Effective* schools, ECA had a unique overarching goal: to support school engagement and perseverance among all students, including vulnerable ones. Moreover, in these schools staff had access to sufficient resources—human and material—and implemented inclusive practices. In *Ineffective* schools, ECA were used as a means to attract well-functioning students from middle-class families, and substantial resources were channeled towards these students, with few efforts to include vulnerable ones. Schools with a *Mixed* profile had both strengths and weakness. Recommendations for school-level policies that bolster ECA’s ability to support students’ perseverance are provided.

Keywords: extracurricular activities, high school dropout, school perseverance, organizational policies and practices, school-level dynamics

Why Do Extracurricular Activities Prevent Dropout More Effectively in Some High Schools Than in Others? A Mixed-Method Examination of Organizational Dynamics

Two factors are known to increase the risk of high school dropout among adolescents: poor academic functioning in the classroom, and lack of positive engagement in their schools' social life (Finn, 1989; Tinto, 1975). Dropout prevention research has mainly focused on impaired classroom functioning and deficit-oriented interventions addressing learning, behavioral or emotional disabilities (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). However, it is increasingly recognized that it is also necessary to capitalize on vulnerable students' strengths to improve their social integration and engagement in school (Brown, Corrigan, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2012; Lerner, 2017; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016; Tolan, Ross, Arkin, Godine, & Clark, 2016; Zaff et al., 2016).

In high school, extracurricular activities (ECA) can represent a key opportunity for encouraging academically vulnerable students to develop their strengths (Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, & Zarrett, 2009; Vandell, Larson, Mahoney, & Watts, 2015). To achieve this goal, vulnerable students need to participate in a sustained manner in quality ECA, broadly defined as developmentally appropriate ECA led by supportive leaders (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016; Vandell et al., 2015). Unfortunately, it is precisely these students for whom ECA represent a unique chance to achieve some measure of success in school who are the least likely to participate. So far, research has attempted to explain vulnerable students' low participation by considering individual and family factors, generally ignoring the influence of school policies and practices (Vandell et al., 2015). This gap is significant given that changes at the school-level are bound to be a key part of any solution to improve access, especially in a broad manner. Thus,

this study seeks to compare organizational practices and policies in schools that more or less successfully leverage ECA to improve vulnerable students' perseverance.

Positive Youth Development, School-Based ECA, and Vulnerable Students

The Positive Youth Development model points to some ways in which schools policies and practices may shape vulnerable youth's participation in meaningful ECA (Lerner, 2015; Lerner et al., 2017). According to this model, positive growth occurs when there is a close correspondence between the opportunities and demands in youth's immediate environment (including ECA) on the one hand, and their developmental needs and goals on the other hand (see Eccles & Roeser, 2009). As the latter are highly variable across adolescents, a given context will represent a better fit for some than for others. Because proximal contexts like schools tend to reproduce larger structural inequalities, supportive opportunities are thought to be harder to come by for disadvantaged than advantaged youth (Lerner, 2015).

High schools' policies and practices regarding ECA are likely to determine whether developmentally-appropriate school-based ECA led by qualified leaders are available, and whether vulnerable students have access to them. These two aspects are important. To illustrate, even if a school offers an ECA program with the right features for promoting positive development, this program is unlikely to reduce dropout if policies like No Pass/No Play render access tenuous for academically vulnerable students (Burnett, 2000). Under such policies, ECA programs could even backfire and feed sidelined students' feelings of disengagement. A similar effect could result from more subtle practices, for example, if ECA slots are reserved for the "talented", in effect favoring advantaged students who are more likely than more disadvantaged peers to have had prior experience in organized activities to develop their skills (Lareau, 2011). In contrast, schools could have inclusive policies aimed at increasing participation among

vulnerable students. Studies not focusing on ECA per se but on school climate generally suggest that inclusive policies fostering vulnerable students' sense that school staff care about them and value their contribution contribute to boost academic outcomes and reduce achievement and attainment gaps (Berkowitz, Moore, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2016).

However, whether and how these principles apply to ECA policies specifically remains unclear, as the organizational-levels processes thwarting or boosting schools' ability to support vulnerable students' school perseverance via ECA have received scant research attention. A few studies have looked at how basic structural characteristics such as school SES, size or location shaped the availability of school-based ECA, regardless of whether or not these activities successfully supported development (Feldman & Matjasko, 2007; Parsad & Lewis, 2009). Looking beyond structure, a few ECA-focused studies have examined organizational-level processes influencing the provision of quality experiences likely to support development. However, these studies have not considered the impact of these processes on school dropout and perseverance, and have focused on community organizations rather than schools. Despite their focus on different outcomes and different organizations, they still provide valuable clues as to broad organizational approaches that may prove relevant to the effectiveness of school-based ECA programs, at least to some extent. The findings from these studies are thus reviewed next, followed by a discussion of how they may apply similarly or differently in school contexts.

Organizational Processes at Play in Community Centers

Process-oriented studies conducted in community-based organizations have mostly examined after-school programs for elementary school children (see Mekinda & Hirsch, 2013; Vandell et al., 2015). Notable exceptions focusing on programs for adolescents include Hirsch et al.'s (2011) study conducted in three community centers serving disadvantaged youth, and

Larson and Walker's (2010) examination of 12 effective programs mostly managed by community-based organizations (see also Larson, Walker, Rusk & Diaz, 2015; Smith, Peck, Denault, Blazeovski, & Akiva, 2010). Ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews conducted with staff and youth in those studies consistently show that organizational policies and practices regarding both youth and staff influence organized activities' quality, echoing the findings of other studies conducted with younger children (Pierce, Bolt, & Vandell, 2010; Vandell et al., 2015).

Hirsch et al. (2011) observed that in centers that successfully promoted youth development, youth's needs were unequivocally the top priority. To motivate youth to participate and keep them engaged even when they struggled with problems at school or at home, the staff participated in outreach activities, and were responsive to youth's evolving needs and suggestions. In contrast, in the least effective center, an overarching implicit goal emphasizing obedience and control was often achieved at the expense of youth's needs. Similarly, Larson and Walker (2010) observed that in large, complex organizations with conflicting priorities, developmental considerations sometimes took a back seat to other organizational priorities.

Effective community centers were not only more consistently youth-oriented; they also provided their staff with more resources and support. Hirsch et al.'s (2011) observed that in effective centers, staff received more supervision and time to coordinate with their colleagues and to innovate, which helped them to provide youth with quality experiences. In contrast, in the least effective center, communication between management and staff was poor, staff turnover was high, and a climate of mistrust prevailed (see also Mekinda & Hirsch, 2013; Vandell et al., 2015). Frontline staff in Larson and Walker's (2010) study worked in generally successful centers, but some still reported a need for more resources and support, as they sometimes

operated under conditions of scarcity, and had to deal with suboptimal situations like staff cutbacks and high youth/adult ratios.

