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Exploring Connections in Co-curricular Activities and Students' Holistic Development: A Case Study of a High School in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Co-curricular programs are increasingly recognized as essential for educating the "whole child," yet empirical research on how they promote holistic development in Ghanaian schools remains limited. This study investigates the impact of co-curricular activities on students' cognitive, psychomotor, and affective development at a high school in Ghana. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted in focus groups and individually, classroom and club observations were conducted, and audio transcripts, field notes, and photographs were created. The data were analyzed thematically. Findings reveal a vibrant ecosystem of 21 co-curricular clubs and activities officially integrated into the school timetable and curriculum. Students expressed high interest and engagement, often joining multiple clubs, leading to immersive Head, Hand, and Heart learning experiences. Participants reported that involvement in co-curricular activities enhanced students' critical thinking, practical skills, leadership qualities, and personal values. The school's ecosystem of supportive relationships and activities at micro- and mesosystem levels created proximal processes that fostered holistic growth. Practical implications include scheduling dedicated time for co-curricular activities, providing resources such as materials, funding, and transportation for clubs, and training educators to facilitate experiential learning.

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KEYWORDS:
co-curricular activities; holistic development; ecological systems; learning experiences

INTRODUCTION

Education is a key pillar of growth, providing young people with the knowledge and skills to contribute to society. Recently, experts emphasize that success requires more than academic teaching; a holistic approach develops the 'whole self" — including intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects — in an integrated way. Sarkar (2020) states that cognitive, physical, emotional, and social skills help learners face challenges and succeed professionally. Rahmat (2016) finds holistic environments improve academic results and life skills by addressing individual learning styles and emotional needs. This comprehensive development goes beyond textbooks, involving experiential learning and community support.

Co-curricular activities are vital for holistic education. Addai-Mununkum (2020) sees the co-curriculum as school activities like clubs, sports, arts, service projects, excursions, and religious events that supplement classroom learning and deepen understanding of abstract concepts. Participation helps students develop teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, and creativity skills beyond academics. Winston et al. (2008) and Kariyana et al. (2012) argue these activities support intellectual, character, and health growth alongside academic programs. Quinlan (2011) notes they teach skills like time management, research, and design across various domains. Studies by Aytoda (2018) and Rahmat (2016) find involvement boosts confidence, character, talents, and correlates with better academic performance.

Despite acknowledged benefits, the implementation of co-curricular programs often falls behind. In Ghana and other African contexts, high-stakes academic pressures (e.g., Ghana's Free Senior High School policy and double-track systems) tend to push clubs and sports lower on the priority list (Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021). Teachers and parents may

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resist activities perceived as distracting from examinations, and many schools lack the resources to support comprehensive programs. Notably, the literature reveals a gap: few qualitative case studies in Ghana detail how co-curricular activities influence students' holistic development. This study addresses that gap by examining a prominent high school renowned for its strong co-curricular tradition, aiming to understand how and why student participation in clubs and activities impacts their learning and growth.

The study is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory, which provides a framework for analyzing the multiple environmental layers that influence student development. Specifically, the study investigates: (1) the types of co-curricular opportunities offered and their integration into school life; (2) students' experiences and attitudes toward participating; and (3) the effects on their cognitive, psychomotor, and emotional development, summarized as the "Head, Hand, Heart." The goal is to generate insights for educators and policymakers working to develop holistic education strategies in Ghana and similar environments.

Theoretical Framework

This work draws on the Bioecological Systems Theory originally developed by Bronfenbrenner (1994) and further elaborated by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007). This theory asserts that human development unfolds through dynamic, reciprocal interactions between an active, evolving individual and a series of nested environmental systems. At its core lies the notion of *proximal processes* — enduring, patterned interactions between the person and their immediate surroundings, which are regarded as the principal engines of development. The model emphasizes that a person is not merely passive but actively shapes and is shaped by their contexts over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Tudge et al., 2009).

The model delineates four interrelated components known by the acronym PPCT: Process, Person, Context, and Time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). *Process* refers to the proximal processes described above; *Person* denotes the individual's characteristics (e.g., biological, gender, temperament); *Context* refers to four nested environmental systems — the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem — ranging from immediate settings such as school or family to broader cultural or societal influences; *Time* (chronosystem) acknowledges both the timing of events in an individual's life and historical time as influences on development (Tudge et al., 2009).

