

Improving Engagement Among Youth in After-School Programs at Banksia Gardens Community Services

December 2022

Abstract:

School disengagement in disadvantaged areas of the Northern Region of Melbourne, Australia has contributed to poor educational outcomes for these communities. In collaboration with Banksia Gardens Community Services, we created a catalog of after-school enrichment program offerings and determined that there is a deficit of program offerings to meet the community's needs and interests. In order to support stronger academic re-engagement, we analyzed the needs, interests, and engagement patterns among youth in the community through interviews, focus groups, and surveys with experts to produce recommendations for Banksia Gardens' Study Group.

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Need for Youth Engagement in Broadmeadows

A child's education is crucial for their social, emotional, and cognitive development. When a child is given a safe and encouraging educational experience, they thrive in other aspects of life. However, children from disadvantaged areas are often preoccupied with situations at home such as violence, an absence of parental support, and a lack of basic needs, resources, and stability. These adversities can be detrimental for many developmental reasons and can cause children to become disengaged from their education and fall behind in school.¹ Poor education outcomes for children also spread throughout families and communities, which often challenges the advancement of future generations.

Engagement principles for underprivileged children have been a widely researched topic due to the various challenges of families and communities.²⁻⁵ Emphasis on social and emotional learning, community outreach, and family connections support educational programs and prove to be beneficial, but the needs of youth are constantly evolving, and the specific approaches must be localized.²

As seen in Figure 1, the Northern Region of Melbourne, Australia, is divided into seven local government areas (LGAs). Within one of them, Hume, a small suburb known as Broadmeadows has long been ranked as one of the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in the area. Children living here are significantly more likely to have jobless parents, live in government-funded public housing, and have

experienced abuse or family violence.⁶ Outside of school, a child spends the majority of their time at home, where their stress levels, exposure to resources, and parental support will affect their educational growth. While schools offer an ideal place for personal growth for children, a lack of engagement as a result of their family life can damage future outcomes.

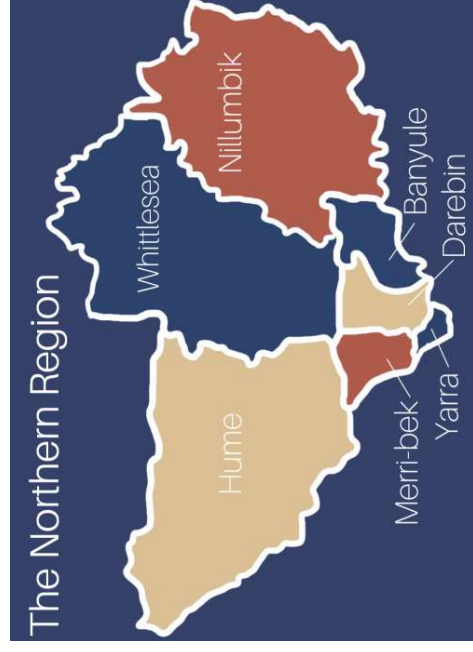


Figure 1: A Map of the Melbourne Northern Region

Banksia Gardens Community Services is a community center that provides resources for adults and children in Broadmeadows. Their enrichment program, Study Group, shown in Figure 2, is an after-school homework club for children in the area and is one of their most important program offerings for children. Study Group offers academic support, sports, creative activities, and more for kids to come free of charge after school. Banksia Gardens' Study Group aims to increase engagement and offer support to the disadvantaged families of the local community.



Figure 2: Banksia Gardens' Study Group

This project analyzed the programs, needs, and engagement patterns among youth in the Northern Region to produce a catalog of after-school program offerings and provide recommendations to Banksia Gardens Community Services to aid the creation of an action plan for Study Group in the future. The project was completed through the following four objectives:

1. Map After-School Offerings in the Northern Region
2. Assess the Needs, Struggles, and Interests of Youth in the Local Community
3. Understand the Level of Engagement and Vision of Stakeholders at Banksia Gardens' Study Group
4. Analyze Data to Develop Recommendations for Improving Youth Academic Re-Engagement

Through exploring schools and after-school programs in the area, learning about successful engagement practices, and assessing the community's needs, we were able to assist Banksia Gardens with their goal of fostering strong engagement and improving education outcomes in the community.

Personal and Educational Hardships: Disengagement

Successful engagement in education and enrichment activities is essential to a child's life and well-being. There are many elements such as family, school systems, and community that if integrated properly will likely lead to this success. Connected home life and community can play a key role in brain development for children.³ Success in learning is a long, difficult process for even the most privileged and supported families that requires careful consideration, consistency, support, and resources.

Disadvantaged children are burdened with additional challenges to this already complicated journey. Impoverished families often face financial issues that can lead to a lack of nutrition, housing, and other tools that are important to a child's well-being.⁷ Disadvantaged households may not have access to educational resources such as reading materials or technology. Along with lacking physical resources, parents who do not have the time to help with schooling or those who do not hold education as a high value may contribute to a child's disengagement. Poverty affects the emotional support and proper

guidance that is necessary for one's learning career.

The sections below explore the causes and implications of disengagement from school, strategies for re-engagement, the impact of after-school enrichment programs, and an overview of Banksia Gardens Community Services. This research will lay the groundwork for our team's dive into Banksia Gardens' Study Group and the disengagement of disadvantaged children in Northern Melbourne.

Family and Community Struggles in Greater Melbourne Lead to School Disengagement

Living in a disadvantaged area requires coping with greater adversity in achieving one's ambitions, while often having less support in doing so. The complexities families deal with in disadvantaged areas not only make it hard to improve daily life but also break the barrier to advancing future generations. Studies suggest problems remain in these communities due to the inability of families to advance because "disadvantage is difficult to shift when it occurs across multiple areas of life as these challenges combine to create what can seem to be insurmountable hurdles."⁶ When these challenges are inflicted upon families, the impact on kids often extends from generation to generation.

Greater Melbourne, Victoria consists of many disadvantaged places, all of which have impacts on families. Based on data collected from Dropping Off the Edge, an organization that studies the disadvantaged areas across Australia, Broadmeadows, Victoria has been

ranked the top-most disadvantaged area of the state for multiple years.⁶ Figure 3 displays a color-coded map of the disadvantaged areas of Northern Melbourne and outlines the contrast between communities.

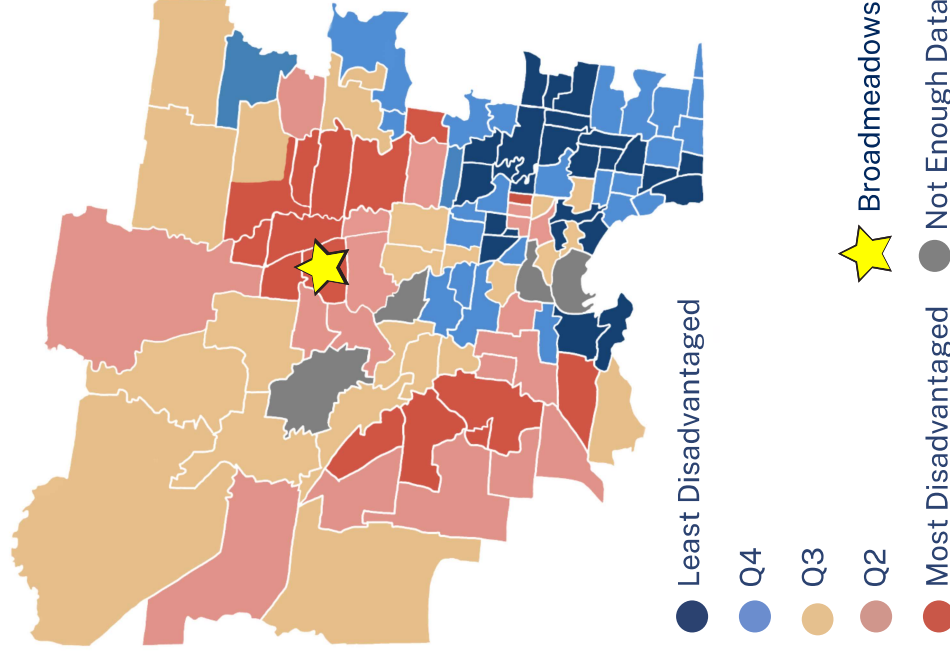


Figure 3: Levels of Disadvantage in Greater Melbourne⁶

Challenges for families in disadvantaged areas of Greater Melbourne have largely remained constant over the years. For children living in the top 3 percent of most disadvantaged areas, including Broadmeadows,

their families were 3.1 times more likely to live in government-funded public housing, 2.9 times more likely to have jobless parents or prison admissions, 3 times more likely to have gone through child abuse, and 2.4 times more likely to have family violence in their lives.⁶ Due to these challenges, children living in this area require specific attention to maximize potential success. This puts pressure on school systems and child services to take special notice. While a lack of resources can be a scapegoat for this persistence, an additional root of the issue can be observed in schools in the lack of engagement underprivileged kids are experiencing.⁴ Without adequate child support, communities struggle to combat their additional adversities.