Organizational Dynamics at Play in Schools

The findings of studies focusing on community centers are likely to apply to schools to some extent, yet studies focusing specifically on schools are needed. Despite sharing the general goal of fostering positive youth development through ECA, these two types of organizations are embedded in, and regulated by, different structures, and their specific goals and priorities for ECA do not overlap perfectly. Unlike in community centers where organized activity programming is a core mission, ECA programming in high schools is an auxiliary aspect of a much larger operation with a primary mission centered on academic learning. As such, the explicit goal of school-based ECA is typically not only to foster development generally, as in community centers, but rather to specifically support academic functioning. In fact, significant school investments in recreation are often justified on the grounds that ECA have the potential to improve school engagement and reduce dropout (Ripley, 2013; Vandell et al., 2015). Accordingly, effective policies and practices for ECA programming could, to some degree, take different forms in the two types of organizations.

For example, tensions between multiple goals are likely to be disruptive in schools as in community centers; yet, such tensions are likely to arise around different issues in school contexts. Schools often operate in competitive educational markets (e.g., because of school choice programs), which is not typically the case for community centers. As a result, private and public schools sometimes use ECA as a promotional tool to attract middle-class families who tend to value these activities (Barrett DeWiele & Edgerton, 2016; Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007; Carpenter & Winters, 2015; Lareau, 2011). When this competition goal is present, enrollment

efforts for ECA may be directed primarily towards high functioning “model” students who would figure well in promotional material or local newspapers articles rather than towards their “troublesome” schoolmates who would not. In this scenario, ECA may serve to create a more positive organizational image and to attract selective families, but they are unlikely to help support school engagement and reduce dropout among vulnerable students.

Another way in which public schools differ from community centers is their formal integration into larger administrative entities like school boards and state/provincial governments. As such, compared with community centers, schools have to conform to more directives imposed from above and to deal with more administrative constraints (see Hirsch et al., 2011). To illustrate, hirings and dismissals in public schools have to abide by union rules and collective labor agreements. Within the boundaries imposed by these rules, some schools may find ways to use the system to their advantage and hire stable, highly-qualified leaders for ECA, for instance by involving school staff. In contrast, other schools may decide to hire outside part-time employees on short-term contracts, a process that offers more flexibility but that is likely to negatively influence the quality of students’ ECA experiences and, in turn, the positive developmental impact of these experiences (Bennett, 2015; Denault & Guay, 2017).

Finally, community centers can focus exclusively on creating quality activities for youth without considering those who choose not to attend the center. In contrast, schools have to address the impact of their school’s ECA program on students who do not participate in school-based ECA, as these students are still members of the larger school community and as such are exposed to, and could be influenced by, these programs. For instance, ECA can be promoted and managed in a manner that fuels students’ sense of exclusion or inclusion whether or not they participate. As previously noted, schools’ way of developing, promoting and regulating ECA can

create a school climate affecting all students' sense of belonging (Berkowitz et al., 2016; Martinez, Coker, McMahon, Cohen, & Thapa, 2016).

Objectives

The goal of this study was to examine the organizational processes facilitating or thwarting the development of school-based ECA programs capable of supporting student perseverance in Canadian high schools with high dropout rates (see Figure 1). To do so, two specific hypotheses were examined in sequence, using a mixed-method approach. First, it was expected that ECA would prevent dropout and support perseverance more effectively in some schools than in others. This hypothesis was tested by comparing within-school correlations between ECA participation and school perseverance. Second, it was expected that these differences would be rooted in organizational-level practices and policies regarding ECA. To test this hypothesis, a qualitative analysis of frontline practitioners' descriptions of their school's ECA programs was conducted, with a dual focus on themes considered important a-priori based on extant studies (e.g., coherence of ECA's objectives, administrative constraints), and on emergent themes introduced by participants during individual interviews.

General Method

The motivation for the present study emerged in the midst of another project with a different focus, conducted between 2012 and 2015 in 12 public high schools located in and around Montreal (Quebec, Canada). The goal of the initial project was to identify the proximal processes shaping adolescents' decisions to drop out of high school, in terms of both precipitating and protective factors (Dupéré, Dion, Leventhal, et al., 2018; Dupéré, Dion, Nault-Brière, et al., 2018; Dupéré et al., 2015). Among the protective factors considered, participation in school-based ECA was found to be particularly strongly associated with school perseverance

in quantitative analysis (Thouin et al., submitted). However, when school-specific results were computed in preparation of knowledge-transfer (KT) seminars organized in each school, it became obvious that the apparent protective effect of ECA varied considerably from school to school. These variations did not seem random, because during the KT seminars, school staff were not surprised by the relative strength or weakness of ECA as a mechanism of student perseverance in their schools and volunteered coherent and forceful explanations for it.

These off-the-cuff comments prompted an offshoot project whose goal was to capture in a more systematic manner the organizational practices implemented in schools that effectively leveraged ECA to boost perseverance, and in schools that did not. To do so, the first author conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with recreation coordinators in each of the 12 participating schools. The present study thus followed an explanatory sequential mixed design, in which qualitative data were collected to illuminate puzzling quantitative results (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011). To be consistent with this timeline and to improve clarity, the method and results pertaining to the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study are presented in sequence. For both phases, IRB approval and informed consent were obtained.

Phase 1: Quantitative

Method

The study design for the quantitative phase of the project has been described in detail elsewhere (Dupéré, Dion, Leventhal, et al., 2018). Accordingly, only a broad overview is presented here.

Schools. Twelve low- and moderate-income urban and rural high schools with high dropout rates ($M = 36\%$, more than twice the provincial average; MEES, 2015) participated in

the project. In Quebec, schools are considered low-income when they have a high proportion of poor families in their catchment areas (MEES, 2017). Schools are ranked based on this proportion and separated in 10 equal categories called “deciles”, with high deciles signaling more disadvantage. Most of the participating schools (8) had decile scores ≥ 8 and thus served overwhelmingly disadvantaged students, but some (4) had middle-range scores between 4 and 7 indicating mixed catchment areas with appreciable proportions of students from both low- and middle-income families.