This work adapts the theory to emphasize the Person and Context components. The student is seen as an individual with unique traits, interests, and motivations for growth. The context is a nested environmental system from clubs to the broader socio-cultural setting. Bronfenbrenner's model shows that learning and development are influenced by personal ability, curriculum, and interaction quality in the school environment. Co-curricular activities act as proximal processes in the microsystem—clubs and teams involve students in collaborative projects with teachers and peers. These are further affected by mesosystem factors like administrative support and parental valuation, as well as systemic influences like ministry guidelines and cultural expectations. This framework provides a valuable perspective on how co-curricular activities and school environments support holistic development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative instrumental case study design. A case study was suitable because the goal was to gain an in-depth, context-rich understanding of how co-curricular activities operate in a single school setting, rather than to generalize broadly. According to Stake (1995), an instrumental case study focuses on a case that provides insight into a broader issue. In this context, the case is a school referred to as Sankofa Senior High School, known for its strong emphasis on co-curricular activities. The researchers were immersed for one school term (three months) in the school environment to generate data revealing the interactions of factors shaping students' experiences during classroom lessons, club meetings, and school events. Multiple data sources were used to enhance credibility, including interviews, direct observations, and documentary artifacts.

Participants and Sampling

The case site was Sankofa School (pseudonym), a government-funded boarding school intentionally selected for its reputation for active student involvement in clubs and sports. Permission was obtained from the school administration prior to commencing fieldwork. Criterion-based purposive sampling was used to identify participants who were students or teachers heavily involved in co-curricular activities (Palinkas et al., 2015). A total of 21 participants took part: 18 students (male and female, ages 16–19, from various academic tracks) and three teachers (all male), each serving as a club patron. Student focus groups enabled peers to discuss their experiences together, while one-on-one interviews captured patrons' perspectives. The relatively small sample size reflects a data-saturation approach common in qualitative research.

Data Collection

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and observations. The interview guides included 15 core open-ended questions to explore participants' involvement, perceptions, and the effects of co-curricular activities on their learning. Follow-up prompts helped deepen responses. Interviews, lasting 40–50 minutes each, were audio-recorded and transcribed. Student interviews were conducted as group discussions, while patrons were interviewed individually. Observations were made with minimal interference during club meetings, sports practices, and co-curricular events. Detailed field notes were taken, and, with permission, selected activities were photographed and video recorded. A structured observation guide maintained consistency, focusing on participation, student interactions, and skills employed. School documents, including timetables, club rosters, and competition records, provided valuable contextual data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures. Transcripts, observation notes, and photographs were imported into Taguette, an open-source qualitative analysis tool. Coding was both deductive (guided by research questions and Bronfenbrennerian concepts) and inductive (allowing new themes to emerge). Codes were iteratively refined; categories such as time allocation, skill development, enjoyment/motivation, and peer support emerged from participants' narratives and observation patterns. Themes were organized to address each research question. To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher engaged in reflexive note-taking and triangulated data from interviews, observations, and artifacts. Participants reviewed key themes through member checking to validate interpretations. Finally, thematic results were connected to Bronfenbrenner's framework as an interpretive lens. A key limitation of this study is that it reflects only one context; its results may not apply to schools without similar support or flexible scheduling.

RESULTS

Sankofa School

Sankofa School, a girls' secondary school established in the mid-1980s, has evolved from a modest community-day institution to a mission- and church-affiliated school before fully joining the public education system. It maintains a vision of holistic development, emphasizing academic excellence, character, leadership, creativity, and service. The ethos promotes integrity, industriousness, and nurturing young women to contribute meaningfully to society. The school now enrolls over 2,300 students with 50+ teachers, offering full second-cycle education and specialized programs. Its flagship initiative is a STEAM program integrating Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics to prepare students for a rapidly changing global environment.

The school's achievements are both national and international in scope. Students have twice won the prestigious World Robotics Competition, in addition to 30 other awards, a feat that earned government commendation. The Ministry of Education has acknowledged Sankofa as a trailblazer in revolutionizing education in Ghana, specifically recognizing its STEAM Centre as a key component of its vision to create a generation of innovators, problem-solvers, and leaders. Consequently, the state regularly supports the school with infrastructure, including a dedicated robotics laboratory. Corporate bodies have also donated resources to support its programs. A teacher captured the school's philosophy as follows:

> *"In our capacity as educators, we firmly believe that the promotion of comprehensive development transcends the confines of classrooms and textbooks. These initiatives play a crucial role in our overarching objective of cultivating individuals who possess not only scholastic prowess but also social acuity, emotional equilibrium, and resilience." (Mr. Ofori, Teacher)*

The Co-Curricular Program at Sankofa

Living its vision of providing a holistic learning experience, Sankofa offers a wide range of co-curricular activities integrated into both the official curriculum and student life. Interviews and observations revealed 21 distinct clubs and associations across academic, artistic, sports, cultural, and service domains. These include: STEM clubs (Robotics & Entrepreneurship Club and Science & Math Club); academic and humanities clubs (Writers & Debaters Club, Students of History/Geography Associations); creative groups (Drama Club, Editorial Board, Royal Mass Choir, Instrumentalist Association); as well as Sports Clubs, Cadet Corps, Sanitation Club, Chaplaincy, and HOSA. Patrons' lists and school records confirmed these offerings.