Poverty-Related Challenges to Successful Engagement

One of the most powerful ways to improve a community is by advancing youth to overcome struggles and excel in their future. While school is the ideal place for underprivileged kids to better their personal development, a lack of engagement in their education hinders this process. The root of disengagement is often found within their home life and from educational difficulties in a highly diverse community.

Poverty's Substantial Role in Brain Development and Learning

Many studies have demonstrated that living under the poverty line is associated with delays in brain development.⁵ Besides school, a child will spend most of their time at home, so

poverty has a direct relationship with childhood development and educational growth. Of low-income children, 5 percent experience brain development delays and 8.3 percent have learning disabilities, which is 1.3 times more common than for children living above the poverty line.⁵ As seen in Figure 4, the three key factors contributing to brain development include the child's relationships, access to resources, and stress.

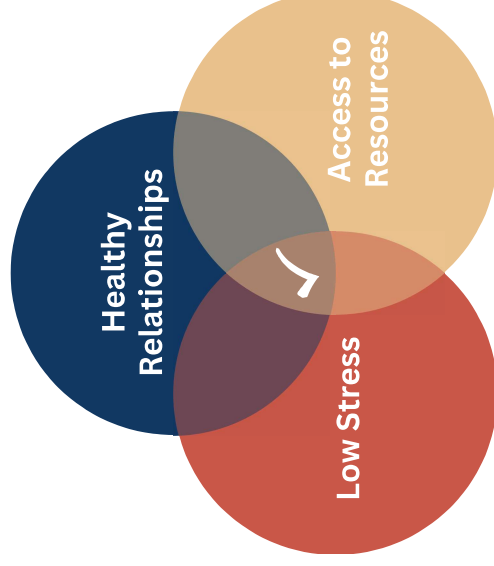


Figure 4: Major Factors of Brain Development

Healthy relationships at home are crucial for encouraging a culture of learning and expressing oneself. A parent or guardian's engagement in their children's education starts early, and a positive mindset about schooling can make a large difference in the student's academic success. Many children living in poverty have one or more parents without the time or capability to help them with schoolwork. This lack of a relationship between school and home life can negatively impact a

child's association and motivation with their education.⁸

Resources also play a key role in development. Homes in high-poverty areas such as Broadmeadows are more likely to lack access to computers, high-speed internet, books, and other materials to aid a student outside of school. These resource limitations lead to delays in the development of language skills and cognitive abilities.⁷ More privileged children have greater and more consistent access to learning resources, increasing their ability to leap ahead.

Poverty-inflicted stress can also impact a child's performance in the classroom. Chronic stress can affect a child's life, resulting in emotional problems, lower IQ scores, memory loss, shortened dendrites, neuron death, and the fostering of inappropriate attachments.³ This stress is heightened in an impoverished lifestyle with health issues stemming from a non-nutritional diet, homelessness, lack of food, or the inability to receive medical treatment for illness.³ A child cannot fully focus on their education if other stressors in their life consume time and energy.

Diversity Causes Challenges for Teaching and Learning

While diversity can be greatly beneficial to children for several educational, cultural, and acceptance-related reasons, "classroom diversity can also raise challenging issues within the classroom and create cultural barriers or learning disadvantages".⁹ Educators in a diverse classroom face the challenge of teaching a variety of educational, linguistic,

and developmental differences among students. In a diverse place such as Broadmeadows, the most conventional teaching methods may not reach all learning preferences.

Furthermore, students who are not taught in their primary language have an added challenge comprehensively.¹⁰ In a disadvantaged area, families often gather from all over the world and their children come from diverse learning, behavioral and cultural backgrounds. In the city of Hume, where Broadmeadows resides, there are over 156 countries represented as well as 150 languages spoken, which can make it difficult for educators to effectively teach and appeal to all students.¹¹

Lastly, linguistic diversity may cause an added social challenge that can negatively affect confidence in the classroom. Students may not be able to integrate themselves fluidly if a language barrier has a strong effect on communication. This makes it difficult for all parties and can affect the confidence of the students who are not taught in the language they speak at home.⁹

Encouraging Engagement in Education

Dysfunctional family environments can lead children to disconnect from their learning, fall behind developmentally and cause a decline in a child's perception of their abilities. However, 1 out of 3 children facing these circumstances goes on to catch up to their peers with assistance from programs and trusted adults.⁷ Much research has been developed regarding the principles and strategies to engage

students.² ¹² Social and emotional learning (SEL), community and family outreach, and a focus on well-being are important approaches that can aid in student engagement.

Supporting Student Re-Engagement

While many factors can contribute to a learning disconnect, there are many key principles for supporting student re-engagement. As displayed in Figure 5, these include healthy and beneficial relationships, inclusive and intentional programming, safety, and accessibility.¹² Effective communication, family and community engagement, educational activities, resource sharing, and other collaboration can foster an enthusiasm for

learning. Social and emotional learning (SEL) works to combine many of these principles and learning approaches to support the social, emotional, and academic needs of a child, which assist in student success and interest in learning.¹²

Safety, health, and well-being are the top priorities in a student's experience. A safe space for students is essential to their confidence and well-being so a place with proper security and supervision will allow children to immerse themselves in their learning. While a child's physical health is a high priority, their mental health and well-being are just as important.

