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Extracurricular Activities in Australia and Singapore: Equal Opportunities and Access to Cultural Capital

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Abstract: This study compares school-linked organized activities in Australia, where they are called extracurricular activities (ECA), and in Singapore, where they are called co-curricular activities (CCA), with regard to equality of opportunity and access to cultural and social capital. The two systems share a British tradition of school sport, clubs, and uniformed groups but regulate these activities in opposite ways: participation is voluntary and largely family-funded in Australia, whereas in Singapore it is compulsory at secondary level, funded through schools, and formally recognized in selection. The study uses a qualitative comparative document analysis of 100 sources identified through a documented search of Scopus and Google Scholar, backward citation searching, official websites, and targeted searches for policy evidence. The sources were analyzed thematically with a codebook approach and interpreted through a framework that combines Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory with Bourdieu's theory of capital. Both systems expect the activities to support holistic development, belonging, and citizenship. In Australia, inequality appears first in access, which depends on family resources, school sector, region, and disability, although participation benefits disadvantaged young people most. In Singapore, compulsory participation secures access for almost all secondary students, but differences between schools in the activities they can offer, together with the use of CCA records at points of selection, shift inequality to the kind of activity students join and the recognition they obtain. Universal, state-organized provision therefore does not remove inequality but relocates it. The study discusses implications for policy and teacher education in both countries.

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Keywords: extracurricular activities, co-curricular activities, equality of opportunity, cultural capital, comparative education, Australia, Singapore

Schools in many countries offer organized activities outside timetabled lessons, such as sport, music, drama, debating, and uniformed groups. Research links participation in these activities with a stronger sense of school belonging, better psychological well-being and, in some studies, higher educational aspirations and attainment (Fischer & Theis, 2014; O'Donnell et al., 2022, 2024). The strength of these associations is debated: longitudinal Australian data suggest that part of the apparent benefit reflects who takes part rather than what the activities do (O'Flaherty et al., 2022). Australian studies nevertheless show two consistent patterns. Participation follows a socioeconomic gradient, and adolescents in low-SES schools and regional communities who do take part often benefit more than their peers (Blomfield & Barber, 2011; Kennewell et al., 2022; O'Donnell et al., 2022).

The gradient matters because the skills, dispositions, and networks acquired in these activities can function as cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986/2011). The literature is divided on whether organized activities reproduce or reduce inequality (Merino et al., 2022). Some studies show that unequal participation carries class advantage into later education (Blanden et al., 2023; Park et al., 2023), while others find compensatory effects for disadvantaged groups (Blomfield & Barber, 2011; O'Donnell et al., 2022, 2024). Which outcome prevails depends to a large extent on how access to the activities is organized.

This is also a policy question in both countries. Australia's national education goals commit governments to an education system that promotes excellence and equity (Education Council, 2019), yet participation in activities outside the classroom is voluntary, much of it is provided by community clubs for a fee, and public support takes the form of targeted programs such as Sporting Schools (Australian Sports Commission, n.d.). In Singapore, participation is compulsory at secondary level and funded through schools (Ministry of Education Singapore [MOE], 2026a), yet in March 2026 the Ministry of Education acknowledged that challenges of access remain and committed to widening access, including for students in smaller schools and from disadvantaged backgrounds (MOE, 2026b). In practice, both systems depend on what individual schools can offer, including their facilities and the time of their teachers, and in Australia also on parent volunteers and fees (Dowden & Drager, 2016; Foo & Yang, 2022; Soo et al., 2023).

Research on organized activities in each of the two countries is substantial, but it seldom looks across national borders, and the cross-national work that includes both countries focuses on children's everyday out-of-school lives (Yelland et al., 2024). A comparison of Australia and Singapore can show something that neither case shows on its own. The two systems regulate organized activities in opposite ways. Australia leaves participation to families, schools, and markets, while Singapore makes it compulsory, funds it through schools, and converts it into credit for admission to post-secondary education. Placing the two side by side makes it possible to ask whether universal, state-organized provision removes the socioeconomic gradient in access or relocates it, for instance from whether children take part to which activities, and in which schools, they take part. A study of either system alone cannot answer this question.

The two countries were selected because they share important features while differing in the one that matters most for this question. Both inherited school sport, clubs, and uniformed groups from the British tradition (Adair & Vamplew, 1997; Aplin, 1998), both are multi-ethnic, high-income societies, and in both the education system is marked by strong academic competition, reflected among other things in consistently high results in international assessments such as PISA. What differs is the governance of schooling: Australia is a federation

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in which the states and territories and three school sectors (government, Catholic, and independent) run schools, whereas Singapore is a city-state with a centralized system. International test results are thus part of the shared background and not the criterion for selection. Because the two units differ in scale and structure, we do not treat them as uniform national cases. For Australia we attend to variation between states, sectors, and regions, and for Singapore to variation between types of school.

The study compares school-linked organized activities in Australia, where they are called extracurricular activities (ECA), and in Singapore, where they are called co-curricular activities (CCA), with regard to equality of opportunity and access to cultural and social capital. It addresses four questions:

Q1: How are school-linked organized activities defined and positioned in the Australian (ECA) and Singaporean (CCA) education systems, and what are they expected to achieve?

Q2: How are these activities governed, funded, and implemented, and how does this vary within each country?

Q3: Which factors shape students' access to these activities, and how does access translate into cultural and social capital?

Q4: What do the similarities and differences imply for equality of opportunity, and which policy and practice responses do they suggest?

The next section establishes in what sense ECA and CCA can be compared, and the one after it sets out the theoretical framework. We then outline the historical and policy context of the two systems before presenting the method, findings, and discussion.

Extracurricular and Co-curricular Activities: Establishing Comparability

Australian research and policy usually call school-linked sport, arts, clubs, and similar pursuits extracurricular activities (ECA), whereas Singapore's Ministry of Education calls them co-curricular activities (CCA). The different labels raise the question of whether the two terms refer to the same kind of activity. A cross-national comparison is meaningful only if the units compared share an attribute that can be defined independently of either country. This section defines that attribute and then compares ECA and CCA on the dimensions where they may differ: purpose, compulsion, assessment and recognition, provision and cost, and status within the school.

The terminology has its own history. Singapore used the term extra-curricular activities from the 1960s and renamed them co-curricular activities in 1999 to signal that they are part of education proper and not an optional addition (MOE, 2026b). The change of label was therefore a decision about the status of the activities within a single system. The debate over the label was older than the change itself: by the 1980s some school administrators were already proposing terms such as CCA, because *extra* suggested additional work for teachers, and the activities were increasingly seen as part of the curriculum (Koh, 1987). For this reason, the difference in terms between Australia and Singapore cannot by itself settle the question of equivalence, and the comparison has to rest on what the activities are and on how each system positions them.

The repertoire of activities is largely shared. Singapore groups CCAs into clubs and societies, physical sports, uniformed groups, and visual and performing arts (MOE, 2026a), and Australian studies use comparable categories, often distinguishing sport from non-sport activities (Blomfield & Barber, 2011; O'Flaherty et al., 2022). In both countries the activities are organized and supervised by adults, take place outside timetabled subject instruction, and are not examined as academic subjects. We use these features as the common ground of the

comparison and refer to activities that share them as school-linked organized activities. Under this definition, out-of-school-hours care services (OSHC in Australia, Student Care Centres in Singapore) fall outside the unit of comparison, since their primary function is childcare; where they appear in the findings they are treated as context only.

Beyond this common ground the two systems differ, as Table 1 summarizes. The largest differences concern compulsion and assessment. In Singapore every secondary student must take part in CCA, while participation at other levels depends on students' preferences (MOE, 2026a; Yeo et al., 2023). Secondary students' co-curricular attainment is graded under the LEAPS 2.0 framework in four domains (participation, achievement, leadership, and service) at the end of their final year, and this grade gives an advantage in admission to further education (MOE, 2026a, 2026b). In Australia participation is voluntary, and there is no system-level assessment or recognition of it (O'Flaherty et al., 2022).

Provision and cost follow the same pattern. In Singapore, activities organized in schools are largely funded from the state budget, and students can use their Edusave accounts for additional costs (MOE, 2026a). In Australia, activities are delivered through partnerships between schools, voluntary organizations, and fee-charging providers, and families bear most of the cost (O'Flaherty et al., 2022; Reece et al., 2020). The activities also hold a different place in the school. In Singapore, organizing CCAs is one of teachers' regular duties (Koh, 1987; MOE, 2026a), whereas in Australia what a school offers depends heavily on its resources, and private schools with larger budgets can provide more varied and intensive programs than state schools (Rioseco et al., 2018). The stated purposes overlap to a large extent. Both systems speak of holistic development and well-being, but Singaporean policy ties CCA explicitly to belonging, national identity, and social cohesion (Ho, 2014; MOE, 2026a), while Australian aims span a wider range, from well-being and school belonging to employability (Education Council, 2019; O'Donnell et al., 2024).