Joining a co-curricular group is mandatory at Sankofa, a policy students gladly welcome. In practice, students typically joined more than one club. One third-year student remarked: *"I am part of the mass choir, school choir, Scripture Union, and Writers Club — it is all about interest and availability."* A patron confirmed this pattern:

> *"I have seen students belonging to a lot of activities. My sports prefect, for example, is a member of the entrepreneurship club, attends scripture union regularly, is a member of the prefectorial board, and is again part of the sanitation association. So, these things are very normal here and we encourage that." (Mr. Ofori, Patron)*

Integration into Curriculum and Schedule

Two spaces exist for the enactment of co-curricular programs at Sankofa. First, conventional co-curricular periods: Thursday afternoons from 2:30 to 4:20 have been designated as a co-curricular block during which every club is expected to meet. A student confirmed: *"We normally meet on Thursdays for rehearsals ... so it does not conflict with classwork."* A patron elaborated: *"We have a timetable, and* *on it, we have a place for co-curricular activities. On Thursdays after class, we meet — we do not compromise academics."*

Second, Sankofa formally integrates co-curricular activities into academic programs, with each class allotted at least two hours per week for subject-related co-curricular pursuits. For example, literature classes schedule debate competitions during English periods, business classes hold entrepreneurship seminars during regular lessons, and science fairs are organized for science programs. Taken together, the two forms of co-curriculum offer complementary roles to classroom instruction. Co-curricular activities at Sankofa are not merely optional extras but are embedded at multiple levels through scheduled hours and school policy, fostering an environment where such activities are normalized and appreciated.

Student Response and Engagement

Students not only participated in co-curricular activities but were deeply engaged. During club meetings, students showed strong interest: meeting spaces were full, and some rushed to secure spots. One student, Dzifa, expressed her enthusiasm:

> *"I love drama and debate … I participate in sports not because it is compulsory, but because I am genuinely interested. These activities are opportunities to explore my hobbies and become a more confident, well-rounded person." (Dzifa, Student)*

At the Robotics club meeting, students showed rapt attention to detail, brainstorming in pairs and troubleshooting programming glitches. These findings are noteworthy given that low student engagement has been reported in the literature (Antwi, 2023; Yankyerah et al., 2023). Parental support further shaped engagement. While some students, such as Dzifa, reported parental encouragement, others faced financial barriers.

Impact on Holistic Development

A central aim of the study was to investigate the impact of co-curricular activities on students' holistic development. Across multiple data sources, consistent themes emerged regarding improvements in the cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains — the "3H" (Head, Hand, Heart) of development.

Cognitive (Head). Participants reported that club activities sharpened intellectual skills and critical thinking. The Writers & Debaters Club and the Entrepreneurship Club boosted students' analytical and research skills as they researched current events for debates and business ideas for projects. As one patron observed, *"Debate, Entrepreneurship, and Robotics clubs make learners think logically and research a lot, increasing their understanding of concepts."* The school's consistent success in academic competitions — including national robotics contests and regional debate championships — indicates cognitive improvements from applied learning. Several students reported improvements in academic performance, attributing these gains to their club experiences.

Psychomotor (Hand). Almost all activities had a physical or practical component that built skills. Sports clubs and daily dawn jogging sessions enhanced fitness and discipline. Creative arts (choir, drama, instrumental clubs) fostered fine motor skills and coordination. Patrons commented that clubs prepare students for the job market by promoting both soft and gross skills such as leadership and craftsmanship. The Robotics club involved hands-on engineering and teamwork, while the school choir trained students in singing and collaborative performance. These embodied activities engaged the body and mind together, aligning with Ghana's current education emphasis on Head-Hand-Heart learning. Co-curricular activities thus functioned as laboratories for experiential learning where practical exercises complemented theoretical knowledge.

Affective (Heart). Participants highlighted significant improvements in attitudes, values, and social-emotional skills. Teamwork, leadership, perseverance, and humility were frequently mentioned as outcomes of club participation. The Debaters Club built confidence and public-speaking skills, while community service clubs fostered empathy and civic responsibility. One student commented that co-curricular involvement *"makes me a better person; I learn to cooperate, manage my time, and respect others"* (Adom, Student). Teachers observed positive behavioral changes: students generally avoided harmful vices and exhibited greater motivation and focus on schoolwork. These affective changes mirror findings by Wangai (2012) and Kuan et al. (2019), which suggest that co-curricular participation enhances self-esteem, emotional intelligence, and social competence.

Collectively, the evidence shows that Sankofa offers an ecology of educational experiences promoting students' overall growth. Co-curricular activities directly support cognitive learning (Head), practical skills (Hand), and emotional/social development (Heart). These areas align with Bronfenbrenner's idea that development occurs through interactive processes in the environment: club activities create close, ongoing interactions within the student's microsystem that, in turn, shape outcomes across various personal domains.