Participants. Students at least 14 years old in the participating schools were initially screened using a validated index of dropout risk (Archambault & Janosz, 2009; Gagnon et al., 2015). Among those screened ($N = 6,773$; participation rate $> 97\%$), a subset of students was invited for individual interviews (about 45 per school, with a final $N = 545$), during which they were asked about their experiences in the past year, notably about participation in ECA. The subset targeted for the interviews comprised three distinct subgroups. Dropouts represented a first one. Schools informed the research team whenever a student dropped out, and those who consented were interviewed soon thereafter. After each interview with a recent dropout, another schoolmate with a similar background (same school, same program, same sex) and dropout risk (according to the risk index administered during the screening phase) but who persevered was interviewed, to form a second, matched comparison group. To the extent possible, matched students were also similar to dropouts in terms of age, ethnicity, immigration status, family structure, and family SES. Finally, we also interviewed “average” students with a risk for dropout that was close to their school’s average risk level. For the interviews, a participation rate of 70% was obtained, a high rate given the overrepresentation of socioeconomically disadvantaged, academically vulnerable adolescents (Dupéré et al., 2015).

Measures. During the individual interviews, *participation in ECA* was measured by asking adolescents about whether they had participated in any ECA in their school in the past 12 months. About one-third (30%) did, with a higher rate of participation among average (45%) than among vulnerable dropouts and matched at-risk students (23%).

School staff identified *high school dropouts* based on administrative data. Those who had filed an official notice of schooling termination before obtaining a diploma were considered as dropouts, as well as those who asked for a transfer to the adult sector (GED equivalent) and those who had stopped attending school for at least a month without justification.

Analysis. Previous logistic regression analyses focusing on dropouts and matched at-risk students ($n = 366$) established the presence of an independent association between youth's ECA participation and their school perseverance for the sample as a whole (Thouin et al., submitted). The goal of the present analysis was to examine how this apparent protective role varied across the 12 participating schools. Given that the study was not initially designed to answer questions about between-school variations, the sample size at the school-level was too small for sophisticated analyses (e.g., multilevel, LCA). Thus, simple Spearman correlations were computed within each school to gauge the strength of the link between youth's participation in ECA and their perseverance. Schools were separated into three groups depending on whether the correlation fell above, below or in between $\pm 0.75 SD$ from the average correlation across the 12 schools.

This admittedly crude grouping procedure demanded some form of validation beyond the general endorsement of school staff during the KT activities. Thus, comparisons based on t and χ^2 tests were used to contrast the groups on basic quantitative indicators. Some of these indicators were derived from data gathered during the youth interviews (e.g., participation

among average students), others from official provincial administrative data (e.g., school size, low-income decile; MEES, 2017), and finally some were provided by each school's recreation coordinator (e.g., proportion of ECA led by teachers *vs* outside staff, see section on Study 2 for details). Due to the small sample size, one-sided tests were used to retain adequate power.

Results

Within-school Spearman correlations between participation in ECA and school perseverance ranged between $r_s = -.28$ and $r_s = 0.40$ ($M = .11$; $SD = 0.19$), indicating that the link between youth's ECA participation and their perseverance varied considerably. Three schools had a correlation more than $0.75 SD$ above the mean, and were classified as *Effective*. In these schools, the correlation was positive, moderate in size, and statistically significant ($r_s = .33$; $p < .001$). Conversely, two schools had a correlation at least $0.75 SD$ below the mean, and were considered *Ineffective* in leveraging ECA to support perseverance. In these schools, the correlation between youth's participation and perseverance was small, *negative* and non-significant ($r_s = -.15$; $p = .12$). Finally, seven schools fell within these two extremes, and presented a *Mixed* profile. In these last schools, the correlation between youth's participation and perseverance was small but positive and marginally significant ($r_s = .09$; $p = .09$).

As shown in Table 1, the three groups of schools differed in other ways besides correlations between youth's participation and perseverance. *Ineffective* schools had a lower rate of participation in ECA than those in the two other groups. However, this difference was significant only among vulnerable students (pooled participation rate among dropouts and matched at-risk students) and not among average peers. Also, *Ineffective* schools tended to serve economically diverse students, as the proportion of low-income families in their catchment areas was close to the provincial average (with an average decile rank around 5); whereas, the schools in the other groups served more uniformly disadvantaged communities, with their catchment

areas having some of the highest proportions of poor families in the province (average decile ranks of 9). Few differences emerged between *Effective* and *Mixed* schools, although the former tended to have marginally more ($p = .06$) activities led by school staff than the latter (70% vs 43%).

While some of the observed differences were expected (e.g., a tendency towards more activities led by teachers in *Effective* schools), others were not (e.g., the relative ineffectiveness of moderate-income schools compared with low-income ones). The second qualitative phase of the study was meant to illuminate some of the reasons underlying these unexpected findings.

Phase 2: Qualitative

Method

Participants. In each of the 12 participating schools, the principal identified the staff member primarily in charge of ECA management. Then, the first author contacted these individuals to explain the project and verify whether they would agree to participate. If so, a face-to-face interview was scheduled. All of the contacted staff members (10 men, 2 women) agreed to participate. Most (7) occupied recreation coordinator positions; others managed ECA while officially occupying various positions in the school, including physical education teacher or assistant principal. They had, on average, 16 years of experience in ECA management ($SD = 11$).

Procedure. The semi-structured interviews took place in the interviewees' office, and lasted, on average, 90 minutes. They were conducted between June and September 2015 by the first author. This author was not involved in the quantitative phase of the study, and as such she did not know the status of the participating schools (*Effective*, *Mixed*, or *Ineffective*) when she

conducted the interviews. All participants consented to the audio recording of the interviews, except one. In this last case, extensive notes were taken.

The interview protocol included mainly open-ended questions about a variety of themes inspired both by the feedback provided by school staff during the KT meetings, and by research on the characteristics of organizations offering high-quality organized activities. The questions were about the vision and goals of the school regarding ECA, the strengths and weaknesses of their ECA program, the number and type of ECA offered, the financial, material and human resources available for ECA, the practices and policies implemented for promoting ECA and for enrolling or discharging students, the procedures for recruiting and supporting ECA leaders, and the interviewees' working conditions and relationships with colleagues and superiors, as well as the barriers and facilitating factors that affected their work.

Analysis. A thematic analysis was conducted based on interview transcripts (Guest et al., 2011). A cross-case comparison approach was adopted (one case = one school), with the goal of extracting the similarities and differences between the three school groups derived in the quantitative phase (Stake, 2006). To do so, the first author listened to the audio recordings and read the transcripts to have an overview of the interviews. She then selected three interviews at random to establish an initial codebook defining relevant themes and subthemes. Using this codebook, she coded all interviews with NVivo 10, adding a few new themes along the way. Once the coding was completed, she extracted the text associated with each theme and subtheme, using a matrix approach to compare the three groups of schools.