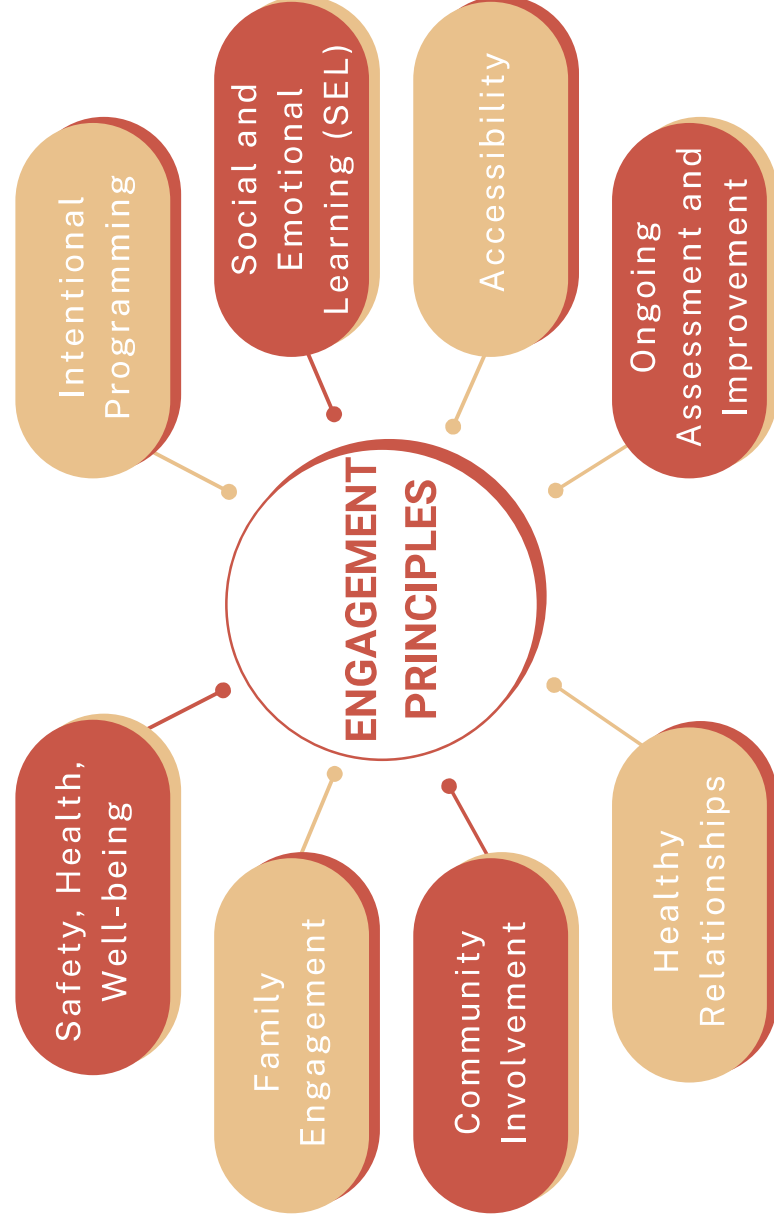


Figure 5: Engagement Principles

Program **accessibility** is a crucial necessity for engagement. According to Rachel Peachy, a former schoolteacher, “[a]ccessibility in education gives all people the same access to educational experiences, services, and information,” regardless of disabilities or disadvantages.¹³ In areas of financial hardships, such as Broadmeadows, accessibility is an important factor. Programs must provide diverse teaching formats, appropriate literature, and a variety of practices to be engaging and allow access to these materials outside of school. Without access, other educational benefits cannot be realized.¹⁴ Therefore, accessibility can be a significant aid to a child’s engagement in school.

Intentional programming is another aspect that is essential for success in student engagement. Activities that tailor to a student’s academic and social needs are correlated with healthy development, which will benefit the child’s learning and involvement. To aid intentional programming, the most successful expanded learning programs consider **improvement based on frequent assessment**. To optimize programs, new data and research that become available should be utilized to make beneficial improvements.

A child’s **relationships with their family, community, and fellow students** are essential for student learning and engagement.² Children whose families participate in their education tend to behave better, perform better, and have improved social and academic skills.¹⁵ Partnerships between families, schools, and the community enhance learning, so

encouraging these healthy relationships at school, after school, and at home will lead to positive results. Therefore, schools and after-school programs that incorporate family and community involvement often have greater success in re-engagement.

Many programs utilize **social and emotional learning (SEL)**, which helps relate learning material of the students’ lives, backgrounds, and knowledge with practice in social skills to help increase student motivation and engagement in the classroom.¹⁶ SEL practices include cooperation, managing conflict, making friends, coping, being resilient, and managing their own feelings to increase engagement and thereby improve a child’s academic success, and mental health.¹⁷ Social and emotional learning can improve the class atmosphere and the instructor’s teaching style by promoting a safe, collaborative, and inclusive atmosphere.¹⁸

A framework developed by Hume City Council provides useful guidelines for organizations to increase engagement and improve the community. This framework contains five key themes including feeling secure, cared for, and safe; having access to necessities; being healthy; learning throughout their life; and being involved, connected, and valued.¹⁹ These themes are critical to having youth grow and develop in their early years. This framework aims to promote engagement and youth success through the proper utilization of engagement principles and student needs.

Banksia Gardens and Local After-School Programs: Striving for Re-Engagement

After-school programs can often be a safe space for students following the school day and include many enriching activities. These programs are aimed to increase educational engagement, while also providing childcare to parents or guardians for their school-aged children. Most programs provide academic help, physical activities, life skills, and other benefits.²⁰

The Effect of After-School Programs on Children

Studies have shown several positive connections between adolescents participating in after-school activities and their well-being.¹⁸ After-school programs give adolescents higher confidence which leads to better academics and higher goal-setting. This can positively impact behavior making them less likely to use drugs and alcohol or drop out of school. Participation in after-school programs also allows adolescents to explore activities they would not have otherwise tried. These programs provide opportunities for interpersonal development; sports, for example, can improve teamwork skills, resilience, and initiative. These skills can then be transferred into the classroom, putting adolescents ahead of their peers.²¹ After-school programs are a great tool because “[a]ll young people need access to afterschool and summer opportunities that include time with friends and mentors, opportunities for creative enrichment and expression, healthy meals, daily physical activity, and fun engaging projects that allow them to explore and create and help them re-engage with learning.”¹²

Banksia Gardens' Study Group: A Key Resource for Students

Banksia Gardens Community Services has many programs that aim to support children and adolescents in the Northern Melbourne community. These programs are free to the public and do not require registration to attend, making these easily accessible for any student after school. Banksia's Study Group, an after-school enrichment program and homework club, meets twice a week for primary and secondary students. Study Group, shown in Figure 6, includes academic tutors as well as other enrichment and entertaining activities available depending on the day of the week. Banksia Gardens' overarching goal with Study Group is to enrich students' lives while providing support for re-engagement.

The Role of After-School Programs in Northern Melbourne

Organizations within the surrounding areas of Northern Melbourne offer after-school programs with different goals and focuses. While many programs are geared towards more advantaged communities, there are a variety of programs and homework clubs that cater to similar demographics of Broadmeadows. A "homework club" is a term used in Victoria to describe an after-school space that aims to help students learn, grow and develop their academic and social skills. Some of these programs are exclusively homework time and others can include a variety of games, sports, life skills, and other enriching activities that help the overall development of children. These after-school programs are mainly government-

funded and focus more on helping kids through their personal lives than keeping them entertained. A mix of academics, social interaction, and other life skills positively impacts a child's engagement and growth in their educational experiences. The choice of activities is often picked strategically to maximize engagement and advance academics. In addition, programs that receive government funding strive to make indirect impacts on the community, such as improvements to poverty and family life. Because of this complicated mission, these programs must constantly evolve based on the changing needs of children and the community. The data gathered in this project is aimed to aid this evolution to support the current needs of the community and provide a path that Banksia Gardens' Study Group should head towards to fulfill its mission.



Figure 6: Banksia Gardens' Study Group

Research Activities: Assessing the Availability of Programs for and Needs of Disengaged Children

This project analyzed the programs, needs, and engagement patterns among youth in the Northern Region of Melbourne to produce a catalog of local after-school program offerings and provide recommendations to Banksia Gardens Community Services to aid the creation of an action plan for their Study Group next year. There were four main objectives for the project, as seen in Figure 7. The first objective was to identify the after-school offerings in the Northern Region. The second objective was to assess the needs, struggles, and interests of youth in the local community and the third objective was to understand the level of engagement and vision of stakeholders at Banksia Gardens' Study Group. The final objective analyzed the data collected to develop recommendations for improving youth academic engagement.

Objective I: Identify After-School Offerings in the Northern Region

The first objective was to map out after-school offerings in the Northern Region by reaching out to organization directors and identifying program details. To achieve this, we first contacted the city council's youth services offices in each of the seven local government areas (LGAs) of the Northern Region — Merrimbek (Moreland), Darebin, Whittlesea, Nillumbik,

Gardens, we first had to understand the needs of the community, how after-school programs can optimize learning for children, and what activities the children would like to participate in. This objective included three main activities. The first was a series of semi-structured interviews with school staff and a local pediatrician to investigate the needs of children in the Broadmeadows area. The second and third methods included observing a focus group at St. Dominic's Primary School and distributing a student survey. The information from these activities provided qualitative and quantitative data about current student needs, struggles, and interests.

In preparation for this project, our team traveled to the Boys & Girls Club of Worcester in Worcester, Massachusetts to interview Alexis Benoit, Operations Manager. We focused on themes including the program's connections with schools, after-school programs, what activities kids find most engaging, communication with the community and families, and any challenges to successful programming. The same approach was used when visiting after-school programs in the Northern Region and interviewing program directors.