Finally, the two countries are not equivalent units of governance. Singapore is a city-state with a centralized system, yet the resources its schools can devote to CCA differ markedly by type of school (Soo et al., 2023). The Ministry of Education itself links the range of CCAs open to students to the size of their school and relies on multi-school CCAs and the Strategic Partnership-CCA to let students take part in activities their own school does not offer (MOE, 2026b). Australia is a federation in which schooling is governed at the state and territory level, and provision varies between states, between state and private schools, and between metropolitan and regional areas (Fawcett, 2007; O'Donnell et al., 2022; Rioseco et al., 2018). The comparison therefore keeps within-country variation in view instead of treating either country as a uniform case.

ECA and CCA are thus functionally equivalent as school-linked organized activities but differ in their institutional position. This has three consequences for the analysis. First, we use the national term when a statement concerns one country and school-linked organized activities when it concerns both. Second, compulsion, assessment, and funding are treated as features of the context that the study sets out to explain. Third, findings are reported with attention to variation within each country.

Table 1

Extracurricular Activities in Australia and Co-curricular Activities in Singapore Compared

Dimension	Australia (ECA)	Singapore (CCA)
Term	Extracurricular activities	Co-curricular activities since 1999; extra-curricular activities before that

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Table 1
Continued

Dimension	Australia (ECA)	Singapore (CCA)
Stated purposes	Holistic development, well-being, school belonging, skills, and employability	Holistic development, belonging, national identity, and social cohesion
Compulsion	Voluntary	Compulsory at secondary level; optional at other levels
Assessment and recognition	No system-level assessment or recognition	Graded under LEAPS 2.0 in four domains; grade gives an advantage in admission to further education
Provision	Schools, voluntary organizations, fee-charging providers	School-based; organizing CCAs is a regular teacher duty
Cost	Mainly borne by families	Largely funded from the state budget; Edusave for additional costs
Governance and internal variation	Governed at state and territory level; differences between states, state and private schools, metropolitan and regional areas	Centralized; differences in resources between types and sizes of school

Note. Sources: Education Council (2019); Koh (1987); MOE (2026a, 2026b); O'Flaherty et al. (2022); Reece et al. (2020); Rioseco et al. (2018); Soo et al. (2023); Yeo et al. (2023).

Theoretical Framework

Research questions 3 and 4 ask which factors shape students' access to organized activities, how access translates into cultural and social capital, and what this means for equality of opportunity. These questions have two parts. The first concerns contexts, that is, where around the child the factors that shape participation are located. The second concerns value, that is, why the same activity brings different returns to different children. We therefore combine Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which addresses the first part, with Bourdieu's theory of capital, which addresses the second.

Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner (1979) described development as taking place within nested systems. The microsystem includes the settings in which the child takes part directly, such as the family, a school team or club, and relationships with teachers, coaches, and peers. The mesosystem consists of the links between these settings, for example between home and school. The exosystem covers settings the child does not enter but which still affect them, such as parents' workplaces, local clubs, and school budgets. The macrosystem comprises the policies, institutions, and shared beliefs of a society, and the chronosystem adds change over time. An

ecological model of this kind has already been used to explain young people's participation in structured out-of-school activities (Huebner & Mancini, 2003). In this study the theory serves as a map: it allows the factors identified in the Australian and Singaporean documents to be placed at specific levels and shows how levels interact, for instance how funding arrangements in the exosystem shape what a family can do in the microsystem. Its limit is that it describes contexts as sets of resources and relationships without explaining why some resources count for more than others in a given society.

Forms of Capital and Their Conversion

Bourdieu (1986/2011) distinguished economic, cultural, and social capital and described cultural capital in three states: embodied, as durable dispositions and skills; objectified, as cultural goods; and institutionalized, as academic qualifications and other officially recognized credentials. A central point of his account is that one form of capital can be converted into another, and that families with more economic capital are better placed to invest in the cultural and social capital of their children. Evidence from both countries is consistent with this account. In Australia, parental education predicts the time children spend on arts activities (Mansour et al., 2016), children from socioeconomically advantaged families spend more of their after-school time on sport, homework, and reading and less on screen-based activities (Kennewell et al., 2022), and the social capital young people build through out-of-school activities partly mediates the link between parental background and educational aspirations (Chesters & Smith, 2015). In Singapore, Foo and Yang (2022) show teachers in a lower-status junior college using extra-curricular work to prepare their students for prestigious state scholarships, a practice that opens a route to social mobility while also reproducing the meritocratic ideology of the state. The theory has limits for our purposes. It says little about how an activity affects a child's development, and a strict reproduction reading has difficulty explaining findings that organized activities benefit adolescents in low-SES schools and regional communities more than their peers (Blomfield & Barber, 2011; O'Donnell et al., 2022).

Combining the Two Theories

Each theory covers the gap left by the other. Ecological theory shows where the resources that shape participation are located: in families, schools, clubs, funding arrangements, and national policy. Bourdieu's theory shows what participation is worth and who is in a position to convert it into other forms of capital. The link between the two is the concept of conversion. The ecological context determines how participation is turned into recognized value, and the two countries organize this conversion differently (Figure 1).

In Singapore the conversion is formal and set by national policy. Participation is compulsory at secondary level, and the graded record of participation, achievement, leadership, and service gives an advantage in admission to further education (MOE, 2026a). At the transition from primary to secondary school, the Direct School Admission scheme also allows students to secure places on the basis of their talents and achievements in these activities (Kwek et al., 2023). In Bourdieu's terms, the state turns co-curricular involvement into institutionalized cultural capital. Compulsory participation does not by itself equalize opportunity, however. Since schools differ in the resources they can devote to CCA (Soo et al., 2023), inequality can be expected to appear less in whether students participate than in which activities they join, in which school, and with what record of achievement and leadership (Gjini & Gjini, 2026).

In Australia there is no formal conversion. Participation is voluntary and largely paid for by families, so economic capital acts first on access (O'Flaherty et al., 2022; Reece et al., 2020). Conversion takes place informally, through the better-resourced programs of private

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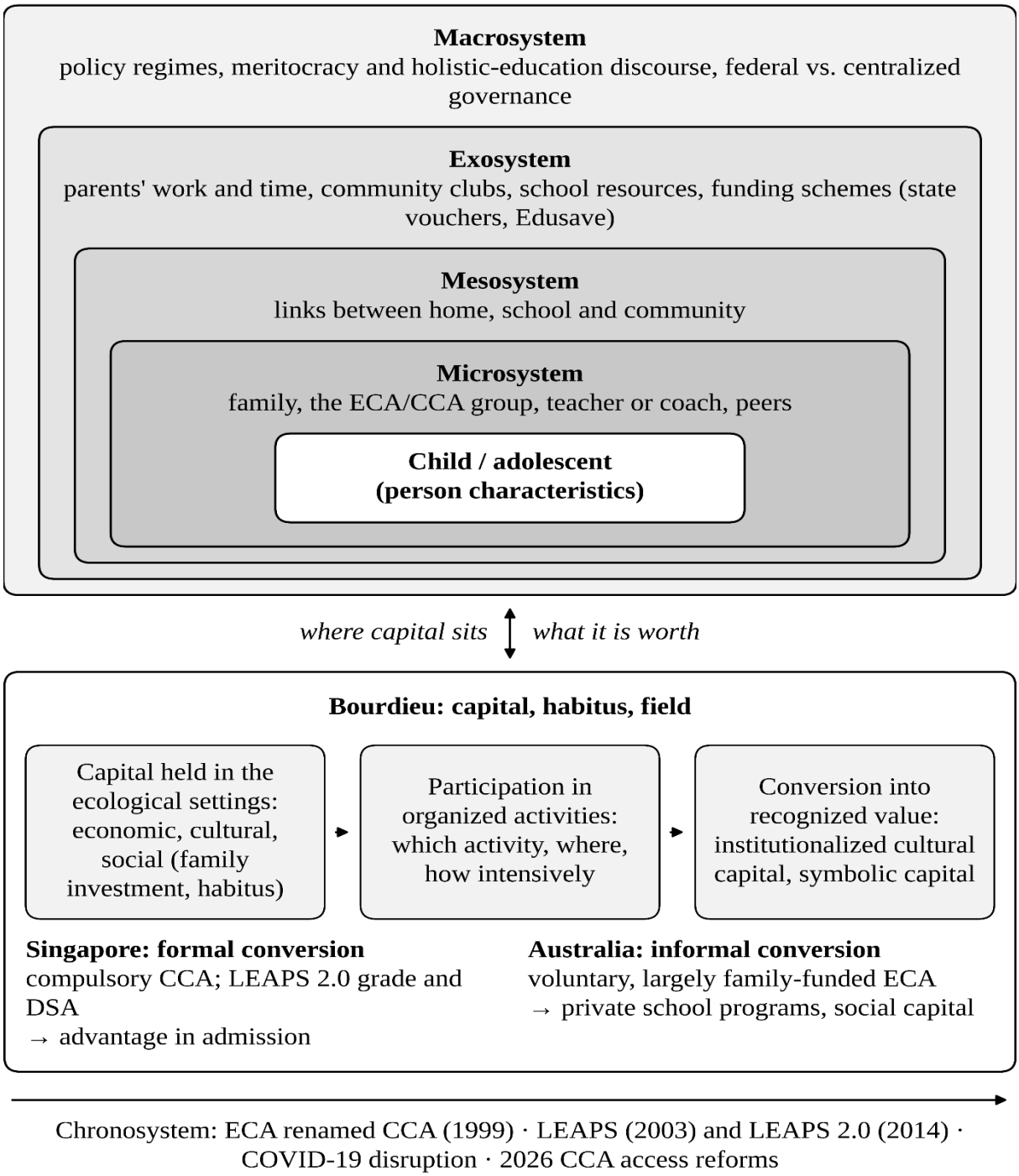
schools (Rioseco et al., 2018) and through the social capital built in activities (Chesters & Smith, 2015). Inequality can therefore be expected to appear first in whether children participate at all and then in the type and intensity of their participation.