Reliability and validity were assessed via a number of strategies. The coding and interpretation processes were regularly discussed in team meetings, and every analytical decision was recorded in an audit trail. External reviews were conducted at critical junctures by one

colleague highly experienced with this type of analysis. He reviewed the codebook and portions of the coded transcripts, to make sure that the codes were applied consistently. He also reviewed excerpts from the cross-case comparisons, to verify that the interpretations faithfully reflected the content of the interviews. Following his feedback, significant adjustments were made. Also, the analysis and interpretation yielded results largely coherent with remarks voiced by school staff during KT activities, thus providing some form of ecological validation for the main findings. Finally, quotes (in free translation as the interviews were conducted in French) are provided to illustrate the main findings with concrete examples from the raw data.

Results

Five broad themes roughly aligned with the interview themes were extracted during the analysis. Three were related to larger organizational conditions, including 1) the schools' vision regarding ECA; 2) the socioeconomic status (SES) of the student body and the schools' ability to offer free/low-cost ECA; and 3) the schools' capacity to adequately support inside and outside staff managing and leading ECA. Two additional themes were related to the inclusiveness of everyday practices directly aimed at students. One concerned 4) the development, promotion and retention of students in ECA, whereas the other was related to 5) selection criteria regulating who could and could not participate. Detailed results contrasting the three groups of schools in terms of these five broad themes are presented next; also, an integrative summary is proposed in Table 2.

Organizational Conditions

1. Schools' vision regarding ECA. All the interviewees described the official goal of ECA in their school in the same general terms: to provide a diversity of quality ECA capable of

strengthening students' sense of school belonging and engagement. In *Effective* school, this goal was clearly a priority at all levels, including management as well as frontline staff.

In contrast, some interviewees working in schools with a *Mixed* or *Ineffective* profile talked about a competing objective that permeated ECA to different degrees. In these schools, ECA were also seen as a means to improve the reputation of the school and curb the flight of middle-income families to private schools. In Quebec, this issue is prominent because private high schools are subsidized at 75% and are thus widely accessible to middle-income families (Champoux-Lesage, Lapointe, Leblanc, & Provencher, 2014). In the participating schools, this secondary objective of attracting middle-income families was typically sought via the development of advanced placement programs and special magnet programs called “concentrations” that were tied to ECA (for a detailed analysis of these programs, see Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2016; Laplante, Pilote, & Doray, 2017). To illustrate, a basketball concentration program would entail both basketball practices during the regular schooling hours, and after-school participation in the school basketball team. ECA participation in the after-school hours is not necessarily mandatory for concentration students, but it is strongly encouraged, to allow them to further develop their skills and participate in regional or provincial tournaments: “All these concentrations, we find them in the extracurricular activities as well. [...] In fact, they are like our means to advertise our public school in the region.” Put another way:

The school still doesn't have a good reputation. It's a school of, well, of bums, I'd say. As the hearsay goes: “at [name of the school], there's a lot of fights, there's dope...” And now, it really isn't like that. For a long time it was, and for the last few years, since they started to put in concentrations, well, you know, all told, it helps to change the image of the school... a bit.

The interviewees did not directly mention that this second objective was at odds with the first one. It was implied however, because they acknowledged that the concentration programs,

and by extension the corresponding ECA, were typically accessible only to students who functioned well academically. During KT activities in *Ineffective* schools, special education teachers spontaneously addressed this issue: even while agreeing that there was a lot of great activities in their school, they complained that their purpose was to cater to “good” students, and that their own students, even though they were not explicitly excluded, were not encouraged to participate either, especially in popular, high profile activities (e.g., popular sports, school orchestra). In their view, this situation contributed to further marginalize vulnerable students from their more mainstream schoolmates, and to erode their sense of belonging and engagement.

2. Schools’ SES and ECA budget and costs. All the participating schools served students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and most interviewees underscored the challenges this situation posed. One interviewee indicated that some students were so poor that he spent non-trivial amounts of time finding food or school supplies for them. Thus, these students’ ability to participate in ECA was conditioned by the availability of free or low-cost activities. The availability of such activities varied considerably from school to school depending on the school’s budget and other discretionary factors. In Quebec, the lion’s share of schools’ budget comes from provincial grants (local municipal taxes have a limited role). Schools serving overwhelmingly disadvantaged student bodies get extra governmental funding, and they are also priority targets for local non-profit organizations. Accordingly, all schools had at least minimally adequate funding to support ECA.

In *Effective* schools, ECA were allocated extra resources to address the needs of the large number of disadvantaged students in these schools. In one of these schools, all ECA were offered free of charge. In the other *Effective* schools where there were enrollment fees, strategies were implemented to keep all ECA accessible, for instance allowing students to pay in multiple

installments or reserving slots sponsored by private foundations for disadvantaged students. These schools' explicit policy was that no student would be denied access because of a lack of means to pay enrollment fees.

In contrast, schools with a *Mixed* profile were slightly less disadvantaged, on average, meaning that for them access to extra resources was not guaranteed despite their students' considerable needs. *Ineffective* schools for their part were not as disadvantaged and served a blend of low- and middle-income families, meaning that no additional resources were available to them. Reflecting this situation, many interviewees in schools with a *Mixed* profile, and all those in schools with an *Ineffective* profile, cited insufficient funds as a problem: "Finding money, it's really a big problem, especially in the current context, with the recent cutbacks." Consequently, the cost of ECA tended to be comparatively high in these schools. To illustrate, in *Ineffective* schools, ECA could cost up to \$230, whereas in *Effective* schools, at least some ECA were free, and the maximum enrollment cost was \$130 (amounts are in USD, estimated based on the average 2015 exchange rate). The high fees in *Ineffective* schools rendered ECA inaccessible for many students from disadvantaged backgrounds:

[The school does not] inject enough money and that causes a lot of problems. Sometimes, some youth cannot participate, because they do not have money for any activity, in sports team or even the White or Green day field trips.

The negative impact of insufficient budgets was not limited to cost issues: it also reduced schools' capacity to adequately support ECA staff, a subject discussed in the next section.

3. Support of inside and outside staff managing and leading ECA. Inside school staff managing ECA reported varying degrees of support from their school. All the interviewees had to work in collaboration with their school principal to accomplish their tasks, and some also collaborated closely with other colleagues, for instance in large schools where there were two

recreation coordinators, or in schools where two or three teachers shared the responsibility of ECA management via part-time involvement. ECA managers were responsible not only for planning, staffing, and promoting ECA in their school, but they were typically also in charge of organizing fundraising events, and other aspects of school life, like theme days (e.g., Halloween), field trips (e.g., Snow day trip), and unstructured activities (e.g., lunchtime pick-up games). Some also personally lead one or two ECA.

What differentiated *Effective* from less effective schools did not seem to be the number of people involved in ECA management, the particular job title they held (e.g., recreation coordinator vs teacher) or whether they worked full-time or part-time on ECA. Rather, what emerged as particularly discriminating was the degree of principal support, and the degree to which schools recognized and appreciated staff efforts.