Challenges Identified

While the overall program was intensive, participants pointed out some implementation challenges. Limited resources were mentioned, including insufficient funds for equipment or excursion trips. Some teachers suggested that certain parents and colleagues did not fully value co-curricular time, which could have slowed broader support. However, these issues were less severe at Sankofa compared to other schools. The school's strong leadership and culture helped overcome many obstacles, enabling co-curricular activities to thrive despite typical limitations.

DISCUSSION

Interpreting the findings through Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory reveals that students' holistic development at Sankofa School emerged from the complex interaction between the individual learner (*Person*) and the multi-layered environment (*Context*). Students' engagement in co-curricular activities — such as clubs, societies, and competitions — functioned as proximal processes within the microsystem, shaping personal attributes such as confidence, teamwork, leadership, and resilience. These immediate interactions with peers and teachers reinforce Bronfenbrenner's argument that development is propelled by sustained, reciprocal exchanges between individuals and their close settings (Tudge et al., 2009).

At the mesosystem level, linkages between school and home environments further strengthened developmental outcomes. Collaboration between teachers, parents, and club patrons enhanced learners' motivation and commitment. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's (1994) view that interconnected settings foster developmental consistency, whereby values learned in one context are reinforced in another. When parents encourage participation in co-curricular programs, they bridge the microsystems of family and school, deepening students' social and emotional learning.

The exosystem also exerted an indirect yet significant influence. Institutional policies such as allocating official timetable time for clubs provided enabling structures that sustained participation. These policies echo the notion that systems beyond the learner's immediate environment — such as educational administration and ministry directives — shape available opportunities for growth (Hong et al., 2020). The involvement of external partners, including entrepreneurs and corporate sponsors, expanded students' experiential learning and highlighted the supportive role of distal contexts in enriching developmental pathways.

At the broadest level, the macrosystem — comprising cultural expectations, gender norms, and national education goals — framed how co-curricular engagement is valued. The emphasis on moral discipline, leadership, and service in Ghanaian school culture reinforces a national vision of producing well-rounded citizens. Such macro-level values legitimize co-curricular activities as integral to formal education rather than peripheral add-ons. Hence, the interplay between person and context in this study exemplifies Bronfenbrenner's assertion that development is simultaneously personal and ecological.

These findings reflect broader global research on extracurricular activities. Das (2022) and others found that activities such as tours and excursions expand learning perspectives and social skills. Social activities such as debates and poetry promote critical thinking and cultural appreciation, aligning with Danoa (2017) and Mathew et al. (2011). The positive association with academic self-confidence (Marsh & Kleitman, 2002) was clear: students reported that practical club activities reinforced classroom lessons. Overall, this case supports theories that co-curricular involvement enhances cognitive and emotional development while promoting a sense of school belonging.

A notable insight is how this school's approach offers a model for practice. Unlike many Ghanaian schools where co-curricular activities are undervalued, Sankofa SHS demonstrates that when clubs are deliberately integrated into the educational process, students thrive holistically. Theoretical and empirical evidence align: Bronfenbrenner's theory predicts it, and the data confirm it — the school's environment of experiences truly fosters comprehensive development.

Policy and Practice Implications

The findings implore schools and policymakers to view co-curricular engagement as an integral component of holistic student development rather than a peripheral activity. Schools must incorporate co-curricular activities into their timetables. Diversity and inclusiveness in co-curricular offerings are crucial for accommodating students' varied interests, abilities, and developmental needs. Providing opportunities across academic, artistic, sporting, and service domains expands the learning ecology and allows each learner to discover their personal strengths. Effective implementation depends on capable and motivated facilitators. School management should build mesosystemic linkages by engaging parents, alumni, and local professionals as mentors, patrons, and sponsors. Such collaboration not only broadens the resource base but also reinforces shared developmental values between home, school, and community. At the exosystem and macrosystem levels, educational authorities should establish supportive policy frameworks and provide necessary resources. Systematic monitoring and evaluation should accompany these reforms, tracking participation rates, competition outcomes, and indicators of student well-being to assess program impact and advocate for continued investment.

CONCLUSION

This case study shows how a Ghanaian high school uses co-curricular activities to promote holistic development through scheduled programs and student involvement, aligning with Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory. Findings indicate co-curricular participation improves academic, physical, and socio-emotional skills, supporting the view that these programs are essential, not optional. Prioritizing them in schools can produce adaptable, creative, responsible graduates, fulfilling Ghana's educational goals. Future research could explore other schools or track long-term outcomes. This evidence highlights investing in co-curricular activities as key to developing knowledgeable, healthy, engaged citizens.

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