These expectations are analytical starting points. They guide the interpretation of the findings, and they allow for the possibility that organized activities compensate for disadvantage at the level of the individual child while conversion reproduces it at the level of the system.

Figure 1

Combined Framework: Ecological Levels and the Conversion of Participation into Recognized Value



Use of the Framework in the Study

The framework is used in three ways. It grounds research questions 3 and 4. It is used to interpret the themes developed from the documents (see Method), by locating the factors in each theme at an ecological level and identifying the form of capital involved (Table 2). And it structures the comparison in the Discussion, which returns to the two expectations set out above.

Table 2

Ecological Levels, Forms of Capital and Examples from the Two Countries

Ecological level	Capital mainly involved	Australia	Singapore
Microsystem	Economic and cultural capital of the family; social capital among peers	Parental education predicts time spent on arts activities (Mansour et al., 2016); school-level participation culture shapes individual participation (Fullarton, 2002)	Teachers in a lower-status junior college prepare students for state scholarships (Foo & Yang, 2022); peer acceptance within CCAs (Liem & Fredricks, 2025)
Mesosystem	Social capital carried between home, school, and community	Partnerships linking schools, parents, voluntary organizations, and fee-charging providers (Dowden & Drager, 2016)	Seminars for parents and partnerships between schools and community centers (Lee et al., 2014)
Exosystem	Economic capital	Fees, transport, and regional location (Fawcett, 2007; O'Donnell et al., 2022)	State funding of school activities; Edusave; the activities offered depend on each school's facilities (MOE, 2026a)
Macrosystem	Institutionalized cultural capital; policy rules	Voluntary participation; funding imbalance between state and private schools (Rioseco et al., 2018)	Compulsory participation; graded record used in admission; meritocracy (Foo & Yang, 2022; MOE, 2026a)
Chronosystem	Changes in how participation is valued	Post-pandemic decline in arts and music participation (Zhou et al., 2025)	Renaming of ECA as CCA in 1999; LEAPS introduced in 2003 and revised as LEAPS 2.0 in 2014 (MOE, 2026b)

Historical and Policy Context

Extracurricular Activities in the Australian Education System

The foundations of extracurricular activities in the Australian education system lie in the British education system and in a pastoral care tradition concerned with students' holistic development (Adair & Vamplew, 1997; Hearn et al., 2006). Some activities were integrated into the formal curriculum in the early twentieth century, and schools organized clubs such as photography, glee, and lifesaving outside lesson time, with school management, teachers, parents, and pupils all taking part in running them (Smith, 1927). Outdoor education, including camps, excursions, nature walks, and water sports, developed through cooperation between schools and other organizations both within and outside the curriculum, and Outward Bound,

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founded in 1956, extended this work through partnerships with schools (Gül & Tağrikulu, 2022). Around the same time, some social activities previously offered outside the curriculum were brought into it to strengthen ties between schools and the community (Kapferer, 1978).

The aims of these activities went beyond individual development. They included giving physical activity a regular place in school life: by the 1920s, athletics, play, and games had been accorded curricular status, and a full period each week was devoted to physical education (Smith, 1927). During the First and Second World Wars, activities were used to build national identity and the physical resilience needed for national defense (Adair & Vamplew, 1997), and they also served to foster integration between ethnic groups (Gorzanelli & Knijnik, 2025). Between the 1950s and the 1970s, marching activities and bands were used to assimilate Aboriginal children into Anglo-Australian culture (Phillips & Osmond, 2018).

From the 1980s, rising employment among women increased demand for out-of-school-hours care (Simoncini et al., 2015). In the 1990s, inclusive education policies and the support of voluntary organizations kept fees nominal and allowed a high proportion of pupils to take part in activities (Dowden & Drager, 2016). Projects developed between 1996 and 2001, such as the Gatehouse Project, aimed to meet students' cognitive and social needs and to prevent harmful habits and early school leaving (Hearn et al., 2006), and in the 2000s attention turned to healthy eating, physical activity, and screen time as part of efforts against obesity (Yu & Baxter, 2016).

Today, cuts in school funding for activities in some states (Le, 2013), high insurance and licensing costs, the focus of sports clubs on developing elite players, and the overall cost of participation (Dowden & Drager, 2016) mean that access remains incomplete and unequal. About 71% of Australian children aged 0 to 14 took part in organized sport or physical activity outside school hours at least once a year, and children in the most disadvantaged areas took part substantially less than those in the most advantaged areas (Reece et al., 2020).

Co-curricular Activities in the Singapore Education System

Singapore's system of co-curricular activities also developed from British models, adapted over time to the needs of the new state (Aplin, 1998). In the first years after independence in 1965, security, defense, and academic achievement took priority over social activities (Aplin, 1998). Activities were used to foster social cohesion and national consciousness and to prepare students physically for national defense (Ho, 2014), and the Outward-Bound School (1967) and the National Cadet Corps (1969) contributed to these aims (Horsky & Chew, 2004).

Participation in sports and games became compulsory for all secondary pupils in the late 1960s, and the National Cadet Corps and the National Police Cadet Corps were made mandatory in secondary schools in 1975. In the 1970s, activity programs were criticized for their narrow range, their focus on a gifted few at the expense of the majority, an unequal distribution of duties among teachers, inadequate equipment, and a shortage of trained staff. Under the policy of 1982, every secondary pupil took part in one ECA, and the resulting grade could be used in applications for scholarships, bursaries, and admission to pre-university centers (Koh, 1987). In the 1980s, the emphasis shifted to employing specialists to organize activities, supporting students' holistic development, and helping them cope with the stress of an achievement-oriented system (Leong, 1984), alongside substantial investment in science fairs and outdoor education (Ang, 1986). Partnerships with external providers aimed to give every secondary pupil at least one residential camp (Atencio et al., 2015), and by the 1990s most pupils took part in organized camps at home or abroad (Ho, 2014).

The late 1990s brought wider reform. Thinking Schools, Learning Nation (1997) and Teach Less, Learn More sought to move schooling away from rote learning toward student-centered practice that supports creative thinking and lifelong learning (Tan et al., 2008). Activities were expanded as one means to this end: the formal curriculum was streamlined, time was set aside for activities, teachers received support staff, and program managers were appointed (Gopinathan, 1997). From 1999, participation brought advantages in university admission (Tan & Gopinathan, 2000), and from 2004 the Direct School Admission scheme allowed primary school leavers to gain places at secondary schools on the basis of their achievements and talents in these activities (Kwek et al., 2023).

These initiatives met resistance from parents who prioritized academic results (Green et al., 2006). The Ministry responded with seminars to raise parents' awareness, a requirement for pupils to take part in six community service projects a year, and partnerships between schools and community centers (Lee et al., 2014). A grading scheme for co-curricular attainment, LEAPS, was introduced in 2003 and revised as LEAPS 2.0 in 2014 (MOE, 2026b). From 2010, programs such as the National Arts Council Arts Education Programme and Strategic Partnership club activities were supported with school budgets and private-sector partnerships (Chua, 2018; MOE, 2026a). Values in Action and Character and Citizenship Education programs were introduced, and all Secondary 3 pupils take part in a five-day camp on an offshore island (Ng, 2020).