We traveled to schools in the Northern Region and interviewed principals, engagement officers, and teachers. Visits were set up with two primary schools in the area: St. Dominic's Primary School and Holy Child Primary School. At St. Dominic's Primary School, in Broadmeadows, we interviewed Caroline Menassa, Community Learning Centre Hub Coordinator, and Vesna Curmi, Literacy



Figure 7: Project Objectives and Methods Overview

Yarra, Banyule, and Hume — to obtain a list of programs and contact information for the after-school offerings in the area.

We then contacted each of the organizations we were referred to and asked about their general mission, activities offered, availability, and the age of participants. The list of questions we asked is available in the Supplementary Materials. Many programs had accessible websites that we also referred to for more information. Furthermore, we used these contacts to direct us to additional programs in the area.

In total, we identified 19 different organizations: three in Merri-bek (Moreland), two in Darebin, four in Whittlesea, two in Nillumbik, four in Yarra, two in Banyule, and two in

Hume. To culminate this research, we created a spreadsheet that lists each program along with its website, contact details, activities offered and its programs' hours. We also created an interactive map, using Google My Maps, to display the location of the 19 organizations, as well as a brief description of their program offerings. These details are available in the Supplementary Materials.

Objective II: Assess the Needs, Struggles, and Interests of Youth in the Local Community

Before recommendations could be provided to improve academic engagement at Banksia

leader. At Holy Child Primary School, located in Dallas, Victoria, we interviewed Martin Prior, Transition and Community Partnership Leader, and Alan Smith, Principal. Questions were asked about child engagement and needs, school communication with after-school programs, and the benefits of enrichment programs. The pre-interview consent statement and a questions list for interviews can be found in Supplementary Materials.

We also interviewed Dr. Lyndal Peake, a pediatrician working in and around Broadmeadows. To understand the needs of youth in the community, topics discussed included social and emotional needs, engaging activities, and healthy relationships. A list of interview questions for Dr. Lyndal Peake is available in the Supplementary Materials.

Also at St. Dominic's, we observed a focus group with ten children who were involved in the primary school's after-school program. Questions included what they do after school, their favorite activities, and the struggles that they have in their home life. These questions can be found in the Supplementary Materials. To quantify their interests, a short survey was handed out (sometimes verbally in the case of kids who could not read or write yet) about what activities they would be most interested in attending. The activities available on the survey were based on the responses from the focus groups conducted at Banksia Gardens, which will be discussed in the next section. The survey was given out to the participants of their after-school program and can be seen in Figure 8.

Objective III: Understand the Level of Engagement and Vision of Stakeholders at Banksia Gardens' Study Group

This objective focused on understanding Banksia Gardens' Study Group, the value it provides families in the Broadmeadows community, and the vision of stakeholders for the program's future. This objective had three main activities: interviews with Banksia Gardens' program directors, focus groups with children who attend Banksia Gardens' Study Group, and an activity interest survey.

Banksia Gardens directors were interviewed to develop an understanding of the current state and future direction of the program. Bodhi Sweeny, Study Group Team Leader, was asked about future plans for Study Group and

what resources they have to pursue these plans. Erin McLindon, Aiming High Coordinator and former primary school instructor, provided a teacher's perspective on the needs of children in the community and the direction the program could take to be more effective. Additional questions asked to both directors included insight into current engagement, the effects they feel their program has on the Broadmeadows community, where their program is lacking, and their overarching goal for the organization. The list of interview questions for Banksia Gardens' program directors can be found in Supplementary Materials.

During Banksia Gardens' after-school sessions, focus groups were conducted with participants of Study Group. Topics included

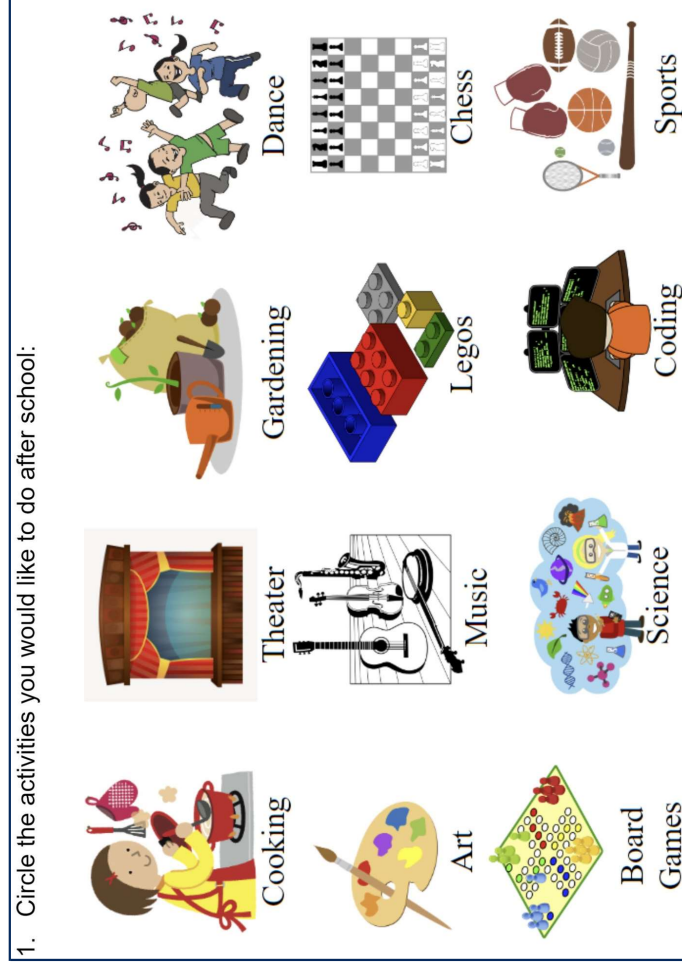


Figure 8: Activity Interest Survey for Children at Banksia Gardens' Study Group and St. Dominic's Primary School's After-School Program

their typical after-school schedule, interest levels in the current offerings at Study Group, and activities they would like to see next year. The list of focus group questions asked to children can be found in Supplementary Materials.

As volunteers during Study Group, we collected deeper foundational knowledge through observation and informal conversations with children. We gained an understanding of what primary school children like to do as well as their attitude and excitement towards the program. The interest survey used at St Dominic's was also distributed in the Study Group primary room.

Objective IV: Analyze Data to Develop Recommendations for Improving Youth Academic Re-Engagement

To conclude our investigation, we analyzed the data collected from our interviews, surveys, focus groups, and observations to make connections between the needs, interests, and struggles of children and the goals of Banksia Gardens' Study Group staff. Using the information collected from our discussions, we looked for patterns of key topics and sorted them into overarching themes. We categorized information into sections such as community struggles, family and individual needs, and techniques to increase academic re-engagement. The results from our child survey provided a basis for activities that expanded our research to include their interests, needs, and struggles. Using our new research and

feedback, we created a summary report for Banksia Gardens outlining the strengths of their programs as well as some short and long-term recommendations that would encourage engagement and improve Study Group next year.

Findings: Optimizing Success and Learning in the Community

This section provides the results of our objectives based on the completed research activities. Following our discussions with Banksia Gardens liaisons, we identified four key topics:

1. After-School Program Offerings in the Northern Region
2. Struggles, Needs, and Interests Among Youth in the Community
3. Successful Techniques for Learning and Support at Other Programs
4. Strengths and Opportunities of Banksia Gardens' Study Group

The main deliverable from identifying the after-school offerings in the Northern Region was an interactive map and organization table of the programs in the area. These tools provided opportunities for analysis that allowed us to draw conclusions and generalizations about programs in the Northern Region. Assessing the needs, struggles, and interests of youth in the community, led us to a report of

the common themes and successful techniques of other programs. Then, these findings, along with understanding the level of engagement and vision of the stakeholders at Banksia Gardens' Study Group, produced the information necessary for a summary of Study Group's strengths and opportunities. A representation of the project objectives and deliverables can be seen in Figure 9.