All the interviewees cited their principal's support or lack thereof as a defining factor of their work environment. Some principals were involved to the point of assuming complete responsibility for some dimension of ECA management like fundraising, whereas others' involvement seemed more cursory. In *Effective* schools, the interviewees saw their principal as very supportive and helpful. "When we need something, when we knock at his office's door, immediately, we have an answer or we have some support related to that. That's, that's super important." In contrast, in *Ineffective* schools principals were not seen as particularly supportive, and even sometimes as obstructive:

Well... [pause]. It's a delicate topic [...]. The relationship between the principal and er... Well, it's more of an internal problem, I'm not sure I want to go there. [...] But look, it's always a fight... That's it, we always have to fight.

Gaps between the three groups of schools were also noted when comparing comments about whether paid working hours were commensurate with actual responsibilities. In *Effective*

schools, the interviewees had little to say on that point, beyond noting that they were paid for all the hours they spent working on ECA. In contrast, in *Ineffective* schools and in some *Mixed* schools, respondents said that there was a mismatch between what needed to be done and the time they were paid to work on ECA, so that they ended up volunteering on their personal time:

“We are working long hours, we do [unpaid] overtime work. I am so overwhelmed!”

We put a lot, a lot of hours in this. Me, it's four hours per week from September to April, plus all the weekend tournaments [...]. At some point, even if you love it... But it is quite an engagement over the weekends and all. You know, when you work all week long and then you continue working over the weekend [...] It's not easy!

In schools where the staff in charge of managing ECA reported little support and encouragement, they also underscored insufficient recognition of the work of inside staff contributing as activity leaders. When referring to a school principal disregarding staff efforts, an interviewee from an *Ineffective* school expressed this thought: “Well, at some point, if wrenches are thrown in the works, you will do like [name of a teacher who decided to no longer be an ECA leader]: you stop.” Inside staff involvement as ECA leaders was also stymied when they were not compensated via overtime pay or a reduced teaching load. In schools with an *Ineffective* or *Mixed* profile, budget constraints often meant that teachers volunteered on their own time. This situation collided with teachers' unions directives to “stop working for free”, a tension that was exacerbated because of a labor dispute ongoing at the time of the interviews between teachers and the provincial government.

This situation posed problems as all the interviewees agreed that ECA were more likely to foster school engagement and perseverance when leaders were part of the school staff as opposed to outside temporary workers:

It's better for school perseverance if school staff take part. Even the janitor, if he feels like it! One year, I had the school's principal as a basketball coach. Youth were there all the time. They could not believe that the principal was actually

their coach. [...] It's important because in the end you will end up creating stronger links whether you want it or not.

[School staff doubling-up as activity leaders] are not only coaches, we are also go-to persons. Students come see us. When you hire a coach, he's there only during the practices; afterwards, he's off. Us, we are here all day long. Students come to us if they have problems, that kind of things, so that's a big strength.

In support of these observations, the analysis revealed that in *Effective* schools, most activities were led by school staff, who often took charge of a given activity for a number of years. Such auspicious circumstances ignited a virtuous cycle, as the interviewees did not have to spend as much time and energy recruiting outside staff as ECA leaders, which left room for other pursuits, like leading activities themselves, thus increasing the proportion of ECA lead by inside staff. According to the interviewees, staff involvement was facilitated when staff turnover was low, and when the school had the resources to recognize their contribution.

Yet, even in *Effective* schools one form of staff support was absent: no school conducted formal evaluations of ECA with detailed individual feedback. Evaluations, when there were any, were limited to informal inquiries: "It's informal, you know, in passing: Did you like your year? What would you change next year? Do you have needs for next year?"

Finally, the negative consequences of low budgets also affected outside staff leading ECA: "Experienced and skilled leaders, there's the salary that comes with it. [...] They come at a price. We are not always privileged enough to get that." Many interviewees had to hire inexpensive, inexperienced college students who were typically not equipped to deal with challenging participants. A lot of training and supervision was necessary, leaving less time for the interviewees to be involved as ECA leaders themselves. Moreover, the return on their investment was short-lived: college students tended to quit when they found a job or an internship in their field. The interviewees thus had to either cancel activities or hire and train new

college students in the midst of the school year, a turnover process that both taxed their time and reduced the quality of students' experiences.

Inclusiveness of Everyday Practices Directly Involving Students

4. Developing, promoting and retaining students in ECA. All the schools developed ECA programs featuring activities in varied domains such as sports, arts, culture, and social clubs. However, in schools with a *Mixed* or *Ineffective* profile, interviewees mentioned that their program tended to be skewed towards certain kinds of activities, either because there were more activities in a given domain (e.g., sports) or because some activities were more visible or valued than others, such as the ECA related to concentration programs. *Effective* schools were different not only because of their generally well-balanced programs, but also because students were more involved in the selection and development of activities: "We have to listen too, sometimes, to youth's needs, to what they really want." In these schools the interviewees responded rapidly when students asked for new activities. They cited instances when they started new activities even if only a small number of students asked for it, or if it was in the middle of the school year.

In addition, in *Effective* schools, varied and numerous strategies were used to promote ECA and to retain students in them, including some specifically developed with vulnerable students in mind. In these schools, promotion went well beyond the usual beginning-of-the year pitch addressed to all students indiscriminately. Rather, promotion was open-ended and students were frequently reminded about ECA, for instance via PA messages or informal invitations to individual students in the hallways. In one *Effective* rural school, local newspapers also contributed to promote ECA all year long by covering games and shows. *Effective* schools' staff also paid particular attention to the recruitment of vulnerable students, notably those in special

education classes: ECA coordinators would systematically tour these classes, and work in close collaboration with special education teachers throughout the school year.

The special ed teachers here, they are ultra-involved. It's not rare that one of them comes down here in my office and says "Hey! I have this student who would like to play football" [...] Some special ed teachers are even willing to adapt their students' schedule a little so that they can come.

Some interviewees noted that enrolling vulnerable students was just the first step, and that to make sure that they stayed involved, arrangements were made to follow them very closely, for instance, by reminding them about upcoming practices or calling when they did not show up. In one rural school where transportation was an issue, one interviewee even drove students with no means of transportation to their ECA practice: "We try to find a solution, we try. I have personally picked some students up every morning [for early practice]."

In schools with a *Mixed* profile, many interviewees implemented varied promotional and retention strategies, some specifically targeting special education students:

If you just present it, let's say on a piece of cardboard, it doesn't work. You have to be able to reach out to them, one by one. [If] we know that well, this one plays music, we go see him and: "Hey! Are you interested?" And if, you know, if he's not sure, then: "Invite your friends. Do you know others?" And then he says "Oh yes, this guy". You know, you have to chat to be able to enroll them in extracurricular activities.