As a result of this investment, the expansion of schools' capacity to organize activities (Soo et al., 2023) and compulsory participation at certain levels, participation rates have risen markedly (Yelland et al., 2024), helped by a partial change in parents' negative perceptions (Ng, 2019) and their growing wish for their children to acquire social skills (Yelland et al., 2024). Yet the meritocratic, selection-oriented character of the system and the skepticism of many stakeholders about the benefits of the activities continue to limit what the activities can achieve (Roopesh, 2018).

Method

Research Model

This study is a qualitative comparative document analysis. Document analysis involves the systematic examination and evaluation of written sources such as articles, books, theses, institutional reports, and policy documents in order to understand a phenomenon in its context (Kutsyuruba, 2023; Morgan, 2022). The design suits the present study for two reasons. First, the research questions concern how two education systems define, organize, and fund school-linked organized activities, and these arrangements are recorded mainly in policy documents and in the research literature. Second, a comparison across two countries and several decades cannot rest on new fieldwork within a single study, whereas published documents make the development of both systems accessible. The corpus was built through a structured and documented search, described below, but the study is not a systematic review: its aim is to interpret policies and practices comparatively, not to estimate the effects of participation. The comparison follows the horizontal approach of comparative education, which examines similarities and differences between education systems within the same period in order to identify their underlying causes and to draw lessons for policy (Phillips, 2006).

Search Strategy and Source Selection

The corpus was assembled from four sources. First, Scopus was searched on September 27, 2026 in the title, abstract, and keyword fields with the following query: TITLE-ABS-KEY

Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies
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((“extracurricular activities” OR “extracurricular activity” OR “extra-curricular activities” OR “extra-curricular activity” OR “co-curricular activities” OR “co-curricular activity” OR “cocurricular activities” OR “after-school activities” OR “out-of-school activities” OR “organized activities” OR “organised activities”) AND (australia OR australian OR singapore OR singaporean)). No limits on publication year, language, or document type were applied, because the historical part of the analysis required older sources; all sources that met the criteria were in English. The search returned 183 records. Second, Google Scholar was searched on the same date with two queries, “extracurricular activities” Australia school and “co-curricular activities” Singapore school, and the first 100 results of each query, sorted by relevance, were screened by title. Third, official documents and research reports were retrieved from the websites of the Singapore Ministry of Education, the Australian Government Department of Education, and the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Fourth, historical and policy sources that the searches did not return were identified by backward citation searching of the included sources. Finally, during the revision, targeted searches for evidence on state voucher schemes in Australia identified five further sources.

Sources were eligible if they concerned school-linked organized activities in Australia or Singapore, addressed primary or secondary schooling, and were peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books or book chapters, official documents, or research reports of government agencies, public research bodies, or university research centers. Studies of higher education, studies that did not include Australia or Singapore, conference papers, theses, and professional magazines were excluded, as were studies of other curriculum subjects and records that did not concern organized activities. In line with the definition given above, out-of-school-hours care services were also excluded. Table 3 sets out the criteria separately for academic sources and for official documents and reports. The criteria apply to the analyzed corpus; works cited only as background, such as methodological sources, studies of other countries, and two doctoral theses, are not part of it.

Table 3
Criteria for Including and Excluding Sources

Source type	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Academic sources	Peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books and book chapters; concern school-linked organized activities (ECA or CCA); primary or secondary schooling; include Australia or Singapore	Higher education; no data on Australia or Singapore; conference papers, theses, and professional magazines; other curriculum subjects; not about organized activities; out-of-school-hours care services; full text unavailable
Official documents and reports	Documents of the Singapore Ministry of Education and the Australian Government Department of Education; research reports of government agencies, public research bodies and university research centers	Commercial or promotional material; sources whose authorship or origin cannot be verified

The records were screened by two of the authors at title and abstract level and, where necessary, in full text (Table 4). Of the 183 Scopus records, 2 were duplicates and 139 were excluded, leaving 42 studies that were read in full; none of them was excluded at this stage. Of the 200 Google Scholar results, 4 were duplicate versions of the same work and 137 were excluded at title level. Of the remaining 59, 21 had already been retrieved through Scopus; the

other 38 were assessed in full and 27 of them were included. Backward citation searching added 21 historical and policy sources, 5 official documents and public reports were included, and the targeted searches on voucher schemes added 5 sources. The final corpus comprises 100 sources.

Table 4
Selection of Sources

Stage	Description	n
Identification	Scopus records (search of September 27, 2026)	183
	Google Scholar results screened (first 100 of each of two queries)	200
Screening	Scopus: duplicates removed	2
	Scopus: records screened by title and abstract	181
	Scopus: records excluded (not about organized activities, 70; higher education, 45; conference papers or encyclopedia entries, 13; no data on Australia or Singapore, 9; other curriculum subjects, 2)	139
	Google Scholar: duplicate versions removed	4
	Google Scholar: results excluded at title level (no data on Australia or Singapore, 73; higher education, 40; theses, conference papers, and other items outside the criteria, 19; not about organized activities, 5)	137
	Google Scholar: already retrieved through Scopus	21
Eligibility	Scopus: full texts assessed	42
	Google Scholar: full texts assessed	38
	Google Scholar: excluded after assessment (not about organized activities, 4; outside the source-type criteria, 3; no data on Australia or Singapore, 2; higher education, 1; full text unavailable, 1)	11
Included	From Scopus	42
	From Google Scholar	27
	From backward citation searching	21
	Official documents and public research reports	5
	From targeted searches on voucher schemes	5
	Total corpus	**100**

Table 5 summarizes the corpus by country, source type, period, and theme. Australian sources outnumber Singaporean ones (64 and 34, with 2 sources covering both countries). The Australian evidence consists largely of survey-based studies of participation and its outcomes, many drawing on national or state cohort data, whereas the Singaporean evidence contains a larger share of policy analyses, books, and historical accounts. This imbalance is taken into account in interpreting the findings and is discussed among the limitations of the study.

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Table 5
Characteristics of the Corpus

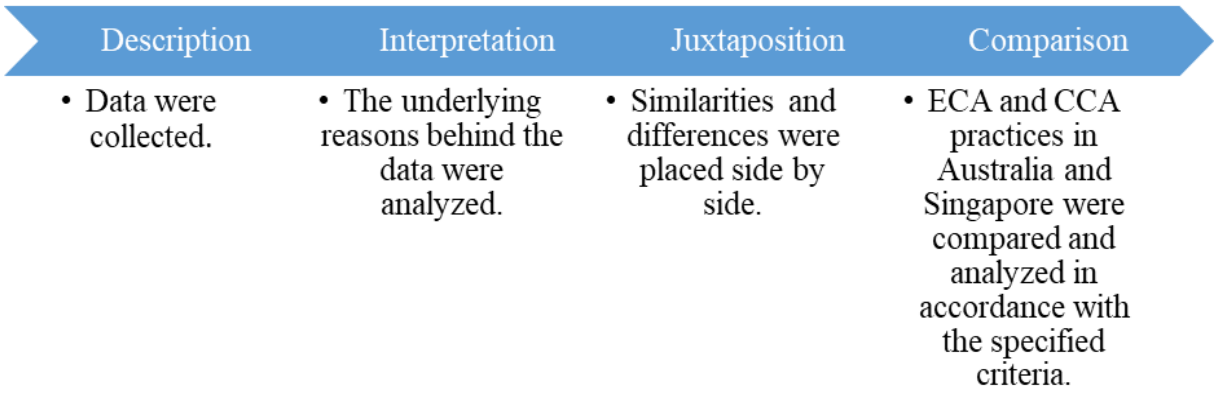
Characteristic	Australia	Singapore	Both	Total
Source type				
Journal article	52	19	2	73
Book or book chapter	3	10	0	13
Research report	7	3	0	10
Official document	2	2	0	4
Period of publication				
Before 2000	3	5	0	8
2000–2019	42	15	0	57
2020–2026	19	14	2	35
Theme				
Expectations	29	12	2	43
Management and funding	7	5	0	12
Problems in implementation	30	7	0	37
Historical and policy context	7	14	0	21
Total sources	**64**	**34**	**2**	**100**

Note. A source can contribute to more than one theme. *Historical and policy context* refers to sources used only in the description and interpretation stages of the comparison.