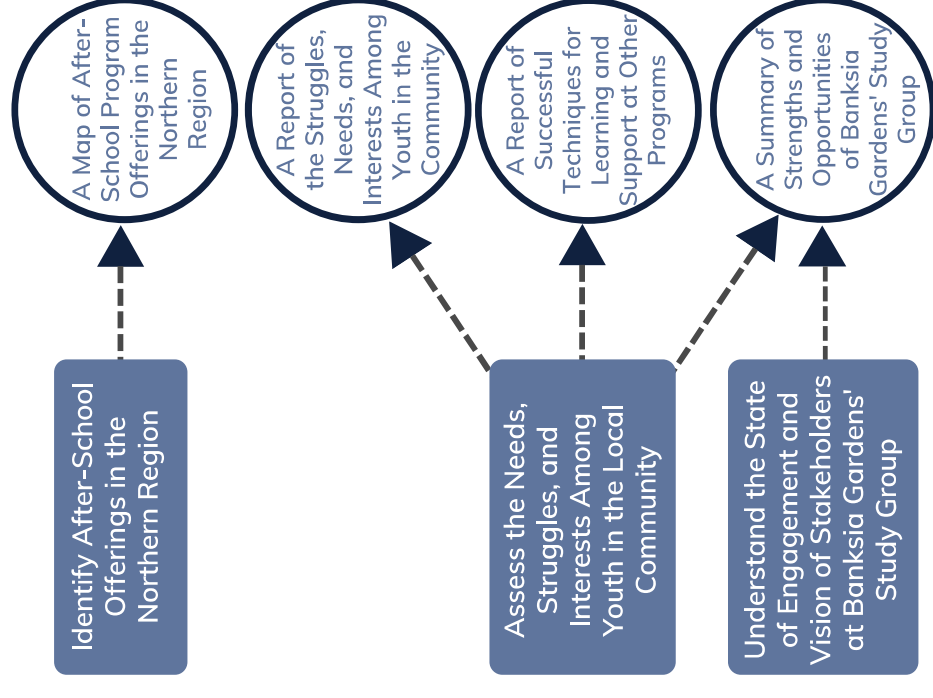


Figure 9: A Diagram of the Relationship Between the Project Objectives and Deliverables

After-School Program Offerings in the Northern Region

Through our investigation of the offerings in the Northern Region, we found a variety of after-school programs in Merri-bek (Moreland), Darebin, Whittlesea, Nillumbik, Yarra, Banyule, and Hume. While many have commonalities in their goal to enrich children and families, they achieve this in a variety of ways.

The majority of after-school programs we looked at in the Northern Region of Melbourne are facilitated by the youth services offices in their respective local government areas (LGAs). However, the distribution of after-school offerings varied. The cities of Whittlesea and Yarra had several offerings, while the identified after-school programs in Banyule, Darebin, and Nillumbik were limited. We found a few programs in Hume and Merri-bek as well; most organizations within the seven LGAs were located towards the center of the Northern Region. Some of the programs were easy to find and locate on the city council websites, but many organizations were advertised by word of mouth only, and not by formal promotional material. This is an identifiable issue as it can lead to difficulties for families and their children to find appropriate programs. Youth service officers of the LGAs indicated that their depth of knowledge extended only to city council-run programs and not the various other non-government-run after-school programs in the area.

Including Banksia Gardens, we identified 20 organizations that offer after-school programs for youth in the Northern Region. Among the 20

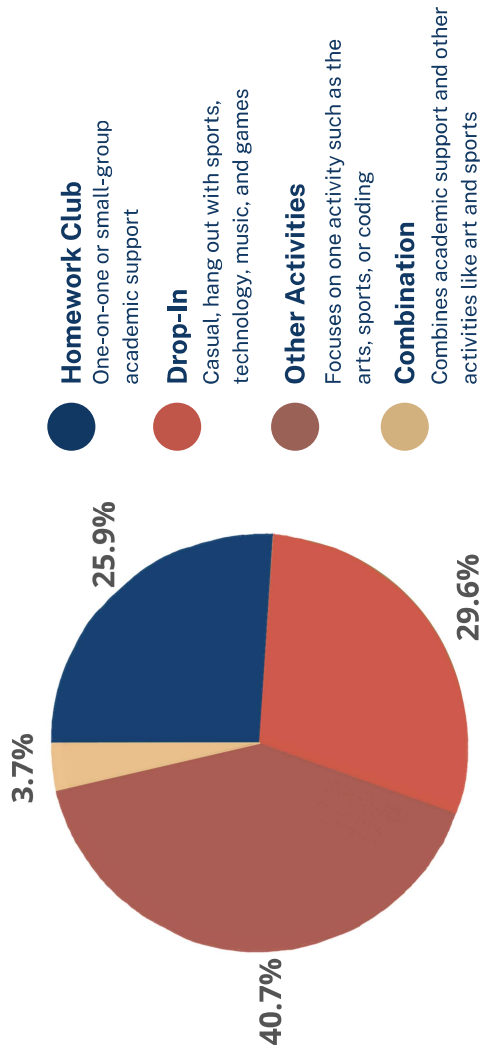


Figure 10: Identified After-School Program Offerings in the Northern Region

organizations, there are 27 different after-school programs covering a broad range of offerings, but almost all of them fall into three categories. There are 12 homework clubs; 8 drop-in-based programs, most of which include games, sports, and arts; and the rest are niche after-school programs that cater to a particular interest, such as music or coding. A representation of the programs can be seen in Figure 10. Homework clubs, a flexible term, often strictly focus on homework but for many programs, this may mean a combination of academic support, activities, and fun.

Even though there are many available programs, most do not assist with both academic growth and fostering other interests. Many organizations either focus on academic development or provide a less-structured drop-in; none identified, with the exception of Banksia Gardens, offer both. Many organizations are also not advertising their

homework club programs or have waitlist options. Collingwood Homework Club, for example, does not advertise because they are overwhelmed by the academic need of youth in the area. On the other hand, there are also programs, like Youth Central, that have little attendance at their drop-in programs. Also, some programs, like the Young Assets Foundation, will not be able to continue their homework club if they do not receive the necessary funding for 2023.²³ Overall, the mapping revealed gaps and weaknesses in the offerings in the Northern Region.

Table 1 displays a comparison of the 20 organizations identified in the Northern Region. The organization name, LGA, type of program, and activity offerings are also listed. Furthermore, the age range is listed as under or over 10 years old (the cut-off for primary school), and the days of the week on which the programs run.

Table 1: After-School Offerings in the Northern Region

LGA	ORGANIZATION	HW CLUB	DROP-IN	SPORTS	ARTS & MUSIC	AGE <10	AGE 10+	DAYS
Merri-bek (Moreland)	Don Bosco Youth Centre		✓	✓		✓	✓	Tu-F
	Fawkner Neighborhood House	✓				✓		Th
	Oxygen Youth Space		✓	✓			✓	M, W, F
Darebin	The Hub @ Northland		✓		✓		✓	Tu-F
	Decibels Youth Music Centre		✓		✓		✓	Tu-F
Whittlesea	Thomastown West Community Hub	✓				✓		W
	Whittlesea YMCA	✓					✓	-
	Mernda Community House	✓				✓		Th
Nillumbik	Innovation Youth Centre		✓	✓	✓		✓	Tu, Th
	Living and Learning Centre Nillumbik				✓	✓		M-Th
	Yarra Plenty Library**	✓				✓		Tu, Th

Table 1: After-School Offerings in the Northern Region (Continued)

LGA	ORGANIZATION	HW CLUB	DROP-IN	SPORTS	ARTS & MUSIC	AGE <10	AGE 10+	DAYS
Yarra	Collingwood Homework Club	✓				✓	✓	W
	Yarra Youth Centre		✓		✓		✓	M-F
	Richmond Youth Hub		✓	✓			✓	Tu, Th-F
	Young Assets Foundation	✓					✓	M-F
Banyule	Himilo Community Connect	✓		✓		✓	✓	M-W
	Banyule Community Health*	✓				✓		Tu
	Spectrum	✓				✓	✓	-
Hume	Youth Central		✓					Th
	Banksia Gardens	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	Tu-W

Symbols

* Special Exception (Story Club)

** Special Exception (Coding Club)

- Not Enough Information

Struggles, Needs, and Interests Among Youth in Broadmeadows Area

Through our more in-depth analysis of the schools and after-school program offerings in Hume, we evaluated the struggles of local youth, the needs of the disadvantaged children in the area, and their interest in activities. We identified several struggles including language barriers and a lack of one-on-one support. We found several necessities for successful learning through various academic and emotional support techniques. We also found that children gravitate towards interactive learning activities such as cooking and sports.