However, interviewees in *Mixed* schools also referred to barriers limiting promotional activities, including lack of time and lack of teacher interest (e.g., some teachers did not consent to class visits for ECA promotion). When they felt overwhelmed, some interviewees preferred to channel their promotional efforts to less challenging students. One interviewee justified not touring special education classes in those terms: "You know, I prefer to stick with those who are really interested instead of losing my time with students I know won't come". Moreover, in a few schools with a *Mixed* profile, promotional strategies were primarily oriented towards the

recruitment of elementary school students for the concentration programs (in Quebec, there are no middle schools, so high schools recruit future students directly in primary schools):

Promotion, I'd say, mostly target elementary school students. It's like a charm offensive. [Teachers] visit the primary schools and show students in fifth, sixth grade, sometimes even in fourth grade, what we do here. [They try] to create a little bit of an interest.

Finally, in all the *Ineffective* schools, promotion was primarily geared towards elementary school students, as part of campaigns to recruit students from middle-income families. In the high schools themselves, few promotional activities were implemented, and none specifically targeted vulnerable students. A flyer was typically distributed early in the school year. In one school, no other school-level promotional activities were deployed; rather, individual activity leaders were responsible for enrolling students in any manner they saw fit.

5. Selection criteria and access to ECA. In *Effective* schools, a good proportion of ECA had no or minimal selection criteria related to individual characteristics like skill or talent. Moreover, with the exception of one ECA in one school, no criteria related to grades or other academic outcomes were applied. Even without such rules, some ECA like robotics still attracted mostly academically gifted students, whereas others naturally brought together students of all types, including significant proportions from special education programs:

[Talking about the football team] Among 45 players, you've got fast ones, fat ones, strong ones, and you need everybody. Because in this sport, some block, some run, so no, there are no prerequisite. [...] The only reason why we could exclude a student is if it's dangerous in terms of safety.

In contrast, in schools with a *Mixed* profile, most activities had inclusion criteria related to skills or academics. Moreover, when there were concentrations programs, students in these programs were encouraged to participate more than their schoolmates in mainstream or special education programs, even though ECA were officially open to everyone: "And all those who are

in the [sport concentration programs], the teachers insist a lot that they also participate in the extracurricular sports team. A lot. A lot. A lot.” Vulnerable students’ participation was not only “less encouraged”, but it was sometimes outright discouraged. According to one interviewee, some teachers threatened to bar student from ECA if they had a bad grade, or forbade them to attend their training session.

In *Ineffective* schools, there were surprisingly few activities with explicit selection criteria. Again however, those who enrolled tended to be well-functioning students either because the activities were expensive, or because students from the concentration programs had precedence: “It’s usually girls who succeed, who want to perform [...] It’s an elite sport, sort of, if we compare to the rest of the school.” Moreover, one interviewee mentioned that even if there were no official criteria related to skill or talent, some activity leaders were not as welcoming towards students who were not particularly skilled, and as a result these students were prone to get discouraged and quit.

Discussion

Much of the scholarship on organized activities and youth programs focuses on the features of activities (e.g., quality leadership) and youth involvement (e.g., sustained participation) associated with developmental benefits (Mahoney et al., 2009; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016; Vandell et al., 2015). In comparison, little attention has been paid to the challenges faced by frontline staff trying to achieve these desired features in everyday settings (Larson & Walker, 2010; Larson et al., 2015). The goal of this study was to address this gap, with a focus on top-down constraints in one type of organization managing a significant portion of youth activities: schools.

Specifically, we compared organizational practices and policies in schools that more or less successfully leveraged ECA to reduce dropout and improve school perseverance among

vulnerable students. The results, summarized in Table 2, showed that ECA programs in *Effective* schools were consistently oriented towards a single goal, that is, supporting school perseverance. Moreover, these schools had material and human resources in sufficient quantity and quality to offer quality low-cost ECA, and they systematically favored inclusive policies and practices likely to facilitate participation and to foster a sense of belonging among vulnerable students. In contrast, *Ineffective* schools had multiple problems. For instance, they tended to hold multiple, equivocal goals for ECA, to have resources that were inadequate and/or primarily channeled towards relatively advantaged students, and to implement promotional practices and participation rules limiting accessibility for vulnerable students. As a result, vulnerable students' participation rate was low in these schools. Schools with a *Mixed* profile fell somewhere in between and combined strengths found in *Effective* schools along with limitations found in *Ineffective* ones.

Links with Extant Research

The results of the present study are consistent with the Positive Youth Development premise stating that positive development is conditional on a correspondence between youth's needs and goals and the opportunities and experiences to which they are exposed in their immediate environment (Lerner, 2015, 2017). They also reinforce the conclusions of previous studies focusing on the mechanisms underlying the positive impact of ECA participation on schooling outcomes (see Denault & Guay, 2017; Denault & Poulin, 2017; Vandell et al., 2015). By showing that the most effective ECA programs are those in which a large proportion of ECA are led by teachers, the results suggest that ECA contribute to promote school success and attachment when leaders are stable, high-quality staff in a position to create and build up positive links with adults and peers in the school, and in turn with the school itself as an institution.

The results are also largely consistent with previous studies focusing on the organizational factors at play in community centers offering organized activities for adolescents (Hirsch et al., 2011; Larson & Walker, 2010; Larson et al., 2015; Vandell et al., 2015). In line with these studies, positive outcomes emerged in organizations (in the present case, schools) where youth's needs consistently took precedence over other considerations, and where adequate support and resources were directed towards both youth and frontline staff. Yet, the analysis revealed new issues specific to schools, related to the particular goals of school-based organized activities, and to the context in which schools operate.

The central goal of youth activity programs in community centers is typically expressed in broad terms, and involves generally supporting the development of local patrons (Hirsch et al., 2011). In comparison, staff members working in public high schools with substantial dropout rates tend to frame the goal of their ECA programs in more precise terms. Among them, there is a general agreement that school engagement and students' perseverance should be the main goals, and that the student body as a whole should be targeted. Problems emerge when schools under conflicting pressures drift from an ideal of meeting all students' needs towards a situation in which they primarily address the needs of certain subgroups only, typically those of already well-functioning students. Such lapses are not always recognized or acknowledged, especially when school-based ECA programs achieve otherwise valued outcomes that would rightly be considered satisfactory in other organizations for which perseverance is not a key issue. Thus, when crucial outcomes of key interest in a given context are not monitored, ECA programs may pass as effective even when they miss their original target. To avoid overlooking such problems, the goals of particular interest for the specific organizations under study should be exhaustively assessed, rather than to automatically rely on blanket, unprecise outcomes like "favoring positive

development” that are bound to be inconsistently operationalised and often misaligned with context-specific priorities (for a similar point, see Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016).