Data Analysis

The documents were analyzed with thematic analysis, following the six phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. We used a codebook approach. One author first coded the original set of documents openly, and the codes were grouped into three themes: expectations of the activities, their management and funding, and problems encountered in implementation. The codes and their definitions were then compiled into a codebook, which the second author used to code the same documents independently. Sources added through the revised search were coded with the same codebook. The theoretical framework was not used to generate codes; it served to interpret the themes, by locating the factors in each theme at an ecological level and identifying the form of capital involved. The comparison followed Bereday's (1967) four stages of description, interpretation, juxtaposition, and comparison. In the description and interpretation stages, the development and current state of the activities in each country were identified. In the juxtaposition stage, the findings were placed side by side with regard to equality of opportunity, and in the comparison stage the implications of the similarities and differences were assessed (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Research Process



Note. Adapted from "Reflections on Comparative Methodology in Education, 1964–1966," by G. Z. F. Bereday, 1967, *Comparative Education, 3*(3), 169–187.

Trustworthiness

Several steps were taken to support the credibility of the analysis. Two authors coded the original set of documents independently with the shared codebook, and their agreement, calculated with Miles and Huberman's (1994) formula as the number of agreements divided by the sum of agreements and disagreements, was 80.77%. Because a codebook approach was used, this figure shows how consistently the codes were applied; it is not in itself evidence that the interpretation is valid. Disagreements were resolved through discussion until the authors reached consensus, and sources added in the revised search were coded by one author and checked by the other. Involving more than one researcher brought different perspectives into the analysis (Lauri, 2011). The search log, screening records, and codebook were retained as an audit trail that allows the selection and coding of sources to be traced.

Ethical Considerations

This study analyzed published research and publicly available official documents. It involved no human participants, no personal or identifiable data, and no animals, so approval from an institutional review board was not required and there is no approval number to report. All documents were used in line with their terms of access and are cited in full.

Findings

The findings are organized under three themes: expectations of the activities, their management and funding, and problems in implementation.

Expectations of ECA in Australia and CCA in Singapore

In general, activities aim to support the holistic development of students (Dowden & Drager, 2016), prevent them from developing harmful habits such as alcohol and drugs, improve their sense of belonging to their environment, reduce school dropout rates, contribute to their professional/academic development, increase their interest in science (Le, 2013; Modecki et al., 2014), improve their self-awareness, close the education gap of disadvantaged

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students, and keep student interest alive with fun activities (Education Council, 2019; O'Donnell et al., 2024).

These activities also aim to strengthen the link between school and real life, enable students to acquire a range of soft skills—referred to as 21st-century skills (such as fostering individuals who are creative, able to work in teams, and possess effective communication and leadership skills, etc.)—thereby increasing their employment prospects after graduation and meeting the public sector's need for competitive, well-trained staff (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017), fostering a sense of shared nationhood by integrating different ethnic groups within society (Gorzanelli & Knijnik, 2025), fostering citizens who are sensitive to social issues, equipping students with experience and skills in political activities (Saha, 2004), and enhancing social solidarity through community service. In practice, however, organized community sport can uphold the segregation of ethnic, linguistic, religious, and socioeconomic groups instead of bridging it (Fox & Paradies, 2020).

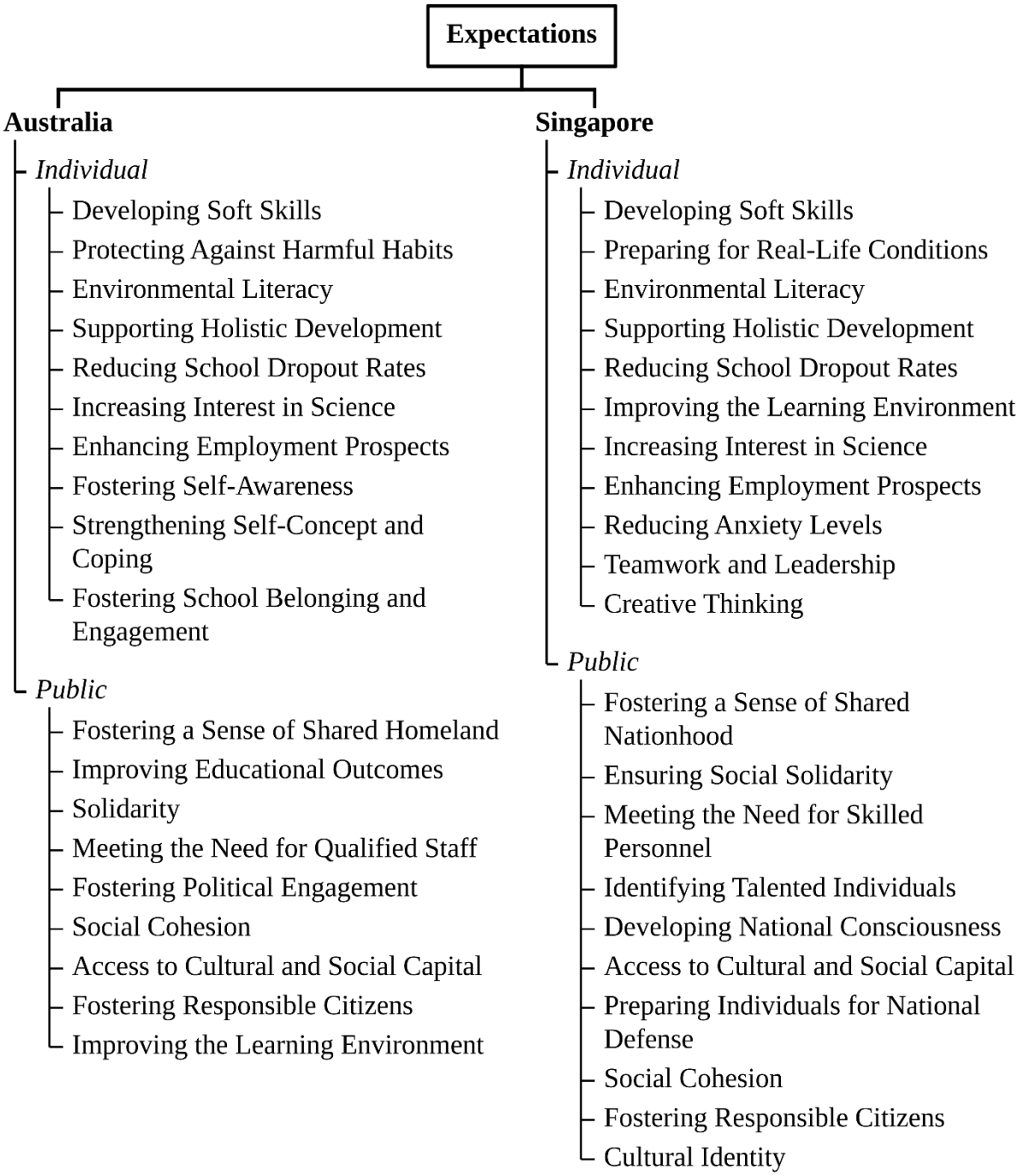
Research on Australian adolescents gives these expectations an empirical basis, although the evidence is mostly correlational. Participation has been linked with a more positive self-concept, particularly when young people combine sport with non-sport activities or take part in a wider range of them (Blomfield & Barber, 2009; Modecki et al., 2018), with higher university aspirations and a stronger sense of school belonging (Blomfield & Barber, 2010; Geagea et al., 2017; O'Donnell et al., 2024), with engagement and connectedness at school (Hall et al., 2007; Thomson, 2005), with self-awareness and social connectedness (Bower & Carroll, 2014), with self-regulation and coping efficacy (Carroll & Purdie, 2007; Heaslip et al., 2021), and with lower substance use and risk-taking (McCabe et al., 2016; Modecki et al., 2014). Studies of particular programs point to gains in young children's behavior and in students' interest in science and music (Eastwell & Rennie, 2002; Ng, 2017; Simoncini & Caltabiano, 2012), and structured activities offer more positive peer and identity experiences than social networking sites (Blomfield Neira & Barber, 2012). Several studies qualify these links. Team sport has been associated with higher alcohol use (Blomfield & Barber, 2010), the effects of intensive participation depend on young people's coping efficacy and on the peers they meet in activities (Heaslip & Barber, 2017; O'Donnell & Barber, 2018), and a fixed-effects analysis of national cohort data suggests that part of the apparent benefit reflects differences between those who take part and those who do not (O'Flaherty et al., 2022). Participation in student governance and community activities is among the strongest predictors of students' intended civic engagement (Homana, 2018; Reichert & Print, 2018).

In the Singaporean education system, too, activities are organized for a wide variety of purposes. In general, these activities aim to support pupils' holistic development, raise their levels of ecological literacy, meet their physical and social needs, foster a generation that grows up healthily, identify talented individuals, and equip them with a range of vital soft skills (MOE, 2026a). In practice, CCA can also give students access to the cultural and social capital valued in selection for scholarships (Foo & Yang, 2022). In addition to the stated expectations, it is also expected that pupils will develop a sense of belonging and responsibility toward their schools and countries (MOE, 2026a), that they will be prepared for national defense by enhancing their physical, mental, and emotional resilience, that a sense of national identity will be fostered among different ethnic groups (Ho, 2014). The codes related to this theme are presented in Figure 3.