Broadmeadows Children Face Many Challenges Hindering their Engagement

Through our interviews conducted in Hume with school administrators, after-school program managers, and other experts in the field, several key themes arose about the struggles of children at home. As shown in Figure 11, these challenges include a language barrier, too much screen time, a lack of one-on-one support, obligations, disruptions, and resource availability.

All interviews indicated that **language barriers** are the biggest challenge to improving youth engagement in school. Many children who attend school in the Broadmeadows area come from different cultures and balance the use of different languages. Alan Smith, Principal of Holy Child Primary School, noted that many families settle in communities from the same country of origin, therefore they lack further exposure to English outside of school. When children need assistance with academics

Common Challenges Among Children



- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

Language Barrier

Children may not speak English well, which adds an additional social and academic challenge.

Heavy Use of Electronics

Children who go home after school often face too much screen time rather than working on homework or spending time with friends.

Lack of One-On-One Support

Schools tend to lack the ability to provide one-on-one support. When families also struggle to provide this, children can fall behind in school.

Obligations at Home

Many children have other siblings or obligations at home they have to help with, which can distract from their own personal tasks.

Disruptions at Home

Many children indicated they have siblings and other distractions at home that make it difficult to focus on homework.

Lack of Resources

Many households in the area lack resources that can be helpful for schoolwork and additional learning at home.

Figure 11: Common Difficulties for Children at Home in the Broadmeadows Area

at home, their parents and older siblings are often unable to help as they are still grasping English themselves. Therefore, there is a common lack of adequate English support and exposure at home.

Interviews indicated that most kids go home after school, and most spoke about the **heavy use of electronics** causing a lack of socialization. One expert, Dr. Lyndal Peake, a local pediatrician, commented “most kids get picked up by their parents and go home and find a device and might [only] come out for dinner.” Children often spend too much alone time with their electronics and receive little support from their parents. **A lack of one-on-one support** is common in larger family sizes that are prominent in the area, so kids often have little

academic and emotional support when they need it. Thus, many children struggle to build one-on-one connections with others, which experts indicated are crucial for the success of children in the area. As the key engagement principles indicated, children who have healthy relationships with family, community, and other students tend to have improved behavior, academic performance, and social skills. This lack of one-on-one support can negatively impact a child’s association and motivation with their education.^{8 15}

After discussing with kids their frustrations with academic engagement at home in the focus groups conducted, three common struggles emerged: **obligations, disruptions, and a lack of resources**. While many children

are encouraged by educators to continue their schoolwork or participate in social activities after school, disruptions from siblings make it difficult to do so, and many of the older kids regularly have to watch over and support their younger siblings. This diverts their attention away from their academics, social life, and personal development. Children also discussed how they often lack the resources, such as pencils and notebooks, to complete their work. Additionally, some children mentioned that sharing limited resources among many family members is difficult, which creates additional barriers for children to engage in their work, leading many of them to turn to other distractions.

Experts Identified High-Priority Needs for Children to Succeed in School

After discussions with teachers, principals, after-school program directors, and doctors, it's clear that there are many strategies for helping child academic re-engagement in Broadmeadows. The most prominent response involved a strategically high exposure to quality **language support**. When children begin to understand and apply basic language skills, a higher linguistic and social confidence is the result.²⁴ Confidence caters to a student's well-being, one of the key engagement principles, which is a high priority for successful education. Experts Caroline Menassa, Community Learning Centre Hub Coordinator at St. Dominic's, and Dr. Lyndal Peake stated that constantly reading aloud to disengaged kids helps them pick up communication skills while enjoying developing English.

According to teachers and after-school program directors, **freedom of choice** between activities is important for the children's time outside of school. As Alexis Benoit, Operations Manager at Boys & Girls Club of Worcester, indicated children require free time apart from academics that is loosely structured for providing as much freedom of choice as possible. This freedom gives kids the opportunities, open-mindedness, and confidence they need to feel successful, which is crucial for a child's well-being and engagement.²⁴ When children have an activity set in mind and are restricted, they will typically lose engagement in what they are doing (Peake, pers. comm.), so it is beneficial for children to have the ability to choose their activities. In order to grant children this freedom of choice, a variety of offerings are required at programs. This variety would then help keep children interested in trying new things, while also practicing and developing various skills.

A child's **connections with adults** give them a friend and a mentor to encourage them to engage with their academics. As mentioned, this is a common challenge for children, as one-on-one support is lacking at home, so it is important for children to constantly build these connections. In addition, effort and excitement are fostered in academics when a child receives positive reinforcement for the work they attempt by adults and peers.²⁵

While support given directly to children through youth centers and schools has helped disengaged kids immensely, a large focus was

also on giving **support to families**. Involving the whole family takes the efforts much further to involve and support children. Principal of Holy Child, Alan Smith, explained how their school tailors to the needs of children in the community by first involving the whole family in the child's schooling. Specifically, they refer families to agencies and services to provide opportunities for those who are most in need of them. St. Dominic's also runs a parent program for working through concerns about their child and family life. By immersing everyone, the lessons and structures set up in the classroom can be extended to home life, further providing the children and family with access to learning opportunities and support.

Children in Hume are Interested in Hands-On Activities

Through focus groups, interviews, and one-on-one interaction with children from Banksia Gardens' Study Group, as well as St Dominic's, we obtained 54 survey responses on the activities the children would be most interested in, as seen in Figure 12. The top five of the twelve options, as seen also in Figure 12, were **art, LEGOs, sports, science, and cooking**. These activities are hands-on and have the potential to incorporate many of the needs of disengaged children that were discussed by experts. Hands-on learning engages children by involving their whole bodies in the learning process, which causes them to be more focused on their activity and continue to learn for longer.²⁶

Art not only helps with creativity but promotes the development of fine motor skills, cognitive development, math skills, and language skills. A child's math skills can be increased through exploring shapes, proportions, and counting. Art can also increase language development through new vocabulary and the experience of explaining artwork to peers and parents.²⁷ Additionally, children from low socioeconomic backgrounds who have had continual exposure to the arts in school have shown better academic outcomes, including higher test scores and college enrollment.²⁸

LEGOs were repeatedly brought up during discussions with kids and were the second most popular response from the data received in the activity survey. Research indicates that the use of LEGOs increases the creativity of children and their cognitive ability. This activity has been shown to increase children's overall self-confidence, which then transfers into their motivation for schoolwork.²⁹ In addition, studies have shown that the use of LEGOs as a child can be a predictor for strengths in mathematics later in life and can lead to an interest in STEM-related studies.³⁰

Many children indicated they were interested in **sports** as an after-school activity. Sports assist with emotional regulation and social and physical skills.³¹ It teaches children to cope with disappointment but to also gain confidence in their abilities through success. These activities help children learn appropriate behavior for both scenarios. Socially, being part of a team teaches communication and teamwork skills that can be transferred into many other aspects of life.²¹ Sports keep kids

active, healthy, and has shown to stimulate brain chemicals that help emotional regulation.³¹

Of the five most popular interests, **science** activities have the most potential for academic enrichment. Apart from learning direct science concepts through these activities, English exposure through reading and listening can be easily incorporated. Additionally, science experiments can foster interest in STEM subjects and motivate their learning in those areas at an early age.³²

Half of the children surveyed expressed an interest in **cooking**, which can be beneficial if applied to after-school organizations. Cooking not only can provide life skills but, if incorporated strategically, it can assist with academics. Proper nutrition is important for every child and cooking can help develop healthy eating habits. From an academic standpoint, children who learn to cook “indicate a sense of accomplishment” [and] self-confidence,” important aspects to motivate academics.³³ Cooking can also increase language development through reading recipes and following directions. By having them read aloud recipes, or even just listening to a volunteer, children get further exposure to English. Cooking also allows youth to work on their math skills through measurements and counting.^{33 34}