In the present study, a few schools managed to effectively leverage ECA to support perseverance. However, a majority failed to do so. Why is that? In accordance with core principles from life course and relational developmental system models, answering this question requires a careful consideration of the larger contexts in which schools themselves are embedded (Elder, Shanahan, & Jennings, 2015; Overton, 2015). Even while the interview questions focused on organizational-level policies and practices, frontline school staff kept referring to larger dynamics influencing their work, for instance at the provincial or school-board level. They pointed factors shaping local educational market and daily working conditions, including labor disputes, subsidies for private schools, and rules for allocating resources. Ultimately, such factors had concrete consequences on school policies, staff practices and youth’s experiences in ECA. In community centers, administrative constraints imposed at levels above and beyond the organization did not appear as central to practitioners’ experiences (Hirsch et al., 2011; Larson & Walker, 2010). Overall, understanding the organizational determinants of youth activity programs effectiveness apparently requires the consideration of the broader structures in which organizations themselves are embedded (see also Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016).

Finally, the results suggest that ECA policies and practices may contribute to shape important components of school climate, especially when it comes to vulnerable students’ perception. In fact, these students seem to benefit from a generally positive school climate only when they feel respected and included in the larger social fabric of their school (see Berkowitz et al., 2016; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2013). In line with this literature, the goals pursued by schools via their ECA programs, and the manner that they fund, staff, promote,

and manage these programs, could apparently contribute to create a sense of connectedness and engagement among vulnerable students or, conversely, to reinforce feelings of disconnection (see also Martinez et al., 2016). Such overlapping themes suggest that studies focusing on school climate and on the organizational features supporting the deployment of effective ECA programs would benefit from further cross-fertilization.

Strengths and limitations

This study's mixed design combined strengths from quantitative and qualitative approaches (Small, 2011). Surveys of vulnerable students were used to classify schools based on the strength of the association between participation in ECA and school perseverance.

Subsequent qualitative interviews with school staff generated a detailed understanding of the organizational factors underlying this association, allowing us to identify successful and less successful school policies and practices. Our findings seem valuable from both a theoretical and applied perspective, especially in light of the paucity of studies examining how schools—as opposed to community centers—organize their youth activity programs.

Nevertheless, both the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study had significant limitations. Quantitative analyses relied on a small number of schools, with a limited number of cases within each school. As a result, sophisticated quantitative approaches were not applicable, and schools were classified using basic correlation analyses. Yet, this crude procedure seemed to have led to valid distinctions, because interpretable differences between school groups were found both in quantitative and qualitative analyses. Another limitation of the quantitative data is the limited range of students interviewed about ECA participation. The sampling focused on high-risk and average students and did not include high performing students. Because of this feature, it was not possible to comprehensively assess the factors associated with participation.

Qualitative analyses were limited by their reliance on one source of information, that is, frontline staff managing ECA in the 12 participating schools. Because of their central position, their perspective provided a rich understanding of the organizational dynamics surrounding ECA programs. Still, ethnographic observations, document analyses, and interviews with other actors would undoubtedly have provided further nuances and provided a better grasp of potential perspective bias. Underscoring this point is the fact that tensions at play in some schools only touched upon during the interviews were fully fleshed out by comments made by special education teachers during KT activities. For a broader perspective, future studies should consider conducting detailed interviews with school principals, teachers, school board administrators, and students who do and do not participate in ECA and their parents. Also, the results should be interpreted while bearing in mind that the apparent differential effectiveness of ECA in various schools may be linked to other factors besides those discussed in the interviews.

Finally, the study was conducted in public schools with high dropout rates in one region of Canada, and the specific dynamics observed in the present study cannot be readily generalized to other contexts. Despite this limitation, some general conclusions are likely to apply elsewhere at least to some degree, for instance when it comes to the disruptiveness of conflicting goals or the importance of the broader contexts in which schools are embedded.

Practical Implications and Conclusion

A number of practical and policy recommendations can be drawn from the results. These recommendations, presented as a function of the levels at which they apply (school-level or larger levels such as school boards or provincial/state governments), are summarized in Table 3.

The results first underscore that providing quality ECA seems necessary but not sufficient to support school perseverance in public schools struggling with high dropout rates. For

vulnerable students to participate in and benefit from these activities, schools should orient their ECA program towards a single goal: supporting school engagement and perseverance among all students. Moreover, sufficient resources that support quality programming are needed. These resources should be channeled to enlist competent activity leaders, notably teachers, who are in a position to be involved long-term and to help youth transfer the skills developed in ECA to other contexts like the classroom. Finally, school staff needs to work actively to recruit and maintain vulnerable students in ECA.

The results further suggest that effective organizational policies and practices depend on dynamics in which schools are embedded. To identify these dynamics, as well as the gaps that they sometimes create between the stated goal of ECA and how they operate in practice, schools should probably conduct periodic evaluations of their ECA program. At present, the results pointed to a general lack of formal evaluations of ECA programs even in the most effective organizations, echoing observations made in previous studies conducted in community centers (Hirsch et al., 2011; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). More efforts should be directed at evaluating youth activity programs offered in schools or in community centers, otherwise the limited resources available for youth programs risk being used inefficiently.

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Table 1 *Schools' Characteristics as a Function of Profile*

	School Profile					
	<i>Effective</i> (n = 3)		<i>Ineffective</i> (n = 2)		<i>Mixed</i> (n = 7)	
	<i>M/%</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M/%</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M/%</i>	<i>SD</i>
Data based on students' interviews						
Participation among at-risk students ¹ (%)	22.2		10.2 ^a		27.0 ^a	
Participation among average students (%)	46.8		36.7		44.2	
Administrative data						
School size (in thousands)	1.2	0.6	1.6	1.0	0.9	0.3
Dropout rate	36.3	13.9	27.7	6.4	38.8	11.2
Low-income decile rank of the catchment area	9.3 ^a	1.2	4.5 ^{a, b}	0.7	8.6 ^b	1.6
Data based on frontline staff interviews						
Number of activities	13.7	2.9	17.5	4.9	13.9	4.3
Variety of activities	5.0	2.0	5.5	0.7	5.0	1.4
Proportion of activities lead by school staff	70.0	26.5	53.5	51.6	42.9	30.0

Note. ¹Including dropouts and matched at-risk students. ^{a, b}Based on *t* tests (for means) or χ^2 tests (for percentages): means and percentages sharing subscripts in each row differ significantly at $p < .05$