Research on CCA in Singapore has asked whether these expectations are met in a system where participation is compulsory. Studies grounded in self-determination theory show that the benefits depend on the quality of participation, with autonomous motivation predicting developmental outcomes (Yeo et al., 2023; see also Guo & Liem, 2025; Liem et al., 2019), and acceptance by CCA peers supports gains in teamwork and leadership among primary school

students (Liem & Fredricks, 2025). In-school activities, especially in expressive and STEM fields, also predict students' creative thinking (Li et al., 2025). Case studies describe CCA clubs as settings for purposeful learning outside the classroom (Chong, 2023; Osman et al., 2022), and some CCAs, such as Chinese orchestras, carry cultural meanings for particular communities (Tay, 2021). A comparison of nine- and ten-year-olds in Hong Kong, Melbourne, and Singapore found that the most common out-of-school activities were largely similar in the three cities (Yelland et al., 2021).

Figure 3
Tree Code of Expectations of ECA and CCA



Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies
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Management and Funding of ECA in Australia and CCA in Singapore

In Australia, school-linked organized activities are organized mainly at school level within a state-based model of governance.

The organization of these activities is carried out through a range of partnerships involving schools, civil society organizations providing voluntary services (churches, parents' and citizens' organizations, etc.), pupils, parents, teachers, and external professional organizations that provide services for a fee (Dowden & Drager, 2016; O'Flaherty et al., 2022). As there is no general public funding to cover the costs of these activities, parents bear most of them (O'Flaherty et al., 2022; Reece et al., 2020). Five of the eight states and territories introduced sport vouchers between 2011 and 2018, with a median value of AU$150 a year against a median annual spend of AU$447 per child on organized sport (Reece et al., 2020). In New South Wales, for example, families receiving Family Tax Benefit can obtain two $50 vouchers per child each year for sport, recreational, and creative activities; the family pays the remaining costs, and activities provided by schools are not eligible (Service NSW, 2026).

Provision also takes different forms. In Queensland, part of the health, sport, and physical education work of schools has been outsourced to external providers (Williams et al., 2011), and school sport programs that aim to promote lifelong physical activity are designed and evaluated at the level of individual schools (Lubans & Morgan, 2008). National goals refer to students' participation in school governance and activities as part of citizenship education, but the curriculum gives priority to academic learning (Doecke & Huo, 2024).

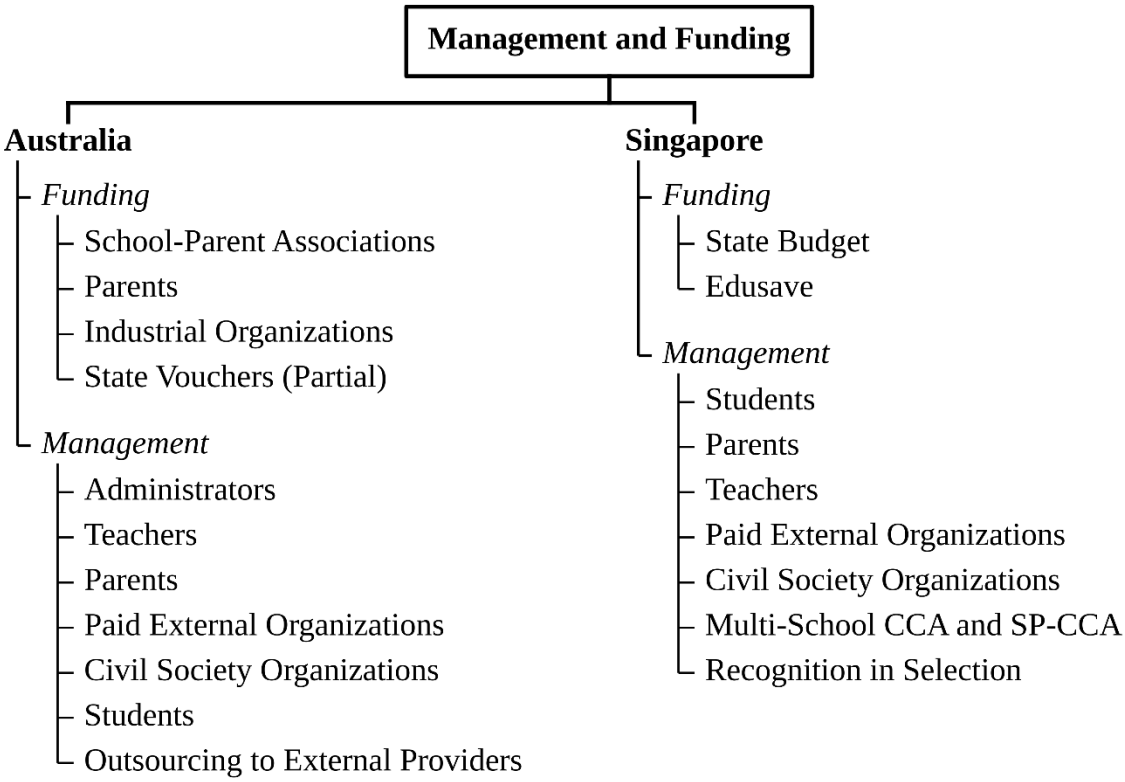
In the Singapore education system, the management and organization of CCAs are the responsibility of each school (MOE, 2026a). Koh (1987) recommended that the program be coordinated by an ECA Coordinating Committee comprising the principal or vice-principal, senior assistants, the sports secretary, and the assistant sports secretary. Activities are organized in varying forms and intensities, largely depending on the schools' existing facilities. While organizing activities is considered one of teachers' mandatory duties in the country, students, parents, voluntary civil society organizations, and local bodies, as well as external organizations that provide paid services (such as travel agencies), are also involved (Koh, 1987; MOE, 2026a). Efforts are also being made to reduce the workload on teachers by assigning students active roles in organizing events, thereby enabling students to benefit more fully from the activities (Koh, 1987). The state budget largely funds events organized in schools. In addition, it has been made possible to use the Edusave funds allocated by the state to all pupils to cover the costs of these activities (MOE, 2026a).

Recognition of CCA is tied to transitions between levels of schooling. Co-curricular achievement was added to the criteria for university admission (Tan, 2005), and the Direct School Admission scheme allows students to enter secondary schools on the basis of their talents and achievements in these activities (Kwek et al., 2023). Some activities have also been moved into the formal curriculum, as when outdoor education became part of physical education (Ho et al., 2015), and schools develop school-based niche programs alongside CCAs (Chong, 2022).

In Singapore, compulsory participation at secondary level, central funding, and a common framework of assessment have widened access and made provision more uniform across schools. The same arrangements turn CCA records into advantages at points of selection, so that differences between schools in the CCAs they can offer (MOE, 2026b; Soo et al., 2023) carry over into differences in what students can later present when they apply for places. In Australia, where participation is voluntary and financial support is limited, access depends on the capacity of schools to organize activities, on parents' ability to cover the costs and on

regional conditions, which creates the conditions for unequal access. The codes for this theme are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4
Tree Code of the Management and Funding of ECA and CCA



Problems in Implementation in Australia and Singapore

The importance attached to extra-curricular social activities in the Australian education system, from the nation's founding to the present day, is reflected in generally high levels of participation; in one study, nearly 90% of 8- and 9-year-olds took part in at least one activity (Carroll & Purdie, 2007). However, despite the creation of opportunities for generally high levels of participation in these activities, the failure to fully ensure equality of opportunity remains a significant problem. The current problem stems largely from the structure of the education system, the limited opportunities available in remote locations from the centers where students live, and the inability of some parents to cover the costs of these activities (O'Donnell et al., 2022; Simoncini et al., 2015).

In the Australian education system, schools do not receive a separate allocation from the central budget for these activities, and state voucher schemes cover only part of the costs (Reece et al., 2020; Service NSW, 2026). When New South Wales offered a universal voucher, it reached children in high socioeconomic areas most effectively, while children in low socioeconomic areas were less likely to register for it (Foley et al., 2020). Parents in the most disadvantaged areas were about twice as likely as those in the least disadvantaged areas never to have heard of the program, or to have registered without redeeming the voucher (Owen et al., 2020). Among children who did use it, the voucher covered about a fifth of annual spending on structured activity, and the gap in physical activity between children who speak a language other than English at home and their peers widened after voucher use (Foley et al., 2021).

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Children in the most disadvantaged areas take part in organized sport substantially less often than those in the most advantaged areas, and their families spend less than half as much on it, although vouchers cover a larger share of their costs (Reece et al., 2020). As a result, children from low socioeconomic status families take part in structured extracurricular activities at lower rates than their more advantaged peers (Mullan, 2013).