Successful Techniques for Learning and Support at Other Programs

After-school programs employ several methods to successfully engage children in activities that aim to enrich their lives in some

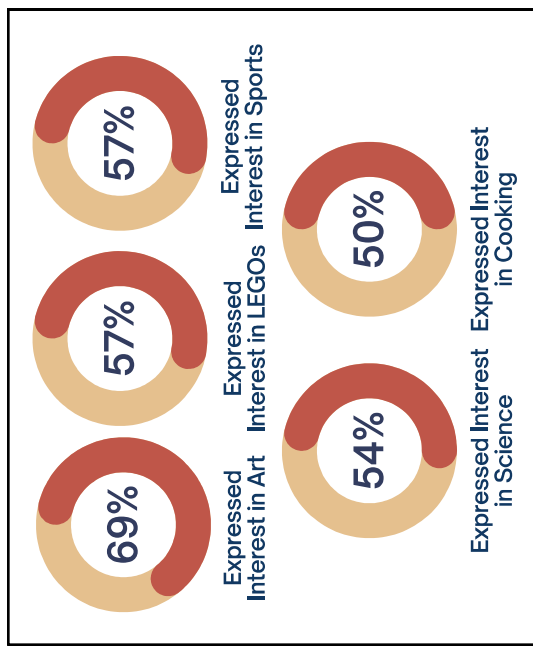
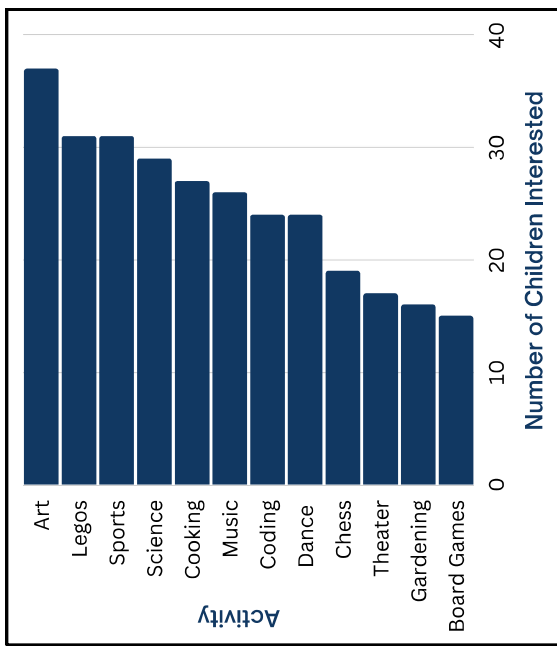


Figure 12: Results of Child Activity Interest Survey (N=54)

The top three activities, art, LEGOs, and sports, are not strictly academic-related tasks but still play an important role in re-engaging children. **Art** was by far the most popular activity in the interest survey distributed to children.

way. We found that in most after-school programs, a mix of structured and unstructured programs is most effective in catering to the needs of each child. Furthermore, programs with a heavy focus on both language and emotional support were found to have the best outcomes in enriching the children's lives.

In terms of encouraging focus and engagement for kids in academics, our findings suggest a **separation of spaces** for schoolwork and play is beneficial. As many children indicated, disruptions at home prevent them from focusing on their work, so a space to focus on their academics is largely beneficial for academic engagement. The Boys & Girls Club of Worcester have implemented a "homework power hour" where students focus on solely academic work for a set amount of time and then are given the freedom to do what they wish afterward; great success has been reported with this strategy. St. Dominic's is another example of a program that completely separates homework from other activities; their homework help is in a separate location and day of the week from non-academic activities. Keeping work and play areas separate helps children avoid distractions and engage in their respective activities.

Language support is critical for academic engagement, socialization, and self-esteem, especially in a linguistically diverse area like Broadmeadows. Children have a more difficult time with language if they have a literacy gap after the age of ten, so these programs put a significant focus on supporting language as early as possible.³⁵ Many of the after-school

programs visited, such as the Boys & Girls Club of Worcester, aid in constant literacy learning by labeling everything with English words for additional reading materials throughout the space. Figure 13 shows a wall at St. Dominic's where they placed several pictures with words and objects that are labeled in English. Toys and objects were all labeled so that kids connect the images to words. Importantly, this is not an isolated occurrence: almost every room was covered with signs and labels at most after-school programs visited, and they were often discussed by those we interviewed. In addition, some after-school programs encourage quiet reading as much as possible, and schedule dedicated time and spaces to do so. All of this language exposure gives these children more practice with English, which is essential since many do not get it at home.

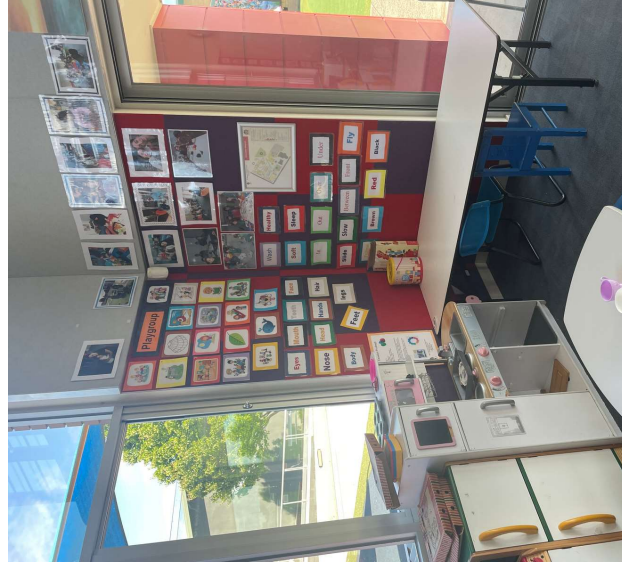


Figure 13: Picture and Word Wall at St. Dominic's Community Hub

Emotional support is important for child re-engagement as well. We found that most programs train their staff in the basics of how to identify children that are struggling and overwhelmed. Boys & Girls Club of Worcester has gone further—they employ dedicated staff to provide one-on-one support for children. This is important to give the children personal attention to help address their unique needs. They have someone to turn to that can give them personalized attention and assistance to help re-engage in the classroom. Overall, emotional support and one-on-one connections, along with the other components discussed, all fit together to help children re-engage in school.

Strengths and Opportunities of Banksia Gardens' Study Group

Banksia Gardens runs an after-school program, Study Group, where children come in twice a week for homework help and fun activities. We observed and participated in several sessions and were able to capture the themes and inner workings of the program. We identified several strengths that the program has that set them apart from other programs. We also found a few opportunities for Banksia Gardens to further improve its program.

Banksia Gardens' After-School Program is Very Unique

When comparing the 26 other after-school programs identified, the trends show a diverse set of offerings and the uniqueness of Banksia

Gardens. The findings revealed that there is a lack of programs in the Northern Region that offer dedicated time for children to do homework, get individualized support, and participate in various activities. One thing mentioned repeatedly during interviews was the acknowledgment that Banksia Gardens has a unique program that can cater directly to disadvantaged children. As Erin McLindon, the Aiming high coordinator, stated, “It’s not about the qualifications of the staff at Banksia, but about the heart in helping children. The staff is there not just because of their background, but because of their vision to help the community.” Banksia is the only organization we identified that hosts a program that combines the needs and interests of children in the community. With Banksia Gardens’ plentiful volunteers, Study Group combines homework time with other enriching activities to cover a variety of needs, and they are the only program we identified that does this extensively. Based on comments from interviewees on the effectiveness of Study Group, this approach has had a noticeable impact on students and can aid by producing beneficial educational outcomes for future generations.

Banksia Gardens Has the Opportunity to Engage More Children

One of the key takeaways from background research and the interviews of after-school program directors was the importance of continuously evolving after-school programs to maximize children’s enrichment. Alexis Benoit, from the Boys and Girls Club of Worcester, mentioned that program assessment const-

antly needs to be addressed because the needs of children are always changing. Banksia Gardens has a strong homework club program that many interviewees have indicated has greatly supported the Broadmeadows community by reaching and supporting the most disadvantaged children and families. Banksia Gardens’ programs grew out of the specific needs of the community at the time and have been able to adapt their programs as the needs of the community change. Many of the strategies they utilize, such as flexibility in programs and one-on-one support, help with engagement. However, there are opportunities that Banksia Gardens can consider reaching more children and increasing their impact.