Table 2

Summary of Main Qualitative Findings

Themes	School Profile		
	Effective (n = 3)	Ineffective (n = 2)	Mixed (n = 7)
Organizational conditions			
1. Vision regarding ECA	Unity of purpose, one unequivocal goal: supporting school perseverance among all student	Ambiguous/multiple goals: supporting perseverance AND attracting middle-class students	Various combinations of Effective schools' advantages and of Ineffective ones' problems. Ex 1: combination of a strong, coherent commitment to support perseverance via ECA, but insufficient financial resources to consistently hire competent leaders and to keep enrollment costs low.
2. School SES and resources to offer of free/low-cost ECA	Extra-funding linked to high poverty concentration, sufficient resources to offer free/low-cost ECA	Less poverty concentration, no extra funding, higher-cost ECA, competitive educational market	
3. Capacity to support inside and outside staff managing/leading ECA	Principal supports, praises & recognizes staff contributions, inside staff involved long term as ECA leaders	Low principal support, many ECA lead by outside –often less stable and qualified– staff	

(continued)

Table 2

Summary of Main Qualitative Findings (continued)

Themes	School Profile		
	Effective (n = 3)	Ineffective (n = 2)	Mixed (n = 7)
Inclusive practices			
4. Development, promotion and retention strategies	Efforts to respond to vulnerable students' tastes and needs, to recruit them and maintain their interest	Skewed towards the needs of relatively well-functioning students	Ex 2: Somewhat conflicting goals for ECA, some tied to "concentration" programs, but loose selection criteria making these programs relatively accessible
5. Selection criteria regulating who can and cannot participate	Selection criteria based on skills or academics almost nonexistent	Few explicit criteria, de facto priority for concentration program students	

Note. ECA = Extracurricular activities. SES = Socioeconomic status.

Table 3

Recommendations for Policy and Practice to Strengthen the Capacity of ECA Programs to Support School Perseverance among Vulnerable Students, Summary by Theme

	School-level policies and practices	Larger policies at the school district, state/provincial or federal levels
Vision regarding ECA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uniformly and clearly state that ALL students, including vulnerable ones, are welcomed to participate in ECA • Be mindful of the unintended consequences of other policies (e.g., regarding school choice, magnet programs) on ECA programming and its inclusiveness 	
Resources for ECA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Channel ECA resources equitably towards all students (including vulnerable ones) • Offer low-cost activities; for expensive ones, support inclusiveness (e.g., sponsored spots for low-SES students) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide schools with sufficient resources allowing for the implementation of low-cost, high-quality activities
Staff support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that ECA practitioners feel supported by principals • Appropriately compensate and show appreciation for school staff's involvement in ECA • Evaluate ECA, provide staff with feedback and opportunities to grow and learn as ECA leaders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide schools with sufficient resources to hire and retain high-quality ECA leaders • Set aside budgets for ECA evaluation and staff development; facilitate program evaluations

(continued)

Table 3.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice to Strengthen the Capacity of ECA Programs to Support School Perseverance among Vulnerable Students, Summary by Theme (continued)

	School-level policies and practices	Larger policies at the school district, state/provincial or federal levels
Development, promotion and retention strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop quality ECA programs based on students' interests and needs • Seek students' suggestions for new activities and improvement of existing ones • Actively promote ECA enrollment and participation, especially among vulnerable students (e.g., by touring special education classes, by specifically inviting individual students) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formulate guidelines regarding ECA development and promotion aimed at maximizing inclusiveness
Selection criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid explicit or implicit selection criteria (e.g., based on grades, skills, or parents' capacity to pay) likely to discourage participation among vulnerable students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify alternatives to policies like "No Pass/No Play", so that ECA programs can be leveraged to support perseverance among students struggling academically

Note. ECA = Extracurricular activities.

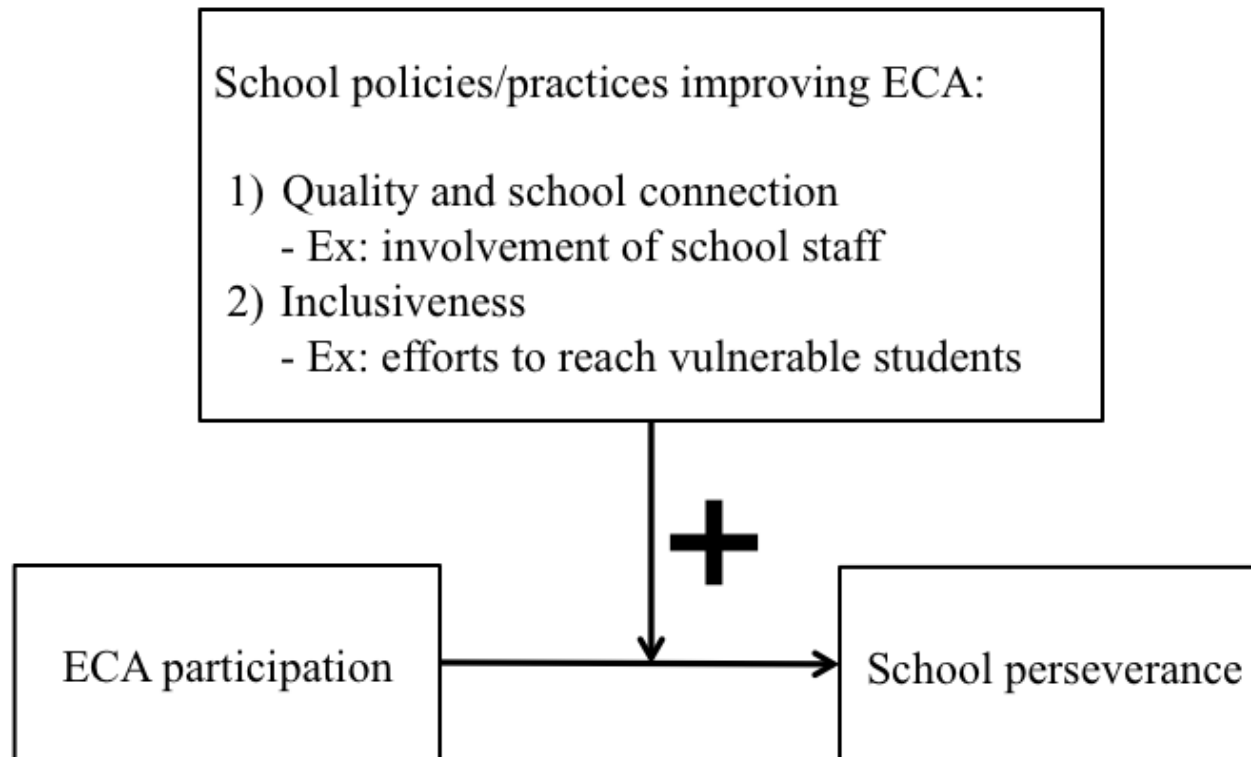


Figure 1. School-level factors potentially strengthening the link between ECA participation and school perseverance.