Furthermore, the Australian education system's structure, which supports and encourages private schools, coupled with an imbalance in funding between private and state schools, leads to inequalities in access to activities. This is because private schools, thanks to the income they receive from parents, have higher budgets and better physical facilities and equipment than state schools, and are therefore able to offer higher-quality, more intensive, and more varied extra-curricular social activities (Rioseco et al., 2018).

Another problem hindering access to activities in Australia is the lack of educational opportunities in rural areas comparable to those in the country's central regions (Fawcett, 2007). In rural or geographically remote areas, issues such as a shortage of specialist staff, inadequate school facilities, parents' inability to cover activity costs, and transport-related problems hinder pupils' participation in activities (Fawcett, 2007).

Studies in the corpus document these inequalities from several angles. Children from disadvantaged families spend less of their after-school time in sport (Kennewell et al., 2022), girls and urban children take part more often in school-based activities (Carroll & Purdie, 2007), and students are more likely to take part in schools where participation is widespread (Fullarton, 2002). Parents' own habits and support shape children's participation in sport, and students name cost and safety among the family constraints (Cleland et al., 2005; Maniam, 2017). Children in rural areas take part in different activities, and with different people, than children in cities (Brown et al., 2011), and young people in severely disadvantaged suburbs describe narrower opportunity structures than their peers elsewhere, which limits the skills they can accumulate for later transitions (Skattebol & Redmond, 2019). Studies of children with disability and developmental conditions report differences in the extent and type of their participation compared with other children (Farrell et al., 2024, 2025; King et al., 2013; Wigston et al., 2017), shaped by the type and severity of disability and by children's preferences (Shields et al., 2015). Religion and culture also play a part, as in the participation of Muslim girls in school sport (Alamri, 2013) and in the way cultural background shapes how senior students balance extracurricular activities, homework, and sleep (Lushington et al., 2015). At the same time, several studies find that participation benefits disadvantaged young people most. The link between developmental experiences in activities and self-concept is stronger in low-SES schools (Blomfield & Barber, 2011), non-sport activities offset the effect of financial hardship on risk-taking (O'Donnell et al., 2023), sport is protective for refugee-background youth, especially in disadvantaged communities (O'Donnell et al., 2020), and participation reduces the gap in educational expectations between regional and metropolitan adolescents (O'Donnell et al., 2022). Through these activities young people also build social capital that mediates the link between family background and educational aspirations (Chesters & Smith, 2015; Cuervo et al., 2019).

Participation has also changed over time. After the COVID-19 pandemic, participation in sport, arts, and music remained lower and social media use rose, with the largest declines in music, arts, and reading among students moving into secondary school (Zhou et al., 2025, 2026).

In Singapore, the problems in implementation stem largely from an education system focused on academic achievement (Green et al., 2006; Soo et al., 2023; Varghese & Kankaani, 2018). This approach within the education system leads children to devote most of their time outside school hours to private tuition and homework, to place less importance on social

activities (Soo et al., 2023), and causes education stakeholders to view such activities as distracting, hindering academic achievement, and unnecessary (Roopesh, 2018). This competitive, academic achievement-focused approach within the education system restricts children's and young people's opportunities to engage in social activities (Woo, 2008).

Another problem encountered in implementing activities in Singapore is the failure to ensure equal opportunities for pupils to access them. The main reason for this is the existence of schools in the country that are classified as either public or elite (for example, independent schools) and which have different educational resources and capacities (Soo et al., 2023). The high level of funding and school facilities available to these elite schools enables them to offer their pupils a greater variety and intensity of activities, both domestically and abroad. However, the inability of schools without comparable resources to organize activities of the same intensity and variety results in inequalities in students' access to these activities (Soo et al., 2023).

Compulsory participation therefore does not remove inequality; it changes where inequality appears. Because CCA records count at points of selection, differences in what schools can offer become differences in the achievements students can present when they apply to secondary schools, for university admission, or for scholarships (Kwek et al., 2023; Tan, 2005). Foo and Yang (2022) show that teachers in a lower-status junior college use extra-curricular work deliberately to prepare their students for prestigious state scholarships, which opens a route to mobility for some of them while aligning them with the meritocratic ideology of the state. The Ministry has acknowledged that the range of CCAs open to students depends on the size of their school and relies on multi-school CCAs and the Strategic Partnership-CCA to widen their options (MOE, 2026b). Primary school students who do not take part in CCA show a less adaptive academic and motivational profile (Liem et al., 2018), and an Outward-Bound program for students with frequent truancy improved their attendance at school and at CCAs in the short term (Ang et al., 2014).

In Australia, the problems stem largely from the structure of the education system, a lack of resources, and regional disparities, and they show first in whether children take part at all. In Singapore, where participation is compulsory, the problems are also structural but show mainly in the kind of CCA students can join, the school in which they do so and the recognition they obtain. Information on the codes is presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Tree Code of Problems in Implementation

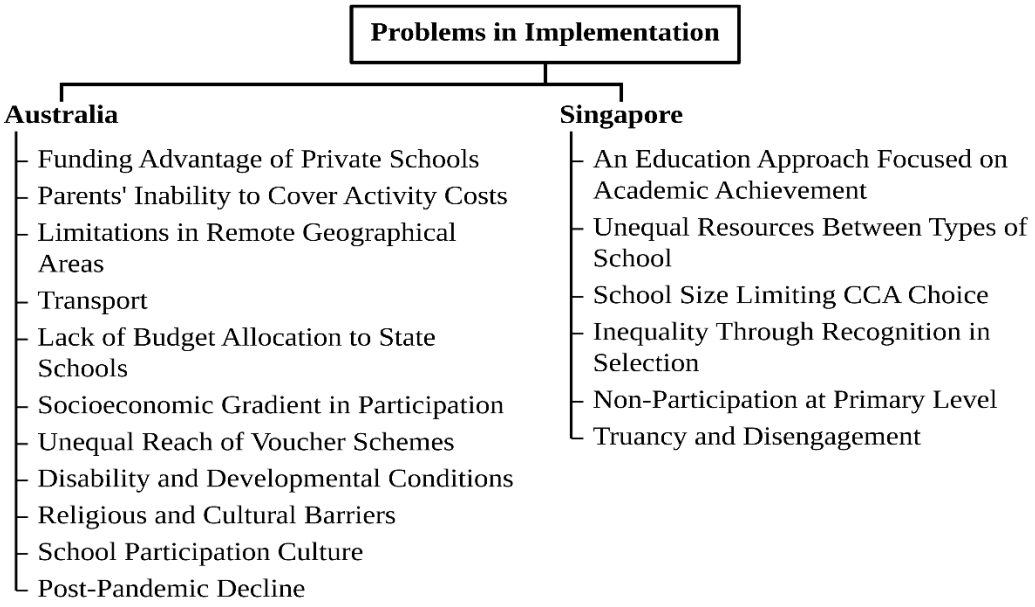

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Table 6
Comparison of ECA and CCA Practices in Australia and Singapore in Relation to Equal Opportunities

Comparison Criteria	Singapore	Australia
Expectations	To equip limited human resources with a high level of knowledge and skills. Participation is compulsory at secondary level, and CCA is presented as integral to holistic education.	Although similar expectations exist, there are challenges in creating inclusive and suitable conditions for all children to access activities.
Management	A centralized management approach is in place. Co-curricular activities at certain levels are mandatory.	A local governance model exists at the state and territory level. Participation in events is based on volunteerism.
Financial Access	The central government budget covers expenses for co-curricular activities. Stable, sustainable financial resources are available.	The parents cover extra-curricular activity expenses. Access depends on the parents' socioeconomic status. Unstable income sources are present.
Physical Infrastructure of Institutions (Opportunities, Equipment)	Common standards exist, but resources and the range of CCAs differ between types and sizes of school.	There are significant differences in the equipment and facilities of public and private schools. There is no standardization across institutions; different practices exist.
Social Mobility	Success in these events leads to admission to prestigious schools. Mandatory participation in events at certain levels and the provision of these events free of charge broaden access to cultural and social capital, but differences between schools affect what students can convert into admission advantages.	A similar application does not currently exist. Socio-economically advantaged families use these community events to increase their children's opportunities for social mobility. Conversely, the social mobility of children from disadvantaged groups who have difficulty accessing these events is limited.
Variation Within the Country	Differences between types and sizes of school in resources and in the range of CCAs offered.	Differences between states and territories, between government and non-government schools, and between metropolitan and regional areas.