The staff at Study Group understand the essential role their program plays in enhancing literacy development for the children of



Figure 14: Puzzle Activity at Banksia Gardens’ Study Group

Broadmeadows, but more can be done to increase exposure. Banksia Gardens has access to a large number of literacy resources such as decodable books and high-frequency word flash cards that are beneficial, but there is rarely an atmosphere that encourages their use. Presenting these activities in front of the children’s workspace, instead of scattered on tables with other activities, would help with personal encouragement. Further exposing children to English when they do not realize it is also effective, so labeling objects and putting words on the wall can be expanded upon from what is already present. Activities done outside of the Study Group rooms can also be strategically designed to incorporate language development by including as much reading and listening as possible, which as discussed, is a primary benefit.

As we found earlier, the ability for children to have the freedom to choose their activities each day will help engage them, which Banksia Gardens does very well. However, the separation of academics and fun activities, as evidenced by other after-school programs, is a potential opportunity in Banksia Gardens’ after-school program. In Study Group, the academics and playful activities blend in the same room, with the most separation being informal guidance to keep homework on one side and activities on the other. This lack of separation increases distractions and prevents motivation for homework. Experts emphasize the importance of having a quiet space away from other distractions; some kids need time to themselves, especially those who live in a chaotic environment at home.

Volunteers are also very plentiful at Banksia Gardens and can therefore provide one-on-one attention to children. Each Study Group session is supervised by many hard-working volunteers, in conjunction with Banksia Gardens staff, who are all eager to work with children and make an impact. We observed that many children spend time with specific volunteers with whom they have previously made connections. However, more can be done by educating the volunteers to be strategic in their one-on-one interactions with the children. Volunteer preparation for Study Group includes quick briefings before and after Study Group sessions. Here, the volunteers discuss scheduling and quick instructions on activities available for the children. While the briefings provided helpful information, volunteers could use more guidance on how to use Banksia Gardens' resources to engage children most efficiently and motivate them to complete their work. Additional dedicated time to instruct volunteers on how to engage and support children would be largely beneficial, especially for newer volunteers who may have minimal experience with children. Many children at Study Group have resources available but infrequently do their homework or language support activities because there's little encouragement to do so.

Banksia Gardens' Study Group provides a variety of activities including soccer, basketball, board games, coloring, and LEGOs. Many of these activities are fun, engaging, and beneficial. Based on the child interest survey, focus groups, and interviews conducted with experts, there are more activities such as

cooking and science that could be incorporated into Study Group in the future. These activities are beneficial for providing additional literacy opportunities, improving children's cognitive abilities, and working with math skills.³³ Banksia Gardens can further tailor to these needs and interests by expanding their activity offerings for Study Group.

Recommendations

This section integrates all findings to outline a set of recommendations Banksia Gardens Community Services can incorporate to improve academic re-engagement in their Study Group program. These recommendations

combine background research with the needs of children discovered through our conversations with various experts. This information was then compared to the feedback received from the children we interacted with and their interests received from surveys. The resulting recommendations are focused on addressing the needs of the children in a manner that kids would likely be engaged in based on their responses. In addition, our research revealed recommendations for all organizations that offer after-school programs in the Northern Region of Melbourne, which can be further improved to make a bigger impact on the community. Below is a table outlining six recommendations we compiled.



Figure 15: Banksia Gardens Community Services

Recommendations

1

Incorporate More Literacy Options Throughout the Facility

2

Have a Distinct Separation of Homework Space and Other Activities


3


Create a Plan to Further Train and Prepare Study Group Volunteers

<p>Action Plan</p>	<p>Label as many objects as possible within the facility to help connect objects to words. In addition, facilitate a designated reading time at Study Group. This can include time for staff members to read to the group as well as for kids to read to the staff.</p>	<p>Have a separate space for homework help away from recreational activities. Continue giving children the freedom to decide what activities they wish to participate in, even with the separation of spaces.</p>	<p>Provide all volunteers with training sessions for working with kids in Study Group. This can be done through in person or online modules and hands-on activities related to the activities at Study Group.</p>
<p>Potential Limitations</p>	<p>Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are potential limitations for time, space, and staff for reading aloud. • Proper literacy resources will need to be obtained for deploying and preparing the staff to best utilize them. 	<p>Space</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding enough resources to operate separate spaces, especially a dedicated, quiet area. 	<p>Time</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Required training is time consuming especially for short term volunteers. • Methods for developing quality training modules will take careful time and consideration.
<p>Outcomes</p>	<p>Literacy exposure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is beneficial to create the highest possible access to reading, writing, listening, and speaking in English. • Success in literacy helps build confidence and academic engagement. 	<p>Improving focus and engagement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children would not be as susceptible to disruptions. • It will be easier to prepare rooms with themes and materials when they are in separate spaces. 	<p>Volunteers will be more familiar with strategies for helping children</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children can receive quality assistance for literacy and emotional support.

Recommendations

	4 Develop More Structure and Offerings for Study Group	5 Advocate for More Government Funding for After-School Programs	6 Develop Connections and Collaboration with Programs in the Area
Action Plan	<p>Consider offering Study Group on more days of the week.</p> <p>Include rotational activities weekly and introduce new ones based on the interests of children.</p>	<p>Apply for more government funding to aid their programs. They should cite the needs of the community, the high demand for programs, and the benefits that children are currently receiving.</p>	<p>Communicate to best develop strategies that will fulfill the needs of the community collaboratively. Sharing space, resources, and schedules will be an effective strategy for expanding the program's reach and impact on the community.</p>
Potential Limitations	<p>Space</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It may be difficult to spare the space for providing Study Group on multiple days. <p>Volunteer availability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A variety of activities will require a proper number of staff to support them all. 	<p>Research</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Receiving funding can be a long and difficult process, especially producing research that provides evidence for need. 	<p>Organization / adjustment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Heavy coordination and time commitments by program directors is required. Having children go to different programs can be a difficult transition, especially if location is a concern.
Outcomes	<p>Child engagement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children will have more consistent participation and excitement for new activities. Children will be better enriched and interested with a larger variety of offerings. 	<p>Increased engagement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Obtaining funding would lead to more staff and opportunities to expand programs. Even more personalized and specialized assistance can be provided. 	<p>Reaching a wider audience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many programs are at capacity, while others are struggling with gaining participants. Organizations can work together to help more children in the community.

 = Recommendation for Banksia Gardens

 = Recommendation for After-School Programs

Project Outcomes and Conclusion

The research conducted in this project led to one main conclusion: after-school programs are one of the most important ways to enrich the lives of disadvantaged children. In Broadmeadows, the positive impact that these programs have had on the community is clear and could be recognized even in the short time our team was there. Through each interview, program visit, and discussion, the excitement from the community on their work's ability to affect so many students and families was prominent. We hope that our findings will help Banksia Gardens Community Services extend its program to impact more children as they look to the future. We also hope that the community recognizes the important role that after-school enrichment programs play in advancing the success of children, especially those with additional adversities. Our mapping revealed a lack of programs that reach all of the needs and interests of children and have available space for those who need this support. We hope that the communities within the Northern Region understand these opportunities to support a range of families, and the ability for that change to impact the disadvantaged communities for generations to come.

Acknowledgments

Our team would like to thank our sponsors, Erin McLindon, Paul Atkinson, Bodhi Sweeny, Gina Dougall, and all of the other supporting members of Banksia Gardens Community Services for their support and guidance throughout our time in Melbourne. A thank you also to our interviewees and organizations who so generously contributed to our research and directed us to additional resources. Finally, we would like to thank our advisors, Prof. Holly Ault, Prof. Stephen McCauley, and Prof. Tanja Dominko for their guidance, advice, and support.



Figure 16: The Melbourne B22 Banksia Gardens Team and Supporting Staff



WPI

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