Discussion

This study compared school-linked organized activities in Australia and Singapore with regard to equality of opportunity and access to cultural and social capital. Three findings stand out. The two systems expect broadly the same things of these activities. They differ sharply in how they govern, fund, and recognize them. And both produce unequal opportunities, but at different points: in Australia mainly in access, and in Singapore mainly in the kind of participation and the recognition it brings.

The shared expectations reflect a common origin. Both systems took school sport, clubs, and uniformed groups from the British tradition (Adair & Vamplew, 1997; Aplin, 1998), and both have used them to integrate ethnically diverse populations and to build national identity (Gorzanelli & Knijnik, 2025; Ho, 2014), in Australia at times in the service of assimilation (Phillips & Osmond, 2018). The Australian research supports these expectations only in part. Participation is associated with self-concept, belonging, aspirations, and lower risk-taking, but the associations weaken once differences between participants and non-participants are taken into account (O'Flaherty et al., 2022), and they depend on the peers and settings that young people encounter (O'Donnell & Barber, 2018). The Singaporean studies add a point that the Australian evidence cannot show: where participation is compulsory, what students gain depends on whether they take part autonomously (Yeo et al., 2023). Compulsion secures participation, not engagement. That children in Melbourne and Singapore spend their out-of-school time on largely similar activities (Yelland et al., 2021) suggests that the differences between the two systems lie less in what children do than in how access to these activities and their recognition are organized.

The first expectation derived from the theoretical framework was that inequality in Singapore would show less in whether students take part than in which activities they join, in which school, and with what recognition. The findings support it. Compulsory participation and school funding bring almost all secondary students into CCA, but schools differ in resources and in the range of CCAs they can offer (MOE, 2026b; Soo et al., 2023), and CCA records count at the transitions into secondary school and university (Kwek et al., 2023; Tan, 2005). In Bourdieu's (1986/2011) terms, the state sets an explicit rate at which co-curricular involvement is converted into institutionalized cultural capital. Differences in school resources, located in the exosystem, thus pass through a conversion rule set in the macrosystem and reappear as differences in students' credentials. Foo and Yang's (2022) account of teachers who use extra-curricular work to prepare students in a lower-status junior college for scholarship selection shows that this conversion can also serve mobility, but only by aligning students with the model of merit that the system rewards. The strong academic orientation of the system adds a further constraint, since it limits the time and value that families attach to CCA (Green et al., 2006; Soo et al., 2023; Varghese & Kankaani, 2018).

The second expectation was that inequality in Australia would show first in whether children take part at all. This is also supported. Participation, and the kind of activity children take part in, vary with family income and education, school sector, region, and disability (Carroll & Purdie, 2007; Kennewell et al., 2022; Rioseco et al., 2018; Skattebol & Redmond, 2019), and religious and cultural commitments shape participation for some groups (Alamri, 2013; Lushington et al., 2015). Because participation is voluntary and largely paid for by families, economic capital acts first at the point of access, and the costs and distances that parents face in the exosystem decide what is possible in the microsystem. Conversion is informal. It runs through the richer programs of private schools and through the social capital young people build in activities, which mediates the link between family background and aspirations (Chesters & Smith, 2015; Cuervo et al., 2019).

The findings also show why a reproduction reading alone is not sufficient. Several Australian studies find that participation benefits disadvantaged young people most, whether they attend low-SES schools, live in regional communities, experience financial hardship, or come from refugee backgrounds (Blomfield & Barber, 2011; O'Donnell et al., 2020, 2022, 2023). The framework anticipated this possibility: what happens within an activity can compensate for disadvantage while conversion at the level of the system reproduces it, and the two processes coexist, in line with studies that frame the question as one of reproduction or compensation (Merino et al., 2022). The practical consequence is that the students who take part least are often those who would gain most. Comparative studies of other systems point in

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a similar direction: state-organized provision was associated with broad access in Finland and in Soviet-era Kyrgyzstan (Adsız & Gül, 2025; Gül & Adsiz, 2026), whereas studies of Russia document inequality in access to extracurricular education (Kosaretsky & Ivanov, 2020).

Taken together, the two cases answer the question raised in the introduction. Universal, state-organized provision does not remove the socioeconomic gradient; it relocates it. Voluntary provision that depends on families and markets leaves the gradient at the point of access, where it excludes some children altogether. Evidence from other systems points the same way. In Lithuania, where non-formal activities for pupils have been funded through a per-pupil voucher since 2011, participation varied between 4% and 61% across municipalities, more than half of the pupils surveyed in several municipalities reported that their parents paid for their activities, and provision remained weaker in small towns and rural areas (Mažeikienė et al., 2026). Compulsory, school-funded provision moves it inside the system, to the range of activities that schools can offer and to the credentials that students can present. Neither arrangement on its own secures equal opportunity. Both systems are also changing: in Australia, participation in several activity areas has not recovered since the pandemic (Zhou et al., 2025, 2026), and in Singapore the Ministry of Education has committed to widening access to CCA (MOE, 2026b).

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. First, it relies on published documents and secondary data, so the practices it describes are those recorded in policies and research, not those observed in schools. Second, the search terms were in English and all included sources were in English, so relevant work published in other languages is unlikely to have been found. Third, the evidence base is uneven. Australian sources outnumber Singaporean ones, the Australian evidence is dominated by survey studies drawn from a small number of cohorts, and the Singaporean evidence relies more on policy analyses and case studies, so the two countries are not described in equal depth. Fourth, several Australian studies measure school-based and community-based activities together, whereas CCA is school-based, and part of the difference in participation patterns may therefore reflect what is measured. Fifth, the search covered one bibliographic database and Google Scholar, and relevant studies indexed elsewhere may have been missed, although backward citation searching reduces this risk. Finally, policies in both countries are changing, and the findings describe the situation at the time of the search.

Future research could collect primary data from schools, students, and parents in both countries, examine variation within each country in more depth, for instance between Australian states and territories or between types of Singaporean school, and extend the comparison to other high-performing systems such as Canada and South Korea.

Implications for Policy and Teacher Education

The findings have the following implications for policy makers and teacher educators:

- In Australia, public funding for school-linked activities, directed at schools and regions with fewer resources, could reduce the dependence of participation on family income.
- In both countries, support for the activity programs of state schools and smaller schools could prevent differences between schools from turning into differences in students' opportunities.
- In Singapore, the recognition of CCA in selection could be reviewed so that it rewards participation and growth more than achievements that depend on

school resources, and measures that balance academic and co-curricular demands could be strengthened.

- Teacher education programs could prepare student teachers to plan, lead, and evaluate organized activities, since teachers carry much of this work in both countries (Foo & Yang, 2022; Koh, 1987).
- Teacher educators could address how organized activities distribute cultural and social capital, so that future teachers recognize when participation depends on family resources and learn to reach students who do not take part.
- Initial teacher education and professional development could include inclusive practice for students with disability, students from refugee and migrant backgrounds, and students whose religious or cultural commitments affect their participation (Alamri, 2013; O'Donnell et al., 2020; Shields et al., 2015).
- Programs could help teachers attend to the quality of participation, including students' autonomy and their relationships with peers within activities, which the Singaporean evidence identifies as conditions for benefit (Liem & Fredricks, 2025; Yeo et al., 2023).

Conclusion

This comparison shows that the way a system governs organized activities determines where inequality appears. Australia's voluntary, largely family-funded provision leaves access dependent on family resources, school sector, and region. Singapore's compulsory, school-funded provision secures participation for almost all secondary students, but differences between schools and the use of CCA records in selection allow inequality to reappear in the kind of activity students join and the recognition they obtain. For Australia, the lesson is that wider public support for access would benefit the students who now take part least and who, several studies suggest, gain most. For Singapore, the lesson is that universal participation needs to be matched by comparable quality and fair recognition across schools. Read together, the two cases show that equal access to participation and equal access to the value of participation are different policy goals, and that a system that achieves the first does not thereby achieve the second.

Declarations

Author Contributions

Remzi Adsız contributed to the conceptualization and methodology of the study, carried out the literature search and source screening, coded and analyzed the documents, and wrote the original draft. ***Muhammet Nurullah Cicioğlu*** took part in source screening, coded the documents independently with the shared codebook, and reviewed and edited the manuscript. ***Yavuz Ercan Gül*** contributed to the conceptualization and theoretical framework, interpreted the findings, and reviewed, edited, and revised the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Ethics Statement

This study is based on published research and publicly available documents. It did not involve human participants, personal data, or animals, so ethics committee approval was not required.

Data Availability Statement

The search log, screening records, and codebook are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

The authors used a generative AI assistant (Anthropic Claude) solely for language editing during manuscript preparation. Generative AI was not used in the research design, data collection, analysis, or interpretation. The authors reviewed and edited all content and take full responsibility for the published article.

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